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**EMPOWERMENT IN THE WORKPLACE:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

By

Dale Burt

Honours Bachelor of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1994

THESIS

**Submitted to the Department of Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree
Wilfrid Laurier University
1996**

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EMPOWERMENT

It enhances human potential at individual and social levels of expressions.

Empowerment is an essential starting point and a continuing process for realizing the ideals of human liberation and freedom for all (Hall, 1992, p. 83).

ABSTRACT

Physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and economic factors contribute to a worker's quality of life and sense of wellness in the workplace. There are also social climate factors, such as social support and empowerment, which may contribute to quality of life and a sense of wellness at work. It is on the *empowerment* aspect of wellness that this research focuses. This research was conducted for the purpose of investigating empowerment and disempowerment in the workplace. More specifically, the study investigates workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment, facilitative and limiting factors, the effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment, and ideas for creating an empowering work environment. In four focus groups and five interviews, 22 white collar workers shared their experiences, feelings, insights, and opinions of personal empowerment, or lack of it, in their workplaces. Having a sense of control, a comfortable level of challenge and responsibility, experiencing voice and choice, having resources for development, and a balanced approach between process and outcome were found to promote self-determination and empowerment for workers. Working in an environment where there are punitive consequences and an undemocratic management style are barriers to workers' empowerment. Related to the value of distributive justice, an unequitable distribution of workload, an economic climate in which there is abuse of employees, and unfair criteria for promotion and recognition are barriers to empowerment. Findings also suggest that workers need compassion and caring in the workplace, and that there are emotional, physical, and even spiritual effects of empowerment and lack of empowerment at work. There is a discussion about how to

create an empowering workplace by replacing the traditional workplace paradigm with a new one in which there would be an equitable distribution of power, a closing of the gap between empowerment words and action, and caring and compassion. Responsibility for such change must come from personal, interpersonal, and organization levels.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment Defined

Empowerment is a term that has been used extensively in academia, human and social services, government, and business (Lord & Hutchison, 1993). However, despite its apparent popularity, there seems to be little agreement on a definition of the construct. In fact, Rappaport (1984, 1994), and more recently Zimmerman (1995), suggest that no single definition can actually capture the meaning of empowerment because empowerment differs across contexts, as well as across time and populations. Wallerstein (1992) describes empowerment as a social-action process which involves the participation of individuals, organizations, and communities, toward the goal of increased control, improved quality of life, and social justice. Wolff (1987) describes empowerment in terms of people having “some kind of meaningful say in their lives” (p. 157). Rappaport (1987) suggests that the concept of empowerment includes both “individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community” (p. 121). Rappaport (1987) adds that “empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influences, political power, and legal rights” (p. 121).

Prilleltensky (1994) expands on previous definitions of empowerment, defining the construct in terms of three basic values: *self-determination*; *collaboration and democratic participation*; and *distributive justice*. The value of *self-determination* refers to people being able to pursue and achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations. That is, one has control over his or her life. *Collaborative and democratic participation*

communicates the idea that people should have a voice and legitimate input into the decisions that affect their lives. *Distributive justice* reflects the notion of fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for people.

To understand empowerment, we must reflect on powerlessness--whether perceived or real (Wallerstein, 1992). According to Albee (1981), powerlessness occurs when those with restricted social, political, or economic power lack the means to gain greater control and resources in their lives. Serrano-Garcia (1994) explains that empowerment is based on power relationships. She tells us that "some groups within any society control (possess or manipulate) greater portions of resources than others" (p. 9) and "power relationships begin when an agent manifests interest in controlling a resource that another agent controls" (p. 13). She suggests that changing the dynamics of the power relationships, toward a more equitable sharing of power, will lead to social change. She describes social change as "any process of planned or accidental alteration of the prerequisites necessary to initiate power relationships, or of elements needed to maintain the relationships" (p. 16).

To empower, then, means to instill a sense of power (Conger, 1992). However, empowerment comprises a specific type of power--power *to*, not power *over* (Parker & Price, 1994; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Empowerment gives people the power to pursue goals, to participate, and to make decisions. Power *to* is "in contrast to individual power *over*, which focuses on controlling others" (Yoder & Kahn, 1992, p. 384). Parker and Price (1994) explain, "One can have a high level of control over decisions (power *to*) without having a high level of control over other individuals (power *over*)" (p. 923).

Powerlessness has been related to feelings of helplessness and to a variety of emotional problems (Seligman, 1990). Prilleltensky (1994) notes that “practically in almost every sphere of our lives there is the potential for psychological damage caused by some people oppressively controlling others” (p. 370).

Empowerment is not something one can *do to*, *force on*, or *give to*, someone else. Aktouf (1992) suggests that empowerment “must be a lived experience and it can neither be contrived nor commanded” (p. 419). Empowerment is a personal process. Rappaport (1994) describes empowerment as “a process, a mechanism, by which people gain mastery over their affairs” (p. 367). In the process of empowerment, according to empowerment researchers Lord and Farlow (1990), people move through varying degrees of powerlessness toward gaining a sense of personal control and “participatory competence” (p. 2). When speaking of empowerment, then, the involvement of others is not in the *giving* or *administering* of empowerment, rather it is in the *enabling* of empowerment and in the *providing* of support and opportunity for individuals to work through a process toward their own personal empowerment. Rappaport (1987) suggests that “empowerment refers to a process of becoming able or allowed to do some unspecified thing” (p. 129).

In summary, then, empowerment is defined in the literature as a social action process in which increased control, justice, and quality of life are the goals. It includes individual determination over one’s life as well as democratic participation in one’s community. Empowerment means having power to do and accomplish things in one’s life and it is a personal process that cannot be given to or forced on a person. In this research,

I formulate my own working definition of empowerment using a value-based framework. My working definition of empowerment includes the values of *self-determination/participation*, and *distributive justice*. Self-determination communicates the notion that people should be able to pursue and achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations, and that they should have a voice and legitimate input into the decisions that affect their lives. Distributive justice reflects the notion of fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunity.

Empowerment at Work

Empowerment is a central concept in community psychology and I believe it is a concept that can be applied to the workplace community. In this context, *self-determination/participation* communicates the idea that workers should be able to pursue and achieve their workplace goals without excessive restrictions and limitations inhibiting their efforts and that they should have legitimate input into the workplace decisions that affect them. *Distributive justice* means that employees should experience a fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and burdens in the workplace.

Empowerment at work is described by Conger and Kanungo (1988) as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques” (p. 474). Empowerment in the workplace is also described by Clarkson (1989) as “the sharing of power, knowledge, information, and authority” and as “a prerequisite for the development of self-respect and

of self-esteem” (p. 18). Gastil (1994) suggested that empowerment in the workplace involves “self-determination, inclusiveness, equal participation, and deliberation” (p. 956). According to Wright (1989), empowerment at work is a “process through which members ... take action toward achievement of their collective visions” (p. 229).

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggest that workplace empowerment includes workers having “a sense of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact” (p. 603). *Meaning*, or purpose, refers to workers experiencing a good fit between their work role and their own personal values and needs. *Competence*, or self-efficacy, means that workers have a belief in their own capability to perform work activities. *Self-determination* has to do with workers having a sense of choice in initiating and monitoring one’s own actions. Self-determination also refers to workers having autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behaviour and processes such as deciding on work methods, pace, and effort. *Impact*, the opposite of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1990), is the degree to which a worker can influence outcomes in one’s department or work unit.

Lawler (1992) described an empowering work environment as one in which there is (a) little ambiguity related to roles and tasks, (b) support from superiors and peers, (c) adequate accessible information, (d) resources that enable employees to take action, and (e) a work unit culture that focuses on the importance of the people in the workplace. Wright (1989) suggested that empowerment in the workplace involves teamwork, participation, and collaboration. Spreitzer (1995) suggested that an empowering workplace has a “participatory culture.” More specifically, she said an empowering work environment is one in which employees have autonomy over the initiation and continuation

of work behaviour and processes, legitimate choice in initiating and regulating one's workplace actions, and the opportunity to affect change in one's department or work unit.

Maton and Salem (1995) identified four characteristics which made an organization or setting an empowering one: (a) a *belief system* which focuses on its members' needs, the belief that members should be able to work within the setting to achieve personal goals, a belief in the capacity, potential, and value of each member, (b) accessible *roles* that provide meaningful opportunities for individuals to grow, learn, develop, utilize skills, exercise responsibility, and participate, (c) a *support system* which creates a sense of community and contributes to individuals' quality of life and to their ability to cope with stressful situations in the setting, and (d) *leadership* which is committed to the setting and to the members' growth, which encourages full membership participation, sees member involvement in decision making as an asset and not a threat, has the ability to motivate and inspire members, and has the ability to work well with others, mobilize resources, maintain the stability of the setting, and support setting change and evolution.

Importance of Empowerment at Work

Empowerment is an important and meaningful part of work life. Work can have a significant impact on workers' lives and on their sense of well being (Burke, 1993; Daniels & Guppy, 1992; Klein & D'Aunno, 1986; Sperry, 1991). Empowerment issues at work are of particular importance given the reality that Canadians spend a great deal of their time at work and often experience a variety of stresses associated with work. Stress

associated with feeling powerless, experiencing a lack of participation, and experiencing a lack of control can negatively affect workers' mental and physical health (Burke, 1993; Wallerstein, 1992).

Empowerment at work benefits employees as well as organizations. When employees work in an empowering environment they are likely to be happy, healthy, and productive (Sperry, 1991). Empowered workers may have a sense of increased quality of work life, a sense of worth and value, and a psychological sense of community (Klein & D'Aunno, 1986; Lambert & Hopkins, 1995; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Shelton, 1992). Empowerment may also benefit employees because they are provided with an opportunity to improve their skills, assume greater responsibility, learn, gain experience, and increase their level of involvement and sense of ownership at work (Nelson, 1994). It is theorized that empowerment is negatively associated with powerlessness (Zimmerman, 1995) and with helplessness (Rappaport, 1987; Shain, 1990). Employees that are empowered may also experience a strengthening of their personal efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977; Conger & Kanungo, 1988), and efficacy expectations "determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles" (Bandura, 1977, p. 194). Parker and Price (1994) suggest that when workers have control over decision making, they are likely to experience satisfaction in the workplace along with emotional well being. Cowen (1994) suggests that empowerment is a pathway to wellness; when people are empowered they benefit psychologically and experience "greater gratification in living" (p. 157). Daniels and Guppy (1992) found that psychological well being in the workplace may be increased by providing workers with control.

For the work organization itself, not only is there the humanitarian benefit of being instrumental in creating a healthy workplace community, there may also be financial benefits associated with the organization running more efficiently (Nelson, 1994), employees being more productive (Fleisher, Fleisher, & Brown, 1994; Nelson, 1994; Shain, 1990; Sperry, 1991) and less health care costs related to poor physical health and absenteeism (Adams, 1988). Managers, it is suggested, could also benefit from employee empowerment by eliminating the burden of constant employee monitoring so they are free to engage in other managerial tasks (Nelson, 1994).

There are also humanitarian, health-related, and financial costs associated with an absence of empowerment in the workplace. Employees experiencing a lack of empowerment may be less satisfied at work, less healthy, absent more often, and less productive (Shain, 1990; Sperry, 1991). Block (1987) suggested that nondemocratic and controlling managers, for example, heighten a sense of powerlessness in employees, foster dependency, diminish employees' sense of self-efficacy and limit employees' self-expression. Fleisher et al. (1994) suggest that employees who experience a lack of empowerment at work also experience negative stress, which is associated with various behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and medical problems. They also suggest that prolonged negative stress can lead to workers experiencing learned helplessness, reduced feelings of self-efficacy, and a decline in productivity (Fleisher et al., 1994). A lack of empowerment can affect not only a worker's mental health, but his or her physical health too. Lord and Farlow (1990) note that "personal control--its absence or presence--can

have a direct impact on people's health. If we feel powerless to control our work situation ... then our capacity to control our own health is also undermined" (p. 3).

From an ecological perspective, not only can the workplace environment directly affect the lives of individual workers, it can also have a spillover effect in which families, and perhaps communities, are affected. In a recent report investigating the social and economic context of work life in Canada, current trends impacting Canadian workers and their families are detailed (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994). It is suggested in the report that:

In today's economy the buoyant optimism of the 1950's and 1960's is missing. The result is a sense of insecurity that is especially harsh in the modern workplace--whether it is experienced in the corporate boardroom, in the managerial office, or on the plant floor. (p. 8)

The specific trends identified in the report include dramatic increase in work time often without pay, lack of jobs and unemployment, job insecurity, heightened competition, cost cutting to create a "lean workplace," and business restructuring. These realities can create an atmosphere of stress and strain that affects individuals and their families.

Creating an Empowering Workplace

To create an empowering work environment requires more than trying out a new strategy or the latest management fad. Empowerment is an approach, in a sense, an ideology. It is a process, not merely an outcome. In a recent copy of Harvard Business Review (Rothstein, 1995), a narrative describes an employee's negative reaction to the

news that his company is going to try an empowerment approach: "I say it's just another pile of corporate crap. One minute they try downsizing. The next minute reengineering. After that, they dabble in restructuring. Now Martin's pushing empowerment. What in the world does this empowerment mean? If Martin really wants to empower us, he can give us a raise" (p. 20). Any *one* tactic or strategy is not likely to create an empowering workplace. Prilleltensky (1994) suggests that what makes an intervention or a strategy an empowering one is not its specific content, rather it is its adherence to the values of empowerment.

The work group responsible for the recent report on the social and economic context of work life in Canada suggested that to enable employee wellness, workplaces should work to meet not only the financial and physical needs of employees but also their emotional and mental health needs (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994). The work group further recommended that workplaces not only improve work conditions for employees, but that they also value equity and fairness. In essence, the work group suggested creating an empowering workplace culture--one that values workers' experiences and feelings and one that recognizes that people and processes are at least as important as the goal of profit making.

An empowerment perspective in the workplace should allow for an eclectic approach which recognizes that there is more than one "right" way to enable empowerment; there are multiple realities that exist in the workplace. In a study of personal empowerment in which 38 people who had experienced the process of gaining more control in their lives were interviewed, Lord & Farlow (1990) found that the process

of personal empowerment is a highly individualized one. It is a process which is experienced in different ways for different people. The researchers found that even though there were specific identifiable factors that contributed to a sense of empowerment (like the feeling of being valued, having a willingness to question, having support, and recognizing personal capacities), there was no template or generic empowerment formula which could be applied to all participants.

Empowerment Language and a Paradigm Shift

This research represents a departure from the traditional workplace paradigm in which competition, cost, and profit-making are the key values. This research is conducted in line with the values of an emerging paradigm in which the empowerment and emotional health needs of workers are valued. Along with the emerging paradigm comes a new language--a language of empowerment where terminology such as *self-determination*, *distributive justice*, *participation*, and *humane workplace* are used.

With regard to the new language, however, one should exercise caution recognizing that the mere *use* of empowerment language does not constitute *real* change from the traditional paradigm to the emerging one. Simply using empowerment terminology does not mean that one's actions are compatible with the values of empowerment. In other words, empowerment rhetoric does not equate with empowerment action. Perkins (1995) warns that the use of empowerment language is often empty hype. Cowen (1994) offers a note of caution, suggesting that because empowerment has become a fashionable word, we must question the virtue and morality

of any so-called empowerment actions. We should be aware, then, that misuses and abuses of empowerment language can, and do, occur. One can espouse the values of empowerment, and use empowerment language, but one's actions can belie this.

Forming one's identity and pursuing one's goals at the expense of someone else, for example, is not self-determination, but domination. Acquiring resources and escaping burden at the expense of others is not distributive justice; on the contrary, it is another instance of domination. Having a more powerful voice and more legitimate input at the expense of others is not collaboration and democratic participation; but another instance of domination. Empowerment is a reciprocal phenomenon; it is the sharing of power, resources, burdens, and voice (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). We must be prudent in terms of recognizing that empowerment is practiced, and not just stated. Empowerment is never an abuse of power, domination, or oppression regardless of the language used to justify such actions.

Empowerment is a term used often in today's workplace, a concept whose values are often espoused but not practiced. Sadly, there exists damaging misinformation about empowerment in the workplace from self-proclaimed "experts" who suggest to managers and decision-makers how they can "give" empowerment to employees or how they can "make" employees empowered. Boyett and Conn (1991), for example, wrote a book called Workplace 2000: The revolution reshaping American business in which they outlined how managers, employing an empowerment approach, can succeed in the future. (Emphasis mine).

The leader of the future American business will trust his or her *subordinates* and reject the possibility that the organization can be successful as a result of command and control.... The leader of the future will push responsibility and accountability *down to the lowest ranks* of the organization.... The Workplace 2000 leader will *expect uncompromising excellence* in performance and assume that it can and must be achieved.... To enable excellence, leaders of the future will search diligently for the best way to *do things right the first time* and will be devoted to training and coaching every employee in the details of performance.... Workplace 2000 leaders will insist upon the organization finding and following 'one best way,' but then the new leader will be equally *insistent that employees be 'empowered'* to find a better way. (p. 156)

It is obvious, in this quote, that the needs and experiences of the worker are not valued. Language like "do it right the first time" and "uncompromising excellence" place unrealistic expectations and unnecessary pressures on employees. Terminology like "subordinate" and "down to the lowest ranks" illustrate that employees are viewed as unimportant, and certainly as less important than those working at more senior levels in the hierarchy. Suggesting to leaders that they be "insistent that employees be empowered" shows that the authors do not understand the nature of empowerment as a personal process that cannot be forced on someone. It also demonstrates that they do not understand the role of the democratic leader as a facilitator and not a commander.

According to Rankin (1990), the traditional paradigm of the work organization follows the "technological imperative" in which "people are regarded simply as an extension of technology, as expendable spare parts" (p. 3). He goes on to explain that in the traditional paradigm "control is achieved through layers of supervision, staff

specialists, and formal procedures. An autocratic management style is dominant; competition is the key cultural value” (p. 3). Rankin (1990) suggested that this paradigm “was suited to a world of mass production, standardized products, mechanization, and a poorly educated labour force” (p. 3). Today we require, and indeed deserve, a more empowering model--one that values workers and their workplace experience.

The emerging paradigm represents a transition in our thinking, an alternative way of viewing the work world that is more compatible with workers’ needs and values today. Clarkson (1989) further explains the rethinking that takes place in the emerging paradigm:

Until relatively recently it was taken for granted in many organizations that the values of profit and of technology took precedence over human values. ‘The bottom line’ was all that really mattered, and pollution, shoddy or dangerous products, coupled with an authoritarian management style, were used to achieve that line. But ‘profit maximization’ is no longer generally acceptable.... ‘The bottom line’ no longer provides adequate justification for actions and consequences that are neither morally nor socially acceptable. The values of profit and of technology are no longer taking complete or clear precedence over human values because empowerment of others and collaboration with others is seen to result in greater adaptability, commitment, and productivity. (p. 18-19)

Recognizing that there is more to "good business" than profit making is part of the paradigm shift. There is also the recognition that the workplace is an emotional arena where workers’ experiences and feelings are meaningful and real. Fineman (1993) explained “work organizations, as well as producing goods and services, are also sites where individuals make meaning for themselves, and have their meanings shaped” (p. 12). Putnam and Mumby (1993) suggest:

Emotions play a vital role in organizational life, not simply as forms of labour or the means to instrumental ends but as a way to enhance community and interrelatedness. Work feelings ... emerge from human interaction, aid in co-constructing meaning, build mutual understanding, and provide options for alternative forms of organizing. (p. 55)

At times, the workplace can be a source of negative emotions for workers. Fineman (1993) stated:

Some work organizations offer a cultural value system with rules which compromise, conflict with, or even negate, moral principle. People's lives and livelihoods can be devastated by intentional acts to deceive and cheat. Executives have taken actions which they know can destroy parts of the natural environment on which others depend, dupe customers, lose a colleague his or her job, or renege on an agreement ... [actions which] render moral considerations irrelevant to organizational survival. (p. 17)

Fineman (1993) believes that we should strive to "humanize the workplace" and that "feelings contribute to, and reflect, the structure and culture of organizations" (p. 9). Working toward creating an empowering workplace culture may be one way to humanize the workplace. Dimock (1992) also supports the notion that we need to humanize the institutions that impact people's lives. As previously mentioned though, we should keep in mind that to create an empowering workplace requires more than the mere use of empowerment terminology such as "humanize the workplace." Such language may sound like empowerment but we need to ensure that empowerment language is accompanied by empowerment action. Saying that workers are valued or merely changing the language to one of empowerment is not enough to make the workplace an empowering one.

Community Psychology in the Workplace

This research is an effort to bring community psychology into the workplace, and specifically into the private sector--a community which has largely been neglected by the discipline. Perhaps community psychology does not often venture into the workplace environment because the workplace has been traditionally viewed as the domain of Organizational and Industrial Psychology. Perhaps there is a notion that the workplace environment is not a good fit for community psychology because it ventures away from the discipline's dominant human service approach.

It was over a decade ago that Levin (1983) suggested the need for intervention in the workplace. He said that improving the quality of life in the workplace and increasing worker participation in decision making were necessary and worthwhile goals. Shinn (1987) suggested that community psychology should not restrict itself to research and intervention within traditional mental health and human service settings, but rather should expand into diverse and "naturally occurring" settings such as work sites. She pointed out that "if we hope to prevent mental illness and promote competence in people ... we must work in settings where people spend most of their time and in settings that most influence their lives" (p. 556). Rappaport (1987) also supports the view that community psychology should expand its domain. From an ecological perspective, he suggested that the study of empowerment should not be limited to the study of individuals but should emphasize the study of settings as well. Rappaport described the study of empowerment as "the study of people in context" (p. 121).

By applying the values of community psychology to the workplace, we can work toward improving the fit between workers and their environment, toward eliminating disempowering social conditions, and toward building a workplace culture that is empowering. Bringing community psychology into the workplace may create opportunities for change--the focus, for example, can be on working to *change* or *eliminate* workplace stressors, not merely to *cope* with them. Shinn (1987) pointed out that there are several entry points for community psychology to make a valuable contribution to the workplace. She suggests that "we may be able to work with unions and employers in both the public and private sector to reduce job stressors, enhance supportive resources, and empower workers" (p. 560).

In the previous section, there was an overview of workplace empowerment issues. More specifically, the importance of empowerment at work was discussed in terms of the impact work has on people's lives, the benefits of empowerment at work to both employee and employer, and the costs associated with a lack or absence of empowerment at work. The issue of creating an empowering workplace was also included in this section. The suggestion was made that to create an empowering workplace requires more than trying out the latest management fad; it requires taking on an empowerment approach which adheres to the values of empowerment. There was also a cautionary note about the potential for abuse of empowerment language as well as a discussion of the need for a new workplace paradigm in which workers and their workplace experiences are valued. Finally, I suggested that community psychology has an important role in the workplace.

Limitations of Empowerment

Values, such as self-determination, participation, and distributive justice, have obvious benefits. They also have limitations. Prilleltensky and Nelson (in press) tell us that there is not a value that is universally good across time and place. Over time, the merits of values can diminish as contexts change. At the time of Freud, for example, the value of self-determination was a strong one because this was a time of Victorian repression and restriction. Thus, people wanted individualism and liberation. As times changed, the merits of this value have changed. Today, there is a risk that self-determination translates into the interests of one group or individual being protected at the expense of another. Prilleltensky (in press) points out that self-determination can “potentially undermin[e] other values such as collaboration and caring and compassion for other groups” (p. 19). He goes on to say that “in seeking power for oneself or one’s group, there is a risk of becoming less sensitive to other equally or more disempowered groups” (p. 19).

The value of collaboration has problems as well. This value implies that collaboration is a good thing and that people *want* to collaborate. This may not be true for everyone. If people do not want to collaborate, and it is forced on them, their empowerment may be compromised. We cannot assume that everyone is invested in true collaboration. Furthermore, the need and want for collaboration may change over time and across contexts.

Related to the value of distributive justice, there exists a problem in determining *how* to fairly distribute power and resources, and with *who* will determine how to

distribute them. It is unlikely that everyone's needs can be met. Some people may want to divide the power and resources on the basis of need regardless of means. Others may want to divide power and resources on the basis of merit or depending on the magnitude of the contribution. When speaking of empowerment values, we need to think historically and anticipate changes in the future. What we may see as a good value today may not meet our needs tomorrow.

In addition to empowerment values diminishing across time and context, there is also the limitation that the values could conflict with each other. Each value--self-determination, participation, and distributive justice--is equally important. The values of empowerment are complementary and they should not compete. Any one value taken on its own is insufficient and problems can arise when one value is adhered to more closely than another equally important value (Prilleltensky & Nelson, in press). However, Prilleltensky (in press) suggests that "occasionally, values will conflict in such a way that we will be forced to accord precedence to one or the other" (p. 7). He goes on to point out that making such a choice is difficult in the abstract because we need to have contextual considerations and the needs of individuals taken into account.

In an article by Shipper and Manz (1992), some problems related to an empowerment approach are outlined. The article describes a situation in which, in an attempt to empower workers by decentralizing power and providing opportunities for them, a system of self-managed work teams--a system with no bosses or managers--was adopted. Within this system, employees are empowered to perform many traditional management functions such as assigning work, problem solving, and employee selection

and training. Because everyone is self-managing, they interact with everyone else in the system without concern for a formal chain of command. On a positive note, this system is described as one which encourages fairness, freedom, and commitment and as a system which goes beyond the traditional “democratic, capitalistic organization to an egalitarian, participative, entrepreneurial society.” (p.60). The article offers a word of caution, however, suggesting that this empowerment approach should not be adopted blindly. There are potential problems and considerations that should be taken into account: (1) Not all people function well under a self-managing system. Moving to such a system may be a difficult transition for some people and there could be adjustment problems. (2) Such a system may not fit with an organization’s culture and objectives. (3) Since there is no formal chain of command, there is the possibility for disorganization or confusion in daily work operations. The authors suggest that “when you remove titles and positions and allow people to follow whom they want, it may very well be someone other than the person who has been in charge” (p. 59). (4) This system requires lots of teamwork and an overall commitment to contributing to the entire organization team. Without such a commitment, the system will not be successful. (5) The system requires that individuals in the organization master some basic self-leadership skills. Workers need to learn more than a specialized set of skills to do their own jobs; they need to learn the keys to motivating and directing themselves, and in helping others do the same. The article concludes with this cautionary note: “Such a change is not for everyone or for all organizations. The commitment must be whole, not half-hearted” (p. 60).

Barker (1993) also described problems with a self-managed work team approach. Barker described a scenario in which a hierarchical system was replaced with a new system of employee self-management. He demonstrated how an organizations' members developed a system of value-based normative rules that actually controlled their actions more powerfully and completely than the former system. He used a metaphor of an iron cage to symbolize rational control. In the new system, the iron cage, rather than opening up and giving workers more freedom and control, became tighter, constraining workers more powerfully.

The implementation of empowerment will not be easy. There are no ready-made solutions or generic remedies that can be applied to all work situations with equal success. It seems reasonable to expect that everyone in the work organization will have a responsibility in creating their empowering work environment but admittedly, knowing how to do it is difficult. As mentioned in this section, there are limitations to empowerment and it is important to consider them. However, such limitations are not insurmountable.

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

Empowerment is a central concept in community psychology and it is a concept that can be studied in a variety of settings and organizations. A review of the literature, however, suggests that the study of empowerment in the workplace from a community psychology perspective is uncommon. This research, therefore, represents an effort to expand community psychology's domain by bringing community psychology into the work

environment. I also hope to make a contribution to the existing empowerment literature by offering a value-based framework with which to understand the construct.

Empowerment in the workplace involves “the sharing of power, knowledge, information, and authority. [It is] ... a prerequisite for the development of self-respect and of self-esteem” (Clarkson, 1989, p. 18). It involves teamwork, participation, and collaboration (Wright, 1989). Empowerment is an important and meaningful part of work life. When employees work in an empowering environment they are likely to be happy, healthy, and productive (Sperry, 1991). Empowered workers may have a sense of increased quality of work life, a sense of worth and value, and a psychological sense of community (Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991). Empowerment may also provide employees with an opportunity to improve their skills, assume greater responsibility, learn, gain experience, and increase their level of involvement and sense of ownership at work (Nelson, 1994). In this research, I hope to advance our knowledge about empowerment in the workplace by offering valuable insights into workers’ understanding of the definition of empowerment, the facilitative and restrictive factors of empowerment, and the effects of workplace empowerment. The data gathered represent a variety of worker perspectives and experiences which can all contribute, in some way, to a more complete understanding of the realities and issues of empowerment.

It is also hoped that this research provided an empowering opportunity for workers, who are often not heard, to have their opinions, feelings, and needs about workplace quality of life issues heard and respected. The approach taken in this research was one in which listening to workers’ stories, insights, and experiences of workplace

empowerment was deemed a valuable way to understand the phenomenon. In this research, participants had legitimate voices and input into generating ideas for creating an empowering workplace. Furthermore, this research may have provided an opportunity for participants to experience an increase in awareness about themselves, their quality of life in the workplace, their needs and feelings, and empowerment issues in general as they shared personal information and heard others' experiences. Participants might also have found support and affirmation within the group.

Approach to Research

This research takes a qualitative approach, drawing on workers' experiences to focus attention on and work toward greater understanding of the issues of workplace empowerment and disempowerment. Empowerment researchers (e.g. Lord & Farlow, 1990; Rappaport, 1987) have suggested that the way to learn more about empowerment is to listen to the voices of those who actually experience empowerment or a lack of it. In this research the voices, stories, feelings, and insights of workers have been solicited and valued as meaningful data in an attempt to understand how empowerment, or a lack of empowerment, is experienced in the workplace. The research participants themselves are considered the experts on workplace empowerment as they provide the valuable information necessary to understand the issues and to work toward change.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of this research is to investigate empowerment and disempowerment in the workplace. There are five specific research objectives:

- (1) to investigate workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment;
- (2) to learn about the factors which may facilitate empowerment in the workplace;
- (3) to learn about the factors which may limit empowerment or create barriers to achieving it in the workplace;
- (4) to investigate the effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment; and
- (5) to generate recommendations for creating an empowering workplace environment.

In an effort to achieve the five research objectives, participants were asked questions (see Focus Group Questions in Appendix Aii) addressing each objective. To address objective number one, for example, participants were asked to read a definition of empowerment which divided the construct into three values (self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation). Participants were then asked *Is there anything you would add to this definition of empowerment?* To address objective number two, participants were asked *What goes on in your workplace that enables empowerment?* To address objective number three, participants were asked *What goes on in your workplace that is a barrier to experiencing empowerment?* To address objective number four, participants were asked *How does your experience with empowerment and disempowerment in your workplace affect you?* Finally, to address

objective number five, participants were asked *What can be done to create an empowering workplace?*

Objective number one is included because it is important to get an understanding of what people mean when they talk about *empowerment* in the workplace. When they *say* or *describe* empowerment, do they actually *mean* empowerment or are they describing something else? As mentioned previously, the use of empowerment language does not necessarily mean empowerment is being practiced.

This first question is deductive in nature. I asked participants to comment on the applicability and accuracy of a *predetermined* definition of empowerment rather than asking an inductive question such as *What do you think empowerment is?* It should be noted, though, that there was an opportunity for participants to be inductive in their response to the question *Is there anything you would add to this definition?* The reason I chose to ask the first question deductively is that I wanted to put some boundaries around the construct to ensure that we were all talking about empowerment and not some other construct. By putting boundaries around the construct, I was attempting to reduce the risk of getting responses that were beyond the scope of defining empowerment. This was a challenge I experienced in a pilot focus group I ran on the same topic. In the pilot focus group, which was run in March of 1995, I asked 7 participants *What do you think empowerment is?* Participants provided an abundance of rich information, however, some of the responses stepped outside the bounds of defining *empowerment* in particular. Some participants discussed, for example, what they liked and disliked about their jobs and some of these were things not related to empowerment.

Objectives number two and three refer to the characteristics of empowerment--both the facilitative and limiting factors. As the facilitator, I used both inductive and deductive types of questions to address these two objectives. General inductive open-ended questions such as *What makes your workplace an empowering place for you?* and *In what ways do you experience a lack of empowerment at work?* were asked first, followed by more closed-ended questions. Asking open-ended questions first reduced the risk of biasing or limiting participants' responses. Inductive questions were followed by more deductive closed-ended type questions in the form of probes. The purpose of the probes was to investigate the three specific values of empowerment. To investigate the value of self-determination, probes such as *To what extent do you experience a sense of control in your job?* and *To what extent do you experience a lack of control in your job?* were used. To investigate the value of collaboration and democratic participation, probes such as *To what extent do you have input into the decisions that affect you at work?* and *To what extent are you denied input into the decisions that affect you at work?* were used. To investigate the value of distributive justice, the probes *To what extent do you feel you are treated fairly at work?* and *To what extent do you feel you are treated unfairly at work?* were used.

Objective four was included because it is important to understand how empowerment and disempowerment in the workplace affect people--particularly since so much time is spent at work. Objective five is included because I recognize that the participants are, in many ways, experts on empowerment in the workplace. Having

experienced empowerment and/or disempowerment, participants were able to offer valuable insights and ideas on how to move toward creating an empowerment workplace.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 22 white collar workers (8 men; 14 women), over the age of 18, participated in four focus groups and five interviews. Fourteen workers participated in the focus groups (two focus groups had three participants, and two focus groups had four participants) and eight workers participated in the interviews (three interviews were two-person interviews and two interviews were single-person interviews). The focus groups were conducted throughout September 1995 and then again in December 1995 and in April 1996. Interviews were conducted in December 1995, April 1996, and May 1996. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in Waterloo, Mississauga, and Toronto. Each focus group session lasted from one to two hours. The interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. I facilitated each focus group and interview. Participants were employed in the following types of organizations: financial institutions (six participants), telecommunications and computing (six participants), government (three participants), education (two participants), insurance (one participant), health care (one participant), real estate management and development (one participant), and other (two participants). Workers were employed in a variety of positions within those organizations. Positions include: Public Relations Officer, Auditor, Social Worker, Customer Service

Representative, Business Analyst, Teacher, Account Manager, Sales Representative, Researcher, Programmer, Human Resources worker, Underwriter, and Project Manager.

Participation was solicited in two main ways: by placing newspaper advertisements and by posting informational flyers. A “snowballing technique” was also employed in which I contacted potential participants from my existing network and asked those people if they knew potential participants. The informational flyers (Appendix B) were posted, with permission, in public areas of various organizations in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Newspaper advertisements were placed in two local community newspapers: the Pennysaver and the Kitchener-Waterloo Record (Appendix C).

Data Collection

Prior to conducting the focus groups and interviews, participants received an information package containing information about the research. In the package there was a letter (Appendix Ai) providing details about the time, date, and place of the focus group; a summary of focus group questions (Appendix Aii); and a consent form (Appendix iii). Each participant was asked to bring his or her signed consent form to the focus group session or interview.

In the focus groups and personal interviews, participants were invited to share their experiences, feelings, and opinions of personal empowerment, and lack of empowerment, in their workplace. The primary instrument used to facilitate discussion was an interview guide (Appendix Aii). I conducted all focus groups and interviews. With consent from all participants, each session was audio taped and later I transcribed

them. A summary of findings was sent to those participants who had expressed interest in receiving such information (Appendix D).

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures employed in this qualitative study are consistent with those supported by qualitative researchers like Patton (1990), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The data from focus groups and interviews consists of participants' own words as they responded to the questions. In this study, I was concerned with making inferences and with understanding the experiences of the participants--their uniqueness and commonalities. It was important for this data to be gathered and analysed with integrity. Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggested that qualitative data gathering and analysis should be "trustworthy." They proposed four criteria for establishing trustworthiness: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The techniques used in this research seek to attain such trustworthiness.

Dependability

Dependability is closely associated with reliability. An important way to establish dependability was to create an atmosphere of trust and comfort for the participants so that they felt they could respond to the questions accurately and honestly. The informal nature of the focus groups and interviews, the complete description of the procedures to be employed, and a reminder of the participants rights to confidentiality and withdrawal from the study were ways employed to encourage comfort and a sense of safety for participants.

Participants were also assured that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers and that I was not looking for any specific answer to any question. Participants were encouraged to respond in any way they felt was appropriate and accurate for them.

Credibility

Credibility is closely associated with internal validity. Credibility addresses the question *Is the data being collected helping us to understand the construct under investigation--in this case, empowerment in the workplace?* To increase the credibility of the data in this research, I wanted to ensure that what I *thought* I observed and heard during data collection is in fact what I actually observed. This was done by periodically asking participants throughout the sessions *Do I understand that you are saying xyz? Does xyz reflect what you said, feel, or think?* I also aimed at increasing the credibility of the data by talking with participants about the accuracy of the results. Once I had analysed the data, I sent interested participants a feedback package detailing the findings. Participants had approximately two weeks to review the feedback and then they were invited to discuss the accuracy of the findings with me on the telephone--either they contacted me or I contacted them. This technique of “checking out” the accuracy of the data with another source (the participants) is called triangulation. Fourteen participants discussed the findings with me. They affirmed the accuracy of the results suggesting that the data accurately reflected what they had said, felt, and thought in the focus groups and interviews.

Confirmability

Confirmability is closely associated with neutrality and objectivity. It means that the reactions and involvement of the researcher are taken into account. In an effort to increase confirmability, I kept a summary sheet for each focus group on which reflective and analytic thoughts were recorded (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Pertinent information was recorded on the summary sheet as soon as possible after the focus group session or interview had taken place, and prior to the data being transcribed. Descriptive notes included details about how the focus group session or interview went, the emotion of the group, my personal reactions and impressions, and the influence I may have had on the participants. Analytic notes included details pertaining to coding and organizing the data, the quality of the data, and clarification of what was said. The summary sheet notes were used during data analysis to support the transcribed data.

Transferability

Transferability is closely associated with applicability and external validity. Transferability addresses the question *Can other researchers use and apply the findings to their work?* Transferability is possible through providing rich data. In this research, the goal was to take an in-depth look at empowerment in the workplace--to acquire thick description and rich data. This perspective aims at establishing meaning, not at making generalizations to the population, nor at establishing causality. To acquire thick description and rich data I interviewed people from various workplaces, employed in jobs

at various levels, in various types of work and industries. I also gave participants an opportunity to explore and expand on the meaning and quality of their responses.

With the consent of participants, the focus group sessions were audio taped and later transcribed and analysed. I read through the transcribed data line by line to code and organize it into meaningful units. The first level of coding was primarily descriptive in nature and its purpose was to break down or reduce the data into more manageable units. Strauss and Corbin (1990) call this first level of coding “open coding.” In the open coding phase the responses were organized according to question i.e. responses pertaining to question number one were categorized as such. It should be noted that responses pertaining to any specific question did not necessarily and only follow that particular question. In other words, responses to question one for example, about the definition of empowerment, were given throughout the sessions in responses to later questions.

I chose to use a colour coding technique, in which each category of responses were assigned a specific colour, because it seemed to work best with the data. Answers pertaining to the definition of empowerment were assigned one colour, answers pertaining to enablers of empowerment were assigned another colour, and so on. I revisited each transcript numerous times, extracting and coding information which addressed each research objective. There was a lot of data to keep organized, so a summary sheet of each transcript was prepared. There were nine summary sheets in total, corresponding to the total number of focus groups (four) and interviews (five).

The information from each transcript summary sheet was then transferred to a data analysis matrix (Table 1) which was created as an analytical tool to manage the data and to

determine if there were patterns or relationships among factors (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Strauss and Corbin (1990) call this second level of coding “axial coding.” Whereas the purpose of open coding is to break the data down, axial coding combines the data in ways to form an emerging theory. The matrix was organized so that the identification number of each focus group appeared down the right column and the research objectives appeared across the top. In the first column are the results related to the participants’ definitions and perceptions of empowerment. In the second column the factors that facilitate empowerment in the workplace are listed. In the third column there are the factors that limit empowerment in the workplace. In the fourth column responses related to the effects of empowerment in the workplace appear. In the fifth column there are recommendations for change. I also added a column to record any emerging themes. The dark grey area at the bottom of the table, called “Final Summary of Data,” is the area where the final manipulation of the data was recorded. Here, information from the nine summary sheets was reduced and combined as appropriate until there was a final succinct summary of the data from all 22 participants. The summary sheet appears as Appendix E.

Table 1

Data Analysis Matrix

Transcript #	Issue 1: Definition	Issue 2: Enablers	Issue 3: Barriers	Issue 4: Effects	Issue 5: Change	Emerging Themes
1						
2						
...						
9						
Final Summary of Data						

There was a low level of risk anticipated in this study. Participants may have had concerns about jeopardizing their jobs by participating in this research; thus maintaining confidentiality was paramount. Participants were not required to disclose their full identity nor specific place of employment to other participants. They were asked only to provide a first name and basic descriptive information about their place of work. I did not disclose any information about participants' identities to anyone. All participants were asked to respect the privacy of other participants by keeping any information disclosed in the focus group confidential. I was the only person that heard and transcribed the audio tapes. My research advisor saw only first names on the transcripts. Audiotapes were erased after the data was transcribed. Issues pertaining to confidentiality were outlined for participants in the information package letter (Appendix Ai), in the consent form (Appendix Aiii), and they were reminded of these issues in the introduction and closing of each focus group. Steps were also taken to encourage a sense of comfort and safety in all participants. There was a possible risk that certain focus group members, for various reasons, may have felt silenced or overpowered in the group. I made every effort to facilitate equitable participation in the groups. Participants were also provided with details on how to contact a support person, should they have needed to do so prior to or following the data collection.

Feedback detailing a summary of findings was available for each participant (Appendix D). No names of participants were used in the feedback. Only those participants expressing interest in receiving feedback received it either by mail or by

picking it up at Wilfrid Laurier University's Psychology office. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct a follow up focus group to discuss the findings. Instead I talked on the phone with participants who had expressed a willingness to participate in a follow up focus group, giving them an opportunity to discuss the accuracy of the feedback with me.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate empowerment in the workplace. The participants in this study shared information, insights, and opinions about their experiences of workplace empowerment and disempowerment. In this section, an overview and discussion of participants' responses will be presented along with the current academic literature. Areas to be covered include workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment, factors which may facilitate and limit empowerment in the workplace, effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment, and suggestions for creating an empowering workplace environment. This study employed qualitative methodology, and as such it does not attempt to identify differences, suggest causal relationships, nor make generalizations to the population. Qualitative methods were used to obtain depth of information about the quality of workers' experiences, as opposed to breadth of information. While generalizations cannot be made, the trends emerging from this data appear to provide support for the existing body of literature.

Definition of Empowerment

To investigate workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment, participants were asked to consider a definition of empowerment which divided the construct into three values: self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation. Self-determination means that people are able to pursue and achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations. Distributive justice is the fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. Collaboration and democratic participation means having a voice and legitimate input into the decisions affecting one's life. Participants were then asked *Is there anything you would add to this definition of empowerment?* I also probed with questions such as: *What do you think of this definition? Do you agree with it? Would you refute it?* Answers provided insight into how people understand empowerment and relate to the three values of empowerment.

At this point, it should be mentioned that I thought each of the three value categories were distinct and separate. I had expected to find participants' responses to this question falling neatly into one of the three categories. However, what I found was that many responses fell into *both* the category of self-determination and the category of collaboration/democratic participation. The categories were not separate. They overlapped. As Rappaport (1987) noted, empowerment includes *both* "individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community" (p. 121). It was, therefore, not appropriate to assign such responses to one category or the other. So, I reframed the three categories to more accurately reflect what the participants said. As mentioned in previous sections of this paper, I have combined the

two values of self-determination and collaboration/democratic participation into a category called self-determination/ participation.

Overall, participants thought that the three values, as stated on their question sheet (see Appendix Aii), accurately and thoroughly defined empowerment in the workplace. No participant refuted the definition provided, but a few participants felt the definition was too complex and too theoretical in nature. No one explicitly added a new value or category to the definition. The first question was an invitation for participants to explore their own ideas about what empowerment in the workplace means to them. When considering their own definition, every person talked about issues related to the value of self-determination/participation. One participant described empowerment as “having control over your work and work environment.” Another participant said empowerment is “the ability to have your say and have it acted upon.” Another explained empowerment this way:

Empowerment is the freedom to do my job the way I see fit. I have a goal and an outcome specified for me, but I can get there the way I see fit without someone controlling me and looking over my shoulder all the time. Empowerment is the freedom to do my job.

Surprisingly, none of the participants described issues relating to the value of distributive justice when answering this first question. One person referred to this value briefly, saying “fairness tends not to be held up as an important value. It seldom happens in a hierarchy.” I am not prepared, however, to conclude that the value of distributive justice is not part of workplace empowerment. As the focus groups and interviews progressed, participants did speak about issues related to distributive justice in their

responses to other questions. In general, they communicated that distributive justice was part of empowerment because an absence of distributive justice was related to feeling disempowered at work. When pondering their own definition of the construct, however, they did not align workplace empowerment with this particular value. Instead, they most closely aligned workplace empowerment with the value of self-determination/participation.

Participants might have responded in this way because the value of distributive justice is not tested or discussed as much as the value of self-determination/participation in everyday work life. Therefore, distributive justice does not readily come to mind as part of workplace empowerment. Empowerment is a term that has been used extensively in business, but perhaps distributive justice, in particular, is not talked about in the workplace as being part of empowerment. This value is not mentioned in company literature such as mission statements that espouse empowerment, nor is it mentioned in popular business magazines that present articles on empowerment. As Prilleltensky and Nelson (in press) noted, in our culture, we tend not to talk about distributive justice because it poses a threat to hierarchies and power relationships. Our culture and popular discourse seem to avoid the issue of distributive justice because it threatens the status quo, and doing so could mean negative political, economic, or social repercussions for the powerful groups of society (Prilleltensky, 1990).

It is also possible that participants did not describe issues relating to the value of distributive justice when answering this first question because specific values of empowerment are more or less important in certain contexts and at certain times (Prilleltensky & Nelson, in press; Rappaport, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995). In the work

context, for example, employees may feel that self-determination/participation is the most important part of empowerment. Distributive justice, in that particular context, may be important but not *as* important as self-determination/participation. In other situations--for example at church, at home, or in political arenas--the values may configure differently.

In addition to being influenced by place and time, the literature suggests that empowerment can also be experienced differently by different people (Rappaport, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995). One participant suggested "the process of empowerment is different [for different people] because a barrier to one person may not be a barrier to another."

Another participant explained:

My definition of empowerment and someone else's may have the same components but I think the balance may be different. There are different degrees. For example, I am very early in my career so having input into certain decisions may not be as important to me right now as the other two values. ... One value [of empowerment] may take up a larger percentage than the other two values.

One participant, who agreed that empowerment is made up of component parts, or values, talked about how the values must be experienced in combination to feel empowered. He said, "Every situation is all of those values in a blend. No *one* of them can define a situation as empowering on its own." To separate the concept of empowerment into values (see Prilleltensky, 1994; Prilleltensky & Nelson, in press) is certainly useful for understanding the concept. However, empowerment is a holistic concept that is not experienced in a piecemeal manner. It is the adherence to all the values of empowerment, in a balanced way, that makes a situation empowering (Prilleltensky, 1994; Prilleltensky & Nelson, in press). If we have self-determination/participation at

work, but are denied distributive justice, we are not likely to feel empowered. To be empowered, then, is to experience a blend of all the component parts, or values, of empowerment.

Summary of Section

Participants thought the definition of empowerment--as made up of self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation--accurately and thoroughly defined the construct. When considering their own definition of empowerment, all participants talked about issues related to the value of self-determination/participation and no one spoke about issues related to distributive justice. The notion that empowerment changes across time, place, and people, as well as the notion that empowerment values must be experienced in combination, were also discussed. In the next section, a summary of responses to the questions *What enables empowerment at work?* and *What are barriers to empowerment at work?* is given. Responses to this question provide insight into workers' perceptions about what makes them feel empowered and disempowered at work.

Barriers and Enablers

After participants explained their perception and definition of workplace empowerment, they were asked to reflect on what factors facilitate and restrict empowerment at work. To learn about the factors which may facilitate empowerment in the workplace, participants were asked *What goes on in your workplace which enables self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation?*

Another way of asking this question was *What happens in your workplace that enables empowerment?* To learn about the factors which may create barriers to achieving empowerment in the workplace, participants were asked *What goes on in your workplace that is a barrier to experiencing self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation?* Another way of asking this question was *What happens in your workplace that is a barrier to empowerment?* Answers provided insight into workers' perceptions of how empowerment is and is not practiced in the workplace. Responses also provide insight into what makes people feel empowered and disempowered at work, as well as insight into the nature of the work environment in which empowerment is fostered or inhibited. The question about facilitative factors was asked first, however, participants seemed to find it easier to reflect on what *is not* empowering for them in their workplace. Thus, most participants answered the question about barriers to empowerment before reflecting on facilitative factors of empowerment.

In general, participants communicated the idea that having the values of empowerment espoused in theory but not practiced is the main barrier to their empowerment. One participant said, "I think empowerment is just a buzzword that the corporate community likes to use, but don't practice." Another participant said, "I've just seen so often that we are lead to believe that we are empowered. They speak a lot about it, but when it comes right down to doing it it just doesn't happen." Another said, "They don't live up to what they say. That's for sure." Responses are further organized under the categories of self-determination/participation and distributive justice.

Self-determination/participation

Related to the value of self-determination/participation, participants said that what facilitated empowerment at work was having a sense of control in their job, a comfortable level of responsibility and challenge, voice and choice, resources for development, balance between individual and collective needs, and democratic leadership. Participants also said that working in a punitive environment and having an overpowering manager were barriers to experiencing empowerment at work.

Sense of Control

Participants said that when they felt they had no control over how and when their job was done they felt disempowered. One participant talked about how having no control over setting her own timeline was a barrier to her empowerment at work. She explained how having unrealistic timelines imposed on her and her team mates set them up for failure:

...we're given unrealistic timelines and it is something we have no control over. We know there is no way we're going to make the timeline they've given us, and we keep saying that but we have no control in it. So basically we fail because we cannot make the timeline. People are setting the timeline who have no experience in the area.

Conversely, participants felt that having the freedom over the how and when of their job, and being able to set and achieve goals in their workplace enabled their empowerment. It was approximately two decades ago, that Hackman and Oldham (1976) talked about the importance of designing work in such a way as to give freedom and

autonomy to workers. If workers are given “substantial freedom, independence, and discretion... in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out,” they said, employees will experience higher job satisfaction and be motivated to perform effectively in their jobs. More recently, Spreitzer (1995) suggested that an important part of workplace empowerment is for workers to be able to have autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behaviour and processes. She suggests that being able to make decisions about work method, pace, and effort, for example, is part of what makes a worker feel empowered. Maton and Salem (1995) suggest that a characteristic of an empowering setting is that it provides its members with opportunity to set and achieve personal goals. One worker, feeling empowered in his current job, said, “now I am completely in control of how and what I’m doing. That gives me self control. Control in the sense that I control what should be done, where I should take things. I’ve been given room to maneuver without someone looking over my shoulder.” Another participant, who reported feeling empowered at work, described a work situation in which she felt she had freedom and control in her job:

I have freedom to move within my company and to achieve personal goals whether they be career or otherwise. In my job I’ve been promoted because I worked really hard. I knew that I would get the accolades I deserve and get promoted to a certain position that I wanted. To me self-determination means you can achieve certain goals.

Participants also talked about how setting and pursuing goals related to the direction of their careers made them feel they had control over their career destiny, and that was

empowering. Workers said that having legitimate personal development and advancement opportunities, and having control of these opportunities, enabled their empowerment.

Level of Responsibility

A few participants also mentioned that having a comfortable level of responsibility and challenge in their job, as well as having a good fit between the worker and type of job, enabled empowerment. They said it was important for them to be in jobs that recognize, and are suited to, their skills and abilities. Lambert and Hopkins (1995) support the notion that there should be a good fit between the worker and the level of challenge and responsibility they have in their job. They suggest that “jobs that challenge workers by requiring them to use skills they value can create a sense of mastery, thus reinforcing a sense of mutual commitment between employer and employee” (p. 154). On the other hand, “jobs that overwhelm workers with work responsibilities can interfere with the mastery of job requirements and thus detract from workers’ sense of efficacy” (p. 154). Maton and Salem (1995) suggest that in an empowering setting--where members take on roles that complement their level of skill, responsibility, and self-confidence--members should be encouraged to take on new roles and responsibilities only as their skill and interest increase.

Voice and Choice

Participants also said that not being able to make decisions, not having legitimate input, not having legitimate choices, and not being able to affect change in their workplace

limited their empowerment. They expressed that empowerment for them meant having “some kind of meaningful say in their work lives” which is how Wolff (1987, p. 157) defined empowerment. One participant summed up the value of self-determination/participation this way: “You don’t want to just feel like a mouse on the treadmill. You want to have some direction into which way the treadmill goes.” Another participant explained that in her workplace she has no input into the decisions affecting her job:

...decisions are made outside of my unit about my unit. It’s hard to understand how they [management] go about making their decisions... I just feel that it’s wrong for another department to make decisions for people that have no say in it. Nobody that I directly deal with at work, me or my supervisor, have a say in the decisions that affect me.

Conversely, empowerment was facilitated in an environment where participants had valid choices, legitimate input into the decisions affecting their job, and the ability to affect change. Spreitzer (1995) suggests that having impact, or being able to influence strategic or administrative outcomes in ones’ department or work unit is a necessary part of workplace empowerment. One participant said “I recognize in my job it is important for me to have input personally. I feel like I am contributing that way and that I am able to effect change in my small area.” Another worker said, “I definitely find it empowering in my workplace that I have total control over my schedule and any decision that is affected around my schedule... I don’t have to get it OK’ed.”

Lawler (1992) tells us that giving employees access to resources so that they can take action in the organization is part of empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) found that “a

participative culture helps employees believe that they are important assets in the organization and that they can make a difference” (p. 620-621). Spreitzer also suggests that having legitimate choice in initiating and regulating one’s workplace actions is an important part of workplace empowerment. Shain (1990) suggests that if “we want a robust and healthy democracy, we must encourage the development of workplace relations that foster the democratic competence of employees” (p 3).

Other participants explained that in their work situations they had the opportunity to give input, but it was not valued, listened to nor acted upon. One worker explained:

Right now we are going through a major exercise...what they’ve done is they’ve asked us for our opinions...but we have a very strong sense that they’ve already made up their minds. So albeit they are asking us the questions and making us feel that we may have a voice, I don’t truly feel that we do. I think the decisions have already been made. They ask us for our opinions then they twist what we say so that we feel we have a sense that we had some sort of say in it. There is a lot of talking out of both sides of the mouth.

Another participant explained, “empowerment for someone at my level is very very limited. We’re able to say our opinion but it takes a long time to get the wheels in motion to get things going, whether it’s a good suggestion or not. To get it to come to fruition it’s very difficult to do.” Another talked about a situation in which he had no input into the decision that would directly affect his mandate. He explained, “All of a sudden there’s all these significant changes in my job and I don’t feel like I have any say whatsoever. My input was asked for but it fell by the wayside.” Another participant told us that in her workplace “we’re encouraged to speak up, but it doesn’t go anywhere. It’s in one ear and out the other.”

Another participant talked about how it was a barrier to her empowerment to spend time and energy giving input that is not going to be used. She explained, “We’re having all these group meetings, coming up with brainstorming ideas, and formulating all these great plans, and then they just sort of float out the window.” She added, it’s “frustrating to see yourself putting the time and effort into coming up with ideas and decisions and then watching nothing happen.” Another participant wondered aloud: “Why did we bother spending all that time putting together a mission statement? ...every policy decision has been in violation of the mission statement.”

Others spoke about the numerous levels of approval in their workplaces as barriers to their empowerment. One worker explained how her input gets lost or manipulated in the many levels of the hierarchy at her workplace. She explained, “Basically we are told we have input and we have meetings to give input. But there’s so many levels it has to be passed by, by the time it gets passed through the line, the input is so different than what we gave that we might as well not give it anyway.” Another worker said, “For me, hierarchy absolutely has to do with disempowerment because there is so many levels and things get so distorted.”

Balance Between Process and Outcome

Another participant added that, while being able to participate in decision making and having a legitimate voice in the workplace was an important facilitative factor for empowerment, it was a barrier to empowerment to have no reasonable limits in place around the participation process. He explained, “If you collaborate to the point where

absolutely nothing gets done then it just generates frustration amongst the group... the decision should be democratic to make people feel empowered.” He adds, “There has to be a limit to the democratic process. Once everyone’s input is in, there comes a point where the process has to stop or you never get to the next step of actually doing something.” There needs to be a balance between individual needs for input and collective needs for action.

Punitive Consequences

Participants also communicated that it was a barrier to their empowerment to work in a punitive environment where there are negative repercussions for speaking up, trying something new, or for making a poor decision. One participant explained the punitive environment in her workplace: “You speak up, you get in trouble for it. You don’t speak up then you’re dumped on all the time. It feels like a no-win situation.” Another said, “They [management] don’t admit when something doesn’t work. But for the rest of us, trying something can blow up in your face and you have no protection. ...[Employees] have lost their jobs trying to do things.” Later she adds, “I made a decision and I just felt I was being crucified for it.” Another noted that, “If you’ve ever been outspoken in the past, it takes a long time for that to be forgotten... The bad things are written on your file in permanent ink and the good things are written in pencil.”

Resources for Personal Development

Participants also talked about having a lack of tools, information, or training as barriers to their empowerment. The research supports the notion that, in an effort to make the workplace an empowering place, workplaces need to provide information to workers to enable them to do their jobs and make decisions (e.g. Lawler, 1992). One participant explained:

We get told things like that you can take courses and get reimbursed, but they ran out of funds. Or there are 3000 employees and only one seminar being offered for 12 people. We keep getting told that we can improve ourselves, our skills, but they don't provide the resources to do it.

Another worker explains:

In my job, a barrier to self-determination is that I don't feel I've been given all the tools I need to do my job. I think there is an assumption that you were just born with that knowledge. The information is just not there to do a thorough job sometimes.

Management Style

The majority of participants suggested that the presence or absence of empowerment in ones' workplace depends largely on the type of manager that one works with. A main theme that emerged is that poor management is a barrier to empowerment. A poor manager was described by the participants as someone who does not practice the values of empowerment. He or she is undemocratic, restrictive, and overpowering. He or she is described by workers as someone who abuses power, does not share power, is coercive, controlling, and manipulative. Serrano-Garcia (1994) explains that

empowerment is based on the sharing of power in power relationships, and a poor manager attempts to exert power *over* the employees (Parker & Price, 1994; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Participants talked a lot about how disempowering it was for them to work with management that abuses, or does not share, power. One participant said “there are certain managers who want to make sure they’re in charge and that they have control over you. They want that manager attitude and manager status.” Another described her controlling manager this way:

He says you’re here to do an 8:30 to 5 o’clock job. Just do it! Pay attention to it. Stay focused. I don’t want you chatting about what happened on the weekend. I don’t want you socializing.... I don’t want you looking up from your computer. Look at what I’m doing... Serious control. I don’t want you doing this. I don’t want you doing that.

Another participant said, “The Old Boys Network is there and they are not going to want to share the power... Empowerment will never get down to the peons where it really should be. The power will never filter down.” Another worker said “It’s management’s way or forget about it. Because they have control they want to prove to themselves that they have power over you.” Another participant recalled being overpowered by a manager: “I’ve been in horrible situations where I’ve had to take the crap because of what a manager directed. Just because I was lowest on the totem pole.”

Block (1987) describes how nondemocratic and controlling management styles encourage powerlessness in employees, foster dependency and limit employees’ self-expression. Shain (1990) says that “managerial practices that are highly and unnecessarily directive, where control is exercised over even the minutiae of performance” has a

profound negative effect on workers mental health. He adds that “objects of such surveillance are made to feel stupid or insignificant” (p 3).

A few participants explained how an unsupportive manager can be a barrier to their empowerment at work. One worker explained, “You need to feel that [management] are supportive of what you do. no matter what the outcome. There are managers that are there to take the credit, but they’re nowhere in sight when the opposite takes place.” A poor manager is also described by participants as someone who is not accessible, is unapproachable, unsupportive, unqualified, and not knowledgeable. A poor manager is described as someone “who does not care about people” and who practices favouritism, sexism, or other biases. A poor manager is further described as someone who does not give employee useful feedback nor recognize their efforts. One man explained his position, “I think it’s incumbent upon the manager to let me know when I’ve done something right and let me know that he’s recognized it. The fact that he’s not doing that is just as bad as him not noticing as far as I’m concerned.”

Conversely, participants suggested that a good manager could enable empowerment, and this view is also supported in the literature. Gastil (1994) said that democratic leadership plays a vital role in empowering employees. He defined democratic leaders as those who rely “upon group decision making, active member involvement, honest praise and criticism, and a degree of comradeship” (p. 955). This is in contrast, he says, to nondemocratic leaders who are “domineering or uninvolved” (p. 955). Maton and Salem (1995) suggest that good leadership is a characteristic of an empowering setting. They describe good leadership as that which is committed to the setting and to

the members' growth, that which encourages full membership participation, sees member involvement in decision making as an asset and not a threat, has the ability to motivate and inspire members, and has the ability to work well with others, mobilize resources, maintain the stability of the setting, and support setting change and evolution.

In addition to being skillful and knowledgeable, a good manager was described as one who shares power and is supportive. In other words, a good manager allows employees to experience power *to* (Parker & Price, 1994; Yoder & Kahn, 1992) and does not attempt to impose power *over* the employees. A good manager gives employees power to pursue goals, make decisions, and have a legitimate voice. A good manager is also described as someone who trusts the worker's ability to get the job done, helps guide workers when help is needed, gives encouragement and support, is a motivator, works with integrity and has no ulterior motives, is understanding and approachable, and is fair and compassionate. A good manager is described as a facilitator and a coach.

The literature suggests that empowering leaders are those who share power with employees, have confidence in employees abilities, foster opportunities for employees to participate in decision making, provide autonomy and reduce constraint, and use power in a positive manner (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Parker and Price (1994) suggest that "managers who exercise power in a supportive manner will be an empowering force for their workers" (p. 915).

One worker explained that her concept of a good manager was one that takes a "hands off" approach, giving the power to the employee to do the job in her own way: "I think a good manager is one who clearly states what the goals are and lets you run with it.

‘Here’s what we need to accomplish and here’s all the room you have to get it done. Here’s what I want to achieve, and if you have problems come to me.’” Another said, “I have a manager who does empower us by giving us the work saying ‘here you go. You know what you have to do. Do it.’” Another worker explained her manager’s positive attitude in these words:

The attitude is ‘this is your job. I’m not going to bother you. You just go ahead and do it. If you have a problem you can hunt somebody down to help you out with it. I’m not going to be looking over your shoulder and breathing down your neck, or timing you when you come in in the morning, timing you when you take your lunch.’

Another explained, “I have the freedom in my job to try new things... Sometimes it doesn’t work, but [my supervisor] is great. She will talk to me about why she thinks it didn’t work. She doesn’t come down hard on me. ... She supports me and is there to help me if I need it, but she’s not standing outside the door watching me.”

Distributive Justice

Related to the value of distributive justice, participants said that having an unequitable distribution of workload, an economic climate in which employers are favoured and employees often overworked and underpaid, and having unfair recognition and promotion criteria were barriers to experiencing empowerment at work.

Workload

Specifically related to the value of distributive justice, participants thought that not having the workload shared equitably or having a burdensome workload was a barrier to empowerment at work. This view is also supported in the literature (e.g. Shain, 1990). One participant summed it up this way: "When divvying up the work it should be done fairly so that the load is shared by all instead of one person having to take it all on." Another participant remembered a time when she felt disempowered because she was "the one who got dumped on with a lot of nonchallenging things to do." Another participant explained that the workload in her job is not divided fairly. She said:

The work is not equitably distributed. A majority is dumped to two people and it's a four-person team... everyone is not pulling their weight. The people who are not pulling their weight are making a hell of a lot more money. They are also the ones who are supposed to be in control of what's happening, and really don't fulfill any of that so we end up carrying a lot of the weight.

Another participant talked about how the extra work she took on was not recognized nor appreciated. She felt that this was a barrier to her empowerment. She noted that in her workplace "If you go over and beyond the call of duty quite often what that does is it encourages extra workload or an expectation that you're able to handle and able to do more than the person sitting next to you, but the recognition is not there." Another participant said, "Oh yeah. I think it's the little person who gets all the crap where I work. Management hands it down and you're not allowed to hand it down any further. So the little person is the one who gets all the work all the time."

Empowerment is a term often used and *misused* in the workplace. A common misuse of the term is when it is applied to a situation in which workers are overloaded with a burdensome amount of work. Sometimes, workers are told they are empowered because they are given “added responsibility.” Often what happens is that workers are overloaded and burdened with responsibility. This is not empowerment. Empowerment is not the administration of additional burden under the guise of “added responsibility.” Real empowerment is a positive and strengthening concept. While giving employees additional responsibility and challenge in their job may give them the opportunity to feel a high level of self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), overdoing it may overwhelm them and limit their sense of empowerment. What is empowering for workers is to give them a *comfortable* balance between responsibility and challenge. One participant, who previously managed staff, shared this view. He said, “I don’t think it’s empowering to withhold responsibility from somebody. If you can offer them more then offer them more. I think it’s empowerment to give them more. But in the same respect don’t just give volumes of work, rather do what enhances their job.”

In addition to experiencing an unequitable distribution of workload, one woman talked about not receiving the credit for the work she and her team mates did as a barrier to empowerment. She told us that the work she does “certainly is not recognized as my work. The credit is given to the team, and basically only two of us are doing the work... We should have been hired at a higher level and for a lot more money for the work we’re doing. There is no recognition of that. None whatsoever.”

Men and women are spending a great many hours in jobs outside the home. In many cases, workers are paid for a 40-hour week but they are expected to put in many more hours than this. They do this because it is expected of them and/or because they have so much work that they cannot possibly get it all done during regular work hours. It is my experience that workers who work overtime without pay are often made to feel that they are more valuable and more loyal to the company if they work more hours than the job description states. This is a blatant injustice. A participant explained that, in his company, workers are expected to work overtime without pay. He explains, “[the company] says you’re compensated indirectly. But you’re not. No one but part time employees get paid for working extra hours. As a salaried employee, you’re expected to put in the hours to get the job done.”

Economic Climate

A few participants also spoke of the economic climate as being a barrier to distributive justice. Changes in the global, national, and local economic climate are having a profound effect on workers’ sense of empowerment (Human Resources Development Canada, 1994). The economic times are such that employers are often favoured. As one participant said, “It’s an employers’ market.” It is a time of cutbacks and downsizing. It is a time when many workers fear job loss. One participant noted, “It’s difficult to feel a sense of empowerment in this time of uncertainty.” It is also a time when, as one worker said, “More and more work is expected for less pay. It’s frustrating.” In some cases, workers must do the extra work for less pay simply to keep their jobs. They may be made

to feel they must be quietly grateful to have a job, regardless of how disempowered they are in that job. One participant told us that “I’m at 80% above the legislated workload we’re supposed to have” and her pay has not been increased to reflect that increase in workload. Another noted that, “Because of the economic times, it’s not easy to move onto another job, so people are forced to stay in their job.” Another said, “you’re only one trump card away from being unemployed.” One participant explained how a recent restructuring in her organization translated into unfair pay for her and many of her colleagues:

Where I work, we’ve been reorganizing so ...with the next promotion there is no pay increase because of this new broadbanding. It seems no matter what you do they’re not paying you fairly. I’m at the top of my level so I get all the work but don’t get paid for it. There’s no incentive to get promoted or work harder, because you don’t get paid for it.

Recognition and Promotion

Participants said that receiving appropriate recognition in the workplace enabled their empowerment. One participant said “it’s an empowering thing to have your achievements recognized in some way.” She went on to explain that positive achievements are not always recognized. “We have our work audited on several levels,” she said “and those are always in your personnel file. But when you do something particularly well, that’s not always in your file.” Another noted, “Talk about lack of recognition! The work we do is not valued.”

A few participants also talked about unfair recognition and promotion criteria as barriers to empowerment. One participant said, “At [name of workplace] recognition is

based on the level and the number of years. It has nothing whatsoever to do with performance.” Another said, “It’s been an observation amongst a bunch of us at work that it’s not competence that gets you a promotion, it’s compliance.” Another explained, “I was told when I was originally hired ‘this is my base salary and we know it sucks but you’ll get a review in six months.’ Then when the six months came up they said ‘oh well it’s actually a year till your review.’ ...It was very disempowering.” Another explained his workplace in these words:

There is a definite political machine. There are favourites and not favourites... If you’re on the favourites list there is a job for you and there’s lots of progression for you. That’s fine if the employee is a good employee. But a lot of time they’re not. They’re just somebody’s pet. It’s evident to anybody in [company name]. There are people who get promotions merely because of who they are, not because of what they do. That creates a lot of resentment.

Caring and Compassion

Recently, Prilleltensky and Nelson (in press) wrote about *caring and compassion* as a key value in community psychology. Caring and compassion describes “the expression of care, empathy, and concern for the physical and emotional well-being of others” (p. 45). Caring and compassion also reflects the notion that there is a sense-of-community in which there is “a shared emotional connection, common ground, and feelings of belonging” (p. 10). Without caring and compassion people lack the necessary support to pursue their own goals.

I believe there exists no single definitive set of workplace characteristics that will promote the well-being of workers. A number of values and practices contribute to workplace wellness--empowerment is one of them. But it is not the *only* value, nor is it the most important one. There are other values and practices, such as caring and compassion, that contribute to wellness in the workplace as well. Participants were not explicitly asked questions related to the value of caring and compassion because this value was not conceived as a key ingredient of empowerment. It did, however, emerge as an important theme.

In general, workers said that working in a place where there is caring and compassion contributes to their overall sense of well-being. Participants also said that when they were not appreciated nor supported they felt they were not cared about, which limited their empowerment at work. One worker said, "You have to be able to fail and still be supported." Shain (1990) supports the notion that caring and compassion are important elements in workplace well-being. He says "having people to call upon in times of trouble contributes to feeling loved or cared for; this feeling is somehow empowering, leading to a sense of well-being" (p. 4).

Participants also described disempowering situations in which employers did not following through on promises, agreements, or plans. This lead to workers feeling that their employers lacked compassion and did not care about their well being. One worker explained, "lately with my team there are some big changes happening... So far certain aspects, of what we thought were happening and where we are going, have changed. It seems like people have reneged on it. That's disempowering." Another told us about an

open door policy that was put in place to offer support to the employees. The policy, however, was not practiced. He explained how employees using the open door policy were made to feel like they were unimportant and imposing. He explained, “There is this open door policy, but it’s lip service again. [The manager says] ‘the door is always open, except when I’m kind of busy.’”

While caring and compassion is not a value of empowerment per se, workers regard this value as playing an important role in their empowerment. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an empowering place without caring and compassion. Perhaps caring and compassion are preconditions to experiencing empowerment. Prilleltensky (in press) points out that “caring and compassion provide the basic motivation to look after someone else’s well-being, while the pursuit of social justice ensures that our compassion is extended to other people” (p. 7)

Summary of Section

In this section, an overview of the facilitative and restrictive factors of empowerment were presented. Responses provide insight into the nature of the work environment in which empowerment is fostered or inhibited. Overall, participants communicated that many employers declare to espouse empowerment but they don’t really practice it. In terms of issues related to the value of self-determination/participation, participants said that having a sense of control in one’s job, a comfortable level of responsibility and challenge, voice and choice, resources for development, balance between individual and collective needs, and democratic leadership enabled empowerment. Conversely, working in a punitive environment and having an overpowering manager were

said to be barriers to experiencing empowerment at work. Related to the value of distributive justice, participants said that having an unequitable distribution of workload, an economic climate in which employees are overworked and underpaid, and having unfair recognition and promotion criteria were barriers to experiencing empowerment at work. Finally, there was a discussion about the value of caring and compassion. This value emerged as an important theme, contributing to workers' sense of well-being. In the next section, an overview of responses related to the effects of empowerment and disempowerment in the workplace is provided.

Effects of Empowerment and Disempowerment

To investigate the effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment participants were asked *How does your experience with empowerment or disempowerment at work affect you?* The question further probed *Are you affected at work, at home, mentally, emotionally, physically?* Answers to this question provided insight into what can happen when workers do not get what they need from their workplaces to feel empowered.

All participants disclosed information about feeling disempowered in their workplaces at some point in their careers. Many of the participants report that they continue to feel disempowered in their current work situations. Participants said that empowerment at work, or a lack of it, affected them in many ways including emotionally and mentally, physically, and even spiritually. Workers also said that their experience with empowerment or disempowerment at work affected every aspect of their lives including at

work, at home, and in their relationships. One worker said, "Because I wasn't motivated at work, I wasn't motivated at home. When I should be reading the newspaper and stuff to find out what's going on in the world, I just didn't care." Participants said, when empowerment efforts at work are restricted they feel a low sense of self esteem, worth, and value. They described themselves as feeling "like a puppet," trapped, and stifled. One worker said, "You just don't know how to get out of it. You feel devalued to the point that you don't even feel you are worth anything better than this. You just feel like gee whiz I'm just so darned lucky to have this job."

Participants also reported that they could not think logically in their jobs, and they had no motivation and no energy to work. One worker said, when disempowered "I think there's a lack of self-confidence, lack of motivation. I don't think logically. I'm lethargic. I have no ambition to do my work. Almost like helplessness." A number of participants said they felt their productivity or level of performance declined due to a disempowering work environment. One worker said "I don't feel like doing my normal work--I can't when that sort of [disempowering] thing happens." Another worker said that when disempowered at work, she is "not going to want to work for that organization." She further explained, "If I don't feel I have any control over the job I do, I'm not going to be as productive as I could be." Connected to lower productivity, one worker mentioned that morale at work declined when empowerment efforts were inhibited.

Workers also described feeling depressed, defeated, drained, and helpless, as well as disheartened, degraded, and demoralized. One woman said she had experienced "a loss of faith in the system." Another worker said:

When you know that you're disempowered, I was there. I know what severe depression is all about. That's how bad it can get. It affects your home life, your relationships. If you're not happy at work it gets to your core. A lot of people, myself included, get stuck in that state, not sure what to do. It affects your determination, self-worth, esteem.

Participants also reported feeling frustrated, angry, bitter, and resentful as well as feeling antagonistic toward their disempowering managers. One participant noted, "I get mad when I'm disempowered." She added, "I didn't want to bother with certain things. I didn't care. I cared less and less for the people I worked with." Another worker said, "Anger builds up. If you don't have the freedom to do your job, it's no longer *your* job. You're just doing something that a controlling manager is *making* you do."

When disempowered, employees say they also feel unimportant and silenced. One participant said: "There is the Boys Club and the people who have the control keep the control, and you're never going to get into the group that can affect change unless you're in it from the start. Nothing can be done to save [compan, name]." Another worker described the feeling of being disempowered as "too many times you feel like you're just a cog in a machine of 45,000 other cogs... It's very difficult to get past the notion that you just go in and you do your job and then you go home. There's really not a lot you can do."

Participants expressed how far reaching the effects of workplace empowerment or lack of empowerment can be. One worker said, "If you are in a job for 7 or 8 hours a day, it affects your entire life." Another worker said when disempowered "everything drops. Everything." Another said:

If you are committed to the workplace, it does become part of your personal life. It is part of it. If experience at work is crappie, you feel crappie. I know for me my energy level is on the floor. I feel like I'm not willing to give my all, because I don't feel appreciated. I get snappy at my family, and just feeling like I'm pressured and always on edge. It just doesn't feel good. Work experience is such a big part of your life. I think if workplaces really did hold these values [of empowerment] and live by these values, it would make a really big difference.

Another participant explained:

It affects the way I am with my children and with myself. If I am miserable at work, and I have been many times, I am really unhappy in my job and it affects my sleep. It affects my whole mentality. When I come home at night I can't even drag myself up to do anything. It affects my relationships. My energy falls. You have no drive, no motivation, or enthusiasm at work to get anywhere. It changes your whole attitude both at work and outside work.

Another participant summed it up saying, "It's impossible to just leave it at the office"

In addition to experiencing mental and emotional effects, some participants said that disempowerment affects them physically too. A couple of participants reported that their sleep patterns were affected. One participant noted being sick more often when in a disempowering work situation, and one participant reported experiencing an eating disorder when she was in a disempowering work situation.

The literature supports the notion that disempowerment at work can affect workers in negative ways. Workplace wellness researchers, Fleisher et al. (1994) suggest that employees who experience a lack of empowerment also experience a great deal of negative stress. Such negative stress, they suggest, is associated with various disorders

including behavioural (e.g. alcoholism), cognitive (e.g. memory problems), emotional (e.g. mental illness), and medical (e.g. hypertension). They also suggest that prolonged stress can lead to workers experiencing a decline in productivity, learned helplessness, and reduced feelings of self-efficacy (Fleisher et al., 1994). Lord and Farlow (1990) suggest that if a worker feels powerless to control his or her work situation, he or she may feel powerless in controlling his or her own physical health. Blanchard (1993) writes about the crucial role the manager plays in employee wellness, suggesting that a healthy manager-employee relationship is a major contributor to employees' mental well-being and ultimately physical health.

Conversely, when employees experience empowerment at work they experience positive effects. When empowered at work, workers describe themselves as feeling happy, having a sense of self esteem, as being energetic, and motivated to work. Participants suggested that empowerment in their workplace could boost morale, instill a sense of job satisfaction, and encourage growth in employees. One participant believes that "Empowerment is a motivator. It keeps you functioning and working properly." Another said, "I have complete control over what I do, when I do it, and how I do it. I'm happy. No complaints."

The literature supports the idea that workplace empowerment is associated with positive outcomes. It is suggested, for example, that a worker's psychological well being (Daniels & Guppy, 1992) and self-efficacy expectations (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), may be increased when empowered. Cowen (1994) suggests that the effect of empowerment is a state of psychological wellness. Empowered workers may also enjoy increased quality

of work life, a sense of worth and value, and a psychological sense of community (Klein & D'Aunno, 1986; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991). Shelton (1992) suggests that there is a positive relationship between people having a sense of control over resources and outcomes such as a psychological sense of community and personal growth. Zimmerman (1995) suggests that empowerment is negatively associated with powerlessness. Rappaport (1987) tells us that empowerment is negatively associated with helplessness. When workers are empowered, by having control over decision making, they are likely to experience satisfaction in the workplace along with emotional well being (Parker & Price, 1994). Wright (1989) suggests empowerment in the workplace "is a prerequisite for the development of self-respect and of self-esteem" (p. 18). Nelson (1994) notes that employees benefit from workplace empowerment because they can assume greater responsibility, increase their level of involvement, and possibly even improve their skills.

Empowerment in the workplace shows respect for *workers* and concern for their sense of satisfaction at work. It also shows concern for workers as *people*. I support the notion that empowered workers are likely to be confident, autonomous, productive, and happy workers. Disempowered workers, on the other hand, may not function fully and may not meet their full potential. Thus, employers, concerned with productivity, level of performance, and costs, can benefit from workplace empowerment (e.g. see Adams, 1988; Nelson, 1994). One participant said, "I find when you give your employees reins to do their job, you have really happy employees that want to work hard for you."

Another worker spoke about how her employer would benefit from worker

empowerment and how that positive effect could spillover into other areas. She explains that:

taking into consideration the workers will automatically serve [the company] better. If [the company] were to take care of their people first it would find there would be a trickling effect to their shareholders, to [the company] as a whole, their bottom line. It would have a really good ripple effect. I think they need to pay more attention to taking care of the workers because they will get it back in spades, in every area.

The literature supports the notion that empowerment at work is related to increases in productivity and reductions in workplace health care costs. Fleisher et al. (1994) suggest that if the work environment is improved for employees, the overall efficiency and performance of the company will increase. Shain (1990) suggests that organizations do better, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, when their employees feel better--and employees feel better when they are empowered. Parker and Price (1994) suggest that when workers perceive that they have control, they are also likely to feel and *perform* better. Empowerment at work has been related with reduced health care costs associated with absenteeism and poor worker health (Adams, 1988; Nelson, 1994; Sperry, 1991).

In addition to creating positive outcomes for employees and employers, I think that empowerment for workers may improve the quality and richness of the *relationships* they engage in, both inside and outside of the workplace. Thus, co-workers, managers, families, and companies in general could benefit from workplace empowerment. Empowerment is a goal that will ultimately benefit everyone--and, I believe, it is *cheaper*

and more effective than hiring a so-called high paid professional to presumably fix the problems resulting from disempowerment in the workplace. Cowen (1994) supports this notion, suggesting that “promoting wellness is likely to be more humane, efficient and (ultimately) more cost-effective than struggling to undo dysfunction” (p. 171). Fleisher et al. (1994) suggest that “maintaining one’s healthfulness [at work] costs much less than the pain and expense of having to correct ailments reactively” (p. 16).

Summary of Section

Overall, participants said that their experience with empowerment or disempowerment at work affected every aspect of their lives including at work, at home, and in their relationships. Participants said that they were affected emotionally, mentally, physically, and even spiritually. They also reported that their productivity declined when disempowered.

Recommendations for Change

In an effort to generate ideas for creating an empowering workplace environment, participants were asked *What can be done to create an empowering workplace?* and *How can the workplace be made into a more empowering place?* What follows are a variety of ideas, insights, and opinions from the workers themselves. Workers talked about what they need and value in the workplace to feel empowered, to enhance the quality of their work life and to foster wellness. Responses are presented along with the academic literature.

Overall, participants communicated the idea that to create an empowering workplace, the “old ways of thinking” and action must be replaced with new thinking and action--thinking and action guided by the values of empowerment. Cowen (1994) calls this a “paradigm shift toward the promotion of wellness” (p. 173). Workers require a departure from the traditional workplace paradigm in which there may be domination and control over workers. They want to replace the old paradigm with a new one; a paradigm that supports an equitable distribution of power, a closing of the gap between empowerment words and action, and caring and compassion.

Levels of Responsibility

I believe workers, managers, peers, and the work organization as a whole, must work together to reach an empowering end. Empowerment is reciprocal (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) and there needs to be integrity and reciprocal respect from and for workers, peers, managers, and the company. To create an empowering workplace, responsibility must be taken at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational level. What follows are participants’ suggestions, organized according to these three levels of responsibility.

Personal Domain

Participants recognize that in moving toward a sense of personal empowerment, workers have a responsibility to be motivated toward, and active in, achieving their personal empowerment at work. Workers understand that they must journey through

their own empowerment process in their own way. They recognize that empowerment is not something the company, nor anyone else, can *give* to them, rather, empowerment is a personal process (Lord & Farlow, 1990). One participant said it this way: “A company cannot give you self-determination and a sense of control...We are the ones to take the power... No company *gives* you power.” Another participant said, “I think you have to take responsibility for empowerment. I don’t think you can wait to say *they’ve* empowered me. I think it’s something you find internally.” Participants also talked about the need for peers to be supportive and to act with integrity.

I am not suggesting that there is any one set of strategies that individuals should adopt to create an empowering workplace. The dynamics, needs, and resources in each workplace will differ, and thus the strategies adopted may differ. As mentioned previously, empowerment is a personal process and there is not any one “right” way to achieve it. I believe, however, that a minimum requirement must be met. That is, individuals must treat other people as ends in themselves and not as means to their own end (see Kane, 1994). In other words, people must agree to “play by the same rules” so to speak, and not use other people to advance their own self-determination at the cost of others.

I also believe that individual responsibility requires the assessment of personal needs and goals. Workers should collaborate with peers to identify what is it that can be done at the individual level to create an empowering workplace. Workers should have input into setting specific goals to meet the needs of each unique work situation, and those goals should be reviewed and revised as necessary. Workers might need to divvy up work

differently, take on more decision making responsibility, or offer their input more often. Managers may have to change their management style completely or perhaps adopt a situational leadership approach in which they alter their management style to meet the needs of each unique work situation (see Hersey & Blanchard, 1979). It should be noted, however, that some forms of situational leadership may not be congruent with an empowerment approach. When a situation calls for autocratic decision making, for example, those not included in the decision-making process may feel their empowerment is inhibited.

Interpersonal Domain

No one can *force* empowerment on, nor give it to workers. However without the support and action of others--peers, managers, company decision makers--individual efforts at empowerment may be restricted. Participants suggested that while "we must steer our own empowerment ship," so to speak, we also need an *environment* that enables workers' empowerment, an environment that does not put barriers in the way, and an environment that provides support as well as opportunity for personal empowerment. Maton and Salem (1995) support this notion, suggesting that part of what makes a setting an empowering one is that there is a support system that creates a viable sense of community and contributes to individuals' quality of life and to their ability to cope with stressful situations in the setting. Lambert and Hopkins (1995) suggest that empowerment grows out of mutually supportive relationships in the workplace. One worker spoke about this issue, saying "I think to a certain extent our empowerment is up to us, but a lot of it is

out of our hands. A lot depends on the work environment.” She further explains, “If the work environment is not supportive and doesn’t offer opportunity, if that isn’t there to begin with, there is no way to be empowered.” Another said,

I really think empowerment comes from two sides, the environment you’re in and the self-determination. You can have the greatest will and desire to be empowered but be in the worst environment to attempt to do it. That would be self-defeating. Or you could be in a very nurturing environment and be self-determined and achieve your goal. So for me empowerment requires the proper setting for it to be successful.

In addition to having supportive relationships, creating an empowering workplace requires a fundamental shift in power from those who have all the power and decision-making control to sharing it with those who have traditionally held less power--to the benefit of the *entire* workplace community and not just to the benefit of those in power. Participants said it was important to replace traditionalist power mongering managers, who feel threatened at the thought of sharing power, with good leaders--democratic leaders who will share power, put authority and decision making in the hands of the workers, and realize the benefits in doing so. One participant said, “I think it takes a mature manager to realize that it will work better by sharing control.” Rappaport (1987) notes that, “Empowerment is not a scarce resource which gets used up, but rather, once adopted as an ideology, empowerment tends to expand resources” (p. 142).

Serrano-Garcia (1994) suggests that changes in the distribution of power in any power relationship (such as the one between a manager and an employee) can lead to social change, and more specifically, to greater distributive justice. Prilleltensky and

Nelson (in press) suggest that “The negotiation of power between unequal groups is central to promote social change” (p. 21). Furthermore, they suggest “When power is shared, personal connections are made, and unique strengths are recognized, a working alliance for social change is formed” (p. 21).

Participants made it clear that many traditional managers will have to change their ways for any empowerment effort to work. In a recent edition of Harvard Business Review (Rothstein, 1995), a narrative describes the new role that managers will have in an empowering workplace: “As managers, you’ll have new roles: coach, facilitator, resource developer. You’ll be involved in new relationships: you’ll be helping, informing, evaluating, and motivating people” (p. 21). The democratic leader will also take on the role of aiding “constructive participation, facilitation, and the maintenance of healthy relationships and a positive emotional setting” (Gastil, 1994, p. 960). One worker suggested that a manager’s responsibility in an empowering workplace was to be “a facilitator and not a commander.” He went on to say, “As long as you have more commander types you won’t have empowerment.” Another said, “I believe that management, at an individual or a corporate level, is at the heart of any sense of empowerment. They have to believe that giving the people room to maneuver is in their best interest.” Another worker suggested that managers can help to create an empowering workplace by “standing *with* you” as opposed to standing *over* you.

Participants also talked about the need for managers to allow workers the freedom and control to do their jobs in the way they see fit, to give workers legitimate input into the decisions that affect them in their jobs, and to provide legitimate opportunity to affect

change. Workers said they want to be treated in an empowering way, listened to, valued, and recognized by their managers--regardless of the worker's level. One man explained, "In my job there will always be a hierarchy. But they [managers] need to listen to the input of the peons." He added, "We also need authenticity and more definite listening to the people who actually do the work. They [management] should act upon the input. The decision makers need to value the input of the people that are actually in there doing the work."

Organizational Domain

In helping organizations to change, Dimock (1992) suggests that affecting change requires more than change at the individual or interpersonal level. It requires change in the standards and practices of the organization as a whole. He tells us that "for real change to take place in the way things happen, more than the self-development of individuals needs to take place. The whole social system culture within which they operate needs to change" (p. 3). Participants communicated that change in the workplace needs to focus on closing the gap that exists between policy and practice, between words and action. Workers need their places of employment to be authentic in their empowerment efforts, to act with integrity, and to "practice what they preach." They need organizations to have structures in place so that they can carry out their mission statements and truly practice their empowerment philosophy.

Many participants shared stories about how their workplaces do not operate in line with the empowerment values they supposedly espouse. Sadly, many organizations,

despite their claims to act in line with empowerment values, have remained paternalistic. As a result they have, in many cases, done more harm than good. The problem may be that work organizations have not actually understood the concept of empowerment. They may see empowerment as some sort of managerial technique and they do not pay sufficient attention to the processes underlying the construct (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The term empowerment is used in the workplace, but often it is only “a vague buzz word” filled with empty hype (Perkins, 1995).

Participants also said that empowerment needs to be practiced at all levels within the work organization, starting at the top. One worker said, “it has to come from the top down. If the top don’t practice it then middle management won’t practice it and it just won’t get filtered down.” Another worker said, “the leaders really should be pushing and practicing it.” Another participant said, “We see the higher ups saying all the right things. How come it’s not filtering down? I think a good manager should take it and filter it down into the workplace.” Rothstein (1995) suggests that “Because empowerment spreads the responsibility for decision making throughout an organization and across functional disciplines, top-level managers, in particular, must be committed to the company’s new values” (p. 28). One participant put it this way: “In the same way that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, a company is only as strong as it’s empowering at the lowest levels.”

Participants also suggested that their workplaces have a responsibility to hire and train competent managers. Work organizations need to ensure that the leaders understand that good “leadership... is the capacity to empower others” (Wright, 1989, p. 229). One

participant said, "In my company...we need someone to be brave and move managers out of those positions if they shouldn't be there."

Another part of the proposed workplace paradigm shift requires workplaces to be more compassionate and caring toward workers. Fineman (1993) noted that when we examine the workplace today, "we are left with the impression of organizations as places where there is much head work, but little of the heart (p. 13)." He said there is a definite need to "humanize the workplace." Gastil (1994) suggests workplaces need democratic leadership because "democratic leaders show genuine care and concern for the members" (p. 959). Lawler (1992) suggests that to empower employees, workplaces should foster a culture that emphasizes the importance of human capital. One participant spoke about the need for workplaces to be compassionate and to recognize the impact that workplaces have on people. He explained:

It's important for employers to realize that people have dreams and aspirations and that the culture that you provide in that company can actually affect the way people think about their jobs, about their lives, about themselves. It's important to recognize those sorts of things to truly empower people.

Workers also said they want workplaces that will help them meet their goals, have fair promotion and recognition criteria, and match workplace demands to the capacity of the employee.

I would like to add that I believe part of this emerging paradigm requires work organizations to stop talking about how to "cope" with workplace stresses, stemming from disempowerment, and start learning how to reduce and eliminate those sources of

stress. We should be working to *change* the stressful system, not learning how to deal with it. Stress is a major counterproductive effect of workplace disempowerment (Shain, 1990). Getting rid of the sources of stress may be a pathway to wellness and a pathway to empowerment.

Barriers to Change

Work impacts our lives in many ways and I believe that creating an empowering workplace is a necessary and worthwhile goal. In the words of one participant, "There is much more to work than just work. It's a way of life." But there will be undoubtedly be many individual, organizational, and political forces against such change. Rothstein (1995) warns that "Because [empowerment in the workplace] requires a fundamental cultural transformation, empowerment is a long and difficult journey. Resistance to it is frequent, predictable, and often fierce" (p. 30). Gastil (1994) warns that "some people have authoritarian values and are not easily swayed from strong belief in the justness and efficiency of powerful, directive authorities" (p. 970). A couple of participants spoke about such issues as barriers to change in their workplaces. One worker said, "The Old Boys Club has been there for so long, that's the biggest obstacle in a workplace. It's like, we've done it this way for so many years and it's served us well so we'll continue to do it." He goes on to explain that some traditional managers "don't want to relinquish control. They say 'don't give these people too much room to maneuver because then what do you need me for?'" Another participant explained that changing the attitudes of

some traditional thinkers in a hierarchical organization will be slow and difficult because of entrenched ways of doing things:

In a large corporation, change is painfully slow. A lot of what is preached is not practiced. You get a lot of the old world thinking.... People think, 'hey I paid my dues and now I'm a manager and it's pay back time'... They want the power. If you can shake that attitude you can do a lot to create an empowering workplace. A lot of time the people making the policies are the ones not practicing the empowerment they preach.

It is clear that to create an empowering workplace means there must be a fundamental shift in power from those who have all the power and decision-making control, to sharing it with others. Spreitzer (1995) suggests that "empowerment is a key challenge for contemporary organizations as they undergo a radical change from traditional hierarchical structures to ... more participative systems" (p. 602). But such a paradigm shift is grounded in individual behaviour and attitudes and until individual behavioural and attitudinal changes occur, the power structure and practices within corporations are not likely to change. Many people, particularly the ones "at the top" who have held all the power, may not feel comfortable with the idea of sharing their power. Dimock (1992) writes about this issue, noting that the main barrier to change in organizations is those in power who have no intention of changing the status quo. He adds that the people in power must support the change effort or there will be little chance of success.

Summary of Section

Creating an empowering workplace, then, is not a straightforward proposition. It seems evident that any *one* strategy is not likely to create an empowering workplace.

Rather, what workers need is an overall approach in which the values of empowerment are believed in, espoused, *and* practiced. Overall, participants communicated that a new workplace paradigm is needed to replace the traditional one in which domination and control of workers is practiced. The new paradigm would support an equitable distribution of power, a closing of the gap between empowerment words and action, and caring and compassion. Responsibility for such change needs to come from personal, interpersonal, and organization levels. At the *personal* level, workers have a responsibility to be active in their journey through the empowerment process because empowerment is a personal process requiring their full participation. They cannot be passive, waiting for their work organizations to *give* them empowerment. Individuals must also agree to treat others respectfully as ends in themselves, not as means to an end. However, the worker requires the support and action of others, at the interpersonal and organizational levels, to achieve individual empowerment. At the *interpersonal* level, supportive work relationships must be developed and maintained with managers and peers. Managers must learn to share power with workers, take on new roles as facilitators and coaches, and allow workers the freedom and control to do their jobs. Peers need to be supportive and also work with integrity. At the *organizational* level, work organizations must ensure they have the structures in place so that they can carry out their mission statements and truly practice their empowerment philosophy. As the new paradigm attempts to replace the old, there will likely be many barriers to change. Change will likely be slow and it will require the support of all members in the organization, particularly the support of those in positions of power.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In closing, I would like to summarize the main contributions of this research. Empowerment is a term that has been used extensively in academic, human and social service, government, and business circles (Lord & Hutchison, 1993) and there appears to be no common definition of it. Clarkson (1989), for example, defined workplace empowerment as “the sharing of power, knowledge, information and authority” (p. 18). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined empowerment at work as workers having “a sense of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact” (p. 603). Using Prilleltensky’s (1994) definition of empowerment as a starting point, I formulate my own working definition of the construct. My working definition of empowerment includes the values of *self-determination/participation*, which communicates the notion that workers should be able to pursue and achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations, and that they should have a voice and legitimate input into the decisions that affect their lives, and *distributive justice*, which reflects the notion of fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for employees.

Overall, the findings suggest that under the category of self-determination /participation what enables empowerment for workers is having a sense of control, a comfortable level of challenge and responsibility, having voice and choice, having resources for development, and balance between process and outcome. Working in an environment where there are punitive consequences and an undemocratic management style are cited as barriers to workers’ empowerment. Related to the value of distributive justice, findings suggest that experiencing an unequitable distribution of workload, an

economic climate in which there is an abuse of employees, and unfair criterion for promotion and recognition are barriers to empowerment. Workers also spoke about issues related to the value of caring and compassion. While this value was not added to my working definition of empowerment, it was discussed as an important part of workers sense of well-being at work. Participants said that working in a place where they were appreciated, supported, and cared for enabled their empowerment. Findings also indicate that there are emotional, physical, and even spiritual effects of empowerment, and lack of empowerment, at work. All participants disclosed information about feeling disempowered in their workplaces at some point in their careers. Many of the participants reported that they continue to feel disempowered in their current work situations. Participants also talked about creating a more empowering workplace by replacing the traditional workplace paradigm with a new one in which there would be an equitable distribution of power, a closing of the gap between empowerment words and action, and caring and compassion. Responsibility for such change needs to come from personal, interpersonal, and organization levels.

In conclusion, I would like to say that it has not been my aim to present workplaces as inherently “bad” and disempowering places. When I embarked on this research project I believed, however, that sometimes workers can feel dissatisfied with their workplaces, not so much because of the actual job they do, but because they are treated unfairly, they do not feel respected, they have little or no control in their jobs, they are excluded from decision-making processes, they are overworked, their voices are not heard, and they feel unappreciated and undervalued. This research affirms my hunch. I

suggest that there is room for improvement in terms of making the workplace a more empowering place and a place that fosters well-being. It is my hope that managers and decision makers will listen to and value the voices of the workers presented in this research, and attempt to make necessary changes to create a more empowering workplace. Employers need to ask themselves “*What do we have in place to enable empowerment for our people?*” I hope they will make the necessary changes, not because it is the latest fad, but because employees are worth it.

The workplace has become, for many workers, more than just a place to do a job and earn a wage. It has become a place where a great deal of our energies are expended and our talents utilized. It is also a place where much of our social interaction takes place and where our sense of value and self-worth is greatly affected. When workers are disempowered at work, we have seen that their mental and physical health can suffer (Burke, 1993; Daniels and Guppy, 1992; Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Sperry, 1991; Wallerstein, 1992). These negative effects can also spillover into the individual’s family life and even into their community life (Human Resources Canada, 1994). While there will be barriers to creating an empowering workplace (Dimock, 1992; Gastil, 1994; Rothstein, 1995), it is a worthwhile and, I believe, an achievable goal. We must work to correct the imbalance of power and authority in the workplace, giving back power which rightfully belongs to the worker. We also need to openly confront the barriers and contradictions between empowerment rhetoric and action.

Unfortunately, in traditional psychology, the problem of power differentials in the workplace has largely been ignored and the focus has been on issues such as improving the

behaviors of employees. The implication has been that "if workers have problems, they should change something within *themselves*, not in the working conditions" (Prilleltensky, 1990, p. 76). Prilleltensky (1990) suggests that while industrial-organizational psychology, in particular, has the potential to serve the needs of workers, it has been used "primarily to protect the interest of managers... whereby it contributes to uphold the industrial status quo" (p. 73). Furthermore, Conger (1992) notes that "much of the management literature has focused on the strategies and tactics that managers can use to increase their *own* power and influence" (p. 178).

I suggest that community psychology is a useful vehicle for social change in the workplace. But it is not a panacea. There are serious social issues to attend to in the workplace, and community psychology is not a "quick fix" answer. This does not mean, however, that we should not strive for social change in the workplace. There are powerful financial, political, and bureaucratic barriers in place that could inhibit community psychology's change efforts in the corporate sphere. Undoubtedly, it will be difficult to achieve empowerment in an environment which was built upon the premise of the "haves" and the "have nots." It is unlikely that the "haves" will relinquish their power willingly. As community psychologists, we must recognize the barriers and perhaps take a "small wins" (Weick, 1984) approach in which small but meaningful changes are made slowly over time. Empowerment in the workplace will not happen overnight. In the words of one worker, "Empowerment is still trying to unseat the traditional." On a positive note, he concludes that "I see things changing slowly toward empowerment." Gastil (1994) also talks of some promising trends: "expectations of shared power and responsibility are

increasing; there is a greater degree of collaboration and communication; and people have an increasing awareness of the need for organizational openness and flexibility” (p. 971).

It should be noted that there exists a body of social science literature that deals with work design issues and which is relevant to this research and to the practice of empowerment in the work organization. The literature describes a “socio-technical” approach which attempts to balance the technical design of work with the social side of the organizational system. The paradigm suggests that since organizations employ whole persons, it is prudent to attend to human social needs beyond those required for the technical portion of the job (Pasmore, 1995). The social-technical system is characterized by “employee empowerment, opportunity to learn, and autonomy, [and] supports work teams with an emphasis on enhancing worker job satisfaction” (Persico & McLean, 1994, p. 11). This approach values workers’ need to have control, decision-making power, and support, as well as variety and meaningfulness in the job. The socio-technical paradigm is described as an alternative to the “traditionally asymmetrical dependency-based organizational paradigm of the master-servant relationship” (Emery, 1980, p. 19).

I believe that there were a number of benefits to doing this research. First, in this research, participants were heard and they had opportunity to participate in the creating of alternatives based on their values, needs, and experiences. In addition, I believe that some participants experienced support and affirmation. Another benefit of this research was that it expanded community psychology’s domain. Data was gathered from people with a variety of perspectives and experiences which contributed in some way to a more complete understanding of the realities and issues of empowerment. Finally, I benefited

from this research by having the opportunity to further develop skills as a researcher and a facilitator.

Empowerment is a positive and strengthening concept. However, I would like to offer a word of caution about its limitations. While empowerment is a worthwhile and necessary goal, it is not a fix-all. It will not eliminate workplace conflict. It is not a guarantee that all employees will love their jobs, and it is not likely to replace the need for hierarchical structure. Even in an empowering work environment, employees will continue to face situations, stresses, and strains that lead them to question their level of satisfaction at work. Furthermore, what is experienced as empowering for an employee one day may change the next because as workers grow and change over time so too will their empowerment needs change. Empowerment will not replace the need for hierarchy or leadership. Power differences will remain. The notion of all workers having equal voices is not realistic. Power, however, can be distributed equitably and leadership can be practiced in a respectful manner. Power differences do not need to result in oppression or exploitation.

When creating social change, we strive to make the world a better place but it is also possible that there will be abuses of empowerment. Prilleltensky and Nelson (in press) tell us that the values of empowerment are complementary and not mutually exclusive. Empowerment requires all its values to be experienced in a balanced way. Problems can arise if we adhere too closely to one value and neglect other equally important values. If employees seeking self-determination, for example, do so at the cost of participation and/or distributive justice, other employees' empowerment will be

inhibited. If group needs always come at the expense of personal autonomy, empowerment at the individual level would be compromised.

The inherent limitations of this study suggest some direction for further research. Issues of job satisfaction were not taken into account in this research. It is likely that workers who consider themselves satisfied and happy at work would respond differently than workers who would describe themselves as experiencing dissatisfaction on the job. Further research should take into account the issue of job satisfaction. It is also possible that workers' responses would change over time, or if they were to be employed in a different job, in a different department, or in a different workplace altogether. Researchers suggest that empowerment takes on different meanings across different settings, times, and communities of people (Rappaport, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, further research could investigate changes in the way empowerment at work is experienced across different contexts, situations, and populations. The participants in this research came from a variety of organizations and they were employed at a variety of levels in their work organizations. Presumably, a manager working in the head office of a large corporation and a front line worker employed in a small organization would experience empowerment differently. Further research could explore how empowerment is experienced by different employees working at high levels in the organizational hierarchy as compared to those working at lower levels in the hierarchy. In the future, researchers could also examine how empowerment is experienced by workers in different types of organizations--in traditional hierarchical compared to cooperative organizations, for example.

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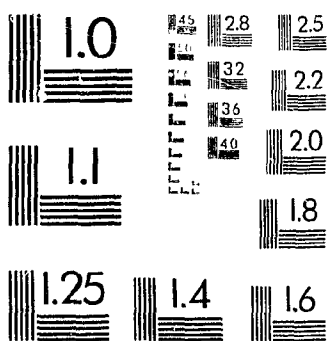
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PM-1 3½"x4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT



PRECISIONSM RESOLUTION TARGETS

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APPENDIX A

Information Package with

**Letter to Participants (Ai)
Guiding Questions (Aii)
Consent Form (Aiii)**

APPENDIX Ai:

Letter to Participants

Wilfrid Laurier University



Founded 1911

[date]

Dear [participant name]:

Thank you for accepting my invitation to attend a focus group discussion on workplace empowerment where you can share your experiences, feelings, and opinions on this important topic. There will be a total of [#] participants in the group who are employees also willing to share their opinions, feelings, and experiences related to workplace empowerment and disempowerment. The details of your focus group are: [date, time, location].

I want all participants to feel safe in disclosing information in the group. Therefore, it is imperative that all information disclosed in the group stay confidential. Please do not discuss other participants' personal information or experiences outside the group.

I have attached a list of guiding questions. The structure of this focus group is informal, meaning that these questions are just a rough guideline. If you can, please consider your responses to the questions ahead of time. Feel free to make notes and bring them with you to the session if you wish. I have also attached a consent form for you to read and sign. The second part of the consent form requests you provide me with your name and address for the purpose of verifying quotes and sending you feedback. This part of the consent form will be kept separate from any data so that your name and data cannot be matched.

Please note that you will not be asked in the interview to disclose information which reveals your full identity or specific place of employment. You will be asked in the session for a first name, the type of company you work for, the length of time you have worked for this company, and the type of job you do there. It is your choice to disclose, or not to disclose, this information. All information you share will be kept confidential. If you have any questions before or after the interview please contact me at 725-5872. Thank you once again for your participation.

Sincerely,

Ms. Dale Burt

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dale Burt'.

Graduate Student Researcher,
Community Psychology

Department of Psychology

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5 (519) 884-1970 Fax: (519) 746-7605

APPENDIX Aii:

Focus Group/ Interview

Guiding Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

You will not be asked to disclose information which reveals your full identity or specific place of employment. You will be asked to provide the following descriptive information:

- (a) a first name,
- (b) the *type* of company you work for,
- (c) the length of time you have worked for this company, and
- (d) the *type* of job you do there

The focus group will continue with the following content questions:

1. The academic literature defines empowerment in terms of three values: *self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation.*

Self-determination refers to people having a sense of control and being able to pursue/achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations.

Distributive justice reflects the notion of fair and equitable distribution of resources and burdens.

Collaboration and democratic participation reflects the notion that people should have a voice ie have legitimate input into the decisions that affect their lives.

Is there anything you would add to the definition of empowerment?

2. **What goes on in your workplace that enables:**
 - (i) self-determination,
 - (ii) distributive justice, and
 - (iii) collaboration and democratic participation?
3. **What goes on in your workplace that is a barrier to experiencing:**
 - (i) self-determination,
 - (ii) distributive justice, and
 - (iii) collaboration and democratic participation?
4. **How does your experience with empowerment or disempowerment at work affect you--at work, at home, mentally, emotionally, physically?**
5. **What can be done to create an empowering workplace?
How can the workplace be made into a more empowering environment?**

APPENDIX Aiii:

Research Consent Form

Research Consent Form

The purpose of this research is to investigate *empowerment* and *disempowerment* in the workplace. The specific research objectives are (1) to investigate workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment; (2) to learn about the factors which may facilitate empowerment in the workplace; (3) to learn about the factors which may limit empowerment or create barriers to achieving it in the workplace; (4) to investigate the effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment; and (5) to generate recommendations for change and ideas for creating an empowering workplace environment. Your story, experiences, and insights will be used to advance this understanding.

You are being asked to participate in an interview being conducted by Ms. Dale Burt, a graduate Community Psychology student at Wilfrid Laurier University. The interview will last approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

Workplace empowerment can be an emotionally charged topic for some people. At any time, you have the right to take a break from the interview, to omit answering any question, or to stop altogether. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without negative repercussions.

I would like to ask for your permission to audio tape the interview. I want to tape the so that I do not miss anything that you say. *It is your decision as to whether or not the interview is audio taped.* If the interview is taped, only I will be hearing it. If it is not taped, I would like to take notes. If you do not want the interview audio taped, please indicate this at the bottom of the consent form.

All information you share in the interview will be kept confidential. Your name will never be used in any publication or discussion.

I might want to use some quotes from the interview in my written thesis document. If this is the case, identifying information such as name, age, place of employment, etc. will never be attached to any quotes. Please indicate your consent or nonconsent to use quotes on page two of this form.

If you would like it, you can receive feedback from me via mail by August 31, 1996. The feedback will summarise emerging themes and will not include any quotes. To have a copy sent by mail, please provide me with your name and address.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights or the procedures employed, please contact me at 884-1970 ext. 2950 or my supervisor, Dr. Isaac Prilleltensky, at 884-1970 ext. 3989. Isaac will be available to talk with you about any concerns you may have.

If you are satisfied with the conditions of this interview, please sign this consent form on page one and page two. To ensure confidentiality, please note that your signed consent form will be kept separate from any data so that your name can never be associated with any quotes.

Investigator, Dale Burt



Participant's signature

Date

☐ Yes, I give my consent to have you audio tape interview.
☐ No, I do not give my consent to audio tape the interview.

Consent Form

Please check (✓) the appropriate response:

- ___ Yes, you can use my quotes in your written thesis document. I understand that my name will never be attached to any quotes.
- ___ No, please do not quote me.
-

Please check (✓) the appropriate response:

- ___ Yes, I would like you to mail me written feedback by August 31, 1996.
Please send feedback to the address given below.
- ___ No, I do not wish to receive feedback. If I choose, I can obtain a copy of written feedback from the Psychology office at Wilfrid Laurier University after August 31, 1996.
-

NOTE: Once all the data is analysed, I would like to hold a focus group to discuss the findings of this research with some participants. Please indicate your interest in such a session.

Please check (✓) the appropriate response:

- ___ Yes, I would be interested in participating in a focus group to discuss findings.
I have provided my address and/or phone number below.
- ___ No, I am not interested in participating in a focus group to discuss findings.
-

Signature _____

Name (printed) _____

Address _____

Phone # _____

Comments _____

Note: This form will be kept separate from any data.

APPENDIX B:

Informational Flyer

Empowerment in the Workplace

I am a Community Psychology researcher working on my Masters thesis on the topic of Empowerment in the Workplace.

In this research, the opinions, stories, feelings, and insights of workers will be sought and valued as meaningful data in an attempt to understand how empowerment, or a lack of empowerment, is experienced in the workplace.

I am looking for volunteer research participants who are willing to take part in a focus group session in which they share their thoughts on this important topic.

Research Participants Needed

Focus groups will be run in Waterloo throughout September 1995. The sessions are expected to last for two hours.

If you would like more information about the research, or think you might be interested in participating, please call me and I can give you more information.

Confidentiality is assured and no tests or deception will ever be used.

Ms. Dale Burt
725-5872 or
884-1970 ext 2950 .

Dale re:
Empowerment
Research
725-5872 or
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APPENDIX C:

Newspaper Advertisement

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY researcher, doing Masters thesis on topic of "Workplace Empowerment," is looking for volunteer focus group participants to discuss workplace empowerment issues. If you are a white collar worker & are interested in participating, please call 725-5872. Confidentiality assured.

APPENDIX D:

Feedback to Participants

Wilfrid Laurier University



Founded 1911

[date]

Dear [name of participant]:

As promised I am sending you feedback from the research in which you participated on the topic of empowerment in the workplace. First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you sincerely for your participation and cooperation in this research. The quality of discussion in the focus groups and interviews was outstanding. Your input was indeed very valuable.

This research was conducted for the purpose of investigating empowerment and disempowerment in the workplace. More specifically, the study investigated workers' perceptions and definitions of empowerment and disempowerment, characteristics of empowerment in terms of facilitative and limiting factors, the effects of workplace empowerment and disempowerment, and ideas for creating an empowering work environment. In seven focus groups and two personal interviews, 22 white collar workers shared their experiences, feelings, insights, and opinions of personal empowerment, or lack of it, in their workplaces. Please note that there is a summary sheet attached which provides an overview of main findings in chart form. The main findings appear below:

- (1) All participants supported the definition of empowerment as including three values: self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation.
- (2) All participants, when pondering their own definition of empowerment, spoke about issues related to the values of self-determination and participation. No one spoke about issues related to distributive justice. Participants also spoke about issues related to another value called "compassion and caring." I have created my own working definition of empowerment based on what you, the participants, told me. My working definition of empowerment uses a value-based framework. The redefined values are included: (i) *self-determination/participation*, and (ii) *distributive justice*. Self-determination communicates the notion that people should be able to pursue and achieve goals without excessive restrictions and limitations, and that they should have a voice and legitimate input into the decisions that affect their lives. Distributive justice reflects the notion of fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunity.
- (3) The value of caring and compassion was also considered important to workers' overall well-being. The value of caring and compassion is the expression of care, empathy, and concern for the physical and emotional well-being of others as well as a shared emotional connection, common ground, and feelings of belonging.

Department of Psychology

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5 (519) 884-1970 Fax: (519) 746-7605

Wilfrid Laurier University



Founded 1911

...more

- (4) In terms of self-determination/ participation, having a sense of control, a comfortable level of challenge and responsibility, having voice and choice, having resources for development, and balance between process and outcome enables empowerment for workers. Working in an environment where there are punitive consequences and an undemocratic management style are barriers to workers' empowerment.
- (5) Related to the value of distributive justice, an unequitable distribution of workload, an economic climate in which there is an abuse of employees, and unfair criterion for promotion and recognition are barriers to empowerment.
- (6) Findings also suggest that there are emotional, physical, and even spiritual effects of empowerment, and lack of empowerment, at work.
- (7) To create an empowering workplace the traditional workplace paradigm, in which there is control and manipulation of workers, must be replaced with a new one in which there would be an equitable distribution of power, a closing of the gap between empowerment rhetoric and action, and caring and compassion. Responsibility for such change exists at personal, interpersonal, and organization levels.

You may recall, in the consent form you signed I had asked if participants would be interested in attending a follow up focus group to check the accuracy of these findings. A few of you expressed a willingness to take part in such a session. Unfortunately time and personal obligations restrict my ability to run such a session. However, I would still like to hear your comments and opinions about the feedback! Once you have had an opportunity to read this feedback, feel free to call me and we can discuss the findings on the phone. Alternately, I can call you. Once again, thank you for your help with this research. If you would like to read the final version of my thesis, you can borrow a copy from me directly or you can find a copy at Wilfrid Laurier University's Psychology Office in the New Science Building on the second floor. Should you have any questions or comments about this research feel free to contact me.

Ms. Dale Burt

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dale Burt".

Graduate Student Researcher,
Community Psychology
725-5872 or 884-0170 ext 2950

Department of Psychology

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5 (519) 884-1970 Fax: (519) 746-7605

APPENDIX E:

Analysis Summary Sheet

SUMMARY ANALYSIS CHART

Definition of Empowerment	Enablers	Barriers	Effects	Recommendations for Change	Emerging Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all described issues related to self-determination and participation • no one spoke directly about value of distributive justice • empowerment changes across people, contexts, and time • a personal process; empowerment cannot be given to worker by others 	<p><u>Self-determination/participation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sense of control</i> - autonomy in job - freedom to set/achieve goals - how and when job is done - career development • <i>Level of responsibility</i> - fit between job and worker • <i>Voice and choice</i> - decision making power - being able to affect change - legitimate input - having input acted upon • <i>Resources for development</i> - necessary tools to do job - training • <i>Management style</i> - democratic - shares power - role as facilitator <p><u>Distributive Justice:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Workload</i> - work equitably distributed <p>• <i>Caring and Compassion:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emerging theme - important to worker well-being - being valued, appreciated, supported 	<p><u>Self-determination/participation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sense of control</i> - lack of freedom to do job - being overpowered - told what and how to do job - unrealistic goals imposed • <i>Level of responsibility</i> - overwhelming job requirements • <i>Voice and choice</i> - no input - cannot affect change - no legitimate choices • <i>Resources for development</i> - lack of information to do job - inadequate training • <i>Balance process and outcome</i> - collaboration without results • <i>Punitive consequences</i> - punished for speaking up - punished for making decisions • <i>Management style</i> - undemocratic - hoards power - role as commander <p><u>Distributive Justice:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Workload</i> - work not shared equitably - burdensome workload - no credit for work done • <i>Economic climate</i> - abuse of employees - underpaid, overworked - fear job loss • <i>Recognition and promotion</i> - unfair criteria <p>• <i>Caring and Compassion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - undervalued, unappreciated, unsupported - promises broken 	<p><u>Lack of empowerment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emotionally</i> - no self confidence - lowered self esteem - no sense of worth - reduced morale - feel trapped, stifled, silenced - cannot think logically - depressed, defeated helpless - cynical, frustrated, angry • <i>Physically</i> - disturbed sleep patterns - poor physical health • <i>Productivity</i> - lower productivity - no motivation to work - no energy • <i>Other</i> - reduces spirituality <p><u>Empowerment present:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emotionally</i> - self-esteem intact - sense of satisfaction - encourages growth • <i>Physically</i> - sick less often • <i>Productivity</i> - increased productivity - motivated to work 	<p><u>Levels of Responsibility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>personal</i> - be motivated - active in own empowerment • <i>interpersonal</i> - reciprocal respect and integrity - managers' new roles - treat people in empowering way - supportive relationships • <i>organizational</i> - structures in place to enable empowerment - practice empowerment philosophy - model empowerment from top - hire good leaders - be compassionate - change the system, not cope with it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring and compassion

END

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FIN