

(Mis)managed Empowerment: Exploring Paradoxes of Practice in Domestic Violence Prevention

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Empowerment approaches to domestic violence prevention are gaining in popularity because of their commitment to individualized care and recognition that the survivor is the expert of her own life. However, organizations charged with empowering survivors of domestic violence confront paradoxes when putting empowerment theory into practice. To better understand how practitioners address paradoxes of practice, we take a grounded practical theory approach to explore how one domestic violence prevention organization discursively constructs and enacts empowerment in organizational life. Our analysis reveals two paradoxes of practice: (1) a paradox of consistency, and (2) a paradox of transparency. Both paradoxes inform and constrain social change organizing. This study's practical promise is revealed in the discursive strategies employed by organizational members to bridge the gap between empowerment in theory and empowerment in practice.

Keywords: Empowerment; Domestic Violence; Organizational Communication; Paradox

Social work and advocacy organizations that take an empowerment approach to client interaction are unique because of their focus on individualized care and flexibility in goal setting and attainment. Indeed, these organizations stand out in a field replete with case management philosophies embedded within market economies in which the provision of care is based on corporate principles and bottom lines (Meagher & Parton, 2004; Thompson, 2002). The work of domestic violence prevention is one context in which empowerment approaches have gained traction because of gender equity commitments of both empowerment philosophies and

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domestic violence prevention programs, as well as the increased likelihood that survivors will achieve positive outcomes (DuBois & Miley, 2010; Ferree & Martin, 1995; Fetterman, 2000; Lee, 2001; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Organizational structures that can enhance empowerment philosophy efficacy include participatory work practices and equitable decision making and reward processes for those who do the work of domestic violence prevention (Ashcraft, 2000; Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002; Buzzanell, 1994; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Ideally, when these structures are in place, social service workers are empowered to assist survivors in gaining greater control over their lives (Lee, 2001; Thompson, 2002).

However, organizations charged with empowering survivors of domestic violence often confront paradoxes that threaten to undermine the translation of an empowerment program philosophy, or theory, to everyday practice. For example, research has documented paradoxes of participation wherein participatory organizational structures constrain empowerment practices (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). And paradoxes of power highlight how voice and agency are sometimes suppressed by managerial interests in participatory structures (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

This study is primarily concerned with paradoxes of practice, which incorporate issues of participation and power, and refer to how the needs of different stakeholders are accounted for when implementing empowerment processes (McDermott, Oetzel, & White, 2008). Extant research has yet to discern the specific ways in which domestic violence prevention practitioners frame and address challenges around translating theory into practice. Doing so can point to how organizations approach everyday interactions that potentially subvert program philosophy goals (LeGreco, 2012).

Toward this end, we conducted a grounded practical theory analysis to better understand how empowerment in theory is constructed in everyday practice for a domestic violence prevention organization (Craig & Tracy, 1995). This case study highlights how an organizational structure designed to empower paradoxically works to undermine the agency of social service employees. In specific, our analysis proposes two paradoxes of practice: (1) a paradox of consistency, and (2) a paradox of transparency, both of which surface when putting theory into practice. Pragmatically, this study draws attention to the communication strategies utilized by employees to navigate the paradoxes. In doing so, this example of problem-focused research of micro- and meso-level organizing practices attempts to translate communication scholarship in a way that could benefit domestic violence prevention organizations (Tracy, 2002; Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006).

Next, we explain empowerment as a program philosophy in the context of domestic violence prevention. We then explore how structure and agency intersect in empowerment processes, drawing attention to organizational paradoxes.

Empowerment as Program Philosophy: The Paradoxes of Empowerment in Practice

Domestic violence and other social work contexts typically view client interactions and support from one of two philosophies or approaches. By “approach,” we mean a

way of thinking about and engaging a kind of practice that encapsulates organizational purpose, values, ideology, knowledge, and methods (Lee, 2001). The first approach is case management where survivors meet regularly with a case manager to achieve specific goals and can sometimes be denied services if they do not achieve those goals (Dustin, 2007).

A second approach to domestic violence interactions positions empowerment as the process and end goal, and details how an empowerment philosophy permeates both client interactions and organizational processes (Lee, 2001). In contrast to case-management programs, empowerment-based services acknowledge the individual as the expert and sole decision maker of her life. An empowerment approach focuses on both the individual and the community in the sense that services are individualized and the healing “does not come from an expert’s hands but from the collaboration of people with peers and helpers in a self-healing and self-empowering process” (Lee, 2001, p. 31). In the best case, workers are empowered through participatory organizational structures to then empower survivors by identifying and garnering resources that will assist the survivor in ideally leaving the abusive relationship (Stewart, 2000). To facilitate this mutual empowerment (Crabtree, 1998), employee empowerment processes engage workers in diverse organizational activities, increase their access to organizational knowledge and their participation in decision-making processes, and value individual goals and feelings, in addition to other organizational objectives (Cheney, 1995; Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

As both process and outcome, an empowerment program philosophy is a discursive structure that coordinates behaviors and establishes routines. As part of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, rules lay the foundation for meaning and interaction, while resources routinize those interactions. Accordingly, an organization’s program philosophy serves as both rules and resources to guide organizational practice. Thus, by its very design, a program philosophy helps to guide employee behavior (LeGreco, 2012). However, in practice, individuals have the ability to transform empowerment meanings and interactions; in other words, employees can assert their agency to autonomously implement program philosophy (Weick, 1995). Consequently, empowerment is a communication process in which actors frame, articulate, and construct behaviors, interactions, and procedures through relationships with others (Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, & Wayangankar, 1998). To be sure, empowerment will emerge from organizational structures only if the values and norms of organizational members are consistent with meanings of empowerment (Manning, 2003). Thus, the enactment of a program philosophy by organizational employees has the potential to sustain or transform existing organizational structures (Giddens, 1984; LeGreco, 2012).

Within this structure-agency dialectic, where program philosophy is the structure that influences and is influenced by employee agency, critical research notes paradoxes that can hinder the translation of philosophy to practice. According to Stohl and Cheney (2001), a paradox “results when, in the pursuit of a specific goal (or goals), one calls for or carries out actions that are in opposition to the very goal(s) one is trying to accomplish” (p. 354). Paradoxes are inherent in organizational life,

they occur at the structural or organizational level, and they can influence the agency or efficacy of individuals within those structures (McDermott et al., 2008; Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

In implementing empowerment philosophies, paradoxes of participation highlight how participatory structures may demand intense involvement to the detriment of other life aspects and are not always desirable by all members (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). For instance, in their analysis of empowerment at one domestic violence shelter, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) concluded that staff and volunteers had different definitions of empowerment. Staff empowered volunteers by increasing their authority and participation in the organization. However, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz discovered that volunteers also wanted to be empowered through enhanced social support processes and not just enhanced responsibility. Thus, how theory is discursively constructed in practice and how agency is enacted may vary with organizational position. Paradoxes of power point to the presence of increased organizational control and the failure to see value in oppositional voices in participatory structures (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). For example, Vaughn and Stamp (2003) explored how domestic violence shelter workers “balance the control necessary to run an efficient and comfortable shelter and the freedom necessary for women to feel empowered” (p. 155). This example highlights the competing commitments faced by domestic violence prevention employees working to empower survivors while sometimes restricting their agency to ensure a safe environment.

Of particular concern to this study are paradoxes of practice that serve as a reminder that “well-intentioned policy text may be manipulated, resisted, and subverted as they are translated into practice” (LeGreco, 2012, p. 58). A focus on practice highlights differences around organizational participation, power, and policy meanings and can assist practitioners in anticipating the perspectives of various stakeholders (McDermott et al., 2008). However, extant research has yet to reveal the underlying paradoxes of (dis)empowerment practices that emerge in attempts to implement an empowerment philosophy, and to articulate how workers navigate these paradoxes. Doing so can point to effective possibilities for translating theory to practice because most practical challenges in organizations revolve around paradoxical situations (Simpson & Seibold, 2008). Thus, this study’s practical promise is revealed in the discursive strategies and tactics employed by organizational members to bridge the gap between empowerment in theory and empowerment in practice. As such, this study is guided by the following research question (RQ): How does a domestic violence prevention organization discursively enact an empowerment philosophy in everyday practice?

Method

Context

The context for this case study is a nonprofit, domestic violence prevention organization called Harbor Safe House (HSH).¹ HSH was founded in the 1970s as

one of the first battered women's shelters in the country. HSH provides shelter, peer counseling, advocacy, and other services to survivors of domestic violence throughout three counties, reaching approximately 275 women and children every year. HSH is a useful site for considering empowerment in practice because it offers a feminist-informed, empowerment-based set of services that privilege the woman as the expert of her own experiences and circumstances.

HSH staff positions include an executive director, a director of community engagement, a director of survivor services, a children's coordinator, a health and wellness coordinator, two outreach coordinators for surrounding counties, a volunteer coordinator, a shelter manager, an overnight manager, a court advocate, a bookkeeper, an administrative assistant, as well as interns, and multiple volunteers.

Participants

At the time of our study, HSH consisted of 12 staff members, 13 board members, two interns, and six volunteers. Participants in our study were 12 current and four former staff, five current and two former board members, two current and one former intern, and three current volunteers ($N = 29$ total). All current staff participated. Eight current board members and one current volunteer did not participate.² They either did not respond, or they indicated that they were too busy. Former staff had left the organization to pursue jobs that offered more pay and/or opportunities for advancement or were let go by the organization. Twenty-seven of the participants were women, and two were men. The average age of participants was 35 years, and the range of employment tenure was two weeks to 11 years.

Procedures

Both authors gathered data at HSH over a six-month period, working as volunteers. Like other volunteers, we each completed a 40-hour volunteer training and did our weekly volunteer shifts at the shelter. Volunteer tasks included answering crisis lines, interacting with survivors, and managing shelter duties. We also attended staff and department meetings and community events. Data consisted of: (1) participant observations of work practices and events that yielded 450 single-spaced pages of field notes; (2) 29 in-depth interviews with 16 staff, three interns, seven board members, and three volunteers that yielded 783 pages of double-spaced text; and (3) analyses of documents that filled five file-size boxes. Documents included the website, business documents (e.g., policy and procedures manual, job descriptions), and memos (e.g., e-mails, meeting agendas).³ All procedures were approved, as was every aspect of our design, by our university's institutional review board.

Interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes (with an average of 47 minutes) and probed: (1) constructions of empowerment (e.g., stories that illustrate how empowerment is defined); (2) the role of empowerment in organizing and decision-making practices (e.g., how they engage and what role the empowerment philosophy plays in day-to-day organizing practices and processes); and (3) the role of empowerment in meeting

individual and organizational goals (e.g., the rewards and challenges of putting empowerment into practice). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, double checked for accuracy (transcripts against digital files), and masked for confidentiality.

Craig and Tracy's (1995) grounded practical theory approach is appropriate for an exploration of how theory is translated to practice because it offers multiple levels of analysis to discern "the communication problems experienced by practitioners" and "the specific techniques by which they attempt to cope with those problems" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 250). Thus, with the research question in mind, we analyzed the field notes, interview transcripts, and document data using two steps of grounded practical theory. At the problem level, we combed the data to foreground the core problems or paradoxes experienced by organizational members. At this level of analysis, participant discourses revealed struggles around how to actually implement the organization's empowerment program philosophy. At the technical level, we identified the communication strategies employed by organizational members to navigate these paradoxes. For instance, participants managed empowerment ambiguity by developing counter-discourses. We also coded for contextual factors that influenced participant interpretations of empowerment, and illuminated the conditions in which these interpretations were embedded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, participant discourses revealed how key transitions in the organization's structure influenced how they conducted their work.

This entire analytic process was informed by Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method. In specific, each author went through all data forms line by line. We also engaged in discussions of all codes over the entire time of data gathering, transcribing, memoing, sense making, and writing. Each author engaged in memoing to tie different data together and show relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because coding and analysis are iterative processes, coding was ongoing. We coded and memoed individually, then met to compare codes, memos, and preliminary analyses, then separated again and came back together again and so on until we reached agreement.

To ensure that the generated findings represented the data appropriately, alternative participant opinions were considered when pulling together support for each category (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, staff and interns had varying opinions based on organizational tenure and access to communications. Experiences that refuted the authors' findings were problematized and incorporated into the results. The plausibility of the findings was considered in terms of what was known from previous research. This plausibility was contextualized to ensure that participants' voices were privileged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, our volunteer experiences were consistently compared and contrasted with that of other volunteers, as well as the reported and observed experiences of current and former full-time staff, and research on empowerment program philosophies. These processes illuminated participants' diverse experiences and prevented privileging the authors' limited experiences. Last, member checks with participants sought their feedback with findings and encouraged critique of interpretations. For member checks, we presented an executive summary of our findings to staff and board

members, and we also invited all participants for follow-up interviews (one person accepted); member checks resulted in no changes.

Results and Interpretation

The research question guiding this study asked how a domestic violence prevention organization discursively enacts an empowerment philosophy in practice. Our analysis revealed two overlapping paradoxes of practice: (1) a paradox of consistency, and (2) a paradox of transparency. Findings not only highlight differing interpretations by management and non-management, but also detail the communication tactics employed by organizational members to navigate these paradoxes.⁴

The Problem: Paradox of Consistency

At the problem level, the *paradox of consistency* reflects staff expectations that HSH's program philosophy influences organizational structure and culture. In other words, employees expected consistency between organizational philosophy and organizational practice (see Hatch & Schultz, 2002, 2008). Yet, structural transitions that fueled cultural tensions indicate how consistency was perceived by organizational leaders as detrimental to the empowerment program philosophy. Thus, the consistency paradox illustrates how empowerment-based organizing processes did not guarantee empowered survivors. In short, alignment between philosophy and structure can sometimes inhibit empowerment.

In particular, HSH had experienced three significant structural transitions since the organization's founding in the 1970s. At that time, it was established as a feminist collective without a hierarchy or executive director. Instead, the collective staff engaged in participatory and consensus decision-making processes about all organizational procedures in consultation with an external Board. For instance, one manager comments that these procedures included, "where the organization went, what grants were applied for, how much the staff would make."⁵ At this time, there was consistency between program philosophy and organizational structure.

Then in the late 1990s, the Board recommended bringing in an executive director and transitioning away from a collective to a hybrid organizational form, maintaining some aspects of consensus decision making but placing more constraints on the power of collective staff. This transition occurred mainly because the work was not getting done (see Ashcraft, 2001, for hybrid organizing). A manager adds:

The staff and volunteers weren't coming to agreement on what grants to apply for, who's responsible, who's accountable for getting the grant reports turned in, for making sure that the work gets carried out. That consensus and agreement stopped . . . I think one of the reasons it stopped is, as a collective, they believed that everyone had to agree in order to move forward.

Then, in 2010, during our data collection, the organization transitioned to a more formal hierarchy with an executive director and two mid-level managers.

This transition occurred because the Board felt that the executive director was too engaged in the day-to-day organizing and not doing enough “big picture work.” One board member explains, “there are things that executive directors do that aren’t getting done.”

These changes in HSH’s structure confronted staff with a paradox of consistency as the organizational structure no longer reflected the program philosophy. Yet, each of these transitions was intended to help the organization better implement the empowerment program philosophy and maintain financial sustainability. Nonetheless, staff perceptions were that they were top-down decisions that fundamentally contradicted how the organization was intended to function. For instance, many staff perceived there was a lack of transparency. A volunteer adds, “[some] of the structural changes have probably been for the best, and others of them...I just don’t understand their motivation.” Some staff also commented that the new hierarchical structure actually discouraged them from interacting with each other in helpful and supportive ways. A staff member says, “I’m concerned if I go to the other supervisor, the immediate [supervisor] might be offended or upset that she was being bypassed.” Indeed, staff perceived that communication in the new structure was exclusively top-down and that individuals would be penalized for not going to their manager with any issues or concerns. Moreover, the structural transitions contributed to detrimental organizational divisions among various working groups such as board versus staff; and direct service staff (working at shelter) versus non-direct service staff (working at the office). For instance, the second author observed the tension between direct and non-direct service staff, noting, “[o]ne shelter staff member is strongly convinced that ‘all staff need to have shelter shifts!’ She said, ‘We are a crisis center that revolves around the shelter—yet most people have no idea what goes on here’” (September, 2010). A volunteer agrees, “there’s this real big disconnect between what’s happening at [the office] and what’s happening at the house [shelter].”

The paradox of consistency was also reflected in cultural tensions that undermined the agency of staff. Organizational culture refers to “the internal values, beliefs, and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the company and manifest in the ways employees think and feel about the company they are working for” (Hatch & Schultz, 2008, p. 231). Overall, staff perceived a culture of disempowerment despite the implicit expectation by staff for an empowered workplace. One staff member explains, “[w]hen you don’t feel like you’re being treated well, how are you supposed to work with people? Or like the whole notion of empowerment goes out the window when you feel like your employer is mistreating you.” Another staff member adds, “[t]hey should be doing a little more empowering of their staff while they’re supposed to be having the staff empower the women.” This culture of disempowerment created a sense of paranoia among staff. A third staff member says, “[j]ust the way that our supervisors treat us, the way that the organization treats us, it’s like we have absolutely no sense of job security, like we are all afraid that we’re going to get fired the next day.” For HSH, the organizational memory of the founding feminist collective structure may have influenced current staff expectations of what the work should look like. By organizational memory, we mean “stored information from an

organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions" (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 61). Nevertheless, our analysis reveals how these structural transitions, intended to support the implementation of the empowerment program philosophy, contributed to a workplace culture in which staff perceived they were not supported to do good work.

Technical tactics to address the paradox of consistency. At the technical level, staff enact several strategies to address the consistency paradox. Importantly, these strategies indicate how workers attempt to retain their agency within a structure they perceive to be disempowering. First, staff construct a discursive divide between meaningful and non-meaningful work. Meaningful work is that which deals with survivors and the community, and non-meaningful work is that which deals with other organizational members. For example, when asked if she would recommend volunteering with HSH to a friend, one volunteer said, "I would tell this person also that these things [disorganization, structural issues] should not matter because you're contributing to something, you're giving your time." Staff also construct rigid work and non-work boundaries, recognize the potential for burnout, and utilize self-care strategies. According to a staff member, "[w]ork is work, and home is home, and you have to be able to set those aside. And making sure to take days off." By employing these strategies, staff redirect their energies and reassert their agency over aspects where they feel they have control. In this way, they accept that the paradox of consistency exists, but then withdraw from engaging it directly (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

There is one additional tactic that addresses the paradox of consistency. This strategy is employed exclusively by management and reflects what Stohl and Cheney (2001) term a "culture of adaptation" in which structural change is necessary for the organization to move forward (p. 393). HSH management privileges empowerment in service philosophy over empowerment as organizing principle by differentiating intimate partner relations from manager subordinate relations. One manager explains, "[t]here's a difference between [the] intimate-partner power differential and an organization's power structure . . . Without the power structure that we have, folks couldn't be accountable. Then, within the power structure that we have, they need to be accountable." This strategy serves as a reminder of management's interpretation that consistency between program philosophy and organizational structure is not necessarily desirable, especially when it comes to employee accountability.

The Problem: Paradox of Transparency

At the problem level, the *paradox of transparency* refers to employees' desire for clarity of empowerment meanings in client interactions, goals, and outcomes. For workers, transparency is meant to combat ambiguities at the conceptual level that can perpetuate confusion and disempower those meant to be empowered (Collins, 2000; see also Deetz & McClellan, 2009). However, management's vision of empowerment

suggests that transparency is a problematic ideal. The transparency paradox illustrates how clarity of empowerment meanings can curtail employee efforts to empower survivors.

We open our explanation of the paradox of transparency by articulating HSH management's vision of empowerment because how organizational leaders think about empowerment as a service philosophy contributes to staff perceptions of ambiguity regarding how to treat survivors. HSH management defines empowerment by what it is not. First, empowerment is not equality. When asked to describe empowerment in practice, one manager elaborates:

Sometimes that discrepancy of not doing everything exactly the same for each person creates a conflict among staff and among volunteers because "Well, we did this for survivor A. Why can't we do exactly the same thing for survivor B?" Well, her situation is not the same; she needs other things.

At the same time, this manager explains that empowerment is also not favoritism: "we don't connect too much with survivors, because when that happens, then favoritism occurs, and that's something that cannot be allowed... There is a difference between ensuring the needs are met, and even though they're not equal... they're fair." So, whether staff treat survivors as favorites or as equals, they contradict management's ambiguous vision of empowerment.

Management's construction of empowerment as an ambiguous process is meant to give staff the flexibility to offer the individualized care of an empowerment approach. Indeed, strategic ambiguity invites individuals to retain their own interpretations of the program philosophy while encouraging the perception of agreement among organizational members (Eisenberg, 2007). However, staff discourses indicate their preference for more transparency. These conflicting perceptions around empowerment mean that staff are unclear about what counts as an empowerment success and failure. One volunteer comments on the volunteer training, "I have to say it was very unclear to us how we were actually supposed to implement this empowerment philosophy... what kind of responses to women's questions are empowerment?" A staff member expresses her confusion, "I'm really big on definitions, just explain this definition so I can get it so I know what I'm doing." Staff are also unclear about where advocacy ends and enabling begins or when advocacy turns into enabling. Another staff member adds, "I don't know where my job ends". According to a third staff member, survivors think "[w]e do have resources, we do have these services, and we can help people and we can do things, but sometimes the downside of that is then people think that we can do everything." In these examples, staff perceive they are immobilized by the ambiguous program philosophy, although this ambiguity is supposed to enhance their agency.

Technical tactics to address the paradox of transparency. To combat empowerment as an ambiguous process, staff construct alternative meanings or counter-discourses of empowerment. However, these meanings have the unintended consequence

(Giddens, 1984) of disempowering survivors. First, empowerment is constructed as a procedural scapegoat in which the survivor is made accountable for her own empowerment, abdicating the staff member of any accountability. In these instances, staff often blame the survivors for failing or for not being empowered. Staff construct survivors as lazy and entitled. One staff member argues:

you are getting free rent and board, and you are getting free food and free laundry facilities, and new rooms and rides and help with your resources. And then you guys come and ask for stuff, and you feel that you're entitled to it, and I don't understand that.

Further, some staff believe survivors are guilty of deception and of manipulating the system. A staff member says, “[s]ometimes you just know there are lies that are going on and . . . I do believe in the empowerment theory, but I don't know that necessarily believing every single thing every woman says can always be beneficial.” Staff also claim survivors use the empowerment model as a crutch. A staff member explains, “sometimes it can create a crutch . . . that's the difficult part, because I want to be able to do those things for them, but physically and emotionally, I just can't take all that load on, nor am I supposed to.” Not all staff agree that survivors are to blame for empowerment issues. A manager points out, “[w]hat I see as the challenge is I think advocates can maybe get to a place where [empowerment is] used as kind of a scapegoat for not reaching out.” Instead of blaming the survivors, this manager points out that staff can become part of the problem.

Second, empowerment is constructed as a tacit control mechanism. Despite the notion that empowerment means services should be individualized, this construction indicates how staff use the empowerment model as a disciplinary tactic in which some behaviors are rewarded over others. Specifically, staff privilege tangible, outcome-oriented choices of survivors over other choices. Staff also generate informal rules to determine who can and who cannot have services. For instance, survivors who apply for jobs and appear to be actively trying to improve their situation are allotted more resources and extensions than survivors who appear to be spending their time sleeping and “doing nothing.” A staff member explains “[i]t's become very . . . outcome, outward-based sort of things . . . [and] they're very, you know, quantity-based about what you're doing.” The first author also observed this empowerment construction in her field notes:

Staff were discussing whether to grant an extension to a survivor who was nine months pregnant. She was spending most of her time sleeping in her room. Staff opposed to granting the extension claimed she was not doing anything to prepare for her life after shelter and possibly using her pregnancy as an excuse. One staff member said “She's taking advantage of the situation.” (July, 2010)

Third, staff construct empowerment as a game in which survivors are the players and shelter staff are the referees. Advocates then engage in empowerment coaching where they advise survivors on how to play the game of empowerment, including

how to best describe their progress to other staff. One staff member explains that she sometimes tells survivors exactly what to do to manipulate the system: “[i]f you want this extension, you need to show shelter staff that you’re doing this, that you’re doing that, that we just met and we’re doing this, and this is planned, and we have this appointment.” In this way, some staff are complicit in perpetuating the systems and challenges that they find so frustrating.

In sum, in reaction to management’s vision of empowerment as an ambiguous process, staff construct alternative meanings of empowerment as a procedural scapegoat, as a control mechanism, and as a game. These notions of empowerment outline how staff resolve their desire for transparency, aspire to present voices of opposition, and attempt to reassert their agency in a structure they perceive to be disempowering. Unfortunately, these counter-discourses paradoxically work to disempower survivors. In this way, transparency becomes a mechanism of power and control; a transparent program philosophy that leaves little room for interpretation can be used to closely monitor and discipline individual actions (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya, 2008).

However, there are a number of additional tactics employed by staff to navigate the paradox of transparency, including both the ambiguity of the empowerment program philosophy and the disempowerment of the counter-discourses. These tactics underscore ways to live with the paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) but to positively work with and through it. First, staff redefine what counts as an emergency. This strategy helps to maintain work life boundaries and determine where the work of empowerment can end, and it redirects efforts back to advocacy and away from enabling. For instance, a staff member whose personal life was suffering because she would always quickly respond to survivors’ requests, now admits:

If you don’t have water, if you don’t have lights, that’s not an emergency unless . . . someone’s on some either medication or they’re on a machine and they need that to survive . . . You knew that water bill was coming; you knew you couldn’t pay it . . . The only emergencies for me are if your abuser found you and you need to get out of town.

Second, staff recognize the value in asking colleagues for their opinions and expertise while examining each case from multiple perspectives. An intern explains, “try to see where other people are coming from as far as like how they’re basing their decision or whatnot, and just try to look at every possible angle that I can.”

Last, some staff emphasize the need to build programs from the ground up, maintaining an open-door policy that encourages conversation and collaboration among staff and survivors. This tactic offers the most promise in terms of allowing staff to benefit from the ambiguity of the program philosophy. In this way, this strategy could work to resist systemic disempowering processes by redirecting staff back to engaging directly with survivors about their needs. A staff member elaborates, “[t]here’s this emphasis on planning your program . . . But it should start from . . . the ground up, the individuals you’re working with. I don’t really see the point in shutting the door.” Combined, these strategies articulate how staff individually

navigate empowerment challenges around transparency, and sometimes resist, dominant constructions of disempowerment in practice.

Discussion

Domestic violence prevention organizations that employ empowerment-based approaches are faced with paradoxes in their attempts to translate empowerment theory into practice. This study illuminates how one domestic violence prevention organization discursively attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, this study proposes two paradoxes of practice that represent disagreement between management and non-managerial staff around the organization's program philosophy. The paradox of consistency refers to employee expectations that an advocacy organization with an empowerment program philosophy will have participatory work structures that empower staff. In other words, an organization's program philosophy should influence organizational structures such as organizational culture and policy decision-making processes (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, 2008; Hyde, 1995; Lee, 2001). Yet many organizations have found participatory organizing processes nearly impossible to sustain without threatening other organizational objectives, such as positive survivor outcomes in the case of HSH (Ashcraft, 2001; Eisenstein, 1995; Thomas, 1999). As such, to ensure that the organization could realize its program philosophy, HSH privileged organizational outcomes over process and chose to forgo a participatory structure because of time and accountability pressures. However, staff were left feeling disgruntled and disempowered. This workplace disempowerment was exacerbated by the paradox of transparency.

The paradox of transparency refers to clarity of program philosophy in governing client interactions, goals, and outcomes. Yet a transparent definition of empowerment can threaten the flexibility and individualized care warranted by an empowerment approach (Lee, 2001). Specifically, the removal of all ambiguity can lead employees to become ignorant of what is missing, fail to problematize underlying assumptions, and stop asking questions (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). There is a commonly held assumption in today's organizations that transparency is desirable when, in fact, our analysis suggests that it may not be to all stakeholders and for all organizational procedures (see also Christensen et al., 2008). Specifically, although HSH management and non-managerial staff both wanted to enhance the agency of organizational members, management privileged ambiguity in its interpretation of the program philosophy, whereas non-managerial staff desired transparency.

In delineating these two paradoxes of practice, we identified how program philosophy influences the day-to-day organizing processes of a domestic violence prevention organization (Seibold & Flanagan, 2000). These two paradoxes compound

to undermine employee agency. In the case of HSH, staff do not perceive they are empowered by the organization's structure. At the same time, they desire more transparency around how to implement the program philosophy, despite the notion that an ambiguous program philosophy should presumably give staff more flexibility in how they do the work of empowerment. Thus, empowerment in theory penetrates practice in contradictory and ironic ways. In response to paradoxes of consistency and transparency, staff create alternative constructions of empowerment that actually contradict the organization's official service philosophy. Ironically, in constructing their own rules of what counts as empowerment and in setting up reward structures that privilege tangible outcomes for survivor success, HSH's approach to domestic violence prevention more closely resembles a case-management approach. In this way, some organizational structures and processes can induce ineffective employee responses to organizational paradoxes (Tracy, 2004).

Second, we contribute to recent calls for the investigation of the dark side of organizing via (mis)managed empowerment processes (Lutgen-Sandvik & Davenport Sypher, 2009). Specifically our analysis exposes the underlying process mechanisms of program philosophy in practice that actually work to disempower domestic violence survivors. Moreover, in considering empowerment constructions as contextually embedded, we complicate current understandings of organizational memory. To date, few studies illustrate how organizational memory can actually hinder organizational learning, progress, and production (Fiedler & Welp, 2010). Yet this study indicates how the residues of the founding feminist collective created a set of expectations among staff about program philosophy implementation and staff decision making. In doing so, we answer recent calls to look at how context intersects with organizational memory (Fiedler & Welp, 2010).

Third, we outline the challenges and constraints of empowering diverse organizational stakeholders (Collins, 2000; Stewart, 2000). In doing so, this study accounts for the intersections of meso-level, empowered organizing with micro-level, empowered activism of individuals. At the meso-level, we articulate how organizational structure and culture can become a barrier to empowerment in practice. At the micro-level, we discern the specific tactics employed by members that both resist and maintain the status quo, an especially important endeavor given practitioners' concerns with practical knowledge about how to make choices in contingent situations (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). Combined, our analysis contributes to calls to critically consider the effectiveness of domestic violence prevention and intervention programs (Jouriles & Vincent, 2000) by indicating how the services offered sometimes do not have the effect intended.

Pragmatic Implications

Although our analysis uncovers problematic facets of putting empowerment into practice, we still believe that an empowerment philosophy can make a positive difference in the lives of women. As such, we offer some practical take-away points in the form of suggestions for empowerment-based programs that could also be

transferable to other social advocacy organizations. These suggestions are intended to serve as a springboard for other suggestions.

Our first suggestion is to encourage staff and survivors to collaboratively develop empowerment guidelines that add specificity and clarity without creating a one-size-fits all approach. For instance, HSH does utilize an advocacy wheel that outlines the different facets of empowerment but what we are suggesting is to clarify a baseline of “quality services.” This baseline could take the form of a checklist that assists advocates and survivors in collectively assessing the particular needs of a survivor, but not a list that generates a hard and fast process. Advocates and survivors would ideally discuss checklist items to determine, for instance, a survivor’s short-term and long-term goals (e.g., financial, employment, housing, childcare), what she perceives she needs to achieve those goals (e.g., resources), and her general timeline (e.g., days, weeks, months). This checklist should build in flexibility to accommodate a woman’s individual and particular needs and to assist her in prioritizing her goals. Then advocates could discuss survivor checklists with other advocates to offer advice and assistance in how best to empower each survivor.

Our second suggestion is a reminder to explicitly acknowledge the emotional aspects of domestic violence work. Indeed, bridging the gap between empowerment in theory and empowerment in practice “requires recognizing the centrality of the feelings as well as the ideas and strategic actions” of the work of domestic violence prevention (Taylor, 1995, p. 224). Organizational leaders could engage in conversations and strategizing with staff about how to balance the tension between advocacy and enabling, how to avoid favoritism while still doing good work, and explicitly acknowledge the attendant tensions and emotional challenges of their work. These conversations could be incorporated into regularly scheduled meetings where individual staff report the challenges they experienced each week and gain insight from organizational colleagues on how to move forward. Alternatively, these conversations could be part of a series of sessions devoted exclusively to discussing the emotion work of domestic violence prevention and potential coping strategies. Pennebaker and his colleagues (e.g., Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker, 1995, 1997; Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999) have consistently found that talking about emotional distress or discomfort has the potential to motivate significant physiological, emotional or psychological, and physical benefits. Staff should be encouraged to participate in such discussions.

Our third suggestion is to incorporate reflexivity into decision-making processes as part of an organization-wide initiative that is built into meetings and interactions. Ideally, this reflexivity should be rooted in and supportive of diverse organizational relationships, employ inclusive and safe communication tactics, and serve as a foundation for creating an empowered organizational environment (Barge, 2004). We borrowed this suggestion from a board member who insightfully recommended that staff ask themselves, “[a]re we sticking with our fundamental (beliefs) and what are our fundamental beliefs now?” Referring back to the organization’s official empowerment service philosophy is one way to engage reflexivity. Furthermore, this research and the consultant (i.e., brown bag) portion of our project offered HSH a start in thinking about how to create a culture of reflexivity. First, the research gave

staff voice in a safe space. Indeed for some, the interviews were a cathartic and therapeutic experience of reflexivity (Alvesson, 2003). Second, we collaborated with HSH to develop a plan of action based on our analysis. This collaboration led to a series of brown bag presentations based on our recommendations and what the staff wanted to learn more about. In this example, we note how “the consultant and workers jointly come up with a plan of action; and the workers control the use of information that is generated. In this collaborative endeavor, the outsider becomes to some extent an insider” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p. 37).

Our fourth suggestion is to engage in “trauma stewardship.” Indeed, “by developing the deep sense of awareness needed to care for ourselves while caring for others and the world around us, we can greatly enhance our potential to work for change, ethically and with integrity, for generations to come” (Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009, p. 12). In practice, HSH could have brainstorming sessions, staff support groups, and one-on-one meetings around issues of self-care. In addition, HSH could educate staff on symptoms and signs of workplace stress and burnout, and then provide organizational support to address these issues. It is important for the organization to recognize that ongoing stress can give rise to a number of counterproductive and unhealthy behaviors, and thus to create “buffers” against those stressors (Steers & Black, 1994). Buffers might include strategies such as teaching time management skills, fostering the development of outside interests, encouraging enhanced physical activity or exercise, and helping individuals to adopt new cognitive understandings or appraisals of current situations (Lazarus, 1991; Miller, Birkholt, Scott, & Stage, 1995). Moreover, giving an organizational member an active “voice” in the work environment has been shown to reduce stress and burnout (e.g., Starnaman & Miller, 1992).

Our final suggestion is to craft a “pay it forward” culture. This entails educating each other on job roles, rules, and responsibilities of other staff and board members. Then, whenever possible, reward staff for helping each other out and breaking down workplace divisions. As one board member suggested, HSH could invite survivors to assist in doing some of the work, which could assist survivors in attaining some job skills while minimizing the workload of staff. In specific, survivors could volunteer to help staff with office tasks such as filing, copying, or conducting relevant Internet searches. Survivors could benefit from getting some professional workplace experiences, and staff could potentially reprioritize their workload.

Conclusion

In closing, although empowerment-based approaches to domestic violence prevention are on the rise, given the increased likelihood of positive outcomes for survivors, our analysis reveals the paradoxes staff face when putting empowerment theory into practice. Organizations charged with doing the work of domestic violence prevention should consider how thoughtful reflection, candid conversation, and strategic focus can assist staff with bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Notes

- [1] The name of the organization has been changed for this study.
- [2] The authors are included in the total number of HSH volunteers.
- [3] The reported study is a subset of a larger study that also included 28 interviews with survivors of domestic violence who utilized the services of HSH that yielded 950 pages of double-spaced text.
- [4] Our results and interpretations are based on a combination of all types of data (e.g., interview, field note, and organizational documents).
- [5] To maintain the confidentiality of our participants, we use the following labels when introducing a quote: manager, staff member, volunteer, intern, and board member.

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