

## **“Hey, I’ve Got a Voice Too!” Narratives of Adversity, Growth and Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study explored meanings of “empowerment” from bottom-up perspectives. Sixteen low-income individuals experiencing homelessness and related forms of economic adversity participated. Participants reported experiencing empowerment, but also adversity, for example discrimination and ongoing poverty. Results are discussed in a broader societal context, with recommendations made for professionals interested in social and economic justice. Suggestions include enhanced inter-agency partnerships for underserved communities, investment in concepts such as workforce development, and increased opportunities for change through policy reform.*

*Keywords:* empowerment, narrative, social & economic justice, homelessness, community psychology

Empowerment has become a keyword in interdisciplinary social and political science jargon over the past several decades. Yet a concise and consistent understanding of this concept has frequently proven elusive. Some have argued that due to its myriad contested and poorly operationalized meanings, the utility of empowerment phenomena is limited and may be viewed with cynicism by practitioners (e.g., LeCompte & deMarrais, 1992). Others hold that despite the sometimes-vacuous claims that surround academic discussions of empowerment, it is a subject to be elucidated, whose mechanisms of action should be specified in order to maximize effective and consistent theory and practice (e.g., Fielding, 1996).

The impetus behind the present study was to explore meanings underlying the concept of empowerment, as told through the narratives of individuals engaged in a program designed to effect empowerment. Furthermore, the overarching mission of the study was to actualize empowerment, at least theoretically, by inviting the voices of individuals who had been—and may continue to be—socially disempowered into academic discourse.

Specific desired outcomes were twofold: 1) To consolidate the concept of empowerment into a few key themes, and to couch these in the context of the recent iterative model of empowerment proposed by Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) (this model will be further explored in the History of Empowerment section, below); 2) To evaluate the effectiveness of the empowerment program from which participants were recruited, in order to maximize its potential for both intrapsychic empowerment and increased agency, as experienced by participants in extrinsic, social contexts.

For the purposes of this study, we understand empowerment to mean the active, iterative process of self-directed and goal-oriented accrual of individual and social agency.

Participants for the present study were recruited from a *street newspaper* vendor program operated by a nonprofit organization whose mission focuses on empowerment of homeless and otherwise economically disadvantaged individuals (the street newspaper model is defined in the *Methods* section of this article). We selected this group for study for multiple reasons. First, the individuals who work as vendors of the street newspaper are self-selected as candidates for empowerment, implying that they are aware of being relatively disempowered—either intrapsychically, socially, or both—and are motivated to acquire greater power. We therefore assumed that participants from the street newspaper program would be personally aligned with the precepts of the Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) empowerment model.

Furthermore, in the present study we focused on this particular group of street newspaper vendors because the publication was the first of its kind to be wholly established by individuals themselves experiencing homelessness. The organization that houses the street newspaper thus embraces a history of a *bottom-up* empowerment process, through which transformational support is afforded by peers—with a strong emphasis on “doing it yourself”—rather than by professional service providers. We viewed interviews with members of this organization as opportunities to understand how the iterative process of empowerment functions at street level, in fundamentally nonacademic terms.

Finally, we selected the participants for the diversity that they represent. While the street newspaper program in which they are involved is primarily concerned with the issue of homelessness, its vendors experience myriad forms of disempowerment at both intrapsychic and social levels, including disadvantage based on mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), histories of substance use, prior incarceration, learning disabilities and illiteracy, physical health problems, and multiple forms of discrimination based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors. Interviews with

participants could therefore elaborate the process of empowerment from multiple perspectives, and in multiple psychosocial domains.

### *History of Empowerment*

Theories and practice of empowerment have been expounded in the literatures of psychology and social work in North America since at least the early 1970s, with a focus on the concept as a mechanism of improved mental health outcomes as well as a vehicle for the realization of social justice. Empowerment became associated with the stimulation of positive effects, especially for people living in situations of disempowerment, such as marginalization, disenfranchisement, or low social status. Practitioners dedicated to individual as well as systemic change, e.g., social workers and community organizers, began to thump for empowerment in the 1970s for many reasons, including to influence public policy and meet social needs (e.g., O'Connell, 1978).

While empowerment is frequently conceived of as an effective tool for motivating psychic change at the personal level, it can be best understood as a balance of individual and group dimensions. For instance, in a study of the formation of consumer advocacy groups for homeless clients, Cohen (1994) suggests that programs to actualize empowerment through group-based approaches should be developed in order to "transcend the dichotomy between individual and social change" (p. 743). Consistent with this notion, empowerment has been studied in the context of multisystemic interventions, involving individual, family, and community dimensions in myriad underserved populations (e.g., Boyd-Franklin, Morris, & Bry, 1997; Baffour, Jones, & Contreras, 2006; Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009; Tsey, et al., 2009).

Most recently, Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) proposed a comprehensive, integrative model for empowerment. This framework recognizes and articulates empowerment as an iterative process, and pragmatically identifies core elements of that transaction. The fundamental components of the Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) empowerment model are: 1) personally meaningful and power-oriented goals; 2) self-efficacy; 3) knowledge; 4) competence; 5) action; and 6) impact. The six elements of this framework are evident throughout the interviews with participants in the present study, though they have not been not systematically incorporated into the empowerment program from which participants were recruited. Recommendations for this program based on the results of the study are articulated in the discussion section of this article.

### *Bias and Researcher-Participant Dynamics in the Interview Situation*

Before venturing further, we must acknowledge that despite good intentions, we may be part of the problem rather than the solution. In other words, the very presumption that there exists an operationally-definable process for empowerment is a manifestation of the values of a social status quo in which professionals are privileged with the ability to create foundations of knowledge. Therefore, the very pursuit of universal definitions may inherently disempower those whose voices are not represented in the professional echelon, despite the ostensibly good intentions of professionals (Pease, 2002). If the goal is to understand how empowerment is experienced, it is crucial that individuals who

participate in empowerment interventions and programs be asked to describe the phenomenon in their own words. In doing so, local, context-bound understandings of psychosocial existence can be elaborated, meanwhile propelling conventionally obscured voices into the realm of scientific discourse.

The noble ideals that underlie any human service profession are not to be discounted. Nevertheless, it is possible for even the most justice-oriented professional to subtly recapitulate an inequitable status quo through the dissemination of both epistemic (i.e., “values employed by scientists to choose among competing theoretical explanations” [Howard, 1985, p. 257]) and nonepistemic values (i.e., “social and political beliefs congruent with [society’s] predominant ideology” [Prilleltensky, 1989, p. 795]). In other words, due to society’s situation of social science researchers and practitioners as relatively privileged with regards to access to social and political power, these individuals may risk the reification of culturally embedded injustices through both intra- and extra-disciplinary actions.

Therefore, even when a practitioner’s epistemic or stated values are consistent with notions of empowerment, this individual might unwittingly and perhaps unconsciously endorse power imbalances embedded in the language and actions with which Americans are socialized, engaging nonepistemic channels of reproduction. Furthermore, the power disparity that automatically exists between professional and client is exacerbated by the fact that most experts who would empower their clients belong to a social class whose political and economic interests are aligned with those of the dominant sectors of society, potentially biasing their work either overtly or covertly (Prilleltensky, 1989).

In research interviewing, the means for data collection that we employ in the present study, there exists a “hidden problem of power”, potentially operant both in the microcosm of the interview situation itself and the mainstream tradition of social science research (Mischler, 1986; Mizock & Harkins, 2008). This concealed concern may be of grave importance—social status discrepancies between the interviewer and interviewee can shape the narrative that the respondent creates based on values woven into the language and content of both the questions and responses. Therefore, data from interviews in which power asymmetry is salient may be inherently biased.

In an interview situation in which the interviewer holds more power than the interviewee—as a result of both status as a professional *and* situation as the individual in control of the course of the interview—questions of whose interests are truly being served may arise. Mischler (1986) argues that in order to empower respondents, the classical interviewer-interviewee relationship must be restructured to encourage respondents to speak in their own voices. Therefore, to create a more equitable distribution of power between researcher and participant, interviews should optimally be built in an open format, allowing space for extended narrative accounts by respondents.

We designed the present study according to the recommendations of Mischler (1986), while also employing a *constructivist-interpretivist* framework for understanding. This research paradigm primarily refers to a relativist position, in which reality is constructed, and meanings are multiple and frequently hidden. Through the constructivist-interpretivist approach, researcher and participant co-construct the findings of research

via their interactive dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). In the present study, the researcher relied on the participants to create their own definitions of empowerment through description of this process in the context of their personal situations and their involvement with the street newspaper organization from which they were recruited.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

We recruited participants for the present study based on their involvement in a nonprofit organization as vendors of a street newspaper. Street papers serve many functions. Among these are: 1) economic opportunity for people experiencing homelessness and severe economic disadvantage; 2) creation of an alternative public sphere for marginalized constituencies within a geographic community; 3) publication of community activism; 4) eradication of myths surrounding homelessness and poverty; 5) challenge to mainstream media versions of reality; and 6) identity formation, elevation of voice, and development of critical consciousness for marginalized communities (Howley, 2005; Brown, 2002; Heinz, 2004).

Based on the mission of the organization studied, which includes the goal to “empower the economically disadvantaged...through self-employment, skill development and self-expression”, we determined this particular street newspaper vendor program to be an optimal venue in which to study psychosocial meanings of empowerment.

Yet, although the organization’s vision of empowerment is defined through discrete domains in its mission statement, the organization does not actively coordinate any formal program or intervention focused on transferring or engendering power. Furthermore, the skill development component of the mission statement was effectively defunct, as previous skill development and training initiatives were no longer funded at the time of data collection. Therefore, the present study sought to illuminate how vendors of the street newspaper interpret their experiences based on the hypothesis that they are primarily empowering themselves individually.

In order to learn about how self-employment as a street newspaper vendor affected intra-individual and interpersonal well-being, we conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen (n=16) men and women. The majority (75%; n=12) of participants were male, which was consistent with the overall demographic distribution among current newspaper vendors at the organization studied, 78% of whom were male as of April 2010. The majority of interviewees (62.5%; n=10) identified as being between 41 and 60 years of age. In terms of racial/ethnic self-identification, the sample was somewhat heterogeneous, with 31% (n=5) identifying as Black/African American, 56% (n=9) identifying as White/Caucasian, and 12% (n=2) not specified.

### *Procedure*

Data collection procedures for the present study followed a relatively open format. We recruited participants via advertisements posted at the organization headquarters, as well as through announcements at twice-monthly vendor meetings and with word-of-

mouth referrals. We offered the vendors ten free copies of the then-current issue of the newspaper (a value of at least \$10, when sold) in exchange for approximately one hour of conversation in an open interview.

We conducted the interviews in one of two locations; either in a private office at the organization headquarters, or in public surroundings at a local café. Participants were given the opportunity to choose the location based on their level of comfort. We reasoned that giving the participants a choice of environments would facilitate their willingness to speak openly and in their own voices. By doing so, we attempted to accommodate any unease or mistrust individuals might feel about research participation based on perceptions of marginalization by the mainstream system of social service provision (which we admittedly represent). Furthermore, by ensuring that participants possessed and understood that they possessed agency in shaping the research process, we endeavored to minimize the typical power disparity between interviewer and interviewee described by Mischler (1986).

After electing the interview venue, I (the principal author) conversed casually with participants. After a few minutes, I explained the nature and purpose of the study, and outlined how data would be collected and reported. I also spoke about my own role as the researcher (for more on the latter, see *Discussion* below). I asked participants to sign a consent for participation form, which I also orally described in detail. Finally, I switched on the digital recorder device and began the ten question semi-structured interview.

Interview durations varied from fifteen minutes to over an hour, depending on the length of participants' responses. We collected participant demographic data subsequent to the interviews, at a later date. We reasoned that this separate collection of demographic information would avoid unduly influencing the interview situation. In other words, we sought to avoid undermining the interpersonal rapport built after open dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. However, due to the relocation of two individuals, the entire sample did not complete the demographic questionnaire. Nevertheless, we obtained this data from  $n=14$ , or 88% of participants.

### *Analysis*

For analysis, we followed the model of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), developed by Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997) and updated by Hill, et al. (2005). The essential components of CQR involve (a) the employment of open-ended questions (i.e., via a semi-structured interview format) for data collection; (b) the engagement of several judges throughout the data analysis process; (c) consensus between these judges to draw conclusions from the data; (d) the employment of an auditor to oversee judges' analyses; and (e) the identification of domains (i.e., themes), core ideas, and cross-analyses as results of the data analysis (Hill, et al., 2005).

CQR methodology has been widely utilized since its introduction in 1997, underpinning investigations whose focuses are relevant to the research questions of the present study. For example, research surrounding social class (Nelson, et al., 2006; Lehman, 2008), power dynamics and disparities between service provider and client (Fuertes, et

al., 2002; Knox, et al., 2003), ethnically diverse populations (e.g., Kim, et al., 2003; Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003), and homelessness (Liu, et al., 2009) have employed CQR. While no statistics on reliability or validity were available for CQR at the time of writing, the usefulness of the methodology is bolstered by the fact that it has proven to be popular with qualitative researchers. At the time of writing, a PsychINFO database search yielded 188 results of studies designed around the utilization of CQR.

### *Coding of Data into Domains and Core Ideas*

After interviews were completed, I (the principal author) transcribed the digital audio files into written documents. I then divided these transcripts among members of my primary team, as recommended by Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997) and Hill, et al. (2005). This group was composed of three Masters-level doctoral candidates in clinical psychology. Transcripts were divided among team members in the following fashion: Team member 1 received all odd-numbered transcripts; team member 2 received all even-numbered transcripts; team member 3 received a mixture of even and odd-numbered transcripts from beginning, middle, and end stages of the data collection process. Therefore, team member 3 acted as a counter-balance to the other two members.

After reviewing their assigned transcripts, each team member generated a "start list" of domains and core ideas that they identified in participants' narratives. Domains can be understood as general themes or undercurrents that occur throughout participants' responses. After compiling a "start list" corresponding to each transcript, team members presented the domains they found to the entire team, using excerpts from participants' narratives to reinforce their interpretations. After each member presented their list of domains, the entire team debated over how to consolidate identified themes, focusing especially on the ideas consistent across team members' lists. Together with my methodological guidance and the oversight of the internal auditor—the second author and doctoral advisor for the group—the research team then generated a list of five broad domains that could be evidenced in all interview transcripts.

After the team meeting that focused on the solidification of domains, team members individually reviewed their assigned transcripts for core ideas. These can be defined as specific facets of domains developed from within the context of each narrative individually. According to the definition outlined in Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997) and Hill, et al. (2005), core ideas should remain close to the data, serving as more parsimonious phrasings of interviewees' actual words. Core ideas contrast with their broader and more abstract associated domains, lending multifaceted meaning to general trends within the data. The process of core idea coding mirrored that of domain identification. Specifically, team members separately combed their transcripts for notions in participants' responses that re-occurred or were stated with emphasis. Subsequently, the team convened with three "start lists" of core ideas and debated which were the most relevant in the context of their assigned interviews, defending choices with evidence from the transcripts. After discussion, consensus about whether core ideas should be maintained, modified, deleted, or supplemented with alternative notions was reached. A final list of core ideas that corresponded with each of the five previously identified domains was collectively generated.

### *Cross-Analysis of Core Ideas*

Subsequent to the finalization of the core idea list, the team conducted a cross analysis, which involved the development of broad categories from the identified core ideas. These categories were defined based on their representation of core ideas that occurred in multiple domains and across participants' narratives. In this sense, the cross analysis signified the isolation of some of the most salient and generalizable information that was evidenced throughout interview transcripts. Therefore, if a core idea surfaced in two or several of the five domains, was evoked by multiple interviewees, or was mentioned in response to several different question prompts, this notion was considered to be representative of a broad category of meaning. For example, the domains Relationships, Struggle and Experience all included related core ideas such as "some people are more powerful than you"; "you empower yourself"; "desire to empower or 'give voice' to others while maintaining self". These diverse core ideas are all subsumed by the category Empowerment / Powerlessness Dichotomy.

### *External and Internal Audits*

After the completion of the finalized document that included consensus-based domains, core ideas and categories for all interview transcripts, an external auditor checked the cross-analysis and domain and core idea construction. The external auditor was a Masters-level psychology clinician and instructor familiar with the field of community psychology but unfamiliar with the particulars of the present study. Prior to auditing the final document of domains, core ideas, and categories, the external auditor had read all interview transcripts and generated a separate list of domains and core ideas. Therefore, when auditing the document created by the research team, the external auditor suggested revisions based on the confluence of his findings and those of the research team.

As a final step in the analysis process, the internal auditor (the second author of this article) read all interview transcripts and checked the document created by the research team and confirmed by the external auditor. The internal auditor presented her findings to the primary research team, who again made revisions to the domains and categories, finalizing the data analysis document.

## **Results**

After completion of the CQR analysis, five domains emerged from the data. The first of these was *Relationships*, which revealed how interviewees interacted with other street newspaper vendors, as well as with "panhandlers" and homeless individuals, with customers, staff and board members of the organization, and with the general public. The specific categories within this first domain were (a) *Connection at multiple levels*, (b) *Stoicism in the face of adversity*, (c) *Desire to be supporter and supported*, and (d) *Empowerment / Powerlessness dichotomy*.

The second domain identified was *Struggle*, which pertained to the various, multi-level challenges that interviewees face in their daily lives. Core ideas within this domain were defined in relation to the experienced dichotomy between internal and external



struggles. Therefore, the categories for this domain related to either intrinsic or extrinsic dynamics, or both. The specific categories were (a) *Need for income and employment* (extrinsic); (b) *Need for independence and to feel independent* (intrinsic and extrinsic); (c) *Need for compassion and empathy* (intrinsic and extrinsic); (d) *Inability to transcend social barriers* (intrinsic and extrinsic); (e) *Raising awareness of injustice and inequality* (extrinsic); and (f) *Need for safety* (extrinsic).

The third domain was *Perceptions*, which also involved internal and external components. Specifically, participants' narratives included descriptions of how they felt others perceived them, while also focusing on the importance of how they perceived themselves. Categories within this domain were (a) *Work and the meaning of being a working person*, which pertained to both self-esteem and membership in a community and in society; (b) *Prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping*, based on being identified as homeless or mentally ill, or based on racial group membership or gender; and (c) *Self-perception and relation to society*, which involved the described ability of an individual to re-evaluate and re-create his or her own socially constructed role.

The fourth domain was *Growth and Development*, a salient theme for elucidating meanings of empowerment. Categories within this domain were (a) *Resilience and hopefulness for the future*; (b) *Mutuality in growth*, which referred to the belief participants' expressed that they desired to foster the growth of peers, which in turn would further their own progression; and (c) *Comfort with self and self-definition*. The latter core idea alluded to a process of psychosocial development, which participants described as requiring that one first come to terms with oneself in order to later advance socially and potentially eradicate cultural myths surrounding homelessness and poverty.

The fifth and final domain was identified as *Experience*. This domain broadly referred to how interviewees navigated the circumstances of their lives, especially in relation to their participation in the street newspaper vendor self-employment program. Core ideas in the realm of *Experience* included (a) *Dichotomy between empowerment and powerlessness*; (b) *Having voice and raising awareness*, which was described as being related to feeling empowered, independent, and autonomous; (c) *Multiple levels of influence in experience*, which referred to the impact of self, peers, the micro level community and the macro level society on participants' lives; and (d) *Desire for visibility and recognition*. This final category summarized interviewees' often-expressed aspiration to be known as a person of value, rather than as homeless or poor.

## **Voices from the Street**

### *Relationships*

Several participants described the relationships they have cultivated through work as a street newspaper vendor as highly valuable. These interactions were depicted as *occurring at multiple levels*, in that the work connected vendors to a micro-level community, as well as to the macro-level general public. For the former, one man said, "I feel happiness because I'm among my peers", referring to his experience of relating to other vendors. Another interviewee discussed the vendor's experience with the public:

So, we don't realize that even if we see somebody homeless on the street, it ain't about buying a magazine off of them, it ain't about giving money to them or throwing change in their cup. It's about interaction, I mean if we can just understand that if we can simply say hello.... (Interview 3)

While transcripts often included words indicative of solidarity between vendors, at times, participants' narratives reflected relative *stoicism* when describing relations with peers:

Why, because something happened last night, why should I bring it to the street? Or someone upsets you...why take it out on somebody else? Because it's not their fault that you went through bad times last night or you had a bad day. Don't emburden them with that. Because they can't help you.

Interviewees frequently discussed the perceived importance of *supportive relationships*, especially in relation to the organization. Some vendors were adamant about the desire to be supported, emphasizing that the organization should provide more empathy. For example, one woman said, "I think there should be a lot more supportive people that support a person's emotional needs. I think that there should be more compassionate people because I see a lot of distant types of people around the office."

Yet other participants expressed the wish to support themselves. Another woman differentiated what she does from receiving welfare benefits or other subsidies. "I'm supporting myself. I may not have a job per say right now, but I'm still out there supporting myself."

Finally, a number of participants discussed support in collective terms, voicing the belief that participation in the organization provided the opportunity to support and to be supported by others. One man said:

It's a bunch of us joining all our voices as one into the newspaper, so it gives us a sense of unity. As the community pushes us away and treats us as we're not even there, the whole, the newspaper brings us together once again.

### *Struggle*

Throughout their narratives, participants outlined the multiple challenges that they regularly face, often airing stories of their struggles even when unprompted. The barriers faced by interviewees were various, understandably pervasive given their circumstances as currently or formerly homeless or otherwise severely economically disadvantaged. In relation to *external factors*, participants elaborated struggles associated with unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. For instance: "The economy hinders me because it's in such bad financial shape that finding another part-time job in this economy is really tough."

Some participants acknowledged that while part-time self-employment as a street newspaper vendor does represent a positive opportunity to combat economic challenges, such work can also be a hindrance. "Sometimes when looking for a traditional job I may not mention the newspaper. If it's not appropriate. Because people

when you look for jobs are very fussy.” In this sense, negative public perception of the street newspaper and its vendors can limit opportunities for advancement.

Other participants also discussed the frustration they felt over the lack of a perceived ability to transcend *societal barriers*. One man’s assessed his situation as such: “I’ll just stay where I am. I’ve hit the glass ceiling.”

The inability for many street newspaper vendors to escape from adversity is exacerbated by the sometimes-sordid version of reality that they face daily on the street. For instance, one participant discussed the unfortunate fact that, by proxy, he is implicated in negative situations where he sells the newspaper:

The thing is, especially where I’m at all the time, you get the panhandlers, the drunks, the fist fights, the whores. Everything going on, you know. And it gives everyone a bad name up there.

Although selling the street newspaper can sometimes place vendors near situations in which their *safety* could be threatened, some participants saw the organization as providing a safety net for them:

I know a lot of people. People know me. I built a safety net with that paper. That paper makes me feel safe. If I’m not around, if I get hurt you don’t think people are going to start screaming?

Finally, in addition to the various adverse circumstances facing street newspaper vendors externally, many interviewees described facing *internal struggles*. Often, these discussions contextualized participants’ involvement in the organization as assisting individuals to overcome intrapsychic barriers. For example, “I believe that the newspaper as a whole, the whole concept is positive, and if anything negative was to come out of it, it would have to be because of me, you know, something that I’m not doing.”

### *Perceptions*

The *Perceptions* domain centered on participants’ discussions of how they understood that members of the general public perceived them, as well as reflections about how interviewees perceived themselves. In relation to society at large, many participants elaborated an understanding of the *meaning of being a working person*, and how work situates one within a sociocultural context.

For some participants, employment as a street newspaper vendor was associated with independence, in contrast to other forms of low-threshold work that might offer less freedom:

The thing is, I don’t see myself as working for the newspaper because I see myself as self-employed. When I do the newspaper I’m working for me. I’m not an employee of the newspaper, I’m a self-employed individual. The newspaper

allowed me the opportunity to be self-employed, to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, basically.

Yet many narratives reflected concerns or consternation with how the public views the street newspaper, which seemed to beget a sense of insecurity for many vendors. "Some people look at you like 'get a job.' But this is my job." Other participants discussed a general lack of awareness of the newspaper and its mission. For instance, one woman said, "I get told a lot by people that they had never heard of the newspaper." Another woman expressed:

Sometimes it can be depressing if you're standing out there, and waiting forever trying to get some income in your pocket, and you've got people walking past you like you're a ghost. And they don't acknowledge the cause and they don't acknowledge what the paper brings to the community—which is global insight.

Public perceptions of the street newspaper vendors were also negatively manifested in discrimination and stereotyping, as voiced by participants. Discrimination experienced spanned multiple realms, especially based on homelessness: "Before I had the newspaper in my hand it didn't matter what color I was, they still discriminated against me because I was homeless"; based on gender: "I had a few people walk by me and say 'a woman? Oh please'"; and based on mental illness: "People see me as retarded and stupid and mentally ill."

Furthermore, participants described discrimination that resulted from negative stereotypes of people who sell street newspapers:

There's a lot of prejudice against people selling the newspaper. I see it from the [transit] people, I see it from whether it's the police or people inside [the stations], and I see it from people on the street. And somebody told me that it looked like some of the ones who do go and do it drunk, they send a bad message. I just wish there was a way to say to people we're not all like that. We're not all out here to support our drug habit or our drinking habit. We're here to support ourselves.

However, despite negative stereotypes and discrimination, some interviewees talked about rising above the impact of such adverse perceptions:

People in general, we have all these egotistical things and sometimes people might they're better or you're less or whatever. But it doesn't matter. All that doesn't matter when you understand it. It doesn't matter what anybody thinks but you.

*Self-perception* was a consistent point of discussion throughout the interviews, and many participants discussed how their views of themselves have changed subsequent to obtaining self-employment with the street newspaper program. One interviewee talked about his experience in psychological terms: "[The newspaper] actually helped me get

back on my feet again after going through a rough break up with my girlfriend. It's given me some self-worth in myself again."

Another vendor used similar language to describe his experience: "I had low esteem when I first came to this paper here, but today my esteem is lifted way up. I'm in good spirits, I'm happy. I'm not sad anymore."

### *Growth and Development*

Many participants described their experience working with the vendor self-employment program as one that has involved transformation. Similar to interviewees' narratives that elaborated upon the domain of perceptions, participants often discussed their personal growth in relation to the external world and to themselves simultaneously. For instance, one man discussed how he has changed:

I've been homeless for a little while, and I've been in a few relationships and different situations, and I've even been incarcerated. And through all my experiences it has caused me, I think, to withdraw from general society, and people in general. But now that I've been doing [the newspaper] it's kind of reversing that. It's forcing me to be out, you know, to communicate with people. It's a matter of survival.

Another woman reported the desire to give back and to help others, providing evidence for the perception of mutuality in growth: "You make me think, I can't just do something I love, I also have to give back, and just being and doing this, I know that's something I want to do." Another interviewee described his professional goal to "find a career where it doesn't matter how much I get paid. A career where I have purpose, where I feel I belong. You know, and [am] giving back."

Some participants discussed their growth in terms of both tangible abilities and the experience of becoming more comfortable with themselves. One man said, "[The newspaper has] given me communication skills, life skills. It's shown me how to sell myself and represent myself as a person and how to grow."

Several participants described feeling hopeful for the future despite continual experience with adverse circumstances. For instance, when asked about his long term goals, one interviewee responded without cynicism that his desire was to "Get a job, get an apartment, retire and live a long life. That's my goals." Another participant described aspirations for a future professional career. "My main field of interest is to get into some sort of entertainment. Acting, you know, amateur acting."

### *Experience*

The *Experience* domain identified across interviewees' narratives represents the myriad observations and wisdom that street newspaper vendors have accrued in relation to their self-employment through the organization's empowerment program. The core idea categories associated with this domain were in some ways our most interesting results. Since this investigation was primarily concerned with identifying themes surrounding the

phenomenon of empowerment, discussions about individuals' experience with the street newspaper vendor program provided especially intriguing insights.

The first core idea category identified in the *Experience* domain described the *Dichotomy of Empowerment / Powerlessness*, with which many participants were acutely familiar. When asked to describe what empowerment meant to them, interviewees' responses were diverse. Some individuals described the concept in individualistic or libertarian terms. For instance, "Empowerment means giving people freedom and confidence to help themselves so that you can be a self-starter, and independent, as opposed to people dictating to you what they think you need."

Meanwhile, other participants elaborated a concept of empowerment in relation to a vision for a more ideal world. "[Empowerment is] a combination of being enlightened and seeing things through the lens of nature and what is and peaceful and what should be. And then being able...to go after our ideal of a peaceful world, without worrying about the consequences."

In contrast, several vendors discussed empowerment at a more pragmatic level, relating the phenomenon to the optimization of concrete opportunities. "[Empowerment] means giving me the tools to get myself out of the situation, to help myself. That doesn't necessarily mean that I have to do everything for myself." Likewise, another participant said, "It's up to you. They're giving you a tool. Use the tool."

While many interviewees' responses reinforced the street newspaper organization's mission of fostering self-empowerment, others spoke of their continued experience of powerlessness within a broad, societal context. For example, one man said, "What empowerment means to me is that some people are more powerful than you are, and they might have a little more than you have, and they kind of have a tendency of rubbing it in your face."

Generally, participants' perception of empowerment appeared to entail relatively positive experiences on a micro, or intrapersonal level. Yet many still experienced marginalization or disempowerment on a macro, or interpersonal level. One woman described her experience of working to sell the newspaper while living with a disability: "My thing is ever since I became disabled and what they call in the system, [I've found that] we're limited. People say this is a free country, but the less money you have, the less voice you have."

The core idea category of *Having voice and raising awareness* featured prominently in many participants' narratives surrounding their experience with empowerment. One interviewee said:

The word empowerment means to me like it gives me an advantage on something. It gives me a chance to do something that I wasn't able to do before, like express my word, express my voice, express my feelings.

Similarly, another participant said the selling the newspaper "gives me a

voice and an outlet. I think it gives everybody a voice, from the bottom up, and kind of promotes dialogue, and in doing so, essentially I think bridges the gap between the haves and have nots."

For many vendors interviewed, the ability to make submissions in writing to the newspaper was a salient and important means through which their voices could be elevated. For instance, when asked about what the organization does to effect empowerment, a vendor who utilizes performance and humor as sales techniques said, "You can put articles in the paper yourself. Or I was thinking about submitting a few of my riddles to put in the paper."

A vendor who has authored several articles, including feature stories, for the street newspaper expressed pride when talking about his experience as a writer: "I get comments on the articles, people like reading the paper. A lot of people will say, 'are you writing in this issue?' There are people who I'll run into who will say, 'oh you're the gentleman who writes for the paper.'"

One participant explained that if he or other vendors would write for the newspaper, collective agency through solidarity could be shared among them. He described a sense of ownership over the content of the newspaper, and explained that this experience empowered him: "So there's a power there that not just I would have but a power that whoever hands out this news article would have over onto people that says 'hey, we got a voice too.'"

The core idea category of *Multiple levels of influence in experience* emerged across interviews. Many interviewees described their experience with selling the newspaper as fostering interpersonal connection. One respondent said, "It puts me right out there, and you never know who you're going to meet, and you can never have enough friends." Another participant described in similar language the positive experience of engaging in mutually educational dialogue as the result of selling the newspaper:

It gives me a chance to talk one on one with people that are of the same mind as I am. It gives me a chance to encourage people to talk to other people about the same thing. It gives me a chance to share ideas and learn things that are new to people.

While many participants expounded upon the opportunity for "one on one" connection, others discussed the development of broader bonds after involvement with the organization:

In reading the paper, I've read a few things that I was—I wouldn't say I wasn't aware of, but I didn't take notice of. It makes me more conscious of things around me, in the community where I live. More positive things that's going on, as far as my situation of being homeless, the homeless situation, or just community-based things that's going on in my community that I never took notice of.

In relation to the wider world in which they live, many interviewees described a *Desire for visibility and recognition*, which was subsumed into a core idea category in the domain of experience. One participant described the ongoing struggle she experienced when selling the newspaper, in relation to stereotypical views of the public, their influence on her self-perception, and her ability to overcome biases to experience empowerment:

The whole thing about how [the newspaper] also helps me, when I do stay out there, then I show myself that I'm worth being a human being in this world. Then I can say to myself 'that's just somebody else's opinion. That's just hatred.'

Empowerment, through the descriptions of the vendors of the street newspaper studied, can be described as a psychological, psychosocial, and socioeconomic construct. It is a concept that is experienced multiply and in relation to various abstract and concrete variables, from voice to tangible skill sets. Empowerment occurs both in relation to internal and external factors and in conjunction with other people. Finally, empowerment is developmental, and frequently involves struggle, perceptual transformation, and transcending adverse circumstances.

## Discussion

Our impetus in the present study was to explore meanings underlying the concept of empowerment, based on a constructivist-interpretivist framework of research inquiry. We were informed by the model of empowerment proposed by Cattaneo & Chapman (2010), which provides, among other aspects, that empowerment is a cyclical rather than linear process. We collected data via narrative interviews, and themes emerged based on the conversations that ensued between participants and myself (the primary author), which we then analyzed and interpreted via the CQR methodology developed by Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997). We have reported the many trends that the data indicated here, with the intention to expand the academic discourse of empowerment to include voices from an underserved community, as well as to provide feedback to the street newspaper organization for the improvement of its program.

In reflecting on the results of the study, contextualized in the expansive literature of the field, we here define empowerment as the active, iterative process of self-directed and goal-oriented accrual of individual and social agency.

Much interdisciplinary social science literature conceptualizes empowerment as a process (e.g., Chamberlin, 1997; Williams-Boyd, 2004; Fielding, 1997; Gore, 1990; Lorion, 2008). The model proposed by Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) furthers this understanding by providing specific components that underlie the transactional nature of empowerment. These are: 1) personally meaningful and power-oriented goals; 2) self-efficacy; 3) knowledge; 4) competence; 5) action; and 6) impact. The results of the present study provide evidence to support the understanding of empowerment as a process.



Instead of functioning through a linear or binary dynamic, the Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) model suggests that empowerment involves an iterative dynamic—that is, individuals moving through the process may experience progress and setbacks, potentially retracing their steps as experience promotes reflection. The participants here embodied this interpretation of empowerment. Interviewees described diverse feelings during our conversations, with forlorn expressions nearly as common as vocalizations of pride and satisfaction. However, all participants endorsed the concept of empowerment as fundamental to their lives, meanwhile demonstrating the self-reflective component described by Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) as critical to the empowerment process.

Furthermore, participants reported experiencing empowerment on both intrapsychic (e.g., the *Perception* domain) and social (e.g., the *Relationship* domain) levels. Yet, the results suggest that the program of interest had more impact in fostering the former than the latter, since most participants still lacked substantial societal power at the time of interviewing (i.e., the *Struggle* domain). Participants appeared to understand empowerment most saliently through the experience of improved self-efficacy and increased knowledge, as evidenced in the domain of *Experience*. Finally, the identification of empowerment as a process is embodied in the *Growth and Development* domain, implying the iterative process of observation and reflection on the impact of one's actions in relation to goal achievement, a phenomenon also suggested by the Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) model.

The methodology that we employed in itself sought to represent an exercise in empowerment. Such an objective was the rationale behind various components of the research design and data collection and analysis processes (e.g., dialogue with former newspaper vendors for the creation of the interview schedule; provision of a choice of interview settings; employment of CQR methodology for data analysis). Yet it must be recognized that the dynamics of power and privilege that we described in the Bias section of this article still may have influenced the results, even if in subtle or nonconscious ways.

As suggested by Mischler (1986), the “hidden problem of power” often exists in interview situations, in that the interviewer holds relatively more power than the interviewee. Bias can be introduced when interviewing for the social sciences if the participant perceives the researcher as an individual of relatively higher social class or status and therefore hedges responses according to the expectations construed.

At the time of data collection, I (the primary author) was a graduate student and not a professional psychologist. Nevertheless, it is possible that participants perceived me as relatively more privileged due to my background—as a white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied male, I am a walking paradigm of dominant culture norms. Therefore, the “hidden problem” could have been especially salient for participants who feel that they are denied equitable power, privilege or opportunities based on their backgrounds or experiences.

In order to mitigate the “hidden problem of power” in the present study, we intentionally imbued the interview schedule with flexibility, incorporating in it a loose framework of open-ended questions. Furthermore, I consistently attempted to

encourage participants to speak in their own voices throughout the interviews—interviewees directed the conversation, which was encouraged to meander and stray from the interview schedule. The result of this interview format was what have been termed *extra-interview moments*, in which participants broke through the interview script to engage with and reflect upon the interview situation itself.

At times, participants took the opportunity to question me further about the purpose of the interview, beyond the full disclosure that I had given in writing and orally via the informed consent. Such queries may be interpreted as demonstrations of the participants' feeling of agency in the interview situation. For example, one interviewee expressed concerns about staff employed in the street newspaper organization, then asked: "So where's your role in this, are you going to give the organization feedback on this?" I responded, initiating the following dialogue:

Interviewer: "Yes, directly. The information like I said earlier won't be associated with any one person, like with your name, but what I'll do is I'll look for common themes that run across different interviews and also look at things that stand out in each interview."

Interviewee: "I see."

Interviewer: "And I'll give that as feedback back to the organization."

Interviewee: "Well sure."

Interviewer: "So, thank you."

Interviewee: "You're welcome. I also feel like I'm glad you've helped. Thank you and I appreciate the support, just listening to it, like you're going to bring it forward."

Other examples of *extra interview moments* in the present study more overtly centered on the possibility for the interview situation to contribute to an experience of empowerment. For instance, in one interview, the participant responded to my question about how the street newspaper program effects empowerment:

Interviewee: "It gives me a chance to reach out to people and to dialogue with people. It gives me a chance to do this. Just doing this is a big step in my growth."

Interviewer: "When you say 'this' do you mean being able to talk, to communicate?"

Interviewee: "Yeah, this interview."

Voice is a concept that underpinned many of the narratives, leading to the identification of the core idea category *Having voice and raising awareness* in the *Experience* domain. While we concluded that having voice is an important variable in the empowerment construct, an understanding of the significance of voice in the eyes of marginalized communities should transcend any academic definition of empowerment. We encourage

empowerment frameworks that would support underserved groups to place a high value on voice. Such paradigms could range from psychological intervention approaches, e.g., Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990; Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009) to individual and community development projects such as street newspaper organizations.

In order to effect the change needed to minimize the social and economic stratification encountered by the many individuals for whom social justice remains elusive, empowerment will continue to be a critical concept. The multiple meanings of empowerment that we found here should be explored in even greater depth through the iterative framework provided by the empowerment model of Cattaneo & Chapman (2010). We recommend that future studies utilizing similar methodologies (i.e., via research interviewing and Consensual Qualitative Research) focus on the empowerment process as described by participants, in order to better understand how this operation can be enhanced.

Furthermore, prospective studies focusing on street newspapers or other programs coordinated by community-based organizations should include both qualitative and quantitative components, the latter of which would measure concrete outcomes for individuals who participate in newspaper vendor and other bottom-up programs designed to effect empowerment. These outcomes could include tangible factors such as the number of people able to transition from situations of homelessness to housing, the number of people able to transition to permanent employment, the amount of earned income able to be saved. However, the authors caution that any outcomes variables of interest for quantitative analysis should be defined based on their relevance to members of the community themselves. In other words, researchers and practitioners should begin to address areas of structural disempowerment by first focusing on the realms of greatest importance to the relatively disempowered individuals themselves.

Despite the clear support found for the street newspaper program's ability to effect empowerment, many areas for growth and improvement exist for it; we have made recommendations in the form of a report to the organization, and several of these suggestions have been incorporated into the organization's long-term strategic plan. Some of the areas of growth that we garnered from the interviews include the need for greater support of street paper vendors by the organization in areas such as strategies to boost sales, as well as increased opportunities for skills training and options for future employment opportunities.

We furthermore recommend collaborations between academic researchers and community-based nonprofit organizations similar to the relationship depicted here for other grassroots programs. Through such a model of cooperative evaluation, academic knowledge—coupled with energy from student volunteers—can be channeled in a direct and effective manner towards the improvement of community-based programs and services, while ensuring that consumers of services have an avenue for providing feedback that will be systematically collected and disseminated.

While it is admittedly challenging to draw broadband conclusions about the policy and practice implications of this study, we believe our results to allude to several promising areas for growth. First, as previously discussed, collaborations between entities

interested in social and economic justice will continue to be critical. While our recommendation for greater linkages between the academy and the nonprofit sector stands, a likely more pragmatic, initial area for growth would be to enhance collaborations within the nonprofit sector. For instance, a street newspaper program could partner with an agency providing substance use counseling, another that specialized in skills training, and yet another organization whose focus is job placement. Indeed, examples of similar experiments already exist at some street newspapers and other homelessness organizations in the United States.

These collaborations can effect several positive ends. First, in an era when both public and private funding for social services is shrinking, partnerships can reduce overhead expenses, streamline services for the client, and ensure that individuals' needs are more thoroughly addressed. Second, when multiple organizations effectively collaborate, they can boost each other's perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the public, through both actual effectiveness and, more ephemerally, by better "brand recognition" for the program in question. Such outcomes could benefit individuals like the participants in this study, by backing up their personal commitments to self-empowerment with positive institutional associations. As explored above (see "Struggle" from the Voices from the Street section), we believe it a tragedy that a street newspaper vendor devoted to self-improvement should feel obliged to hide how he currently makes a living from potential employers.

Additionally, while we continue to advocate for community-directed, grassroots paradigms for empowerment such as street newspaper programs, it will be crucial for these approaches to be backed by strong organizational support. Though the "do it yourself" style of the program studied is admirable, our conversations with its participants revealed that they also craved guidance in some areas (e.g., development for skills such as personal computing or writing). To us, this wish indicated the need for relationships with professional allies at the individual level. A seemingly good starting point for the development of such relationships could be within service organizations themselves, for instance through the increased employment of consumer advisory boards or internal workforce development.

Finally, our impressions spoke to the need for improved political organizing among communities of currently and formerly homeless individuals. Unlike other marginalized groups with more intrinsic social bonds, those who have experienced homelessness come from an expansive array of backgrounds, each person with his or her own story. As a result—and because of the broader society's relative ignorance of the extent of homelessness as a social issue—these individuals may lack the solidarity witnessed in other underserved populations. Therefore, we recommend that professional allies, social justice practitioners, and service organizations foster political organization among populations of currently and formerly homeless persons. Such ends could be achieved by hosting community meetings, assisting with legal issues, and lobbying for policy change. Together, such actions should seek to both raise awareness and realize tangible results.

Through cooperative strategies between academic institutions and community based nonprofit organizations—with participation from both leadership and constituents of

these grassroots groups—collective political power could be consolidated to further initiatives towards increased structural empowerment for underserved individuals and groups. In addition to the examples mentioned above, researchers and practitioners could cooperate with leaders and constituents of community organizations to push for government sponsored job creation or affordable housing construction, among other areas of real policy change. Although it will remain crucial for people to empower themselves, psychologists and other professionals can act as empowering allies, as connectors of disparate systems, and as liaisons for the voices of the disempowered.

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