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RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT: COLLECTIVE ACTION
AS INTERVENTION WITH WOMEN

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Melissa Liberty Darnell

June 2008


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June 2008


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ABSTRACT

This study explores women's feelings of empowerment that result from participating in collective action events. The study contributes to the growing body of social work scholarship on empowerment practice by identifying and describing the specific variables that may contribute to or enhance empowerment feelings in women as a result of collective action participation. In an exploratory study using a series of open-ended questions, 15 adult women were interviewed and asked to describe the details of a collective action event at which they felt empowered. Findings of this study will provide empowerment-oriented feminist social work practitioners with a greater understanding of the ways in which participation in collective action contributes to the development and maintenance of feelings of empowerment among women. Implications for further research are discussed.

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Importantly, I would like to thank the women who have accompanied me on this two-year journey. To my grandmothers I owe my deepest respect and adoration. Their comforting phone calls and letters provided invaluable support. I thank my mother, Barbara Joan, for traveling great distances to be with me when I needed her most. I am grateful to Colleen, Kathy, Stephanie, and Carolyn for providing physical and emotional sanctuary at times when I felt lost. I am humbled by the depth of gratitude I feel for my dear friend and neighbor, Ms. Gerda Peper. Many of the interviews contained in this study were conducted from the warmth and security of her kitchen. And I thank Zoe for helping me to breathe and for introducing me to the second wave. I am a better woman because of her influence.

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honor the contributions of my former partner and friend, John Wells. We had a good run.

Without the initial guidance of Dr. Val Burris, social movement theory and its implications may have eluded my scholarly interest. I am forever indebted to him for passionately suggesting that I apply for an undergraduate internship with Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste.

May I also convey my gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Tom Davis, who has provided me with boundless support and encouragement, first as my faulty advisor, and later as the supervisor of this research project. Completion of this study would not have been possible without his mentorship.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all women, past and present, who have used their voices, their bodies, and their hearts to work together to change the social conditions that affect their lives. I stand on the shoulders of generations of women who have worked with courage and diligence to promote positive, progressive social change. This work is my gift to them.

It is also dedicated to the fifteen women who shared very powerful, very personal collective action experiences for this study. Their passion, vision, and determination lifted me up when this thesis seemed interminable. Without them, these pages would be blank.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the continued oppression of women in the United States and provides evidence of the unequal status of women in this country. It describes the purpose of this study and the general rationale for the study's design. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the significance of this project for social work practice.

Problem Statement

Though significant advances toward gender equality have been made in the last century, the literature on the continued oppression of women in the United States is profound. As a group, women continue to fare worse than men on recognized composite indices of well being: employment and earnings, economic and social autonomy, reproductive rights, and political participation (Werschkul & Williams, 2004; Koenen, Lincoln, & Appleton, 2006). For example, early gains made in narrowing the gender wage gap have now stagnated, according to the U. S. Census Bureau, who reports median wages of women who worked full-time, year-round to be just 76.7 percent of

men's earnings in 2005 (Webster & Bishaw, 2006). That is, more than 40 years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act, women still earn less than men, even when controlling for such variables as age, race, and educational attainment (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001). Occupations dominated by women, such as caring for small children and the elderly, are paid less than occupations dominated by men, such as construction, leading scholars to conclude that "job segregation is the most important single cause of the pay gap between sexes" (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Other studies have documented that the greater the percentage of women in a given occupation, the lower its average pay (Treiman & Hartmann, 1981) and that the entire gender pay gap could be eliminated through complete occupational integration (Cotter, DeFiore, Hermsen, Kowalewski, & Vanneman, 1997). This overall devaluation of women's work means that women of all races are more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts (Lips, 2003; Webster & Bishaw, 2006).

Women's social and economic equality has been conceptualized as the extent to which women are able to exercise control over their social and economic lives and

is measured by examining women's access to health insurance, college education, and business ownership. Because women are occupationally segregated in low-paying jobs, they have less access to employment-based health insurance and are more likely than men to be covered by means-tested governmental health insurance programs (U.S. Census, 2003). Women currently exact majority ownership in only 35 percent of U.S. businesses (U.S. Census, 2006c).

With regard to political participation, women are more likely to register to vote and participate in electoral politics by casting ballots, but they remain underrepresented in elective office (CAWP, 2006). In 2007, for example, women occupied only 16 of 100 U.S. Senate seats, and 70 of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, bringing their overall representation in the 100th U.S. Congress to 16 percent. Currently, women of color compose just 3.7 percent of the total members of Congress and no women of color serve in the U.S. Senate (CAWP, 2007b). Further, less than one in four statewide elective executive offices are held by women, and women constitute only 23.5 percent of all state legislators in the United States (CAWP, 2007). Because political

participation is a vital means by which women of every race and ethnicity are afforded the opportunity to shape the policies that affect their lives, women's underrepresentation in elected political office means that their interests and concerns are less well-represented in the political process.

East (1999) and others have argued that recent social service reforms, particularly those related to welfare programs, have failed to adequately address the cumulative effects of oppression and disempowerment experienced by women (Raheim & Bolden, 1995). While policies have focused attention on the challenges involved with moving families off welfare and into the workforce, less attention has focused on whether the jobs that are available provide sufficient income to support a family or on the economic challenges facing working families as they attempt to make ends meet. The debates have, in large part, centered around the personal successes and failings of individuals, rather than the social conditions that create and perpetuate the need for social service programs in the first place and the ways in which the effects of these oppressive social forces constrain women's lives. This reality has lead social

work scholars to conclude that "intervention strategies with women...must consider the principles of empowerment in their practice approaches" (Parsons, 2001, p. 160).

While issues of women's empowerment are of immediate concern to social service agencies, governmental bodies, and community organizations that serve women, they are also relevant to agencies and organizations charged with meeting the needs of society's children, since numerous studies have documented the positive correlation between women's social and economic equality and child well-being (Koenen, Lincoln, & Appleton, 2006; UNICEF, 2006). If we accept that social and economic barriers prevent equal participation of women in all aspects of civil life, then we are obliged to empower women to seek solutions to their problems that will address these barriers. Indeed, "empowerment as a strategy to support people in need of help has to pay due attention to economic, political and cultural structures that limit an individuals freedom to choose" (Leonardsen, 2007, p. 9). Given that the implementation of change at the community level can only be done through mobilizing disenfranchised groups (Rubin & Rubin, 2000), it follows that community social work practice must empower citizen participation if it is to

have a positive effect on the continuing fight for women's equality in the United States.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further existing empowerment scholarship by exploring feelings of empowerment as experienced by women with collective action experiences. The best source of data on the relationship between feelings of empowerment and participation in social action are, naturally, the women themselves. Thus, for the purposes of this study, I will gather my data using semi-structured interviews of women who have at least one collective action experience. It is the hope of the researcher that the information obtained will provide empowerment-oriented feminist social work practitioners with a greater understanding of the ways in which participation in collective action contributes to the development and maintenance of feelings of empowerment among women.

A secondary yet equally important goal of the research design of this project includes the aim of empowering the participants themselves by recognizing and recording the firsthand experiences of women (Lee Sohng,

2003). Qualitative oral history/life story research has been shown to be empowering at individual, social, and practice levels (Atkinson, 2004). By creating the space in which the research participants are allowed to speak their individual and collective truths in their individual and collective voices, it is the hope of this author that participation in this project will, in and of itself, be an empowering experience that preserves and protects the knowledge of the women who share their voices in this study.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

Other authors have argued that empowerment-based social work practice is at the foundation of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 2003). Indeed, empowerment as a construct is codified in the *Code's* Preamble:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and *empowerment* of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (National Association of Social Workers, 1999).

If we accept our mission to be one that seeks to empower those with whom we work, we are also obliged to further our own understanding of the conditions, processes, and intervention strategies by which this mission can be fulfilled. In keeping with the social work profession's ethical obligation to "enhance [our] professional expertise," this study adds to the existing literature on the development of empowerment feelings among women and the use of collective action strategies as an intervention to promote and enhance feelings of empowerment. If, as the literature suggests, a positive relationship exists between collective action experiences and feelings of empowerment, then the implications for social work practice are clear: failure to encourage the self-advocacy of women through collective action and to design such actions to enhance empowerment development could be considered to be a disempowering action in and of itself, since to do so would deny female clients the opportunity to experience empowering feelings. Thus, empowerment-oriented feminist social work practice can only be developed when we better understand the relationship between participation in collective action and feelings of empowerment among women.

This study attempts to answer the following research question: What factors positively contribute to women's feelings of empowerment during collective action events?

Though this project identifies women as a group, the author is aware of the scholarship and evolving feminist theory that continues to expand our understanding of the social construction of gender (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Brickell, 2006; Hollander, 2002). Additionally, though I do not specifically address racism, classism, ageism, or heterosexism in my problem formulation, I do not intend to imply that these do not exist or that all women experience oppression in the same way. It is not my intention to privilege gender over other identities and I do not mean to minimize the complexities of the interlocking experiences of individual women. Consistent with the postpositivism/critical epistemological understanding that "researchers and practitioners who work with women must define their own vantage point," I acknowledge that my research project has been influenced by my own status as a white, working class, feminist graduate student (GlenMaye, 2003, p. 29).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two consists of a discussion of the relevant literature. Specifically, literature about empowerment, empowerment-oriented social work practice with women, and the role of collective action in empowerment generation was reviewed.

Empowerment

Formal definitions of empowerment are numerous. For example, in their discussion of empowerment in an organization context, Parker and Price (1994) define empowerment as "the belief that one has control over decision making" (p. 911). Conger and Kanungo (1988) borrowing from Bandura (see 2001, for example), define empowerment as increased "feelings of self-efficacy" (p. 666). Some scholars place emphasis on the act of becoming powerful, as does Adams in this definition of empowerment: "the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals" (2003, p. 8). Kaminski and colleagues (2000) provide further summary of

empowerment definitions in the literature, giving special attention to the ways in which scholars have incorporated their understanding of social and political institutions in their understanding of empowerment.

Empowerment has been conceptualized in the helping profession as both a theory and a practice. According to the *Dictionary of Social Work*, empowerment is "theory concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives, so as to achieve their interests as a group, and a method by which social workers seek to enhance the power of people who lack it" (Thomas & Pierson, 2002, p. 134). There is consensus in the social work literature that empowerment is more than a goal or an outcome. In fact, most empowerment scholars conceptualize empowerment as a process. For example, Gutierrez, Parsons and Cox (2003), describe empowerment as a process by which individuals, families, groups or communities develop the ability to gain power. They view this process as having four inter-related, equally-important components: attitudes, values, and beliefs about self-efficacy; collective experiences that validate the self and one's perceptions; the acquisition of knowledge and skills that lead to critical thinking

and consciousness raising; and the development of action strategies that reinforce these components and allow individuals to "assume responsibility for their actions" and "become willing and able to act with others to obtain common goals and social change" (p. 5).

Likewise, in their analysis of empowerment practice with mental health consumers, Nelson, Lord, and Ochocka (2001) describe empowerment as a process involving a personal dimension, a community dimension, and the ability to gain access to valued resources. They suggest that these processes occur at multiple levels of analysis, mediated by various ecological systems. These views are consistent with the definition of empowerment put forth by Zimmerman (1995), who describes psychological empowerment as processes whereby individuals "create or are given opportunities to control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives" (p. 583).

Several researchers have set forth theoretical frameworks by which to understand empowerment processes. Zimmerman's (1995) nomological network of psychological empowerment includes an intrapersonal component, an interactional component, and a behavioral component.

Taken together, the components provide a picture of an individual "who believes that he or she has the capability to influence a given context, understands how the system works in that context, and engages in behaviors to exert control in the context" (p. 590). He distinguishes psychological empowerment from personal self-efficacy, self-esteem, and competence, arguing that these later concepts fail to adequately account for an individual's personal perceptions and actions as they exist in a social context. The author states that personal empowerment is distinguishable from organizational and community empowerment, but it does not exist in isolation of them.

Another empowerment framework is described by Lee (2001). She presents a transactional view of political and personal change that is rooted in social work's professional purpose and unique value basis, as codified in the aforementioned *NASW Code of Ethics*, that distinguishes social work from other helping professions. Empowerment-oriented social work practitioners, according to this conceptual framework, rely on their "multifocal vision," or the ability to focus individually and collectively on seven distinct domains: a historical view

of oppression and its consequences, an ecological view of oppression, and perspective that examines the interaction of racism and classism, a perspective that recognizes and affirms the multicultural nuances of individual, group, and community experiences, a feminist perspective that acknowledges the unique position of women as the devalued half of humanity, a global perspective that requires the recognition of the causes and effects of social exclusion on entire nations of people, and a critical perspective that facilitates the critical analysis of oppression in all its forms and serves as an imperative to find ways to connect individual and social change(p. 49).

Empowerment Practice with Women

Social work empowerment practice with women has grown steadily since the 1970's and is a natural byproduct of the philosophies and goals of the women's movement to liberate women from oppressive social structures. However, Liane Davis (1994) argues that from its inception, social work praxis has always involved women's issues and that much of that work was empowering. Likewise, in her book on the history of empowerment practice in American social work, Simon (1994) identifies

the efforts of early social workers like Mary Richmond and Edith Abbott as examples of empowerment-oriented social work practice. That said, it is recognized that empowerment-oriented social work practice with women, as currently conceptualized, is a relatively recent development that has paralleled the social and political struggle for women's equality and the founding of thousands of organizations and programs created by women and for women to address all levels of oppression. For example, in 1972, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center was incorporated as one of the first rape crisis centers in the nation. Transition House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, opened the second battered women's shelter in the United States in 1975.

In her work on the empowerment of women, social work scholar GlenMaye describes empowerment as the process of "transformation from individual and collective powerlessness to personal, political, and cultural power" (2003, p. 29). This occurs when women are afforded the opportunities to "speak the truth of one's life in one's own voice, and working collectively to create that possibility for all" (GlenMaye, 2003, p. 35). All women, she asserts, are oppressed because of three shared

conditions that, when taken together, act as producers and enforces of women's powerlessness. The first of these conditions is an alienation from the self which women experience as a result of stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification. The second condition affecting women's oppression is the cultural double bind in which women are forced to navigate their realities. For example, mothers who work are often accused of selfishly abandoning their children, while mothers who do not work are deemed selfish and lazy, creating a lose-lose situation. Finally, institutional and structural sexism in the United States work systematically to reinforce the unequal distribution of power and resources. Drawing on the work of other empowerment scholars, she proposes a three-part model of empowerment practice with women, arguing that all such practice must include opportunities for women to develop a personal and political consciousness; find ways for women to acknowledge their anger while reducing feelings of shame and self-blame; and ultimately involve intervention strategies whereby women can assume personal responsibility for self and social change.

Many studies have discussed empowerment-oriented social work interventions with women. For example, Parsons (2001) reports a qualitative study of two groups designed to empower their woman participants and identifies the specific strategies that were used to accomplish this goal. One of the groups, a Domestic Violence Survivors (DVS) support group, was defined by the author to be a micro social work intervention group since its participants were seeking safety and security within the mutual aid and social support of the group process. The other group, the All Families Deserve A Chance coalition, was defined to be a macro social work intervention group since its participants voluntarily joined the organization with the expressed goal of initiating community change and gaining social and economic justice for women receiving governmental means-tested benefits.

Using constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the author was able to identify several themes relating to the conceptual categories of causality, context, intervention and outcome. The female respondents stated that having a voice, receiving support, learning about problems, having an advocate, resolving conflict,

taking risks, having and being role models, and taking small steps were all important environmental factors or helping strategies that served as direct stimuli for change. Thus, the author concludes that effective empowerment practice with women must include the opportunity for group experiences and the development of social service practice settings that foster a feeling of community. The focus on commonality and interdependence in both groups is consistent with the findings of other researchers who argue that empowerment is a collective phenomenon. She states that personal issues and social change are both outcomes of effective empowerment practice.

Itzhaky (2003) describes a community-based program designed to empower and cultivate leadership skills and a sense of belonging to the community in a group of immigrant women in Israel and reports the findings after a 5-year period. This study is significant in the literature because, unlike other research on the effects of community interventions on empowerment, this program focused exclusively on women. Specifically, the participants in the program were trained to become community activists by working as a collective to develop

social programs for immigrants, develop intensive Hebrew language courses, and develop job-training programs. The program's objectives were to teach the women Hebrew so that they could successfully communicate with other members of the community and participate in their children's educational and social lives and involve the women in work so as to reduce the women's feelings of social isolation and provide knowledge and skill development. The project assumed that these interventions would increase empowerment feelings in the women participants since similar interventions have been found to be effective in other populations.

This study measured empowerment, community participation, a sense of belonging to the community, and the ability to converse in Hebrew. Based upon a comparison of data collected at the beginning of the project and then again four years later, the author describes the program as successful because participation in the program increased the women's feelings of empowerment and sense of belonging to the community. The researcher reports community interventions can contribute to the personal empowerment of immigrants, particularly programs that are designed to combine theoretical

learning and practice. This feminist-oriented community work is viewed to be empowering on an individual level and a community level.

In an earlier study, Cox and Parsons (1996) report the effects of empowerment-oriented small group interventions on a group of elderly women. For the purposes of their research study, empowerment was articulated as a process that involves a critical evaluation of attitudes, values and beliefs and the way these things influence the interpersonal and political nature of one's problems; mutual support, learning and skill development; and the taking of action for oneself and others based upon one's critical perspective and new-found knowledge. The authors cite various studies that distinguish the interpersonal needs of older women from those of older men and identify a number of themes identified by the women participants of the empowerment-focused small group intervention. These include "a safe environment, the opportunity for interaction, commonality, interdependence, support and acceptance, expression of feelings, mutual education, mutual aid, role modeling, collective decision making and problem solving, and taking collective action" (p. 135).

The authors conclude that empowerment-oriented small group practice with elderly women can enhance quality of life issues in the population, specifically the cultivation and maintenance of meaningful interpersonal relationships.

These findings are similar to those of Rodriguez (1999) who describes a participatory action research project with *Lideres Campesinas*, a collective of migrant farmworker women in Riverside, California, and the process of conscientization that resulted from a three-day informational training on domestic violence. A retreat setting was chosen for this intervention to provide the woman participants with the opportunity to share ideas, stories, and meals in a relaxed, safe environment. In this case, the researcher was invited as an "expert, not to tell [the women] what they already knew about their problems, but to work with them in figuring out a solution" (p. 421). Migrant farmworker women are identified as the "invisible" survivors of domestic violence due to the marginalized legal, economic, and social status that many of these women share. Interventions with this population are further complicated by cultural norms and mores, including the

primacy placed on making decisions based on the good of the family unit rather than the good of the individual. Thus, the author pays particular attention to the cultural sensitivity required to work with migrant farmworker women. She reports that as a consequence of the trainings, the mutual-aid and social support that resulted, and the grassroots organizing techniques that many of the participants had learned from their involvement in the migrant labor movement, the collective was empowered to make an action plan to address the domestic violence issues in their community.

Collective Action as Empowerment

Scholars have linked the application of empowerment-based social work practice with community organizing. For example, Carr (2003) suggests that participation in collective action is a fundamental component of the empowerment process. Building on the work of Freire (1970) and Gutierrez (1995), she proposes a cyclical relationship between feelings of empowerment, conscientization, and political action. It is through group work, she argues, that empowerment praxis exists. Parsons (2001) also highlights the "importance of the

collective in empowerment models for work with women" (p. 177). Her research with a women's political advocacy group and a group for domestic violence survivors reveals that effective empowerment practice includes both personal and social change. Itzhaky (2003) concluded that community level interventions led to increased feelings of empowerment among a group of immigrant women in Israel.

Hardina (2003) has summarized the literature specific to the relationship between citizen participation and empowerment practice. She argues that social work practitioners are mandated to "provide opportunities and resources that will assist in the acquisition of power by members of oppressed group," and that empowerment practice must have the goal of fostering social change (p. 26-27). Her model of empowerment practice asserts that because participation in collective action activities has been shown to enhance feelings of empowerment, empowerment-driven activities must include interventions of mobilization.

Drury and Reicher (2005) define empowerment as "a social-psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination" (p. 35).

Relying heavily on social identity theory, they propose an Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) through which they identify empowerment as an outcome of collective action participation. When individuals participate in collective action, their self-identification as campaign participants generates feelings of confidence that could not otherwise have been achieved. Tropp and Brown (2004) cite similar research by other proponents of the social identity perspective to understanding empowerment. They argue that within the context of social movement participation, individual feelings of empowerment (though they do not label it as such) are enhanced relative to the extent to which individuals identify as members of a group and support the group's values and interests.

Identification with the community was also highlighted in Gittell and colleagues' (2000) study of women-led community development organizations. They argue that collective action brought about by the association of women with common values and norms "is the main vehicle for the creation of social capital and that [community] participation often leads to social change" (p. 145).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

In addition to social work empowerment theory, described above, this study is informed by feminist scholarship. Feminist theory is considered because of the deliberate focus it places on the sociopolitical and interpersonal sexual hierarchies that define the experiences of women and are thus useful in understanding and explaining these experiences. Several branches of feminist theory have been articulated (Lorber, 1998) and summaries of these perspectives and their social science application can be found in Campbell and Wasco (2000), and Saulnier (2000). For the purposes of this project the following feminist assumptions are made:

- All knowledge is socially constructed; there is no value-free or neutral knowledge.
- Everyone has the capacity to be a creator of knowledge.
- What one knows comes out of a specific historical and cultural context, whether one is an insider or outsider to that context.
- Knowledge should be used for the purposes of helping to liberate oppressed people and to

transform the current social and economic structures of inequality into a sustainable world for all people. (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 1998, p. 10).

Summary

This chapter consisted of a discussion of the relevant literature. Specifically, literature about empowerment, empowerment-oriented social work practice with women, and the role of collective action in empowerment generation was reviewed.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section will present the methods used in conducting this study. Attention will be given to the study's design, sampling, the interview instrument, data collection, procedures, and protection of human subjects during the course of this study. This chapter will conclude with an overview of issues pertaining to qualitative data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of collective action experiences on women's feelings of empowerment. The existing research on women's empowerment has defined qualitative analysis as the current research standard. This is due, in part, to the ongoing need for scholarly work that defines empowerment and describes its development among women. When conceptualized as a process, empowerment becomes more complex and harder to quantify. Previous researchers have found that qualitative interview studies have been useful in adding to the growing body of literature on women's feelings of

empowerment. Therefore, since the depth of meaning sought in this study can only be achieved with one-on-one interviews, qualitative analysis was chosen as the research design that guided this study.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with women who have had at least one empowering collective action experience. Respondents were identified through personal contacts and snowball sampling techniques. The interviews were designed to answer the following research question: What factors positively contribute to women's feelings of empowerment during collective action events?

Given the extensiveness of the interview objectives, the sample size for this study was limited to fifteen respondents and was not intended to be representative of all women with collective action experiences.

Sampling

As previously stated, the sample for this study includes fifteen women with at least one empowering collective action experience. The sample was obtained through availability and non-probability snowball methods. Some of the respondents were personally known to

the researcher and others were identified as acquaintances of initial participants. The researcher attempted to obtain a diverse sample by identifying potential respondents from a variety of protest movements.

The respondents for this study were chosen on the basis of self-expressed gender identity and the presence of at least one empowering collective action experience. Because of the nature of this study, the sample excluded all men, as well as women without empowering collective action experiences.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected in this study focused on empowering collective action experiences of women. The interview schedule used in this research study was an abbreviated version of the interview schedule used by Drury and associates (2005). They propose that feelings of empowerment occurring as a result of participation in collective action can be attributed to a number of inter-related variables, including collective self-objectification. Collective self-objectification has been defined as "action that actualizes participants'

social identity against the power of dominant groups" (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005, p. 309). However, this project did not seek to confirm the existence of CSO or evaluate its relative importance in collective empowerment. The interview schedule was chosen because it is the only one known to the researcher that has attempted to collect phenomenological data on empowerment generation as a result of collective action. The data collected from the interviews were intended to provide the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of women who have participated in collective action. Therefore, the data also include the specific meanings and interpretations of the collective action events that are unique to each research participant.

Procedures

Data was collected by the researcher through direct interviews, either in person or over the phone. The interviews were conducted in various locations including private residences and public meeting places. One researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews within a 90-day period, beginning in January 2008, and

ending in March 2008. The first few respondents were familiar to the researcher through a variety of settings including former colleagues, community organizations, and acquaintances. Snowball sampling was then used to identify other participants. Initial contact with the participants was made by phone or email, at which time the purpose of the interview was explained and participation was solicited. Written informed consent was also given at this time. In all, fifteen women were interviewed for this study.

Using open-ended questions, respondents were asked to describe a collective action event at which they felt empowered. They were asked about the goals of the action and the expectations they had of the event itself. Then, respondents were asked to identify what it was about the experience that contributed to their feelings of empowerment. The questions were asked in such a way as to ensure the collection of a narrative stream of data. The strength of this method is the personal depth of meaning that was obtained. The fact that it is not always very clear how to interpret the resulting data is identified as a limitation in this study.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were afforded the opportunity to ask questions about the informed consent or the study itself. Without exception, the researcher was granted permission to take detailed interview notes. Following the interview, a debriefing statement was provided to the participant and she was thanked for her time and effort.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study asked women to describe collective action experiences and the circumstances that contributed to or enhanced the participants' feelings of empowerment. Because some of the events described are easily identifiable in the popular press, special attention has been given to assure the anonymity and confidentiality of the study's participants. Following the example of Drury and colleagues (2005), certain biographical variables, such as age and race, were intentionally omitted from the data collection. Random numbers were assigned to the interview notes. This written data was stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's personal residence until stored electronically on a computer file for analysis. At that time, all written records were destroyed.

Participants in this study were informed of the purpose of this research, as well as their right not to participate or to discontinue participation at any time during the research process. Completed consent forms were number coded and separated from the interview data to ensure confidentiality. The informed consent and debriefing statements are attached as Appendices B and C.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using qualitative analysis techniques. The researcher assured thorough review of the resulting data, a requirement unique to qualitative research studies focusing on the iterative process of data analysis.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodological details specific to the current research study. Information on the design of this qualitative study and the data collection instrument were discussed. Specific procedures for conducting the study were explored and protocol for sampling was revealed. Additionally, this chapter included information on the protection of human subjects, providing added emphasis to issues of confidentiality.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The following tables and their content represent the qualitative outcomes of this study. These qualitative outcomes are further delineated, interpreted, and discussed at length in chapter five. The following qualitative outcomes were guided by the fundamental questions of this study: What factors positively contribute to women's feelings of empowerment during collective action events? This study was comprised of 15 participants from throughout the United States. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Demographics

There were 15 total respondents in this study. All were female. As previously indicated, no specific demographic data were collected in order to protect the identities of the participants. Roughly, their ages ranged from the early 20's to the mid 80's. Approximately half were women of color, and roughly one-fourth self-identified as lesbians.

Presentation of the Findings

Participants in this project described events that took place between 1969 and 2008. They represent a variety of causes and are reflective of the diversity of influence that women exert on the social landscape. In total, eight causes were identified. The experiences described by the contributors to this study also represent a variety of strategies that women have chosen to exert this influence.

Table 1. Summary of Collective Action Events

Collective Action Event	Cause
1. Same Sex "Wed In"	Marriage equality
2. Four-day Chaining in the Illinois capital	Constitutional Equality for Women
3. White House vigils	
4. 37-day fast for justice	
5. Women's self-help clinic planning meeting	Women's Right to Make her Own Decisions
6. Founding of women's center for the study of feminist theology	
7. Sit-in for the right of female students to wear pants to school	
8. Legal victory against Oakland, CA, police department and the FBI	Environmental Justice
9. Women's Encampment for the Movement of Peace and Justice	Anti-Nuclear Movement
10. Civil disobedience in support of hotel workers in Los Angeles	Economic Justice for Workers
11. Rally in support of the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides	
12. Counter-demonstration in support of immigrant day labor center	
13. Internal worker organizing campaign	
14. March and demonstration against US military involvement in Iraq	Anti-War
15. Email campaign to inspire women's political activism	Women's Political Participation

Qualitative Results

As a set, the data collected in this study represent the personal accounts of empowering collective action experiences of 15 individual women. When asked the interview questions, "What was it about the event that made you feel empowered?" the researcher identified six primary modal themes: ownership, rebellion, diversity, learning, media, and victory.

Seven women explained that the collective action was empowering because of her own participation or contribution to the event, and these responses were coded as "ownership." For example, one of the women who organized and participated in the 1982 civil disobedience action in which seventeen women chained themselves together in the Springfield, Illinois, capital rotunda in support of ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, said, "You take ownership of what you are doing and you think that it is significant and you are having an effect." Another woman said, "It was empowering to me personally because I saw the fruits of all of the hard work that I have done as the founder of the organization." The participant who described her experience as one of seven women who fasted for 37 days

in support of passage of the Equal Rights Amendment expressed her feelings of empowerment in this way:

No one, for as long as I live, will ever be able to tell me that I don't care. It was a done deal. It was settled. I never have to put it on the table again. There are many people who have to question if they care deeply enough. But deeply, in my own heart, I know how much I am willing to sacrifice for a cause I believe in.

Responses relating to challenging the dominant culture in some way were categorized as "rebellion." For example:

- [It was empowering to me because] it presented the opportunity to participate in thumbing our nose at the man in a meaningful, political theater.
- For me, resist[ing] arrest was very much a part of the empowerment experience. It was the tangible, physical rejection of traditional roles and stereotypes.

The responses of women who talked about the creation of knowledge were categorized as "learning." Two women talked about the diversity of the participants as contributing to her feelings of empowerment. As one woman

explained, "For me, it was the act of being on the streets with so many different people in a very positive, peaceful environment." One woman attributed her feelings of empowerment to the outcome of the event she described, and her response was thus categorized as "victory".

Table 2. Participants' Rationale for Empowerment Feelings

	(n)	(%)
Ownership	7	46.67
Rebellion	3	20.00
Learning	2	13.33
Diversity	2	13.33
Victory	1	6.67
Total	15	100.00

In addition to this open-ended question, women who lent their voices to this study were asked to describe seven specific variables related to the empowering collective action event in which they participated and discuss whether or not they believed the variable was an important contributor to the empowerment they felt as a consequence of participation.

Police

The respondent's were asked to identify the presence or absence of the police and whether or not their association with the event contributed to the participant's feelings of empowerment. In total, 11 respondents described empowering experiences where the police were present.

Table 3. Respondents Reporting a Police Presence

	(n)	(%)
Yes	11	73.33
No	4	26.66
Total	15	100.00

Of those, 6 respondents indicated that the presence of the police positively contributed to their feelings of empowerment:

- It was empowering in that we understood they [the police] were there to protect us from the counter-protesters.
- [The police presence] was integral to my feelings about the process because we had the opportunity to speak truth to power.

- The police presence legitimized the actual power that we had and that we were threatening the status quo. It made me realize that what we were doing was a big deal.
- I felt empowered because I was one of more than 350 people who were arrested.

Two respondents indicated that though the police were not present, the experience was empowering because their participation in the event was challenging the status quo in some way:

- What we were doing was illegal and this contributed to my feelings of empowerment.
- What we were doing was subversive in a sense because we were involved in the work of fundamentally altering language and liturgy.

Event Size

The respondents in this study described their participation in collective action events ranging from a small handful to several thousands. Roughly half of the women (n=8) described the size of the event as being important to her feelings of empowerment.

Table 4. Respondents Reporting that Event Size
Contributed to their Feelings of Empowerment

	(n)	(%)
Yes	8	53.33
No	7	46.67
Total	15	100.00

- They performed over 4,000 marriages, but there were thousands and thousands of other people who participated in some way. This contributed to my feelings of empowerment because of the amount of participants, but also the variety of the people.
- There were about 250 of us after everything was said and done. The amount of people we were able to turn out on such short notice was amazing. The numbers mattered in a big way.
- There were 15 workers. The size of our delegation was great in that there were people from all different departments [of the hotel we were organizing].

The other half of the respondents (n=7) reported that the event in which they participated did not influence their feelings of empowerment.

Public Support

11 of the 15 women in this study described events where there was significant public support for the action. Without exception, these women attribute some of their feelings of empowerment to this outpouring of support.

Table 5. Respondents Describing Events with Observed Public Support

	(n)	(%)
Yes	11	73.33
No	4	26.67
Total	15	100.00

- The outpouring of support was contagious. The courtroom was packed to overflowing for every day of the trial, which lasted for over two months.
- It seemed like there were tons of people on the sidewalks cheering us on. It was empowering and validating to know that there were other people

who knew what was going on and were showing their support in a different way than getting arrested.

- People from all over the world sent us care packages...People sent flowers and many [community] groups brought food, sleeping bags, and so many other things.
- We began [organizing] in the summer and by October there was quite a momentum, so that was very empowering because you had the sense that you were part of a larger community, an international community.

Unity

All of the participants in this study agree that the sense of unity among the participants in the collective actions of which they were a part positively contributed to their own feelings of empowerment.

- We were all united because of the gross injustice of the situation. We were prepared to do everything we could to ensure that the court decided in her favor.
- It was very empowering to know that none of us are in this work alone and [the event] was really a

micro chasm to demonstrate that there are people who are together with s in this struggle all along the way.

- It was amazing. We are trying to teach the workers that we are all in the same boat. We move together or we sink together. It was such a powerful experience for all of us.
- On that day, in that action...we had a collective goal. The fact that there were so many of us, just sitting there, with arms linked in solidarity. That was so empowering.

Success

12 of 15 participants in this survey described the outcome of the empowering event as successful, though the success they described was not always defined in relationship to the goals or the long-term outcome of the event. The three respondents who described their experience as unsuccessful, were still empowered by their participation in the events themselves.

- It became clear to me that we had unlocked a door that the patriarchy had kept closed on us.

- [The organization] originated to empower women. That's what it did for me, and I know that it has done that for them too.
- I don't think that anyone had realized how historic it was for us to carry on this tradition that had begun in the 1800's when working women began to demonstrate in front of the White House.
- The outcome was not effective, though I was empowered and it changed me forever.
- I wanted to activate my sphere of influence. I wanted to do what I could, where I am with what I have. And I did, and I am. My goal is progressive political social change and I participated in that. I'm thrilled actually!

Other Areas

All of the women who contributed to this study reported that their participation in the collective action events they described positively influenced other areas of their lives.

- I have always been out, but it helped me to come out more. It helped me recognize myself as queer.

- It has given me the eyes and ears and has given me lifelong connections with wonderful women from around the world.
- The skills that we learned, and I will talk personally, I have been able to carry those things that I learned and...what we accomplished. I am empowered when I see that the things we learned...are being carried on by younger generations now.
- It changed our lives. We were housewives. We weren't agitators at that time. It moved me to continue to fight for the Equal Rights Amendment and not let it go down silently.

Other Actions

All of the women who contributed to this study reported that their participation in the collective action events they described encouraged their participation in other collective events.

- We participated as grand marshals along with about 200 other couples in the Palm Springs Pride Parade.

- I participated in many other actions, including chaining myself to the White House fence in support of ratification of the ERA.
- I got to be arrested a lot! It motivated me later to be a part of the NGO Peace Center in Nairobi. The whole process took me places I never imagined I could go, all based on the simple belief that we are all equal.
- [Participating] made me aware that [positive] change can happen when a group of people act collectively and move in the same direction. That awareness and that experience is really responsible for many of the movements I have been involved in over the years.
- I later went on to intervene between men and guns during the Vietnam War.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the qualitative, narrative data revealed in this study. The qualitative data were analyzed, coded, and placed into categories. The qualitative outcomes are further delineated, interpreted, and discussed at length in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five includes a presentation of the conclusions derived from this qualitative study. The study's limitations are presented. In addition, further recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research are delineated. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Discussion

This study aspired to understand what factors contribute to the feelings of empowerment reported by women as a result of collective action experience. Empowerment was described by the respondents as a process within episodes of collective action and also as an experiential outcome of such action. The most frequent responses given reflect a strong identification with the event itself and the woman's personal contribution to the event or action. One woman, whose legal testimony helped lead to a landmark legal victory against the Oakland, California, police department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation stated, "I was able to make a difference

because I was able to be so forthright and I was able to answer questions so convincingly." Another woman described how empowering it was to participate in an event with others she had helped to mobilize:

It was empowering to me to see that I had these deep face to face conversations with all of these people who had shared their passions with me and with whom, in the quiet solitary of their offices or living rooms I had shared my passions...to see that passion continuing and to see that those individuals were still a part of the movement and were helping to fight for worker justice more than two years later.

This finding seems to indicate that simply attending a collective action event is not necessarily enough to empower women. When working with women to develop opportunities for collective action, empowerment-oriented social work practitioners should seek out strategic ways to foster feelings of ownership among the women.

Interestingly, the presence of the police or other law enforcement officials was not, in itself, described by the study's respondents as an important contributor to their feelings of empowerment. Rather, the police presence served as tangible evidence of the events'

disruption or disturbance of existing power relations. The women in this study described collective action experiences in which they acted in concert with a group of others to challenge the status quo of the dominant social groups. It was this action, this defiance of the way things are and the assumption of personal responsibility for affecting change, which proved empowering for these women. They were aware of the unequal distribution of power relations, and chose to act with others to challenge the dominant social structures that oppressed them. The woman who participated in a middle-school sit-in with her classmates to win the right for girls at her public school to wear pants put it this way:

The police presence legitimized the actual power that we had and made me aware that we were threatening the status quo. I think they thought that they could control us because we were girls and they could just talk to us and make us go back to class.

Nearly three-fourths of the women in this study described events for which they perceived significant public support. In some instances, the support was

expected, but some of the women were surprised by the response from the community at large, and particularly the media attention. The public support for the collective actions described by the women in this study helped to validate their efforts. For example, a woman who legally married her same-sex partner at the 2004 San Francisco wed-in stated, "It is empowering to have so many people saying, by their words and their actions, that what you're doing is right." Another woman, arrested in a planned, peaceful civil disobedience action designed to raise awareness in the public consciousness about the living and working conditions of hospitality workers in the Century City corridor said, "It was empowering and validating to know that there were other people who knew what was going on and were showing their support in a different ways."

In addition to validation, several women described the public support they experienced as empowering because it reinforced the belief that they are not alone, and that others share their feelings and experiences of oppression. One woman stated:

I found out that the very same things that were troubling me were troubling other women too! It was

like finding out that this giant muzzle that you've felt for all of these years, that other people have felt that muzzle too.

These findings indicate that publicly supported collective action events can be empowering for women because they validate one's individual reclamation of personal agency and because they serve as tangible evidence that individual experiences are shared.

The women of this study unanimously cited the importance of unity among the participants in the actions they described, regardless of whether or not they viewed the event as successful. This finding supports the research of other empowerment scholars who have suggested that a perceived sense of unity is necessary for empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

The results of this study also highlight the lasting impact collective action participation can have on women's lives, the way they define themselves, and their personal efficacy beliefs. Without exception, the women of this study view their participation in the events they described as having a positive, sustained influence on their lives. One woman stated, "This experience fundamentally altered the sense of who I am and the power

I have." Another woman described the effect of her participation in this way: "[Participating in this event] privately changed the fabric of who I am forever." Yet another respondent summarized her experience by saying, "It simply built me as a woman." This finding is significant because it identifies participation in collective action events as a highly effective strategy for promoting positive self-identity development among women.

The study is also important for what it did not find. For example, event size, while important in some cases, was incidental or described as "completely unimportant" in others. A woman who described an empowering event involving approximately thirty women stated, "The number was not critical. The same [feelings of empowerment] could have happened with only three or four." Another woman said matter-of-factly, "The numbers didn't matter. What mattered was our message." This finding is promising for feminist-oriented macro social work practitioners who find themselves working to develop opportunities for female clients to take action for personal and political change since it suggests that

relatively small manifestations of collective action can be empowering to participants.

Limitations

There are several possible limitations of this study. First, the sample size is quite small. With only fifteen participants, the data collected in this study is not assumed to be representative of all women with empowering collective action experiences.

Additionally, because snowball sampling techniques were utilized to obtain the sample, the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to the larger population of women with empowering collective action experiences. Although multiple starting points were used in an attempt to solicit a diverse sample, all of the participants in this study described actions or protest movements relating to progressive social change. Surely there are women who have felt empowered as a consequence of their participation in more conservative social actions. However, their voices are missing from this study.

Another possible limitation of this study is the absence of operationalized variables. Because of the

exploratory nature of the research question driving this study, the researcher purposefully declined to define "empowerment" or "collective action." This was done in an attempt to design the study to share power with those who participated with the researcher in the creation of knowledge. To do otherwise would have been to ascribe privilege to others' definitions and thereby disempower the women who granted me the opportunity to record their stories. However, the lack of definitions of these two important terms impairs the study's content validity.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The results of this study reveal that participation in collective action can have significant, enduring effects on women. Direct service practitioners should be aware of opportunities within the local community for their female clients to gain collective action experience, and they should encourage such participation. It should be standard practice for social work practitioners to maintain current resource lists of women-centered organizations and linkage to these community resources should be emphasized in case planning.

The results of this study confirm the findings of Gillterman and Shulman (1986), who suggest that the development of an understanding of shared experience can be an empowering process. Community organizers involved in the planning and implementation of collective action events should spend time working to develop the collective consciousness of the participants and seek out opportunities to encourage unity among women participants. Opportunities for women to achieve a sense of ownership in the event itself should also be exploited.

It is the hope of the author that this study will promote further qualitative inquiry on the development and endurance of empowerment feelings in women who participate in collective action events. As this study reflects the experiences of women who have participated in a variety of protest movements, more studies are needed to fully explore the empowerment feelings of women who work collectively for specific causes. This study also reflects the experiences of women organizers and activists. Future studies should further our understanding of the empowering collective action

experiences of women who might not self identify in this way.

The results of this study also suggest a number of questions for further research. For example, under what conditions would women who spontaneously join a collective action event or passively participate from the periphery describe the same level of empowerment as the women in this study? How does participation in direct action/civil disobedience affect women's subjective descriptions of empowerment? How would the descriptions of empowerment development differ among women with relatively few collective action experiences and women with many empowering collective experiences?

Conclusions

This study explored the subjective feelings of empowerment of women with collective action experiences. The majority of the participants in this project described their participation in action events to which they ascribed some level of personal responsibility. The very vast majority of women discussed experiences that were empowering because they involved challenging existing power relations. Perceived unity among

participants is identified as an important factor promoting empowerment in collective action among women. Finally, the lasting positive effects of participating in collective action events cannot be ignored.

It is hoped that this study will help social workers to increase their knowledge on the importance of considering intervention strategies with their female consumers that include collective action. Increasing social work knowledge in this area will result in an improvement in services to female consumers and go far to fulfill social work's mandate to adopt intervention strategies that empower our clients.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Schedule

- Please describe a collective action event in which you were a participant and resulted in you feeling empowered. What was it about and where did it take place?
- What were the goals of the collective action event?
- What was it about the event that made you feel empowered? (What was empowering about that? Can you say a bit more about why that was empowering?)
- Were the police present? Did that have an effect on how you felt?
- Was there much public support for the action? (Did that contribute to your feelings of empowerment?)
- Were there many people involved? (Did that contribute to your feelings of empowerment?)
- How much unity was there among the people taking part? (Did that contribute to your feelings of empowerment?)
- Did you achieve what you wanted?
- Were you successful? (Did that contribute to your feelings of empowerment?)
- Did the experience affect other areas of your life?
- Did the experience encourage you to take part in other actions?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Melissa Darnell, from the Department of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between participation in collective action experiences and the development of empowerment feelings among women. The results of the study will contribute to her original research project as partial fulfillment of her Master of Social Work degree requirements. The study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board at California State University, San Bernardino.

Consenting to participate in this study means you consent to an interview at a time and place of your preference. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to describe a collective action event in which you have participated and during which you experienced feelings of empowerment. You will also be asked to identify what it was about the event that contributed to your feelings of empowerment. There are no identified risks to you as a result of your participation.

Throughout the process of conducting this study, every effort will be made to ensure that your answers remain strictly confidential. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you can only be disclosed with your permission or as required by law.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in, or withdrawal from the study at any time without penalty. In addition, you do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. Your permission will be asked to allow the interview to be digitally recorded. You may refuse to allow the interview to be recorded if you choose. When you complete the interview, you will be given a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. At that time, you will receive a gift certificate to Syracuse Cultural Workers as compensation for your time. You are also entitled to a copy of the results of this research project. Please indicate if you would like a copy of the final version of this study.

If you have further questions or concerns about the study please feel free to contact Dr. Tom Davis, California State University, San Bernardino, Department of Social Work, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407. You may also contact Dr. Tom Davis by phone at (909) 537-3839, or by email at tomdavis@csusb.edu.

Please check the box below to indicate you have read this informed consent and voluntarily agree to participate in the study described herein.

Please place a check mark here: ☐ Date: _____

I agree that my interview may be recorded: Yes ☐ No ☐

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for your participation in this research project. The study you have just completed was designed to investigate the relationship between collective action participation and feelings of empowerment in women. I was particularly interested in the descriptions of the variables that may have contributed to or enhanced your feelings of empowerment.

There are no anticipated adverse risks to you for your participation. However, should you experience any discomfort, please feel free to contact the counseling center at California State University, San Bernardino, at (909) 880-5040. If you have any questions about the study you may contact Dr. Tom Davis at (909) 537-3839. If you indicated that you would like a copy of the final study, one will be sent to you after June 30, 2008. A copy of this study will also be available in the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after June, 2008.

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