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**The Paradox of Empowerment from a Sociological Point of View:
New Implications for Management Research**

Abstract

Many applied fields in the social sciences have used the concept of empowerment during the last decades, among them the fields of human resource management and development. Despite several attempts at organising, especially theoretical, research on empowerment and creating different dimensions in order to conceptualise the concept, the field of empowerment is characterised by diverse definitions, approaches, applications – and a disregard of the concept's more problematic sides, such as its ambiguous nature: The term paradox of empowerment is well-known, yet significantly understudied, and refers to the fact that empowerment efforts can lead to empowerees feeling indignation and resentment rather than motivation and enthusiasm.

The aim of this paper is to approach the concept of empowerment from a sociological point of view, introducing theoretical ideas and analyses that have, as yet, not found any attention in management research. They might, therefore, contribute with insights into the workings of empowerment that have not been considered in management research so far. Due to the concept's inherent relation to power, the paper starts out by drawing on theoretical assumptions of the concept of power as defined by classical as well as modern sociological discourses. Building on three concrete assumptions of power – power is a resource, power limits agency and power is zero-sum – I then continue by introducing what I call a communicative approach: The usually purely economic take on empowerment as a transfer of resources fails to consider the dimension of communicative interaction; i.e. communicative messages implied in certain aspects of power transfers, such as power differentials, reciprocity issues and paternalism.

I argue that the paradox of empowerment evolves from discrepancies between approaching empowerment from a purely economic as opposed to a more interactionoriented, communicative viewpoint and the fact that these two cannot be separated in empowering interactions: While an empoweree's agency might be increased on an economic level, it might simultaneously be decreased on an interactional level – leaving the empoweree feeling disempowered.

The concept of empowerment has been prominent in management contexts for a considerable time and has become an integral part of studies on management strategies, tools, dilemmas and achievements. Therefore, approaching the concept from an interaction-oriented, communicative point of view, inspired by sociological theory, might be beneficial for future empowerment research as well as practice and contribute to a better knowledge of how to empower without at the same time disempower employees.