

# Qualitative Case Study on the Empowerment-Practicing Experience of Social Workers

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## 사회복지사의 임파워먼트 실천 경험에 관한 질적 사례연구

최정민

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**Abstract** This study aims to determine the social worker's experiences of practicing empowerment. The researcher conducted interviews with five social workers who had worked in social welfare practice for more than seven years. The interviews were conducted between October and December 2020. Written but in-depth interviews were used owing to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative case study was used to investigate the research question, and the researcher ensured study rigor. Data analysis was conducted with the researcher seeking to understand the interview materials in detail through line-by-line analysis. The researcher then examined the categorization and uniqueness of the research participants' experiences of empowerment practice. The research participants' experiences were examined within-cases and between-cases. Both these types of examinations were conducted by investigating the similarities and differences among the research participants to derive core data. The analysis showed that the social workers' experiences of practicing empowerment could be classified into power balancing, two-faced relationship, between the ideal and the real, and unknown effect and measurement tool. Based on these results, this study discussed the contextual situation confirmed in the relationship between social workers and clients. Furthermore, this study proposed practical implications for revitalizing the social workers' empowerment practices.

**요약** 본 연구의 목적은 사회복지사의 임파워먼트 실천 경험은 무엇인가? 라는 근본적인 질문의 답을 얻는 데 있다. 이를 위해 사회복지실천 현장에서 7년 이상 활동한 사회복지사 5명을 대상으로 면접을 실시하였다. 면접은 2020년 10월-12월 사이에 진행되었다. 이 시기가 코로나 19 팬데믹인 점을 고려하여 서면 면접, 심층 면접 등의 방법을 활용하였다. 그리고 연구 질문을 확인하기 위해 질적 사례연구 방법을 사용하였고, 연구의 엄격성을 확보하기 위한 노력을 하였다. 특히, 인터뷰 자료를 바탕으로 줄 단위 분석을 하여 자료를 세부적으로 이해하기 위해 노력하였다. 또한 연구참여자의 임파워먼트 실천 경험의 범주화를 실시하고 독특성을 확인하였다. 즉, 연구참여자의 임파워먼트 실천 경험과 더불어 연구참여자 간 임파워먼트 실천 경험을 비교하면서, 핵심 이슈를 발견하였다. 분석 결과 사회복지사의 임파워먼트 실천 경험은 “힘의 균형 맞추기”, “이중적인 관계”, “이상과 현실 간 갈등”, “알 수 없는 효과와 측정도구”로 확인되었다. 이러한 연구 결과를 기반으로 사회복지사와 클라이언트 간 관계에서 확인된 맥락적 상황을 논의하였다. 또한 사회복지사의 임파워먼트 실천을 활성화하기 위한 다양한 실천적 제언을 제시하였다.

**Keywords** : Social Worker, Empowerment Theory, Empowerment Practice, Client's Participation, Qualitative Research

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## 1. Introduction

Principal interest of the social welfare practice is an improvement of the quality of life of the socially suppressed clients. Hence, social welfare organizations are making use of diverse theories for enhancing the clients' quality of life [1]. The existing social welfare organizations are practicing social welfare based on the theories related to treatment paradigm. Under the treatment paradigm [6], only the role of the clients as a subject that participates in the program designed by using the social workers' expertise is emphasized. In this situation of social welfare practice, it is inevitable that clients frequently feel helpless [2]. That is, the social welfare practice based on the treatment paradigm caused an outcome where the clients' quality of life cannot be consistently guaranteed.

In this background, empowerment theory gained popularity. The empowerment theory helps clients overcome an environment where they are suppressed and the resulting helplessness and make their own decision about their life [3,4]. In particular, the empowerment theory is being evaluated to become a basis for effective practical methods that stimulate the ability of the socially weak who are experiencing helplessness under a suppressive social structure [4]. Surely, there is a criticism that the theory also shifts the responsibility of negative life experience to the clients because the clients have a power to make decision about their lives [5]. Nevertheless, the empowerment theory still has an important meaning as it emphasizes the political characteristics of the social welfare practice, considering that the empowerment is the goal of social welfare practice [6].

Meanwhile, early research on the empowerment was mainly focused on the concept, political characteristics, and the meaning from an aspect of social welfare [5,7,8]. Afterward, the focus of the research gradually shifted to testing the

factors that affect the empowerment of the socially isolated [9-11]. Following the saturation of the empowerment research, the direction of the studies became diverted to a development, process, and assessment of the programs that use the empowerment theory [12,13]. Actually, multiple studies [14,15] stated that an intervention through the empowerment program contributes to improving the client's quality of life.

Despite the usefulness of the empowerment program, disputes are spreading as some of the existing studies discovered the differences between empowerment theory and practice [6,16]. For example, there can be a case where the social welfare is practiced still based on a treatment paradigm with an addition of only a partial element of the empowerment. This cannot be seen as a social welfare practice applied with the empowerment theory [6].

This study aimed to determine the social worker's experiences of practicing empowerment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Concept of empowerment

Empowerment is being applied to the disabled, the elderly people, and children who experience helplessness because of suppressive social system [17]. In particular, empowerment theory puts more stress on clients who overcome suppressive social system and helplessness, rather than clients who simply experience helplessness [6].

The purpose of empowerment is to account for the human perspectives within an environment, change the suppressive social system, and reinforce the individuals' power at the same time [3]. For example, with regard to the mistreatment of the elderly people, although short-term intervention on the helplessness that the elderly people experience is necessary, intervention that addresses the unequal social

system and problem of the family members who receive influence also need to be accompanied in the long term.

The empowerment theory is distinguished into three aspects, including personal/internal empowerment, interpersonal relationship empowerment, and community empowerment [18]. Personal/internal empowerment refers to self-efficacy aimed at acquiring sense of control. Interpersonal relationship empowerment includes self-assertion and resource mobilization. Community empowerment includes participation in decision making process in local community [18,19]. Also, the aspects of the empowerment are related to each other. Previous studies [9,18,19] explained that empowerment which starts from the personal/internal level affects interpersonal relationship empowerment and community empowerment or that the concepts develop through mutual interaction.

## 2.2 Literature review

Previous studies on the effectiveness of the empowerment practice in the case of diverse disadvantaged groups were mostly focused on the western research on empowerment around 2000. Actually, the domestic studies regarding the empowerment in Korea were affected by foreign studies, which proposed the theoretical basis for diverse ideologies and concepts of empowerment [19,20]. As a result, the domestic empowerment research in early days mostly involved debates on the meaning from an aspect of social welfare [21] and political characteristics [5]. There were some critical studies, which argued that empowerment research accepted the neo-liberalism. However, most were discussed as a type of radical social welfare practice. Naturally, research on the empowerment was conducted from practical perspectives focusing on the operation in the actual field of social welfare practice [6,16]. Despite the usefulness from an aspect of practices, empowerment was often fragmentarily

understood without scientific inspection. As a self-reflective practice on this trend, studies that test the influential factor on the empowerment of a variety of disadvantaged groups, such as the disabled [10], the elderly people [11], poor adolescent [9], and the urban poor [22], were progressed after the 2000s.

The research related to workers' empowerment changed to the development of programs using empowerment theory and their progress and evaluation. The effectiveness of the actual empowerment programs were proven in diverse population groups, including women [23], adolescents [24], family of dementia patients [25], and the disabled [27,28].

As such, the effectiveness of empowerment practice was confirmed. The current study raises a fundamental question of whether the empowerment practice is actually based on the empowerment theory.

## 3. Research method

### 3.1 Research participants

For data collection, one social worker with experience in empowerment practice was selected. After listening to the researcher's explanation about the purpose of this study, the first research participant recommended four social workers. The four social workers were selected as research participants for the following reasons: First, social workers who with 7 years experience of working in the field of social welfare practice were chosen. Second, the social workers who specialized in the disabled, children, elderly, and community welfare were chosen to capture characteristics of the empowerment practice in diverse areas. Third, social workers who had experience running an empowerment program were selected, considering the research question of this study.

Table 1. Research participants' characteristics

Research participant	Age	Specialty area
A	30s	The disabled
B	40s	Community
C	40s	Children
D	40s	Community
E	40s	The elderly

### 3.2 Data collection

Interviews were conducted between October and December, 2020. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, written interviews and in-depth interviews were used. In the case of in-depth interviews, the researcher first tried to secure reliability between the researcher and the research participants so that the interviewees could give accurate answers to the interview questions. The in-depth interview was conducted for approximately 1 hour using a semi-structured questionnaire. The interview place was determined following the research participant's request. Some interviewees directly visited the institute to take their interview in a counseling room and other interviews were interviewed in a quiet café.

The researcher carefully chose the location to ensure full confidentiality of the contents of the interview. When additional questions arose after the in-depth interview, the researcher explained the specific questions to the interviewees by phone and received written answers from them via email.

### 3.3 Data analysis

A qualitative case study was used, which has the advantage that empirical knowledge can be obtained from contextual circumstances. In this study, "social workers' empowerment practice experience" was chosen as the case.

For data analysis, the researcher sought to understand the interview materials in detail through line-by-line analysis. The researcher

then examined the categorization and uniqueness of the research participants' experiences of empowerment practice. The research participants' experiences were examined within-cases and between-cases by investigating similarities and differences among the research participants to derive core data.

To check whether an error occurred in interpreting the analysis results or conveying the meaning, the researcher directly shared the research outcome with the research participants and other social workers who had experience in empowerment practice. As such, the researcher tried as much as possible to secure the reliability of the research outcome. Furthermore, the researcher considered the fact that bias could cause error in the research outcome. Hence, the researcher described bias and tried to maintain objectivity to rule out study.

## 4. Analysis results

### 4.1 Within-case analysis

#### 4.1.1 Research participant A

Research participant A had professional theoretic knowledge related to the operation of the empowerment program. In particular, he was clearly aware of the difference between theory and practice being related to the empowerment program operation. He knew that although the social workers and clients have an equal relationship, a power imbalance occurs once the program is actually run. He said that it is difficult to progress the program when the client has too much authority because of unreasonable demands for example.

He pointed out that the lack of an empowerment practice manual and measurement tool was the main reason that the empowerment theory-based practice was difficult.

#### 4.1.2 Research participant B

Research participant B believed that the client's self-determination was important in empowerment practice. He thought that the clients could manage their lives when their self-determination was guaranteed. He also explained how the client's self-determination also helps to induce the client's active participation in the operation of the empowerment. However, He was not sure whether her way of practicing empowerment was correct because He had never observed a case of operating special empowerment program in detail.

#### 4.1.3 Research participant C

Research participant C worked on needs assessment, planning, and monitoring with the client by ensuring his self-determination. Several programs were revised following the client's request. Although He decided that the cancelled program was definitely necessary, he accepted the client's opinion because of the lack of time while processing multiple projects. After the completion of the empowerment program, He could not stop thinking about whether he left the client to himself too much.

#### 4.1.4 Research participant D

Research participant D guaranteed the client's self-determination as much as possible when operating the empowerment program. However, he could not shake off feelings of doubt about the empowerment practice. He believed that the practice that guarantees the client's self-determination might not be suitable for the field of social welfare practice. He ran the empowerment program by constantly communicating with the client. However, because he spent too much time on coordinating the program with the client, he ran out of time to actually implement the finalized program. Hence, during this process, he inevitably managed the other programs poorly.

#### 4.1.5 Research participant E

Research participant E wrote the proposal by referring to the books about empowerment programs following the research trend at the time. After his empowerment program was selected, he felt a sense of shame while thinking "how much do I really know about the empowerment program?". Actually, he explained that he could not get rid of the question "is this really an empowerment program?" when he analyzed other empowerment programs.

### 4.2 Between-case analysis

#### 4.2.1 Empowerment practice: power balancing

Although empowerment model is being broadly used in the actual field of social welfare practice, the main subject include helpless individuals within an unequal social system [17]. However, it was proven that the social workers considered every client who uses the social welfare organizations as a subject of the empowerment practice. This is because the socially disadvantaged are the main users of the social welfare organizations. However, the number of well-educated or middle-class clients, that is, those who have power, is increasing in social welfare organizations these days. Hence, the empowerment model cannot be said to be the best social welfare practice model to the client. On balance, a variety of social welfare practice models should be used by considering the characteristics of the client.

*"Every client is a subject of empowerment intervention... It is because the clients that I met while working on the social welfare practices need power in the process of solving their own problems... It was often difficult to proceed with the program when the client had too much authority." (Research participant A)*

*"The empowerment practice is useful because every client has to control his life by himself or*

*participate in the decision making process based on the right to self-determination.” (Research participant B)*

#### 4.2.2 Relationship between social workers and client: two-faced relationship

Although the relationship between social workers and clients is based on equality, the social workers and clients were proven to be on unequal footing in the actual field of social welfare practice [20]. This is because the social workers and clients are in a relationship that exchanges helps. That is, the social workers who distribute resources take a superior position to the clients in overall social welfare practice. However, the social workers perceived that the goal of the empowerment practice can be achieved when they have an equal relationship with the client in the process of empowerment practice. Meanwhile, it was reported that difficulties of program progress and question about the damage on the social workers' authority occurred when the right was given to the client.

*“The relationship between one who practices and the client should be based on a collaborative and equal relationship. However, once the program is operated, they are divided into a program operator and program participant and it is not easy for their relationship to have a collaborative and equal basis... It becomes similar to a relationship between a teacher and a student... Reestablishment of the relationship is necessary...” (Research participant A)*

*“The relationship between social worker and client... is based on an equal relationship. In reality, however, the relationship between the social worker and client is not equal in early stage of the intervention. This is because their position starts from a giver and receiver of aids and resources... Since equal relationship is necessary for achieving the goal of the*

*empowerment practice... education process that promotes the perception of equal relationship between the social worker and client is required... Of course, sometimes I question why my expertise is necessary or what my authority as a social worker is.” (Research participant D)*

#### 4.2.3 Reality of the empowerment practice: conflict between the ideal and the real

The social workers had a perception that clients should play a role as a main actor in the entire process of the social welfare practice, including needs assessment, planning, executing, monitoring, and evaluation of the program. In particular, some social workers explained that equal contract relationship can be formed when the client participates in the entire process of the social welfare practice and, in that case, the client can independently implement the social welfare practice. In reality, however, the research participants failed to guarantee sufficient participation of the client due to short amount of time related to the program operation.

*“I was in charge of the career exploration skill program aimed at improving the client's empowerment... There, the clients were aware of their own situation and needs and they developed plans accordingly. The clients established self-planned goals by themselves... Then, they checked their current situation through monitoring and assessment together with the social worker... This is because the final decision is their own choice.” (Research participant C)*

*“The client has to participate in the entire process of the program. The outcome of the empowerment model is the client's solution of his problem by himself without a presence of the social worker... However, the reality is that it is difficult for the client to participate in the process of social welfare practice including the planning and practice process, except for the needs assessment, due to the lack of time... I*

*cannot guarantee the client's sufficient participation because of the short amount of time given to the program operation." (Research participant D)*

#### 4.2.4 Effect of the empowerment practice: unknown effect and measurement tool

The research participants questioned the effectiveness of the social welfare empowerment program. This could be attributed to the lack of understanding about the tools that measure the effectiveness of the empowerment practice and empowerment program. In particular, although it was confirmed that effectiveness assessment of the empowerment was being conducted at an individual level in the field of social welfare practices, social workers showed a lack of understanding about the effectiveness measurement of the empowerment in the local community. This is because community-level programs are rarely operated in the social welfare organizations. Also, the social workers revealed low level of understanding about the measurement tools that are used in the empowerment practice process.

*"There seems to be some effects. But, in most cases, I was not sure whether the positive change was actually caused by the empowerment program." (Research participant B)*

*"Regarding the empowerment effectiveness in the actual field... from a community level... difficult to measure... The personal/internal empowerment is measured by the change before and after the participation in the program... Sometimes I question what the empowerment measurement tool is." (Research participant E)*

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis results indicated that the social workers' experience of empowerment practice

can be categorized into the following four groups: power balancing, two-faced relationship, conflict between the ideal and the real, and unknown effect and measurement tool. Based on the results of this study, we made the following proposals.

First, the social workers considered every client who uses the social welfare organizations as a subject of empowerment practice. However, recently, the number of well-educated or middle-class clients, that is, those with power, is increasing in social welfare organizations. Hence, the empowerment model cannot be said to be the best social welfare practice model to the client. On balance, a variety of models of social welfare practice should be used that can account for the characteristics of the client.

In the social welfare practice, empowerment theory or practice is very important. Because of this significance, social workers often regard the empowerment theory or practice as a panacea for all the clients' problems. However, it should be understood that the empowerment theory or practice is useful for solving problems of only a part of the clients. Hence, studying more diverse social welfare practice theories and practice methods that can be applied to the client is necessary.

Second, although the relationship between social workers and client is based on equality, the social workers and clients were proven to be standing on an unequal footing in the actual field of social welfare practices [20].

In general, the social workers' reluctance to grant right to the client can be attributed to the misunderstanding about the empowerment theory. The social workers often think that giving the self-determination right to the client (share of power, distribution of power) damages their authority. Kim & Woo [16] stated that social workers tend to feel uncomfortable about a situation where the clients develop political power or independently solve a certain problem

using their own power.

However, even if right is given to the client, it does not damage the social workers' authority and legal responsibility [16]. For example, clients are specialist in their own life and social workers are the expert of the social welfare. Because each party has its own role, they have to take a respectful and collaborative attitude to each other. Also, the clients can execute their right within legal bound. Hence, the change of the social workers' perception regarding the provision of right to the client is required.

Third, the social workers had a perception that clients should play a role as a main actor in the entire process of the social welfare practice, including needs assessment, planning, executing, monitoring, and evaluation of the program. In reality, however, the research participants failed to guarantee sufficient participation of the clients due to short amount of time related to the program operation.

In general, development of a program requires approximately two years, starting from the detection of the problem. However, less than two months of time is given to developing programs in the actual field of social welfare practices in Korea [26]. In other words, sufficient time for the program operation should be guaranteed to increase the client's participation in the empowerment program. The existing programs mostly run in six-month or one-year time span in reality. Considering this, the empowerment programs in the future need to run for at least two or three years starting from the problem detection to the assessment.

Fourth, the social workers acknowledged the necessity of measuring the effectiveness of the empowerment practice. However, they revealed low level of understanding about the measurement tools that are used in the empowerment practice process.

For the understanding of the empowerment measurement tools, education for the social

workers related to the personal/internal, interpersonal relationship, and community empowerment is essential. For example, the personal/internal empowerment includes information provision regarding the resources and raising awareness. The interpersonal relationship empowerment includes knowledge acquirement about a group, meeting with decision-making group, and participation in self-help group. The community empowerment includes knowledge acquirement and clear expression about the political and economic system and problem, improvement of skills of negotiation and intervention, participation in civic groups, and actions for change (writing letter or make a phone call to politicians) [4]. Hence, the empowerment measurement tools will have to be developed based on these concepts.

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