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Empowerment and Communication:  
Lessons Learned From Organizing for  
Social Change

EVERETT M. ROGERS  
*University of New Mexico*

ARVIND SINGHAL  
*Ohio University*

Empowerment is the process through which individuals perceive that they control situations. Such perceived agency is a fundamental behavior change, which often leads to many other behavior changes. The present chapter synthesizes research on empowerment and communication in the developing nations of Latin American, Africa, and Asia. Several investigations into the empowerment of underdogs in society are examined, including (a) women dairy farmers in India, (b) women members of the Gramneen Bank in Bangladesh, (c) community-based radio listening groups in the villages of Lutsaan and Abirpur in India, and (d) people living with AIDS in Thailand. Essentially, the process of empowerment occurs in small groups at the local level when individuals organize for social change in order to accomplish goals that they cannot achieve as separate individuals. By exploring the relationship between individual and collective empowerment, we seek to draw a series of lessons learned about the empowerment process and apply them more generally to any type of system in any nation.

In 1999, the *Soul City* entertainment-education television series aired in South Africa, modeling a new collective behavior by portraying neighbors intervening in a domestic violence event (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). At that time, the prevailing cultural norm in South Africa was for neighbors not to intervene in a domestic abuse situation. Wife or partner abuse was perceived as a private matter, carried out in a private space, behind closed doors and with the curtains drawn.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Many of the ideas expressed here are drawn from Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, & Whangankar (1998). Various other recent publications on empowerment coauthored by one or both of the present authors (with Michael J. Papa of Michigan State University and other collaborators) are also synthesized here.

**Correspondence:** Everett M. Rogers, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-1171, email: erogers@unm.edu

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In the popular *Soul City* series, however, neighbors collectively decided to break the ongoing cycle of spousal abuse in a neighborhood home. When the next wife beating occurred, they gathered around the abuser's residence, collectively banging pots and pans, censuring the abuser's actions. This prime-time entertainment-education (E-E) episode, which earned one of the highest audience ratings in South Africa in 1999, demonstrated the importance of creatively modeling collective efficacy in order to energize neighbors, who, for cultural reasons, felt previously unempowered to intervene. Evaluation research found that exposure to the *Soul City* E-E program was associated with willingness to stand outside the home of an abuser and bang pots (Soul City, 2001). After this episode was broadcast, pot banging to stop partner abuse was reported in various locations in South Africa (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Patrons of a local pub in Thembisa Township in South Africa exhibited a variation of this practice, collectively banging bottles on the bar when a man physically abused his girlfriend (Soul City, 2001).

The *Soul City* series modeled both *self-efficacy*, an individual's perception of his or her capacity to organize and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations to produce desired attainments (Bandura, 1997), and *collective efficacy*, the degree to which the members of a system believe they have the ability to organize and execute actions required to produce desired attainments (Bandura, 1997). The pot-banging episode described how neighbors collectively displayed efficacy to intervene in a private domestic violence situation. The communication processes that raise individual and collective efficacy also contribute to individual and collective empowerment.

The objective of this review chapter is to synthesize a body of research on empowerment and communication that has been conducted by communication scholars in recent years. Much of this work has been completed in the developing nations of Latin American, Africa, and Asia. Many of the investigations studied empowerment of the underdogs in a society, particularly women in patriarchal societies. Small groups, communities, and organizations have been key components in these empowerment processes. This research, although primarily focused on individual empowerment, also gives attention to collective empowerment. We explore here the relationship between individual and collective empowerment, seeking to draw a series of lessons from the empowerment process that may apply more generally to any type of system in any nation. In doing so, we explicate the theoretical perspectives of Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky.

## EMPOWERMENT AS COMMUNICATION

Empowerment is the process through which individuals perceive that they control situations (Bandura, 1997; Bormann, 1988; Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000a; Papa et al., 2000b; Sheffer-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, & Wayangankar, 1998). This concept of empowerment is the oppo-

site of fatalism and is very similar to the self-efficacy described by Bandura (1997). The empowered person actively engages the environment instead of passively reacting to events. A collective of disempowered individuals may organize for social change so that each individual becomes more empowered. Bandura stated:

"Empowerment" is not something bestowed through edict. It is gained through development of personal efficacy that enables people to take advantage of opportunities and to remove environmental constraints guarded by those whose interests are served by them. . . . Equipping people with a firm belief that they can produce valued effect by their collective action and providing them with the means to do so are the key ingredients in an enablement process. (p. 477)

Empowerment can be individual, or it can characterize a system or collectivity such as a group, community, or organization.

Unempowered individuals usually require external stimuli to become empowered. Often a change agent (trainer, community organizer, etc.) will become the focal point that will enable the empowerment process. In this instance, the role of the change agent is that of a facilitator, not problem solver, in order to assist and encourage the group/individual's capacity for self-empowerment. To sustain empowerment, the community (the population of empowered individuals) must establish and maintain a localized social organization. Of course, the test of any externally induced process occurs when the change agent withdraws from the system and is successful only if the empowerment process continues to function effectively (Bandura, 1997).

Although there has been notable interest in the concept of empowerment in past communication study (Albrecht, 1988; Buzzanell, 1994; Chiles & Zorn, 1995; Cooks & Hale, 1992; Craig, 1994; Deetz, 1994; Mumby, 1993; Novak, 1992; Pacanowsky, 1988), we still do not understand completely how the empowerment process occurs and how it is manifest through specific communication behaviors. When people collaborate with one another to create their own social rules, opportunities for individual and collective empowerment can emerge. Although there are different ways to conceptualize empowerment (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Blau & Alba, 1982; Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanugo, 1988; Pacanowsky, 1988; Vogt & Murrell, 1990), we advocate the basic view of empowerment as a communication process that often results from individuals communicating in small groups. Research in other disciplines reveals important insights into the communicative aspects of empowerment. In the community psychology literature, for example, empowerment is described as an internal process that allows people to gain mastery over issues of concern to them (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Importantly, empowerment requires an active engagement of one's system (Zimmerman, Israel, Schultz, & Checkoway, 1992).

The communication dimension of empowerment has been examined by several disciplines, including community psychology (Kroecker, 1995), feminist studies (Young, 1994), urban planning (Wilson, 1996), organizational studies (Cheney,

-1995; Mumby, 1997; Papa et al., 1995, 1997), and development communication (Jacobson, 1993; Thomas, 1994; White, 1994). For example, Kroeker (1995) argued that collective action increases the potential of overcoming poverty because when people work together they can carry out communal projects, pursue resources, and overcome dependence on government assistance.

#### Paulo Freire and Active Participation

Empowerment as a communication process was initially defined in the theoretical works of Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1968) was critical of adult literacy classes that used a rote memory approach. To counter this, he developed problem-posing education. This approach "respond(s) to the essence of consciousness . . . rejects [one-way] communiqués and embodies communication" (p. 66). Traditionally, the instructor would show the adult students a picture of a farmer with a cow and insist that the students memorize the word "cow" (one-way communication). Freire believed that the instructor should also show a picture of a farmer with 10 cows and inquire of the adult students why it was that one farmer had 10 cows and the other only had one. This type of instruction, dialogic interaction, would then create consciousness-raising in which the students became aware of class and power contradictions. The short-term effects of both teaching methods were that all students became literate. However, the long-term effect was that many students of the one-way communication reverted to illiteracy within a few years while those taught through dialogic interaction did not because they had been empowered through a consciousness-raising process. Freire's thinking about communication and empowerment has been implemented throughout the world in adult literacy and other types of development programs.

In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky (1972) provides another perspective on the empowerment process—that of the change agent. Alinsky believed that the community must be involved in social change for lasting change or true empowerment to occur. Alinsky explained, "My thing, if I want to organize, is solid communication within the people in the community" (p. xix). Theorizing and research on the role of participation in development programs exists in scholarly traditions and includes intervention intended to empower (e.g., Fals Borda, 1987).

One of Alinsky's rules was to never do for someone else what they could do for themselves, that is, start with the current situation not with the desired end. Alinsky also believed that disillusionment was a necessity in order for people to take a risk on a future that they would control (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998).

#### Dialogic Communication

In the Indian village of Dubhagunta, in Andhra Pradesh, the women responded as one to drunkenness and economic or physical abuse by their spouses. A fictional woman, Sithamma, inspired the women of this village. They had read about her in

the adult literacy classes. Like her, they organized and destroyed the local liquor (*arrack*) shops. News of this event spread and soon the phenomenon of the antiarrack movement had spread to hundreds of villages. Because of the pressure from women, four Indian states eventually enacted prohibition laws. In many Asian nations, women have become empowered in recent years in order to combat their husbands' drunkenness. In this sense, alcohol abuse by males represents one stimulus to female empowerment at the village level.

The collective action demonstrated by the women of Dubhagunta increased their potential for overcoming social inequality. When people work together they may perceive and experience the strength of a collectivity. In reality, it is the process of organizing, talking, networking, collaboration sharing, and so forth that encourages empowerment and facilitates the new community awareness (Papa et al., 2000a).

Freire and Alinsky each believed that a communication process drives empowerment. Both Freire and Alinsky posited that through this process the relationships between two unequal entities are fundamentally altered. How empowering messages are relayed, that is, dialogic versus one-way communication, is important to this process. Also vital to empowerment is the dialogue and interaction that takes place between the subordinated group members. We see empowerment when human decision making and actions are the result of consensus.

The communication facet of empowerment is often not recognized even by communication scholars who study feminism, development, persuasion, and social change. In relating the relevant dynamics of self-efficacy, Bandura (1997) stated:

Such beliefs influence the course of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-handicring or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize. (p. 3)

Most programs to raise levels of empowerment in various nations are essentially communication interventions, and such empowerment effects are stronger when the communication process is dialogic.

Approaching women's advancement through empowerment in the third world accepts that the use of local women's organizations is necessary to overcome the patriarchal structure of subordination. The feminist style of organizing starts with the premise that patriarchy does exist and that this dominance over women must cease (Buzzanell, 1994; Calas & Smircich, 1992). The direction one takes to empowerment will vary based upon the feminist stance taken (Buzzanell, 1994; Donovan, 1985; Jaggar, 1983; Langston, 1988; Tong, 1989).

Buzanell (1994) argued that three primary themes characterize feminist organizing processes: (a) cooperative enactment, (b) integrative thinking, and (c) connectedness. The theme of cooperative enactment emphasizes the importance of

working together to reach individual and collective goals rather than competing against one another for limited rewards. In particular, women emphasize a cooperative ethic in their talk by engaging in dialogue to coordinate their efforts to pursue common goals.

The theme of integrative thinking is centered on the importance of context in evaluating potential choices and actions. For example, although a given action, such as small business development, can bring about a specific intended effect (such as increased income), feminists think in holistic or integrative ways by considering how specific actions can produce a number of direct and indirect effects. As Buzzanell (1994) explained, when a woman thinks in an integrative manner, she considers how a given action will influence her life and the lives of her family members. She may be concerned with how a new behavior (such as assertiveness) will contribute to power imbalances in her important personal relationships. She may consider the impact of her actions (such as purchasing an additional milk buffalo for her herd) on the environment.

The feminist-organizing theme of connectedness consists of attempts to integrate the mind, body, and emotions in making sense of the surrounding world (Buzzanell, 1994). Humans are holistic beings who are not limited to displays of rationality. Rather, every individual has an emotional side. Women can thrive in environments where they have opportunities to connect with and nurture others on their pathways to collective success.

Local groups are able to facilitate change from the bottom up by raising the consciousness level of those being subordinated. Some keys to the success of female empowerment programs in the third world are (a) raising awareness of a disadvantaged societal position, (b) access to education, (c) access to employment opportunities, and (d) access to health care. In many of these nations, female empowerment was initially stimulated by the feminist movement in North America and Europe and has been encouraged by national governments, often through a ministry of women's affairs, which launches programs and promotes policies to encourage empowerment.

Community-level organizations of rural women are crucial in providing the individual with group support, collective articulation of common inequalities or problems, and as a base for bargaining. Recently, many development programs have shifted from focusing on the economic aspects of development to focusing on more cultural aspects of community relationships, such as improving the status of women. This shift has directly involved women in their own empowerment programs. This new direction closely follows the theoretical perspectives of Alinsky and Freire in that the empowered individual must desire change and must be involved in the decision that initiates and sustains the empowerment process. Freire (1968) explained that "instead of following predetermined plans, leaders and people, mutually identified, together create the guidelines of their action" (p. 183).

Studies of the female empowerment process suggest that women themselves, when organized in a women's group can best carry empowerment activities for-

ward. As an example, take an organization of mothers in the village of Oryu Li, Korea. The group progressed to larger and larger self-development projects, each project building on previous successes. In this way, the participants gained individual empowerment and collective self-efficacy (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). As a result, the collective group action across the village communication networks shifted the power from older males to a wider sharing of influence. Women in Oryu Li, once empowered, were able to combat problems caused by spousal alcoholism and to achieve some economic gains. Eventually, this empowerment strategy of using the interpersonal communication networks in Oryu Li positively affected the lives of 750,000 Korean women.

The early success in Korea then spread to other Asian nations like the Philippines and Bangladesh, where organizing women's clubs at the village level encouraged female empowerment. This strategy began to reveal the process of organizing for social change, a theoretical approach combining certain elements of organizational communication and development communication in order to understand the process through which a group of disempowered individuals gain control of their future.

In India, during the late 1980s, only one out of every seven tasks related to dairy farming were carried out by men; yet in 1989, as few as 16% of the women belonged to a dairy cooperative that marketed the milk. Husbands controlled income from milk and the men dominated the cooperatives, which meant that the primary workers in the dairy industry (women) were excluded from the marketing process. For the women managing the dairies, this exclusion became a form of oppression. *Oppression* exists when an individual or group systematically obtains a controlling advantage over another individual or group.

Empowerment seeks to change norms, that is, standards for expected behavior within a social system (Rogers & Steinfarth, 1999). An element in the social structure often supports and reinforces other elements in a social structure. For example, in much of the developing world, male infants are perceived as more valuable than female infants. Therefore, men are automatically afforded higher status than women. This forces women into an oppressed position. Case in point, a dowry is commonly received from the bride's family by the groom's family. Therefore, this accepted social life pattern reinforces patriarchal norms that eventually subordinated the female Indian dairy farmers.

Empowered women in India challenged previously accepted norms. For instance, in the Suburdi village of Maharashtra, one of the social life patterns was that husbands spent most of the family earnings on *hooch* (a locally made liquor). The *mahila mandal* (local women's club) that had been established as part of an empowerment program for female dairy farmers, protested the men's drinking. At a meeting, all the village women collectively formed a plan of action. They marched and demanded that the hooch brewers close their businesses. The brewers did not respond. So the women destroyed all the breweries in the village. However, hooch from nearby villages was brought into Suburdi. In response, the women organized

Suburdi as an alcohol-free zone. Here, we see empowered women becoming involved and resolving a social problem that affected their families and their financial well-being. The mahila mandal provided a structure for social change (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998).

The importance of female empowerment in the dairy industry is exemplified in a study in a Rajasthan village. The village women received loans (through a government program) to purchase milk buffaloes (Sharma & Vanjani, 1993). They also received 12 days of technical training in dairy husbandry. However, they were not empowered nor did they have a woman's organization. They did not manage the dairy enterprise nor were they able to demand control of the payment for the sale of milk from their husbands. In fact, they now had to work harder without pay. The frustration levels understandably increased. Without female empowerment, no real progress in dairy development resulted from the government intervention.

The Cooperative Development (CD) program of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) realized that more was required than technical training to have lasting benefits for the female dairy farmers. They needed to be empowered to control not only a dairy enterprise but other parts of their lives. They required sustainability. *Sustainability* is the extent to which a development activity continues its effectiveness after the defining development effort ceases (Rogers & Steinfar, 1999). Similarly, Freire (1968) found in Brazil that adult literacy training lacked sustainability unless it was accompanied by consciousness-raising and empowerment.

The NDDB saw that the females were more effective as dairy farmers and were more effective than their husbands when empowered and organized as cooperative members in mahila mandals. A positive social change had taken place. Those cooperatives with empowered female members obtained greater savings for their membership, produced more and higher quality milk, and usually did not indulge in fiscal malfeasance. The female dairy farmers as members of the cooperative used their money responsibly, purchasing food, clothing, and schooling for their children, as well as saving for the future.

#### TRAINING WOMEN DAIRY FARMERS IN EMPOWERMENT

In 1989 the NDDB established a female empowerment-training program. The objective was to develop more autonomous, self-reliant cooperatives. To implement this program five-person teams were trained at district-level milk unions. Minimally, two of the five team members were women, recruited from female professionals working in the villages. Veterinarians and extension workers made up most of the male component of the CD core teams. To conform to cultural norms, only female CD staff could interact directly with female dairy farmers (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998).

When implemented in 1995 this effort became one of the largest women's empowerment programs in the world. In 1 year alone, these five-member teams typically trained approximately 250,000 women in 4,000 village-level dairy cooperatives. The CD teams were trained in dialogic and participatory processes through a 5-week CD training course that included (a) public speaking and group discussions; (b) designing and using teaching aids; (c) developing field skills by role playing; and (d) creating an environment for two-way communication. Thus, the training itself became a participatory and empowering communication process.

The first step in training a village was to educate the male members of the village dairy cooperative, because it was the male members that resisted the female empowerment program. This first step was to sensitize them to the benefits of empowering the village women.

A restricted access building was used for the women's CD training to enable the women to speak freely outside the presence of village men. Usually seated closely on the floor, the women would perform problem-solving activities and participate in group singing, led by an instructor. These group actions developed solidarity among the women. To further reinforce this bonding, the meetings were often closed by repeating slogans like "Long live cooperatives!" The empowerment process was a highly emotional experience for the women involved.

#### Dialogic Communication

The women CD instructors introduced empowering concepts to the women dairy farmers in a variety of ways. For example, to bring about the realization of the inferior status of Indian female dairy farmers, the instructors led them in the following dialogue.

- Trainer: Who goes to bed last in your house?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who gets up first?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who works hardest?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who feeds and cares for the milk animals?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who milks these animals?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who hands over the milk to your husband to collect the payment?  
 Women: We do.  
 Trainer: Who are fools?  
 Women: We are! (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998, p. 329)

This dialogue emphasizes the issue of gender inequality and demonstrates one way that the CD program employed a dialogic process to raise the level of awareness among the Indian female dairy farmers to this inequality. Basically, the CD instructors created dissonance via participatory activities and through skill build-

ing, thereby enabling the women to empower themselves to gain ownership and control over their dairying operations, as well as to gain the ability to participate in decision making. Cooperation through dialogic action permitted the female dairy farmers to be empowered collectively in ways that were impossible for them as individuals.

At the conclusion of the 2-day training session, the CD team then assisted in organizing a women's club, a mahila mandal. The intent of the mahila mandal was to sustain self-empowerment by encouraging income generation, savings plans, and temperance campaigns. The sole role of the CD instructor was to instigate and catalyze the empowerment process in the villages (Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998). The empowerment process then usually continued under the complete control of the village women. Here, we see the importance of organizing for social change, a process that facilitates empowerment.

#### EFFECTS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT TRAINING

Shefner-Rogers et al. (1998) noted a number of findings directly correlated with the CD programs, including (a) greater empowerment among participants; (b) greater effectiveness of the village cooperatives; (c) increased female membership in the cooperatives and better attendance of meetings; and (d) significant increases in cattle-feed sales and milk production. Further, female dairy farmers who became members of mahila mandals were empowered to a greater extent than women who did not join the groups. Membership in the mahila mandals provided women dairy farmers with the opportunity to interact with one another, learn from each other, and to empower themselves.

Empowerment, once instigated, can also occur interactively between members of an empowering organization. For example, two women dairy farmers used protein enriched cattle food to increase production (Papa et al., 2000a). One woman's cattle refused the new feed. She told her friend, who responded:

I had problems too. Then I started mixing a little of the new cattle feed with regular green fodder. Then my cow took it. I slowly added a little more of the new feed each day until she was eating all of the recommended amount. (p. 104)

The CD empowerment program was effective in helping many women dairy farmers to increase their incomes through higher milk production and better milk quality. Women learned from one another by sharing dairying techniques that they had learned through experience.

Empowerment is not a linear process, free of barriers, paradoxes, and contradictions (Papa et al., 2000a). One woman in training to be a dairy cooperative manager was learning to test for levels of milk fat. This process required the use of acid. During the training session a glass tube exploded, spaying acid into her eyes. After being treated the woman insisted on returning immediately to continue the training, saying,

my husband and the other men in this village have told all of us [women dairy cooperative members] that women can do nothing. They say that running the cooperative is their job. Women will get hurt if they try to test the milk. If I don't complete my testing today . . . the dairy cooperative will close. (Papa et al., 2000a, p. 98)

This impressed most women in the training courses; however, some became disenchanted and saw this as one more barrier to women in a male-dominated society.

In summary, a large-scale empowerment intervention for female dairy farmers in India through 2-day training meetings and the organization of village-level women's clubs led to (a) heightened empowerment, (b) increased milk production and better quality milk, and (c) stronger dairy cooperatives.

#### GRAMEEN BANK IN BANGLADESH: ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The Grameen (rural) Bank, founded in Bangladesh in 1983 by Professor Muhammad Yunus, exemplifies the empowerment strategy of organizing for social change, defined previously as a theoretical approach combining certain elements of organizational communication and development communication in order to understand the process through which a group of disempowered individuals can gain control of their future (Auwal, 1996; Singhal & Rogers, 2003).

##### Small-Group Networks as Collateral

Grameen Bank is a system of lending small amounts of money to poor women so that they can earn a living through self-employment. No collateral is needed (the poor do not have any). Instead, the women borrowers are organized in a small network of five friends. Each group member must repay their loan on time, and ensure that other group members do the same, or else their opportunity for a future loan is jeopardized. The delicate group dynamic between peer pressure and peer support among Grameen borrowers is at the heart of its widespread success (Papa et al., 1997). By 2002, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh loaned money to about 2.5 million poor women borrowers and had an enviable loan recovery rate of 95%. The idea of micro-lending, based on the Grameen Bank experience, has spread throughout the world and has proven effective in gaining a high rate of repayment of the loans (Singhal, Svenkerud, & Flyvdal, 2002).

Borrowers from the Grameen Bank must become interdependent on the other members of their small (five-member) network of peers. If each individual fulfills their expected role by repaying her loan, all members of the five-member network are empowered. The purpose of Grameen Bank loans is to provide self-employment, which is itself empowering. By inviting individuals' participation in the Grameen Bank's local borrowers' networks, self-employment is encouraged (Fals Borda, 1987; Gunnucio Dagron, 2001).

Grameen Bank has over 12,000 field workers who serve 2.5 million members in 41,000 villages in Bangladesh. The Grameen Bank exercises an empowering influence on both its field workers and its borrowers/members (Papa et al., 1995; 1997). Muhammad Sobhan, a Grameen worker from Chittagong, Bangladesh, provided insight into the empowerment of field workers.

I could never imagine working [at] another job where I could have so much influence in helping others. Professor Yunus trusts us and respects our judgment. We decide together in the [local] branch what needs to be done to help members, and we put the plan into action. (Papa et al., 1997, p. 233)

Sobhan's comments reveal how Grameen workers experience empowerment through interaction with their peers.

#### Organizing for Social Change

Grameen Bank women borrowers in one village in Bangladesh organized for social change through collective action to oppose local money lenders who charged exorbitant interest rates. A village money lender threatened to break the legs of a Grameen Bank worker serving one village. In response, 30 women borrowers from the Grameen Bank went to the money lender's house and told him that he had to provide them with loans at the same interest rate as Grameen Bank, which he would not do. However, he did stop harassing the Grameen Bank worker. Here we see the power of numbers. Thirty landless women could intimidate a wealthy man when they joined forces (Shehabuddin, 1992).

Papa and associates (1995, 1997) provided another example of how Grameen Bank members experience empowerment through group interaction. Bank members in a village near Nageswari, Bangladesh, were concerned with the continuing practice of dowry in their community. They negotiated a solution among themselves by deciding not to give or take dowry in the marriage of their children. To avoid the clandestine practice of dowry, the villagers arranged marriages between their sons and daughters. On one occasion, the Grameen Bank members learned that a local bridegroom was demanding a bicycle and a radio as dowry. At the end of the wedding ceremony, the women of the village told the bridegroom that he could leave with either the bride or the dowry that he demanded, but not both. To avoid public embarrassment, the bridegroom left with the bride.

In recent years, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has begun making loans to village women in order for them to purchase a mobile telephone. Each borrower then provides telephone service, for a fee, to other villagers, earning enough income to support their family. Today, Grameen Bank also provides loans to village women in order to purchase laptop computers, so that borrowers can act as mobile cyber cafés and provide Internet access to fellow villagers (Rogers, 2003; Singhal et al., 2002).

Empowerment emerges among both Grameen Bank's field workers and borrowers as they meet, socialize, discuss ideas, and determine actions they can take in the face of demanding situations. These examples show how empowerment is an interactional process (Chiles & Zorn, 1995; Papa et al., 1997) in which members collectively identify specific courses of action to improve their lives socially and economically. Although the initial purpose of the Grameen Bank, and of the various microlending programs around the world today modeled after it, was economic development through job creation for poor women, one important consequence has been female empowerment achieved through organized group action.

#### THE LUTSAAN VILLAGE STUDY

An investigation in Lutsaan, a North Indian village, helped illuminate the process of female empowerment. In January 1997, 184 villagers in Lutsaan signed a pledge not to pay, or accept, dowry (an illegal but widespread practice in India). These villagers also refused to allow child marriages (also an illegal but common practice) and pledged to educate daughters equally with their sons (Papa et al., 2000b). The 20- by 24-inch poster-letter pledge was mailed by the villagers of Lutsaan to All India Radio, the government broadcasting network, in Delhi. The petition was inspired by an entertainment-education radio soap opera, *Trinka Trinka Sakhi* (Happiness Lies in Small Pleasures), which was being broadcast in North India. In the radio program, a young woman, Poonam, is continually abused by her husband and his parents for bringing an inadequate dowry, until she commits suicide.

The poster-letter stated: "Listeners of our village [to *Trinka Trinka Sakhi*] now actively oppose the practice of dowry—they neither give nor receive dowry." The letter-poster was forwarded by All India Radio to the present authors, who were evaluating the effects of the entertainment-education radio soap opera. The authors conducted an in-depth case study of the empowerment process in Lutsaan over several years. At that time, research on entertainment-education had showed that this strategy could have strong effects (Singhal & Rogers, 1999), but these investigations consisted mainly of large-scale audience surveys. The Lutsaan study disaggregated this research approach, allowing us to better understand the process through which entertainment-education had its effects on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior change in regards to audience individuals.

A local group, the Shyam Club, devoted to village improvement, already existed in Lutsaan. The episodes about dowry (those dealing with the suicide of Poonam) activated members of the Shyam Club to attack the problems of dowry and gender inequality in their village. As one villager stated:

Poonam's suicide in the soap opera resounded with us because we also practice dowry. Now after listening to *Trinka Trinka Sakhi*, . . . we formed a group to end dowry in this village. In this way our sisters and daughters will not suffer. (Papa et al., 2000b, p. 45)

A young tailor in the village was especially influenced by the radio program episodes about dowry and initiated the process of writing the poster-letter among the people in his tailor shop. The tailor was of lower status but he activated village leaders of the Shyam Club in the antidowry initiative.

As a result of the forces set in motion by the tailor and members of the Shyam Club, the villagers formed radio listening clubs, planted trees for reforestation, and built pit latrines for improving village sanitation. Girls' enrollment in the village's schools increased from 10% at the time of the radio broadcasts, to 38% 2 years later. Fewer dowry marriages and child marriages occurred in Lutsaan, although these practices did not disappear completely in the village (Papa et al., 2000b). The Lutsaan case study suggests that audience members are not just passive receptors of media messages. Entertainment-education interventions have their strongest effects on audience behavior change when messages stimulate reflection, debate, and interpersonal communication about the educational topic among audience members (Papa et al., 2000b), as well as when services can be delivered locally. One means of stimulating peer conversations is to broadcast to organized listening groups (Singhal & Rogers, 2002).

#### THE TARRU PROJECT

In 2002, All India Radio, in cooperation with Population Communications International, New York, broadcast an entertainment-education radio soap opera *Tarru* (the name of the program's female protagonist) in four Hindi-speaking states, Bihar, Jharkand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhatisgah, which together have a population of about 180 million people. The ground-based partner in these four Indian states was Janani, a nongovernmental organization that trained 20,000 rural medical practitioners (RMPs) and their spouses in reproductive health care services. Preprogram publicity about *Tarru* was conducted on-air by All India Radio, encouraging people to listen and also persuading prospective audience members to organize radio listening groups. On the ground in the 20,000 villages where Janani operates, *Tarru* was publicized by the rural medical practitioners through wall paintings, posters, stickers, and through folk media performances (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Group listening was also encouraged in the villages. All India Radio provided the air cover and Janani provided the community-based ground forces to stimulate active message reception. Janani's RMPs provided local service delivery, including condoms, pills, pregnancy dipsticks, vitamins, and other medications.

One of the present authors (Singhal) is leading an investigation of *Tarru* to gauge the impacts of integrating entertainment-education media broadcasts with community-based listening and service delivery. In Abirpur, a village in Bihar State, a young women's listener group is very active. It meets every Friday to listen to *Tarru*, discuss the episode's contents, and to record their daily impressions in a diary. Usha Kumari, an 18-year-old listener and group member, noted:

The character of *Tarru* has inspired me to do something with my life. Previously I lacked in self-confidence, but I have slowly gotten out of my shell. I am beginning to learn how to administer medication, including injections and saline drips from my uncle who is the rural health provider in Abirpur. (personal communication, September 2, 2002)

Another listening group member, Kumari Neha, noted:

Our discussions have given us strength and confidence. Now I am not shy of speaking in front of my parents. We have all told our parents that we will like to go to college, and we will not marry in a household which demands dowry. (personal communication, September 4, 2002)

Abirpur's experience reinforced the point that when people organize themselves around a common purpose, in this instance listening to a radio soap opera, the interactions help stimulate reflection, debate, and action, which may not occur for an individual listener. As Suneeta Kumari, a young listening group member said: "There is strength in numbers" (personal communication, September 2, 2002).

The *Tarru* Project is intended to improve access to health services, provided by RMPs, in remote areas of Bihar State, as well as to empower radio listeners in the small listening groups. Here again we see the potential for social change through organizing people in small groups at the local level.

#### EMPOWERING PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

In the past decade, the worldwide AIDS epidemic has become concentrated among poor people, especially those living in Africa and certain Asian nations. Currently, 95% of all people with AIDS (PWAs), about 40 million individuals, are in Latin America, Africa, or Asia. In certain nations like Thailand, thousands of PWAs, organized in local groups, have become empowered to make demands on their government for lower priced antiretroviral drugs, to fight the stigma of HIV/AIDS, and to provide each other with social support (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Through the collective actions of PWA groups, individuals can accomplish objectives that are out of their reach when they act separately.

The organization of HIV-positive people was initiated in 1991 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Individuals with HIV/AIDS were greatly stigmatized at this time and most feared to disclose their HIV status. A traditional health provider was cooking up a batch of herbal medicine for seropositive individuals and a group of PWAs gathered to await preparation of the drugs. With the encouragement of the traditional healer, the PWAs decided to form a support group.

PWA groups in Thailand grew from this first unit in Chiang Mai in 1991, to 15 in 1994, to 35 in 1995, to 78 in 1996, to 105 in 1997, to 195 in 1998, and to 224 in 1999; this just in the six northern provinces around Chiang Mai. Over 400 PWA groups existed in Thailand in 2001. These PWA groups have names that hint at



their functions: New Life Friends, Doi Saket Widows, White Sky, Warmly Love, and Tapestry of Friendship. By forming these local groups, people living with HIV/AIDS gained a feeling of collective efficacy, lobbied for their civil rights, and defeated stigma (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Several thousand members of local PWA groups in Thailand, organized nationally in the AIDS Access Foundation, massed at the Ministry of Health in Bangkok on December 1, 2001, World AIDS Day, to demonstrate for lower priced AIDS drugs. The Thai Minister of Health agreed to cover the cost of the antiretroviral drugs for PWAs enrolled in the nationwide 30 baht (\$1.50 U.S.) per month health scheme, at least to the extent that the Ministry budget would allow.

Here we see how local groups, in this case composed of people living with HIV/AIDS, can serve as informal schools for empowerment. PWAs, once empowered, became an important force in combating the worldwide AIDS epidemic.

## CONCLUSIONS

What general lessons learned can be derived from the research reviewed here about the nature of empowerment and communication?

1. The empowerment process fundamentally consists of dialogic communication. Individuals gain a belief in their power to achieve desired goals through talk with others, particularly peers.
  2. The process of empowering individuals occurs especially in small groups. These groups often must be organized by a trainer or change agent, who then withdraws from the scene, with the groups, hopefully, continuing.
  3. The small groups that serve as informal schools for empowerment may be organized for a specific purpose, such as combating a particular social problem, but then the members of these groups gain a sense of empowerment and often attack other problems that are perceived as important to them.
  4. The mass media can play a role in empowerment, for example, by providing role models for empowerment to an audience, but these effects are greater (a) when the media messages follow an entertainment-education strategy and (b) when audience members are organized in listening or viewing groups.
- When vulnerable individuals organize around a common purpose, opportunities for collective learning, mutual support, and group action emerge. The vulnerability of a single individual is overcome by the strength of the many. One woman by herself has little power to confront an abusive husband or a dominating money lender. However, women organized together (i.e., in a microcredit borrowing group such as the Grameen Bank) can free themselves from financial bondage and from violent husbands.

When individuals organize in small groups to take charge of their lives, they shift community norms, which may make the social change more sustainable. For instance, when an empowered individual decides not to give or receive dowry,

such action does little to change the community practice of dowry. However, when community members decide that dowry is wrong and the entire community (or most of its members) halts the practice, more lasting social change is likely.

The present review essay focused on organizing for social change, a theoretical approach that combines certain elements of organizational and development communication in order to understand the process through which a group of disempowered individuals gain control of their future. This conceptual approach to understanding the empowerment process emerged gradually through the sequential series of empowerment investigations reported here, studies that were conducted by the present authors and their colleagues over a period of 20 years. Most of these studies dealt with the empowerment of women in patriarchal Asian societies, especially India and Bangladesh.

These restricted beginnings of theorizing about organizing for social change may limit the application of this theory to other cultures and other interventions for social change, such as in organizational development in nations like the United States. Future communication research is needed to test the possible applications of organizing for social change.

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