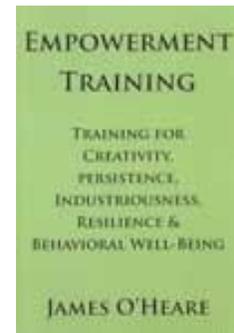


An excerpt from

Empowerment Training

Chapter 2 – General behavioral wellbeing and empowerment

by James O’Heare, Dogwise Publishing. 800-776-2665, www.dogwise.com
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The concept of empowerment that I will elaborate is not necessarily inconsistent with the notions of confidence, learned optimism, locus of control and self-efficacy. These notions could be reframed in a more behavior analytic orientation to avoid the assumption of a body-controlling inner agent (“mind”) that acts as an underlying force that more or less independently causes behavior. However, it is more productive to focus on the practices that reduce or increase effective adaptation to the environment. Our emphasis will be on the level of analysis involving functional environment–behavior relationships, conditioning and other practices that promote relevant behavior patterns. Here, I attempt to identify a way to achieve general behavioral wellbeing, using the concept of empowerment to operationalize it, making it measurable and accountable (i.e., empirically refutable).

Empowerment can refer to general behavioral strategies, tendencies and patterns that make available a wider range of reinforcers under a greater number of circumstances, and to the process of conditioning them. This process of influencing the environment to cause more adaptive behavior patterns and effective problem solving can be thought of as empowerment training. At the level of analysis of the individual organism, I define empowerment as **the process by which individuals acquire behavior patterns that effectively and efficiently contact reinforcers and avoid or escape aversers**. To be empowered is to be adaptable and capable of operating on one’s environment. Although this is a rather broad definition, I hope that it is a more operational definition or model than the alternatives discussed above.

Further elaboration, which we will explore further below, is needed to define the type of behavior patterns that characterize empowerment. The three characteristics I outline (persistence/industriousness, creativity and resilience) are not necessarily the only, or perhaps even the best, characteristics of empowerment,

and I may include others in a following edition of this book. For now, I believe these three characteristics to be a good set of core behavior patterns (or tendencies, tactics or strategies) for achieving “power and control” or adaptability and capability over contacting reinforcers and hence achieving general behavioral wellbeing.

If life always went well and there never were any obstructions to contacting reinforcement, there would be no such thing as empowerment or disempowerment. Implicit in the notion of empowerment is obstruction or challenge that requires a means of overcoming it. Individuals need a way to deal with inevitable extinction trials (leading to frustration) or aversive contingencies (leading to fear) in the real world without giving up or falling to pieces emotionally. We need behavioral tactics or strategies for minimizing the likelihood of obstructed access to reinforcers or aversive contingencies, but also tools for dealing with instances where these do occur. In other words, life does not always go our way, despite our efforts to contact certain reinforcers, and we can respond either with a lack of “power and control,” with depression or disruptive emotional arousal, or by persisting and, with creativity, finding a way to access the reinforcer or some other reinforcer instead.

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