

**WILLIAM M.
EPSTEIN**

**EMPOWERMENT
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**WILLIAM M.
EPSTEIN**

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*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child*
—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I, Scene IV



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Preface

The social problems of the United States are embedded in its culture. The problems are not technical and neither social services nor economic growth, even with the sanction of social science theory, will resolve them. In fact, the nation's problems have persisted through decades of social welfare provision and in spite of enormous economic growth. Rather than unfortunate dislocations of a beneficent ethos, the nation's social problems, by and large, are engendered by social preferences that are romantic more than pragmatic. The social services as well as the distribution of economic growth are expressions of these social values. Empowerment practice is a characteristic instance of the pitfalls of American policy romanticism.

Despite its pretenses to radical change, contemporary empowerment practice in the United States is a civic church of national values, clearer in performing its ceremonial role than god-based churches whose day care centers, men's clubs, bible classes, and singles nights obscure their essential civic rituals. Empowerment practice and American social welfare generally embody determinative cultural preferences in the same way that photography, painting, sculpture, and music open windows into deeper social meaning. David Hume might well see it occupying the same role as the Church of England that he claimed received its public subsidies as a "bribe to indolence"—the perverse antithesis of the political activism that empowerment practice claims.¹ By itself, empowerment practice is not worth the effort of an extended commentary, as it achieves none of its program goals and has not even bothered to accumulate a respectable critical literature. However, similar to social welfare and the personal social services, it is a portrait of the society given meaning by its embrace of social values. To understand empowerment practice is to peer deeply into decisive American social values.

Perhaps as professional caution or misconceived loyalty, the small number of evaluations of social welfare practice only delicately trace

back to the forces that give a program its essential cultural meaning. The typical critique largely restricts itself to description and rarely addresses effectiveness, let alone the actual social preferences that sustain the program. Nonetheless, the emptiness of empowerment practice as social welfare—the absence of credible evaluations of practice—is the only conclusion that approximates certainty. The virtues of empowerment practice in resolving social deprivations are speculations of hope without evidence. The ambiguities created by inadequate, incomplete, and misleading information are apparently tolerated, if not actually nurtured, by practice and the culture itself.

The paradoxical persistence of empowerment practice—popularity without effectiveness—is resolved by its ceremonial role in affirming basic tenets of American ideology, in particular an exaggerated form of individualism and individual responsibility. More generally, the dominance of a ceremonial role over a true production function in social welfare says much about the pervasive inadequacies of America's social provisions, the weaknesses of the occupations that staff its agencies, and their tepid intellectual presence in the university.

The paradox of persistence recalls the conditions of American preferences, that is, the justifications for American policy choices. These choices explored through empowerment practice constitute a determinative American ideology—democratic populism—that is romantic rather than pragmatic. The continuing investment in empowerment practice defers attention to the deep cultural and economic inequalities of the nation. Happiness has forever been elusive, and existential angst may be inevitable. However, it is probably more agreeable to be miserable in an egalitarian society than in a highly stratified one.

Despite its Enlightenment pretensions, the nation has largely rejected democratic progressivism. Policy romanticism pervades the culture and naturally expresses itself in public policy. Contrary to popular antagonisms toward the public sector, the American government is an obedient creature of its very open society. The antagonisms are legitimate but better focused on the populist dominance of the nation's democracy, its appetite for ignorance, neglect, and cruelty.

The view of American society through the lens of empowerment practice is neither an assault on American society nor a condemnation of its openness. Indeed, it is a tribute to both in the hope that a more decent national ethos emerges from consideration of its faults. Still and all, hope does not constitute much of a program for change.

This book lays out its themes in the introduction but waits until after the long consideration of empowerment practice to develop them in the final chapter. The conclusions of empowerment practice are obvious extensions of the analysis that considers the best of the vast empowerment literature.² However, the interpretation of the conclusions are inescapably speculative, as there is no credible research method that produces apodictic evidence of what determines social outcomes. That is, the United States cannot be divided into experimental and control regions in which a series of variables are manipulated over generations in order to discover the causes of social outcomes. This methodological limitation seriously circumscribes the ability of the social sciences to identify true causal elements of social problems and to reach true scientific standing as disciplines.

Nonetheless, the social sciences have accommodated social tastes and carved out decisive social roles for themselves by constantly looking for relatively simple remedies for social problems that are both inexpensive and compatible with contemporary social arrangements. These simple factors—counseling, tutoring, psychotherapy, a bit of day care or job training, and so forth—then become the core justifications for social services. Inevitably, they fail but still they persist. However, they persist as ceremonies of social values rather than as solutions to social problems. Empowerment practice and the social services generally are as much cultural institutions as July 4th parades, Mother's Day, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Notes

1. A gem of a phrase attributed to David Hume in his friend Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.
2. More than 13,000 *Social Sciences Citation Index* articles (Thompson Reuters) since 1960, together with an enormous number of books and undindexed material impose a difficult challenge to any review of empowerment practice. A great effort was made to identify the principal, most influential material and to analyze at least a sampling of the best of it, although it was rare to find any study at all that conformed to the expectations for solid empirical research. Frequently cited, prominent works on empowerment (e.g., Solomon 1976; Gutierrez 1990) and their citations in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* were mined for evaluations of empowerment programs. The bibliographies of books on empowerment were similarly searched. In addition to the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, many other databases were searched for evaluations of empowerment programs published after 1995: child development and adolescent studies, family and society studies worldwide, general science collection, health source-nursing/academic edition, masterfile premier, psych articles, psychinfo, socindex, and women's

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studies international. Many key terms were searched and combined for all years, among them being *empowerment*, *empowering*, *women*, *feminist*, *randomized controlled trials*, *blacks*, *African Americans*, *Latinos*, *Hispanics*, *Asian*, *sexual minorities*, *gay*, *outcomes*, *Chinese*, and *evaluation*. Except for rare instances, only domestic programs are included in this analysis.