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Between Emancipatory Practice and Disciplinary Interventions: Empowerment and Contemporary Social Normativity

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Abstract

Over the last decades, empowerment has become one of the defining concepts of twenty-first-century social work practice. Many studies have set out to show its benefits, highlighting a positive view of individuals and their ability to instigate sustainable change in their life and/or community. The concept, however, has been more often praised than it has been critiqued. This article aims to add to critical works on empowerment in analysing its implications from the point of view of contemporary social normativity, informed by the works of Ehrenberg (2010), Rose (1996) and Foucault (1979). In this perspective, we suggest that the ever-present injunctions to autonomy and individual responsibility can serve simultaneously as a goal and as means to empowerment-centred interventions. The line between emancipatory practices and discipline can thus be thin. By postulating that social work extends beyond inter-individual interactions, the relationship between individuals and normative injunctions becomes a highly interesting subject of study that would prove fruitful in future empirical studies.

Keywords: Empowerment, critical reflection, critical practice

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Introduction

Over recent decades, the concept of empowerment has garnered a great amount of attention in the helping professions, especially in the field of social work (Adams, 2006; Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). Whether it is

defined as a method of intervention or as a larger philosophy to guide practitioners, empowerment discourses send a positive view of the individual centred on one's strengths, and encourage actions that have the potential to bring about change in individuals' lives and their community (Solomon, 1976; Lee, 2001; Ninacs, 2008). Many studies have set out to show the benefits of empowerment in various intervention contexts such as international and community development (Adams, 2003; Toomey, 2011), old age (Fisher and Gosselink, 2008), poverty (Cohen, 2009) and mental health (Alegria *et al.*, 2008; O'Hagan, 2009). Other studies adopt a critical stance on the topic of empowerment, questioning the theoretical assumptions of the concept regarding its polysemy (Ward and Mullender, 1991), its modernistic view of power (Pease, 2002; Wendt and Seymour, 2010), as well as its status as a professional construct rather than something emanating directly from the individuals concerned by our interventions (Aujoulat *et al.*, 2007).

This present article is situated within the latter, critical category. It has indeed been noted that empowerment is more often praised than it is critiqued or, at the very least, examined under a gaze which would focus more on the concept's limits (Karsz, 2008; Wendt and Seymour, 2010). Our goal is to suggest an innovative look at the way empowerment is mobilised and articulated in the present day—that is, through the lens of social normativity. We are suggesting that the interaction between the increasing emphasis on empowerment in social work practice and the predominant norms encouraging independence, personal initiative and responsibility constitute an essential area of study and critical reflection for the field of social work. It is with this context and perspective in mind that our method will consist, first, in retracing the roots of empowerment in the field of social work in order to elucidate the transformations in the concept's theory and applications. This will illustrate the shift from politically oriented and collective models of intervention to depoliticised and individualised courses of action. Second, we will survey the norms present in today's Western society. This will allow us to discuss the implications of empowerment in relation to the current normative context based on autonomy, responsibility and personal initiative, and to reframe perceptions around this concept that is set to define social work in the twenty-first century.

Social work and social justice: from settlements to empowerment

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines the profession of social work as follows:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social

> systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2013).

Before its professionalisation, and even since its inception, social work practice has been infused with a noted concern for social justice—a concern that flourished in tension with paternalistic interventions (Simon, 1994). Established in the early 1900s, settlements are regarded as the first initiatives to promote these core values of social work, and even as the first seeds of empowerment (Simon, 1994; St-Amand, 2003).

Empowerment appeared in the field of social work at the critical juncture of an era of increased awareness of social injustices (the 1960s and 1970s), and an era plagued by economic constraints (the 1980s). According to Le Bossé (2003), it was this second context that proved more influential in leading towards the expansion of empowerment-centred practice in social work, as these economic changes urged a rethinking of the nature of social work. Surely as an echo to the social and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the paternalistic and infantilising attitudes attributed to social work slowly made their way towards obsolescence, paving the way towards interventions based on an empowerment framework (Le Bossé, 2003, p. 31).

Theoretical foundations of empowerment

Theoretically speaking, Barbara Solomon's *Black Empowerment* is known for having introduced the concept of empowerment in the field of social work, more precisely in regards to social work in African American communities. Solomon defines empowerment as 'a process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatised social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of personal influence and the performance of valued social roles' (Solomon, 1976, p. 6). In the author's view, the empowerment process applies to individuals who have been in a situation of social disadvantage or inequality. Going beyond the personal, interpersonal, systemic and community dimensions of empowerment, Solomon offers a vision of a society in which all individuals have access to 'valued social roles' (Solomon, 1976, p. 16). Thus, for Solomon, empowerment does not stop at the personal level: the ultimate goal is to improve the living conditions of present and future generations, to help create a society where discrimination and situations 'which have lead to increased powerlessness among individuals and groups in black communities' (Solomon, 1976, p. 7) are no longer a reality. Moreover, the final chapters of *Black Empowerment* envision a future in which black communities will have achieved a sense of collectivity enabling them to overcome long-standing negative valuations (Solomon, 1976, p. 390).

Paulo Freire (1970) was also crucial in setting empowerment's foundations in social work practice in a philosophy of anti-oppression and consciousness-

raising. Solomon herself makes claims similar to Freire's work, for instance, when she speaks of surmounting negative valuations as a key step in 'establishing the client as element of change' (Solomon, 1976, p. 334), and aims for long-term, sustainable changes that benefit not only a chosen oppressed group (in her case, black American communities), but society at large. Moreover, Freire's concept of *praxis* proved notably useful in regard to the operationalisation and the application of empowerment. The underlying idea to Freire's *praxis* is the realisation that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970). Thus, one must be conscious of her situation of oppression within the social context. This newfound awareness is accompanied with the will to freedom (Freire, 1970, p. 25). Freire's ideas are generally understood to go beyond the liberation of the oppressed and aim towards a societal transformation. The oppressed do not simply take power from their oppressors. Rather, a new form of existence can be attained for both parties through the consciousness-raising of the oppressed: 'Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both' (Freire, 1970, p. 25). The seeds of empowerment emerged in the field of social work with a clear vision of societal change, as is shown through the respective works of Freire and Solomon.

Maurice Moreau (Moreau and Leonard, 1989; Moreau *et al.*, 1993) contributed another important development to empowerment theory and practice with the structural approach, which he elaborated in part as a reaction to the systemic, technocratic penchant of a number of empowerment-centred interventions at the time. All interventions must promote change at the individual and larger scales. Carniol (1992), a former colleague of Moreau, resumes the structural empowerment approach as meeting the following goals:

> . . . maximizing client resources; reducing power inequalities in client–worker relationships; unmasking the primary structures of oppression; facilitating a collective consciousness; fostering activism with social movements; and encouraging responsibility for feelings and behaviours leading to personal and political change (Carniol, 1992, p. 1).

Despite empowerment's strong roots in social justice, defining this concept remains a gargantuan task. Indeed, a great many works have been published since the first utterances of the word 'empowerment' in social work, promoting this approach in many different contexts (Cox *et al.*, 1998; Lee, 2001; Dubois and Miley, 2002; Ninacs, 2008). In fact, certain authors are quick to point out the lack of consensus (Ackerson and Harrison, 2000; Boyd and Bentley, 2005; Cohen, 2009; Kaplan *et al.*, 2009; Bejerholm and Björkman, 2011) as to what empowerment really signifies. In this regard, Rappaport claims that, often, 'we do not know what empowerment is, but like obscenity, we know it when we see it' (Rappaport, 1984, p. 2). This remark remains pertinent today, as can be confirmed by the many ways in which the concept of empowerment has been mobilised and articulated by a number of actors.

Drawing on key texts and authors (such as those of Rappaport, 1987; Cox, 1992; Breton, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995), Le Bossé (2003) suggests five consensual components of empowerment, which can prove useful to better circumscribe this often fluctuating concept, and which we will retain for our own understanding of the term. First, the individual and structural conditions must be taken into account, regardless of the scale of action (individual or structural) and the 'unit' aiming for change (the group or the individual) (Le Bossé, 2003, p. 34). Second, an empowerment *process*, as opposed to a state or an outcome, must allow for consciousness-raising and critical thinking, as understood through the works of Freire (1970). Third, the notion of 'actor in context' is indispensable to empowerment theory. In fact, empowerment encourages the transition from passivity to activity regarding the situation deemed problematic. Even if perspectives differ in regard to views of empowerment as a 'treatment' outcome (Segal *et al.*, 2011; Hunter *et al.*, 2013) or as a multilevel process (Zimmerman, 2000; Ninacs, 2008), the field application of empowerment remains highly contextualised. This constitutes Le Bossé's fourth identified component (Le Bossé, 2003, p. 35). Indeed, context is essential in the definition of the problematic situation and ensuing actions, as empowerment must be concrete and lead to observable and sustainable transformations for individuals and communities. Finally, and in relation to this last criterion, Le Bossé underlines the imperative that the people directly concerned and affected by the situation identified as problematic must be involved to a higher level than the professionals involved, who may have been 'mandated' to address the situation (Le Bossé, 2003, p. 35).

Context and research question: critiques of empowerment—polysemy, power and scope of empowerment

The previous sections provided a succinct historical and theoretical overview of empowerment practice in social work. Empowerment can foster a highly positive perception of individuals, and/or in promoting solidarity through its concern for structural injustice and its goal of social justice and change. In more recent times, authors have spoken out to encourage a more critical view of empowerment; Pease (2002), Karsz (2008), as well as Wendt and Seymour (2010) note that, despite the preponderance of this concept in the field of social work, there remains a lack of critical analyses. We will now address three main areas of empowerment critiques to set the tone for our proposed framework.

We have briefly addressed the polysemy of empowerment in our attempt to define its key characteristics. This constitutes an important area of critique of empowerment. As we have seen, empowerment is often used and promoted in different contexts. At first glance, this is not inherently problematic. The

danger lies in the act of using empowerment discourses to legitimise practices that are not at their core based on an empowerment approach. This can result in the use of empowerment in contradictory contexts. Ward and Mullender (1991) state that this polysemy dilutes the potential of empowerment and of its conceptual foundations.

Second, it is impossible to discuss empowerment without addressing the notion of power. Traditionally, empowerment in the field of social work has relied on a modernist conception of power (Parker *et al.*, 1999; Tew, 2006). To put it simply, power has been considered as a material resource. Some people possess more power than others, and power can be transferred from one person to another. In the case of social work, this view of power has been transposed to illustrate the hierarchy of power that exists between the 'expert' and the 'client'. Empowerment would thus constitute a 'transaction' in which power is transferred to the client from the expert. In this conception of power, the client is actually disempowered, as she is not completely in control of the process (Pease, 2002, p. 137).

In the same vein, it has been argued that empowerment is more often a professional and academic construct rather than a concern that emanates from individuals concerned by the interventions (Aujoulat *et al.*, 2007). In practice, this can translate into an 'epidemiological' view of interventions, in which the actual process of empowerment (as lived by the client) is eclipsed by the need to meet specific therapeutic goals. At its extreme, the power to define a situation as 'needing' empowerment is detained by the professional, when empowerment theories state individuals wanting to be empowered should be the ones to initiate the process. What, then, can be said of power in this situation? Thus, the modernistic analysis of power has been questioned and criticised, as its potential to understand the intricacies at play in an empowerment-centred therapeutic alliance is limited (Shera and Wells, 1999; Pease, 2002; Tew, 2006). Alternative conceptions of power such as those of Lukes (1974) and Foucault (1979) have been used to further analyse the mechanisms and the implications of empowerment (Pease, 2002; Wendt and Seymour, 2010). These theories constitute attempts to transcend the sometimes simplistic, modernistic view of power. Lukes (1974) presents a three-dimensional analysis of power in which an individual can have 'power over' another. In a Foucauldian perspective, power is neither something that can be possessed, nor is it strictly an oppressive force. The notion of power is used nominally and is best described as existing in the form of power relations (Foucault, 1979).

Finally, although empowerment is generally constructed and theorised as a multilevel concept, the focus of action in practice as well as in empowerment literature centres mostly on the individual dimension (Cox *et al.*, 1998; Ackerson and Harrison, 2000; Fisher and Gosselink, 2008; Cohen, 2009; Song, 2011). Maurice Moreau, who developed the empowerment-based structural social work approach, found in research that half of structurally minded interventions are focused on the individual level (Moreau *et al.*,

1993, p. 160): the long-term effects of these interventions can thus be mitigated. This focus on the individual level of intervention and empowerment constitutes our object of interest for this article. Precisely, this article aims to explore the ramifications of empowerment-centred interventions through then lens of social normativity. The following sections will provide an overview of the predominant norms in Western society, which will allow us to delve deeper into the links between empowerment and social normativity.

Individual empowerment through the lens of social norms

What is a norm?

In our search for conceptual referents, we found the work of Foucault to be particularly enlightening, as the concept of norms constituted one of his main subjects of interest. Foucault's norms, and the larger process of normalisation, namely the 'development of forms of knowledge that sets standards and ideals for human thought and human conduct' (Chambon, 1999, p. 276), find their point of emergence towards the end of the eighteenth century, with the 'birth' of a discipline-based society. The rise and subsequent proliferation of disciplines in the field of health and social sciences such as medicine, including psychiatry, criminology and social work, created new knowledge claims that permeated the social realm. These became accepted and established as criteria for regulating society.

Intrinsically linked to social transformations and knowledge claims, norms are not created *ex nihilo*. Norms thus constitute an integral part of social experience; they are 'the mass effect of a number of extremely diversified practices and discourses, but centralised within organisations, institutions or devices (the state, school, family, the office, church, the health system, the media, etc.)' (Otero, 2003, p. 247, our translation). Foucault thus highlights the absence of exteriority of the norm: its specificity resides precisely in the idea of an *average*, acceptable mode of conduct, and not the idea of rectitude, an absolute normality to which one must aspire. To pursue this logic, norms create a common set of referents that enables individuals to communicate and understand one another and also themselves; they create conditions of possibility, action and identification. Thus, norms are not exclusively coercive. They are in fact 'that through which society communicates with itself' (Ewald, 1992, p. 206, our translation)—that through which individuals can recognise one another and constitute their identity, their subjectivity.

According to Foucault, current Western, 'modern' societies can still be characterised as being disciplinary and, with his theory of bio-power (Foucault, 2010), norms occupy a central place on both the micro and the macro planes through 'the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population' (Foucault, 2010, p. 262), respectively. These two poles are not antithetical as, together, they create what Foucault called a 'normalizing society' (Foucault, 2010, p. 266).

A brief history of contemporary normativity

We began by exposing Foucault's concept of norms and the process of normalisation. In summary, his theories highlight norms as a crucial element in the constitution of modern societies. As norms are not imposed on individuals in a top-down manner, they are fluid as well as historically and socially situated. Therefore, in order to concretise our analysis, the following question must now be addressed: Which norms are characteristic of today's society?

Ehrenberg (2010) provides a point of emergence for the norms with which we are composing today: he argues that a sociologically significant overturn occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century that marks the rupture between a society in which norms were explicit and rigid, generally founded upon highly institutionalised class and gender roles. Individuals had to *obey* and *conform* to social and moral codes that allowed certain behaviours, all while forbidding others. The factory worker and the housewife serve as examples of typical roles from which it was frowned upon to stray. If one transgressed these explicit norms, shame and guilt were brought on to the 'deviant'.

Nowadays, the normative model is based on an almost entirely different premise. It is no longer sufficient for an individual to conform to pre-established behaviours or long-standing social roles. The imperative to not only be the person one wishes to be, but, more importantly, to be continuously engaged in a process of *becoming* this idealised self is an integral part of contemporary social normativity (Rose, 1996). The allowed/forbidden dichotomy has waned to the profit of a binary of the impossible and the possible, putting a never-before-seen responsibility on individuals. One must, in the face of this implicit code, be independent and show personal initiative in the ongoing quest to surpass oneself.

The idea that norms today are more implicit, as opposed to clearly defined and impacting directly on the lives of individuals, remains a matter of debate. Some authors have attributed these changes in society to the 'birth' of a new anthropological figure, the narcissistic individual (Lipovetsky, 1983; Gauchet, 2002). In this vision, society appears to be completely dismantled, individuals evolving in a world *without* any perceivable norms. Others have spoken of these changes in terms of a structural production of singularity, denoting a different social configuration (Martuccelli, 2010) marked by a horizontal relation between the individual and institution. Instead of 'receiving' injunctions from a monolithic institution in a top-down manner, individuals are seen as having an active role in maintaining existing structures to such an extent that their survival relies on the singular performance of individuals and less on the long-established legitimacy of institutions. While contradictory, these two hypotheses highlight individuality as the driving force of social relations for the past forty years. The subsequent analyses in this paper are more inclined to reflect Martuccelli's position than that of Gauchet and Lipovetsky, since we postulate that, although the current context is focused on individuality, it is by no means a sign of the dissolution of society.

Analysis: empowerment and social normativity—helping professions in the new social normativity

Also essential to this article is an understanding of the role of the helping professions in this normative portrait of Western society. Before the process of deinstitutionalisation, 'traditional' institutionalised services almost unequivocally placed the 'client' and the 'professional' in a hierarchical relation, in which the professional decided on treatment, reinsertion or rehabilitation options for the client. This imbalance of power and lack of influence of the clients on their own life fuelled demands for increased involvement in the design and implementation of services, in order to reclaim a hold on the subjectivity and the singularity of the therapeutic process. Parallel to these demands, case management was introduced in many spheres of health and social services, on one hand to address the adverse effects of deinstitutionalisation and the economic crisis of the 1980s (Sullivan and Rapp, 2002) and on the other to respond to the demand to meet more specific, individualised needs of clients.

Case management can be defined as follows:

> . . . a collaborative client-driven strategy for the provision of quality health and support services through the effective and efficient use of available resources in order to support the client's achievement of goals related to healthy life and living in the context of the person and their ability (Canadian Home Care Association, 2005).

Case management thus relies on the perception of the individual as an expert of her own situation, who must activate herself in order to achieve her goals. Here, the professional becomes an ally rather than a decider, both parties working towards the individual's needs. Thus, 'with the proliferation of people-centered practice, the development of one group is linked to the development of the other' (Chambon, 1999, p. 67). In this context of normative overturn, case management and the ensuing reorganisation of the therapeutic relationship embody the shift from a vertical to a horizontal relationship between the individual and the institution. Individuals no longer passively 'receive' services. They are also crucial to the survival of the helping institutions. A 'subjective investment' (Kirouac, 2012) of sorts is required of social service consumers/clients. Client involvement, for instance, is now a prerequisite in elaborating treatment goals and other therapeutic activities, as we have seen with empowerment practice.

Empowerment, social norms and implications for social work practice

The framework of social normativity on which our analysis rests is consistent with visions of social work that situate the profession at the intersection of individuals and social structures. On one hand, norms can encourage

certain individual behaviours. On the other hand, social workers can help individuals develop individual strategies and a sense of agency by helping clients compose with these norms. Thus, individuals do possess a certain liberty in choosing their level of conformity to these norms. However, the ever-present injunctions to autonomy and individual responsibility mean that they must fully accept the consequences of their actions. By postulating that social work extends beyond inter-individual interactions, the relationship between individuals and normative injunctions becomes a highly interesting subject of study, as we will illustrate in the following sections.

The injunction to empowerment in contemporary social work practice

When we consider the extent to which society is infused with the aforementioned normative codes, the concept of empowerment takes on a new level of significance for the field of social work. At its beginnings, empowerment emerged as an alternative to paternalistic models of intervention. Nowadays, it has become the norm, so to speak, for social work practitioners to embrace an empowerment perspective. More and more practitioners claim to adhere to an empowerment philosophy, while organisations integrate the framework in their services, so much so that it is often unquestioned and uncontested.

Empowerment has undergone significant transformations since its inception and appearance in the field of social work. Solomon and Freire fuelled a vision of empowerment that promoted social justice and change through individual, group and community actions. Nowadays, the accent in practice remains on the individual dimensions of empowerment. At first glance, one can easily draw connections between this focus on individual empowerment and the social norms that promote personal initiative, independence and responsibility. Evidently, the question is much more complex, as empowerment and social change do not happen overnight. This processes require patience and long-term planning, but also a consideration for individuals' needs in the present. Still, considering that empowerment has remained vaguely defined for the past forty years, the scale to which social change can be attained with this philosophy/theory appears reduced or, at the very least, fragmented. The line, then, is thin between empowerment (defined as a political process including larger-scale changes) and self-determination, and perhaps this term would be more appropriate to reflect this derivative of empowerment. While self-determination is indeed an essential component to empowerment, it cannot constitute the totality of the empowerment process when limited to the individual dimension, and when it does not emanate from a situation of social disadvantage or, as Freire and his contemporaries (Ward and Mullender, 1991) would call it, oppression. Because of the lack of consensus on the meaning and process of empowerment and of the focus on the individual dimension of empowerment, it can be difficult

to differentiate actions that could lead to empowerment from abuses of the term.

The depoliticisation of empowerment

The focus on 'individual empowerment' also points towards a certain depoliticisation of the concept. In the field of mental health, for instance, Speed (2007) reflects on the popularity of the term 'consumer', used increasingly instead of 'psychiatric survivor' as an indicator of the depoliticisation of empowerment (Speed, 2007, p. 309). The term 'psychiatric survivor' referred directly to a political struggle that can be linked to an empowerment process which fulfils Le Bossé's aforementioned components: the specific context of psychiatry (i), the consciousness-raising (ii) and activation (iii) of former patients, and the ensuing individual and structural changes (iv) to the conditions of concerned persons (v).

While the term 'consumer' appears to denote a sense of agency and liberty of choice, its economic rationale can eclipse the subjective experience of distress and recovery as well as the political nature of medical and social service encounters. For example, in the field of mental health, since 'the consumer discourse functions to prioritise symptomology over aetiology' (Speed, 2007, p. 316), some therapeutic avenues are more accessible and accepted than others, such as medication. When empowerment and participatory rhetoric are added to the equation, the illusion of the empowered service user is perpetuated in the constrained realm of the medical model. Moreover, this responsibility placed on the individual can constitute a double-edged sword, as individuals often feel they are at their last resort once they decide to seek help in the social services. Consequently, it may not always be liberating for some to be told that they are the experts, that they do possess power to make changes in their lives. Such statements can be perceived as normative. They can lead, for instance, to an over-responsibilisation of individuals who may not yet possess sufficient resources to make significant changes to their situation. An emphasis on individual actions can also be seen as detrimental to the acknowledgement of the social and structural qualities of certain situations (poverty, unemployment, abuse, etc.). Indeed, the stakes are high:

> . . . we have witnessed a move from a collectivist welfare state to a competitive individualist society in which everyone takes responsibility for themselves. If individuals cannot do this, they are increasingly dealt with in authoritarian ways. What have been lost are collective measures for social protection, which have been sacrificed in order to achieve the goals of more flexible market-orientated systems and people (Rogowski, 2012, p. 932).

Revisiting Moreau's (Moreau and Leonard, 1989; Moreau *et al.*, 1993) works on empowerment could be beneficial in bridging the gap between micro-level empowerment (on the individual plane) and macro-level empowerment, thus avoiding individual, individualising and normative empowerment.

Measuring empowerment: measuring normativity?

Another instance of the depoliticisation of empowerment can be seen in the use of quantitative scales as a measure to evaluate the level of empowerment that can be gained from services in various contexts ranging from mental health (Rogers *et al.*, 1997, 2010), old age, social work in Aboriginal communities (Laliberté *et al.*, 2012) and domestic violence (Perez *et al.*, 2012). The implications of this quantification of empowerment are also interesting to consider from the point of view of the norm. The emergence of normative power was accompanied by a diffusion of the mechanisms of discipline, which were no longer contained within the walls of the prison or of the judiciary system. With the aforementioned psy complex, even the most mundane aspects of everyday life could be placed under scrutiny, marking the shift 'towards a more finely tuned justice, towards a closer penal mapping of the social body' (Foucault, 1979, p. 78).

A Foucauldian perspective apprehends the possible division between 'good', 'active' service users—individuals showing signs of empowerment—and 'bad', 'passive' service users—individuals stagnating, in 'need' of more tailored interventions. Furthermore, it could be argued that these scales, measuring self-efficacy, autonomy—all grouped under the umbrella of empowerment—divide between the normal and the abnormal (or the pathological), in relation to contemporary normativity. That is to say, the imperative to 'measure, assess, diagnose, cure, transform individuals' (Foucault, 1979, p. 227) is also present in contemporary applications of empowerment, and constitutes an instance of this diffusion of discipline across the social body. In this perspective, the emancipatory project of empowerment seems to have been transformed in an individualised project of self-actualisation. Thus, the fragmentation of the empowerment process into indicators of individual progress has three identifiable consequences. First, from a Foucauldian standpoint, it increases the ability to monitor and discipline individuals, to mould them into accepted social figures of autonomy. Second, it prevents a transversal look on empowerment processes (as the focus is on individual actions). Third, scopes of action extending beyond the individual sphere are not encouraged. There is a risk, then, that social norms of autonomy may inadvertently be used simultaneously as the goal and means of empowerment-centred interventions.

Is empowerment really a revolution in the provision of social services?

The above paragraphs highlight dimensions of empowerment that are rarely showcased in literature. All throughout his career, Foucault sought to show that practices that are generally perceived as evolution or progress in certain fields—the shift towards more humane treatment of prisoners or the medicalisation of madness, for instance—are neither neutral nor

inherently positive. In *Discipline and Punish*, he famously posed the following question: 'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (Foucault, 1979, p. 228). As we have seen, empowerment has been acclaimed and heralded as a concept that would not only unify social work practice, but would also be instrumental in fighting oppression and encouraging self-determination. Veiled behind this preoccupation for empowerment are a series of contingencies that not only permit the existence of such a concept, but actually *allow* for its existence, as it can create 'useful' (Foucault, 1979, p. 211), disciplined individuals. Considering the current normative context, which rewards autonomy, individuality and personal responsibility, the line can be fine between empowerment as an emancipatory practice and empowerment as a normative practice.

Concluding remarks

This articled sought to provide an analysis of empowerment based on Foucault's theories on social normativity. The first sections served to outline the general conditions of emergence of empowerment in the field of social work and to highlight the main areas of critique of the concept in order to situate our own critical perspective. We then presented our general framework of analysis, which allowed us to delve into the sociological implications of this emphasis on individual empowerment in recent years. The risks we identified included the possibility of an over-responsibilisation of individuals, a depoliticisation of the concept of empowerment as well as a possible confusion between emancipatory and normative empowerment. In regard to this, Rogowski (2012) states that, despite the individualisation of users and social work practice, 'a niche can be found for some progressive, even radical/critical possibilities' (Rogowski, 2012, p. 936). Small acts of resistance in our day-to-day work, anti-oppressive practice as well collective action appear crucial to counter the wave of individualisation in social work and the normative risk this encompasses.

Lastly, it was not our intention to invalidate the concept of empowerment, as it can in fact foster positive therapeutic relationships and help individuals regain a sense of control of their lives. However, empowerment does not exist in a social vacuum, devoid of any relation with the world outside the therapeutic realm and with existing social norms. It is crucial, then, to examine empowerment under all its angles, and re-evaluate and question taken-for-granted assumptions about social work practice. Our goal in this paper consisted of providing points of reflection linking empowerment practice to social normativity: a hypothetical and theoretical endeavour, indeed, but a potentially fruitful one, as future empirical research on the links between empowerment and social normativity could be beneficial to further critiques of empowerment and to solidify social work's concern for social justice and emancipation.

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