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CHAPTER 8

SILVER EMPOWERMENT: TOWARDS EMPOWERING POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Katrien Steenssens, Tine Van Regenmortel & Jasper De Witte

1. To expand the meaningful choices for all older people

At its core, the paradigm of empowerment consists of a strengths-based perspective within a relational perspective (see Chapter 1). The strengths-based perspective stands for the acknowledgement and development of the sources of strength within the involved individuals, their personal network (containing individuals and organisations) and their community. Because of their preconditional character (as in their necessary requirements), particular attention is paid to resilience and experiential knowledge as sources of strength. The relational perspective brings to the fore the shared responsibility for empowerment on and among all levels of society, with its accompanying duty to create those conditions that enable empowerment of the target group at hand (see Chapter 1 on ‘enabling niches’).

The concept of Silver Empowerment expresses an empowerment approach to older people. As such, it counteracts the dominant discourse of ‘ageism’ that narrowly stresses unproductivity, vulnerability, decline, loss and dependency in the lives of older people. At the same time, it breaks open the widely used concept of ‘active ageing’, with its tendency to overlook realities of social vulnerabilities, disadvantages and marginalisation. In doing so, Silver Empowerment does not seek to impose a new singular ideal of how older people should live or what their lives should look like. On the contrary, it seeks to expand the meaningful choices on the basis of which all older people are able to maximally gain mastery over their own life. Two intertwined notions here deserve some digression: ‘meaningful choices’ and ‘all older people’.

The notion of ‘meaningful choices’ here can be a tricky one, as determining a preferred choice depends not only on the choice that is expressed. Indeed,

this choice in turn is influenced by many tools consciously or subconsciously used to present a choice, for example, the number and wording of the choices offered (Johnson et al., 2012; Johnson, 2020). A relevant example of a discussion of the influence of ‘choice architecture’ can be found in a recent study on ageing at the Flemish countryside, more precisely in its critical approach of the often empirically identified, policy influencing preference for ‘Ageing In Place’ among older people (De Decker et al., 2018). In the context of, among others, the observation that not all neighbourhoods are suitable to age in place (see also Chapter 4), the authors argue that the so-called overall wish of older people to stay put and age in place often is not a matter of ‘wanting’ but a matter of ‘having to’ because of a lack of appropriate, affordable and appealing (in other words, meaningful) alternatives. There is no real choice, it is concluded, because for many older persons there is only one (undesirable) alternative: the residential care centre. De Decker et al. (2018) suggest to at least complement measures focused on ‘Aging In Place’ with measures geared at its counterpart ‘Moving In Time’ through the creation of a variety of types of neighbourhoods and residences meaningful for *all* older people.

Even more than referring to the inclusive quality of empowerment, the notion of ‘all older people’, stresses the specific attention that should be paid to vulnerable and ‘at-risk’ groups among the group of older people as a whole. These groups are identifiable along the lines of personal, social and community characteristics, such as deprivation, migration background, age (younger versus older old), type of personal network and neighbourhood characteristics (see Chapters 3 and 4). Not only do these groups suffer more from the problem at hand (i.e. loneliness and inappropriate housing); at the same time, they tend to be under-represented in (large-scale and long-term) research and many types of policy and practice consultations. Hence, unless specific attention in terms of means and methods is paid to vulnerable groups, the people that suffer the most risk being met with choices that least fit their circumstances, needs and preferences.

2. Principles to shape empowering policy, practice and research

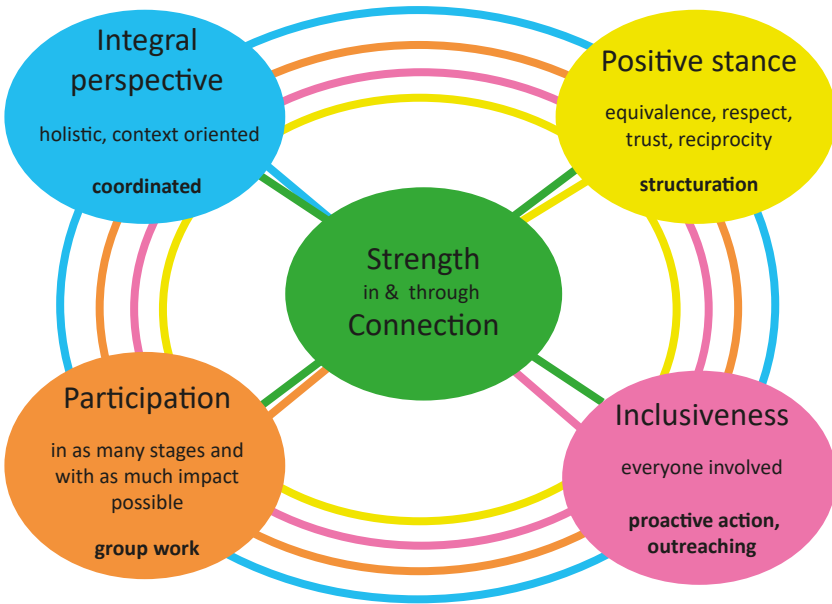
Through applied research based on the empowerment paradigm and its accompanying theoretical framework (see Chapter 1), a number of guiding principles to develop individual empowering policy, practice and research has started to emerge (Steenssens & Van Regenmortel, 2007a; Steenssens et al., 2009). Using these principles as touchstones during the process of development and implementation of an intervention offers feedback about

the extent to which the intervention, in the light of its purpose and execution, can be expected to actually lead to empowerment.

These principles can also be used as quality criteria to evaluate interventions that aim to realise empowerment. This makes sense, as the more one invests in the formative stage (the empowering process), the higher the likelihood of results in the summative stage (empowerment as an outcome or product).

The visual representation of these principles has become known as ‘the empowerment flower’ (Van Regenmortel, 2015). The heart of this empowerment flower contains the core principles.

Figure 8.1: The core principles of empowerment



Its visual representation expresses the following:

- The centrality of the dual principle of ‘strength in and through connection’.
- The cornerstone principles that contribute to the central principle: a positive stance, participation, inclusiveness and an integral perspective. Each of these principles is accompanied by a specific method of action that can support the empowering implementation of the principle: structuration, proactive action and outreaching, groupwork and coordination.
- The interdependency of all five core principles: they reinforce one another. Hence, respecting all five principles maximises the aimed for strengthening process of empowerment.

2.1. Strengths in and through connection

The first principle of any silver empowering policy, practice or research intervention is characterised by is the central ‘strength in and through connection’ principle. Chapter 3, on the loneliness among older people, highlights this central principle with its focus on the development of resilience and the importance of social connections.

This principle stems from the basic empowerment assumption that the strengths of any target group (e.g. older persons) can be unlocked, developed and maintained in and through fostering

- the psychological connection of the individuals with themselves and
- the social connection of these individuals with others, the communities they are part of and, ultimately, society at large.

Instead of striving for independence, this process is about realising a strengths-based autonomy in connection. Chapter 5 illustrates this goal by discussing how formal care can strengthen informal caregivers and citizen initiatives for care of older people.

2.2. A positive stance

Second, silver empowering policy, practice and research presuppose a basic attitude and a basic way of working with all stakeholders involved that can be termed as ‘a positive attitude’. This positive attitude feeds into all other working principles and is characterised by acknowledging equivalence, mutual respect, trust (presupposing reliability and transparency) and reciprocity (see Chapter 1 on ‘the power of giving’). Hereby, it is important that all stakeholders respect each other’s autonomy, also (or especially) the autonomy of older persons and their groups at risk: experiencing autonomy motivates, gives support, amplifies the belief in one’s own possibilities and stimulates a feeling of belonging.

Depending on the topic at stake – or, in the case of interventions, involving multiple groups, organisations or policy areas – this principle can be reinforced through applying structuration to the intervention (e.g. Van Regenmortel, 2015). Structuration stresses the importance of jointly creating a tailored plan in which the possibilities of the individual and his or her environment are described, goals are put forward and priorities on the short and long term determined. Such a plan not only enhances the understanding of the problem at stake and its solutions, but it also gives those persons a voice and offers structure and insight into what works. Hence, structuration clearly results in more transparency. At the same time, it offers footholds for participation.

2.3. Inclusiveness

A third hallmark of silver empowering policy, practice and research is an inclusive approach: they are geared towards all different identifiable subgroups among older people and all stakeholders involved in realising the intervention. Chapter 4 discusses this principle in the context of neighbourhood-oriented care, which offers a starting point to counteract discrimination or stereotyping of older people; at the same time, however, questions arise concerning the feasibility of neighbourhood-oriented care in deprived neighbourhoods or remote areas.

To include all subgroups and especially those that are most at risk, special attention can be paid to ‘outreaching’ (Van Doorn et al., 2008; Van Regenmortel, 2008). Outreaching implies going out into the open and contacting people at risk in their own living environment, such as welfare and community centres, public parks or even pubs or tea rooms. The essence lies in making contact and establishing a dialogue, that in turn and over time can become the starting point of psychological and social involvement. For vulnerable citizens, outreaching offers opportunities to reconnect.

Outreaching fits in the broader approach of ‘proactive action’, a concept referring to solution-oriented measures and initiatives in which the initiating responsibility to take up social rights and services shifts from the beneficiary or recipient to the supply side (Goedemé & Janssens, 2020; Van Gestel et al., 2022).

2.4. Participation

Fourth, empowering policy, practice and research are participatory. The aim is to achieve maximum input and influence, at least from the most directly concerned parties. For Silver Empowerment, this means that older persons should be able to influence an intervention (relating to ‘control’) based on information and insight (relating to ‘critical awareness’). As in any participatory process, the breadth and depth of the actual influence can vary considerably. The breadth of participation relates to the following question: to which stages (ranging from putting a topic on the agenda to the evaluation and adjustment of an intervention) will the participation relate? The depth of participation relates to the following question: how will the participation occur (ranging from consultation for improvement to co-creation) and what impact will it have? Two different examples of participation in research can be found in Chapter 6 concerning empowerment in participatory action research and in Chapter 7 describing the initiation of structural participation of older persons in the Academic Collaborative Center Older Adults.

From an empowerment perspective, the maximum breadth and depth of participation is, of course, preferable, but context and the available time and means often pose challenges to find a balance between the desirable and the attainable level of participation. Without ‘reasonable’ participation, however, no policy, practice or research intervention can be empowering for the ultimate target group.

With this principle, the notion of ‘perceived control’ in the definition of empowerment comes into play. It should be clear that this notion relates both to a psychological *sense* of personal control as well as a concern with *actual* social influence, political power and legal rights (Steenessens & Van Regenmortel, 2013). Hence, it integrates perceptions of personal control with behaviours (e.g. participation) to exercise that control.

The empowerment framework and research furthermore suggest that attention should be given to the use of empowering techniques in the participative creation and execution of interventions, such as collaboration and group work (Steenessens & Van Regenmortel, 2007b; Paes, 2010). Through discussion and consideration, these techniques offer participants the chance

- to give and receive a more accurate view on the nature of the subject and possible solutions, which in turn offers starting points for
 - an increase of knowledge,
 - a sharpened critical awareness,
 - the development of self-awareness and an enhanced self-image,
 - the development and use of skills;
- to create more mutual commitment and more involvement with the subject, which in turn offers starting points for
 - the development of mutual understanding and a sense of belonging,
 - the development of collective strengths and qualities,
 - stimulating the motivation and the desire to exert influence.

2.5. Integral perspective

Last but not least, for Silver Empowerment to arise in policy, practice and research, it is equally crucial to take the unique needs of older persons into account based on an integral – meaning holistic and multidisciplinary – perspective. Topics need to be approached with respect to various (physical, psychological, social, financial, etc.) domains, and in a way that the past, present and future are taken into account. This principle clearly comes to the fore in the description of the intervention ‘Bras dessus Bras dessous’ in Chapter 3.

By listening to older persons and by focusing on the ‘insider perspective’, researchers can gain insight into the personal meaning older persons attribute

to the topic at hand. Such ‘experiential knowledge’ allows for the creation, adjustment or evaluation of interventions to their specific needs and hence enhances their participation (Gobbens, 2017). Furthermore, an integral perspective also pays attention to important social, structural and physical barriers in the environment, such as the accessibility of services, initiatives and public transportation (see Chapter 1).

This principle of an integral perspective will often necessitate the involvement of multiple (domain-specific) stakeholders. It is then recommended to pay attention to the coordination of the intervention, meaning that one actor manages and coordinates all aspects of the intervention. In this regard, it is important to jointly formulate goals and work in partnership to realise a collective strategy.

3. Going the extra mile

The discussion of the interrelated core principles to develop, implement and evaluate empowering interventions – be it in policy, practice or research – makes it clear that good intentions alone will not suffice to accomplish the aimed for strengthening process of Silver Empowerment. One will have to be willing to go the extra mile to maximally reach and involve all older people, pay attention to and develop all their strengths, stimulate their mutual connections and guarantee their impact. This ‘extra mile’ consists of applying the necessary means and methods to assure that no one is left behind and that meaningful choices are available for everyone. As such, Silver Empowerment invites policymakers, caregivers and researchers to combine a strong belief in democratic values with a sustained effort to uncover and involve everyone’s strengths.

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