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Exploring the conceptualization and research of empowerment in the field of youth*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *empowerment* has become increasingly widespread in recent years. Its use is still, however, somewhat controversial and diverse, particularly when referring to young people. This article presents a systematic analysis of how empowerment has been conceptualized over the past 15 years and has been applied to young people. A systematic search of the major databases filtered by relevance provided 297 bibliographical references. The results confirm the ambiguous nature of the concept and the imprecision with which it is used, although they do link its use to three common concepts: power, participation and education. The concept of youth empowerment needs to be defined in order to highlight any nuances that distinguish it from the generic use of the term. The main dimensions associated with youth empowerment have been identified as: (a) that of growth and well-being; (b) relational; (c) educational; (d) political; (e) transformative; and, finally, (d) emancipative.

Introduction

Since its first emergence in the field of social sciences, the concept of empowerment has slowly become much more widely used by a number of scientific and professional groups. It could be said to be a very versatile term, nowadays even used in areas of everyday life. As a concept, 'empowerment' is, however, complex, ambiguous and lacking any clear boundaries; it can be applied to very different situations and processes and in numerous ways. While it has been mainly used to refer to adults, over the past two decades, it has begun to be applied to young people, and particularly to those who, for a number of reasons, can be considered to be vulnerable or at risk.

This study aims to analyse the complexity of the concept of empowerment. The two research questions we ask will form the basis of the study. The first is related to the concept itself: we aim to discover how, and with what meanings, it has been used in research. The second refers to its specific use in the context of youth. Our aim is to see how research into youth has analysed and characterized the concept. It should be noted, we are working from the perspective of social pedagogy that when analysing this research, emphasis was placed on those models, policies and programmes designed to have an impact on youth empowerment that were conceived during the first few years of this century.

Research methodology

The first stage involved in conducting a documentary analysis of youth empowerment is to define the keywords. Our search was performed using the terms 'youth empowerment' and 'empowerment indicators'. The second stage is to work with documentation that post-dates the year 2000, thus limiting the search and choosing the most up-to-date documents and research; in some cases, however, noteworthy documents have been referred to that were published prior to 2000. Mendeley reference manager was used for online bibliographical documentation work.

The main search was carried out using university bibliographical reference search engines for the most important collections and databases: *ERIC (U.S. Dept. of Education), MEDLINE (NLM), SciVerse ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Sage Publications (CrossRef), Taylor & Francis Online – Journals, SAGE Journals, Informa – Taylor & Francis (CrossRef), SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Emerald Journals (Emerald Group Publishing), Oxford Journals (Oxford University Press), Academic Law Reviews (LexisNexis), PMC (PubMed Central), Cambridge Journals (Cambridge University Press), IngentaConnect, IEEE Conference Publications, SciELO Brazil (Scientific Electronic Library Online), NDLTD Union Catalog and SpringerLink Open Access.*

A systematic search was also carried out in university libraries and through search engines such as *Google Scholar* and *Google Books*. All this material was reviewed by the research team in order to select those documents that deal specifically with youth empowerment from a socio-educational perspective. Documents dealing with health, medicine, the economy or other perspectives outside the remits of this research were rejected. A total of 297 bibliographical references were thus selected.

All selected documents were distributed to the members of the research team; each member read a specific number of documents and compiled the corresponding analysis file that enabled the selection of only that information which was relevant to the aims of the research. Among the headings used for these summary sheets were:

(a) *concept of empowerment and youth empowerment (YE)*;
(b) *history of YE*;
(c) *models, levels and dimensions for analysis of YE*;
(d) *experiences and projects of YE*;
(e) *methodological strategies used in the research of YE; and*
(f) *YE indicators*.

All documents were labelled with different keywords, chosen according to the aims of the research. Labelling documents and their corresponding summary files provides a systematic approach to working on the chosen documentation and producing the study here presented.

The results of the research

A total of 3262 bibliographical references containing the terms 'youth empowerment' or 'empowerment indicators' were reviewed, and 268 were chosen from scientific articles, books, doctoral theses, websites and other documentary sources. A total of 105 journals or publishers contained an article or a reference to youth empowerment; despite the heterogeneous nature of bibliographical sources, it should be noted that nine scientific journals deal more frequently with the subject. These are: *American Journal of Community Psychology; American Journal of Evaluation; Community Development Journal; Health Education & Behavior; International Journal of Adolescence and Youth; Journal of Community Practice; Journal of Community Psychology; Journal of Social Work; and Journal of Youth Studies*.

We indentified a total of 454 appearances related to the distribution of the labels of every heading definition of empowerment and youth empowerment. Table 1 shows this distribution.

Table 1. Headings and labels identified in documentary analysis.

Headings and labels	No. of results
Conceptualization of empowerment and Youth Empowerment (YE) [*Concept (59); theoretical approaches (40)*]	99
History of YE;	15
Models, levels and dimensions for analysis of YE [*processes (80); spaces (47); times (13); levels (27); training of professionals, (14); and others (14)*]	195
YE experiences and projects	87
YE indicators	58
Total	454

The use and the characteristics of the term empowerment

Although the origin of the term *empowerment* was already in use, it was in the 1970s that it began to be used in a range of contexts. Among these were the feminist movement, that of popular education (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, & Bird, 2009) and those movements within the black community demanding political representation (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013; Boluijt & de Graaf, 2010).

Since then, empowerment has been widely used in the field of social sciences and as part of practices employed by many international organizations. Zambrano notes that it is an *attractive and powerful* concept and that, for precisely these reasons, it has been used internationally as a tool in the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment (2007, p. 75). Nevertheless, and despite the term's popularity (Pick et al., 2007; Somerville, 1998), it is still unclear exactly what it refers to and what it specifically entails. It has been stated that there is no consensus among researchers as to its meaning (Fundación Cibervoluntarios, 2011; Wagaman, 2011), and that definitions are often very different and abstract (Pick et al., 2007).

One constant in all research is the insistence on the complex nature of the concept and the need to clarify its meaning (Grasley & Wolfe, 1999; HCA Academy, 2009; Hennink, Kiiti, Pillinger, & Jayakaran, 2012; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Narayan, 2002; Tromp, 2007). Other authors refer to the fact that empowerment is a multi-dimension (Peterson, 2014; Rogers & Singhal, 2003, p. 335[1]), multi-level construct (Checkoway, 1997, 2011; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2008; Musitu & Buelga, 2004; Pearrow & Pollack, 2009) to the extent that some see working exclusively on one aspect of empowerment as impossible, given that all of its aspects are interlinked (Tromp, 2007).

Some authors characterize empowerment as an active, continuous process (Betancor, 2011; Tremblay & Gutberlet, 2010; Tromp, 2007) and also as an outcome (Luttrell et al., 2009; Travis & Bowman, 2011). Some hold that it is a process occurring at individual, organizational and community levels (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Checkoway, 1997; Jennings et al., 2008; Lawrencejacobson, 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000) and, furthermore, that it can be applied to different fields (psychological, educational, political, economic, social, cultural, etc.) (Luttrell et al., 2009). This means it is possible to identify different types of empowerment. It is also worth noting that the most common focus of empowerment studies is from the field of psychology (Russell et al., 2009).

Lastly, some authors believe that empowerment is more easily defined when it is lacking, i.e. in situations of weakness or lack of power, than when it has to be defined positively since it may vary depending on the person, group or context (Lawrencejacobson, 2006).

Neither is there agreement regarding the term and its translation into other languages from the original English (Garriga Tella, 2014; Luttrell et al., 2009; Richez, Labadie, & De Linares, 2012). All such translations spring from the specific way in which each author understands and defines empowerment. Translations into Spanish and French have been especially numerous and varied. In Spanish, terms such as 'potenciación', 'fortalecimiento', 'apoderamiento', 'participación social' and 'refuerzo de capacidades' have been used (Luttrell et al., 2009; Zambrano, 2007). Authors writing in French refer to empowerment in a variety of ways, but the meaning is always roughly similar: 'Attribution de pouvoir', 'obtention de pouvoir', 'émergence du processus d'appropriation du pouvoir', 'autonomisation', 'renforcement du pouvoir d'action', 'capacitation' and/or 'habilitation' (Culture & Santé in Éducation Permanente, 2010).

Most empirical research into empowerment has focused on the intrapersonal facet, based on the self-perception of efficacy and control over the socio-political sphere (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Richez et al., 2012). Christens and Peterson (2012) note that socio-political control has been theorized as a construct that includes self-efficacy, motivation, competence and the perception of control.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there are authors who note that while much academic writing exists on empowerment, most of it is based on secondary sources or theoretical approaches, and lacks empirical evidence (Hennink et al., 2012). While these are valuable contributions, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate the range of levels and dimensions comprised by empowerment (Peterson, 2014).

The conceptualization of empowerment on the research

One of the most common agreements among those authors who deal with empowerment is that all of its definitions include aspects referring to people, groups or communities gaining control and power over their own lives in their life contexts (Hennink et al., 2012; Jennings et al., 2008; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Pearrow, 2008; Pick et al., 2007; San Saturnino & Gaicoechea, 2013). One could say that empowerment is related to the change and transformation of such people, groups and communities, and to the process by means of which a situation of lack of power or disempowerment becomes one in which some kind of power is somehow gained (Boluijt & de Graaf, 2010; Pick et al., 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Travis & Bowman, 2012).

The three concepts most frequently linked to empowerment in the research analysed are: power, participation and education. Education includes a range of concepts, including learning, awareness raising and skills acquisition. All are regulated by processes that can be either top-down or bottom-up.

(1) *Empowerment and power*. Most authors refer at one time or another to the role of power in relation to empowerment processes, in three, non-mutually exclusive ways:

(i) *In relation to the starting point, generally characterized as a lack of power, and conceptualized in numerous ways*: a lack of personal and community resources; poverty; structural inequalities; social problems and inequalities; etc. (Betancor, 2011; Breton, 2008; Culture & Santé in Éducation Permanente, 2010; Fortunati, 2014; Lawrencejacobson, 2006; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender 2002; Mayo & Anastacio, 1999; Narayan, 2002; Pearrow, 2008; Shirazi, 2011; Tromp, 2007; Wright, 2010).

(ii) *As progression in levels of access to power*. Various authors consider empowerment as a gradual acquisition of progressive levels of power (Longwe, 1991, p. 5[2]; Gaventa, 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2010; Travis & Bowman, 2012; Zambrano, 2007).

(iii) *As something that must be provided or achieved*. Differences exist between those authors who consider empowerment as a top-down process (Fortunati, 2014; Ricaurte, Ojeda, Betancourth, & Burbano, 2013; World Bank, 2006, p. 298[3]) and others who view it as bottom-up (Gil, 2003, p. 77[4]; Mayo & Anastacio, 1999; Peterson, 2014; Rojas, 2014). Some suggest that empowerment can be understood in both directions (Somerville, 1998)

(2) *Empowerment and participation*. Many authors see a number of distinct types of participation (individual, communal, political, etc.), which constitute a highly important medium for empowerment (Boluijt & de Graaf, 2010; Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Checkoway, 2011; Gong & Wright, 2007; Lawrencejacobson, 2006; Mackinnon & Stephens, 2010; Martínez, 2010; Somerville, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). Nonetheless, some authors focus specifically on agency, i.e. the capacity that people have to act on their surroundings, as a tool in increasing their levels of empowerment (Alkire, 2005; Fortunati, 2014; Hennink et al., 2012; Luttrell et al., 2009; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Pick et al., 2007; Russell et al., 2009; Tremblay & Gutberlet, 2010).

(3) *Empowerment and education*. Few authors fail to connect, in one way or another, the processes of empowerment with (1) education and learning (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013; Bates, 2006; Bello, 2011; Fortunati, 2014; Lemmer, 2009; Mackinnon & Stephens, 2010; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Shirazi, 2011; Tremblay & Gutberlet, 2010); (2) the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Hennink et al., 2012; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Özmete, 2011); (3) the acquisition of capabilities (Qiu, 2008; Wagaman, 2011; World Bank, 2006, p. 298[5]); (4) the acquisition of some kind of resources; and, finally, (5) awareness, (Mackinnon & Stephens, 2010; Quiroga & Alonso, 2011; Zambrano, 2007) which is often associated with the ideas of Freire (Breton, 2008; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Wang, 2006; Wong, 2008).

Through these three approaches, empowerment is connected to the acquisition of power in order to accede or contribute to desired change (Le Bossé & Dufort, 2002, p.77).[6] The different nuances found in the research stem from how this acquisition of power is conceptualized. Power is acquired, among other ways, by:

- Becoming aware of one's own capabilities and opportunities (Breton, 2008; Fundación Cibervoluntarios, 2011; Tremblay & Gutberlet, 2010; Zambrano, 2007).
- Believing in one's own power in order to meet proposed aims (Moressi, 2010; Qiu, 2008; Russell et al., 2009).
- Increasing personal, interpersonal and political power (Gutierrez, 1994, p. 510[7]; Travis & Bowman, 2012).
- Feeling competent and self-confident (Fundación Cibervoluntarios, 2011; Pick et al., 2007).
- Gaining access to the decision-making process and structures (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Zambrano, 2007).
- Having power and control over resources (Pearrow, 2008; Pick et al., 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).
- Being able to make independent decisions (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009).
- Widening the scope of freedom of choice and action (Ricaurte et al., 2013).
- Having intrinsic and extrinsic power, i.e. power over oneself and power over resources (Betancor, 2011; Musitu & Buelga, 2004).Our opinion is that Betancor's wording (2011) most clearly presents the two main dimensions or areas of action implied in the concept of empowerment. The first refers to personal capacities and the means by which they can be acquired, developed or put into practice. This is directly related to people's life paths and their corresponding learning and training processes; this can be said to be a personal, training or learning dimension.

The second refers to the person's environment and the possibilities and opportunities for action that this offers or denies them. It is not just about having access to resources, but also about gaining some kind of control over them (Kishor, 1999; Za Sathar & Kazi, 1997, p. 297).[8] Our interpretation in this study is that the medium or context in which people, groups and communities manage their lives can enable or inhibit the actions and decisions they can take.

Empowerment processes are the result of an interaction, negotiated to a greater or lesser degree, between the capability or capabilities of a person, group or community and the options provided by the physical and sociocultural contexts in which they manage their lives. A person, group or community's level of empowerment at any given moment in any given sociocultural context is the result of this negotiation.

The concept of youth empowerment

Despite the efforts made to conceptualize empowerment when dealing with young people, the existing literature reveals that research has generally been carried out in a more global context, which has at times been none too precise. The specifics of research into youth empowerment often consider characteristics that can be applied to a much broader, more general context, making the design of a more rigorous framework in the specific sphere of young people complicated.

Russell et al. (2009) note that while empowerment is a widely used term in youth development programmes (Huebner, 1998, p. 891),[9] the theoretical and empirical research has basically been carried out in the field of adults. According to these authors, in equating youth empowerment to 'youth leadership', 'civic involvement', 'self-efficacity' or 'youth activism', the concept becomes blurred. It can furthermore be affirmed that, as suggested by Chinman and Linney (1998, p. 901),[10] studies have ignored the multi-faceted nature of the social contexts in which youth empowerment takes place and have focused on oppressed groups or those at risk. Such is the case with Grasley and Wolfe (1999), who considered empowerment to be a factor that reduces relational violence in young people, and one that can be achieved through education, the development of abilities and social competence. More recently, Wong (2008) presented a participation model related to empowerment processes in a thesis on youth violence.

Few studies provide operationalized definitions that would lead to a logical and clear articulation of expected results (Wagaman, 2011). Most limit themselves to the recognition of youth empowerment on individual, interrelational and community levels, approaching it as a process or result (Morsillo, 2003; Wagaman, 2011). Nonetheless, there is unanimity on the term generally referring to the young person achieving efficient growth by overcoming specific situations through the acquisition of competences. Intervention aspects of environmental-based politics are added to these elements.

Kaplan, Skolnik, and Turnbull (2009) consider that the concept of youth empowerment has been constructed from the literature on empowerment (1) produced within the context of what is called 'positive youth development' (Wong, 2008); (2) related to resilience (Moody, Childs, and Seppl 2003, p. 135[11]; Travis & Bowman, 2012); and (3) lastly on community-based prevention programmes (Holden, Cranksghaw, Nimsch, Hinnant, & Hund, 2004; Morrison, Alcorn, & Nelums, 1997; Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan, & Dolan, 2014).

Conceptions and dimensions of youth empowerment

In the various definitions authors provide for youth empowerment in their research work, a number of dimensions emerge which, whether in isolation, connected or interrelated, contribute to shaping more or less differentiated ways of understanding the concept. It should be pointed out that these dimensions are not exclusive. In fact, most are interrelated in authors' conceptions. They are presented separately here with the aim of identifying the main features of youth empowerment processes, and are as follows:

(a) The personal growth and well-being dimension

Some authors view youth empowerment from an eminently personal perspective (Russell et al., 2009), in which well-being and the reinforcement of self-esteem are basic features as they represent improved interpersonal relationships and an enhanced community life (Cargo et al., 2003; Jennings et al. 2009; Morsillo, 2003; Morton & Montgomery, 2012). Luttrel et al. (2009) hold that within the meaning of youth empowerment, whether as an outcome or a process, empowerment can be graded, the first factor being the degree of well-being obtained by satisfying basic needs.

Kaplan and others (2009) have based the study of youth empowerment on seven areas in programmes that fall within the concept of well-being and growth. These areas have been identified by institutions that look after children and adolescents whose disadvantaged backgrounds mean their own families cannot do so. Travis and Bowman hold that the attainment of personal well-being would help young people to '… no longer feel victimized, no longer perceive they are at the mercy of continued adversity' (2012, p. 459).

(b) The relational dimension

The term *relational* empowerment (Russell et al., 2009), also referred to as *interpersonal* (Wong, 2008), seems to be understood in a different manner when dealing with young people than with adults. Despite criticism of relating the idea of empowerment to another person (Russell et al., 2009), a number of experiences show a greater degree of mutual empowerment among young people (Russell et al., 2009). There is, in this respect, a change in the relationship between young people and adults and in the young person's increased self-perception, deriving from their involvement in the community and the feeling that power is shared between the young person and the adult (Russell et al., 2009).

Optimum youth development in a context where the adult plays the main role is inseparable from a good relationship among all elements comprising it. Harmony in such an environment facilitates what is known as 'positive youth development', along with other facets that affect youth empowerment, such as self-esteem, development of abilities, social competences, character, the care system, supportive relationships and the mentor's ability (Travis & Bowman, 2012).

(c) The educational dimension

As well as the acquisition of competences, this includes participation and involvement in change (Hope, 2012; Kronenberg, 2007). Notable indicators here are self-efficacity, critical thought, socio-political awareness and being convinced that it is possible to influence the world's transformation. Furthermore, it points to the need for collective recognition of the potential of and abilities acquired by young people, particularly as agents of social transformation (Agudo & Albornà, 2011).

Several authors consider the correct participatory approach to be an empowerment tool both during training – whether through programmes or experiences – or after its results (Gong & Wright, 2007). In this context, research highlights the key role played by teaching and new educational methodologies. Reference is made to Freire's (1970, p. 426)[12] liberating theories, integrating knowledge and power, while the role knowledge plays in personal development is also stressed (Garriga Tella, 2014). Wang (2006), for example, highlights the change from a passive system of assimilation of contents such as *banking education* to a model where new learning dynamics and the use of new technologies optimize concepts such as autonomy, equality and the gaining of competences, even reducing negative aspects, such as intolerance and, most particularly, violence. The effectiveness of educational programmes in reducing this latter point has produced an extensive bibliography (Grasley & Wolfe, 1999; Pearrow, 2008; Wong, 2008).

(d) The political dimension

The link with politics appears in the conceptualization of youth empowerment from two perspectives. The first: as the acquisition of a space in which to make decisions and as an entry into, or influence on, specific institutions. The second: as a programme of growth and support emanating from governmental systems. The relationship between youth empowerment and politics leads back to the taking of power in order to achieve horizontal relations with organisms decisive in social development on the basis of *a critical awareness and distancing from dominant hegemonic discourse* (Garriga Tella, 2014). Given this, some authors highlight the aspect of empowerment that stresses motivations and ideologies prepared to face up to the hierarchies of power (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Trust in this development is based on an ecology of support in the young person's environment, and on their involvement in community activities (Christens & Peterson, 2012), ever at contrast with the actions of power-holding institutions. Thus, beyond those institutions with a certain weight in government, bodies that are not directly linked with power are often mentioned in this respect – tertiary sector organizations, for example – as well as the private sector (Hope, 2012).

(e) The transformative dimension

Deriving from the above, youth empowerment is integrated within the development of abilities for social change (Wagaman, 2011). This idea owes a debt to the theoretical model of Critical Youth Empowerment (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2009), which stresses the connection between critical reflection and meaningful action, and includes an element of social action directed at the root causes of problems (changes of systems, institutions, values, norms and practices). According to the model, 'empowerment is the process by which adolescents develop the consciousness and skills necessary to envision social change and understand their role in that change' (Wagaman, 2011, p. 284).

Some studies do, however, note that most youth empowerment models fail to sufficiently capture the efforts made by young people to resist oppression and create social change (Prilletensky, 2003, p. 894).[13]

Oppression – also related to Freire's ideas – is specifically mentioned in numerous studies on youth empowerment. Empowered youth is the opposite of oppressed youth, as empowered young people

do not identify themselves as the victims of adversities, using their potential to obtain equal access to social resources (Travis & Bowman, 2012).

(f) The emancipative dimension

Empowerment means, at one and the same time, creating and supporting those conditions that lead to young people being able to act in their own name and on their own terms instead of being controlled by others. This self-efficacy (Kaplan et al., 2009; Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006) is understood to be an attitudinal, structural and cultural process, through which young people gain the ability, authority and confidence they need to make decisions and cause change in their own lives and those of other people (Gervais, 2011; Hope, 2012; Kronenberg, 2007).

Since it is a more individualist aspect, some authors tend to identify this aspect with liberal dynamics (MacKenzie, 2009; Richez et al., 2012). It also includes the concept of learning self-control in order to deal with crises, accept commitments and mitigate alienation without the need for other agents to lead the process (Commonwealth Youth Programme, & Commonwealth Secretariat, n.d.; Russell et al., 2009).

To this end, the United Nations (UN) recognizes empowered young people as '… rights bearers, decision-makers, and social actors with potential to participate fully in their own and their community's development' (UN Commission on Human Rights Safety, 2003, p. 201).[14] The Commonwealth (n.d.) adds four further elements: (a) an economic and social base; (b) political will, adequate resource allocation and supportive legal and administrative frameworks; (c) a stable environment of equality, peace and democracy; and (d) access to knowledge, information and skills and a positive value system.

The democratic desire for emancipation is inextricably linked to youth empowerment. This desire expresses itself collectively, implying mobilization in the name of a common cause; this leads to terms such as 'individual responsibility' and 'collective emancipation' often being found together (Richez et al., 2012).

Youth empowerment models, policies and programmes

Most theoretical models on youth empowerment proposed in the academic literature incorporate the concept of 'positive youth development'. Following the work of different authors, Jennings et al. (2008) set out four models of youth empowerment:

(1) *the adolescent empowerment cycle* (Chinman & Linney, 1998, p. 901),[15] based on psychological theories that bring together participation, positive reinforcement and adult recognition of positive development. In respect of this, and through the development of good practices, Bello (2011) offers a measurement of the degree of youth participation;

(2) *the youth development and empowerment model* (Kim, Crutchfield, Williams, & Helpler, 1998), where theories of social control, learning and expectations foster participation in community projects;

(3) *the transactional association model* (Cargo, 2003), in which relationships between young people and adults are promoted in order to produce friendly and facilitating environments; and

(4) *the empowerment education model* (Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Verlade, 2005), consisting of listening, dialogue, critical reflection and reflective action. This model links youth empowerment with community organization and the strength of political, individual and collective effectiveness.

The combination of these four models allows authors to put forward the theory of critical youth empowerment based on the contributions made by young people to community development and sociopolitical change. Young people are, thus, seen to be active citizens, taking part in the construction of stronger, fairer communities on a daily basis.

Putting these models of youth empowerment into practice is the responsibility of social or education policies or, more specifically, youth policies and programmes or projects implemented in this context. The analysed academic literature on youth empowerment defines the main ideas that identify and promote youth empowerment in said policies as:

- Participation (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Chinman & Linney, 1998, p. 901[16]; Kaplan et al., 2009; Morton & Montgomery, 2012)
- Promotion (Bello, 2011)
- Dialogue (Jennings et al., 2008)
- Support, accompaniment or advocacy (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Jennings et al., 2008; Kaplan et al., 2009)
- Acquisition of capabilities through education (Garriga Tella, 2014; Gong & Wright, 2007; Wang, 2006)

These core ideas and the initiatives and activities implemented around them are simultaneously implemented by various agents, such as the family, community, government, culture and religion (Kaplan et al., 2009), taking it as given that it is the State, as the reference framework of policies, that catalyses, implements, supports or promotes such actions. According to Stanton-Salazar (2010), institutional agencies – as agents of empowerment – facilitate and enable the development of key survival strategies for young people; these are mentioned in terms of problem-solving, seeking help and guidance, social abilities and instrumental behaviour aimed at overcoming institutional barriers and the conditions of a harmful environment (Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

There is unanimity in defining youth empowerment programme activities as interventions that, based on young people's strengths, involve them in decision-making processes regarding the design, planning and implementation of the programmes themselves, and award them an active, central role in this. These programmes generally include Youth Councils, participation on committees, participation in management bodies, group projects and research programmes based on community participation (Morton & Montgomery, 2012).

Among the most widely quoted policies are those directly related to young people's participation in the community and youth development (Dibennedeto, 1991, p. 894[17]; Jennings et al., 2008; Matarese, Mcginnis, & Mora, 2005). Some experiences relate how integrated participation entails the challenges of role occupation and the activation of cyclical dynamics of power acquisition (Chinman & Linney, 1998, p. 901[18]; Jennings et al., 2008). Three interactive components are thus identified which aid the development of psychological empowerment: power shared between young people and adults, emotional care and intellectual stimulation. In situations where all three are present, intellectual challenge is developed and young people receive training and education based on critical analysis.

Conclusions

This study has presented a systematic documentary analysis of research carried out over the past 15 years into the concept of empowerment and, particularly, its uses and applications in the field of youth.

Our work reveals unanimity among most authors regarding the current ambiguous, imprecise nature of the concept, the cause of its versatile use in the various disciplines in which it appears and the number of ways in which it can be applied. Authors also coincide in stating that empowerment is related to change and transformation in people, groups and communities, and to a change from a situation of lack of power to one in which the aforementioned gain control over their lives. The three concepts most frequently linked to empowerment in the analysed research are: power, participation and education.

Whether process or outcome, empowerment is always the effect or consequence of an interaction, to a greater or lesser extent negotiated, between the capacity for action of a person, group or community and the options provided by the physical and sociocultural environments in which their lives are led.

When compared with empowerment per se, youth empowerment is relatively unspecific, suggesting the need for a deeper study into how youth empowerment is produced; such a study should be much more detailed and comparative. In order to reach a full understanding of it, it seems necessary to first clearly differentiate youth empowerment; youth presents particular characteristics, and these produce different features to those of adult empowerment. There is, though, unanimity among authors that the general term refers to the efficient growth of young people by means of overcoming specific situations through the acquisition of competences.

The extensive academic literature dedicated to the positive development of young people leads one to think that empirical research carried out on groups of young people has served not only to understand the concept itself, but also to specify it in the context of youth. In this research, the concept has always formed part of ideas such as leadership, self-efficacy, personal well-being and participation. In addition, and as a defining trait when compared to the global understanding of empowerment, the importance of youth empowerment has been highlighted as a response to the dynamics generated by *adultism*.

The main dimensions that shape or are associated with the concept in the context of youth have also been identified: (a) the dimension of growth and well-being; (b) relational; (c) educational; (d) political; (e) transformative; and, lastly, (f) emancipative. As has been noted above, the convergence of these dimensions in a particular moment of young people's lives, when they are no longer children but not yet adults, means that they all gain greater importance and add value to the definition of the concept of youth empowerment.

There is unanimity in defining youth empowerment programme activities as interventions that, based on the strengths of young people, involve them in decision-making processes regarding the design, planning and implementation of the programmes themselves, and award them an active, central role in this.

The wide range of proposals connected with the political meaning of youth empowerment is particularly noteworthy. Much academic literature has aimed to characterize it from this standpoint: the many ways by means of which young people can access power; the training dynamics that are specifically developed to aid them in gaining such access; and, finally, the ways in which they relate to adults, given that it is adults who are responsible for the emotional, educational and participatory enablement of young people. It is this political facet that sets in motion the flow of relationships between young people and adults and, consequently, makes processes of adult empowerment intertwined with those of youth empowerment.

Notes

1. Qiu (2008).
2. Luttrell et al., (2009).
3. Pick et al., (2007).
4. Zambrano (2007).
5. Pick et al., (2007).
6. Zambrano (2007).
7. Pearrow (2008).
8. Pick et al., (2007).
9. Russell et al., (2009).
10. Russell et al., (2009).
11. Kaplan et al., (2009).
12. Mohajer and Earnest (2009).
13. Russell et al., (2009).
14. Gervais (2011).
15. Russell et al., (2009).
16. Russell et al., (2009).
17. Russell et al., (2009).
18. Russell et al., (2009).

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