



Global Grassroots
CONSCIOUS SOCIAL CHANGE FOR WOMEN

SPOTLIGHT ON: EMPOWERMENT & AGENCY

A Preliminary Review of the Scientific and Scholarly Literature on
Personal Transformation and its Relationship to Social Change



INTRODUCTION

Global Grassroots is an international non-governmental organization (NGO), founded in 2004, which operates a mindfulness-based leadership program and social venture incubator for women survivors of war in East Africa. Over the last 15 years, we have invested deeply in the personal growth, inner leadership, wellbeing, hard skills, and the ideas of our change agents. We have witnessed their personal transformation as they have advanced their own solutions for the betterment of their community. We embarked upon this literature review to help us understand the link between personal transformation and social impact. The key question we were eager to answer through this review was: in what ways does the cultivation of human qualities such as mindfulness, agency, wellbeing, social intelligence, belonging or compassion contribute to a prosocial orientation and positively influence the advancement of positive social change?

To answer this question, we need to understand how various domains of personal transformation are defined, what happens within individuals and community when it takes place, how it transforms the people who experience it, and what outcomes result that may be relevant. Over the course of six months, Global Grassroots conducted a review of scientific and scholarly research on the topic of personal transformation as it relates to societal transformation. For the purposes of this paper, we define:

personal transformation as the process and experience of undergoing positive inner change towards personal growth and self-realization. Personal transformation can take place as the result of intentional effort over time, as well as a significant life changing experience that shifts our beliefs about ourselves and our relationship with the world.

social change or social transformation as a significant and positive shift in the functioning and wellbeing of society. This can result from changes in societal norms and values; changes in the behavior, beliefs and relations of the members of that society; the alleviation

of a social ill; and/or through alterations of the systems, institutions, and structures making up that society.

We explored more than 370 key academic and scientific articles across the following five domains:

- 1. Mindfulness:** “the capacity to pay attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).
- 2. Wellbeing and Resilience:** Wellbeing is “a state of being...where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life” (ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, 2008, p. 4). Resilience is a positive adaptation despite adversity that leads to growth and greater wellbeing (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Luthar et al., 2000; Richardson, 2002).
- 3. Social and Emotional Intelligence:** Emotional intelligence is the ability to be aware of our own and others’ feelings in the moment and use that information to inform one’s action in relationship (Goleman, 1995a; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Social intelligence is “the ability to more deeply understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and, as a result, gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities” (Segal, 2011, p. 266).
- 4. Empowerment and Agency:** Empowerment is the ability to choose, including the existence of options and a capacity to make purposeful choices in a changing context where little power once existed (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer 1999; Samman & Santos, 2003; Sidle, 2019).
- 5. Community and Belonging:** A sense of community includes a feeling of belonging, a sense of mattering to the group, a feeling that needs will be met by shared resources, and having a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

It has been our empirical observation, as practitioners in the field of personal transformation and social change, and our theory from wide-reaching conversations in the social change sector that personal transformation is important for and takes place as an integral part of most long-term, sustainable, positive social change. But, it is not easy to measure these intangible experiences themselves, and there is little consensus on how to define the nature of personal transformation or the metrics with which to assess it. As such, there was a need to conduct a systematic review of the literature to help explain what is known about the process and experience of inner change and how it might be relevant to social change.

We explored a range of literature, including clinical studies, meta-analyses, literature reviews, analyses of scholarly discourse, reviews of measurement tools, proposed operational definitions and mechanisms, and

working papers from practitioners. Our criteria included those studies that provided insight and critique on the definition, measures, mechanisms, outcomes, and potential evidence of the social impact of personal transformation.

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We chose these five domains because they are the areas of personal transformation we have witnessed most on an ongoing basis and because there already exists a body of clinical work trying to understand the mechanisms and outcomes of each of them. We have undertaken this study at this time because there is a growth of interest in expanding from an

exclusive focus on the external and concrete measures of social progress to including the contribution of more intangible, personal shifts towards long-term social change. Our contemporaries in the social justice and international development arena know that something is transpiring among the individuals and communities



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with whom they work. They believe that the internal condition of people matter, that relationships between them drive connection and community, and that their beliefs and values shape how institutions serve or disadvantage others - and change. Our approach and intention with this literature review, then, was to understand within each of these themes: the consensus definition of each concept; the documented mechanisms of such transformation; potential outcomes; measurement tools for and concerns with measuring each concept; future recommendations for research; and, the scientific and academic evidence for any relevance to social change.

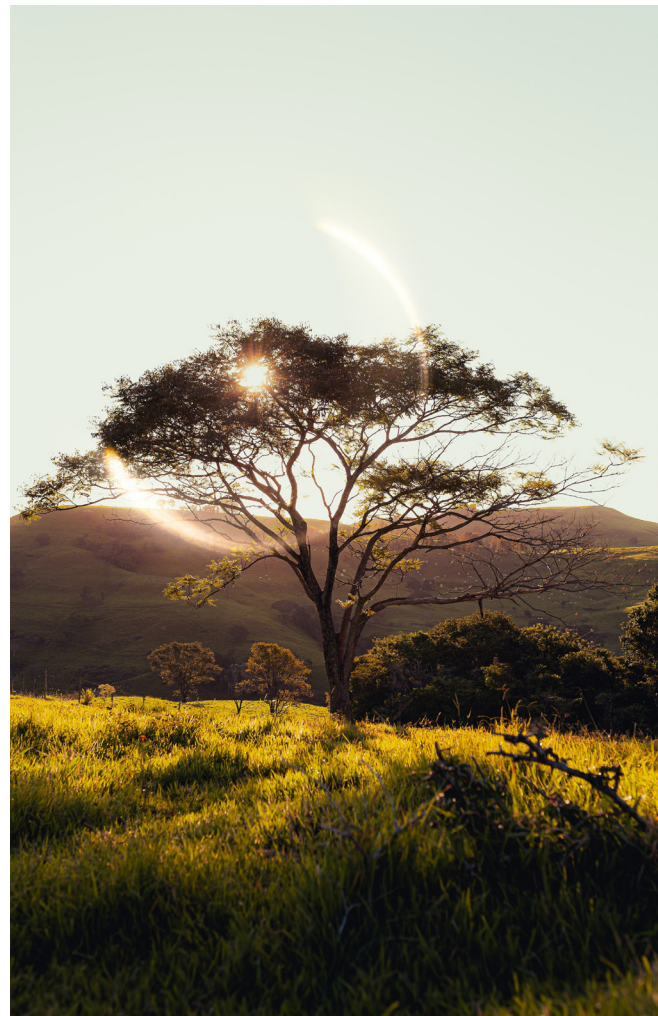
Following are our general key findings and then the more specific review of literature within the domain of empowerment and agency.

Key Findings

Some of our key, cross-cutting findings from exploring this relationship include:

- There is little consensus on the definition, metrics and measurement methods for most domains of personal transformation, aside from the assessment of post-traumatic stress.
- There are a wide range of tools that have been developed for evaluating components of personal transformation, which can help begin to assess whether such transformation has taken place.
- Each domain is multi-faceted, usually involves a component of self-determination, and is context dependent. Tools can measure a range of elements, including self-assessed perspectives, observed behavior, neural activity, or external, material conditions. Therefore, no single tool is likely to be adequate on its own without deeper qualitative evaluation.
- Personal transformation is influenced by and has a direct impact on the nature of the community or external environment in which a person's transformation occurs. As such, the relational field - connection to some form of community or a sense of belonging or relationship with another – is often critical, even for a process of individual, inner transformation.
- Personal transformation involves a fundamental change in the structure and functioning of the brain and physiology, resulting in a more posi-

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tive orientation towards self and the surrounding world.

- The domains of personal transformation reviewed have overlapping interrelationships and effects. Yet, the interpretation of data and outcomes are equally challenging. It is not always clear the directionality of impact between the personal, relational, and societal levels.
- The domains of mindfulness, wellbeing, social and emotional intelligence, empowerment and agency, and a sense of belonging and community help foster prosocial behavior (including helping, charitable altruism, concern, intrinsic motivation to act for the common good, and social communications.) This is influenced by the underlying capacities of self-awareness and self-regulation, compassionate understanding and connection with others, and developing a prosocial orientation for engagement. It is through this pathway that personal transformation is most likely to drive positive social change. Read more about this pathway in our conceptual map of how personal transformation results in the positive conditions for the advancement of social change.
- At this time though, there is little research documenting evidence that prosocial behavior itself translates into deep, systemic social transformation. This is likely largely due to the fact that most of the clinical research is conducted short-term in clinical settings versus the actual, practical application of personal transformation by practitioners in the social impact field that would allow us to see longer-term structural or systemic change.

In the following review, we focus on one individual domain of personal transformation, exploring its (a) history, (b) definitions, (c) any relevant practices and outcomes, (d) mechanisms, (e) measurement tools and approaches, (f) challenges with measurement, (g) future recommendations for research, and (h) applications for social impact. In a complementary text we propose a conceptual model for how the domains of personal transformation interrelate and influence social change, attempting to draw together from the evidence presented, a theoretical, operational model for this relationship. We have also compiled a sample list of the most commonly used measurement tools and a list of key studies

for each topic. Finally, we share a survey of what actual organizations are finding from integrating inner work and personal transformation into the ways in which they deliver their social change programming. You may download this spotlight study here or access the full literature review here.

Limitations

There are limits to our exploration that we wish to acknowledge. Most of the clinical and scholarly study of these concepts that we were able to access through our search of known databases were predominately conducted by Western researchers in mostly clinical settings. More diverse studies, tools, and perspectives from the Global South and other less represented groups are needed for a comprehensive picture. Additionally, we would have liked to find more studies that focus on non-clinical applications among practicing organizations in the social change sector. We also know that our exploration could not possibly be exhaustive, given the explosion of works that have populated the field in the last decade. We acknowledge the risk that by emphasizing the inner shifts through this research, it might be inferred that concrete, material progress may not be necessary - that if someone finds happiness and life satisfaction, that they no longer need a pathway out of poverty. To the contrary, we believe that the most significant pathway towards long-term sustainable change requires the personal transformation that enables complex change on a deeper level. Our purpose through this initial work is to move the dialogue forward by assessing what is known and what more needs to be explored to understand and measure the relationship between personal transformation and social change.

Gratitude

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Spotlight on: Empowerment & Agency

History of Empowerment and Agency

The concept of empowerment has been ascribed many different definitions and meanings in the various, often divergent contexts in which it has been used globally. Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968, 1972) advocated for the involvement of the oppressed in the process of transformation and for oppressors to constantly evaluate their role in the nature of oppression, using dialogue, reflection and action in search of truth and change in social, political and economic systems (Jupp & Ali, 2010). In the 1970s, participatory development and in the 1980s, participatory rural appraisal emerged as an alternative to top-down approaches, whereby the participation and leadership of communities themselves, especially the poor, was considered essential as a process of empowerment (Batliwala, 2007; Chambers, 2009, Jupp & Ali, 2010). In the 1980s, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach proposed that it was not just the availability of resources, but the extent to which individuals had the capacity to use those resources that influenced wellbeing and empowerment (Gibas et al., 2015; Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1980, 1985, 1993, 1999). Robert Chambers was also very influential during this period in advocating for a participatory, bottom-up and human-centered approach to development (Jupp & Ali, 2010). In the 1990s, empowerment work most widely involved women's rights, which culminated at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 with the Beijing Platform for Action towards gender-equity (Batliwala, 2007). Today, women and the poor are still the two populations typically foregrounded in discussions of empowerment. In 2000, The World Bank acknowledged empowerment as one of three pillars of poverty reduction (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The empowerment of vulnerable groups is included as a primary strategy towards ensuring equity under the Sustainable Development Goals established in 2015, including SDG 5, calling for "the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels", and SDG 10, by 2030 to "empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other sta-

tus" (UN, 2015). Increasingly, though, the term is understood to be multidimensional, culturally specific, and relational, meaning it can be used to analyze a person's position along other axes of power and identity as well (Alkire and Ibrahim, 2007).

Definitions of Empowerment and Agency

Broadly, empowerment is understood as the ability to choose, a definition which hinges on both the existence of options within a changing context of power, and a capacity to make purposeful choices, termed "agency" (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer 1999; Samman & Santos, 2003; Sidle, 2019). It is thus useful to differentiate between agency and empowerment.

Agency, as defined by Sidle (2019), is "the capacity of individuals to define aspirational goals and coordinate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and resources both internally available to them (individual capacities) and externally available to them (in their social, institutional or physical environments) in order to take action to achieve stated goals" (p. 4-5). Similarly, Sen (1985) says that agency is "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (p. 203). Thus, agency involves a positive belief in one's self and actual, concrete skills, which combine to drive confidence that one can achieve their goals to reach wellbeing, including happiness and fulfillment (Narayan, 2005; Sidle, 2019).

Empowerment then goes beyond agency's more static capacity or potential to take action, and references whether the individual has developed agency within a particular context where little power once existed. For empowerment, the environment, including its constraints, is a determinant of one's change in perceived power. One of the first and most influential conceptions of empowerment came from economist Naila Kabeer, who considered empowerment "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Choice is not the sole metric, then, because a powerful person can make choices without being empowered if they were not previously denied or always had the ability to choose.

In addition to the shifts in the environment enabling choice, empowerment is also associated with success in achieving desired outcomes. Kabeer associates choice

in empowerment with three interrelated dimensions: resources (the pre-conditions of choice), agency (the process of choosing), and achievements (the outcomes of choice) (Kabbeer, 1999). Deepa Narayan (2005) went further to suggest that in addition to achieving desired personal outcomes, empowerment involves the powerless transforming the environment around them (i.e., to affect social change): “The expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.” (p. 5).

Other definitions are more concrete as to what empowerment requires and looks like when achieved. The World Bank Sourcebook proposes four important factors for empowerment: information access, participation, social accountability and local organizational capacity with the objectives of improved governance, access to markets and justice, and provision of services (Jupp & Ali, 2010). But efforts to standardize definitions that articulate what empowerment outcomes should be may inadvertently disempower by disregarding local preferences. Empowerment may result in changes in political, social, economic realms among individuals and community (Batliwala, 2007). But for empowerment to exist, these outcomes should be determined by locals themselves. Thus, empowerment definitions should include the ability of people to define their preferences and have an impact towards realizing those goals (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Nilsson and Thorfinn (2010) agree that empowerment is a “key prerequisite for social change and development, and [must be] measured and accounted for by the people closest to these change processes” (p. 7). Page and Czuba (1999, online) say, “power (that is, capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities and their society, [is] being able to act on issues they define as important.”

Rowlands (1997) states, “empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions,” (p. 14). Rowlands proposed four categories of power: power over (ability to resist manipulation); power to (creating new possibilities); power with (acting in a group); and power from within (enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance) (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p 384-385). Rowlands fits within a broader feminist critique of empowerment as an originally feminist demand to change power struc-

tures that was then de-contextualized and de-politicized by the international development discourses (Batliwala, 2007, p. 557).

Huis et al. (2017) propose that empowerment must also evolve from participants’ understanding of the cultural context and causes of their suppression and preferences, otherwise, empowerment is pursued with processes and outcomes that reflect and up-hold the majority-world perspectives and systems, limiting actual progress towards equity. It is possible, then, that training in mindfulness and social and emotional intelligence for practitioners and evaluators may provide an antidote to top-down, disempowering approaches. These forms of personal transformation foster more openness, connection and curiosity, which may result in an orientation that is more likely to honor local experiences and processes.

Huis et al. (2017) define empowerment as “a multifaceted process, which involves individual as well as collective awareness, beliefs, and behavior embedded in the social structure of specific cultural contexts” (p. 3). They propose a Three-Dimensional Model of Women’s Empowerment that differentiates empowerment of action and beliefs at the (1) personal level (e.g., personal self-confidence), (2) relational level (e.g., feeling empowered relative to their partner or household), and (3) macro, societal-level (Huis et al., 2017).

Agency also is influenced by the surrounding environment, but in a different way. In order for agency to emerge, individuals need safe space for individual expression and to explore a positive self-identity, which then builds self-efficacy (Sidle, 2019). From a position of self-efficacy, agency, in turn, can involve an individual’s capacity and potential to influence their environment.

Recently, some scholars have sought to refine the relationship between empowerment and agency. For example, Samman and Santos (2009) argue: “empowerment is conceived as the expansion of agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007), in other words, as a trend variable: Just as growth is the increase in GDP per capita, empowerment can be seen as the increase in agency” (p. 4). Alkire (2005) states, “Empowerment is an increase in certain kinds of agency that are deemed particularly instrumental to the situation at hand...empowerment is a subset of agency, and that increases in empowerment

would be reflected in increased agency (but not necessarily vice versa)” (p. 5).

While scholars appear to disagree as to whether empowerment drives and is necessary for agency or whether agency is a contributor to empowerment, the two concepts are integral and interconnected. Jo Rowlands (1997) made an influential early critique of the sole emphasis on individual decision-making, arguing that individual self-belief mattered at least as much as structural opportunity; moreover, the type of power matters, as it should not simply be assumed that increased power and agency will be used in socially beneficial ways (p. 14).

Measuring Empowerment and Agency

The debate regarding measuring empowerment and agency, like wellbeing, centers around the variety of potential metrics, which may involve the objective and subjective, individual and collective, universal and “domain specific”, psychological, and intrinsic or externally derived (Narayan, 2005; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 383). Some measures involve the internal or moral domains of empowerment such as personal fulfilment and human rights, whereas others involve the relational, such as engagement in social and political action, and still others more concrete, material indicators such as economic shifts (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

Self-assessment methods and subjective measures are more commonly used and accepted to ascertain empowerment than measures of external conditions (Narayan, 2005). This is in part because one’s perspective on their power is determined by the relative context in which that power had previously been absent. Focusing on the “central importance of choice”, is a critical determinant of empowerment and agency, and this relies upon self-reported perceptions of power (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 68; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

Ibramin and Alkire (2007) propose a self-assessment-based framework with suggested questions for measuring power or control over choice in four domains: control over personal decisions, domain specific autonomy relevant to the individual (e.g., choice and use of choice in household decision-making), change in one’s life on an individual level, and change within community (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). These measures attempt to assess the extent to which people are constrained by patriarchal or other unequal power relations, whether

people are initiating their own choices or are coerced, and the degree to which they can make changes within their life and environment. Ibrahim & Alkire (2007) recommend that indicators chosen for measuring empowerment and agency on these four levels should:

1. Be relevant to the poor
2. Be internationally comparable to contribute to comparative studies of empowerment
3. Assess both the actual levels of agency and the intrinsic, personal values of aspects of empowerment
4. Be able to measure changes over time
5. Draw upon particular indicators that have already been tested and validated

The most common arenas for evaluating empowerment and agency involve the household and politics, and most often focus on women. In the realm of women’s empowerment Huis et al. (2017) proposed a three-dimensional framework across the following factors:

1. Personal-level: self-report assessments of control over life outcomes, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
2. Relational-level: self-report indicators of decision-making power, incidents of violence within specific relationships such as the household, bargaining power, freedom of mobility, social network size, social capital, and involvement in collective action.
3. Societal-level: measured with maps of gender equity gaps across nations or in specific domains like leadership positions, percentage of female microfinance borrowers, percentage of female staff promotion and attrition, etc.

Progress in empowerment and agency has been argued as essential for progress towards any development goals, including income, health, access to services and justice, and stronger civil society (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994). According to Jupp & Ali (2010) methods often fall into two categories - measuring comparable outcomes at the country and regional level or evaluating the process and impact of empowerment strategies at the program level.

The World Bank undertook a five-country study on measuring empowerment, defined as the capacity to make effective choices, under the assumption that degrees of empowerment could be measured and com-

pared across nations (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The resulting Measuring Empowerment (ME) Framework, is a comprehensive set of indicators for measuring degrees of empowerment in three parts: (1) whether there is an opportunity for a choice, (2) whether the person uses that opportunity to choose, and (3) whether it results in a desired outcome once chosen (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The World Bank suggests a theory of change that empowerment depends on two factors - agency and opportunity - which then drives development outcomes (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). Agency or “the capacity to make a meaningful choice” is measured according to a set of “asset endowment” indicators, which include psychological assets like the capacity to envision an alternative, access to trusted information, human assets like education or skills, material assets, financial assets, and social assets (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). Opportunity is seen as contained in the external context, including laws, customs, and social norms. The ME Framework divides decision-making at the local, intermediate and macro levels into very concrete domains, including state - justice, politics, services; market - credit, labor, and goods; and society - household and community (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). It should be noted that the level about which data is collected (women’s family planning choices) may differ from the level at which data is collected (which could be at the household level or public health level, etc.).

As an example, assessing the degree of empowerment of a woman to make a personal decision on family planning, this framework would first assess whether she had actual access to contraception and it was customary for women to make such a decision (existence of choice), whether she chose to use contraception (use of choice), and finally did that choice allow her to control how often she got pregnant according to her desire (achievement of choice). This simplified, standard framework still requires an in-depth understanding of the individual’s particular context, but is applicable to a wide range of circumstances and can be compared across countries. The approach is aligned with both Sen’s capability approach and Kabeer’s definition incorporating agency, and is intended for universal use (Jupp & Ali, 2010). However, it is context dependent, must be applied to each area of choice, and varies based on that choice and the societal level at which someone is acting (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

In contrast, another approach, more program dependent, might incorporate factors such as sense of self and vision for the future, which would be defined by the local participants themselves and the norms in their particular context, and may not be universally applicable, yet still very relevant (Jupp & Ali, 2010). Jupp and Ali (2010) recommend a two-part process: the first led by the in-group experiencing the empowerment and agency in conceptualizing what is to be measured, deciding indicators, determining a well-defined method, and generating insights. The process is self-facilitated so that there is no bias influenced by outsider preferences and yields important, unexaggerated insights for their own reflection and decision-making. With the permission of the participants, the second part led by outsiders involves collecting, aggregating, and analyzing participant data to ensure that insider values and perspectives do not influence the results. Overall the experience itself is empowering in that it honors people’s own perspectives on what has changed and how it has affected them, but it also yields quantitative, results-based data on outcomes. For example, the focal community in the Jubb and Ali study involved groups of women and men in rural Bangladesh who delivered three theatrical productions to describe how they viewed empowerment, yielding a much more robust and contextualized understanding of their experience and goals than had ever been considered before, resulting in very specific and measurable individual and community-level indicators (Jupp & Ali, 2010).

In addition to methods and frameworks that are applicable across programs or even nations, there are other tools that measure single dimensions of empowerment. One long-standing tool used for measuring control over life outcomes in the personal domain of empowerment is the 13-Item Locus of Control or Internal-External Scale (Rotter, 1966). This tool measures whether an individual has an internal locus of control (outcomes depend on personal actions) or external locus of control (that experiences and rewards are dictated by external forces).

There is also the widely-tested Ryan & Deci (1985) General Causality in Orientation Scale of Self-Determination, which measures autonomy or empowerment across three dimensions – autonomy orientation (high degree of personal choice and internal locus of causality), control orientation (how much is behavior compliant with

extrinsic factors or a sense of what “should” be), and impersonal orientation (how much do people feel their behavior is beyond their intentional control), representing a continuum of self-determination from high to low. In the autonomy orientation, there is an association with high levels of self-esteem. In the control orientation there is self-esteem, but it is conditional upon the perceptions of the external, control environment. And in the impersonal orientation, there is a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Ryan & Deci, 1985).

See Appendix for all suggested resources for measuring empowerment and agency.

Challenges with Measuring Empowerment and Agency

Measuring empowerment is a challenging undertaking in terms of the metrics used, methods implemented, and interpretation of data for outcomes, including the impact of measuring empowerment on empowerment itself.

Choosing Metrics

One of the core debates in measuring empowerment and agency is what indicators to choose. At issue are the prolific intangible and subjective indicators that are difficult to quantify. Empowerment is, by nature, a relative context – influenced by the nature of how one has shifted in disempowerment to power, dependent upon the surrounding environment. This makes any concrete set of measures difficult to standardize, difficult to compare across context, difficult to assess over time, and difficult to understand the complex interrelationships between metrics (Huis et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan, 2005).

Most measures tend to be domain-specific, such as decision-making in the household, economic or political sphere, and so a comprehensive understanding of empowerment must include a range of metrics that operate on an individual, relational and societal level (Huis et al., 2017; Nussbaum, 2001). Then, there are choices as to whether to measure quantitatively or qualitatively and with what unit of analysis (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan, 2005). This also involves deciding which variables are universal versus context-specific (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan, 2005). For example, is the metric

of women holding their own bank account one indicator of women’s empowerment that is true in all contexts, or is it possible that in some contexts, women prefer a community-based approach to financial security? Further, these measures can include aspects that are intrinsic versus material. For example, is it important for indicators to differentiate what powers are valued whether or not people have them? (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

With so many choices at various societal levels, this leads to a concern with the measures’ scope of complexity versus precision within a particular context. Huis et al. (2017) stress that aggregates, like development indices, don’t adequately capture the dynamics of empowerment at the personal, relational, and societal level. Yet single-dimensional measures of societal empowerment, for example, those that assess the numbers of women in positions of leadership or other societal function, are too narrow and may not give a complete picture of women’s position and agency in their societal context either (Huis et al., 2017). One of the single most often used indicator of empowerment is control over income, though this question alone does not shed light on the division of labor within a household, nor preferences or choice regarding the earning of said income (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). For example, just because women may choose how to spend certain money at the market for their family’s nutrition, they may still be severely limited in whether and how they can earn any of that income without their husband’s permission.

Methods

In addition to the indicators themselves, there are challenges with choosing adequate methods of evaluation. Who should conduct the measurements – should all measures be self-reported, subjective perspectives of the vulnerable themselves, or independent professional assessments of objective or observational indicators? Processes can also either be imposed and unempowering or empowering and completely unique to the particular context at hand (Jupp & Ali, 2010). Thus, much of the efforts towards measuring empowerment and agency are seen as either anecdotal and less consequential when information comes from communities themselves, or involving simplified metrics imposed by outsiders for their own use, eliminating the empowering learning process within the local community (Jupp & Ali, 2010).

Processes led by professionals differ by field – psycholo-

gy and clinical research use randomized controlled trials; economics and sociology use and manipulate large surveys; anthropology uses ethnographic methods such as life histories; and participatory practitioners learn by doing and listening to local communities (Narayan, 2005). Bias can also show up in the interpretation of data dependent upon who is conducting the evaluation. The metrics chosen are often related to the outcomes sought by the professionals carrying out the evaluation – for example, sociologists may be looking for changes in rights and power while economists may be looking for economic outcomes and efficiencies (Jupp & Ali, 2010). As such, it can be inherently ineffective, if not inappropriate, for empowerment to be decided by outsiders or for outsiders' exclusive use (Nilsson and Thorfinn, 2010).

For processes that are more locally-led, conceptions of empowerment among those experiencing it are constantly changing as the context evolves. True participatory processes in establishing metrics and determining outcomes, then, will themselves regularly change over time, making longitudinal analysis difficult (Jupp & Ali, 2010). For example, across ten years of empowerment programs with women in one particular place, concepts of empowerment might range and shift from being able to make decisions over use of household income to managing one's own money to sharing household chores with male partners to making independent family planning decisions. This results in outcomes that are difficult to measure over time, hard to compare and inconclusive in their causal attribution (Jupp & Ali, 2010). It is also important to caution that participatory methods have also been taken to the extreme as "participation by command", whereby top-down enforced participation is manipulated and imposed as a means for the outcomes of efficiency of programs and research, not necessarily for the empowerment possibilities as an end of its own (Jupp & Ali, 2010).

Interpretation and Outcomes

The interpretation of data and outcomes are equally challenging. It is not always clear the directionality of impact between the personal, relational, and societal levels (Huis et al., 2017). For example, a woman's self-confidence may shift her bargaining power within a household, or changes in bargaining power within a household that comes from increased economic influence may contribute to greater levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

There is also an interplay between individuals and their environment that impacts and is reflected in their perspectives on what empowerment looks like and how different components of empowerment are valued (Huis et al., 2017). People's experience of empowerment on the personal, relational and societal levels are particularly influenced by both their sense of self and the cultural context in which they exist. For example, in one cultural context empowerment might look like the individual freedom to pursue a career of choice or divorce where socially acceptable, and in another it might be expressed as the capacity to care collectively for more members of an extended network.

Empowerment itself is a non-linear process and does not fit well with monitoring and evaluation processes that seek to understand outcomes within a specific time frame (Jupp & Ali, 2010). An assessment of empowerment at one particular snap-shot of time may not take into consideration the time required for gains to be achieved within a particular set of societal structures and cultural norms without more complex and longitudinal studies (Huis et al., 2017). For example, a particular empowerment training might immediately impact self-confidence, but changes within the household and partner relationships as well as women's standing in society, would require a longer-term, multifaceted set of interventions to shift.

Finally, in terms of outcomes, it is not always explicit whether the power obtained through the empowerment process is solely a perception, used to benefit the common good through a new possibility or to create harm, whether it reduces the power of another population, or involves collective action (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

Future Recommendations for Research

Because empowerment is context-dependent, interventions need to be informed, if not determined, by the local populations they are intended to benefit to ensure empowerment gains are in alignment with local preferences and not contributing to majority-dominant perceptions and processes (Chambers, 2009; Huis et al., 2017; Narayan, 2005). It is most important that the indicators and data collection should be decided and conducted by the local population themselves before aggregated and analyzed by experts (Jupp & Ali, 2010).

Even still, the method needs to be transparent and able to be repeated with consistent results (Jupp & Ali, 2010). Such methodologies are valuable for policymakers—who need tools to enact and evaluate international organizations’ pledges to make their work more genuinely participatory—and for scholars and activists who increasingly understand empowerment as a remedy to global threats like climate change (Ajani et al. 2013).

Research should ensure that studies of empowerment interventions clearly specify on which dimension (personal, relational or societal) the intervention is intended to focus, and to measure outcomes with differentiated metrics for each level (Huis et al., 2017). It is possible to promote empowerment in distinct ways at each level, and so, it is important to measure comprehensively at all three levels, but to also distinguish between the levels in the measures used (Huis et al., 2017). Globally, there is increasing interest from governments—in Sweden, most notably—and from international organizations like the International Rescue Committee in formulating a feminist foreign policy and practice (Thompson & Clement 2013; Miliband 2019); further research is needed on how feminist policies function on different levels of intervention, and how those levels interact.

Assessment tools need to be multi-faceted: for example, looking at women’s perceptions of personal and relational power, it would be important to consider objective measures of women’s social conditions as well as their position relative to men, and further explore how women are utilizing improvements in empowerment to effectively change women’s wellbeing for the future (Huis et al., 2017). Further, studies should not only look at aggregate indices of women’s positions in society, but to understand their position relative to those in power within the local cultural context and over time to understand the changes in equity more comprehensively (Huis et al., 2017). At the same time, there is a clear need to use the term ‘gender’ more precisely, given increasing uncertainty about whether terms like ‘vulnerability’ or ‘empowerment’ can or should apply to men (Carpenter 2003; Henry 2017), or to other non-normative gender and sexual identities (Quilty 2015).

Methodologically, Ibrahim & Alkire (2007) emphasize the lack of rigorous, comparative studies of empowerment and agency, and thus recommend that future indicators be internationally comparable. Similarly, Aili

Mari Tripp and Melanie Hughes (2018) make a specific call for quantitative and mixed-methods studies. Though the study of gender and politics has historically preferred theoretical, conceptual and qualitative work, the increasing use of quantitative or mixed-methods approaches seeks to add a greater degree of transparency and replicability to longstanding feminist research questions and critiques.

Applications of Empowerment and Agency for Social Change

Empowerment and agency are widely viewed as essential for progress along a diverse range of social development indicators, including improvements in economic wellbeing; access to social services, justice, and markets; better governance; and stronger civil society (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Brazilian thought leader and educator, Paulo Freire, identified the critical link between individual empowerment and community wellbeing. “While individual empowerment, the feeling of being changed, is not enough concerning the transformation of the whole society, it is absolutely necessary for the process of social transformation” (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994, p. 143).



The rationale for the link between individual empowerment and social change includes a few key relationships. The first is the evidence of the benefits of women’s empowerment and leadership on wellbeing. Women’s economic empowerment feeds a “virtuous spiral” of greater family wellbeing, as women are shown to invest more significantly in health and education, and also greater influence and involvement in social and political decision-making (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2002; Mayoux, 1999, p. 1; Sen, 1999).

Second, empowerment may also contribute towards good governance, including more effective justice systems, protection of civil liberties and rule of law, if held accountable by empowered citizens who have access to trusted and transparent information and authentic avenues for ongoing participation (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). When more vulnerable groups have opportunities to participate in decision-making and have their voice heard, studies have shown there are better development outcomes at the local level and more equitable income distribution and access to social services (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Empowerment may also influence confidence in making choices that result in lower exploitation, greater bargaining power, and greater accountability among those in leadership, allowing for more inclusive, participatory transformation (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

The World Bank (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005) explored 14 different empowerment approaches implemented globally, some of which were themselves reviews of dozens of other studies, across a wide range of contexts, including women's empowerment, poverty reduction and political participation. The approaches use a wide range of definitions, indicators, measurement methods, and data sources, customized to each context. Some of the important conclusions from this (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005) review include:

- empowerment can occur in one or more circumstances of life, can take place at various levels, and can be experienced individually or collectively
- empowerment within a group is influenced by group-level culture
- most studies of women's empowerment (Malhotra, 2002 review of 45 studies) focus on the household level and are weak with intervening processes and longitudinal perspectives
- community is a stronger predictor of women's empowerment at the individual level, than are individual qualities
- indicators of empowerment imposed by the outside are not always easy to conceptualize by participants, and concepts mean different things to different people, so measures must be based in the realities of the poor
- empowering methods of measurement are important

Finally, empowerment is shown to drive health and wellbeing. A lack of power is shown to be a significant risk factor for disease (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994). As such, the individual as well as community empowerment of vulnerable groups, can lead to greater health outcomes as they have increased power and capacity to transform the underlying social, cultural, political and economic underpinnings of inequity feeding disease (UNDP; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994).

Conclusion

Through this preliminary literature review of the scientific and scholarly writing on personal transformation, we have explored the existing knowledge and challenges of defining, measuring and understanding the mechanisms and outcomes of some of the more intangible aspects of human nature. Despite a lack of consensus on the precise definitions and metrics that would adequately capture all aspects of personal transformation, evidence suggests that it involves a process of self-development with a range of positive outcomes. The five domains of personal transformation reviewed tend to work through a five-part pathway to influence prosocial outcomes and potentially social change: (1) Mindfulness and emotional intelligence build the self-awareness and self-knowledge that enable us to (2) move into a place of greater self-regulation. From this process of inner growth, we find greater agency and wellbeing, and (3) develop the capacity to understand others more completely. As we continue to invest in our inner development and relationships, we (4) find deeper connectedness and engage positively with others. As we continue to foster mindfulness, social and emotional intelligence, and a sense of belonging and/or community, we (5) cultivate the foundational prosocial orientation that motivates us to act on behalf of the common good. While the existing research reviewed does not yet demonstrate a direct, causal link between prosocial behavior and positive systemic change, we propose that personal transformation creates positive conditions for the advancement of social change as mindfulness, social intelligence, belonging, and agency combine to drive altruistic action towards greater collective wellbeing. We have outlined the details of this proposed conceptual model for the interrelationships between personal transformation, prosocial behavior and social change in an accompanying paper. Additional research, especially in non-clinical settings,

is still necessary to determine whether and how prosocial behavior results in systemic social transformation. For now, we hope that this review engenders greater dialogue about what is known and what more needs to be explored to understand more deeply the relationship between personal transformation and social change.

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EMPOWERMENT & AGENCY MEASUREMENT TOOLS

The following table contains an index of some of the more common tools used to measure this domain of personal transformation and its subcomponents.

Tool	Author	Description and Note	Link to Find Tool
WE-MEASR (Women's Empowerment – Multidimensional Evaluation of Agency, Social Capital and Relations).	CARE.org	This tool is designed for use with women, and consists of 23 short, validated scales designed to measure women's empowerment in domains critical to sexual, reproductive and maternal health and nutrition.	https://www.care.org/sites/default/files/we-measr_tool_final_1.pdf
The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)	USAID	An aggregate index that measures the empowerment of women involved in agricultural activities including decisions about agriculture production, decision making power, control of income, leadership in the community and time allocation.	http://weai.ifpri.info/versions/weai/
The Three-Dimensional (3D) Empowerment Framework	The Commonwealth of Learning (COL)	This is a tool to assist in designing a survey, indexing and structuring data analysis to measure empowerment within and between groups over time.	http://dspace.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/2468/2016_Carr_Measuring-Empowerment.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
Measuring Empowerment (ME) Framework	World Bank	A comprehensive set of indicators for measuring degrees of empowerment in three parts: (1) existence of choice, (2) use of choice, and (3) achievement of choice, which can be applied across different programs, circumstances, and nations.	https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/8856
Self-Assessment Based Framework	Ibramin and Alkire (2007)	A framework utilizing subjective, self-assessment questions for measuring power or control over choice in four primary areas: personal decisions, autonomy, change in one's life, and change within community.	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/
Measuring Women's Empowerment	Huis et al. (2017)	A three-dimensional framework, designed for the context of microfinance, for measuring empowerment at the personal level, relational level, and societal level.	https://www.readcube.com/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01678
13-Item Locus of Control or Internal-External Scale	(Rotter, 1966)	A long-standing tool to measure personal control over life outcomes using 13-items to assess whether an individual has an internal locus of control (outcomes depend on personal actions) or an external locus of control (outcomes and experiences are dictated by external forces).	https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?

Tool	Author	Description and Note	Link to Find Tool
General Causality in Orientation Scale of Self-Determination	Ryan & Deci (1985)	A widely-tested tool that measures autonomy or empowerment across three dimensions – autonomy orientation (high degree of personal choice and internal locus of causality), control orientation (how much is behavior compliant with extrinsic factors or a sense of what “should” be), and impersonal orientation (how much do people feel their behavior is beyond their intentional control), representing a continuum of self-determination from high to low.	https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/1985_De-ciRyan_GCOS.pdf

EMPOWERMENT & AGENCY ESSENTIAL STUDIES

Following are a selection of key studies that help define this domain of personal transformation, provide an assessment of tools for its measure, or provide insights on its relevance to social change.

Study	Citation	Summary	Link
Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators.	Alsop, R. and Heinsohn, N. (2005, Feb). Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3510.	Alsop & Heinsohn present an analytic framework that can be used to measure and monitor empowerment processes and outcomes. The measuring empowerment (ME) framework, rooted in both conceptual discourse and measurement practice, illustrates how to gather data on empowerment and structure its analysis. The framework can be used to measure empowerment at both the intervention level and the country level, as a part of poverty or governance monitoring.	https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/8856
Three-Dimensional Model of Women's Empowerment: Implications in the Field of Microfinance and Future Directions	Huis, M. A., Hansen, N., Otten, S., & Lensink, R. (2017). A Three-Dimensional Model of Women's Empowerment: Implications in the Field of Microfinance and Future Directions. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> , 8. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01678	Huis et al., propose a Three-Dimensional Model of Women's Empowerment to integrate previous findings and to gain a deeper understanding of women's empowerment	https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Three-Dimensional-Model-of-Women%E2%80%99s-Empowerment%3A-Huis-Hansen/a2543a87aa59ac89c6ee-44855a8112c3fc4e35a7
Agency and Empowerment: A Proposal for Internationally Comparable Indicators	Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2007). Agency and Empowerment: A Proposal for Internationally Comparable Indicators. <i>Oxford Development Studies</i> , 35(4), 379–403. doi: 10.1080/13600810701701897	Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire offer both a theoretically comprehensive literature review and a methodologically rigorous attempt to develop reliable, actionable metrics for practitioners. The article surveys theories of empowerment and ultimately adopts Sen's definition, supplemented by Rowlands' typology of power. The authors then provide a set of internationally comparable, field-tested indicators and survey questions.	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/

Study	Citation	Summary	Link
Measuring Empowerment? Ask Them: Quantifying qualitative outcomes from people's own analysis: Insights for results-based management from the experience of a social movement in Bangladesh.	Jupp, D., Ibn Ali, S. (2010) Measuring Empowerment? Ask Them: Quantifying qualitative outcomes from people's own analysis: Insights for results-based management from the experience of a social movement in Bangladesh. Stockholm: Sida Studies in Evaluation.	Jupp & Ali offer insights for measuring empowerment using a results-based process based on the experience of a social movement in Bangladesh.	https://www.oecd.org/derec/sweden/46146440.pdf
Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment	Kabeer, N. (1999) Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, Development and Change 30: 435-464.	Naila Kabeer's foundational conception of empowerment as an expanded ability to make choices has been enormously influential, both theoretically and practically. Since the 1990s, and especially in the early 2000s, Kabeer's methodologies and frameworks have been adopted by major international organisations like the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank.	https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-7660.00125
Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras	Rowlands, J. (1997) Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras. Oxford, UK and Dublin, IR: Oxfam (UK and Ireland).	Jo Rowlands' critical feminist intervention questions the imprecise and frequently abstract ways that the term 'empowerment' is used in development discourses. Rowlands proposes a more specific typology of power, since not all increases in power and agency are socially beneficial, and suggests that self-belief and perceived agency matter as much as, if not more than, opportunity alone.	https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121185/bk-questioning-empowerment-honduras-010197-en.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y
Development as Freedom	Sen, A. (1999) Development as Freedom. New York: Knopf Press.	Amartya Sen's capabilities approach was fundamental to popularising empowerment and agency as goals and methods of development work. Sen argues that an individual's ability to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and that such freedom is best understood according to a person's real opportunities to achieve it, i.e. their capabilities.	http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/cde/OMDE625/Sen/Sen-intro.pdf

Study	Citation	Summary	Link
Action on Agency: A Theoretical Framework for Defining and Operationalizing Agency in Girls' Life Skills Programs	Sidle, A.A. (2019). Action on Agency: A Theoretical Framework for Defining and Operationalizing Agency in Girls' Life Skills Programs. Gendered Perspectives on International Development: Working Papers	Sidle offers an operational definition of agency based on a comprehensive literature and an examination of the work of 18 organizations working with adolescent girls in East Africa.	https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Action-on-Agency-%3A-A-Theoretical-Framework-for-and-Sidle/
Methods, methodologies and epistemologies in the study of gender and politics	Tripp, A.M & Hughes, M.M. (2018) Methods, methodologies and epistemologies in the study of gender and politics, <i>European Journal of Politics and Gender</i> 1(1-2): 241-57.	Aili Mari Tripp and Melanie Hughes review the methods, methodologies and epistemologies that scholars of gender and politics have employed over time. The article offers a useful discussion of the current possibilities and limits of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches.	https://static1.square-space.com/static/5b0c-