The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept

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Empowerment has become a widely used management term in the last decade or so, though, in practical terms, it shares the ambiguity of its predecessors in the HRM tradition. This paper sets out to unravel the web of meaning surrounding empowerment to show what a contested concept it is, and hence why its application in organizational settings is fraught with misunderstanding and tension. It does so by taking an approach that contributes to the examination of HRM discourse and management rhetoric. To demonstrate the ambiguity of empowerment as a concept, the paper reviews the various ways in which the term has been used across non-management disciplines (women, minority groups, education, community care, politics), culminating with a review of the use of empowerment in contemporary management theory. The paper concludes that organizations and managers have chosen to coin a phrase which is open to different, sometimes contradictory, meanings and which, when applied, evokes both subjective attitudes and objective behaviour, means different things in varying contexts, and is affected fundamentally by individual differences in perception and experience. Unless organizations offer clear operational definitions when using empowerment, instead of purely acquiescing to a vague and seductive version of the concept, they are abdicating responsibility for the unpredictable consequences that result.

Introduction

For its chief proponents, empowerment is a humanistic device to improve the quality of working life for ordinary employees. For its critics, it is the latest management ruse to intensify work and shift risk. Much more than either TQM or BPR, however, empowerment
is also a highly elusive theoretical concept – it has no single guru, nor does it define a clear-cut set of policy initiatives. Instead, it is much more free-floating, evoking, in vague terms, a new liberated world of work. Indeed, it is a term with a radical left-wing lineage which has been transformed into right-wing managerial discourse. Because of this, the term is attractive, loose and ambiguous enough for it to gain superficial initial acceptance at all levels of an organization. However, this also means that acceptance and perception of empowerment as a concept depends on people’s previous experience of the term via other media (such as through reading feminist literature) and that this may, in turn, raise differing expectations amongst employees, and between employees and middle management. Thus, by allowing this ambiguity to be an initial lever for the acceptance of an empowerment policy or programme, managers may actually be laying themselves wide open to the varied, potentially contradictory, usage and definitions that can result, along with raised expectations that cannot or will not be met. In our view, there are two alternative solutions to this problem. Either organizations need to forgo the seductive language of empowerment altogether, or they need to bite the bullet and make clear statements as to meaning and intention at the start of any initiative involving empowerment. In this way, ambiguity may be pre-empted and longer-term internalization – as opposed to short-term or resentful compliance – achieved. Whatever, it is clear that, hitherto, the use of the term within the management arena has been very vague, ill-informed and, to a large extent, naive, and no single panacea can be applied by management to ensure successful adoption of the term within organizations.

Conceptualizing Empowerment

One of the major issues in the debate on empowerment is to do with definition. The term ‘empowerment’ is used across a wide range of disciplines and each brings differing interpretations. An investigation into the etymon of empowerment exposes a basis for this subjectivity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines empowerment as ‘the action of empowering; the state of being empowered’, and it was first used in this form in 1849. However, the verb ‘empower’ from which this noun is derived was first apparent in the English language some two hundred years before. The word ‘empower’ is of French and Latin derivation consisting of the preposition ‘em’ and the noun ‘power’. ‘Em’ probably comes from the Old French for ‘en’, and they were, at one time, interchangeable words meaning ‘in’. The Latin source of ‘em’ is, however, more complicated. ‘Em’ and ‘en’ also held the same definition of to ‘look’ or ‘come’. This provokes interesting thought as to modern interpretations of the word ‘empowerment’, but it is more likely that its origins lie with the preposition ‘in’ which denoted space, and was defined as ‘into; onto; towards or against’. This form of the Latin would explain the emergence of another spelling of the word, ‘impower’. The first recorded use of the word ‘empower’ and its derivations was in the seventeenth century by Hamon L’Estrange in his book The Reign of King Charles. This first usage was synonymous with the idea of authorizing or licensing: “Letters from the Pope”, wrote L’Estrange, “thou us impow’rd to fortifie thus farr.” The idea of authorizing and licensing is one that the Oxford English Dictionary still sees as common and, indeed, this remains the legal and constitutional usage of the term in today. Additionally, it acknowledges the existence of a second definition, which is to ‘impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit’, which was first used in 1667 by Milton in his famous work Paradise Lost: “Thou us impow’rd to fortifie thus farr.”

However, there are two original definitions of the word ‘empower’, which the Oxford English Dictionary states are now rare or obsolete. These are “to bestow power upon, make powerful” and “to gain or assume power over”. The apparent obsolescence of
these definitions may surprise many modern theorists who rely solely or partly on these definitions to support their theories of empowerment. It seems that we must move away from the connection of empowerment to power *per se*, and address instead its more indirect end, as per the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s more common usage, that is the acknowledgement of power to achieve an end rather than as an end in itself. In this respect, power is an essential component of any interpretation of empowerment, not least because it remains its root word. The original usage of the word and its present definitions do not refute this, but there is a danger that over the centuries of usage the importance of power, within the concept of empowerment, has been overemphasized. Nowadays, there is a constant need to remind the reader that empowerment is not ‘power itself’, but a process by which the latter is only bestowed to an end or for a purpose. Lukes (1974) argues that power is the capacity not only to impose one’s will but also to set the terms of agreement. In this sense, one would see power as something which one has over another. The conception of power as ‘power over another’ is predominant in the literature and indeed the interpretation of power in terms of domination and oppression emerges from a review of the use of empowerment across disciplines.

All this means that employers and managers are playing with fire when they lazily talk the language of empowerment. Individual employees’ previous expectations about what empowerment means will have emerged from these available definitions and common-sense everyday usage. It may well be that when organizations, in the process of implementing empowerment, fail to offer accompanying definitions, their employees seek out their own for clarification, and challenge and ambiguity subsequently follow. Empowerment may be naïvely viewed by some as a relatively new and uncontaminated management initiative and concept, but it is important to consider how it was used before management adopted the term, how it sounds to everyday common-sense ears, and how this impacts on the use of the concept within the management arena.

**The Use of Empowerment across Non-management Disciplines**

At first glance, the non-management literature might be summarized as defining empowerment through a notion of powerlessness and oppression. It is perceived as the use of certain techniques to transform those without power into equitable positions. This occurs when the oppressed recognize that there is an alternative way of living and that oppression does not have to be tolerated. As West (1990) writes, “it is because we have some idea of a more authentic identity, that we can condemn existing identities as formed under constraints, as inauthentic, but most importantly as replaceable” (p. 130). This illustrates one of the inextricable links between empowerment and politics. Not only is the term politically loaded, used as it is to pertain to the revolt of the oppressed, but also politics is itself an area in which ‘empowerment’ has taken effect. West’s *Authenticity and Empowerment* (1990) challenges the assumption that we live in a ‘free world’ and promotes a new theory of liberation. He attacks traditional politics for failing to connect political problems to effective political practices and, hence, for producing an apathetic and frustrated affluent majority who, unconsciously, allow oppression to continue. West argues that, according to theories of rationality, people are both individuals and social beings and that the culture within which an individual lives must be seen by them to be ‘authentic’; that is, consistent with their beliefs and values. If the culture fails to meet these needs, an alternative culture which holds greater authenticity will be sought and through this ‘dissident’ culture individuals will seek the collective goals of their members in the face of indifference from wider society. This process requires a combination of emancipation and empowerment, “a culture which did not in some way
The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept

emancipate would not attract people to it. A culture which did not empower would not survive” (West 1990, 71). Emancipation involves attracting people to a culture for fulfilment. A culture empowers if it proposes, in the words of West, “forms of life which foster the collective strength and resolve of all those who belong (to it)” (1990, 71).

Despite this expectation of rationality, West argues that it is not always exercised owing to the social system, political power and other intervening factors. He contends that, although such concepts of authenticity and empowerment are useful in the politics of liberation, one important thing should be remembered: “there is no universally primary struggle, no justification for the hegemony of a particular class or category within society” (1990, 174). This reminds us that empowerment must not be defined simply as the giving away or the gaining of power. For empowerment is not a revolutionary act or seizure of power by one group. Rather empowerment eradicates oppressive power altogether and enables the whole population to enter a free and fair world. West’s definition, however, remains a wide generalization, and it adds little to our understanding of the term in the management literature – beyond reminding us just how politically radical and utopian some of its connotations are. For the more applied usage of empowerment, a closer look is required at the literature on: women, minority groups, education, community care and political orientation.¹

The Empowerment of Women

It is a basic assumption of feminist literature that women are subject to oppression by men who, through the ages, have achieved domination through power. This power has been gained not only through individual qualities of men (for example, through physical strength) but also through the long-established patriarchal society in which we live (for example, through the legal system). Thus, if women are to fight oppression, they must tackle it on both a personal and a wider social basis. Related to this is the definition of the term empowerment by Bookman and Morgen (1988, 4), whereby it connotes “a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge the basic power relations in our society”. Considering this, the literature generally covers those areas in which women are most subject to the abuse of male power: physical violence; sexual encounters; the workplace and the family. Within each of these areas of study, women seek different ways to conquer oppression and, therefore, empowerment methods vary. Bookman and Morgen see empowerment as the recognition of the forces which act to oppress women and the motivation to change those factors in each woman’s life that allow them to act. This process is neither easy nor does it follow a linear pattern, contend the authors. Instead “it takes twists and turns, includes both resistance and consent, and ebbs and flows as groups with different relations to the structures and sources of power came into conflict” (1988, 4). Many have noted in the feminist literature that the empowerment of women does not involve the disempowerment of men. The assumption that this might be so is based on the concept of ‘power’ which is ordinarily seen as a one-dimensional term: that is, power is either a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing. In this view, the fact that power can be mobilized in oppressive and empowering ways must be recognized if one is to avoid the vicious circle of oppression. As Hall (1992) writes “It is not women’s purpose to take power from men; rather, the goal of women is to develop their own power while respecting men for who they are” (p. 104). In short, power is not simply zero sum.

If we examine the issue of battered women, it is suggested that the superior physical strength of the male gender puts women at an immediate disadvantage as regards violence. Male violence is seen by feminist writers as an abuse of their power to subordinate women into feelings of inferiority.
Holland et al. identifies two components of female empowerment. The first is intellectual empowerment (which refers to the knowledge and expectations which a woman holds) and the second is experiential empowerment (the capacity to control behaviour). These two concepts are independent of each other, and the authors argue that “empowerment at one level does not necessarily entail empowerment at another” (Holland et al. 1991, 2). Additionally, and particularly relevant to physical abuse, was the addition of a third dimension of empowerment, the transitional level of the network. This relies on the idea that empowerment is context-dependent, when a young woman’s intellectual empowerment (knowledge and expectations) is mismatched with her capacity to control her sexuality/the violence in practice (experiential empowerment). The existence of this ‘transitional’ level reflects the idea that empowerment is not a process that ends, but a continual struggle that constantly needs attention and reaffirmation. Indeed, the concern is that battered women often find themselves at the transitional level and that, however empowered a woman is intellectually, there is always a danger with physical abuse that experiential empowerment will fail. In relation to organizational theory, one might argue that no matter how authentic their enthusiasm and desire for empowerment, employees rely on management not to abuse their greater power and hence experientially to empower their employees.

Returning to the fate of abused women, because of the physical superiority of men, women tend to have two immediate options in a violent situation – either to walk away or to risk fighting back. It is considered essential that if a woman does walk away and leave her abusive partner, she not only undergoes therapy but that a certain amount of independence is instilled in her to prevent her returning to the abuser, a common problem with domestic abuse. “A therapeutic approach”, writes Reinelt (1994, 691), “often reinforces dependency and does not improve the economic conditions of women’s lives that may enable them to live independently.” In her view, women must take control of their own lives by talking to each other and transferring their problem from one which is intrinsically personal to recognizing that other women are affected too. This way the problem is not the woman, or indeed women as a whole, but the abuse of male gender structures. Once the problem is externalized, women can try and tackle it. As Schecter (1982, 109) concludes on the topic of empowerment: “Its premise is to turn individual defeats into victories through giving women tools to better control their lives and joining in collective struggle.” In this way, empowerment can be seen as holding a different meaning and encouraging different empowering procedures when related to diversity within oppressed groups. Again, this process may also be relevant to constructing a definition of employee empowerment. Organizational empowerment affects all those within an organization and, yet, as in the case of women, within this group there are many different sub-groups. Those that are empowered in a workplace come from, for example, different backgrounds, have different levels of education, work for different divisions of the organization, have different roles and are at different levels of the hierarchy. There are likely, moreover, to be ‘winners and losers’ in any managerial change programme (Leverment et al. 1998). These internal divisions need to be recognized. As West (1990, 134) writes, “to avoid a destructive fragmentation of the group the members must, in the first place, be concerned with the progressive formation of those on the ‘oppressor’ side of these internal divisions”.

Empowerment and Minority Groups

Membership of a minority may bring with it automatic powerlessness in a society led by a majority. Laws, rules and attitudes most commonly reflect those in positions of power and act against those that differ from the norm. Empowerment emerges, therefore, as a com-
mon theme in the literature covering the lives of minority groups in such areas as race, sexuality, disability and age. There is an assumption here that the oppressed are somehow ‘driven’ to right the injustices that they have suffered. West (1990, 73) attributes this to the fact that once a more authentic identity has been identified, “the existing culture is a place of frustration and low self-esteem for them”. The anger and resentment they feel towards this surrounding culture drives them to be proactive in their fight for equality. Such social movements, concluded West, combine the virtues of empowerment with the pleasures and fulfilment of authenticity.

The largest literature is that on the empowerment of a racial minority. Solomon (1976) discusses the source of oppression, in this instance, as the blocking of two sources of power: direct and indirect. The first relates to the specific restriction of access to resources, which is a societal source; and the second relates to the individual experiences of minorities and how these experiences are mediated by significant others. Soloman refers to the importance in social work of getting black people to recognize their value and their ability to meet self-determined goals through linking them with resources, helping them gain self-knowledge and completing certain tasks. Empowerment is defined by Solomon (1976, 6) as “the process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatised social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued social roles”. It is easy to envisage similar processes affecting some groups of employees. The ability to meet self-determined goals, self-knowledge and the link with resources, all these might appear as important qualities of an empowered employee.

Perry (1980) highlights the socio-economic impact of black empowerment in a political context. Taking a rural southern locality in Alabama (which became the first biracial political entity in the US to be completely black-governed), Perry looks at the benefits received by blacks and how these have changed since black political control. While there are benefits to black political participation in Greene County, Perry states that “black political empowerment has not been without its shortcomings” (p. 219). The problem seems to be that, in ten years, blacks went from having no political power at all to dominance in the political arena. Perry classes this as empowerment, but many would argue that, although the process was an empowering one, the outcome is not one of empowerment because the attitudes and opinions, which were created over a long period of oppression and disadvantage, have not disappeared. Indeed, Perry (1980, 220) reports that the black public officials failed to bring about an integrated school system as “the resistance of whites to integration made the creation of an integrated school system unachievable”. In this sense, whilst the oppressed minority had gained ‘power’ and ‘control’ in a symbolic sense, underlying attitudes of the dominant societal group had not altered and, for this reason, the black community are not considered by Perry as truly empowered. Perhaps “political empowerment would seem to require a prior process of social empowerment through which effective participation in politics becomes possible” (Friedman 1992, 34). Once more, there are potential links to the sociology of organizations using Marchington’s et al. (1992) escalator of participation, one might argue that employee control of organizations, which they translated, as “employee-owned organizations”, are not necessarily empowering unless management attitudes reflect this level of employee control. This potential gap between formal control and empowerment has been discussed by Cheney (1999) in relation to recent experience of the Mandraga worker co-operations.

Empowerment and Education

Empowerment is inextricably linked to education. Not only is education a crucial part of all empowerment programmes but it
also acts to empower in itself. For those who are illiterate or have to adapt to a second language or are deaf, for example, education is crucial to develop a sense of self-worth and empowerment. In the educational literature, much is made of the substantive and symbolic concepts, which the term ‘empowerment’ encapsulates. The idea is that empowerment can refer both to a substantive form of change at the individual level and a more symbolic form of change at the societal level. This encourages educational theorists to question who exactly education empowers – individuals or groups? Griffin (1992), in his study of the links between empowerment and experiential learning, suggests that education empowers everyone through a respect for each individual and his/her personal targets. However, he seems at odds with the idea that a substantive change at the level of the individual will be reflected in substantive social change. “Assuming that empowerment is intended to convey a sense of politics, I want to suggest”, he wrote, “that whereas the capacity of experiential learning for personal empowerment is very real, as practitioners know full well, its capacity for social change or transformation is very limited indeed” (Griffin 1992, 31). In the educational literature, empowerment has tended to focus either on the teachers, or to a smaller extent, on students. As it refers to teachers, empowerment describes the technique by which the delivery of educational services is much more ‘effective’. But as it concerns students, the issue of empowerment is more complicated. According to Courts (1991, 148), student empowerment has been achieved when, “they have begun to gain a sense of their own power as learners and meaning makers”. In the case of illiteracy, the author states that language brings empowerment. “Once the possibility of language becomes an operative fact in the human being’s life”, he wrote, “it becomes enormously significant in the process of naming that which had no name, in the process of learning that there are names, the human begins to feel power” (Courts 1991, 13). The author, however, does not confine himself to the illiterate – those that some might claim to be especially oppressed. He also looks at the power of developing language and skills in reading, writing, listening and discussing amongst ‘normal’ students in order to put them in a more powerful position in the world.

Education also helps those that are members of a minority group. This is particularly true for those who are immigrants or a foreign-speaking minority of a particular country. In this situation, there is a struggle to maintain some sense of oneself whilst accepting the norms and language of the ruling country. Bullivant (1995) discusses this dilemma with respect to immigrants to Australia. He talks of the power of the educational system to reproduce the interests of the ruling or dominant class and the need for education to move away from this ‘power over’ towards an empowerment of all schoolchildren. He bases his conclusions on a study of the evolution in Australia of language and culture programmes, which aim to empower cultural minorities. He explains that, prior to 1973, immigrants were expected to abandon their own backgrounds, culture and language and conform to the majority. Over the years, this has changed, he explains, through various stages of multicultural involvement to the present day. The emphasis has now moved away from the desire to incorporate minorities to a need to encourage differences and diversity in order to remain economically competitive. In short, prominence has progressed from individual empowerment to macro-empowerment. We might speculate, cynically, that economic reasons provide a similar rationale for empowerment within organizations. The desire to remain competitive drives management to look for ways of improving efficiency and one way is through the devolvement of responsibility. The danger, of course, is that, if empowerment only occurs as a result of economic difficulties, this may blunt its critical edge and accentuate the superficial nature of its meaning.
Education sometimes holds different empowerment potential for different people, particularly in situations where there is a dominant group and a minority. Al-Haj (1995, 215) writes of the Arab minority in Israel, “while Palestinians have seen education throughout the different periods as a source of empowerment, the dominant groups have utilized the education system as a mechanism of social control”. Education allows the dominant group to remove from impressionable minds any development of minority tolerance or national consciousness and to enforce the official, ruling ideology, therefore oppressing the minority groups through the education of their children. Yet, to the contrary, some minorities see the education system as empowering in that they can improve their status in the wider society through educational achievement. Also by exerting public pressure and developing parallel informal education, they can force the dominant group to allow some changes in the education system. True empowerment, it seems, is not really achieved through these means, as Al-Haj (1995, 223) notes: “it is, of course, a relationship carefully designed by the majority in order to maintain dependency and prevent the minority from determining the content of its own education”. As we shall see, very similar criticisms have been made of top-down management empowerment schemes in the workplace.

**Empowerment, Social Work and Community Care**

Community Care is conventionally defined as involving those who are physically disabled, mentally ill, have a learning disability or are elderly. It generally also includes those who suffer from alcohol or drug dependence. It is the predicament of these people, their carers and their social workers that is discussed with relation to empowerment. “A new buzz word has entered the vocabulary of social work – empowerment”, write Mullender and Ward (1991, 1), “to be seen as progressive and credible, everyone is trying to jump on the bandwagon.” Like organizational theory, social work has been subject to a wash of literature on the merits of empowerment and the need for it to be central to any practitioner’s mindset. The authors add, however, “unless it is accompanied by a commitment to challenging and combating injustice and oppression, which shows itself in actions as well as words, this professional Newspeak … allows us all, as practitioners, to rewrite accounts of our practice without fundamentally changing the way it is experienced by service users” (Mullender and Ward 1991, 3). Hence, Mullender and Ward see empowerment not just as some form of ideology but as an operational term which can be most clearly understood in relation to oppression, something they define as both a state of affairs and a process which acts to limit unjustly the lives of those with less power. On this understanding, then, empowerment in community care gives rights to its users and those that care for them. This is done in a number of ways. Indeed Stevenson and Parsloe (1993) see empowerment as relating to decisions not only over the larger issues, which affect everyone, but also over much smaller, seemingly inconsequential, matters. Here, the dichotomy re-emerges between individual and social factors. They explain that having the opportunity to make choices is not only about having the freedom of choice as to residential homes but also as to whether you can open a window without asking. “Small victories may have a significant impact on the morale and are intrinsically empowering”, they write, but qualify this by reiterating that “they cannot be a substitute for choice over the major issues” (Stevenson and Parsloe 1993, 8). In this way oppression is being tackled at both the personal and group levels.

Empowerment of Community Care service users, and those that care for them, is itself reliant on the empowerment of the social workers themselves (Stevenson and Parsloe 1993). They explain the need for a new culture, which can lift the limits oppressing
social workers, and change not only the way they work but also how they feel about their work. In this view, such commitment for change must come from the managers (resembling the recommendations made by management theorists); and they go on to say that “managers will be in a stronger position to require, but also to help with, this attitude change in others if they too are changing” (Stevenson and Parsloe 1993, 10). The problem remains, however, as to how social workers can make users feel empowered and not even more powerless when they have to put them through the processes of assessing their needs, managing their care and other potentially patronising procedures. Smale et al. (1993) suggest that this is best overcome through adopting a policy of ‘empathy’ whereby, instead of just questioning and probing the user, the worker assumes the user is the expert of his/her particular situation and acts to develop their understanding of it. This recognition, that those more in touch with a particular situation are more likely to be the expert in that situation, is particularly central to empowerment in Community Care. “It is crucial to avoid a split between those who are in day-to-day or frequent contact, and those who make decisions about what is to be done and the allocation of resources ... splitting these two will inevitably be disempowering” wrote Smale et al. (1993, 42).

Even where service users and their carers appear to be having a real say in what happens to them, their oppression is deep-rooted and attitudes are difficult to change. Also, the inclusion of the physically and mentally disabled and the elderly, who are too often dismissed by society, in major decisions may still be a long way off. However, Stevenson and Parsloe’s (1993) perspective on the personal social services they studied is encouraging. “What we have seen and heard is deeply moving”, they wrote, “it shows workers creating ‘islands’ of empowerment over matters in which they have influence, in the deep and turbulent sea of social disempowerment through poverty, racism, unemployment and homelessness” (p. 14). As in business, however, there must always be a financial framework, rationing resources and constraining or even subverting this talk of empowered spaces.

**Empowerment and Politics**

The political literature seems to embrace the term ‘empowerment’ at three different levels. Empowerment is described: at a national level as the result of a revolution whereby new leaders aim to reduce inequity; at a local level, through the strengthening of mediating agencies which allow closer ties with individual communities; and at a personal level, as a result of the customer revolution and the advent of consumerism.

At a national level, revolution is achieved through the mobilizing of a dissident group to overthrow the existing leadership. Such a revolution in China led to a Communist victory under Chairman Mao’s rule. Woetzel (1989, 162) comments, “most importantly, the social revolution achieved one of the most equal redistributions of wealth in history. The extremes of ostentation and starvation common under previous regimes were virtually wiped out.” Serious problems remained, however; the ‘feudal economy’ failed to be converted along with other changes, and resource allocation became increasingly a function of personal connections. In fact, Woetzel (1989, 163) claims that, rather than empowering individuals within China, the cultural revolution “encouraged this trend by pushing more power into the hands of one man in the factory, destroying incentives and nurturing a cult of leadership”. Woetzel does not draw the conclusion that empowerment is impossible through revolution. Rather, he argues that the redistribution of wealth and the elimination of imperialism had removed two large stumbling blocks to individual empowerment. His point is that the revolution did not, of itself, lead to individual empowerment. By analogy, if workers were to assume power over a factory, empowerment would
The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept

not necessarily follow, as it is independent of power per se.

Local empowerment is often associated with the role of government and its attempts to bring citizens and customers (depending on your political point of view) and their requirements to the forefront of national policy. From an individual perspective, one might find this commendable, as it reduces the feeling of powerlessness which Berger and Neuhaus (1977, 7) attributes to “institutions controlled by those whom we do not know and whose values we often do not share”. The principle of local empowerment is that the government through public policy gives more recognition, respect and involvement to satellite institutions. Yet empowerment, as adopted by Berger and Neuhaus (1977) and Bennett et al. (1994), has two specific interpretations in the area of local empowerment. The first, as stated above, is the extending of responsibility and prominence to the local branches; the second involves, through the aforementioned process, the empowerment of the population. In effect, this latter usage of empowerment, as in the case of the North American communities discussed earlier, describes the way in which a pluralist society can reach out and touch all groups within it, empowering the minorities. For Berger and Neuhaus (1977, 8), “the paradigm of mediating structures aims at empowering poor people to do the things that the more affluent can already do, aims at spreading the power around a bit more … and to do so where it matters, in people’s control over their own lives”.

For some commentators, the handling of training and enterprise was an example of local empowerment in Britain. The Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), and their Scottish counterpart, the LECs, were local agencies, part-funded by local businesses. Their initial aim was to empower business leaders (but not necessarily other training users) by giving them responsibility for developing a strategy for government training. They also potentially gave businesses the opportunity to play a major role in the wider economic development of local areas. Bennett et al. (1994) report that the TECs had not received as much power as had been promised and argue that owing to the economy and other overriding factors, the councils were trammelled to central targets rather than being empowered locally. Boards of the TECs found themselves working as fund allocators rather than developing training strategies, to the point where Bennett et al. (1994, 314) reported that, “Business empowerment has become largely a sham”. The problem, here, was that the use of public funds and the involvement of ministers created a dependency that negated true empowerment. In this interpretation, business flair was clipped by public accountability, and there was little local flexibility. This suggests another equation with empowerment of employees, whereby the imposition of constraints within which employees must work limits their potential flair and reduces a true feeling of ‘empowerment’.

The final level of empowerment in the political literature is that of the individual. In recent years in the UK, and other Western countries, the power of the individual has become central to many government policies. The advent of consumerism has instilled a ‘right to choose’ ethos into the British public as reflected in, for instance, the Citizens’ Charter, whereby every public service must reach certain standards of service or the customer’s money is returned. This power of the consumer is also evident in the introduction of a voucher scheme for Nursery School places and the NHS Patients’ Charter for Children. The example of patient empowerment is an interesting one. For its advocates, this creates a system of accountability and leads to an improvement in the patients’ situation within service delivery procedures. Saltman focused on the issue of empowering patients within public health systems in northern Europe and contended that empowerment is a continuum which is “characterized by the change from moral
suasion... through formal political control... to countervailing power” (Saltman 1994, 203). This final point of the continuum is defined as the ability to control one’s own destiny and differs greatly from the request to be heard that is moral suasion. Saltman claims that it requires changes at the most concrete stage to transform the role of patients to anywhere close to this furthest position on the continuum. Rather than directly empowering the individual patient, the UK system of ‘National Health Service Trusts’ might be seen more closely to resemble the second level of empowerment. In these terms, Trusts have been introduced which work autonomously with NHS grants, are locally empowered, but are still essentially under government control. As in social work, patient empowerment comes up against the reality of financial constraints and the role of experts. The utopian language collides with harsh social and economic realities.

In short, the use of empowerment in the political literature can be seen to relate to the existence of, and problems with, governmental control within a pluralist society. As has been emphasized, empowerment is not the shifting around of a constant amount of power, rather it is the creation of more power, as Saltman (1994, 8) wrote, “empowerment is not a zero-sum game”. Such an approach mirrors a positive-sum view of power, as proposed by Dunlop (1958) following Talcott Parsons. Dunlop perceived power as an exogenous variable to the system and a resource to be used by all. This contrasts with the traditional labour process theorists who consider power to be endogenous to the relationship between unions and management, and unequally divided between them. Dunlop’s perspective, which centres on a common interest of survival, is reflected in the new unitarism (Provis 1996) of which contemporary empowerment initiatives are argued to be a part. Ironically, left-wing utopian ideas of how power should be conceptualized in an ideal, post-revolutionary future state, often dovetail with right-wing utopian ideas of how power actually operates in contemporary capitalist society. The child of this strange marriage is Liberation Management (Peters 1992) and the conceptions of empowerment associated with this.

Empowerment: Contemporary Management Theory

“When I hear the word empowerment, I reach for my gun. It’s like new bottles for old wine.” Taylor, quoted by Osbaldeston (1993).

Through its association with management gurus (Byham 1988; Peters 1988), empowerment has acquired a buzzword quality which leads many academics and managers to use it superficially or ignore it altogether (Clutterbuck 1994). The ‘fuzzy’ discourse that surrounds empowerment may further confuse the definitions adopted by the organizational players. Recent commentary by management academics (Legge 1989; Keenoy 1990), has suggested that whilst empowerment and HRM are essentially modernist approaches to work, they are postmodernist in their use of discourse. Essentially, therefore, it is argued that the ‘brilliant ambiguity’ (Keenoy 1990) which surrounds HRM and the binary oppositions which the language possesses indicates a postmodernist approach. Indeed, in the discussion of empowerment across non-management disciplines, it appears that empowerment has revolutionary connotations, that it is a process by which the oppressed may become free. In this way, it transfers a religious almost Pentecostalist dimension to the term (Ackers and Preston 1997), suggesting that, through the adoption of some intangible spirit, utopian dreams can be realized. Indeed, it is telling that much of the ‘evangelical’ work in recent management literature deploys left-wing, radical terms such as ‘liberation management’ and empowerment to describe right-wing management practices associated with American neo-liberal business thinking. The use of such terms presents inherent contradictions, which are embedded
not only in discourse but also in practice. Though this level of ambiguity may be a playground for academics seeking to define and explore the concept of empowerment, the lack of clarity surrounding the actual meaning of the term makes its practical implementation by management highly problematic.

So, what is empowerment in management terms? Conger and Kanungo (1988, 474) see delegation and participation as a set of conditions, which may or may not empower the workforce. They define empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness, and through their removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information”. The implication is that empowerment is an end product and that the ‘process’ they describe is essentially a mixture of employee involvement techniques. Self-efficacy is a psychological term which is becoming increasingly popular to describe a person’s belief in their own effectiveness, and Conger and Kanungo see empowerment as sharing power and information to give employees more conviction in their own effectiveness. The motivational definitions of empowerment, offered by them, imply that while the initiative may well be old wine in new bottles, the vintage concerned may not be Quality Circles or other forms of employee involvement but the ideals of the more humanistic Quality of Working Life (QWL) movement. In this sense, the rhetoric of empowerment appears to represent a move away from defined specific techniques, which acted as mere add-ons to other management policies (Ackers et al. 1992; Marchington et al. 1992; Wilkinson 1998, 2002) towards something which is deeper and more far-reaching. Indeed, the belief that empowerment is directed at feelings of enhancement and self-efficacy implies that management are introducing such policies for the benefit of employees. However, certain aspects of both current empowerment programmes and QWL, cast this assumption into doubt. First, QWL programmes were introduced to reduce the absenteeism and labour turnover characteristic of problematic work groups. Recent empowerment initiatives appear more strategic, and follow large structural changes in organizations, with the avowed aim of making workers more autonomous. This is partly because companies have no choice, as the organization becomes ever more streamlined and the prevalence of middle managers declines; and partly so that reactions to customers can be made more quickly and effectively. So, whilst both policies may be targeted at the development of positive feelings in employees, this is not necessarily for their personal benefit. In Legge’s view (1995, after Baudrillard), the use of ‘evangelical’ terms, which represent the ‘hyper-real’ can, through the use of imagery, shift people’s perceptions from the mundane reality – the ‘hard’ side of HRM – to the ‘softer’ more acceptable side. In this way, actors throughout the organization could use empowerment and HRM as a rhetoric to represent a shift in thinking, whilst mundane reality covertly continues in much the same way (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). This returns us to the importance of management intentions.

What appears to differentiate empowerment from previous management initiatives is the proposed grandeur of the management intentions behind it. There is a natural cynicism surrounding the introduction of many so-called employee involvement techniques, but the fact that empowerment appears to offer much more than involvement further enhances this scepticism. The idea of bestowing power upon another or of shifting the balance of power is integral to business versions of empowerment. In theory, organizational empowerment should be a way of removing oppression but, in practice, it can be seen as reasserting the oppression due to the fact that redistributing power is not management’s real concern. Peters (1988, 453) argues that empowerment accounts for the difference between ‘letting go’ (which he sees as
delegation) and ‘really letting go’ (empowerment). He states that ‘really letting go’ involves distancing oneself from the task completely – geographically and psychologically – yet impressing on those who do the tasks the high standards held and the belief that they will complete the task well. Really letting go differs from delegation in that “the authority granted is real and significant, but it is matched by the psychological pressure to perform up to one’s limits and to the highest standards”. The work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) interprets empowerment in terms of the emotional response to work rather than the feeling evoked by management or management practices. Empowerment is defined in terms of intrinsic task motivation and internalized commitment to the task. It is implied here that it is employees’ perceptions of what is occurring in the organization that is central to any theory of empowerment. The perceptions of employees are also prioritized by Parker and Price (1994, 913), who claim that empowerment is merely a perception of control and should be defined as “the belief that one has control (i.e. the belief that one can influence decisions)”. They readily adopt perceived control as an interchangeable term for empowerment, enforcing their view that empowerment is as much a factor of an employee’s emotional reactions to it as to the managerial process itself. In short, performance is improved when people think they are in control, as it enhances confidence and reduces stress: a view shared by many managers on the Open University TV programme, ‘Empowerment’.

The theories outlined above suggest that organizations do not need to provide any concrete changes to gain commitment and increase workers’ confidence. Bell (1960, 244) once wrote “the ends of the enterprise remain, but the methods have shifted and the older modes of overt coercion are now replaced by psychological persuasion”. Empowerment has emerged in the management literature along with other ideological ‘buzzwords’ such as BPR, TQM, Management Development and Delayering. As with these other panaceas, much writing on empowerment reinforces this ‘cult’ theme. The early talk of empowerment by Tom Peters, a guru who speaks in semi-religious tones, and the book Zapp! (Byham 1988), which refers to the light which radiated from employees as they were empowered, leads us to believe that empowerment, as the Oxford English Dictionary proposed, is something which is ‘done’ to convert others – a management cultural phenomena. Indeed, as Ackers and Preston (1997) argue, “Some organisations have begun to demand the very soul of their staff as the key to active commitment”. But inflicting such religious metaphors upon employees in an organisational setting might be seen as unethical. As Ackers and Preston continue: “the spiritual domain of the new management is completely internal to the business organisation; it has no higher purpose than to make profit”. From this perspective, the well-being of the workers has no secure place in empowerment and similar initiatives, while the smell of manipulation is there. Empowerment is a contested concept, whose meaning shifts according to the interests and goals of those who use it. For workers, it promises a re-balance of power and a way of fighting the oppression, which they see as existing in their organization. For management, it promises a more committed and involved workforce who will take initiatives within constraints that they set and see as important to the profitability and success of the organization. The innate subjectivity of empowerment allows these differing expectations to coexist and to survive. Lukes (1986) found a similar problem when interpreting ‘power’. He said that it was impossible to come up with a definitive answer to the question “What are we talking about when we talk about power?” and that to search for an answer would be a mistake, as differences between definitions run too deep, and what unites them is too thin and formal. Indeed, Keenoy and Anthony (1992, 235) have argued that business has no need for a
universal definition since, as the case of HRM showed, the ambiguity of such policies is their strength, since the “messages carried … are more important than the specific devices employed” and to explain the messages would be to destroy that hegemony. This is particularly true of the religious metaphors discussed above, whereby destroying the mysticism surrounding policies such as empowerment would lessen their power of conversion. In this view, “belief … is not based upon deconstructing theory or looking for proof, but on faith” (Noon 1992, 29). In the discussion of empowerment across non-management disciplines, it appears that ‘empowerment’ has revolutionary connotations, that it is a process by which the oppressed may become free. In the process, they enjoy a liberating and enabling experience. Business, it appears, would like to imbue employees with the same uplifting emotions (towards the organization) without changing much in their working lives.

However, if the ambiguity of empowerment is of any benefit, it may only be short-lived. If we consider the analogy to religion, Ackers and Preston (1997) argue that evangelical religion faces problems of ‘backsliding’ and ‘routinization’ as spirits ebb. So, one might conclude, if empowerment offers little more than a vague culture change with no permanent or measurable benefits, it, too, will fall victim to ebbing spirits. Worse still, this backsliding may well be accentuated by the breaking down of the psychological contract due to the ambiguity which empowerment promotes. The psychological contract (Morrison 1994) is an emotionally laden, unspoken contract which exists between worker and employer regarding what each desires from the relationship. Related to this are the issues surrounding a low-trust environment. As Fox (1974) argues, when power relations within an organization are altered, it causes a spiral of distrust to occur, which he termed the ‘low trust dynamic’. The introduction of empowerment may build and reinforce differing expectations of the work relationship, which will result in strong feelings of resentment and disappointment and the occurrence of this spiralling distrust. ‘False promises’ may prove more damaging than the dull but honest status quo, leading to a crisis of unmet employee expectations, with management in danger of being burnt by its own hot air.

More practical job redesign versions of empowerment also have their pitfalls. Coming up with innovative ways of working, such as older Quality Circles, which make jobs more efficient and interesting, seems practical and may suggest that management have a genuine belief in employees’ ideas. However, such a policy could also be seen as management using the suggestions of those who know about the job (i.e. those that do the job) without paying them any more, with the possible consequence that, with increasing organizational empowerment, they will do themselves and their colleagues out of a job. The catch of empowerment, moreover, is that it combines management’s use of the disciplinary ‘stick’ and the motivating ‘carrot’. Employees may feel themselves cornered, with no way out. Making suggestions may cost them their jobs, but not involving themselves in the empowerment process could damage their pay review or promotion prospects. And despite the request for innovative ideas, Simons (1995) suggests that management must exercise levers of control in a climate of empowerment to harness employees’ creativity. Yet, the use of such barriers restricts the supposed freedom which empowerment has given employees. As a result, management appears to be offering autonomy in one hand, while taking it away with the other. One cannot help feeling that to make claims which, in practice, cannot be adhered to, is more damaging to employees than to never make the claims in the first place. Indeed, there are some who feel that, far from offering beneficial effects, empowerment is merely a ‘Trojan Horse’ disguising the further exploitation of workers. As Sewell and Wilkinson (1992, 102) suggest, whilst “empowerment and trust [are the] rhetoric
...the centralisation of power and control [are the] reality". The view that, in practice, empowerment represents an "iron fist in a velvet glove", and hails a return to Tayloristic methods of control, has substantial academic support (Claydon and Doyle 1994; Kerfoot and Knights 1995; McArdle et al. 1995; Panteli and Corbett 1996). And McArdle et al. (1995, 161) propose that "empowerment results not in a power shift in the organisation, but in employees becoming morally bound to a system of management which enhances their own exploitation".

Whilst some argue that empowerment in itself is exploitation, others claim that management’s lasting identity with Tayloristic direct control often undermines the potential success of empowerment. For instance, McCabe and Knights (1995), study of an insurance company endeavouring to empower staff through TQM, shows some staff enthusiasm for TQM reflecting "the hierarchical power relations of staff vis-à-vis management which offers staff little choice other than to cooperate" (p. 38). Yet, they argue that this consequence was not necessarily a conscious intention of management. As Kerfoot and Knights (1995, 221) argue, "we regard the management control of employees as an unintended consequence of the development of quality programmes, rather than their direct objective". McArdle et al. (1995, 157) suggests that, if the above arguments are true, the solution must lie in not just implementing participation practices but accompanying them with "the appropriate developments in the structure of the organisation". Others, however, are not as generous. They believe that management consciously uses empowerment to subvert the workforce and exploit the ideas of employees, seeking their views and specialized knowledge about shop-floor issues with no returnable benefit.

Conclusion

From this review of the use of the term empowerment across several disciplines, it would seem that the underlying interpretation of the word is one of mobilizing the oppressed by helping them believe in themselves, increasing their self-efficacy and, hence, motivating them to work towards equality. Indeed, one might further conceptualize that empowerment is both objective and subjective and that the level of the individual is essential for personalizing the wider, objective issues. Indeed, Craig and Steinhoff (1990, 50) write that unless individuals perceive a change in their environment, empowerment cannot be seen to have taken place: "Individuals or groups that do not perceive that real power has been delegated are not empowered. They may hear the words but ... when they see that the behaviour is not consistent with the words they rarely believe that empowerment has occurred."

The review has revealed some interesting aspects of empowerment to have arisen in different contexts. First, the literature on women brought forward the theory that there are two concepts of empowerment: intellectual and experiential. Secondly, the case of minority groups demonstrated that, even if skills are gained and goals are met through self-knowledge, there is always the danger that attitudes are so deep-rooted that any attempt at empowerment will never be more than superficial. This also appears to follow the theory of a dual concept of empowerment, which arose in the women’s literature. This is the idea that those in positions of superiority need to encourage the creation of power in the oppressed and not block empowerment through an abuse of their dominant position. The tendency to do otherwise may occur out of fear; indeed, in the case of organizational empowerment, many managers seem fearful of allowing employees greater freedom. In essence, it is a matter of trust in the intentions of all those involved in the empowerment process. As Friedmann (1992, 760) writes, the search for empowerment amongst the oppressed is not a mission to take over but rather to gain equal treatment: "The empowerment they seek is not to seize the
The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept

state. Their demand is for social justice and a respectful treatment as citizens with equal rights.” This suggests that the ‘ideal world’ for the successful adoption of empowerment in an organizational setting would be a place where employees gain more power but managers maintain the control. In practice, however, empowerment in organizations has been misused, and often within rapidly changing organizations where trust between employees and managers is not to be relied upon.

The educational literature returns to the idea that empowerment is both an individual and a social process. At the individual level, empowerment is said to be substantive, as demonstrated in the case study of the illiterate, “in the process of learning that there are names, the human begins to feel power” (Courts 1991, 13). Yet, on a more social basis, the fear is that education, which is said to be empowering, is often manipulated to reassert the control of the dominant group and is, in that way, symbolic. Empowerment has been adopted frequently in the Community Care literature, which stresses the need for empathy. Rather than merely questioning the users, workers were encouraged to make the user feel that they are the experts of the situation and to ask them what they see as the best way forward. This has particular applications for the case of employee empowerment. If managers demand answers from their employees with the intention of drawing their own conclusions anyway, this process has to be disempowering. In relation to politics, it was claimed that, although revolution could bring a dissident group to power, it was not necessarily empowering. The literature also supported the idea that power is not a zero-sum game and that by helping the oppressed assume power, the oppressors are actually creating more power in the environment rather than losing any themselves. This is a theory often brought to the attention of apprehensive managers who fear and resist the concept of empowerment.

A starting point for consideration of organizational empowerment is that empowerment is both a process and a goal which acts at the individual level to increase self-efficacy. It allows the formation of dissident groups which individuals, through their increased self-knowledge, recognize as holding a greater authenticity for them than the dominant culture. In this sense, the aim of empowerment appears to be the gaining of equality through these groups rather than ultimate power and control and, yet, it faces resistance from a fearful and untrusting dominant culture. Under this assumption, Trade Unions would appear to be the dissident groups who strive for equality in the workplace. In the view of Boreham and Hall (1994), and previously Coates (1986), a change of status will not come from individual empowerment, which they tend to see as another management practice aimed at individualizing the workplace, but through ‘political unionism’. As Boreham and Hall (1994, 314) see it, “the collective empowerment of labour, through trade union strength, is much more likely to be able to be effectively deployed in political institutions than in the direct empowerment of individuals at the level of the enterprise labour process”.

This pluralist/radical reading of employment is very far removed from its current unitarist management usage, where it is explicitly or implicitly hostile to trade union influence in the business organization (see Ackers 2002). Literature surrounding issues of corporate culture suggest that the use of symbolism to manipulate the social aspects of work is being increasingly adopted in modern organizations (Hopfl et al. 1992). Indeed, there is evidence from the management literature that such symbolism does not successfully mask the fact that often, nothing has really changed. There are danger signals when the euphoric experience felt by some managers during their training, and the fact that many employees felt ‘fired up at the time’, did not find an outlet once they were presented with the mundane reality of organizational life, and enthusiasm subsequently faded. “In consciously seeking to manage a change of culture, senior managers had manipulated some symbols to
signify a new order, but these were insufficient to counterbalance the range of signs which persuaded the sceptical that things were pretty much the same” (Storey 1992, 201). Indeed, the use of ambiguous terms and the evangelical hot air connotations could actually be a blockage to the success of empowerment on the shop floor. The fact that empowerment has emerged as a contested concept makes it easy for organizations to use the term to create instant ambiguity. The four divergent definitions of the term given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the use of the term across different disciplines suggest that it is essentially a word from which opposing definitions can flourish. Could empowerment create false expectations due to the differing interpretations which employees bring to work? Our review of empowerment across non-management disciplines suggests that, in other circumstances, empowerment represents an overcoming of oppression and a removal of issues of power and status. It is suggested here that managers are misguided in their expropriation of left-wing terminology and utopian language. By using such terms to ‘symbolize’ their change of culture, organizations are in danger of creating expectations of the policy, which they simply cannot meet. As Willmott (1995, 93) writes, “in the absence of a major shift in power relations, it is probable that empowerment will be experienced and assessed as a patronising act of false charity bestowed upon employees”.

In a recent examination of the ‘career’ of empowerment as a popular construct, Bartunek and Spreitzer (1999) conclude that the definition used in the management literature – of empowerment as primarily participation in decision making – “reflects a softening of the more radical definitions of power sharing implied in the other earlier literatures” (p. 19) such that the meaning of empowerment in contemporary management publications is very remote from its original meanings in the less applied religious, sociological and psychological literatures. The accompanying looseness which now characterizes empowerment as an idea therefore allows management to buy an ‘off the shelf’ concept and apply it to their own organizational needs. In so doing, they are acquiring a house haunted by the ghosts of past inhabitants. As a result, empowerment becomes a floating concept, which means different things in different organizations and, further, means different things to different people within those organizations. Both management and employees interpret empowerment from their own viewpoints to suit their own needs and build up expectations of what the programme will bring. For management, empowerment promises a more committed and involved workforce who are willing to take responsibility at lower levels. Whilst, for employees, empowerment pledges autonomy and the ability to move to a more equitable position within their organization.

The failure of these expectations to share either similar intentions or goals means that the psychological contract between manager and worker could fail, provoking feelings of distrust on both sides (Fox 1974). This acknowledgement that actors within organizations take their own definitions of empowerment from an essentially ambiguous concept, highlights the variation in attitudes and values which individuals bring to the workplace. Yet, Provis (1996) suggests that new management techniques such as empowerment are based on unitarist assumptions, “that every work organization is an integrated and harmonious whole, existing for a common purpose”. Hence, these policies are being introduced with the assumption that everyone holds similar interests and values within the organization. Not only does this account for differences between management and employees, but also differences amongst employees and managers. Indeed, it is easy to make assumptions based on orthodox labour process theory and classical economics (that management is a single, unified agent, united behind policies such as empowerment), or pure cognitive or behavioural psychology (that all employees will react in similar ways
to the same stimuli, such as empowering practices). Instead, we suggest that the impact of social factors on all of the actors within organizations brings differing reactions, and that this challenges the unitary assumptions on which such initiatives were designed.

The issue of empowerment in the workplace involves the consideration of objective and subjective, individual and collective issues. Is the choice of management really one of empowerment or of oppression? Willmott (1993) argues that management secures control of employees through ‘double-think’, whereby organizations lead employees to believe that by adhering to corporate values they will enjoy greater autonomy. But, if management are not truly altruistic in their motives and resist ‘real’ empowerment, their initiatives will only achieve results at the transitional stage, where intellectual empowerment does not equal experiential empowerment and employees are not, in terms of the definitions used in the non-management literature, empowered. This article has presented arguments surrounding the conceptualization of empowerment. It is hoped that by setting empowerment in its management context, and encouraging an appreciation of the theories and debates that lie behind the definitions of the concept, a more effective use of empowerment in organizations may occur. In addition, the paper hopes to encourage a greater level of research examining the use of empowerment in organizational settings. In terms of management policy, our view is that organizations should either stop using the term and spare their employees the disillusionment, or explain clearly and honestly what they do and do not mean by it.

References


Note

1. This survey is not exhaustive, excluding, for instance, theological usage. An earlier version appeared as Chapter Two in Nicola Denham Lincoln’s Ph.D. (1998).

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