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The mantra of empowerment talk: an essay

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ABSTRACT
Projects around the world use the 'mantra of empowerment talk', calling for engagement that is civic, appreciative of local diversity, transformative, sustainably self-reliant, helpful for alleviating suffering, and transparent. These noble missions clash in everyday practice, so organizations that share the mantra also share predictable dilemmas. By gathering together studies of projects that share the mantra, and observing their typical efforts at resolving typical dilemmas, this article characterizes this newly prevalent organizational form: 'The empowerment project'. When one dilemma pops up here, immediately, another pops up elsewhere.

KEYWORDS
Empowerment; participatory democracy; civic engagement; cultural sociology; pragmatism

A certain kind of project is spreading across the globe, promoting a lot of good things that ought to empower people: Civic volunteering; deep appreciation of diverse and unique people, places, and cultures; personal transformation; alleviation of suffering; sustainability; and transparency. These wholesome wishes often tangle when people try to put them all in play at once, so projects that share these missions tend to share predictable dilemmas. Whether in the global North or South; whether sponsored by governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or something else; whether hoping mainly to lift people out of poverty, bring them together, appreciate them, transform them, or all of the above, projects that invoke this list of missions—this 'mantra of empowerment talk'—confront typical dilemmas, and so, they bear an eerie family resemblance. This essay gathers together such projects by looking for projects that use empowerment talk and that share typical ways of negotiating the dilemmas from empowerment talk's criss-crossed missions. The essay names this newly prevalent creature 'the empowerment project'.

What good does it do to give the mantra of empowerment talk and the empowerment project their own names? It lets us 'see' them, even if they do not work the same everywhere, just as Max Weber allowed us to 'see' the bureaucracy, even if it did not work the same everywhere. Naming 'empowerment projects' allows us to predict puzzles and conflicts that participants in them will face, and perhaps to share solutions to those

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predictable problems. It lets us 'see' a field where before there were just thousands of disparate organizations.

Empowerment projects come under various names and operate in various sectors. Some, but not all, projects in the fields of 'participatory budgeting', 'participatory democracy (in which cities ask residents to make decisions about how to distribute the city budget or generally improve the city)', 'sustainable development', 'the Big Society,' 'the third way', or 'outsourced social service non-profit' are empowerment projects. Empowerment projects span sectors, as well: Some, but not all, state agencies, NGOs, and social enterprises fit the bill. They are not new, but just newly prevalent; when they first started, the Boy Scouts and YMCA (Cruikshank, 1999) shared the mantra of empowerment talk; Jane Addams' Hull House and the settlement house movement that it launched (Addams, 1960 [1910]) are old, and they fit, too.

Most studies ask whether such projects work: 'Does the project really care about local cultures?' 'Do participants really become civicly engaged?' 'Do they get transformed?' and above all, 'Do they get helped?' The studies usually pick a few typical goals, and ask if projects fulfilled them. These are absolutely crucial questions, but mine are different.

Other refreshing research asks about meanings and feelings. Baiocchi, Bennett, Cordner, Klein, and Savell (2014) ask what participation means to the people in Providence, Rhode Island, and Swidler and Cott Watkins (2009) ask about the 'subjectivities' that humanitarian aid projects produce in Malawians. Describing the state's outsourcing of care-work to volunteers and families, a group of Dutch scholars asks how disabled people manage their emotions when, with the current neo-liberal turn, they increasingly have to rely on unreliable volunteers instead of social workers (Grootegoed, 2013; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013).

These questions about meanings and feelings are close to mine, but mine are, first, about how to see any particular empowerment project as a case of something larger; and second, about how to use this dilemma-centred approach, by thinking of these projects as constellations of *dilemmas*. Lee (2014) asks somewhat similar questions, showing many poignant dilemmas in a field in North America that she maps out and names 'the public engagement industry'. By looking at shared dilemmas in far-flung projects around the world, we can see the family resemblance even more clearly. It is no accident, after all, that scholars who examine meaning-making are struck by 'paradoxes' (Montambeault, 2016; Swidler & Cott Watkins, 2009), 'puzzles' (Lee, 2014), 'tensions', and 'contradictions' (Ganuza, Baiocchi, & Summers, 2016).

My initial inspiration here comes from my own research on youth and adult volunteering in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in a mid-sized city in the US Midwest that I call Snowy Prairie. When I first heard the thoughtful, smart organizers speak about their projects, I lit up with delight: They wanted to give ordinary citizens the power to make decisions together, to take care of one another, and to improve the world! But what initially sounded so inspiring kept not coming out the way that project organizers had hoped. I looked around to try to see 'what is this a case of?' and at that very moment, projects like these were springing up around the world, even from the offices of the World Bank.

Why focus on dilemmas? Usually, studies of organizations focus on one or two basic, ideal organizing principles: Money, love, fair adherence to rules, and democratic engagement, for example. Their assumption is that even though no organization operates purely

on the basis of money, love, bureaucratic rules, or democratic engagement, these 'ideal types' orient people, the way constellations oriented sailors of yore. But here, there were so many mismatched principles; solving a dilemma in one place just made it pop up in another form elsewhere. All the interesting action seemed to lie in people's never-ending attempts at puzzle-solving. So, I tried taking a pragmatist turn, which means looking for observable, shared, predictable dilemmas; ambivalence rather than certainty; dilemmas rather than answers: Seams in the fragile fabric of reality. Reality seemed more like a game of Whack-a-Mole: Like the mole, the dilemma pops up, the player whacks it down one hole, and immediately, a related one pops up elsewhere. While I argue elsewhere (in a paper that starts with John Dewey's analysis of ideal types) that looking for dilemmas rather than 'logics' is a useful way to characterize any organizational form, my goal here is only to show how this Whack-a-Mole game works in empowerment projects.

The empowerment project and the mantra of empowerment talk

What is an empowerment project? In an empowerment project, (a) one set of people invites another, across a social and/or geographical distance, (b) into a decision-making forum that promises to be open-ended, (c) using *empowerment talk*. Empowerment talk calls for action that is:

Civic:	participatory, inclusive, open to ideas and thoughtful deliberation.
Appreciative of local diversity:	respecting unique people and customs; not relying on distant experts or abstract knowledge, but on deep, mostly unspoken *local knowledge* accumulated over years spent together; community-based, hands-on, do-able, grassroots, 'familiar' (Thévenot, 2007)
Transformative:	inspirational, innovative, character-building.
Sustainable and self-reliant:	not relying on outside funding, but on volunteers and on participants' own money-making efforts, self-sufficient, autonomous, independent.
Helpful:	alleviating poverty or other suffering amongst disadvantaged, needy people.
Transparent:	accountable.

Not all empowerment projects give equal weight to each mantra element. Some mainly emphasize alleviating suffering; others focus more on appreciating diverse cultures. Some mainly emphasize economic self-reliance, while others mainly emphasize civic decision-making. But empowerment projects' shared, predictable dilemmas swing on these hinges.

Each term in bold stands for clusters of meanings that I distilled from reading scores of studies. Throughout this essay, the terms in bold will be shorthand, signposts signalling the rest of its cluster.

To expand the definition of the empowerment project: the *distance* between organizers and participants can be social or geographical. Beverly Hills and Compton are an hour apart by bicycle, but socially, they are farther apart than downtown Los Angeles is from downtown Sydney. Activism that bubbles up from the bottom, like Occupy or Arab Spring, does not fit. Empowerment projects cultivate the grass roots from the top-down. However, empowerment projects are not advocacy groups, and so, though they come

from afar, empowerment organizers are not 'outside agitators' with preset, conflictive goals: Join a movement, union, or political party. Though empowerment projects sometimes hatch advocacy groups (Addams, 1960 [1910]; Polletta, 2014), an empowerment project is potentially supposed to invite everyone, not start with a fight against anyone.

I will not discuss the mantra's element of 'transparency' here, though it is crucial for understanding most empowerment projects. Several wonderful studies show how the relentless demand for transparent documentation easily undermines all of empowerment projects' other goals (Krause, 2014). Here, I focus only on dilemmas between the mantra elements that most organizers themselves sincerely want: *Civic, appreciative of local people and cultures, transformative, sustainable, and helpful.* Even without the coerced need for relentless documentation, the morally magnetic missions clash. Still, it is important briefly to offer three illustrations that show some ways the element of 'transparency' matters: In Snowy Prairie, youth volunteers spent much more time documenting their volunteer work, and discussing how to document it, than they spent volunteering. In Malawi, in anti-HIV projects sponsored by humanitarian aid organizations, local Malawian volunteers learn, above all, how to write a report (Swidler & Cott Watkins, 2009). And making deep cultural or personal transformations visible in the audit's requisite three-month intervals either requires serious expertise in using miniscule changes to detect big long-term trends, or is impossible. As one Snowy Prairie organizer joked to some others, when imagining youth participants filling out a post-test, 'Because you ate pizza and got to socialize on Friday night, do you feel better about … yourself?' She added, 'The effect is more intangible'. In principle, most organizers want transparency, but, unlike the mantra's morally magnetic 'missions', participants usually treat it as an externally imposed 'mandate' (Minkoff & Powell, 2006).

The rest of the essay describes three big clusters of dilemmas. The first set arises when volunteers reach across a social distance to help needy people. The second arises when empowerment projects make the needy people *themselves* into volunteers. The third arises when projects try to appreciate people and cultures while transforming them.

Using volunteers to help needy people

In some empowerment projects, the main focus is on volunteers who reach across a vast social distance to help needy people. The volunteers themselves may be healthy, affluent, and educated, and may help people who are disabled, poor, or illiterate, for example. On paper, the mantra's missions—'civic', 'appreciative', 'transformative', 'helpful', and 'sustainable'—align beautifully: Civic volunteers will have a deep, personal transformation, as they come to appreciate the diversity of unique people, places, and cultures. This work will be sustainable: The volunteers require neither money nor help from outside experts; and eventually, the people they help will, in turn, become self-reliant.

But in empowerment projects' everyday practice, these potentially wholesome goals easily tangle. This section will describe typical ways that participants navigate these typical dilemmas between the mantra's promises:

(1) Most volunteers spend less time on site than paid employees spend. This makes it harder for volunteers to appreciate or even help the people they aim to appreciate and help.

(2) Some volunteers are so eager for personal transformation, they do not transform or help anyone else.
(3) Abstraction and expertise are often necessary, both for helping people and for communicating in a diverse civic forum, but one main reason that volunteers are supposed to be good is that they are supposed to embody local, hands-on knowledge of unique people, places, and customs, not abstract expertise.

Appreciating volunteers versus appreciating and helping needy people

The volunteer symbolizes local, deeply appreciative care. But paid employees, who usually have more long-term and steady contact with needy people, can often appreciate and help them more. Paid employees usually work full time with the people they serve, while volunteers usually have paid jobs elsewhere. The dilemma: Sporadically involved, short-term volunteers may not be able to appreciate people, or even help them, if what the people need is reliable, steady, everyday attention. But civic volunteering is a key element in the empowerment mantra.

In Snowy Prairie, adult volunteers would come to the after-school homework clubs for disadvantaged kids to try to help kids with their homework. But these 'plug-in volunteers' (Eliasoph, 2011) only had a few afternoons a month to spare for a few months at a stretch. In this time frame, plugging in and out as if they were flash drives plugging into standardized ports, they often undermined the intimate appreciative atmosphere that some paid employees managed to create.

Plug-in volunteers also could rarely help kids with homework. For example, members of the after-school homework programmes got contradictory advice on homework each day of the week, and even each hour, from different volunteers. Volunteers had almost no familiarity with any specific child; this made it hard for volunteers to interpret kids' complaints about schoolwork and teachers—or even to grasp the kids' assignments. Wednesday's volunteer often undid advice that Tuesday's volunteer had given, who had, herself, contradicted Monday's volunteer's advice. A typical day shows this: At various times throughout the afternoon, Keith, a second volunteer, and I were helping 11-year-old Jeannette with her homework. When I momentarily stepped out of the room, Keith took my place. He contradicted the advice I had given Jeannette 15 minutes earlier. Jeannette was receiving a wealth of help, but in a mess of bits and pieces that did not add up to a coherent whole.

In contrast, some paid employees came to the after-school programme every day for years. Emily, the paid organizer of an after-school programme, was with some kids every day, often 80 hours per week in the summer (40 paid; 40 unpaid), for several years. She accompanied kids to civic engagement projects on evenings and weekends. She knew their teachers and parents; knew what each kid was learning in each class, and how well he or she was doing; knew who each kid's boyfriend or girlfriend was at every moment; knew how to play their computer games; even knew how fast her kids' hair grew. She had immersed herself in their unique local lives, as the mantra demands. Emily's constancy and relative permanence helped kids and helped her appreciate their unique, local conditions. But as a paid employee, she did not fit with empowerment talk's morally magnetic missions. She was not a symbol of 'local, appreciative community', and, being paid, her work was not as 'sustainable' as a volunteer's.

This tangle of missions appears all over the world. Instead of relying on state-funded social workers for care, disabled people in the Netherlands (and more and more throughout Europe and North America) are supposed to rely on families, neighbours, and friends. The government officials who passed these reforms imagine that welfare professionals do not adequately appreciate local, unique, diverse people, and that voluntary caregiving, in contrast, will knit people together in a warm, caring community, generating 'emotional reform'. The problem is that the disabled person needs a shower, or food, every day, not just when the spirit moves inside the volunteer. Disabled people either have to burden family members who usually have full-time jobs, or they have to go without basic care. They and their family members can often neither work full time nor participate in civic life. With paid social workers, more disabled people and their families could participate in civic life and become self-reliant. Yes, there is emotional reform, but not the one the officials expected. Rather, emotions tend to move from dignity and hope to shame and despair (Grootegoed, 2013; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). Since the use of plug-in volunteers was often so harmful, Snowy Prairie organizers sometimes quietly complained about it, but even these organizers could not bring themselves to fire the volunteers, partly because volunteers are such sacred symbols of an appreciative, local, caring community.

One way to navigate this dilemma is to demand that volunteers make a firm, long-term commitment, and to fire unreliable volunteers. In the mid-twentieth century, volunteers who worked with families in settlement houses in the USA had a very long training period, after an inquisitive interview (including, if they were female, questions about how their husbands would react to their commitment). They also had to accept ongoing advice from professionals (Addams, 1960 [1910]; Hillman, 1960). They *could* be fired. Those volunteers were usually women whose husbands paid the bills. Such dedicated volunteers became experts with 'invisible careers' (Daniels, 1988)—professionals in every way except the credential. Solving the dilemma just makes it appear elsewhere: Making such high demands would discourage many volunteers, especially those with full-time jobs. If the only volunteers were people who did not need to work for pay, an empowerment project would seem less 'civic', 'local', and 'sustainable'. Like empowerment projects' other dilemmas, this one does not simply disappear.

Transforming volunteers versus helping needy people

Civic volunteers want a transformative experience (Hustinx, 2001), but chasing after their own personal transformation might make them forget to help other people or transform them. For example, in Snowy Prairie, adult organizers of youth volunteer projects did not enjoy working with the head of the Food Bank. She had too many specs about the kinds of food, and the pace of gathering it. After one meeting (which the Food Bank head did not attend), one organizer exclaimed to the others, 'She's missing the point: it's all about leadership, and democracy'. How silly; she thought it was about food.

Humour magazine caricatures—the triumphant elite student who feels transformed after having taken a plane to Ghana to bond with orphans for two days—reflect a reality that is not just silly, but often disastrous (well, okay, that example was real—it was a student of mine). To develop an emotionally rewarding, transformative bond, plug-in volunteers in Snowy Prairie's after-school programmes usually ran away from disruptive youth, or youth who were hard to teach. Adult volunteers who wanted a

transformative experience learned to focus only on the teens who had their textbooks, knew what their homework was, and wanted to do it. Volunteers would literally *run* to get to the tables where those studious, easy-to-help kids were, so that they would not get stuck with troublesome kids who were hard to help. Most volunteers shunned kids who looked like they had special needs or emotional troubles. In one after-school programme, a boy with greasy hair and a dirty windbreaker sat huddled by himself in the back of the room, at a table meant for eight, for weeks at a time, and no volunteer ever offered to help him with his homework.

If helping kids who wanted help failed to produce a bond, volunteers would try bonding, by, for example, running into the street at dusk with them, for a snowball fight. Sometimes, paid employees whispered to one another, complaining that such volunteers made their own work harder. But the paid employees could not kick the volunteers out; the employees also had faith in local, civic, voluntary participation. So, three studious girls in one after-school programme often hid in a back room in the basement and shut the door, to get their homework done away from the chatty volunteers.

One way to navigate this dilemma was described in the previous section on unreliable volunteers: Only take volunteers who make a long-term commitment. Another is for volunteers to stop expecting the kind of transformation that comes from intimate bonding. Volunteers can be taught to value humble or specialized tasks, or do tasks that require no personal familiarity with an individual. When church missions, for example, sponsor a steady stream of volunteers, each replacing the previous one who did the same tasks, the droplets add up to river. Some volunteers might not recognize that humbly washing dishes can be transformative. They might stop focusing on their own uniqueness and their own craving for appreciation, and start humbly recognizing their tiny part in a large, impersonal system. Having that insight would be, itself, a transformative experience for many volunteers, but it would require ignoring the element of the mantra that calls for appreciation of uniqueness. However empowerment projects negotiate this dilemma, it does not entirely disappear. It just pops up in a new place.

Appreciation of hands-on local knowledge and unique people, places, and customs versus helping needy people who need expertise

In the empowerment imagination, volunteers are more helpful than experts; experts see everything through their preconceptions, jargon, and dogma, while volunteers appreciate uniqueness. The dilemma is that sometimes, an expert is needed, but it is hard to send volunteers home, since the image of the volunteer magnetizes the mantra's promises for local, self-reliant, civic engagement. Expert knowledge develops through a process of generalization (as in 'How many people per thousand does this medicine help or harm?'), but generalization is something that the morally magnetic image of local, hands-on volunteering is supposed to avoid. In the mantra, each individual is so unique, generalization is taboo.

As noted above, Snowy Prairie volunteers did not have much time with each child. Expert knowledge gives shortcuts to insights, but volunteers did not have that, either. In Snowy Prairie, adult volunteers' lack of expertise was harmful when, for example, a few rare after-school volunteers tried to help children who had emotional or developmental disabilities. In these cases, appreciating the volunteers meant not appreciating or helping the children, but getting frustrated and judging them.

One way to navigate this dilemma is for volunteers to *become* experts, to learn the abstract categories that professional teachers learn. That way, they might easily diagnose or otherwise classify a child, without spending years getting to know him or her. This poses a dilemma: Volunteer caregivers might start using abstract concepts from psychology or medicine to understand the people they aim to help, but empowerment projects are supposed to help people by appreciating local uniqueness, not by using abstract generalizations.

Developing expertise can work when the topic is very concrete, impersonal, specialized, or directed (Baiocchi et al., 2014; Carrell, 2013; Fung, 2004; Nez, 2014; Talpin, 2011). In Porto Alegre's participatory budget, for example, ordinary citizens on the committee that makes decisions about streets learn the differences between cement, asphalt, tar, and macadam (Baiocchi, 2002; see also Nez, 2016). By solving the dilemma this way, a new dilemma pops up: Participants might learn such specialized vocabularies, strewn with so many scientific ideas, acronyms, jargon, and prefabricated concepts, that fellow citizens will no longer understand them. When ordinary citizens develop such expert knowledge, they stop being the symbols of unique, local diversity. They stop being 'ordinary'.

When the expertise is about something personal or intangible, rather than something as concrete as cement, the dilemma sharpens. Participants in an urban planning council in Belgium arrived at a clever way of navigating this dilemma. The council, aimed at humanizing city streets, invited local folks to a series of public forums to verbalize their usually unspoken, customary, possibly quirky ways of walking around in the neighbourhood. Residents also had the burden of proving that their own unique habits were typical, not uniquely theirs. Unable to make the audience (especially the paid organizer who did not live nearby) appreciate his local, unique customary habits, one resident finally started bringing antique maps from the 1800s to meetings. To demonstrate that his unspoken habits were authentically local, customary, and representative, he needed maps: Perfectly impersonal abstractions (Charles, 2016).

Another common way to bridge the dilemmas surrounding expertise is implicitly to give up on actually fixing any problem that requires expertise, but just treat participation as a kind of aesthetic experience, reminding participants that personal transformation and empowerment are just as important. At a bicycle repair cooperative in Los Angeles, volunteers show mostly poor, mostly non-white, mostly young people how to repair their own bikes. Volunteers are not supposed do the work *for* the bicyclists, because that would not be 'empowering'. They should teach bike riders how to be self-reliant, by showing them how to fix their bikes themselves. Some volunteers literally put their fingers on the rider's fingers, 'showing' them how to undo a bolt, so that it will not seem that the skilled volunteer is doing the job *for* the biker, but is teaching. Eventually, the bicyclist is supposed to learn to fix it him- or herself, but since the person may never come in again, the chances of really learning how to fix it are slim. And 'fixing' was not even necessarily the goal, since learning self-sufficiency was equally a goal. Since the volunteer-teachers themselves are not all expert bike repair people, and do not have access to new replacement parts, they often cannot fix the bike. One volunteer fixed a rider's brakes well enough not to come to a full stop but to slow the bike down, but only since the rider was a small fellow, and only as long as he did not speed down any steep hills. So, volunteers focus instead on talking about how empowering it feels to be able to fix one's own bike (Charles, 2016).

Then, participants like the bike riders are required to trumpet their own personal transformation and empowerment, even if they have to drag their bicycles out the door. Similarly, after having participated in many NGO-led workshops intended to teach locals to teach each other how to prevent HIV, a young man in Malawi proudly trumpets what he has learned: That urine and semen both come out of the penis (Swidler & Cott Watkins, 2009)! Whether or not empowerment projects really taught him what penises do, they clearly taught him a powerful lesson about expressing personal inspiration.

An alternative for navigating the fault line is to enlist volunteers only in tasks that require no expertise: Useful, simple tasks, like picking up litter or filing bills, as noted in the previous section on volunteers who crave personal transformation. But then, a dilemma just pops up elsewhere, when this violates the mantra's call for 'personal transformation'.

Another way to navigate the dilemma is to enlist only volunteers who are already experts: Accountants can help immigrants file their taxes, lawyers can provide free legal aid, and doctors can give free medical care (in those countries such as the USA, Haiti, and Ethiopia that do not already have it). This model, in turn, poses another dilemma: The doctors might have neither time nor reason to hold freewheeling conversations about concrete health problems, for example, how to treat strep throat. So, their volunteering might not fulfil the mantra's mission of being open-endedly civic or transformative.

This section has shown the dilemmas of using volunteers to help others. Empowerment talk looks good on paper, but it poses inevitable dilemmas. When one dilemma gets pushed down, another pops up.

Helping and transforming needy people by making them into self-reliant volunteers

Our second set of dilemmas arises when empowerment projects turn needy people into volunteers. The first set of dilemmas focused on volunteers who were not, themselves, the needy people; for this second cluster of dilemmas, the needy people are supposed to improve themselves through the process of volunteering. Here, again, on paper, the mantra's missions—'civic', 'transformative', 'helpful', and 'sustainable'—align beautifully: Through thoughtful, active civic engagement, the disadvantaged people will transform, and thus, be helped, and even become self-reliant. In the World Bank's prose, 'Involving local communities in decisions that affect their lives is central to making development more effective, and it has the potential to transform the role that poor people play in development by giving them voice and agency' (2012).

This vision summons the mutual aid that traditional villages have enjoyed for millennia, in quilting bees, barn-raisings, road-building, home visits for the sick, and burials for the dead. Current projects, such as Time Banking, aim to resurrect this kind of mutual aid: If I can babysit and you can fix refrigerators, and your baby's crying and my fridge broke, we can trade, hour-for-hour. Participating in such a project can transform socially downtrodden volunteers, when they realize that even the lowliest person has something to offer, regardless of money or credentials.

Scholars and practitioners have written a great deal about three variations on the dilemmas surrounding the effort to make the needy people into volunteers. But:

(1) Helping people might require looking for big, national, non-local, non-grass-roots solutions.
(2) For many disadvantaged people, public speaking is the stuff of nightmares. Participating might feel harmful, not helpful.
(3) The people who most need help might be the least able to transform into civic actors who can help themselves.

Local versus helpful

Many scholars describe the first dilemma: Focusing on actions that people can do locally, without waiting for outsiders' aid, might fulfil the mantra's 'transformation' and 'self-reliance' criteria without doing much to help people.

It is easy to imagine that avoiding politics comes only from the project funders' cynical desire to prevent participants from asking big questions, and in some cases, this may be the case. Some empowerment projects are designed mainly for the purpose of suppressing conflict (Lee, 2014). A proud designer of participatory projects in the UK crows that when city officials invite local residents to decide for *themselves* how to cut the city budget, the officials can 'pluck more feathers with a lot less squawking' (quoted in Lee, 2014). Residents might decide to slash funding for the elderly, instead of slashing funding for the disabled. One way to avoid that fight over pennies would be to tax billionaires, but that would not fit the empowerment mantra, and so, organizers ignore residents who suggest a massive, national redistribution of wealth or power to fix a local problem (Lee, 2014; Polletta, 2014). The problem is that while teaching people to recognize the signs of a stroke or eat healthful food may transform them and make them feel self-reliant (Sirianni & Friedland, 2001), it will not help much if they have a stroke but no doctor. Fighting for universal healthcare could help, but is a costly, expert-based solution, not 'sustainable', in empowerment's terms.

Sometimes, the paid organizers of disabled, or elderly, or youth programmes encourage their own constituents to resist budget cuts, and to demand funding for their own group. This poses other dilemmas. Community centre organizers in a poor Brooklyn neighbourhood, for example, encouraged participants to vote and protest to demand more funding for the community centre's own programmes—day care, for example (Marwell, 2004). This fulfils some of the mantra: It encourages civic action and personal transformation, alleviating suffering by appreciating local people's own understandings. But it does so without any questioning of the bigger picture (Moseley, 2012); so, it often means keeping my budget by cutting someone else's, in a fight that can lead to disgust and despair, instead of hopeful civic empowerment. Thus, in Snowy Prairie each year, adult organizers persuaded youth civic engagement participants to attend the county budget hearing to convince county officials not to cut their programmes' budgets. Each year, the teens found themselves competing against sobbing parents of disabled babies and mentally ill old people. Youth volunteers resigned themselves to this seemingly inevitable scenario. As one volunteer said, 'It's a budget. That's all there is. If someone gets more, someone else gets less'. This approach worked by not satisfying the mantra's demands for open-ended civic transformation.

It is easy to applaud when poor and oppressed people like those Brooklynites demand more funding. It is harder to applaud in a wealthier neighbourhood. Neighborhood

Councils in Los Angeles (EmpowerLA) are designed to bring neighbours together, to make decisions for their small area in the megalopolis. When this pits one neighbourhood against another, wealthier neighbourhoods nearly always win (Musso, Weare, Oztas, & Loges, 2006). Then, we get transformation and maybe even open-ended dialogue, but not help for the needy: The dilemma diminishes in one place, only to pop up in another.

Another way to navigate this dilemma is to give more weight to the wishes of the poor. In Porto Alegre, Brazil's famous participatory budgeting process, when two neighbourhoods' desires conflicted, the rule was to favour the poorer one (Baiocchi, 2002). But since doing this requires judging people, and not treating everyone as equals, it violates the empowerment mantra. The dilemmas never entirely disappear.

Helping people versus open, transformative civic dialogue

A second dilemma surrounding the use of open-ended civic dialogue to help and to transform disadvantaged people is that public speaking terrifies most people, especially those whose intelligence is not certified by a diploma. Civic dialogue often involves conflict, which fuels yet more fear and shame. It makes sense, then, that ethnographies often show an inverse relationship between levels of conflict and levels of engagement amongst less educated participants (e.g. Talpin, 2011).

One way to navigate this dilemma is, as noted earlier, to start small, with easy, useful rote tasks like picking up trash. Instead of starting with rote tasks, organizers sometimes start easy by using art, music, and storytelling to coax participants out of their fears: Drawing pictures with crayons (Berger, 2014); telling stories from their own personal experience rather than being forced into abstract, formal, impersonal public speaking (Polletta, 2014); writing their insights on Post-It's to stick onto a wall (Eliasoph, 2011; Lee 2014); and singing, making puppets, and putting on plays. A new dilemma arises in our Whack-a-Mole game: Yes, while singing and drawing are less intimidating than arguing in public, participants might feel 'infantilized' if they know that while they make crayon drawings, big powerful people make proposals and policies. And doing art projects with clay and string will not teach them the specific arts of open-ended civic dialogue (Berger, 2014).

Another way organizers try to squirm out of the dilemma is to force fearful people to speak, but this can feel intrusive—harmful, not helpful. For example, one Snowy Prairie organizer kept telling a quiet girl that she had to speak in meetings of the youth civic engagement projects. After many months, the girl, who usually hid under the hood of her hoodie, finally spoke, and everyone cheered, saying now she would have to talk more. The girl just burrowed her head deeper into her hoodie, and never spoke again.

Another way some projects navigate this dilemma is, paradoxically, to *invite* conflict, on the assumption that however fearful disadvantaged people may be, they also may want to speak their minds, as empowered citizens in a civic arena. Mutual Qualification projects in France invite residents to speak their minds to officials, and vice versa (Carrell, 2013). When French Muslim youth rage at bus drivers for not stopping at their bus stops, the angry bus drivers defend themselves, and the argument goes back and forth. Organizers assume that working through conflict is, in public, as in psychoanalysis, necessary, so they positively expect explosive conflict. As Ganuza, Baiocchi, & Summers (2016) note,

acknowledging conflict might be the only way to make empowerment work. My point is that any approach comes at a cost; it is dilemmas all the way down.

Sustainable versus helpful

On the one hand, it is more 'sustainable'—cheaper—to help those who are easiest to help. The hope is that they will soon be able to help themselves, and, eventually, may help their neighbours. On the other hand, helping them become self-sufficient may mean ignoring people—mentally ill, cognitively disabled, for example—who may never become self-sufficient, civic volunteers. So, the most needy become the least served. This is what policy analysts call 'cherry picking'.

At one meeting in Snowy Prairie, for example, organizers of various non-profits listened as a speaker from the United Way (a large non-profit that distributes individuals' charitable contributions to local charities) announced a new policy. United Way used to give money to help people with immediate, urgent needs. Now, it would give only to organizations that were 'sustainable', she said. All people can find ways to make their organizations 'sustainable', she said. If nothing else, disabled or elderly people can contribute to society by becoming volunteers themselves. A senior centre organizer in the audience objected, saying that some of her elders could not spoon food into their mouths independently, and some had dementia. The United Way director said that she was sure there was *some* way that those seniors could become more self-sufficient, or 'give back to the community'. Trying to finish a sentence that started by saying that her disabled elderly people would never become self-sufficient, but just needed help, the senior centre organizer broke down, sobbing.

A common way to navigate this dilemma is to treat the help as an investment for the future. Helping people become self-sufficient will, according to approach, eventually lift up the whole community, even if *at the moment* it requires ignoring desperately needy, helpless people. Thus, in a foreign aid project aimed at cultivating civic life in Albania, some village groups applied for immediate help for orphans, haemophiliacs, veterans, disabled people, old people, or political prisoners. They needed help, right now. They did not win the grants. Instead, groups of young, urban, English-speaking professionals won them, for investments that might pay off in the future, in, for example, infrastructure (Sampson, 1996). 'Sustainable' support like this might build the whole economy in the future, without immediately helping the most desperate people in the present. This way of harmonizing the mantra's elements has to assume that eventually, a rising tide raises all boats. But in the meantime, being sustainable means ignoring the most needy, in our round robin of dilemmas.

To summarize this section, making the needy people into volunteers looks good on paper. It looks good on paper, but when people solve a puzzle in one way, new puzzles arise in another way.

Appreciation versus transformation

Our third set of dilemmas arises when empowerment projects aim to appreciate unique people and cultures, while also transforming them. Here, again, on paper, the mantra's missions—'civic', 'transformative', 'helpful', and 'sustainable'—align beautifully: When

ordinary folks join together in civic groups, they can truly appreciate each other in all their local uniqueness and cultural diversity, and they will be able to help one another. But there are dilemmas:

(1) Organizers might not consider a culture to be civic enough, or participants might not be eager to transform it.
(2) It is hard to imagine appreciating people or cultures without knowing much about them, or alleviating suffering without knowing much about it. Internally, all cultures are, themselves, full of disagreements (think, for example, of millennia of arguments about how to be a good Christian or Muslim), ambivalences, and nuances that are hard to describe quickly in an open, voluntary, diverse public forum.

When a culture is not civic enough

When organizers do not consider a culture to be civic enough or open enough to transformation, one way they navigate the dilemma is to ignore the parts that they do not like, silently implying that, of course, participants do not *really* cling to those parts of their culture.

For example, at a Snowy Prairie training workshop, a librarian taught potential adult volunteers to appreciate 'multicultural literature'. An audience member asked how to tell what counts as multicultural. The librarian refers to an old American tale that is now considered racist, saying,

> Just make sure that once you find a book that it's ok. Just because it has images of multicultural kids doesn't mean it's a good book. Some of us might remember *Little Black Sambo* from our own childhood: today, if we looked at it, we would see that *Little Black Sambo* is not giving kids a good image of themselves.

It is confusing (aside from the odd use of 'multicultural kids' as a secret code for 'not white'). So, an audience member asks the question again. But the librarian cannot say anything about racism, which would imply that the questioner's tradition might not be worth 'appreciation'. So, she says, 'You have to *go with your gut feelings*. If you're reading along and it makes you uncomfortable, go with your gut. You know the kids and what they like. Go with your gut'.

Which gut? These volunteers' fondest memories may include sitting on Grandpa's knee reading books that we would now consider racist—Little Black Sambo; or Babar, for example, a naked elephant in Africa before he learns civilization and a white lady gives him a dapper suit; or Curious George, who gets kidnapped from Africa altogether. Can appreciating your culture include appreciating this fond memory? If people's guts were not already pure, the librarian could give no explanation. The librarian's dilemma is that empowerment projects have to appreciate local customs, but honouring this custom would not be civic and inclusive. Often, unique cultures have to portray uniqueness in a standardized, cleaned, and pure way. Here, while the mantra's mission of 'civic' grows, the 'appreciation of unique cultures' shrinks.

Another way to navigate the dilemma between honouring diverse cultures and promoting open civic participation is to give an appreciative nod towards the abstract concept of diversity in all its unique and wonderful forms, and then quickly move on, to erase any uniqueness that does not match the rest of the empowerment mantra. In Snowy Prairie, a local newscaster, born in Singapore, gave a speech at a forum on 'youth and

media'. In the sea of blond and pink, Mai Jou's black hair and dark skin implicitly announced that Snowy Prairians appreciated diverse cultures. The speeches before hers had lamented the ways pop culture destroys tradition; the speechmakers' answer was that parents should really 'listen and communicate' with their children. Mai's prepared speech echoed these themes. But, after the prepared notes ended, she improvised.

> My parents are wonderful people, and I—but I was born in Singapore, and the culture there is very much 'kids are not to be listened to; they're to be raised.' So I must have gotten it from somewhere else. I had wonderful teachers, a drama coach, wonderful people all along the way, and I'm thankful for that.

She is saying her culture was not about 'listening and communicating'. Preserving traditional cultures did not mean upholding *those* aspects of traditions—those that did not value 'listening and communicating'.

The dilemma that arose from this solution is that empowerment meant leaving her culture behind. This way of navigating the dilemma makes culture seem like a conscious and completely individual choice: You can personally choose to stay with your culture, if you decide it is egalitarian enough—or you can choose which parts to keep, and ignore the rest. Then, the only culture left is the culture of free choice.

A riskier way to navigate this dilemma is explicitly to distinguish between the parts of one's culture that one cherishes and those one wishes to leave behind. In a Snowy Prairie workshop for youth workers on appreciating cultural diversity, we divided into breakout groups. In one, a black youth worker tried to explain his culture to four white women. The pockmarked man said that while growing up black in South Carolina in the 1950s, he had had daily lessons about how to avoid lynchings. When the white women kept insisting that they did not see black or white, but only human, he patiently explained,

> At the same time, I know some black kids who won't talk to white adults. Period. They're afraid of white people. I know of kids like that. Because they had an uncle who was lynched by the KKK, a brother who was killed by the police, a grandfather who was murdered. I understand where they're coming from. They don't want to talk to any white person.

Such ambivalence is hard to explain quickly and with a smile. It is not empowerment's wholehearted embrace of happy cultural diversity.

Hearing this chilling soliloquy, the four women sympathetically nodded, and jumped right back into battle with their own ghosts: The stifling small towns they had left, breaking out of their boxes, and bravely transforming themselves. For empowerment project organizers like them, helping kids appreciate diversity meant getting them to mix with diverse others, to learn about other people's cultures. They imagined kids who were like themselves, eager to break out of tiny monotone boxes like the small towns they had courageously left behind. For minorities, like the organizers of after-school programmes for Latino immigrants, it meant giving their kids a safe space to speak Spanish, learn to spell in Spanish, and learn about Latin American cultures, after the full school day of experiencing US culture, learning US history, and speaking English. For them, diversity meant separating; for the first group, it meant mixing. *Both make sense*, for different parties. It is a dilemma all the way down.

Yet another way to navigate this dilemma is for people from different walks of life to spend a very long time together. Emily, the white paid after-school programme worker described earlier, developed intimate appreciation of the obstacles her mostly black and

Latino kids faced, after a few years on the job. For example, she eventually learned that when she went shopping with them, a suspicious guard would watch their every move. Consciously highlighting dilemmas and ambiguity, she and her kids often asked each other if what looked like discrimination—from a security guard, teacher, or whoever else—really was discrimination.

Another way to navigate this dilemma is to anoint only certain local folks as true representatives of 'local': Those who welcome transformation, and rummaging through their cultures to eliminate whatever is not civic, or not open enough to transformation. For example, current civic leaders in a Midwestern US city cannot appear committed to any unique local group (Pacewicz, 2015), cannot defend a political party, take sides in strikes, or draw on any other long-term, old-fashioned loyalties of class, neighbourhood, religion, or ethnicity. Instead, they have to be eager to innovate, to be flexible, open to 'partnering' with anyone. They write grants to build a local historical museum; to stage a river festival; to develop a street that will attract a local brewpub: In other words, they fabricate a 'local' that looks just like every other US city's 'local'. These civic innovators do not count old-fashioned, truly unique, local loyalties as the kind of local diversity that fosters local civic life. Paradoxically, such openness and innovation can end up homogenizing all local cultures till they all look the same. The mantra poses inevitable dilemmas. Fulfilling the goal of 'transformation' often means not fulfilling the goal of 'appreciating uniqueness'.

Civic openness and equality versus deep appreciation of unique cultures

The empowerment mantra calls for civic participation, in which participants treat each other as civic equals. But empowerment projects also exist to help people who may not be able to participate as equals right away. The dilemma is that speaking directly about participants' inequalities is one kind of violation; not speaking about them is another.

One way Snowy Prairie's youth volunteers and organizers navigated the dilemma was to lay differences aside, and treat youth volunteers as pure civic equals. The civic engagement projects brought socially diverse youth together. For the disadvantaged youth volunteers (who usually arrive in groups, driven by the organizer of their 'prevention programme' for 'at-risk youth', while, in contrast, the relatively affluent kids drove themselves in their own cars, or were driven by parents), it was okay to come to meetings and never speak, for months at a stretch. At one meeting, a disadvantaged volunteer, Raul, chased Skittles across the table, while others discussed logistic for an upcoming volunteer event. At another meeting, Raul built a tower out of his empty Doritos bags. Many other disadvantaged youth were equally quiet, for months at a stretch. Adult organizers were, nonetheless, happy they came, months on end, without saying a word. Talking amongst each other, organizers were delighted and proud that kids like Raul were not home alone, not getting in trouble, and not taking drugs. They hoped that, eventually, such kids might develop a taste for volunteering. But it made sense not to address it directly. Making Raul talk about it could feel degrading, as if he were someone who needed help, rather than a competent 'civic equal' who could help others.

Not talking about poverty was a way to quell this dilemma, but then, three new ones popped up: Without acknowledging a problem's existence, it is hard to develop the deep appreciation of its effects, or to hold an open-ended civic discussion about the problem, or to alleviate it.

Even if organizers do not speak about inequalities between members, volunteers have to intuit inequality's importance, in order to make sense of interaction in meetings. The relatively affluent youth volunteers in Snowy Prairie were held to different standards than kids like Raul were. Similarly, many disadvantaged volunteers intuit that whatever the activity is—picking up litter or painting a hospital—it is mainly a kind of therapy *for them*, to cure them of their presumed defects. For example, at a city-sponsored outdoor music and art festival in Snowy Prairie, a reporter interviewed a wispy black teenager who was volunteering as a member of his 'prevention programme' for 'at-risk youth'. Hoping to give the young teen a chance to display his generous volunteer spirit, the reporter asked, 'Why are you here today?' The boy answered, 'I'm involved instead of being out on the streets or instead of taking drugs or doing something illegal'. As a volunteer, he was supposed to sound like he could help others, not like someone who needed help. But he recognized that for him, volunteering was a means to an end: To transform his character, so he would avoid the drugs and crime that organizers imagined haunting him. Empowerment projects aim to appreciate unique people. The dilemma here is that some participants recognize that their uniqueness is not something for organizers to appreciate, but to transform. In an ironic twist to the mantra's call for personal transformation through civic engagement, they see that *they themselves* are the problem to solve.

Another way of navigating the dilemma between appreciating unique cultures and holding an open, civic discussion about transforming them is to make the discussion of poverty less personal, to talk about oneself as a member of a recognizable political category, using the impersonal, expert-based language of statistics. For example, organizers of one public event invited a black 13-year old to give a 'personal testimony'. In his prepared speech, he said,

> Most blacks can't control themselves because they have such low expectations on them. There is a 50% dropout rate, so the community makes it tough for black males like me. It's very tough to get off that thing they set up for us.

Learning about dropout rates gave this boy abstract, expert-based distance, so he could see how he fit into the world. But he had been asked to give personal, first-hand testimony. Learning about these numbers might have been personally transformative, but invoking statistics violates the part of the empowerment mantra that shuns distant experts' knowledge. One mole drops; another rises.

Yet a different way for organizers to navigate the dilemma of appreciating uniqueness and diversity without intruding is to display 'diverse' faces or names, without saying why, as the Mai Jou example illustrates. This implies diversity without having to make any suffering or ambivalence explicit. Organizers in Snowy Prairie often worked hard to coax non-white youth to appear on the podium at public events, representing youth empowerment projects, even if those individual kids had not done any volunteer work. Similarly, a French newspaper evokes the oppressed category of 'Muslim youth' in a story about youth volunteers, by just listing their names—Aïcha, Mahmoud, Samira, Kadicha, Babar, etc.—as the punchline of an article, never calling them 'Muslims' anywhere (Luhtakallio, 2012). Thus, describing one kind of empowerment project—participatory budgeting—Françoise Montambeault (2016) says, 'while targeting inequality … [it] often ignores these inequalities … in its daily institutional practice'. It is not just a mistake, but reveals a dilemma.

Another way that some participants navigate this dilemma is reject the implicit idea that they themselves are the problem. Instead, they use the empowerment project to get help right now. For example, a resident of a grimy French public housing project used the invitation to 'participate' just long enough to get herself a decent apartment. Then, satisfied, she went home. In the mantra's terms, this would not be sustainable or civic (Carrell, 2013). A droll variation on this theme comes from a rebellious gaggle of disadvantaged French Muslim youth volunteers, sent to volunteer in Madagascar. Instead of painting the hospital walls, they bounded off to the beach, saying that they have already had enough hardship in their lives and deserve what other French citizens get: A vacation (Hamidi, 2010). They gleefully refused the character-building lesson that the wispy American boy had solemnly absorbed. The twist is that then, instead of transforming, through civic engagement, they go home! Again, Montambeault (2016) puts it well, calling it the tension between 'citizen-agents' and 'citizen-users'.

Another ingenious way that participants navigate this dilemma is to use unpaid work in an empowerment project today to build a resume so they can get paid work in an empowerment project tomorrow. It happens in the terrifyingly precarious economies of both global North and South. Malawians volunteer in empowerment projects for years on end, banking on the possibility of parlaying their unpaid work into a future job (Swidler & Cott Watkins, 2009). Meanwhile, people in the global North also volunteer partly in order to fluff up their resumes, to impress future employers that they are caring and hard-working people (Hustinx, 2001). What a perfect way of harmonizing all of the mantra's elements! If they are the problem because they are poor or unemployed, getting a job in an empowerment project will solve it: They will no longer be poor or unemployed. This *is* sustainable: If participants attract continuous aid from donors, they might eventually use the money to help their neighbours. And it *is* 'transformative': Volunteers become the kinds of people who are skilled at navigating empowerment projects. They learn, above all, to write proposals: A valuable skill for future employment, if anyone is hiring, that is. In some unspecified, potential future, everything works … just not yet.

This third knot of dilemmas has tangled around the threads of appreciating local people and cultures while transforming them. In a round robin, every solution poses, in turn, its own dilemmas.

What is an empowerment project?

On one edge of the empowerment galaxy might be various market-like projects, such as micro-credit schemes that require recipients to hold meetings (Sanyal, 2014), or social enterprises. A bakery in which poor people work in order to learn business skills (Rius, 2010) or a restaurant that allows disabled people to do something they can feel proud of (Vitale, 2005) can be an empowerment project if someone creates it to empower someone else, at a distance, *and* if it shares the dilemmas described here. Often, such social enterprises are not self-sustaining in their first years, if ever. When fulfilling part of the mantra, they often have to ignore its call for economic sustainability.

On another edge of the empowerment galaxy are social service projects that do not emphasize the 'civic' part of the mantra. Some domestic violence shelters or women's prisons, for example, try to appreciate unique individual people and customs, in group sessions that shine an intrusive public glare on ambivalent, hard to explain feelings and

attachments; emphasize self-reliance against all odds; and make participants display personal transformation (Haney, 2010; Rudrappa, 2004). They share many of empowerment projects' typical dilemmas.

This essay has argued that the mantra of empowerment talk generates typical dilemmas and that projects have shared ways of negotiating them. A longer examination would draw on many more studies, to see whether these dilemmas and ways of navigating them are indeed the most common. A big data analysis might help, but it would have to develop a new sampling methodology, beginning the way this essay has, Meno's paradox fashion, without sampling from a pre-existing list or any universe that was defined a priori. To develop the sample, the research would examine culture in interaction, to locate projects that use the mantra and share the ensuing dilemmas.

Why would an approach that looks for dilemmas be useful? For decades, scholars have been saying that the only way interaction stays afloat anywhere—not just in empowerment projects—is that people manage ambiguity, without ever resolving it (Burke, 1969 [1945]). Acknowledging the inevitability of ambiguity and dilemmas allows us to ask a whole set of questions and notice processes that a quest for coherence hides. In other words, admitting that reality is nearly always full of unspoken dilemmas is more, well, realistic. Why would naming 'the mantra' and locating the field of 'empowerment projects' be useful? For people working in empowerment projects, it may be more useful to recognize, 'aha, there's one of those shared dilemmas!' than to ask how reality departs from seemingly coherent ideal types. For organizers, finding the universe of projects that share these dilemmas and, then, sharing them aloud, publicly, freely, without feeling ashamed of having dilemmas in the first place, might let organizers share solutions.

Finally, to end on a somewhat speculative note, I found myself using the word 'eventually' many times here, making me wonder if, just at the historical moment in which being able to anticipate a long future together has become nearly impossible, it may be what is most needed. By seeing how people negotiate empowerment's typical dilemmas, we saw that this and other unfashionable and elusive departures from the empowerment mantra, like ambivalence, humility, patience, commitment, reliability, safety, loyalty, and silence, might empower people in ways that empowerment project organizers rarely notice.

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