Empowerment Training

James O'Heare

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Preface

In this book, I explore a range of circumstances and behavioral phenomena represented by the word "empowerment." I also discuss some training strategies and practices that promote and prevent empowerment. These applies to any species of animal, including, more or less, humans. Finally, I discuss the rehabilitation of disempowerment, again empowerment and disempowerment representing a number of related conditions or patterns of behavior.

Empowerment is not something typically addressed by a scientist because it is one of those airy-fairy, colloquial, and pseudoscientific notions that most scientists would not take seriously. Words like empowerment and disempowerment, though commonly utilized in rather unscientific terms, tact certain kinds of real behavioral phenomena and stripped of their mystical trappings could potentially be useful. Most scientists under such contingencies might opt to explore the real behavioral phenomena without invoking baggage-laden colloquial terms. On the other hand, the term "empowerment" does evoke a unique set of verbal behaviors that more technical terms do not seem adequate to cover in one word or phrase. The concept of empowerment calls attention to certain clusters of circumstances that are rarely identified in the very specific functional behavioral analysis and functional diagnostic processes within behaviorology.

For these reasons, I entertain the term in this book, as least in as much as it evokes said attention and makes proper analysis more likely. However, my entertaining the term extends only far enough to identify a range of issues to be explored. The concept of empowerment is intriguing because it tends to be evoked under contingencies involving a number of real problems and their solutions, that, if treated more seriously, could potentially benefit a great many persons (be they human or otherwise). Personally, the word empowerment evokes private verbal behaviors (i.e., thoughts and chains of

thoughts) related to a number of actual situations that are of interest to bettering lives, including response depression, conditioned helplessness, and excessive aversive emotional arousal. My objective is to explore all of the related issues, but to do so in a more scientifically sound manner than has been typical of the concept, including in the now quite old first edition of this book.

I will assume a professional audience of behaviorologists, behavior analysts, animal trainers, and behavior technologists, and hence a basic familiarity with the foundational principles of behavior and specific animal training techniques. However, as I proceed, I review some of these principles and procedures as they relate to empowerment training tactics. I use proper technical terminology for the purposes of clarity and precision, but I also attempt to define the terms as they are introduced. For further information on key terms, please refer to the Encyclopedic Glossary of Terms of the Association of Animal Behavior Professionals (see list of resources at the end of the book). Readers who are less experienced with the principles of behavior might start by reading my book *Problem Animal Behavior*.

Many of the topics I discuss are far from conclusively established—another part of the problem in tackling this topic. It is important to remember while reading, that there is controversy regarding some of these issues. This is particularly true of some theories accounting for observed behavioral phenomena. In many cases, the phenomena are well known and readily predicted but the hypothesized mechanisms underlying them are not. For instance, we frequently speak of "learned helplessness" and "systematic desensitization," but these notions involve not only the readily observable phenomena but also hypothesized explanations for them that are still debated. This should not stop us from discussing these matters. I generally attempt to stick to the effects and forgo in-depth discussion of the theories attempting to account for them, but this is not always be possible. Where I discuss the theories, I either present the hypothesis that seems to be favored or discuss different plausible perspectives.

This book makes use of a number of published reports of research on non-human animals, that are repugnant and outrageous. I have and continue to struggle with whether to write a book that presents the results from such research. I have chosen to do so because it is already done and the findings may indeed help others. However, I am loath to reinforce such research by describing and citing it. I attempt to offset this harm by being absolutely clear and frank here in this preface regarding my stance on the topic. It is a mad world indeed, where learning more about some phenomenon (such as what happens when you deprive an infant of their mother or expose animals to inescapable intense electric shocks or drop rats into water and see how long it takes them to give up and die under different situations) is considered adequate justification for causing extreme and persistent pain and suffering, and indeed ruining lives and even killing. I do not condone experimentation on non-human animals that requires any kind of exploitation, which includes keeping them in captivity, regardless of whether the experiment causes physical or behavioral harm as well and regardless of how "valuable" anyone believes the results to be. Non-human animals cannot provide informed consent. As a rule of thumb, if an experiment and everything that conducting it requires would not be acceptably carried out on young children (with or without parental consent), then it would be no more acceptable to carry it out on a non-human.

This is a work in progress. Once it is published, I will surely continue to hone and develop my treatment of the topic, so that it will evolve over time. I will prepare new editions of this book to improve the idea of empowerment training. Consider this book an approximation, with the terminal approximation to be shaped into a form as yet unknown.

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