

Experiments in Empowerment

Research as Clearing

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Anthropologists and the Will to Empower

Empowerment has become a hegemonic moral horizon and key modality of governance across the global South and the global North. Whether in the realm of development or in that of welfare and urban governance, a broad range of actors, from local NGOs to social professionals and international donors, now envision the empowerment of local communities as a crucial condition and means for achieving good governance and social justice (Cruikshank 1999; Rose 1996). Anthropologists and development scholars – including ourselves – often find themselves ambivalently positioned in relation to such projects of empowerment. As Barbara Cruikshank has argued, empowerment does not so much liberate people from relations of power as it is itself a mode of governance, one that addresses social problems by seeking to turn ‘those who are held to exhibit some specified lack’ (1999, 3) into active and self-governing subjects. Turning a critical eye onto the entwinement of empowerment and neoliberal governance, anthropologists and development scholars have played a crucial role in tracing the establishment of empowerment as a terrain of expertise and bureaucratic measurement and how this circumscribes the political relations and subjectivities produced in empowerment’s name (Green 2000; Newman and Tonkens 2011; Sharma 2006). At the same time, anthropologists and development scholars – again, ourselves included – also are invested in the promises, held by empowerment, of democratization and just political relations.

In this essay, we turn to the hesitations and experimental practices of our research interlocutors in two urban settings saturated by a ‘will to empower’ (Cruikshank 1999). During ten months in the year 2017, Anick followed the everyday practices of family workers in three community centers and neighborhood associations in the northeast of Paris, who were tasked to help working-class and migrant-background

parents regain confidence and agency *vis-à-vis* state institutions. Like the parents with whom they worked, many of these family workers hailed from the banlieue themselves and were of migrant backgrounds. Anick participated in the activities they organized for parents and families (discussion groups, parenting programs, lectures, outings, neighborhood feasts), as well as joining team meetings and local professional network meetings,¹ complemented by semi-structured interviews with over 40 parenting-support social workers and policy makers. As part of a broader participatory action-research, Naomi worked with 15 male former gang leaders in Mombasa (Kenya) who sought to reform themselves to escape police violence. Naomi's interlocutors were between 16 and 28 years old and worked closely with their friend Hasso during 2019 and 2022. In this period, Naomi conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork with these young men and with Hasso, during which she observed their weekly meetings and the individual lives of several group members, and she conducted life history interviews with five of them.

These two cases thus figure actors who were differently positioned in relation to the will to empower. Whereas community organizers in Paris were agents of a broader governance will to empower marginalized urban populations, former gang members tried to resist the will to empower of NGOs by carving out their own space for reform. In both cases, however, our research participants were critical of the normative form and direction of the empowerment projects and regimes of which they were part. They aspired to something more fundamental: an opening up of a more just social and political order, a reinvention of the self. Moreover, they came to tentatively understand empowerment in this more radical sense as requiring the undoing or destabilizing of given, violent forms of authority. In this essay we think through these cases together to tease out what it takes to recapture empowerment as a transformative force from the will to empower. As we will show, empowerment as the undoing of given forms of authority takes the shape of a clearing of sorts; a symbolic space where the given is (temporarily) suspended and the habitual within oneself is critically engaged, and where experimentation can take place, in the imagining and crafting of what-is-not-yet. In what follows, we first compare the different forms and (authoritative) relations that experimental undoing and redoing of authority takes in the two sites. We end by reflecting on how anthropologists may contribute to such local efforts to create experimental clearings within the will to empower.

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Paris: Poaching Expert Models for Institutional Critique

In the marginalized and ethno-racially diverse neighborhoods of northeast Paris, a dense landscape of municipal programs, urban policy initiatives, and associations exists. These seek to redress social problems – youth delinquency, school failure, poverty and inequality – through a participative approach aimed at social cohesion and reconnecting residents and institutions. The local community organizers and neighborhood officials with whom Anick worked infused their work with a critical understanding of the effect on working-class and migrant parents' sense of self of institutions' hierarchical, normative, and often discriminatory posture towards them. The collective activities offered by community centers were precisely meant as spaces where parents' capacities would be 'valorized', and where they could regain self-esteem and a sense of agency (see also Vollebergh 2022). From 2015 onwards, several community centers also started to offer workshops for parents on a specific parenting method, namely the classic 1970s American self-help method 'How2talk2kids'. The premise of *éducation bienveillante* as this method was often called is that familial relations can become more harmonious by replacing hierarchical parental disciplining by a new mode of authority that is grounded in acknowledging emotions and fostering horizontal cooperation. This method, so community center managers reasoned, would be an appropriate response to the sense of incapacity that many parents' expressed in relation to their own parental authority, while also broadening parents' pedagogical horizons.

The workshops in which Anick participated alongside parents and community center staff revolved around learning and practicing concrete techniques of attentive listening and scripted talk by way of cartoons, role play and other exercises. The workshop material and teacher consistently presented these more 'benevolent' techniques as a solution to the unintended negative effects that common, routinized parental responses were said to have on children's sense of self. In response to parents' and staff's struggle with techniques, the teacher regularly emphasized that changing given habits within oneself is hard work. The workshop was presented as a moment in which the push and pull of everyday parenting life was momentarily suspended, opening up a space where parents could take a step back and together examine their habitual responses. The exercises and role playing allowed parents to experiment with other, alternative responses, try them out, experience their logic and effects. It was such practicing of scripted techniques over and over, first in the clearing provided by the workshop and then in everyday life, that was to allow new sensibilities to slowly take hold.



A square in northeast Paris featuring modernist social housing blocks that are characteristic of the ethno-racially diverse neighborhoods in which community centers are commonly housed.

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On the surface then, this seems like a clear-cut example of the reformative impulse in top-down empowerment projects: governance actors and professionals bringing in expert knowledge and technologies through which a population defined as deficient in some respect is to work on itself (Cruikshank 1999). Things were, however, not that simple. First of all, the community organizers who worked directly with parents were hesitant about the normative nature of the method and the way it responsibilized parents. Moreover, the discussions that were evoked by the workshop material often did not focus on parenting problems per se, but on the ‘violent’ ways in which local institutions treated working-class children and parents. Parents and community organizers often arrived at the conclusion that, actually, teachers and other institutional professionals were the ones who needed to learn how to be more *bienveillant*. Indeed, a diverse set of actors, who had become increasingly uncomfortable with offering the method to marginalized parents, started instead to organize *éducation bienveillante* trainings for interested local professionals, teachers and volunteers, in the hope that this might be a way to trigger institutional change. Drawing on the expert moral language and techniques of *this* parenting method to reimagine what a more human institutional

authority could look like, they thus sought to redirect the reformative impulse of empowerment away from parents and onto the French state, critically uncovering the state itself as morally deficient and in need of transformation.

Mombasa: Staying With Uncertainty to Reform the Self

Whereas in this Parisian case it was governance actors who initiated an empowerment project for others, the field setting in Mombasa, Kenya, figures local residents who urgently wanted to transform themselves. An infamous gang called Kali, in a ghetto in the northern part of Mombasa, had been known for its use of violence when robbing people, houses and cars since its inception in 2006. In more recent years, it also had developed ties with Al Shabaab and other violent extremist groups, adding to its notoriety. The latter move backfired as many neighborhood residents turned against them and teamed up with police to have them killed (see also Van Stapele 2019). Impelled by the rampant extra-judicial killings of their members by police, the group made the decision in 2019 to leave crime, cut their ties to violent extremist groups and become a youth group of peace builders. This plunged them headfirst into a domain of peace initiatives organized around a neoliberal notion of reform and youth empowerment and led by a powerful arrangement of local and international NGOs. Soon they saw a few of their more charismatic members elevated to hero-status while the quiet and less well-spoken ones were left behind. The uneven distribution of stipends and other opportunities tore their group apart, but a friend stepped in. Hasso, a former gang member and Al Shabaab affiliate and now a reformed community worker knew the dangers of NGOization (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013; Gardner and Lewis, 2015). He too had been elevated to hero-status as a reformed member of Al Shabaab, only to be discarded after what he termed 'his sell-by date'. He began to work with Kali on a community-led research and action (CLRA) project as part of his work with an international research organization that Naomi worked with as well. Through this project, Hasso, supported by Naomi, was able to reduce the pull from the NGOs. The CLRA project made a clearing in the dense and entangled hold NGOs had on youth development work in Mombasa by offering Kali members a small stipend and providing them with the space and guidance to explore their own terms of reform. For 18 months, Kali members decided on their own priority issues, and the overall aim was to achieve locally relevant and meaningful actions through research and action, and 'research as action' (Woensdregt et al. 2022).

This desired transformation was instigated by what they dubbed ‘getting focused.’ Interestingly, their newly gained focus was not so much geared towards a specified goal other than exploring alternative positions of masculine authority in their local communities through unlearning violence and criminality. In their search for new meanings of manhood and community, they asked support from Hasso and Naomi in negotiating their working relationships with NGOs in line with their local ambitions to transform from community control to community service. Given that working with NGOs denoted access to money and other opportunities, they did not want to break ties. However, their collective journey depended on their cohesion as a group, giving each other support and engaging in a discipline of ‘undoing anger’ to gradually open up possibilities for new modes of masculine authority. Reform on their own terms turned out to be an ongoing effort for them to stay with uncertainty. Uncertainty to Kali members had at least three interlocking dimensions. First, letting go of their old ideas of ‘a good life’ without clearly circumscribed ideas of alternative ways to live up to masculine ideals, such as providership, had direct social and economic implications. Their ability to provide plummeted immediately and with it their social status. Fear of social death was only surpassed by their fear of physical death, which spurred them on to continue to stay ‘focused’ on reform. Second, ‘undoing anger’ turned out to be an ongoing process of removing habituated mind sets and bodily practices without immediately knowing what else to think and do. Trying out various actions such as community service and reimagining their connections to NGOs allowed them to grow more confident over time. Third, not knowing when their reform would be completed, especially in the eyes of the community, rendered the young men to remain in a state of what they termed *rada* (‘alert’ in Swahili).

Empowerment as Clearing and Experiment

What do these two cases tell us about the possibilities and limits of empowerment in contexts defined by the will to empower? In their efforts to set in motion a deeper kind of change, community organizers and former gang members alike tentatively linked empowerment to the destabilization of given modes of authority that they came to consider destructive. They sought to open up a space, a clearing, where they could work on themselves to undo habituated dispositions within themselves and new ways of doing authority could be experimented with. This work of unlearning and creative experimentation took different forms in Mombasa and in Paris, the former more experimental, the latter more modular. In the case of Kali

members, unlearning engrained embodiments of a violent masculine authority took the form of a conscious move away from authoritative models of reform put forward by NGOs and donors. Instead, Kali members sought to stay with uncertainty, exposing themselves to new environments and exploring new practices. In Paris, community organizers and officials turned precisely to an established, expert pedagogical model of 'benevolent' authority, but this led them to work on their own habituated dispositions and to critically discuss institutional authority with and alongside parents. Here, the experimentation lies in the way they re-oriented this expert model to apply it as a hands-on tool for reimagining and reshaping, from the outside and in baby-steps, institutional authority.

Both processes have their vulnerabilities. In Mombasa, transformation as an open-ended process of reinvention and becoming was constantly at risk of being pulled into the fixed templates and interests of NGOs' will to empower. As the work of Hasso demonstrates, experimentation needed a clearing from the norms and power of NGOs. Ironically, this keeping at bay of the will to empower, including its financial rewards, requires actors with the means and authority to do so. In Paris, community organizers struggled with a different risk: namely that an experimentally applied model might still slip into a normative template, one that closes down possibilities rather than opens up. The ongoing hesitation and worries of community organizers about the 'responsibilizing' character of *éducation bienveillante* points to their awareness of this risk.

The notion of a 'clearing' offers new inroads for thinking about the possible role of engaged scholarship in relation to empowerment. Both of us came to understand engaged scholarship as contributing to our interlocutors' efforts to craft a clearing in everyday routines for reflection and rethinking actions. In Anick's case, community organizers frequently used their informal conversations with her to discuss their hesitations and doubts. Building on these relationalities, she crafted interviews and focus groups explicitly as a space in which routine practices and assumptions could be suspended and reflected upon. Hence, fieldwork relations became part of the research not only as ways to collect data but as part of the transformations the professionals aspired to as well. In Naomi's case engaged scholarship entailed several efforts. First, it meant intensive labor to protect the clearing the young men tried to carve out for themselves from the empowering regimes of NGOs. Second, it involved continuous (weekly) attention from her to Hasso and the group to encourage them in their own research and actions. Third, it required from her constant feedback on their activities to help them realize what they learned through research as action. Research became an important part of

their reform actions through the space it provided for reflections and regaining focus and mutual support to remain open for new possibilities.

Our interlocutors' understanding of empowerment, as only ever transformative if linked to the undoing or unlearning of previous forms of authority, brings into view the creative effort that goes into making space for new moral orders. The will to empower envisions empowerment as the filling up of a lack: adding new capacities, new skills, new forms of agency. Our interlocutors point out that empowerment in a more radical, transformative sense is something else; it is the undoing and the clearing of the given and making space for a not-yet-known new.

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