The Extent and Correlates of the Utilisation of Empowerment Strategies: A Survey of Social Workers in the Field of Partner Violence

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Abstract

Empowerment has been treated as an intervening goal in many areas of social work practices to strengthen clients so they could break through the status of disadvantage and, in turn, increase social functioning and quality of life. Due to the importance of empowerment in social work practice, the purposes of this study were to examine the extent of utilisation of empowerment strategies and to explore its correlates. A survey was conducted on social workers in the field of partner violence and resulted in 243 valid samples. The findings showed that social workers used the individual level (at the psychological level) of strategies more than the interpersonal or social political levels. After taking other variables into account, the significant correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategies were: life satisfaction, the control tendency of the perpetrator, level of service provision, and percentage of two to three contacts per month. The findings imply that empowerment is a mutually beneficial process between social workers and clients; empowerment is still based on needs of clients; and more services and more frequent contacts made by social workers increase the possibility of enacting empowerment strategies.

Keywords: Empowerment strategies, utilisation of strategies, partner abuse

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Introduction

Empowerment has been part of social work theories and practice since the 1970s (Solomon, 1976). It has also become a widely used term in social science in the last decade across disciplines such as social work, women's studies, community psychology, sociology, management and political theory (Hur, 2006). The need for such an approach to practice is pressing, since social workers usually work with clients experiencing discrimination, stigma and oppression, and feeling disadvantaged with low self-esteem. Empowerment is viewed as an intermediate goal to enhance social functioning, life satisfaction and social changes through strengthening an individual's power within and facilitating social participation and resource utilisation.

Over the past four decades, there have been fruitful findings and discussions on the definition of empowerment (Boehm and Staples, 2004; Gutiérrez *et al.*, 1998; Rogers *et al.*, 1997), programme planning, evaluation and strategy development of empowerment (Boehm and Staples, 2004; Chadiha *et al.*, 2004; Song, 2008), and the development of empowerment scales (Rogers *et al.*, 1997; Spreitzer, 1995; Song, 2006). However, we know very little about the extent to which the empowerment strategies have been used and what factors are correlated with its use. This kind of knowledge is important, since it has the potential to improve professional training and supervision, as well as to encourage an organisation to better facilitate empowerment practice. Thus, the investigator drew samples from social workers in the field of partner abuse in Taiwan to address this issue.

The reasons that the social workers in this field were chosen were twofold: (i) the victims of partner abuse might demonstrate negative effects of abuse, such as depression, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress syndrome, fear of intimate relationship,s financial disadvantage and social isolation (Lundy and Grossman, 2001; Wiehe, 1998), making empowerment an urgent issue for them; and (ii) since it has become a major area of social service in Taiwan, the number of social workers in this area has become larger compared to other areas.

The definition of empowerment

Empowerment includes holding a positive attitude toward one's own self-efficacy, mastery of environment, and the possibility and ability to influence the outside world, along with taking individual or collective action to fight against oppression and discrimination (Adams, 2003; Chadiha *et al.*, 2004). Based on ecological theory, the concept of empowerment has been delineated from three levels: individual, interpersonal and social-political (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 1998; Miley *et al.*, 1998). Specifically, the contents within

each level are defined as follows (Song, 2006): (i) individual level: a person feels positive about one's own self-esteem, self-efficacy and mastery, and is able to set goals and take actions to achieve goals, while viewing oneself with a goodness-of-fit with the environment; (ii) interpersonal level: a person feels assertive about interpersonal interactions, is able to form part-nerships with people and gains respect and honour from others; and (iii) social-political level: a person has knowledge about his/her own right, holds positive attitudes toward the possibility of changing the environment by taking collective action and is willing to take action to pursue social justice.

The strategies of empowerment with Chinese culture consideration

How do social workers facilitate the clients with disadvantaged status to recognise his/her power within and also to actualise individual or collective goals? Chadiha *et al.* (2004) mentioned three strategies to enhance black female care-givers: (i) to raise group consciousness through story telling so the personal experiences are reviewed, the meaning reconstructed and reframed, and the strengths and motivation to overcome adversity found; (ii) to teach them concrete problem-solving skills through group dialogues and critical thinking; and (iii) to teach them advocacy skills and resource utilisation for social-political actions.

Peled, Eisikovitz, Enosh and Winstok (2000) suggested a constructivist model for empowering battered women who stay in the relationship. Two dimensions are included in the model: an ecological dimension and a reality construction dimension. The former consists of socio-cultural domain, institutions and organisation, significant others sur-rounding battered women and the women themselves. It suggests that change targets of empowerment are multi-level. The latter involves three interrelated components through which reality is shaped within each ecological level: reality perception, meaning ascribed to an act, and behaviours and actions undertaken as a consequence of the recon-struction process.

Since the idea of empowerment had basically emerged from the Western world, both its implication and application in Chinese society deserve further discrete thought. The literal sense of the word 'China' in Chinese is defined by the traditional Scriptures as being eclectic (neither extremism nor dichotomy), inclusion and wholeness (neither exclusion nor partialness), comprehensiveness (rather than separate-ness), the complementary and dynamic balance between opposites (as well as the everlasting rhythm and harmony of the person, social environment, nature and the universe) and progressive cultivation from inner self to outer world (rather than radical revolution or

regressive isolation). Thus, the different beliefs and thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have been merged into the core value and fundamental philosophy of traditional Chinese Scriptures. From this traditional Chinese perspective, the empowerment process involves awakening one's own mind and accepting the true self, with the present moment as the starting place of behavioural change and growth, and developing a natural concern and respect of one's self and others within defined filial duty and interpersonal roles for achieving a moral society and compassionate world. Yip (2004) maintained that if the concept of empowerment is applied to Chinese communities, then some adaptations and further supplemental empowerment strategies are needed within Chinese culture: the empowerment process should target both the individual and significant others, empower both individual right and social responsibility, maintain harmony among all parties involved and make gradual rather than radical change.

Inspired by literature, the investigator had conducted a qualitative study to explore the concrete strategies and tactics among social workers in Taiwan (Song, 2008). Twenty-five social workers in the areas of psychiatry, partner abuse and welfare service were interviewed. They were asked to use a successful case example for illustrating how they had empowered the client. Successful cases were defined by the social workers as those clients who had had positive changes, demonstrated their own strengths and ability, and had experienced growth through intervention. Thus, the empowerment strategies utilised in this study were regarded as being effective for both the workers and their clients. Special attention was given to the specific strategies utilised in Chinese culture. The rich texts were analysed in accordance with the definition of empowerment mentioned above and the findings yielded sixteen strategies, thirty-eight tactics and sixty-eight detailed tactics (see Table 1). The list is comprehensive and especially fruitful concerning the specific strategies under Chinese culture. The emphasis on family support was tied with traditional Chinese cultural roots that the descendants should enshrine their ancestors forever, which might demand each family member's unconditional devotion to his family. Since some Chinese families might still be patriarchal and suppressing to the clients, the conscious-raising process of self need to be gradual, subtle and respectful with clients' pace to maintain the harmony of family relationship. Although social authority might be a source of stress and oppression, it could also be an important resource for promoting both family support and social justice. The limitation of the previous findings was that the strategies pertaining to social political level were relatively few. As concluded by the author (Song, 2008), social stigma and disadvantaged status preventing the clients from participating in such actions, as well as the structural barrier experienced by the workers (e.g. heavy work load and constrain of civil service law), caused a limited number of strategies utilised. The author also suggested that future study should locate social workers with

Table 1 Strategies and tactics of empowerment

Strategies	Tactics
Help clients recognise their own ability	
Strengths perspective	1 Form genuine and trusting relationship
	2 Evaluate strengths
	3 Explore clients' wants
	4 Facilitate demonstration of strengths
	5 Use the principle of helper
Reframing	1 Re-examine cognitive structure
	2 Use of story telling
Facilitate clients to activate their own ability	
Facilitating thinking	1 Discuss clients' thoughts
	2 Soft confrontation
Facilitating experience	1 Utilise positive experience
	2 Enhance ability for action
Enhancing use of social support	1 Enhance the ability of using formal resources
	2 Use of informal support
Help clients know the possibility of making choices	
Reframing	1 Discuss possibilities with clients
	2 Discuss goals and actions
Providing options	1 Use the experience of peer
	2 Inform alternatives and consequences
Facilitate clients to take action to fight for their own right	
Strengthened by resources	1 Provide resources and information
	2 Use multiple media
Enhance confidence through strengths	1 Encouragement and recognition
	2 Accompany clients in action
Facilitate clients to form alliances with other clients	
Encouraging participation in a group	1 Facilitate mutual support of group member
	2 Form common goal and action
Raise collective consciousness	
Contact and dialogue	1 Use multiple media
	2 Facilitate dialogue
Facilitate collective actions	
Help clients establish goals and alliance	Clarify goals, set up organisation and establish alliance with others
Chinese culture-specific empowerment strategies	
Facilitate better use of family support	1 Establish relationship with clients' significant others
	2 Better use of informal resources
	3 Facilitate clients use informal support
Gradual and maintaining harmony	1 Consciousness raising through mild and gradual way
	2 Respect clients' pace
Use traditional beliefs to facilitate actions	1 Use the traditional concept of 'face'
	2 Use traditional beliefs and rituals
Facilitate better use of social authority for advocacy	Use the help of influential persons, organisations and media to achieve the goals

Source: Song (2008).

much richer experiences on social political empowerment to increase the strategies under this category. The investigator further transformed these empowerment strategies and tactics into a Likert-type scale that was used in this quantitative study for exploring the extent to which strategies had been utilised.

Correlates of utilisation of empowerment strategies
Deducted from factors of self-empowerment

The literature has not yet documented the extent of empowerment strategies utilised or the correlates of such utilisation. Adams (2003) discussed the importance of self-empowerment of social workers and the factors that affect a worker's self-empowerment. Adams (2003) mentioned that 'Empowering others is a demanding job. Before empowering other people, workers need to become empowered themselves' (Adams, 2003, p. 47). The reason is that our own thoughts, feelings and situation would affect us in any work with other people. Adams (2003) also argued that 'the person who feels and is empowered is more likely to have the motivation and capacity to empower other people and to be empowered by them' (Adams, 2003, p. 48). Thus, the investigator hypothesised that these factors might also affect the extent of the utilisation of empowerment strategies.

Adams (2003) cited Stanton's (1990) analysis and suggested that the prerequisites of self-empowerment are: (i) a commonly agreed value base, (ii) an analysis of unequal or oppressing features of the situation of individuals, (iii) clear strategies for addressing areas of inequality and oppression, (iv) a repertoire of relevant areas of expertise to be drawn on, (v) access to learning resources to enable other essential expertise to be developed, (vi) an open style of working together and (vii) a close fit between the empowerment of workers as service providers and the empowerment of service users.

Deducted from the list, the investigator argues that the first five prerequisites could be obtained through empowerment-related training. The fifth one also implies the importance of organisational resource that would affect the opportunity of expertise development of workers as well as the enactment of empowerment in practice. The seventh one has to do with whether social workers have established trust and partnership with clients through outreach and intensive contacts, therefore developing a deep and accurate grasp of each client's perspective, life experience and needs.

Deducted from the correlates of empowerment

Since the personal level of power might affect empowerment practice (Adams, 2003), the investigator hypothesised that the correlates of empowerment could also be the correlates of empowerment practice. Rogers *et al.* (1997) found that quality of life, frequency of mental health service utilisation, community activity participation and overall life satisfaction were significant correlates for persons with mental illness. Education is also a potential correlate based on the finding of Walsh and Lord (2004). As for psychological empowerment, Peterson and Speer (2000) found that capability and support of a leader, opportunity role structure, social support

and a common belief system were important correlates. The investigator's own study in Taiwan using three sources of samples, namely social workers, clients and educators in social work, found that social group participation, role opportunity and support, and life satisfaction were significant correlates across samples, with the last two being more important (Song, 2006).

Deducted from organisational factors

Cohen (1998) maintained that 'the sources of power within the organisation may limit client-worker mutuality or create power disparities that undermine the goals of empowerment practice' (Cohen, 1998, p. 169). Thus, the organisation needs to have financial resources and flexibility in developing programmes for disadvantaged families, in establishing collaboration and partnership with other organisations, and in providing in-service training for empowerment practice. Furthermore, workers need to alter their roles from 'expert authority' to 'collaborator' and from 'individual therapy' to 'community based practice' through outreach (Cohen, 1998). In addition, Cohen's (1998) study found that frontier workers experienced the same sense of disempowerment when working with clients; thus, they need training and supervision to engage in effective empowerment practice. Based on Cohen's (1998) finding and argument, the investigator hypothesised that service resources within an organisation, ways of contact (via phone call, meeting in agency or in community) and professional support were potential correlates of empowerment practice.

Deducted from causes of violence

Since this study used the sample of social workers in the field of partner abuse, the investigator hypothesised that the causes of violence might affect the use of empowerment strategies. Based on the literature, four types of causes are suggested: (i) from the feminist's perspective, violence stems from patriarchal control, (ii) from the system perspective, violence is a negative reaction to conflicts between the family members, (iii) from the social learning perspective, violence is learned from witnessing violence at home during childhood, and (iv) from the pathological perspective, violence is the projection of the perpetrator's anger, anxiety or sadness from early failure in a current relationship (Greene and Bogo, 2002; Lawson, 2003; Mears, 2003; Wiehe, 1998). In practice, the investigator also found other causes of violence such as poor coping mechanism or emotional management, conflicts out of extramarital affair or losing self-control due to substance abuse or mental illness. The investigator maintains that as long as violence is used as a way of deliberate control over someone, the

victim's autonomy is compromised gradually, and empowerment is needed for that person to take action for changes.

In sum, the literature and practice identify five groups of potential correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategies that were included for this study: (i) social worker's personal factors (demographic characteristics and life satisfaction), (ii) organisational factors (role opportunity and support, service resources, professional support and caseload), (iii) service delivery factors (frequency of contact, way of contact, extent of service), (iv) empowerment-related training, and (iv) cause of violence.

Method

Subjects

A cross-sectional design of a survey on social workers in the field of partner abuse was used. According to The Domestic Violence Law enacted in 1998, each county or city government in Taiwan was required to set up a Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention and Intervention (DVPI). There are twenty-four centres already operating around Taiwan. Although the DVPI services involve multi-disciplinary collaboration, social workers are the major workforce that serves as case managers. Some of the services are contracted out to the private sector. The investigator contacted each centre and asked for their collaboration on the survey. As a result, twenty-three centres and eight private organisations agreed to be a part of this study, and the total number of social workers available was 316. Participation of social workers was voluntary, and a sample of 265 social workers was recruited. It took three months to conduct the survey and yielded 243 completed and valid questionnaires. The response rate represented was 91.7 per cent of 265 and 76.9 per cent of 316. Each subject was given a gift voucher (worth $NTD200 or $USD6) to a convenience store.

Variables and instruments

The structured questionnaire was self-administered by participants, and its confidentiality and anonymity were ensured in the introduction. In each centre, one social worker was assigned to be in charge of collecting the completed questionnaires.

Independent variables

1. Personal factors included two sets of variables. One set of variables—demographic characteristics—consisted of: sex, actual age, education (high school, college and master's degree), monthly income (1 = less then

$NTD20,000, $2 = $NTD 20,000–29,000, $3 = $NTD30,000–39,999, $4 = $NTD40,000–49,000 and $5 = $NTD50,000 and above) and work tenure (total work tenure, work tenure in the field of partner abuse and work tenure in current agency by month). The second set of variables—life satisfaction—was measured by a scale of seven items developed by the investigator. The scale captured the level of satisfaction on various life aspects of living: status, work, finance, interpersonal relations, children's status, self-competence and external environment. Items were phrased in ways such as 'I am satisfied with my living status'. The subjects rated each item among four categories: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3) and strongly agree (4). The construct validity of this scale was ensured by its significant correlation with level of empowerment ($\gamma = 0.66$) and the Cronbach's alpha was 0.80 (Song, 2006). The Cronbach's alpha for the current study was 0.79.

2. The organisational factors included four variables. First, role opportunity and support was measured by five items developed by the investigator in a previous study (Song, 2006). The items measured the opportunity of social workers to express their own opinion in role allocation, clear statement of responsibility, level of discretion power, receiving support when needed and mutual help among workers. The response categories were: never (1), seldom (2) and often (3). The alpha in the previous study was 0.83 (Song, 2006) and 0.79 in this study.

Second, service resource was measured by six types of service. Those six types were: consultation (e.g. legal, medical), support (e.g. support group), assistance (e.g. legal, financial), shelter, rehabilitation and counselling, and courses for learning and growth. The participants rated the sufficiency of resources among five levels, ranging from very insufficient (1) to very sufficient (5). The alpha for the five items was 0.87 for this study.

Third, eight items were developed to measure professional support from different aspects. These items were: internal and external supervision for case treatment, the director's attitudes toward content, depth of treatment and outcomes of treatment, sufficiency of manpower, administrative support and training opportunity. The response categories ranged from very insufficient (1) to very sufficient (5). The internal consistency was very satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.86$).

The fourth variable was caseload of each worker, including total caseload and cases contacted within the past three months.

3. Service delivery factors were measured by three indicators. (i) Frequency of contact. The participants rated among their clients, the percentage of contact two to three times a week, once a week, two to three times a month, once a month, once every two months and once every three months, respectively. (ii) Ways of contact. The participants rated the percentage of times they contacted clients by telephone, meeting in agency or outreach, respectively. (iii) Level of service provision. The participants rated the extent of the six types of service (as listed in the

service resources variable) that they provided to clients, with four response categories: never (1), seldom (2), sometimes (3) and often (4). The alpha for the six items was 0.58. This unsatisfactory result might indicate that the services provided were individualised and not necessarily correlated. The mean summation score was used to indicate the extent of service provision.

4. Empowerment-related training. Participants were asked if they had attended empowerment-related conferences and seminars or had read related articles or books.

5. Causes of violence were measured by six types: (i) differences in opinion (conflict out of discordance, poor communication), (ii) poor coping mechanism (ineffective coping methods, poor emotional control), (iii) control tendency of the perpetrator (wanting to control the partner, emotional dependency, lack of trust toward the partner, chauvinist attitude), (iv) violent tendency of the perpetrator, (v) behavioural problem of the perpetrator (loss of control due to substance abuse or mental illness), and (vi) conflict due to an extramarital affair. The participants were asked to rate how frequently each cause of violence occurred based on their work experience. The four response categories for each item were: never (1), seldom (2), sometimes (3) and often (4). While violent tendency and conflict due to marital affair were measured by a single item, the other four types were indicated by a summation of various items.

Dependent variable

Empowerment strategies and tactics extracted from the investigator's previous study (Song, 2008) was further constructed into a four-point Likert-type scale. The response categories were: never (1), seldom (2), sometimes (3) and often (4). The scale comprised sixty-eigth items, including fourteen specific Chinese cultural strategies. The original design of conceptual dimensions is shown in Table 1. In this study, the internal construct validity was ensured by the principal component factor analysis using a varimax rotation. Separate analysis was performed for the general empowerment strategies (fifty-four items) and Chinese culture specific strategies (fourteen items) (see Table 2). The former was constructed by three ecological levels as described above. Upon factor analysis, three items were deleted due to factor loading less than 0.40. After the deletion, nine factors were extracted with 63.73 per cent variance explained (see Table 2). The factor structure basically confirmed the original structure with some re-constellation of items among dimensions. The Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was 0.95. The results of factor analysis for specific strategies under Chinese culture were converged as in the original design. Four factors were extracted with 69.21 per cent variance explained. The alpha for this scale was 0.83. Moreover, the alpha for each dimension was satisfactory given the number of items (Monette *et al.*, 2002). Combining

Table 2 The results of factor analysis and descriptive statistics of empowerment strategies

Factors	No. of items	Eigen value	Alpha	Mean	Sd.
General empowerment strategy—overall	51	NA	0.95	2.80	0.40
F1: Facilitating alliance and action through group action	10	6.24	0.91	1.97	0.59
F2: Facilitating choice and action—reframing and providing options	10	5.70	0.88	3.42	0.44
F3: Recognising own ability—strengths perspective	6	4.25	0.84	3.38	0.50
F4: Activating own ability—peer influence	6	3.20	0.82	2.66	0.60
F5: Facilitating understanding of alternatives and choices—discourse	4	2.87	0.79	3.17	0.58
F6: Raising collective consciousness	3	2.50	0.84	1.69	0.66
F7: Facilitating action—strength perspective	3	2.31	0.73	3.18	0.60
F8: Activating own ability—strengths and support	5	2.28	0.67	2.62	0.54
F9: Facilitating collective action—positive experiences	2	1.60	0.37	2.65	0.71
F10: Recognising own ability—reframing	2	1.56	0.45	3.38	0.55
Unique Chinese cultural strategy	14	NA	0.83	2.46	0.48
F1: Use family support	4	3.06	0.87	3.04	0.67
F2: Better use of traditional beliefs and relationships	4	2.38	0.79	2.13	0.69
F3: Better use of social authority for advocacy	3	2.22	0.82	1.61	0.64
F4: Incremental empowerment and maintaining harmony	3	2.03	0.74	3.02	0.63
Total scale	65	NA	0.95	2.73	0.38

the general empowerment strategies and the unique Chinese cultural strategies items, the internal consistency was 0.95. The mean summation score was computed out of sixty-five items to indicate the level of the utilisation of empowerment strategies.

Data analysis

Correlation analysis

To test the bivariate correlation between each independent variable and the dependent variable, a *t*-test was used for dichotomous independent variables (sex, education and empowerment-related training), a Spearman correlation was used for ordinal independent variables (income, violent tendency of the perpetrator and conflict due to marital affair) and a Pearson correlation was used for a continuous independent variable.

Multiple regression analysis

Simultaneous method of entry was utilised to examine the significant correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategies while other independent variables were taken into account.

Results

Sample characteristics

Among the 243 subjects, the mean age was 31.28 years (SD = 7.18, range = 23–56), and the majority of them were female (86.8 per cent). As expected, most of them (88.5 per cent) held a college degree, and 10.7 per cent of them had a master's degree. About two-thirds of the subjects (67.5 per cent) earned a monthly salary of $NTD30,000–39,999, followed by $NTD40,000–49,999 (16.5 per cent) and $NTD50,000 and above (2.5 per cent). The mean of total work tenure was about 62.58 months (SD = 66.54). The average work tenure in the field of partner abuse was 36.31 months (SD = 37.74), with 52.5 per cent less than two years. On average, participants had worked in the current agency for 40.83 months (SD = 56.85), with 52.7 per cent less than two years.

The utilisation of empowerment strategies

For the sake of comparison on the extent of empowerment strategy utilisation, the mean of the sum score for each factor was computed. As Table 2 shows, the overall utilisation of empowerment strategies (mean = 2.73) among the subjects was close to 'sometimes' compared to the original response category, which indicates an upper-middle level of utilisation. The overall utilisation of general empowerment strategies was also at the upper-middle level (mean = 2.80). Among the eight types of strategies (factors), the most used were in the individual level. *Facilitating making choice and action—reframing and providing options* ranked as the top (mean = 3.42), such as 'to inform clients about their own rights and the possible outcomes of different actions, therefore clients know that they have different options'. Both *recognising own ability—strengths perspective* and *recognising own ability—reframing* were ranked as the second highest (mean = 3.38), such as 'to identify and recognise clients' strengths to let them know their own positive qualities and abilities' and 'let clients tell their own stories without being judged and facilitate their own knowledge about themselves'. *Facilitating action—strengths perspective* ranked fourth, such as 'to join clients in action to increase their confidence' and 'give encouragement and recognition for clients' actions'. The major strategies that social workers used to increase a client's power within were *strengths perspective* and *reframing*.

At the interpersonal level of strategies, *facilitating alliance and action through group action* ranked as the second lowest (mean = 1.97). The major tactic social workers used was to help clients organise as a group and use group dynamic in action, such as 'to facilitate collective action by establishing trust and affection among group members'. The social-political

level of strategies was less utilised among the subjects. *Facilitating collective action and positive experiences* ranked sixth (mean = 2.65) and *raising collective consciousness* ranked last (mean = 1.69). The tactics focused on helping clients to clarify the purposes of their actions, to facilitate positive experiences in actions, to use meetings and media (films and documentary) and to engage in dialogues with outside groups to form collective consciousness.

The overall utilisation of unique Chinese cultural strategies fell into the middle level (mean = 2.46). Among the four factors, the most adopted strategy by the subjects was *use of family support.* Related tactics were to identify, strengthen and collaborate with the informal networkers to facilitate clients' change. The second most used strategy was *incremental empowerment and maintaining harmony*, such as respecting clients' unique paces of change, fostering clients to reframe their cognitive framework through a smooth and subtle way and removing traditional constraints on women step by step. The third strategy was *better use of the traditional beliefs and social relationships*. An important tactic was using traditional beliefs to help clients reconstruct their suffering into something meaningful; in turn, the power within an individual emerged. For example, suffering is like tempering steel; it makes people stronger. The other tactic was better use of *face* (personal identify and dignity) and interpersonal relationships to foster actions. For example, social workers would sometimes do the work for the clients who demonstrated a lack of actions. This caused clients to lose face, resulting in their joining the action. The least used strategy was *better use of social authority for advocacy*. Because many Chinese, according to tradition, tend to respect and believe someone with political power or fame (scholars or writers), this tactic helped clients connect with those respected people and use the fame and power associated with them to influence the public and political decisions.

Correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategies

Bivariate analysis

The personal factors, such as age, indicators of work tenure and life satisfaction, each had a significant and positive association with the dependent variable ($p < 0.05$; see Table 3). Concerning the organisational factors, service resources was the only significant correlate ($r = 0.16$) of the dependent variable. Two of the service delivery factors reached statistic significance: frequency of contact and level of service provision. A higher percentage in providing services to clients by two to three times a month was positively associated with higher utilisation of empowerment strategies. Three types of cause of violence had a significant association with the dependent variable: differences in opinion, poor coping mechanism and control tendency

Table 3 Results of bivariate analysis

Independent variables	Association
Personal factors	
Age	$r = 0.28$***
Sex	
Male ($n = 31$)	$t = -1.03$
Female ($n = 209$)	
Education	
College ($n = 212$)	$t = 0.84$
Master ($n = 26$)	
Income	$r = 0.02$
Total work tenure	$r = 0.20$**
Work tenure on partner abuse	$r = 0.20$**
Work tenure in current agency	$r = 0.20$**
Life satisfaction	$r = 0.26$**
Organisational factors	
Role opportunity and support	$r = 0.06$
Service resources	$r = 0.16$*
Professional support	$r = 0.09$
Total caseload	$r = -0.01$
Cases contacted within past three months	$r = -0.03$
Service delivery factors	
Frequency of contact (%)	
2–3 times a week	$r = 0.08$
Once a week	$r = -0.02$
2–3 times a month	$r = 0.16$*
Once a month	$r = -0.11$
Once every two months	$r = 0.04$
Once every three months	$r = -0.08$
Ways of contact (%)	
Telephone contact	$r = -0.12$
Interview in agency	$r = 0.11$
Outreach	$r = 0.05$
Level of service provision	$r = 0.40$***
Causes of violence	
Differences in opinion	$r = 0.15$*
Poor coping mechanism	$r = 0.29$**
Control tendency of perpetrator	$r = 0.33$***
Behavioural problem of the perpetrator	$r = 0.10$
Violent tendency of the perpetrator	$r = 0.08$
Conflict due to marital affair	$r = 0.13$
Empowerment-related training	
Attend conferences	
No ($n = 78$)	$t = -2.04$*
Yes ($n = 156$)	
Attend seminars	
No ($n = 72$)	$t = -2.07$*
Yes ($n = 160$)	
Read books/article	
No ($n = 57$)	$t = -2.56$*
Yes ($n = 177$)	

*$p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

of the perpetrator. All three training variables were significantly associated with the dependent variable based on results of *t*-tests. Those who had participated in empowerment-related conferences and seminars or had read related books or articles tended to utilise more empowerment strategies.

Multiple regression analysis on the utilisation of empowerment strategies

To avoid losing too many cases due to list-wise deletion in the following regression analysis, only the variables that reached significance in the bivariate analyses were further included. Moreover, age had a high correlation with the three indicators of work tenure ($r = 0.82 – 0.63$ and 0.66). The three indicators of work tenure were also highly correlated ($r = 0.66 – 0.82$). To prevent multi-collinearity among the independent variables, total work tenure was chosen as the indicator of seniority. In sum, eleven variables were included in the multiple regression analysis.

The dependent variable was normally distributed (skewness $= -0.15$, kurtosis $= 0.017$). No outlier or multi-collinearity problem had been found during the analysis. The results showed that the entire model was significant ($p < 0.05$) and all eleven variables could explain 33.1 per cent (adjusted R^2) of the variances in the utilisation of strategies (see Table 4). After other variables were taken into account, four variables appeared to be significant: life satisfaction, control tendency of the perpetrator, level of service provision and frequency of contact (two to three times a month). Based on the standardised regression coefficient (beta), life satisfaction (0.297) was found to be the most important correlate, followed by control tendency of the perpetrator (0.225), level of service provision (0.216) and contact clients two to three times a month (0.137).

For obtaining a more parsimonious model, the investigator entered only the four significant correlates and tested whether this model could explain a similar amount of the variance in the dependent variable, as the previous model had shown. The results indicated that the new model was also significant and the explained variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.332$) was about the same as the original model with eleven independent variables (see Table 5). The model comparison (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989, p. 157) revealed that the difference between the two models in the explained variance was not significant. The parsimonious model comprised the four significant correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategy as presented in Table 5.

Discussions and implications
Psychological empowerment focused on strategy utilisation

The findings revealed that the subjects utilised empowerment strategies at an upper-middle level in their practice, which was promising for the benefit

Table 4 Results of multiple regression analysis on the utilisation of empowerment strategies (valid cases = 175)

Independent variables	β	SE of β	Beta	*t*-value	*p*-value
Constant	0.105	0.334		0.316	0.753
Total work tenure	0.000	0.000	0.054	0.829	0.408
Life satisfaction	0.322	0.071	0.297	4.535	0.000
Empowerment training					
Attend conferences	−0.058	0.064	−0.074	−0.908	0.365
Attend seminars	0.104	0.065	0.128	1.609	0.109
Read books/articles	0.046	0.057	0.053	0.809	0.420
Causes of violence					
Differences in opinion	0.025	0.056	0.028	0.440	0.661
Poor coping mechanism	0.090	0.056	0.114	1.602	0.111
Control tendency of perpetrator	0.167	0.054	0.225	3.120	0.002
Service resources	−0.016	0.033	−0.032	−0.485	0.628
Service delivery					
Service provision	0.197	0.064	0.216	3.098	0.002
Frequency of contact					
2–3 times a month	0.002	0.001	0.137	2.165	0.032

$R^2 = 0.374$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.331$; F(11, 163) = 8.814; $p = 0.000$.

Table 5 Parsimonious model: correlates of the utilisation of empowerment strategies (valid cases = 180)

Independent variables	β	SE of β	Beta	*t*-value	*p*-value
Constant	0.435	0.245		1.777	0.077
Life satisfaction	0.325	0.067	0.303	4.830	0.000
Control tendency of perpetrator	0.203	0.047	0.273	4.327	0.000
Service provision	0.231	0.059	0.253	3.901	0.000
Frequency of contact					
2–3 times a month	0.002	0.001	0.132	2.135	0.034

$R^2 = 0.347$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.332$; F(4, 175) = 23.29; $p = 0.000$.

of their clients. The subjects tended to adopt more of the psychological empowerment strategies (at individual level) than strategies of the interpersonal or social-political levels. Such findings confirmed the results of the previous study using a qualitative research design (Song, 2008). In that study, subjects also pointed out the constraints for using social-political empowerment strategies. First, clients were not willing to participate in such an action due to their disadvantaged status. For most of the clients, social stigma prevented them from standing out and speaking for themselves. Second, the constraints of social structure still exist and such constraints interacting with organisational culture of social work further deter social-political actions. For example, according to the Civic Service Law in Taiwan, government employees are not allowed to join any protest activities. In addition, heavy caseload is a barrier for expanding

the work domain to other levels. The data of this study showed that, on average, each subject had a caseload of 68.5 (median = 32), which is quite heavy. As pointed out by Cohen (1998), the frontier workers experienced some sense of disempowerment. The powerlessness among workers in domestic violence in Taiwan might stem from various reasons. (i) While most social welfare organisations face too many external pressures, the social and organisational culture of blaming has caused the public, as well as the CEOs, to attribute the major responsibility to field practitioners. This has resulted in a high turnover rate among social workers, making political connections and collective actions difficult. (ii) Social workers have neither enough training on advocacy and political actions nor strong support from professional organisations. (iii) The gentle and caring nature of social workers has prevented them from challenging the authority directly (Huang, 2009). Third, Chinese culture emphasises cultivating one's inner self as well as caring for others and contributing to society; thus, an individual self and his moral judgement have become embedded in society. This integration means that even while facing injustice and suppression, one cannot help but try to be 'pro-social', preventing any conflict or disharmony of the society, and avoid any harm and damage to the family. In addition, Chinese people are relationship-oriented; since they care very much for their status within society, most of them tend to be submissive to the norms of society and sensitive to the defined social roles and obligations (Yang and Hwang, 1991). Such Chinese cultural tradition might discourage most social workers from actively getting involved in radical social-political actions. To facilitate further effective use of social political strategy for empowerment, structural changes are needed in Taiwan, including increasing social worker manpower, more discretional power of workers, more openness to liberal opinions and greater recognition of the dedicated efforts of workers in organisations.

Strengths perspective, constructivism and social support

Strengths perspective and *reframing* were the most utilised strategies to help clients to recognise their own positive qualities and abilities, to facilitate clients to reframe their cognitive framework and to understand that they do have alternatives and choices. Evidently, *strengths perspective* is a major strategy for empowerment. This perspective places emphasis on helping clients to realise their own inner and environmental strengths through establishing genuine relationships between clients and practitioners. Moreover, this perspective maintains that it is possible to reconstruct the life story from a powerless role to a successful recovery journey with personal resiliency and tenacity—to transcend the problem and enjoy growth in adversity (Saleeby, 2009; Rapp and Goscha, 2006).

According to the ancient Chinese Scripture of *The Great Teachings* and 'The Poem of Great Strengths', the word 'strength' in Chinese is chi or cheng chi, which means the ultimate substance of both material and spiritual existence of anything in the universe, that remains to be positive in function, universal in characteristic, everlasting in nature and progressive towards the goals of perfection and goodness. Since everything exists with its positive elements of substance and strength, strength should be the common ground and connection to pull every positive part of actions or resources of human behaviour and social environment together as a whole. Thus, the concept of strengths upon Chinese cultural tradition might be considered the core foundation for achieving empowerment, as well as a simple conceptual framework for integrating the extent and correlates of empowerment strategies by social workers in Taiwan. First, life satisfaction indicates the ultimate achievement of subjective well-being and reveals the core entity of self-realisation in practitioners themselves. Second, adequate and moderate frequency of contact serves as the necessary condition for helping the clients empower themselves for recovery. Third, optimal level of service provision also plays the sufficient condition for empowering the clients towards full recovery. Forth, control tendency of the perpetrator acts as the trigger for workers' engagement in empowering the clients for recovery of self.

To foster actions, providing necessary resources proved to be crucial, especially through informal social support. Better use of family support was one of the most adopted unique Chinese cultural strategies. Support from family members and close networkers had some positive features, such as providing long-term support, having multiple sources and feeling more comfortable and feeling less stigma. Such support could consolidate clients' strengths and help clients establish a niche in the community (Saleeby, 2009; Rapp and Goscha, 2006). The biological families of Chinese women have traditionally been major sources of support. Although Chinese families are son-centred (especially the eldest son), the married daughters still keep close relationships with their biological family. As mentioned above, most Chinese families demand their members' unreserved devotion to the family and untiring care for each other. Nevertheless, such a relationship might not be supportive to a woman experiencing domestic violence if family members hold a patriarchal point of view or attribute blame to her. To establish rapport and be able to collaborate with family members is essential to facilitate continuing support for an abused woman.

The importance of social workers' life satisfaction

After taking into account other variables, life satisfaction of the subjects was the most important correlate of the utilisation of empowerment strategies. This finding confirms the argument of Adams (2003) that when a person feels better about themselves and their life, they are more likely to

empower others and to be empowered by them. It is a reciprocal process and positive cycle. In addition, from the ancient teachings of Chinese Scriptures and cultural tradition, one should cultivate his inner spirit. This involves first awakening one's own mind and accepting the true self, and then realising a genuine human concern and transcendent happiness for oneself and others through the ultimate fulfilment of a moral society and compassionate world (Yang and Hwang, 1991). Thus, once a person exists with a sense of satisfaction about one's life, he/she tends to care more about others as a way of completing oneself and having further strength to motivate and instil hope to others. This finding implies that improving the level of life satisfaction among social workers is a critical issue. This could be accomplished through self-care of workers and by providing organisational support to facilitate self-empowerment, as outlined by Adams (2003). Organisations need to pay more attention to the well-being of workers. Emotional and instrumental support through supervision is indispensible (Cohen, 1998).

Critical service delivery factors: optimal level of service provision and adequate and moderate frequency of contact

Level of service provision positively correlated with the extent of empowerment strategy utilisation. It was as expected and logical: no service, no empowerment. Level of service implies more resource provision and the close contact between workers and clients as mentioned by Adams (2003). When social workers made contact with clients two to three times a month, they tended to adopt more of the empowerment strategies. However, more frequent contact (e.g. two to three times a week or once a week) was not significant. One of the reasons might be that these two levels of frequency accounted for only a small percentage of the frequencies of contact (mean = 7.83 and 12.19 per cent, respectively); thus, its correlation with the dependent variable was compromised due to the limited variance. The other possible reason is that, based on the investigator's observation, in Taiwan, such frequent contact usually happened when an emergency or crisis occurred. Under such circumstance, social workers would focus mainly on problem solving instead of empowerment. The findings suggest that the organisations in the field of DVPI need to emphasise both monitoring the adequate frequency of contacts (except for emergency cases) and increasing the level of service provision made by social workers.

Empowerment strategy utilisation based on basic human needs for recovery

Control tendency of the perpetrator was the second most important correlate of empowerment strategy utilisation. The perpetrator gains control of

their partner through demeaning words, cursing, physical harm, etc. Living with such a perpetrator has a negative impact on self-esteem and can cause depression, social isolation and powerlessness of the victims (Lundy and Grossman, 2001; Wiehe, 1998). The investigator speculates that other causes of violence might not induce the loss of psychological and social power as much as the control type, which needs further study. The findings imply that empowerment practice was mostly based on the basic human needs of clients, namely individualised service, for recovery.

Contributions and limitations

This study had a few limitations. Participants were enlisted on a voluntary basis and although the sample accounted for 77 per cent of the population, the representativeness of population could not be guaranteed; therefore, the external validity was compromised. In addition, since survey data were collected through self-administered questionnaires, social desirability could not be totally prevented; for example, the utilisation of empowerment strategies might be over-reported. Moreover, although the analysis of this study ensured the internal construct validity, external construct validity and internal consistency of the instrument of empowerment strategies, the psychometric properties have not been fully examined, such as test–retest reliability and discriminant validity, which might compromise the internal validity of this study. Finally, there might be recall errors in estimating the percentages of frequency of contact with clients and how frequently each case of violence occurred. However, this survey makes a larger sample possible and the general picture of the phenomenon could be depicted.

This is the first study on the utilisation of empowerment strategies in different Chinese communities. We now know more about what we have accomplished and what we need to further pursue in the field of partner abuse in Taiwan. Especially important was the finding that, to some extent, the Chinese culture-specific empowerment strategies had been utilised and that family support and incremental empowerment were emphasised by the participants. In addition, the findings on the significant correlates shed light on how we could enhance empowerment practice. The ultimate goal is that the empowerment practice could become pervasive so that clients could rebuild and live satisfactory lives.

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