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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Disability organizations as empowering settings: Challenging stigmatization, promoting emancipation

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## Abstract

This study investigated how a local disability organization in Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia, has functioned as an empowering setting for its members. This article discusses, in particular, the context specific features that have enabled members of this organization to resist the pervasive stigmatization commonly imposed upon people with disabilities. The research data was collected through interviews with 18 members of the organization and analyzed using the method of constructivist grounded theory. The findings suggest that this organization exists as an empowering setting because it functions as a mindset changer, an alternative resource center, and fosters supportive and courageous allies. Through this empowerment, members can challenge the normalized stigmatization and promote more emancipatory identities, particularly in a rural context where some socio-cultural aspects may further complicate the disadvantages of people with disabilities. Implications for future research and disability interventions are discussed.

**KEYWORDS**
Disability, Disability organizations, Empowering settings

## Highlights

- The current study explores a model of empowerment, which is grounded and produced in Asian context.
- We expand community psychology theorization of empowerment.
- The current study illustrates the intersection between community psychology and disability studies.

## INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the literature of empowering settings (e.g., Aber et al., 2011; Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995; Neal, 2014), this study examined the mediating processes through which a local disability organization in Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia, empowers its members. This article sought to contribute to the literature by explicating the context specific features that have enabled members of this organization to resist the pervasive stigmatization commonly imposed upon people with disabilities. With this in mind, this study aimed to address the concerns that highlight the relatively sparse research and action reports in community psychology that are responsive to the struggles of people with disabilities (Balcazar & Suarez-Balcazar, 2017; Goodley & Lawthom, 2005; McDonald et al., 2017).

### Exploring contextual features of empowering settings

Underpinned by an ecological perspective on human functioning, community psychology is interested in investigating the roles of settings in promoting both personal and collective empowerment (e.g., Rappaport, 1995; Sarason, 1972; Trickett, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000). This interest is reflected in the notion of empowering community settings (ECS), which are defined as social spaces with enabling characteristics and processes that, over time, may lead to empowering outcomes (Maton, 2008).

Studies on ECS have explicated mediating variables and processes that characterize empowering settings (e.g., Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson & Speer, 2000; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000).

Specifically, Maton and Brodsky (2011) suggest three key enabling mediators through which ECS generally facilitate member empowerment. The first component is cognitive/affective mediators that suggest how settings facilitate fundamental alterations in awareness, motivation, and self-efficacy of their members by fostering critical consciousness. The second mediator is the instrumental components, which point to the function of settings in promoting capacity building and meaningful roles. The third component is the relational mediators, which explain how settings foster member empowerment by encouraging supportive and inclusive social relations. It is through the combination of these three enabling mediators that ECS typically enact their transformative roles. Informed by this literature, this study defined ECS as settings that have transformative functions and mechanisms through which members can experience empowering outcomes in relation to their collective struggle for more just living conditions.

Studies on ECS have reported the relevance of these mediators in various types of settings (e.g., Case & Hunter, 2012; Dutt, 2018; Menon & Allen, 2020; Salusky et al., 2020; Todd, 2012; Zeldin et al., 2018). However, these mediators generally manifest differently in each setting. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore context-specific features of empowering settings in different cultural contexts (Christens & Speer, 2011; Maton & Salem, 1995; Speer & Hughey, 1995; Wilke & Speer, 2011).

## Living with disabilities in a rural javanese context

Adioetomo et al. (2014) reported that Indonesia has 25 million people with disabilities (henceforth, PWD), or 10%–15% of the population. Most of them live with multidimensional disadvantages, these include low economic status, poor health condition, lack of education, and social exclusion (Adioetomo et al., 2014). In the rural Javanese context, the context of this study, there are certain socio-cultural aspects that may further complicate these disadvantages, including the emphasis on religious and communal life.

Religion has always been an important political and cultural referent in Indonesian society (Seo, 2013). At present, the majority of native Javanese in Yogyakarta have adopted Islam as their religion with a minority of the population following Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (BPS-Statistics of D.I. Yogyakarta Province, 2021). In addition to these principal religions, the Javanese people's religious orientations are also underpinned by Javanese mysticism, popularly known as *Kejawen*. Despite following different religions, people appear to share similar worldviews and ethical frameworks because of the influence of *Kejawen* teachings (Koentjaraningrat, 1985).

One particular feature illustrating the intersection between people's formal religions and *Kejawen* teachings is the belief in the Supreme Being, which is commonly accepted as a core approach to life. This belief manifests in the understanding that each individual is ascribed to certain roles or fate; therefore, people are oriented toward deterministic views of life (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). Influenced by a deterministic worldview, people typically perceive disabilities as bad personal fate associated with notions like karma, the wrath of God, a divine test or punishment. Consequently, PWD often struggle with feelings of shame and a sense of inferiority (Thohari, 2013).

Maintaining social harmony and emphasizing people's social obligations for providing mutual assistance are also key features of Javanese tradition. These values are translated into various socio-cultural routines that expect people to actively participate, either by providing material support or volunteering in the activities. A failure to do so may result in social sanctions in the form of being socially isolated, stigmatized as a socially ill person, or having access to the social resources available in the community restricted (Guinness, 2009; Newberry, 2007).

Within the broader Indonesian political context, the emphasis on social obligations also represents people's collective strategy to deal with the lack of adequate public services (Guinness, 2009; Newberry, 2007). As poor public services are still common, people often have to rely on their own resources and efforts to meet their basic needs, such as needs for health and education. In these conditions, mutual assistance is an important social resource and insurance. For example, during fieldwork for this study we found that borrowing a neighbor's car had become the response to the absence of a reliable ambulance service. Likewise, participating in a village rotating credit group was a helpful resource for low-income families to counteract the unreliable social benefits provided by the government. This situation suggests there are cultural and economic pressures that encourage people to maintain their involvement in the network of communal exchanges operationalised through various social routines (Guinness, 2009; Koentjaraningrat, 1985; Newberry, 2007).

For PWD, this socio-cultural context poses both protective and risk factors. For example, during our fieldwork, we found that familial connections could create access to employment for PWD, which otherwise might not be available due to the discriminatory employment environment in Indonesia. However, we also observed that the socio-cultural context could put more stress on the social isolation of PWD and reinforce the patronizing views of PWD as community burdens.

The portrayal of PWD as inferior individuals is circulated through various labels in the wider context of Indonesian society (Adioetomo et al., 2014). Despite the ongoing campaign for the use of the terms *disabilitas* or *difabel* (the Indonesian versions of disability and disabled), the use of degrading terms, such as *cacat* and *tuna* (crippled and defect), remain common. As a result, the pervasive stigmatization of PWD as inferior individuals and inattention to their existence and voices has been normalized (Suharto et al., 2016).

Progressive disability organizations that seek to change these realities started to emerge in the early 2000s. Through activities ranging from organizing street demonstrations to advocating the reformation of disability acts, these organizations have gradually raised public awareness of the political nature of disabilities (Dibley & Tsaputra, 2019).

This context orientated this study toward the social model of disability, which emphasizes the socio-political and cultural embeddedness of disabilities (Goodley, 2011; Kagan et al., 2006; Oliver, 2009). Drawing on this model, we explored how a local disability organization in Indonesia functions as an empowering setting and enables its members to challenge the oppression of PWD. We also sought to determine the context-specific features that characterize this organization as a transformative site.

# METHOD

## Setting

The site of this study—hereafter the Indonesian Disability Network (IDN)—is one of the new emerging progressive disability organizations initiated and led by PWD. The IDN is located in Yogyakarta province, Indonesia; an area that was hit by a massive earthquake in 2006 and resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries (Zaumseil et al., 2014). The postdisaster context of this earthquake instigated the development of the IDN, which was established in 2009. The majority of its members are individuals who acquired disabilities because of the earthquake.

In 2013, the IDN became prominent for its initiation of an assistive device service center. It was the first and only organization providing such a service in the area. PWD responded positively to the initiative partly because buying new assistive devices was often hindered by low financial capacity and health insurance provided by the government did not cover assistive devices. This service center also created job opportunities for some members, who were previously unemployed or did not have steady income, by hiring them as the mechanics.

In addition, the workshop provided a space for the IDN to hold regular monthly meetings that involved all members. The meetings were usually used for conducting internal monitoring of the organization (e.g., presenting financial reports), discussing upcoming external events which were relevant to members (e.g., public actions related to disability), and having occasional training sessions. The training sessions introduced practical skills, which aimed to address members' shared needs and concerns. Furthermore, the workshop also became a vibrant gathering place, as there were always members who stopped by to have a chat. It is through these activities that the IDN fostered progressive views on disability, nurtured supportive social interactions, and became an instrumental information hub for its members.

## Participants

When this study was undertaken, the IDN had about 25 active members. The majority of them had physical disabilities and few members were nondisabled. Their education level ranged from not finishing elementary school to graduating from high school (grade XII). Fewer than five members went to university. Most members did not have a steady occupation and were self-employed in home-based microbusinesses (e.g., traditional food seller, tailor, farmer). All active members were approached to take part in this study and 18 members consented to participate. The participants included six females and 12 males, ranging in age from their early twenties to their early fifties, and the majority of these participants had been involved in the IDN for more than five years.

## Research design

The transformative paradigm in disability research that advocates for emancipatory disability studies informed this study. Methodological implications of this orientation include emphasis on the importance of nurturing equal relationship between researchers and participants (Mertens et al., 2011). Therefore, we opted for research methods that accentuated the perspectives of individuals with lived experiences. In doing so, we followed the methods of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as it provides guidelines for collecting and analyzing data in inductive ways and this approach is instrumental for exploring interpretative meanings of a social process (Charmaz, 2006, 2007).

## Data collection

After receiving ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, the first author (an insider in the cultural context of the study) commenced fieldwork at the end of October 2014. Fieldwork preparation also included regular consultations with relevant resource people and organizations in the study site, to ensure the appropriateness of the fieldwork activities to the local context and its cultural protocol.

Data was collected using semistructured interviews. The first author, a native speaker of *Bahasa* Indonesia and Javanese (the local language used in the area), conducted the interviews. The interview included a series of questions which focused on exploring the meaning and significance of this organization to the participants (e.g., *How did you become involved in the IDN? What do you value most from your involvement in this organization?*). Data collection included on-site observation in the organization and participation in daily activities five days a week over five months by the first author.

Interview durations ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. Most of the interviews were conducted at participants' residences at their requests but some took place at the IDN office (i.e., in a room or in the front yard—a space that allowed the interviewer and interviewee to be separated from other people who were at the office). Some participants were interviewed more than once to gain deeper understandings of the information provided. With the participants' permission, the interviews were digitally recorded. A professional service, which ensured data confidentiality, conducted the transcriptions, resulting in 284 pages of single-spaced transcript. The first author read and reread each transcription while listening to the audio record to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions.

## Data analysis

Informed by CGT, the data analysis involved the process of transforming data into theoretical concepts (Mills et al., 2006). Data analysis followed three stages: the process of coding, developing conceptual categories, and creating a theoretical map. Coding involved line-by-line close reading and rereading of each interview transcription. At this stage, the analyst created descriptive labels to capture meanings evident in the participants' responses in each selected part of the data. Codes were written in Indonesian language and often in the form of in vivo labels so that sensitivity toward nuances of the conversations could be maintained and the likelihood of imposing preconceived ideas was lessened. In the next phase of the coding process, all the descriptive codes were transformed into more analytical labels. The analyst moved across all interviews repeatedly comparing descriptive codes and identifying patterns or recurring ideas in the data, from which analytical labels could be created. Both coding processes were conducted manually as the size of the sample allowed for this without risk to the quality of the coding process.

The second stage of data analysis involved the process of transforming all the analytical labels into conceptual categories. At this stage, further analysis and regrouping of codes led to the development of conceptual categories, which represent concise abstractions of core themes identified in the data (Charmaz, 2006). More specifically, this step involved writing all the analytical codes on small cards, which then assisted the processes of comparing, sorting, and transforming all the codes into conceptual clusters. This process was then followed by the development of a theoretical map, which formed the last phase of the data analysis. With the work of Charmaz (2006) in mind, at this stage, the definition and properties of each conceptual category were clarified as well as the theoretical links between categories and how these might contribute to the explication of the psychosocial processes investigated in this study. In each phase of the data collection process, the first author was the primary analyst, while the second and third authors provided triangulation through regular reviews of both the procedures and results of the analysis. This included conducting sampling checks on the coding processes as well as examining the development of the conceptual categories and theoretical mapping.

Memo writing, constant comparison and negative case analysis were used throughout the data analysis process. Memo writing is a process for documenting assumptions, reflections, and other considerations which may influence how codes are created, grouped, and transformed into conceptual categories and theoretical maps (Charmaz, 2006). This method helped maintain the transparency of data analysis, which is instrumental for addressing the potential risks of insider bias. In addition, we used constant comparison and negative case analysis as strategies to ensure the saturation of our analysis. These processed entailed repeatedly comparing, sorting and resorting, and revising all codes and conceptual categories until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data that appeared to negate the common patterns found in the analysis was examined to refine the emerging theories or to provide alternative explanations of those theories (Charmaz, 2006).

Lastly, peer-review and member checking allowed us to refine the quality of the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This analysis was regularly discussed with other researchers who were familiar with the area of study or the research method employed to obtain credible feedback. The first author conducted the member checking process by returning to the study site to discuss the analysis results with some of the participants. This process was conducted twice, 10 months after the fieldwork and again a further 6 months later.

# FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to examine the context specific features that signify the role of a local disability organization in Indonesia as an empowering setting. The analyses led to the identification of three main empowering functions of the setting, as presented in Table 1. These functions are manifested in specific enabling mechanisms that have led to a series of empowered outcomes in relation to members' personal, political, and social identities.

## Being a mindset changer: Disability is not a personal inferiority

In Indonesia, denigrating views of disabilities remain normalized and this can lead to psychological consequences,

**TABLE 1** Findings of the study: The empowering functions of a local disability organization

| Empowering functions | Enabling mechanisms | Empowering outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Being a mindset changer | Nurturing inclusive and critical dialogs | Empowered views of self: Disability is not a personal inferiority |
| Being an alternative resource center | Facilitating capacity building | Resistance to the patronization of PWD: PWD are not passive objects of intervention |
| Fostering supportive and courageous allies | Developing socially oriented activities | Emancipatory representations of PWD: PWD as contributing community members |

such as shame, a sense of inferiority and lack of self-worth. Jalu's experience illustrates this challenge when he shared his failed attempt to invite his neighbor, who also has a disability, to join the IDN:

> Her parents did not allow her to leave her house. Her parents are afraid that if she goes out, neighbors will make fun of her. She used to go out, but neighbors started saying things that made children afraid of her, things like "Look Dewi is coming, aren't you afraid of her?". Dewi is treated as a scary person who makes children frightened (Jalu, male, member).

In a context where participating in community activities is highly valued, this attitude may intensify a sense of otherness. Moreover, when pathologizing and moralistic views on disabilities remain dominant, it is hard for people to problematize such an attitude. Situated in this kind of social context, the IDN has functioned as an empowering setting by acting as a mindset changer and enabling its members to disrupt the internalization of stigmatizing views on disabilities.

The mindset changer function is activated through critical dialogs that are a part of the everyday interactions in the organization. In this setting, critical awareness of disabilities is promoted and maintained through informal conversations, not formal training sessions. This explains the significance of the IDN as a gathering place, as illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with Ilham, one of the IDN founders:

> It may seem that we're just having a yarn [informal discussion], but we are actually having a talk about the meanings of our lives, how we actually like to live our lives. I might casually ask a friend, "So, what did you get by attending the training program at the rehabilitation centre? What differences did it make to you?" and he might reply with, "I don't know, just killing time, perhaps" … like that … So, then I would ask him, "killing time? Is that what you want to do for the rest of your life? Don't you have any dreams? A purposeful aim?" … like that … When we are having formal meetings, there isn't such talk. Friends don't open up about their thoughts or ideas. But, when we are having a yarn, they just speak up.

Ilham's reflections highlight the significant role of everyday conversations held in the IDN. Everyday conversations have become a vehicle for promoting transformative dialogs through which its members can recognize, question, and eventually change disabling mindsets. The emphasis on the role of informal conversations also reflects the inclusive atmosphere nurtured in this organization. Instead of using formally structured training sessions, which can be intimidating and patronizing, personal testimonies are used to share critical views on disabilities. Through this sharing, the IDN is able to make people from various backgrounds feel welcome and comfortable to participate.

By continuously engaging in such critical dialogs, the members of the IDN are then able to transform their perspectives on disabilities. They realize that the problems associated with disabilities are primarily rooted in the ways people or they themselves view disabilities rather than in the physical or mental conditions experienced by PWD. In other words, the IDN has facilitated its members to have critical awareness of disabilities as socially constructed oppressions, and develop the required socio-psychological strategies to refute the normalized stigmatizing views on disabilities. This awareness is illustrated in the following excerpts from an interview with Luna:

> I believe that to live a life is to bring goodness for others around us. Before joining the IDN, all that I knew was that I was a burden to other people. But now, my mindset has changed. Although I have limitations, I want to be able to help other people around me. I am still in the learning process, but I want to make sure that I can bring goodness for others around me (Luna, female, member).

This reflection indicates the significance of the IDN as a mindset changer. For Luna, participating in the organization has enabled her to invalidate the depiction of PWD as a burden for others. Similar to Luna, other participants highlighted on more than one occasion how their active involvement in the IDN has gradually transformed the way they respond to disabilities. Aacquiring such an awareness is a meaningful form of personal empowerment considering that the depictions of PWD as inferior individuals remain normalized. In this sense, the IDN has played a profound role as a mindset changer by enabling its members to discards the oppressive portrayal of disability as a form of personal inferiority.

## Being an alternative resource center: PWD are not passive objects of intervention

The next empowering feature of the IDN is its ability to function as an alternative resource center from which members can garner instrumental and symbolic resources for resisting the institutionalized patronization of PWD. Although some disability organizations in Indonesia have started to advocate critical perspectives on disabilities, the dominance of deficit-oriented perspectives of disability are still limitedly challenged as reflected in public policies and interventions on disabilities (Adioetomo et al., 2014; Suharto et al., 2016). For example, until 2010, some ministerial decrees still assigned PWD under the category of subpopulation with social problems, along with drug addicts, homeless people, beggars, prostitutes, ex-prisoners, juvenile delinquents, and neglected senior citizens. Such a categorization depicts the predominant patronizing approach toward people with disabilities (Adioetomo et al., 2014).

This analysis showed that dealing with patronizing approaches, particularly from government authorities or officers, is also one of the daily challenges experienced by IDN members. This is evident in the following excerpt from an interview with Amir, who shared his experience of attending a government-sponsored training program:

> I was once invited to attend a training program on animal husbandry. I was told that after the training I would be provided with some hens and an egg incubator machine. But when I received the machine, it did not work, and instead of getting some hens, they gave me six roosters. How on earth, would I be able to start a chicken farm with six roosters? That's the point where I started to think that I was just an object for them, an object for training programs (Amir, male, member).

Amir's experience reflects how government authorities might have contributed to institutionalizing the objectification of PWD. In the Indonesian context, where independent disability organizations have developed since the late 1990s, government departments have been the main public institutions shaping the way disability issues are approached through social welfare policies and rehabilitation program for decades (Adioetomo et al., 2014; Yulianto, 2011).

The majority of disability interventions are managed by government institutions. Hence, dealing with government officers at various points of their life has become common for PWD in Indonesia. It is generally difficult for PWD in Indonesia to access alternative sources of instrumental support due to the limited availability of independent organizations that provide such services (Adioetomo et al., 2014). The situation can be more challenging in rural areas where the presence of independent disability organizations is very rare. This has created a socioeconomic pressure for many PWD that has led them be dependent on the social assistance programs provided by the government (Adioetomo et al., 2014; Yulianto, 2011).

Against this background, the findings of this present study suggest that the IDN has functioned as an empowering setting by enabling its members to resist the institutionalized patronization imposed upon them. This function has been enacted by promoting capacity building activities that may create pathways for its members to strive for their economic independence. These activities include organizing training programs that meet the needs and talents of its members, facilitating networking, and developing a wheelchair service center. As illustrated in the following reflection, these activities have enabled the members of the IDN to have access to an alternative source of instrumental support and not be solely dependent on the government's assistance.

> There are many benefits of joining the IDN. First, I have more friends now. Before joining the IDN, my social circle was very limited, but now I am friends with all these people. If I had not joined IDN, I may never have known them. Also, through the wheelchair service centre, I have got a job making pillow seats which gives me additional income (Harto, male, member).

In the Indonesian context, where the majority of PWD still live with unemployment and poverty, Harto's reflection indicates the significance of the IDN as an accessible resource center. Most of the IDN members are self-employed in home-based microbusinesses or work as casual laborers as access to professional jobs is very limited due to the discriminatory working environments. With such a situation, they struggle to have a steady and adequate income. Their income may be sufficient for paying daily expenses, but little can be saved for costs related to health, housing, education, and unforeseen hardship. Because of this, PWD in Indonesia are conditioned to rely on charities to make a living, especially those managed by government institutions. This situation of dependency has perpetuated the patronizing depiction of PWD as helpless individuals (Adioetomo et al., 2014; Suharto et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the ability of the IDN to provide its members with an alternative means of living has been of paramount importance, both literally and symbolically. Currently, not all the IDN members are able to have employment in the organization. However, the ability of the IDN to create full-time jobs for some of its members is symbolically meaningful as it enables the organization to counter the patronizing depiction of PWD as helpless objects of pity. This is echoed in a reflection from Cahyo:

> All of us are working sincerely to revive ourselves. Let's not allow ourselves to become an object of ridicule for government officials. We are here to find ways to revive ourselves: to work out what we can do to resist the demeaning comments from government officials. As *difabel* we are often looked down upon. So, let's not make ourselves dependent on others, no matter what, we should stand on our own feet (Cahyo, male, member).

## Fostering supportive and courageous allies: PWD as contributing community members

The emphasis on interdependence between self and others is a part of the defining features of Javanese social ethics (Guinness, 2009; Koentjaraningrat, 1985). As such, active involvement in community activities is highly valued as an indicator of people's willingness to maintain harmonious social connections and their worth as individuals. Therefore, social exclusion may not only marginalize people from their social environment, but also impede them from fully living their cultural ideal of being dignified persons.

Against this socio-cultural background, the IDN has functioned as an empowering setting by creating relational context and collective activities that have enabled its members to defy their normalized invisibility. The participants reported that their involvement in the IDN has allowed them to experience supportive, egalitarian, and destigmatizing relationships, which has then encouraged them to reject their social exclusion and offset the portrayal of PWD as being incapable of making meaningful contributions to their community. This role is evident in Amir's reflection in which he recalled the participation of the IDN in typical Indonesian annual events:

> We have joined the Independence Day carnivals with other groups in the community. Other than the Independence Day carnival, we have also participated in *Takbiran* nights [the annual religious carnival to mark the end of *Ramadhan*, the fasting month for Muslims]. By participating in such events, we are showing our community our existence. We want to promote an understanding that we do exist and we can do activities along with other groups in our community (Amir, male, member).

Besides encouraging its members to participate in community activities and rituals, the role of the IDN in enabling its members to resist the social invalidation of PWD has been possible through collective activities that allow its members to make meaningful contributions to their community. One such example of an activity is the wheelchair service centre. When we asked the participants about what they valued most about being part of the IDN, most of the participants mentioned the activities through which they can support or provide assistance and services for others. They seem to believe that such activities may enable them to promote empowering representations of PWD as capable and contributing community members and to negate the pejorative characterization of PWD as community burdens. This sentiment is evident in the following excerpt of an interview:

> We develop strategies so that people can see us. Gradually they will begin to realize… "Oh, … I see it is a wheelchair service centre" and they will learn that the mechanics are *difabel* persons and then they may say, "Oh, so they *are* capable". They will recognize us as *difabel* people who are capable of running a wheelchair service centre, so when they meet a *difabel* person who is a beggar, they will be able to think that not all *difabel* people are like that. I think that is where our action is (Luna, female, member).

Luna's reflection indicates how their activities in the wheelchair service center have a significance that goes beyond their instrumental function. By creating such activities, the IDN has become a symbolic resource through which its members can amplify empowering representations of PWD. In addition, the participants' accounts indicate that having the opportunities to conduct socially oriented activities is also culturally meaningful as they are consistent with the Javanese view of an ideal way of being. Agus, one of the IDN founders, shared this point when he recalled his motivations for initiating the organization:

> Back then, I already had my own home-based business. I never had interactions with all these friends, because I already felt comfortable in my own little world. Financially speaking, I had good income. But then, there is this teaching that says, "you are at your best when you can be a useful person for other people".

In this reflection, Agus highlighted the moral and cultural ideal that ignited his enthusiasm for establishing the IDN.

## DISCUSSION

The research explored the empowering roles of a local disability organization in Indonesia. The findings of this study suggest that the organization has functioned as an empowering setting by fostering relational contexts and collective activities that have enabled its members to develop supportive and courageous allies for advocating more emancipatory representations of PWD. Overall, the findings of the study support previous literature on ECS (e.g., Aber et al., 2011; Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson & Speer, 2000; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000), and specifically the Maton and Brodsky (2011) theory that settings may empower members through cognitive/affective, instrumental, and relational processes through which members can access both tangible and symbolic resources.

In addition, this study adds to the literature by identifying empowering processes, which are culture and context-specific. In the context of a local disability organization in Indonesia, the empowering processes include promoting critical views of disabilities, fostering collective resistance against the hegemonic patronizing attitudes toward PWD, and propagating emancipatory identities. These processes have been shaped by and are responsive to the cultural and political contexts of the community being studied where emphases on religious and communal life have significantly influenced the ways disabilities are generally portrayed and experienced. Situated in such a context, the IDN has functioned as an empowering setting by enacting the cultural ideal of being contributing community members, thereby enabling members of the IDN to counter the patronizing construction of PWD as inferior individuals, passive objects of interventions, and burdens to their community.

Promoting critical consciousness in context is one of the core features of ECS that has been widely discussed in the literature on empowering settings (e.g., Balcazar et al., 2012; Christens et al., 2013; Menon & Allen, 2020). In the context of the organization, critical consciousness raising means supporting members to contest the pathologizing and moralistic views of disabilities that have normalized the stigmatization of PWD as inferior individuals. By engaging in critical dialogs nurtured in the setting, members of the IDN gain awareness of the socio-political embeddedness of their oppressive realities and are able to liberate themselves from self-stigmatizing views of disabilities.

Similar to previous studies on ECS (e.g., Balcazar et al., 2012; Maton & Brodsky, 2011; Salusky et al., 2020), this study also found that the ability of a setting to facilitate members' personal and collective development is central to its role as an empowering setting. In the IDN, this instrumental role operates through its function as an alternative resource center from which members can partake in collective activities that develop their social, economic, and political capacities. Development of such capacities has then created pathways for them to resist the patronizing depictions of PWD as passive objects of interventions.

Another key feature of ECS is its ability to develop supportive and meaningful relational experiences from which members can foster solidarity and emancipatory collective identities (e.g., Christens, 2012; Dutt, 2018; Rappaport, 1995). In this study, we found that participation in the IDN has enabled members to forge supportive alliances for the promotion of collective emancipatory identities that reflect both their religious and cultural worldviews. These emancipatory identities are particularly associated with the idea of being able to make valuable contributions to others and the community. In the rural context where the participants live, the Javanese ethics of social care continues to be a significant feature of their community life as it manifests in the normative obligations that require people to take part in various forms of community activities. However, due to the stigmatization that they experienced, the participants were often alienated from such socio-cultural practices. It is through the alliances and socially oriented activities developed in the IDN that they have been able to assert their empowered identities as contributing community members and fulfill their moral and cultural ideals of a dignified life.

## Limitations and implications for future research and practice

This study employed data collection and analysis strategies commonly applied in inductive studies to ensure the credibility of its findings. However, the inductive approach of this study also has limitations. Informed by constructivist methodology, we are aware that the research participants, as well as our positioning and interpretations, might have shaped the nature of our findings. Therefore, we acknowledge the possibilities that others may generate different interpretations of the issue and context being studied. Thus, further studies that employ different theoretical or methodological lenses may generate different understandings on the nature of disability organizations as empowering settings. This is a unique study in this setting and our findings lay out preliminary conceptual insights that can inform future studies for examining a hypothetical model about the empowering functions of disability organizations.

Second, by focusing on the strengths of this local disability organization as an empowering setting, this study might have overlooked any critiques and potential challenges that may be impeding its development. Such a risk may also be doubled by the potential of insider bias, both from the participants in their evaluations of the organization and the first author, given her status as an insider in the cultural context where the study was conducted.

Lastly, despite our conscientious attempts to conduct a study that guided by the values of equality and collaborations, the research team clearly held more control in developing the course of the study than the participants. We recognized the various positionalities that afford researchers power in the context of research despite our efforts to mitigate these effects through ongoing and open communications with participants.

In light of these limitations, future research on similar settings may be benefit from the use of longitudinal approaches to the studies as these may enable researchers to more rigorously identify the extent to which empowering functions and outcomes found in such settings can persist over time and what factors influence their sustainability.

According to the 2020 data reported by the statistical bureau of Yogyakarta province, there were 1824 PWD in the area where the IDN is located ("Informasi Kependudukan D.I. Yogyakarta," n.d.). This data suggests a limitation of the IDN in its ability to make substantive impacts in the area considering they only have 25 active members. This limitation points to the need for further studies that explore how disability organizations like the IDN can extend their empowering roles and impacts to the wider community. Also, although this study has confirmed some common features of ECS (e.g., the presence of an empowering relational environment), some other aspects have not been adequately explored, such as the role of group leadership. This is a possible avenue for future studies including how relevant theoretical models on ECS developed in different cultural contexts can be adapted to Indonesia.

This study found that resisting the stigmatization and patronization of PWD was an important pathway toward both personal and collective empowerment of the participants. Fostering empowering representations of PWD as competent and contributing community members was crucial part of this resistance, as these representations had both political and cultural significance. This finding supports previous analyses on disability policies and regulations in Indonesia (e.g., Adioetomo et al., 2014), which have highlighted the lingering domination of pathologizing frameworks in the Indonesian disability interventions. Informed by these analyses, this study provides qualitative data which supports the need for advocating the mainstreaming of more empowering disability policies and regulations.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has explicated the transformative features of a local disability organization in Indonesia. While the findings are consistent with the much existing discussions on the concept of empowering settings, our study presented more culture and context-specific characteristics which reflect the particular issues and challenges of advocating disability activism in a rural Indonesian context.

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