Goals of the seed grant
The purpose of this seed grant was to use formative research to explore different definitions of empowerment as described by ATASK advocates and clients. The idea for this seed grant grew out of the work of staff members, Sujata Ghosh and Qingian Shi, who had participated in the program, “Building Your Capacity” (BYC.) Through this program, Ms. Ghosh and Ms. Shi became interested in exploring cultural definitions and understanding of empowerment and using this understanding to improve client outcomes. The study aims included 1) describing how ATASK client and advocates define “empowerment” as an outcome of service delivery and 2) investigating perceived barriers and facilitators of the empowerment process. Formative research for this project included three focus groups with advocates, Chinese clients, and Hindi clients. They also hoped to use the findings from this study to evaluate ATASK’s current practice models, assessment strategies, in-take tools, treatment planning protocols, trainings and client-advocate relational approaches.

Accomplishments
Work on the seed grant began in December 2011. To date, we have accomplished the following:

Assembled an academic community research team. The two academic PIs on the program include Carolyn Rubin (Tufts) and Jocelyn Chu (Institute for Community Health.) Sujata Ghosh and Dawn Sauma from ATASK helped to put the grant together. After the grant was awarded to ATASK, we recruited additional members for the research team including the Hindi advocate, Chinese advocate and a former ATASK client.

Trained the research team in community-based participatory research (CBPR) and qualitative methods: Dr. Rubin and Dr. Chu provided readings and training to the research team on the history and practice of CBPR and qualitative methods. The qualitative methods training include how to moderate a focus group, how to take notes, and how to analyze qualitative data. All ATASK staff also became CITI certified. Because of the CBPR approach to this project, one research team member reflected that she felt that the ATASK staff played an “equal part in regard to the leadership and partnership.”

Co-created the data collection instruments: Based on the literature and the experiences of the ATASK staff, we collaboratively developed the focus group moderator’s guide, focus group questions, and survey collecting demographic data. The literature talks about empowerment as being a “process” and the ATASK staff were interested in exploring this idea with their clients. ATASK staff also recognized that the term empowerment, itself, is culturally situated and embedded and therefore wanted to understand the cultural nuances of empowerment. The guide and questions were translated into Hindi and
Chinese. Involving ATASK in the development of the instrument helped to create a protocol that was authentic and meaningful to the CBO.

**Organized three focus groups:** ATASK organized three focus groups. The advocate focus group (n=6) was moderated by Dr. Rubin and Dr. Chu. The Hindi focus group (n=7) was moderated by Ms. Ghosh and Ms. Sanghal. The Chinese focus group (n=6) was moderated by Ms. Ng. The focus groups lasted between 1.5 – 2 hours and took place at the ATASK offices. The average age of clients ranged from 30-35 years.

**Analyzed qualitative data:** Based on the literature and focus group guide, Dr. Rubin and Dr. Chu developed a preliminary codebook and presented it to the rest of the research team. Together, we developed a more comprehensive, nuanced codebook that looked at the similarities and differences across each of the focus groups. The analysis created the following themes:

- **Definition of empowerment:** Across all three focus groups, a central theme of stability emerged. There were also slight nuances across groups as well. Advocates saw empowerment as having the strength to control one’s life and feeling confident in the choices that one makes. It also involves being able to reclaim the dignity and sanctity of life complete with respect and self-worth. The Hindi clients believed that empowerment looked like having a new sense of an identity, as a person with rights. They were able to endure this difficult journey because of the support of ATASK. Similarly, the Chinese focus group viewed empowerment as a “right” and having the freedom to choose or determine what is right and wrong.

- **Empowerment as a process and end goal:** The overarching theme that emerged from the three focus groups was that empowerment was influenced by the role change brought on by immigration to the U.S. Advocates believed that ATASK helped to set the foundation for empowerment being a process and end goal. The Hindi group described empowerment as a “pyramid like process” in which clients worked their ways upwards. The Chinese group likened empowerment to a process of “growing up.”

- **Facilitators and barriers of empowerment:** Facilitators included peer support, ESL classes, and access to services (legal, immigration, and housing.) Barriers included society and cultural norms, language and fear.

- **“Giving back”**: This was an unanticipated finding from this research that emerged organically from the data. The clients saw giving back to others in their situation as an empowering process and also an indicator of empowerment. The focus groups themselves provided clients with an opportunity to meet one another and begin to build a peer support network. Some exchanged phone numbers because they wanted to keep in touch and continue discussing and supporting one another, such as helping each other with childcare.

**Dissemination:** Sujata Ghosh has had several opportunities to present about ATASK’s experience working with academics on this project as well as present preliminary findings. She presented at the Massachusetts State House on her experience in participating in Building Your Capacity and how that experience opened the path to
apply for the TCRC seed grant. Sujata traveled to Case Western University with co-investigator Carolyn Rubin and Doug Brugge to talk about the partnership building process. In June 2012, she presented at the third annual Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Forum on the importance of community-based participatory research in addressing health disparities in the Asian American community. Most recently, she presented preliminary findings at the International Family Violence and Child Victimization Conference in New Hampshire in July 2012.

Dissemination back to ATASK: On September 12, the whole research team did a report back to ATASK staff about the preliminary findings from the formative research. The staff present agreed with the findings that they hear from their clients the desire to give back and participate in peer support groups. This session generated a rich discussion and reflection about ATASK’s role in client lives and the tension inherent in doing cross-cultural work with Asian American and Pacific Islander immigrants in a Western context. Staff acknowledge that the word empowerment is culturally embedded in the U.S. context and that it often refers to individual empowerment. Staff wondered whether this definition was actually disempowering to their Asian clients who come from cultural contexts in which group identity is important.

Challenges

Translation of documents: One challenge that we faced was adhering to our timeline, given the amount of time it took to translate the research instruments and informed consent form. We did not anticipate how long and complicated it would be to translate the documents into Hindi and Chinese and backtranslate them into English. We also did not adequately account for the translation costs in the budget. Consequently, ATASK staff incurred more costs translating the documents than they were compensated them for.

Translation of the word empowerment: During the translation process, it became clear to the research team that there was no direct translation of the word “empowerment” in the Chinese language. This insight we gained from this challenge confirmed for us the importance of the research question that ATASK had developed. This challenges ATASK to be reflective of what does it mean to empower Chinese women when that concept does not culturally or linguistically exist for those clients.

Next steps

Client report back: A report back to the clients who participated in the focus groups is being planning for mid-October. One question that we will pose to the group that emerged from the staff report back session is whether clients are interested in building peer support groups across cultural groups.

Manuscript preparation: We are in the process of developing a manuscript about this formative research. All research team members have indicated that they would like to contribute to the manuscript.
Secure additional funding: ATASK, in collaboration with Dr. Rubin and Dr. Chu, are exploring other funding options to expand the study to other client groups. ATASK has written a grant to the AVON foundation that builds on the focus group finding that clients want to “give back” to others in similar situations. ATASK is proposing to hire an empowerment coordinator, who will act as a generalist advocate for those clients who graduate from their case managers and need help with accessing a different level of services. ATASK is also interested in expanding the research to include other ethnic/language groups that ATASK serves.

Final reflections

Impact on the organization: At this point, it is unclear exactly what next steps ATASK will take, but we believe the seeds for future work have been planted. From the report back session with the staff, it was evident that staff (including the Executive Director) wanted to find a way to institutionalize a way for clients to “give back” and access peer support. They recognized that this is something that happens informally, but it is not yet part of ATASK’s programming and empowerment model. They also acknowledged that it can be powerful if the peer support happens across ethnic groups as well.

ATASK staff also want to find a way to reconcile how their clients think about empowerment with how the U.S. system conceives of and conceptualizes empowerment, (legal and financial independence.) One staff member noted that in the U.S., definitions and conversations around empowerment emerged in the feminist movement, but feminism in Third World countries can look very different. Staff are interested in continuing to identify the ways in which empowerment can start from the clients themselves and support the journey that their clients are on.

Growth of research team members: The investigators of the project gained valuable insights in conducting CBPR. We learned that the goals of research efficiency must be balanced with the daily demands that CBOs face. We also recognized the value added of having clients and survivors participate on the research team. Having the community partners stop us and ask questions about theory, method and practice encouraged us to be more careful and thoughtful in the planning process. As is often mentioned in CBPR reflections, engaging communities in the development of protocols and instruments helped to improve the quality of the questions. Rigor and richness worked together to create more meaningful tools.

There are often process and impact outcomes from CBPR. While the impact outcomes are being written up, anecdotally, we know that the process outcomes include the professional development that occurred for the ATASK staff and volunteers involved in the project. ATASK staff acknowledged that they engage in domestic violence work because they feel like it is part of their “purpose” and it is their way of “giving back.” Participating in the research team afforded them a valuable opportunity to reflect on their work and think more broadly about what they are trying to accomplish at ATASK. Notably, Sujata Ghosh has had several opportunities to grow and develop as a professional. Because of her growing commitment to Asian health and CBPR, she has
recently been invited to co-chair the ADAPT initiative at Tufts. ADAPT (Addressing Disparities in Asian Populations through Translational Research) is an academic-community collaboration started at Tufts in November 2011 whose aim is to address Asian health disparities.

Building capacity in Asian-service CBOs: ATASK’s path from BYC to the TCRC seed grant provides a potential “map” for thinking about how to move Asian-serving organizations into a position where they can engage in CBPR. Building research capacity in community-based organizations to conduct research on issues of importance to them is a complicated, complex endeavor. It requires a commitment of time and resources, investment in building social and human capital, and dedication to building a long-term relationship between academics and the community. Capacity-building of community-based organizations to do CBPR often involves shifting their organizational culture that is service-oriented and not oriented to research. Capacity-building of the academics to do CBPR involves sensitizing them to the organizational culture of community-based organizations and finding creative solutions to administrative roadblocks to CBPR. Participation in the TCRC seed grant helped to strengthen ATASK’s interest and commitment to research. Some of the leaders of the organizations were originally skeptical of the organization’s participation given negative interactions with past academic researchers. Given the staff’s positive experience and the preliminary outcomes of the research, the leadership has now declared that “one of the components of our curriculum is innovation through collaboration with academic institutions and community engagement.” With the support of the TCRC seed grant, ATASK has been able to expand its organizational capacity to conduct research relevant and meaningful to its staff and clients.