Citizen Participation, Perceived Control, and Psychological Empowerment

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The research integrates the citizen participation literature with research on perceived control in an effort to further our understanding of psychological empowerment. Eleven indices of empowerment representing personality, cognitive, and motivational measures were identified to represent the construct. Three studies examined the relationship between empowerment and participation. The first study examined differences among groups identified by a laboratory manipulation as willing to participate in personally relevant or community relevant situations. Study II examined differences for groups defined by actual involvement in community activities and organizations. Study III replicated Study II with a different population. In each study, individuals reporting a greater amount of participation scored higher on indices of empowerment. Psychological empowerment could be described as the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain. Discriminant function analyses resulted in one significant dimension, identified as psychological em-
powerment, that was positively correlated with leadership and negatively correlated with alienation.

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to matters of social policy and social change. It is thought to be a process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Katz, 1984; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Rappaport, Swift, & Hess, 1984). While empowerment is a multilevel construct that may be applied to organizations, communities, and social policies, psychological empowerment is the expression of this construct at the level of individual persons. To date, however, few investigators have derived an empirical description of psychological empowerment.

One notable study reported the results of in-depth interviews with individuals who emerged as local leaders in grassroots organizations (Kieffer, 1984). From detailed thematic analysis of the descriptions of themselves and their experiences, Kieffer (1984) concluded that empowerment among political activists comprised elements of perceived efficacy, self-esteem, and a sense of causal importance. The research reported here is an attempt to further develop a nomological network for the construct of psychological empowerment.

Individual difference constructs such as self- and political efficacy, perceived competence, locus of control, and desire for control appear logically related to the broader construct of empowerment. The individual experience of empowerment is expected to include a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence, social and political understanding, and the ability to play an assertive role in controlling resources and decisions in one's community. One way to develop a sense of psychological empowerment is to become involved in decisions that affect community life. Citizen participation in voluntary organizations is a natural context for studying empowerment because it provides opportunities for the researcher to examine the psychology of those who develop a sense of efficacy in the context of a social and political environment.

Some investigators use a narrow definition of citizen participation that includes only those activities that have a role in decision making (Heller, Price, Reinhart, Riger, & Wandersman, 1984, p. 339). Psychological empowerment may develop more readily from activities aimed at influencing political decision making, but involvement with others, increased responsibility, and organizational problem solving are also expected to contribute to one's sense of empowerment. In this research, citizen participation is broadly defined as involvement in any organized activity in which the individual participates without pay in order to achieve a common goal. This includes involvement in government-mandated advisory boards, voluntary organizations, mutual-help groups, and