Further Explorations in Empowerment Theory: An Empirical Analysis of Psychological Empowerment

Marc A. Zimmerman, Barbara A. Israel, Amy Schulz, and Barry Checkoway
University of Michigan

Developed empowerment theory and replicated previous research on citizen participation and perceived control. Few investigators have designed studies that specifically test empowerment theory. This research further extends a theoretical model of psychological empowerment that includes intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components, by studying a large randomly selected urban and suburban community sample and examining race differences. Results suggest that one underlying dimension that combines different measures of perceived control may be interpreted as the intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment, because it distinguishes groups defined by their level of participation in community organizations and activities (behavioral component). The association found between the intrapersonal and behavioral components is consistent with empowerment theory. Interaction effects between race groups and participation suggest that participation may be more strongly associated with the intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment for African Americans than for white individuals. Implications for empowerment theory and intervention design are discussed.

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All correspondence should be sent to Marc A. Zimmerman, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2029.
Empowerment at the individual level of analysis is a process by which individuals gain mastery and control over their lives, and a critical understanding of their environment (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989; Kieffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1984, 1987; Schulz & Israel, 1990; Swift & Levin, 1987; Zimmerman, 1990a). The form psychological empowerment (PE) takes depends on the context and population being studied (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, in press). In the most general case, PE may be conceptualized to include intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components (Zimmerman, in press). The intrapersonal component refers to how people think about their capacity to influence social and political systems important to them. It is a self-perception that includes domain-specific perceived control (Paulhus, 1983), self-efficacy, motivation to exert control, and perceived competence. It may also include perceptions about the difficulty associated with trying to exert control over community problems. This perceived difficulty may refer to beliefs about one’s own capacity to influence social and political systems, or to beliefs about people in general (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

The interactional component refers to the transactions between persons and environments that enable one to successfully master social or political systems. It includes knowledge about the resources needed to achieve goals (i.e., resource mobilization, see McCarthy & Zald, 1977), understanding causal agents (Sue & Zane, 1980), a critical awareness of one’s environment (Freire, 1973; Kieffer, 1984), and the development of decision-making and problem-solving skills necessary to actively engage one’s environment. The interactional component has not been studied directly, but it may be essential to the construct of PE because it connects self-perceptions about control (intrapersonal component) with what one does to exert influence (behavioral component).

The behavioral component of PE refers to the specific actions one takes to exercise influence on the social and political environment through participation in community organizations and activities. It includes participation in community organizations such as neighborhood associations, political groups, self-help groups, church or religious groups, and service organizations. Other aspects of the behavioral component include participation in community-related activities such as helping others cope with problems in living, contacting public officials, or organizing a neighborhood around an issue. Several investigators have suggested that participation in voluntary organizations is associated with psychological empowerment (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990; Zimmerman &