Empowerment Praxis in Community Coalitions

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Community coalitions address a wide variety of community problems, espousing a community development processes that promotes individual and collective self-determination. They offer a promising venue for the study of empowerment of individuals and organizations. This study utilizes data from members of 35 community coalitions organized for the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems to address the following questions: What individual characteristics are related to the psychological empowerment of coalition members? What organizational characteristics are related to the collective empowering of members? What organization characteristics are related to a coalition being organizationally empowered to succeed in achieving its objectives? At the individual level, psychological empowerment was most strongly related to individuals' participation levels, sense of community, and perceptions of a positive organizational climate. At the group level, the strongest predictors of collective empowering (our operationalization of the empowering organization) were net benefits of participation, commitment, and positive organization climate. Psychological empowerment and positive organizational climate were the two predictors of organizational effectiveness (the empowered organization). Implications and limitations of these findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: empowerment; community coalition; multilevel; prevention; participation.

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Community coalitions are an increasingly visible force for addressing a diverse array of seemingly intractable community problems, such as crime, violence, substance abuse, delinquency, and so on (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Kaftarian & Hensen, 1994). Coalition efforts are being supported through initiatives at the federal, state, private foundation, and grass-roots level, and have been promoted forcefully with arguments that are infused with the language of empowerment (Butterfoss, et al., 1993; Chavis & Florin, 1990; Fawcett, Paine, Francisco, & Vliet, 1993). Community coalitions, it is reasoned, can promote a community development process that builds confidence, competencies, and social connections among participants. They can engage broad participation, which increase local ownership, thereby expanding resources and increasing commitment to sustaining activities long term. Finally, community coalitions can expand health promotion and prevention activities beyond individual life-style change by collectively influencing key decision makers and social policy within the community. Although funding of community coalitions is ahead of clear scientific evidence of their utility, commitment to collaborative problem solving and to local ownership of solutions put this movement squarely at the cutting edge of empowerment praxis, or the practice of translating ideas and theories about empowerment into action and results.

However, empowerment is a concept that is often as elusive as it is compelling. As others have indicated in this volume and elsewhere, translation of the rhetoric of empowerment into concrete terms often reveals different notions about what empowerment entails. Empowerment can refer to values, processes, or outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995), as well as to activities at the level of the individual, the organization, or the community (Swift & Levin, 1987; Zimmerman 1995). Coalition planners who are concerned with psychological empowerment may focus their technical assistance and evaluation resources on understanding and bolstering individual changes in the experience of empowerment (e.g., providing information and/or skills; recruiting individuals with characteristics associated with psychological empowerment). In contrast, leaders concerned about the degree to which they are creating empowering organizations may focus more of their evaluation and technical assistance capital on the organizational characteristics presumed to promote empowerment (e.g., coalition climate, decision-making processes, communication patterns). The focal question becomes, what organizations are most successful in empowering the people who participate in them, and why? The notion of the empowered organization turns the spotlight on the ultimate products or results of coalition efforts. What are the characteristics of coalitions that are empowered in the sense that they have successfully achieved their desired outcomes (e.g., policy changes in schools, redistribution of municipal resources)? Finally, the most