Targeting empowerment in community development: a community psychology approach to enhancing local power and well-being

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Abstract   This article proposes psychological empowerment as an orientation and targeted outcome for community development efforts. Psychological empowerment has been the focus of many studies in community psychology, where it has been defined as the psychological aspects of processes through which people, organizations, and communities take greater control over their affairs. Psychological empowerment has been found to increase with greater levels of community participation, and to have protective mental health effects. Community and organizational processes that are psychologically empowering are promising as approaches to sustainably promote both subjective well-being and objective changes in local systems. The case is made in this article for more widespread use of empowerment theory, at multiple levels of analysis, in community development processes. Participatory development is viewed as a particularly promising approach for the promotion of psychological empowerment, yet more thorough consideration and assessment of psychological empowerment holds promise for achieving the full potential of participatory approaches.

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Introduction: power and well-being

A major premise of this article is that power should be central to discussions of global mental health and community development. Unfortunately, emerging conceptions of global mental health as a field (Patel and Prince, 2010) do not address issues of power, but instead focus exclusively on 'scaling up' services, including professional intervention and drug treatments, for those experiencing mental distress. While it is true that many services should be made more accessible to more people, the notion that professional mental health services could be scaled up to meet the needs of the world's rapidly growing population is unrealistic, to say the very least. Mental health services and treatments are often costly, and many of the people who might benefit most from them lack access to resources needed to meet more basic and urgent needs and concerns, which, if addressed, might well have larger positive impacts on mental well-being.

Even in wealthier societies, some observers have long recognized the impossibility of approaching mental health at a population level from the perspective of treatment and professional service provision. In 1976, Seymour Sarason wrote of his earlier realization that '[U.S.] society did not possess nor would it ever possess the professional resources to deal with troubled individuals. Put another way, as long as we define the problems of individuals in a way so as to require solution by highly trained professionals, the gap between "supply and demand" becomes scandalously greater with time' (Sarason, 1976, p. 318). This realization led Sarason and community psychology, a field of study he helped to initiate, away from mental health services and treatments to a focus on promoting well-being and empowerment.

Research in community psychology has discovered that positive psychological outcomes, such as well-being and resilience, are systemic and can have compounding effects (Prilleltensky, 2012). Psychosocial benefits accrue not only to those fortunate enough to avoid trauma and other risk factors, but also to those who become actively engaged in community organizations and other democratic processes. This is particularly true for those who become engaged in certain types of community and organizational settings – namely, those settings that have structures that permit many people to play meaningful roles, those that provide social support, those that provide access to social networks in different organizations, and those that implement community action (Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004).

These empowering community settings can contribute simultaneously to individual psychological development, community development, and positive social change (Maton, 2008). That is to say, they can build power, resilience, and sociopolitical control at the psychological, organizational and

community levels. Identifying, sustaining, and proliferating such settings have become central tasks for scholars and practitioners of community psychology. Empowerment processes in community and organizational settings also represent a promising conceptual framework and orientation for efforts to promote global mental health. Community development is uniquely positioned, as a field, to encourage the development of empowering community settings in many places across the globe, and thereby promote sustainable gains in mental health and local power in decision-making.

Marginalization and mental health

Members of every society and social class experience symptoms of mental distress. Yet, research on mental health across nations and groups demonstrates that threats to mental health can be understood at a macro-level, and are heavily influenced by inequality and community context. For instance, young people who experience the traumas associated with mass violence and war are more likely to develop adverse mental health conditions. Palestinian youth, for example, are particularly vulnerable to emotional and behavioural disorders as a result of cumulative exposure to two types of trauma: (i) directly witnessing killing, violence, and the destruction of homes and communities, and (ii) the chronic insecurity and stress that comes from the ever-present threat of atrocities or destruction of communities (Qouta, Punamäki and El Sarraj, 2008). However, it is not only mass violence that creates vulnerability. In a study of the impacts of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the mental health of young people living in New York City, Aber *et al.* (2004) found that exposure to that particular traumatic event had minimal effects on mental health outcomes when compared with the young people's direct exposure to 'everyday' violence in their own communities.

It is the most marginalized or least powerful members of societies – women, minorities, the poor, and the young – who experience the greatest vulnerabilities and instabilities in their community contexts. Moreover, these are the same groups most likely to manifest symptoms of mental distress as a result of traumatic experiences (Wadsworth, 2010). Poverty, racism and stigmatization, exposure to violence, and the threat of violence are all disproportionately experienced by people with less relative power, who are, in turn, more vulnerable to mental distress. Mounting evidence supports linkages between racism and health disparities, including psychological symptoms (Williams and Mohammed, 2009). Racial minority populations in impoverished inner cities in the United States, for

example, face a daunting set of compounding pressures and increased vulnerabilities (Ginwright, 2010).

Across societies, the subjective experience of poverty is one that often involves frustration, stress, insecurity, unease, a sense of dread about the future, disrupted family relations, and increased likelihood of experiencing depressive/anxious symptoms (Santiago, Stump and Wadsworth, 2011; Underlid, 2007). When people living in poverty are faced with negative life events and crises, the results more often include mental distress (Anand and Lea, 2011). Similarly, gender-based violence is increasingly being recognized as a pandemic with negative consequences for women's mental health (Gelaye *et al*., 2009).

The relationships between marginalization and mental health extend beyond race, gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, despite significant progress in reconciliations between socio-religious and ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, little progress has been made in extending intergroup tolerance to sexual minority youth – those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender – and the hostilities experienced by these youth are leading to adverse mental health outcomes (Schubotz and O'Hara, 2011). Moreover, because poor mental health creates additional vulnerabilities through loss of control and self-determination, the impacts on members of marginalized groups and communities are compounding, leading to even greater powerlessness. Indeed, while socioeconomic status is consistently found to influence psychological well-being, by itself, it is a weak predictor (Rojas, 2011). Improved economic circumstances can lead to increases in subjective well-being, but mainly for the very poor, while increases in well-being beyond the poverty threshold appear to depend more on social and political freedoms, social tolerance, belief systems, and a sense of control (Inglehart *et al*., 2008). Attempts to sustainably promote well-being, therefore, must consider power, and the processes that might lead to greater relative power and control for marginalized people and groups.

Empowerment in community development

Many community development practitioners are already utilizing empowerment approaches. However, it is important to be clear on the distinction between connecting with empowerment theory and the frequent usages of the term that are more colloquial. Like other terms with positive social connotations (e.g. social capital), empowerment has been a victim of its own popularity among professionals and politicians. For instance, a recent search of articles published in psychology journals (Bennett Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010) returned 6266 results for 'empowerment'; in comparison,

a search for the term 'self-confidence' yielded only 4309 results. This high prevalence, and frequent ambiguity of the term, can lead to the incorrect supposition that empowerment has not been adequately defined or studied systematically. A full-text search for 'empowerment' in the archives of forty-five volumes of *Community Development Journal* (*CDJ*) (1966–2010) reveals that 519 articles have used the term, with the first usage appearing in 1980 (between 1980 and 2010, nineteen *CDJ* articles also had 'empowerment' in their titles). Many of these articles have contributed to empowerment theory (e.g. Kilian, 1988). Further, some have been among the most important milestones in the conceptualization of empowerment at the community level (e.g. Laverack, 2001; Wallerstein, 1993). Nevertheless, others persist in using the term colloquially. This is what has understandably led some to identify empowerment as a 'tired buzzword', and an 'abused term' (Toomey, 2011, pp. 182–183).

Before proceeding, let us define empowerment. Empowerment has most often been defined as the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs (Rappaport, 1987). A more expansive definition is 'a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization' (Maton, 2008, p. 5). In the community development literature, most definitional efforts have focused on the concept of community empowerment (e.g. Laverack, 2001). Yet, it remains uncommon for community development to focus on empowerment at the psychological level. Only ten articles in the archives of *CDJ* contain the term 'psychological empowerment' – that is, less than 2 percent of the articles containing the term 'empowerment'. Particularly alongside the emerging focus on global mental health (World Health Organization, 2010), it would appear an auspicious time for more thorough consideration of psychological empowerment in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community development projects.

Psychological empowerment

Psychological empowerment has been theorized according to a human ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This perspective situates human development within nested levels of analysis (i.e. psychological, organizational, community). This ecological framing has been helpful for empirical studies of empowerment, since it encourages specificity. It should not, however, be mistaken for a claim to essential distinctions between ecological levels of analysis. In other words, while empowerment may manifest

different observable characteristics at the level of individual psychology, psychological empowerment does not occur independently of empowering processes at other levels of analysis. Hence, psychological empowerment can be defined as the psychological aspects of processes through which people gain greater control over their lives, take a proactive approach in their communities, and develop critical understandings of their socio-political environments (Zimmerman, 1995). As such, psychological empowerment includes one's skills and motivations to make social and political change, the knowledge required to do so, and the interpersonal relations and behavioural actions that can contribute to social and political change.

Psychological empowerment can therefore be thought of as the increasing cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and relational capacities that individuals can acquire as they participate in empowering community settings and, in particular, efforts to change social and political systems (Christens, 2012). These capacities include critical insights into social and political systems, and self-perceptions of competence and control in the sociopolitical domain. The most commonly used measures of psychological empower-ment have sought to assess self-perceptions of control in the sociopolitical domain (Peterson et al., 2006), which have been theorized as indicators of the emotional component of psychological empowerment. In addition, measures of the cognitive component of psychological empowerment (e.g. Christens, Peterson and Speer, 2011; Speer, 2000) have sought to assess participants' depth of understanding of social power and its use in local community systems.

Some skills, self-perceptions, and understandings, however, are more relevant in certain settings than others. Furthermore, because psychological empowerment is theoretically linked with organizational and community-level empowerment processes, psychological empowerment may look very different across different organizations or communities (Zimmerman, 1995). Context, therefore, plays a central role in the conceptualization and measurement of psychological empowerment. Measures for psychological empowerment, especially measures of sociopolitical control, are increasingly being developed, adapted, and validated for new populations (e.g. Peterson et al., 2011) and in settings and countries that have not previously been the focus of studies on empowerment (e.g. Kasmel and Tanggaard, 2011; Wang, Chen and Chen, 2011). However, empirical research is needed in many more settings before a clear understanding might emerge concerning which elements of empowerment are contextually or culturally specific and which, if any, transcend context.

In the contexts in which it has been studied, psychological empowerment has been found to be associated with greater levels of community participa-

tion and psychological sense of community (Christens, Peterson and Speer, 2011; Speer, 2000), and to have protective effects on psychological well-being (Christens and Peterson, 2012; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles and Maton, 1999). The mechanisms for these beneficial effects of psychological empowerment relate to the nature of environmental stress (Israel *et al.*, 1994). Many of the sources of environmental stress and trauma (e.g. community violence) are beyond the ability of individuals to change or avoid. Psychological empowerment is an indicator that individuals are taking collective action to create social and political change. Therefore, psychological empowerment indicates positive and protective developmental processes at the community level that are simultaneously beneficial to the individual participants in those processes. Thus, psychological empowerment can be considered an especially relevant process and outcome variable for groups with less relative power, including women (Harcourt, 2010), young people (Kohfeldt *et al.*, 2011), and minority groups including racial/ethnic minorities (Becker *et al.*, 2002), sexual minorities (Russell *et al.*, 2009), and those experiencing mental distress (Nelson, Lord and Ochocka, 2001).

Psychological empowerment can be promoted through collective efforts to encourage local change and challenge the status quo. Moreover, it can be promoted through collective action to resist unwanted change. An example of this is provided by a study of the protest movement to stop construction on locally unwanted land uses in the Susa Valley in Northwestern Italy (Fedi, Mannarini and Maton, 2009). The collective actions provided residents with diverse opportunities for involvement and leadership, and the study participants described their involvement as an active learning process that built their critical thinking skills, their depth of understanding of local systems, and their belief in their own ability to have an impact on those systems. It also broadened and deepened their interpersonal relationships, and created a focus on the common good that radiated out through their social networks into other community settings. Although this study did not assess impacts on mental health, we know from other research on psychological empowerment that it is likely to provide stress-buffering effects and to promote resilience, guarding against risk factors that might otherwise lead to mental distress (Christens and Peterson, 2012; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles and Maton, 1999).

Empowerment as a transactional approach to community development

Empowerment theory provides both a value orientation for practice and a conceptual frame for studying community and organizational processes

and outcomes (Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment has been theorized at different levels (i.e. psychological empowerment, organizational empowerment, community empowerment), and most empowerment theories have insisted that processes and outcomes at these different levels of analysis are interconnected. In other words, empowerment processes take shape in the *transactions* between individuals and their contexts. Since psychological and community empowerment are mutually dependent on each other, identifying and evaluating empowerment processes should involve 'the study of the changing relations among psychological and environmental aspects of holistic unities' (Altman and Rogoff, 1987, p. 9). Too often, however, studies of psychological empowerment neglect community-level processes. Conversely, community development, which has been attentive to empowerment at the community level, has not been consistently attentive to psychological processes and outcomes among people affected by community development projects (Goldsworthy, 2002). Attending to both psychological and community-level processes – and the transactions between them – holds promise for resolving important dilemmas in community development praxis.

Take, for example, the controversies about the true impacts of participatory research (Titterton and Smart, 2008) and participatory approaches to community development (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). While the rhetoric of many participatory approaches would suggest genuine grassroots processes resulting in more equitable power distributions, this often is not the case. Instead, the rhetoric and appearance of participation can obscure power imbalances and the complex negotiations that take place between local residents and outsiders, sometimes allowing the agendas of development agencies and funders to be advanced under the auspices of participatory decision-making. Moreover, participatory processes can exacerbate local power differentials when practitioners are unaware of such differences and treat the local 'community' as if it were a singular entity, inadvertently reinforcing the dominance of certain local groups. Promoters of participatory development have invoked terms such as 'empowerment', often uncritically and with scant evidence of real empowering processes or empowered outcomes (Christens and Speer, 2006).

Progress has been made in addressing shortcomings of participatory development theory and practice. For example, there have been calls to more effectively link participatory development with broader movements for democratization and citizenship, and to more effectively situate specific participatory programmes in local contexts (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). With notable exceptions (e.g. Sen, 2004), however, even these refinements in participatory theory remain primarily focused on the achievement of economic growth and material well-being. And participatory practice often

involves experts who guide the process towards such ends. The common premise that community development practice should universally have material well-being as a final goal therefore limits the degree to which development processes can be truly participatory and transformative (Christens and Speer, 2006). If participatory development processes are considered as empowering processes, it becomes clear that they should involve local residents in selecting not only the means to achieve predetermined ends, but also the focal issues and final goals of development processes. An approach to understanding and evaluating such shifts in practice would be to assess gains in psychological empowerment among local participants in development projects. Identifying, sustaining, and proliferating the types of processes that most effectively enhance the psychological empowerment of participating community members would better position community development to affect well-being not only through economic development, but also through transactional processes that promote wellness, resilience, and sustainable community power.

Of course, a focus on *psychological* outcomes risks introducing a tension into participatory practice. Are the primary goals of development projects to maximize the macro-level concepts to which practitioners are committed (e.g. economic, political, and human rights concerns), or is the goal to ensure that development processes are empowering for participants, in the sense that they build the skills, critical perspectives, and self-perceptions necessary for effective social action? I argue that these goals are not necessarily divergent – as long as psychological empowerment is understood as only one part of a transactional model for empowering community development. That is, psychological empowerment is not just sets of feelings or systems of beliefs, it is a process and an outcome that can be best understood in conjunction with community and organizational processes aimed at the achievement of more equitable distributions of power. A focus on psychological empowerment therefore should be congruent with many other desirable meso- and macro-level outcomes from development processes, if understood and measured as part of a more comprehensive framework for understanding development processes and outcomes (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

There may be many developmental gains at the level of individual psychology for participants in empowering community development processes (e.g. self-confidence, expanded capabilities, a stronger psychological sense of community). These are all important for well-being, understood as a state of affairs brought about by balanced satisfaction of objective and subjective needs (Prilleltensky, 2012). But psychological empowerment is unique among these developmental gains. It is distinguished by its emphasis on agency in the sociopolitical domain, social power, and collective

action. It can therefore be considered as an indicator at the level of individual psychology that a core goal of community development – positioning marginalized communities to more effectively assert their rights – is being achieved.

Implications for community development practice

The near omnipresence of terms like 'participatory' and 'empowerment' has served, in part, to blur distinctions between truly grassroots processes through civic or voluntary associations, professionally driven processes that have incorporated community participation, and top-down processes that have merely disguised themselves under a veneer of community participation (Eliasoph, 2009). The important task of distinguishing between these different types of processes can be facilitated by understanding more about the psychosocial dynamics among participants in these different processes. From a practice perspective, including psychological empowerment as a targeted outcome has the potential to build legitimacy for components of participatory processes that are sometimes undervalued.

Most basically, a framework that includes empowerment at any level of analysis necessarily includes citizen participation. In terms of policy, this means seeking to preserve and enhance the political freedoms of local residents and, whenever possible, decentralizing power and responsibility (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Further, in practice, a focus on empowerment-oriented citizen participation encourages facilitation of participatory processes in ways that are closer to true partnership or citizen control than to consultation, tokenism, or manipulation (Arnstein, 1969). An example is provided by a study of a low-income urban neighbourhood design process in Portland, OR (Semenza, March and Bontempo, 2007). Residents became engaged in a collaborative design process for a public space in their neighbourhood. By re-imagining and changing the physical environmental features of their neighbourhood, they altered the behaviour patterns of residents and visitors to the neighbourhood, yielding increased social interactions, neighbourhood participation, and an enhanced sense of place (Semenza and March, 2009). Moreover, mental well-being among neighbours was improved after the neighbourhood re-design took place (Semenza, March and Bontempo, 2007).

Considering empowerment within an ecological framework leads to an understanding of the importance of empowering organizational settings, namely, the creation of organizational structures that allow community members to play distinct and meaningful roles in community development processes, to provide and receive social support, to build social capital, and to take social action (Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004). Turró and Krause

(2009) provide an example in their study of empowering organizational processes among residents of a poor Chilean settlement. The settlement was formed when residents appropriated land and organized themselves, initially to resist governmental efforts to force them from the land, then to withstand decades of political repression and economic crisis. Named La Victoria, the settlement continues to face many of the challenges common to poor communities, but also contains a high density of organizations that have been formed to represent the community and its interests, and to promote justice and resistance. The qualitative study by Turró and Krause highlights the role of these community organizations in the psychological empowerment of residents, which is described by residents as the ability to cope with poverty, acquire knowledge, struggle through adversity, find meaning and intimacy in life, and help others in the community.

Understanding differences in psychological empowerment of participants – and the characteristics or contexts that moderate processes of psychological empowerment (see Christens, Speer and Peterson, 2011) – can provide insights relevant to community development in diverse contexts, and help provide the basis for challenging oppressive norms and ideologies that serve to isolate or marginalize people. For example, in a Nicaraguan study, Grabe (2010) finds that women's land ownership can lead to broader changes in gender-based ideology, allowing women to exercise more power in marital relationships and ultimately reducing levels of violence against women. In cities across the United States, Swarts (2011) describes community organizing initiatives that are redrawing social boundaries across lines of race, class, and religion through a focus on collective action towards altering community conditions of common concern. These initiatives sometimes address social divisions in a direct way. More often, however, this 'boundary work' (p. 454) is accomplished more subtly through relationship development, issue selection, and the achievement of shared identity. This highlights a paradox of empowerment processes – that the best interventions often do not target a perceived problem directly, instead they intervene in systems with the intent of changing patterns of transactions (Seidman, 2012).

Promoting gains in the cognitive component of psychological empowerment is also vital for transformative community work. This component has been theorized and studied as a keen understanding of social systems, especially the ways that power can be used to prevent and promote social change (Speer, 2000). This component is therefore akin to the development of critical consciousness (Watts, Diemer and Voight, 2011) that likely translates to liberation-oriented behaviour in other contexts in the lives of community members. Critical consciousness is developed through psychological processes described by Montero (2007), drawing

on the work of Latin American psychologists, educators, and sociologists (e.g. Martín-Baró, Freire, and Fals-Borda). These processes, including de-ideologization, de-alienation, problematization, and conscientization can create greater understanding of the mechanisms of power that maintain injustices and shape ideology (Lukes, 1974; Speer, 2008), including pitting less powerful groups of people against each other to insulate the interests of the powerful. Beyond links to liberation-oriented behaviours, this knowledge and awareness can be important for avoiding self-blame for personal troubles, through the recognition that personal troubles are often linked to public issues (Preskill and Brookfield, 2009). Community development practice that draws reflective and critical attention to dominant societal myths and ideologies that preserve injustices can promote gains in this cognitive component of psychological empowerment, thereby simultaneously enhancing resilience and capacity for community mobilization.

Summary and conclusions

If our goal is to promote well-being in communities, power must be taken into account. Incorporating psychological empowerment into frameworks for the evaluation of community development programmes makes power a more central consideration. It can also provide a proximal outcome variable that can be useful for understanding change processes as they unfold, and demonstrating incremental or intermediary gains to stakeholders. For instance, Kasmel and Tanggaard (2011) provide a recent example of the use of psychological empowerment as an outcome for community-based health interventions in Estonia. Demonstrating such outcomes can contribute to programmatic sustainability. Ensuring that participants are becoming psychologically empowered through their involvement contributes to sustainability in other ways as well – it is an indication that true community capacity is being created, making it more likely that collective action will be sustainable (Wells *et al.*, 2007), even after NGOs or other agencies conclude their involvement in the community.

Finally, processes that increase psychological empowerment can build resilience, offset the potential for negative mental health impacts from disempowering processes, and promote positive mental health outcomes (Christens and Peterson, 2012; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles and Maton, 1999; Nelson, Lord and Ochocka, 2001). As an approach to policy and intervention among oppressed and mentally distressed populations, empowerment represents a focus on citizen rights in conjunction with needs (Rappaport, 1981). It presses us to not only seek to treat or prevent mental illness, but also to work alongside vulnerable or oppressed groups towards social change that builds their power and brings them

more control over their affairs. Empowerment is thus a value orientation that takes seriously – and confronts directly – the structural forces that create disproportionate vulnerabilities to psychological distress.

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