

Toward Relational Empowerment

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Abstract Psychological empowerment has been theorized as a construct with emotional, behavioral and cognitive components. Yet, many studies have stressed that empowerment processes are contingent on interpersonal relationships. Moreover, theory suggests that power is developed and exercised through relationships. This article makes the case that expanding our conceptions of psychological empowerment through the addition of a relational component can enhance our understanding of psychological empowerment and the effectiveness of empowerment-oriented community practice. Previous research on empowerment is reviewed for relational content, and additional insights into the relational context of empowerment processes are marshaled from other concepts in community research including social capital, sense of community, social networks, social support, and citizen participation. A new iteration of the nomological network for psychological empowerment is presented, including the elements of a relational component.

Keywords Collaboration · Empowerment · Power · Relationships · Social networks

Psychological empowerment has been a core concept for community psychology theory, practice and values for the last 30 years (Rappaport 1981, 1987). It can be defined as the psychological aspects of processes by which people gain greater control over their lives, participate in democratic decision-making, and develop critical awareness of

their sociopolitical environments (Zimmerman 2000). Zimmerman (1995) proposed a nomological network for psychological empowerment with three components: (1) an emotional (intrapersonal) component referring to self-perceptions of one's competence in exerting influence in the sociopolitical domain, (2) a cognitive (interactional) component referring to the skills and critical understandings necessary for exerting sociopolitical influence, and (3) a behavioral component referring directly to the actions taken to exert influence. While no study has yet validated this three-factor structure for psychological empowerment, many studies have examined one or more of the components, resulting in several well-validated measures and a growing body of research revealing relationships between components of psychological empowerment (Christens et al. 2011a; Itzhaky and York 2000; Peterson and Reid 2003), and between psychological empowerment and other conceptually relevant variables (Hughey et al. 2008; Speer et al. 2001; Wilke and Speer 2011).

Most studies of psychological empowerment have focused on the emotional (intrapersonal) component, which has often been assessed using versions of a sociopolitical control scale designed to measure perceived control of one's sociopolitical environment (Peterson et al. 2006; Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991). The sociopolitical control scale consists of items that assess: (1) leadership competence (e.g., "Other people usually follow my ideas"; "I am often a leader in groups"), and (2) policy control (e.g., "It is important to me that I actively participate in local issues"; "There are plenty of ways for people like me to have a say in what our government does"). Versions of the sociopolitical control scale have been validated across multiple contexts. For example, recent studies have validated measures of the intrapersonal component for youth in

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an urban U.S. context (Peterson et al. 2011) and for adults in an urban Chinese context (Wang et al. 2011).

Less empirical work to date has addressed the cognitive (interactional) component of psychological empowerment. Study of the interactional component of psychological empowerment has focused on critical understandings of societal injustices and power dynamics (Gutierrez 1995; Speer 2000; Speer and Peterson 2000). These understandings have been assessed using a cognitive empowerment scale (Peterson et al. 2002; Speer et al. 2001) with three subscales addressing (1) the sources (e.g., “The only way I can have power is by connecting with others”), (2) the nature (e.g., “Changing a community almost always results in conflict”), and (3) the instruments of social power (e.g., “Those with power shape the way people think about community problems”).

The behavioral component of psychological empowerment has been theorized as participation in the life of a community, particularly in democratic decision-making processes. It has been measured using scales designed to assess community participation (e.g., Speer and Peterson 2000; Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991). Many studies have identified positive associations between community participation and the intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment (e.g., Israel et al. 1994; Peterson and Reid 2003; Zimmerman et al. 1992). Recent findings from longitudinal research indicate that intrapersonal empowerment processes tend to unfold as individuals are socialized through their participation in empowering community settings (Christens et al. 2011a). Yet, the interactional component of psychological empowerment has more complex relationships with community participation that are moderated by socioeconomic status (Christens et al. 2011b). Notably, many studies have treated community participation as a theoretically related, but distinct variable.¹

Conceptual work and empirical research concur that psychological empowerment is a multi-component construct that likely varies across populations and contexts. The relationships between the heretofore-theorized components of psychological empowerment have been shown to vary according to gender (Itzhaky and York 2000) and race (Peterson et al. 2002). Psychological empowerment processes are also mediated by setting-level characteristics (Maton and Salem 1995; Wilke and Speer 2011). These complicated findings underscore early observations that empowerment processes tend to unfold differently in

different contexts, sometimes in ways that are asynchronous, paradoxical (Rappaport 1981) and enigmatic (Zimmerman 1990). Moreover, empowerment theory has emphasized the notion that psychological empowerment processes are not confined to individuals in an atomistic sense (Zimmerman 1990). In contrast, empowerment has been conceptualized holistically as a context-specific transactional process (Altman and Rogoff 1987) taking place as individuals participate and interact within various organizational and community contexts.

Importantly, then, psychological empowerment is not the same as individual-level empowerment. Rather, as Zimmerman (1990) makes clear, psychological empowerment is a psychologically oriented variable that has reciprocal relationships with processes and outcomes at other levels of analysis. In other words, the theoretical foundations of psychological empowerment have been established in ways that suffer less from the inherent individualism that characterizes much of contemporary psychological theory (Gergen 2009). For instance, studies of psychological empowerment have typically been situated in what Maton (2008) describes as empowering community settings—mutual help groups, youth development organizations, educational settings, religious settings, civic engagement organizations, and social action and social movement organizations. Empowerment research has therefore been particularly ecologically sensitive, with interrelated bodies of work at the psychological, organizational and community levels (Schulz et al. 1995), and continual appreciation for context-specificity (Zimmerman 1995).

Despite the ways in which psychological empowerment theory has been sensitive to context at multiple ecological levels, it has been argued that empowerment theory has ascribed primacy to individualism, independence, and control, while neglecting more communal processes and outcomes that are also important to power and perceptions of power (Riger 1993). In addition, it has been argued that psychological empowerment has been overly focused on people’s feelings of control over their lives, while neglecting the actualization of such control (Perkins 2010). This article proposes an expansion of the psychological empowerment construct through the addition of a relational component. It is suggested herein that expanding the theoretical and measurement vantages toward the relational dynamics of empowerment and the exercise of power can further the study of psychological empowerment and empowerment-oriented interventions.

Relationships, Power and Psychology

Power is a frequently used word with many meanings. The question arises, which specific forms and uses of power

¹ Whether community participation can be better understood as a component of psychological empowerment, or a theoretically related but distinct variable, is a question that remains for future theoretical and empirical work. For instance, there are likely empowering behavioral processes and empowered outcomes that are expressed through more specific actions than aggregate community participation.

does empowerment seek to cultivate? Empowerment theory and empowerment-oriented practice have been oriented toward the forms and uses of power that enable access to resources for marginalized groups and the promotion of social change and community well being (Prilleltensky 2008). The conceptual history of empowerment helps to explain this orientation. Empowerment initially emerged as a critical departure from earlier approaches to prevention and intervention that stressed professional-client models of human service. In this context, empowerment has represented a move toward collaborative approaches to working with individuals, organizations and communities to achieve greater social justice and community wellness (Rappaport 1981). Therefore, although power can be understood as suffusing all interpersonal interactions and discourses (Foucault 1982), an empowerment orientation should be most concerned with the dynamics of power within interpersonal relations that enable and catalyze effective social action toward liberation and justice.

These forms and uses of power can be characterized as *transformative* power, which is exercised collectively, through organization (Speer 2008). This conception of transformative power is most similar to “power to” in Riger’s (1993; p. 182) formulation—the opportunity to act more freely—yet, it is specifically related to collective (rather than individual) action intended to alter structural conditions and dynamics in social, political and community contexts. Thus, it is both an end in itself, and a mechanism for increasing well-being at the individual and collective levels (Prilleltensky 2008). Unsurprisingly, many have noted that the successful development and exercise of transformative power depends on relational network dynamics (e.g., Alinsky 1971; Dworski-Riggs and Langhout 2010; Speer and Hughey 1995). This is not to suggest that there are not also relational components of other forms of power that are employed toward the maintenance of the asymmetric distribution of resources and opportunities (Lukes 1974), which transformative power seeks to resist and oppose. In fact, the relational components of such forms and uses of power have received much more scholarly attention across a variety of contexts. For example, Watts et al. (2003) draw on Fanon (1963) in pointing out that oppression shapes cultures that create dialectically dependent beings—the oppressed and the oppressors.² Domination, violence, and liberation are all relational processes. The roles of relationships in power asymmetries have been elucidated in studies on diverse topics from race and critical pedagogy (Lucal 1996) to

international community development (Groves and Hinton 2004).

These examples of the role of relationships in oppressive forms and uses of power further highlight the need for more systematic attention to relational context in empowerment theory and the development and exercise of transformative power. In fact, many studies of empowerment and related processes in community research have been attentive to the relational contexts of collective action, liberation, and psychological empowerment processes. For example, Mattis and Jagers (2001) outline a relational framework for understanding the ways that religion operates through interpersonal relationships to stimulate a range of affective, behavioral and cognitive outcomes, including involvement in collective action for social justice in African American communities. However, there has not heretofore been a coherent incorporation of such insights on relational context into the theory of psychological empowerment. Because psychological constructs are often theorized according to models of affect, behavior, and cognition, a call for a relational component is somewhat atypical. Indeed, there are other ways to conceptually incorporate relational dynamics into the existing components of psychological empowerment—for instance, through considering relational elements of skill development, self-perceptions, and behaviors—yet, the perspective that is offered here is that relationships can be considered as a distinct component of psychological empowerment, and that doing so has the potential to advance the study of psychological empowerment.

Interestingly, empowerment theory has been more attentive to relational context at the organizational and community levels than it has at the level of psychology. For example, Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) identify social support and subgroup linkages as processes that may influence the intraorganizational component of organizational empowerment. Likewise, they identify collaboration, alliance building, and accessing the social networks of other organizations as characterizing the interorganizational component of organizational empowerment. Similarly, Laverack (2006) posits a number of relational characteristics as domains of empowerment at the community level (e.g., strengthening connections to other organizations and people, and building equitable relationships with entities outside the community). Relative to empowerment theory at other ecological levels, then, theory on psychological empowerment has been less explicit in its orientation toward relational context.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that psychological empowerment theory has been less explicitly focused on relationships than empowerment theory at other levels. More broadly, the discipline of psychology has tended to view groups and relationships with suspicion. For instance,

² The distinction between oppressors and oppressed is not absolute as it relates to individual persons. Participants in unjust systems often play at least some element of both roles.

groups have been studied more often as sources of dangerous conformity than of solidarity or support (Gergen 2009). Relationships, however, are not just external components of contexts that humans inhabit; they are constitutive of the human experience, and the construction of identity (Kegan 1982), the development of cognition, emotion and language over the life-course (Fogel 1993; Gergen 1994). While psychology can be generally characterized as having a strong individualist ethos (Miller 1984; Prilleltensky 1994), relational perspectives have existed in the discipline for some time. Some high profile examples include works by Piaget, Wittgenstein and Mead (Carpendale and Racine 2011), yet even these are often misunderstood due to persistent individualistic biases in the discipline, and in Westernized capitalist culture, more generally. Efforts to advance relational perspectives in psychology are ongoing. In counseling psychology, for instance, relational-cultural theories of human development have built on feminist theory, as well as the experiences of women and members of other marginalized groups, to assert the importance of relationships to well being (Comstock et al. 2008). In relational-cultural theory, participating and contributing to growth-fostering relationships has been identified as the goal of human development.

Yet, participating in growth-fostering relationships does not, by itself, lead to agency in the sociopolitical domain. Along with advancing relational perspectives on psychology, some feminist theorists (e.g., Kitzinger 1991) have advocated for greater attention to power in psychology. This article's argument for the importance of relationships to the conceptualization of psychological empowerment rests on a basic proposition—that the transformative power that empowerment theory seeks to promote is developed and exercised in and through relationships, as well as emotional, cognitive and behavioral processes. A similar proposition played a key role in the development theory and measures for the cognitive component of psychological empowerment. Recall that a subset of items in the cognitive empowerment scale assesses understandings that power is not something that an individual possesses, but instead is something that can only be exercised through relationships (Speer and Peterson 2000; Wilke and Speer 2011). Yet, having awareness of the relational source of social power is not tantamount to participation in empowering relationships and the associated psychological processes and outcomes. The cognitive component of psychological empowerment therefore stops short of capturing the psychological elements of relational embeddedness of a person who is developing and exercising transformative power.

Greater attention to the relationships in conceptualizations of psychological empowerment has potential to

answer Riger's (1993) challenge to empowerment theory to focus not only on the traditionally masculine values of mastery and independence, but also on the traditionally feminine values of connection and community. It also offers a possible avenue for incorporating insights from other feminist scholars, who have suggested that power is not fundamentally situated within individuals; but is rather something that emerges in the transactional spaces between them (VanderPlaat 1999). A turn toward the relational dynamics of psychological empowerment also provides a potential bridge between the feelings and beliefs that measures of psychological empowerment have tended to capture, and the macro-level processes of community change that involve the exercise of power. Indeed, as Granovetter (1973) suggests,

“The analysis of processes in interpersonal networks provides the most fruitful micro-macro bridge. In one way or another, it is through these networks that small-scale interaction becomes translated into large-scale patterns, and that these, in turn, feed back into small groups” (p. 1360).

Thus, a relational component of psychological empowerment has the potential to enhance the connections between empowerment at different ecological levels of analysis, thereby diminishing the grounds for a critique of psychological empowerment as simply a sense or a feeling that is disconnected from the actual formation and exercise of power.

Theorizing a Relational Component of Psychological Empowerment

This article is the first to suggest augmenting the nomological network for psychological empowerment with a relational component. Yet, interpersonal relationships have received attention in many previous studies of psychological empowerment. In quantitative work that has taken relational context into account, relational characteristics and aspects of relationships have sometimes been treated as endogenous components of empowerment processes (e.g., Maton and Rappaport 1984), and have sometimes been situated as exogenous to psychological empowerment (e.g., Speer and Hughey 1996) under the rubrics of a number of other constructs with relational dimensions that have been used in community research, including social capital, social support, neighboring, citizen participation and psychological sense of community. On the other hand, in qualitative and conceptual studies, relational dynamics have more often been situated as a parts of empowerment processes (e.g., Kieffer 1984; Kirshner 2008; Russell et al. 2009). This article's aim is to advance the psychological

empowerment construct through the conceptual specification of a relational component. Hence, with an eye toward understanding the elements of a relational component of psychological empowerment, this section first examines the extant research on psychological empowerment as it has dealt with relational context, then draws more broadly on studies of other relevant constructs and frameworks with relational dimensions.

Relationships in Studies of Psychological Empowerment

Although interpersonal relationships have not figured prominently in psychological empowerment theory, it is nevertheless clear from previous research that relationships play critical roles in empowering processes. This has been most evident in descriptive and conceptual studies. For instance, Kieffer (1984) identified collaborations as part of developmental processes of empowerment, focusing in particular on the facilitating roles played by mentors or external enablers of empowerment processes. Importantly, relationships in Kieffer's study not only provide social and emotional support as participants "struggle through their empowering growth" (p. 28), but also help to facilitate the development of critical awareness and research skills, as participants become more effective agents of civic action. Similarly, Pigg (2002), writing about "mutual empowerment" (p. 116) in community development, emphasizes the interpersonal capacities that community leaders must possess, including the ability to motivate and guide others in processes of collaborative or shared leadership. Likewise, in their study of empowerment among participants in a community protest of locally unwanted land uses in Northern Italy, Fedi et al. (2009) describe empowered community members radiating influence through their social networks, transferring the skills and knowledge gained in their protest activities into a range of other settings.

As described earlier, psychological empowerment is inextricably linked with empowering contexts, which have distinguishing characteristics that are important for considering a relational component of psychological empowerment. Indeed, unlike the forms of leadership that often operate in formal organizations such as businesses or government agencies—which tend toward the expression of hierarchy and privilege individual agency over collaboration (Carli and Eagly 2001)—leadership in empowering community contexts has been described as distributed, collaborative, and deeply interpersonal (Chetkovich and Kunreuther 2006; Ospina and Foldy 2010). For example, Speer and Hughey's (1995) study of empowerment in a community organizing context emphasizes that social power is intentionally built through interpersonal relationships. A related study by Speer et al. (1995) showed that

psychological empowerment was higher among participants in a community organizing initiative that emphasized relationships than in a similar initiative that placed a greater relative emphasis on community issues. More recently, Christens (2010) studied the process of relationship development in community organizing, finding that intentional one-to-one relationship development broadened participants' networks of relationships, developed new understandings of the social world, and strengthened their commitments to civic involvement.

Descriptive studies of empowerment processes among young people have produced theoretical frameworks for youth empowerment in several contexts, and have also emphasized the roles of relationships. For example, Kim et al. (1998) detail a youth development and empowerment approach to substance abuse prevention, stressing the role of family and non-familial relationships, youth-adult relationships, and a task force that can tap organizational networks for involving additional allies. Similarly, Cargo et al. (2003) studied youth empowerment through a community health promotion intervention. Their study found that relationships were important for motivations to get involved and stay involved, that relationships between adults and youth impacted youth confidence, and that social integration into the community through an expanded network of relationships allowed youth to assume greater responsibility for mentoring other youth. A growing body of evidence suggests that importance of intergenerational collaborations in youth development and empowerment processes (Zeldin et al. 2005). For instance, Kirshner (2008), in a study of multiracial youth activism organizations, emphasized the role of joint work and participation guided by peers and adults to engage marginalized young people in political action.

The empirical study that has provided the most unambiguous identification of a relational component of psychological empowerment processes is a recent study of young leaders in high school gay-straight alliances. Russell et al. (2009) identified three dimensions through which empowerment was experienced: "empowerment through having and using knowledge, personal empowerment (much like the intrapersonal empowerment discussed by others), and relational empowerment (much like interpersonal empowerment)" (p. 896). In their study, interpersonal or relational empowerment included belonging to a group and associated feelings such as confidence derived from group membership and solidarity. It also included a commitment to passing on the values associated with collective activity to future members. Finally, empowered youth expressed their desire to empower others in their organization. As one participant in their study said, "you can't be empowered and stay empowered for very long if you're not ... connected with other people" (p. 899).

Relational Context in Community Research

More broadly, relational connectedness has become a central theme in community and applied social research through multiple theoretical and analytic avenues. Specifically, several constructs have emerged that have been more attentive to the relational context of life in communities than have most studies of psychological empowerment. Hence, despite the lack of an explicit focus in the conceptualization of psychological empowerment, insights can be obtained from other constructs that can be used to inform an understanding of a relational component of psychological empowerment. One example is the concept of social capital, which has been advanced to the front of the social-scientific lexicon by works by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995). Social capital has a voluminous conceptual history, such that any characterization of the term applies only to subsets of the literature (see Farr 2004). Contemporary usage, however, has tended to focus on the relational contexts of trust, mutual obligation, information sharing, and norms. Portes (1998) argues that the heuristic power of the term comes from two sources:

First, the concept focuses attention on the positive consequences of sociability while putting aside its less attractive features. Second, it places those positive consequences in the framework of a broader discussion of capital and calls attention to how such nonmonetary forms can be important sources of power and influence.

This second function of the concept of social capital is particularly relevant to empowerment theory. In fact, social capital's conceptual connection between relationships and power may help to explain why the study of social capital has eclipsed the study of empowerment in most applied social sciences. However, the tendency of much of the contemporary work on social capital to claim or imply causal connections between access to resources and sociability limits the usefulness of the term for community researchers, who are typically clear on the point that differential access to resources depends more on structural inequalities than differences in sociability—at either the individual or community level (DeFilippis 2001). Moreover, in keeping with the term's economic origins, many usages of social capital have tended to emphasize the 'rational actor' who seeks to build social capital for instrumental purposes and individual-level gains (Kadushin 2004), rather than the expressive or collectivist functions that relationships can serve. Likewise, with some exceptions (e.g., Coleman 1988) social capital theory tends to emphasize the benefits of 'possession' of relationships, but frequently neglects the self and collective efficacy developed by those who become

empowered to act and exercise social power through their relationships.

Nevertheless, research on social capital provides several important insights that can help to inform a conception of relational empowerment. The first is the distinction between different forms of social capital, namely bridging and bonding social capital (Saegert et al. 2001). Bridging social capital refers to sociability in more heterogeneous groups, while bonding social capital takes place in more homogenous groups. While both forms generate norms of reciprocity and trust, bridging is thought to generate more positive externalities than bonding (Coffé and Geys 2007) and is frequently associated with interorganizational relationships. Thus, bridging social capital is particularly relevant for consideration of the relational contexts of empowerment. In some contexts, bonding social capital is also relevant to relational agency in the sociopolitical domain. Coleman (1988) stresses the role of network closure in establishing obligations and expectations, which are key to the exercise of power, for example, in community organizing.

Another important insight can be drawn from Ginwright's (2007) conception of critical social capital, which involves the "connections to small community-based organizations in Black communities that foster political consciousness and prepare Black youth to address issues in their communities" (p. 404). Unlike much of the literature on social capital, which lacks attention to psychology (see Perkins et al. 2002), Ginwright's work makes connections between the development of leadership capabilities and political consciousness and the relational contexts in which individuals are embedded. Critical social capital is a concept that offers insight into the relational context of critical consciousness, which, in the view of Freire and others, is often cultivated through critical group reflection, listening to narratives, and other forms of collaborative action (Watts et al. 2011).

Related in many ways to social capital theory, the study of social networks has extended across the social sciences as a way of conceptualizing and examining relational structures (Borgatti et al. 2009). Social networks have long been a topic of interest to community and ecologically oriented researchers (e.g., Sarason 1976), but have gained momentum as a topic of study as tools for visualization and analysis have become more commonly available. Recent contributions to social network theory, methods, and applications have been made by researchers from an array of disciplines, including sociology (e.g., Diani and McAdam 2003), education (e.g., Miller 2011), and medicine (Christakis and Fowler 2008). Recent applications of social network analysis in community psychology have included a study of the influence of individual and community-level networks on community attachment (Crowe

2010), and a study of the influence of peer social network structure on relational aggression (Neal 2009). Methodologically, social network analysis is inherently relational, differentiating it from other social scientific methods, which focus on attributes (Luke 2005). Theoretically, a social network perspective provides a set of concepts that are focused on relational structure, which potentially extend perspectives on social support or self-reported sociability. A social network perspective, therefore, offers windows into the complex arrangements of relational ties that exist between people (Coleman 1988) within and across various settings.

Empowering community and organizational processes (e.g., citizen participation; community organizing; social movements) create changes in social network structures within and between organizational settings, with implications for the psychosocial dynamics of participants in those networks. Importantly, both the quantity and quality of ties are relevant for understanding social network dynamics. For instance, Granovetter (1973) highlights the role that weak ties play in facilitating processes from diffusion of information to political mobilization. Moreover, social network studies have avoided the ‘more is better’ pitfall that plagues some conceptions of social capital. It has done so by attending to instances in which an absence of ties can enhance the power of certain actors within a network. Burt’s (2001) concept of structural holes demonstrates that certain actors in some networks have greater power when their own interpersonal ties span gaps, or “holes” between clusters of densely connected individuals. Nevertheless, strong ties are also important, particularly for building the kinds of trust that can allow organizations to undertake actions to change the status quo (Krackhardt 1992). Social network theory and methods are therefore likely particularly useful tools for understanding the relational dynamics of psychological empowerment processes.

Several other lines of research in community psychology have provided insights into relational context. Research on citizen participation (Foster-Fishman et al. 2007; Perkins et al. 1990), neighboring and neighborhood cohesion (Unger and Wandersman 1985; Wilkinson 2007), and social support (Shinn et al. 1984) have examined social, cognitive and affective impacts of interpersonal relationships and relationships between individuals and their environments. For instance, Unger and Wandersman’s (1985) conception of neighboring focuses on the social interactions, affective bonds and cognitions that are interrelated with neighborhood participation and the formation of neighborhood organizations.

The most substantial of work in community psychology has been the study of psychological sense of community, which has focused on the subjective experiences and feelings of belonging and identification with a territorial or

organizational community. Sense of community has been identified as an overarching goal for community psychology (Sarason 1974). McMillan and Chavis (1986) provided a definition of sense of community: “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Moreover, they operationalized psychological sense of community, identifying four dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Thus, sense of community goes beyond conceptions of social support to include feelings of belonging to a larger social collective and the confidence that this group will provide one with social support. Like psychological empowerment, psychological sense of community has empirically demonstrated linkages to community participation at multiple levels of analysis (Perkins and Long 2002). Like social capital, sense of community involves sociability and norms of reciprocity. And, like psychological empowerment, sense of community has been studied as a context-specific construct, with different manifestations when residential blocks, neighborhoods, or organizations are used as the referent (Hughey et al. 1999).

A relational component of psychological empowerment diverges conceptually from sense of community principally by virtue of empowerment’s explicit concern with transformative power and change. Psychological sense of community, through its focus on needs fulfillment and emotional connection, may be a precursor to the actions that give rise to empowerment (Hughey et al. 2008), including the relational component of psychological empowerment. Where psychological sense of community stops—and where a relational component of psychological empowerment begins—is identifying the extent to which different sets of relationships (including those that cut across specific territorial or organizational settings) are facilitating the development and exercise of power at multiple levels. There are, however, insights from studies of sense of community that can inform the conceptual development of a relational component of psychological empowerment. For example, Sonn and Fisher (1998) use sense of community to shed light on the ways that mediating structures in oppressed communities interact with and resist domination. In addition, there have been suggestions for further developments in theory on sense of community that might be profitably situated within a relational component of psychological empowerment. For example, Hughey and Speer (2002) point out that “a sharper focus on bridging gaps and spanning extra-individual boundaries can enhance the sense of community concept” (p. 70). A relational component of psychological empowerment might also provide conceptual space for an expansion of this idea.

Synthesis: Augmenting the Nomological Network of Psychological Empowerment

The preceding section's review of existing community research that has been attentive to relational content brings the basic elements of a relational or interpersonal component of psychological empowerment into focus. A relational component of psychological empowerment can be considered as the psychological aspects of interpersonal transactions and processes that undergird the effective exercise of transformative power in the sociopolitical domain. The elements of a relational or interpersonal component are presented in an iteration of the nomological network for psychological empowerment in which a relational component has been added (see Fig. 1) to the three components theorized by Zimmerman (1995). The elements of the relational component have been articulated based on previous work on psychological empowerment (e.g., Kieffer 1984; Russell et al. 2009; Speer and Hughey 1995) and by work on relational context through other conceptual avenues in community research—social capital, social networks, neighboring and citizen participation, and psychological sense of community.

Collaborative Competence

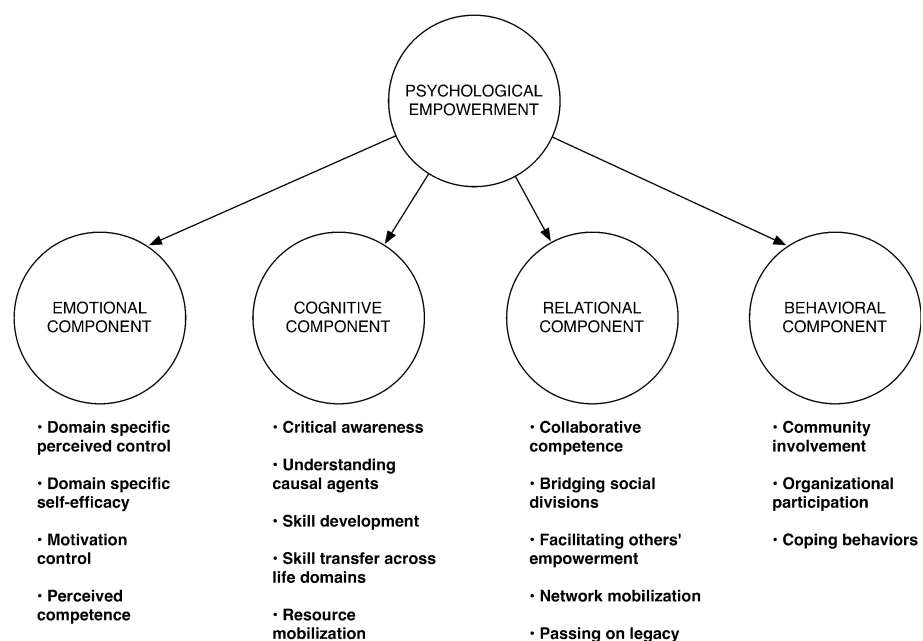
Collaborative competence—the set of abilities and propensities necessary for the formation of interpersonal relationships that can forge group membership and solidarity—is an element of the relational component of psychological empowerment. This element can be thought of as the ability to act as a part of a group exercising

collective agency in the sociopolitical domain. Examples from previous research include Kieffer's (1984) study of collaborations in empowering social action processes, the concepts of group membership and solidarity in Russell et al.'s (2009) work, and Ginwright's (2007) work on the connections within community-based organizations that facilitate the development of political consciousness. Individuals with greater collaborative competence should not be expected engage collaboratively in every context. In some circumstances, they are likely to enter into conflict with others while gaining greater control over their affairs (Speer 2000, 2008). Likewise, they may selectively form either strong or weak social ties (Granovetter 1973; Krackhardt 1992), depending on the context, and may even maintain structural holes (Burt 2001) in their social networks. Yet, in certain contexts (i.e., empowering community settings), they showcase their abilities through developing and sustaining successful collaborations and contributing to the development of group solidarity.

Bridging Social Divisions

Interpersonal activity across diverse settings that develops trust and norms of reciprocity across lines of difference form another element of the relational component of psychological empowerment. This element can be thought of as the propensities and set of competencies necessary for building bridging social capital (Saegert et al. 2001). Examples in previous research include Christens' (2010) study of community organizing addresses the role of interpersonal relationships in developing new understandings of the social world and strengthening commitments to

Fig. 1 Conceptual model for psychological empowerment as a latent construct with emotional, cognitive, relational and behavioral components, and hypothesized elements of each component



civic engagement, Watkins et al.'s (2007) study of the role of intergroup relations across differences in social class, race/ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation in developing critical understandings of marginalization and injustice, and Cargo et al. (2003) study of youth empowerment, which involved breaking down age segregation so that young people could participate as citizens. Those who are more adept at bridging social divisions can be expected to understand the roles that isolation and group divisions play in maintaining power asymmetries. Accordingly, they can be expected to possess strategies for bridging social divisions, and to be embedded in relational networks containing others different from themselves.

Facilitating Others' Empowerment

Another element of the relational component of psychological empowerment is the ability and propensity toward facilitating empowering processes for others. As Gruber and Trickett (1987) point out in their analysis of a policy council in an alternative high school, it is not always possible for one person to empower another, particularly when there are stark inequalities between them. However, in many accounts of effective community leadership, we see that community leaders often relinquish or delegate control and decision-making, positioning others to take on new challenges, and working to guide them in their development as leaders (Evans 2011). Many scholars have emphasized this element of empowerment processes, including Pigg's (2002) work on mutual empowerment, Kirshner's (2008) account of guided learning in youth activism, and Preskill and Brookfield's (2009) concept of organic leadership, which hinges on the task of learning to support others' growth through listening and thoughtful questioning. Likewise, in Turró and Krause's (2009) study of empowerment in a poor Chilean settlement, sociopolitical development of residents is bound up in the obligations and responsibilities that residents feel toward other group members and residents, and the satisfaction derived from helping them. Those who are more empowered in this respect can be expected to demonstrate thoughtfulness and intentionality about group processes, the identification of the capacities of others, and strategies for providing others with key opportunities, supports, and insights.

Mobilizing Networks

Interpersonal relationships have both expressive and instrumental dimensions (Riger 1993). The role of interpersonal relationships in network mobilization spans both of these dimensions. With regard to the expressive dimension, the role of relationships includes providing a sense of personal invitation to participate (Ospina and

Foldy 2010) and strengthening commitments to making change on issues that impact those with whom one is in relationship (Christens 2010). Regarding the instrumental dimension, studies of community organizing have often highlighted the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in motivating and sustaining community mobilization (e.g., Christens and Dolan 2011; Speer and Hughey 1995). Relationships also function as mechanisms for the transmission and enactment of cultural and religious influences on collective action (Mattis and Jagers 2001). Those with greater relational empowerment can be expected to be adept at participating both expressively and instrumentally in mobilization processes within the relational networks in which they are participants.

Passing on Legacy

The models and strategies that create and sustain empowering community settings (Maton 2008) are conveyed relationally through mentorship and guided participation, training, and intergenerational collaborations (Kunreuther et al. 2009). This element of relational empowerment involves the commitments of more experienced leaders to investment in the sustainability of their achievements through growth-fostering relationships with those who will succeed them. Russell et al. (2009) describe this element of the empowerment processes of high school student leaders in gay-straight alliances, who were taking relational action to ensure that the organization would continue beyond their own time in high school. Those involved in passing on a legacy of empowerment can be expected to change not only behaviorally and emotionally, but also relationally and cognitively. For instance, in Ospina and Foldy's (2010) study of leadership in social change organizations, leaders with more experience were seen partnering and collaborating with newer participants, helping them to frame their shared interests in ways that promoted cognitive shifts. Importantly, this element of relational empowerment is not only beneficial for the less experienced members, but can also facilitate growth and development for those with more experience, as well as forging greater group solidarity and capacity (Zeldin 2004).

Measurement and Future Directions

The focus of this article has been conceptual development of an interpersonal, or relational, component of psychological empowerment. As Zimmerman (1990) makes clear, "empowerment embodies an interaction between individuals and environments that is culturally and contextually defined. As a result, interdisciplinary approaches, paradigm shifts, and creative research strategies may be required to

fully understand the construct” (p. 170). Relationships play a pivotal role in the interactions between the individuals and environments involved in empowering processes. In this article, I have advanced the position that understandings of relational context should occupy a more prominent space in studies of psychological empowerment. This view is consonant with calls for moving psychology and social science past individualism, toward a greater understanding of the dynamically unfolding social and relational processes (Emirbayer 1997; Gergen 2009). In relational processes, psychological empowerment may be expressed through collaborative competence, though the formation of relationships that bridge social or demographic divisions, through the facilitation of the empowerment of others, through network mobilization, and through a commitment to passing on a legacy of empowerment. Attention to these elements of relational context will bring the study of psychological empowerment closer to understanding the development and exercise of transformative power in empowering community settings.

Augmenting the nomological network for psychological empowerment raises questions about measurement. Which directions might lead to valid and reliable measures for assessing the relational component of psychological empowerment? Other components of psychological empowerment have been measured as latent constructs (see Bollen 2002) through the use of scales in self-report surveys. For example, as described earlier, the intrapersonal component has most frequently been measured using variants of a sociopolitical control scale (Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991). Development of a scale to measure the relational component of psychological empowerment as a latent construct is a promising avenue for future research. Scales might, for instance, include item designed to assess agreement/disagreement with statements that capture self-perceptions of collaborative competence (e.g., “I am good at building meaningful relationships with other people”), facilitating others’ empowerment (e.g., “I feel strongest when I am investing in the people around me”) and passing on the legacy of empowerment (e.g., “I have knowledge and skills that I am passing on to others”).

Once measures for relational empowerment are validated in specific contexts, future research could explore the associations between relational empowerment and other components of psychological empowerment, and with empowerment at other levels of analysis. Community participation might, for instance, be expected to precede the development of networks of relationships that would, in turn, lead to gains in sociopolitical control. In this way, relational empowerment might be understood as a crucial step along the path of socialization from behavioral to intrapersonal empowerment (Christens et al. 2011a). Similarly, a relational empowerment might lead to gains in

cognitive empowerment as people actively listen, reflect, and facilitate others’ cognitive shifts. Time is an aspect of context that is important for understanding empowering processes and empowered outcomes. Longitudinal research holds promise for understanding key dilemmas in empowerment theory, including the lack of covariance of some of the components of psychological empowerment (Christens et al. 2011b). In-depth qualitative research on empowerment should continue, especially in contexts where empowerment processes remain relatively unexplored. Studies by Kieffer (1984) and Russell et al. (2009) offer excellent examples of qualitative research on empowering processes.

The potential for empirical studies of relational empowerment, however, go beyond traditional qualitative and quantitative research. Relational structures as they relate to the origins, exercise and maintenance of power (Neal and Neal 2011) represent another promising avenue for future research. Social network analysis (Luke 2005) permits inquiry into relational ties and structures themselves. As discussed earlier, concepts from social network theory—including centrality, reach, weak ties, closure, and structural holes—are potentially relevant to understanding relational empowerment, but empirical studies are needed to link these concepts with psychological empowerment. Depending on the contexts being studied, social network data might provide insights into relational empowerment. For instance, Neal and Neal (2011) propose a method for examining the relative power of actors in a resource exchange network, and Noy (2008) presents an approach to power mapping that might be adapted for studies of relational empowerment. In organizational or community settings where it is feasible, it would be advantageous to collect whole network data. In other cases, ego-net data might make be the most logical or feasible method for capturing relational context.

Further possibilities for research on relational empowerment include mixed-methods approaches incorporating social network analysis alongside latent psychosocial constructs, individual characteristics and organizational affiliations. These hybrid approaches are perhaps the most exciting directions for future research, as they could produce insights into intersubjectivity (Gillespie and Cornish 2010), relational structures, and the ways that different settings constrain or enable empowerment processes. In some settings, psychological empowerment may spread through social networks dynamically, or in clusters, as research has demonstrated that happiness, smoking, smoking cessation, and obesity do (Christakis and Fowler 2007, 2008; Fowler and Christakis 2009). Empowering organizational settings, and the relational characteristics of those settings (Luke et al. 1991), may have differing impacts on empowering processes over time (Christens and Speer

2011). The study of relational empowerment promises to advance our understanding of empowering community settings by raising questions not only about setting influences on individuals, but about reciprocal transactions that occur as people exercise agency in and through relationships in different community and organizational settings.

The case that a relational component should be considered in future studies of psychological empowerment should not be mistaken for a claim that relationships are necessarily a preferred point of intervention or resistance. Although promising models for relational interventions exist (e.g., Surrey 1987), it is also the case that structural inequities play roles in maintaining interpersonal oppression. As Grabe (2011) demonstrates in a study of gender-based violence in a Nicaraguan context, oppressive macro-social structures are intertwined with interpersonal violence and control in relationships. When oppressive structural conditions are altered, there are proximal effects on gender-based ideology, agency and control in relationships, and distal positive effects on wellbeing and preventive effects on violence. Hence, in each effort to make change, it is necessary to identify the points of leverage (Christens et al. 2007) where actions have the greatest potential to spur change processes. In some cases, like grassroots community organizing, interpersonal relationships do provide a promising point of interventions for social change (Christens 2010).

Empowerment is more than a conceptual frame and set of measures; it is also a value orientation for practice (Zimmerman 2000). As such, it is fundamentally concerned with processes of liberation. As Watts et al. (2003) explain, liberation “involves challenging gross social inequities between social groups and creating new relationships that dispel oppressive social myths, values, and practices” (p. 187). More systematic attention to the relational contexts of empowering processes and settings is likely to further our field’s understanding of the paradoxes that characterize both disempowering and empowering processes (Rappaport 1981) and accordingly enhance our efforts to promote liberation. For example, Mankowski and Maton (2010) point out that a psychology of men and masculinity must deal with the paradox of men’s power and privilege and their simultaneous feelings of powerlessness and victimhood. The oppressive myths, values and practices that have accompanied the oppression of women by men have, paradoxically, created a very limited and unhealthy version of heteronormative masculinity—one that prizes individuality and eschews relationality. Processes of liberation from gender-based oppression will therefore necessarily involve changes in relationships and new relationships that dispel the myths associated with oppressive systems and replace them with new practices and values.

This article has proposed an expansion of the construct of psychological empowerment through the addition of a relational component. Although interpersonal relationships are frequently understood as components of extra-individual contexts, the position taken here is that there are also relational components to psychosocial constructs and dynamics. This assertion is somewhat unorthodox for work on latent constructs in psychology, which are often theorized according to a multi-component model of emotion/affect, behavior and cognition. There is a broader argument to be made for more relational, and less individualistic, notions of mind and self in psychology (Gergen 2009) and in Western society (Bellah et al. 1985). The scope of this article, though, has been a relational perspective on psychological empowerment. As others have noted (e.g., Zimmerman 1995), empowerment is likely a context-specific construct, such that no one model will apply to all empowering processes. Theoretical work on empowerment will therefore continually be necessary as a corollary to ongoing empirical research, and the incorporation of a relational component will likely be more suitable for the study of psychological empowerment in some contexts than in others.

The main aims of this article have been (1) to advance the position that relational dynamics are crucial to a complete understanding of psychological empowerment as a multi-level construct, and (2) to work toward identification of the elements of relational component of psychological empowerment, based on a review of research on psychological empowerment and other conceptually relevant constructs. As the review of these constructs has made clear, there is no current shortage of conceptual lenses for studying sociability. However, empowerment is unique among these for its explicitly political and value-laden approach to power and collective action. Situating relational dynamics within empowerment theory will therefore likely yield insights that the use of other constructs, whose value orientations are more ambiguous, could not. In sum, this proposed relational turn in the study of psychological empowerment has been offered in hopes that it will open new lines of inquiry with theoretical, methodological and practical significance.

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