SOCIAL CLASS AS MODERATOR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN (DIS)EMPOWERING PROCESSES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

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This study examined whether social class moderated the relationship between empowering and disempowering processes and psychological empowerment (PE) in a sample of individuals from five community organizing initiatives (N = 490). Hierarchical regression analyses were used to test the relationship between community participation (CP) and alienation on the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE. For the intrapersonal component of PE, CP and alienation were, respectively, positive and negatively predictive. Social class was positively related to the intrapersonal component of PE, and no interaction effects were detected. For the interactional component of PE, CP was not a significant predictor, and alienation was a significant positive predictor. Social class was a negative predictor, and interaction effects between independent variables were detected. These paradoxical relationships between social class and the components of PE are pertinent to empowerment theory and measurement. Implications for social policy, community interventions, and evaluation are explored. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

For those who are society's outsiders, the issues of empowerment will be different than for more advantaged groups. (Rappaport, 1990, p. 52)

Empowerment is both a value orientation for practice and a framework for understanding mechanisms of community change at multiple levels (Kieffer, 1984; Perkins, 1995; Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment has been theorized at the psychological, organizational, and community levels (Zimmerman, 2000). Much of the empirical literature on empowerment has focused on psychological empowerment (PE), yet even PE is not typically conceptualized simply as an intrapsychic variable (Spreitzer, 1995). Rather, PE can be best characterized as a psychosocial variable with reciprocal relationships with empowerment at the organizational and community levels. Conceptualizations of PE include self-focused beliefs, but also extend to interactions with ecological systems. For example, a commonly used definition of PE is that it is a mechanism through which individuals gain greater control over their lives, take a proactive approach in their communities, and develop critical understandings of their sociopolitical environments (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995).

Zimmerman (1995) developed a nomological network for PE that included intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components. The intrapersonal component of PE includes perceptions of control and self-efficacy specific to the sociopolitical sphere. Conceptualizations of intrapersonal empowerment have frequently built on the sociopolitical control scale (SPCS) developed by (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991), which contains subscales for leadership competence and policy control. Zimmerman (1995) considered the interactional component of PE as involving critical understandings of the social environment, and researchers have operationalized elements of this component in a community-organizing context, as residents' understandings of the sources, nature, and instruments of social power (Speer, 2000; Speer & Peterson, 2000). Finally, Zimmerman (1995) viewed the behavioral component of PE as involving participatory and coping behaviors that are focused on community and social change.

Participatory behaviors are often treated by researchers as conceptually distinct constructs that influence the level of PE achieved by individuals (Gutierrez, 1995; Holden, Crankshaw, Nimsch, Hinnant, & Hund, 2004; Holden, Evans, Hinnant, & Messeri, 2005; Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996; Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990). In particular, the relationship between community participation (CP) and the intrapersonal component of PE has been empirically demonstrated across a diverse range of contexts and populations (e.g., Christens, Peterson, & Speer, in press; Dunlap, 1996; Holden et al., 2004; Itzhaky & York, 2000; Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, & Wandersman, 1995; Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman, & Checkoway, 1995). Albeit less frequently, CP has also been studied in relation to the interactional component of PE (Peterson, Lowe, Aquilino, & Schneider, 2005; Speer et al., 2001). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between CP and the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE, but CP is typically weaker as a predictor of interactional PE. For instance, Speer et al. (2001) report significant positive relationships between CP and both subscales of intrapersonal PE, but participation is only a significant predictor of one of the three subscales of interactional PE.

Whereas CP is viewed as an empowering process for individuals, alienation has been viewed as a disempowering process and has been included in studies of the intrapersonal component of PE as a measure for assessing divergent validity. For example, many studies (e.g., Hughey, Peterson, Lowe, & Oprescu, 2008; Peterson & Reid, 2003; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991) have used versions of Dean's (1961)

alienation scale to establish the negative relationship between the intrapersonal component of PE and alienation, confirming the hypothesis that as individuals feel more capable of exercising sociopolitical control, they become less alienated. However, no previous study has reported on the relationship between alienation and the interactional component of PE.

One might reasonably expect CP to enhance intrapersonal PE, thus diminishing feelings of alienation. In contrast, previous research suggests a more complex relationship with interactional PE. Findings by Peterson, Hamme, and Speer (2002) suggest that greater levels of alienation may be associated with greater interactional PE. Although cognitive understandings of power are hypothesized to be associated with improved ability to operate in the sociopolitical sphere, these same understandings may be developed through experiencing or observing the impacts of inequitable distributions of social power (Peterson et al., 2002), which can be an alienating process.

Despite widespread use of demographic variables to understand behavioral outcomes such as community and political participation (Hughey et al., 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), relatively few studies of PE have incorporated individual demographic characteristics as anything other than control variables. Exceptions include Itzhaky and York (2000) who demonstrated that gender moderates the relationship between CP and the intrapersonal component of PE. Similarly, Peterson and Hughey (2004) found that gender moderates the relationship between social cohesion and the intrapersonal component of PE. Peterson et al. (2002), who were extending Zimmerman and colleagues' (1992) analysis, found that African Americans scored higher than Caucasians on the interactional component of PE, and Peterson and Hughey (2002) found that socioeconomic status (SES) moderates the relationship between perceptions of organizational characteristics and the intrapersonal component of PE. Finally, although not tested in a multivariate model, Peterson and colleagues' (2006) study displays significant bivariate correlations between subscales of the intrapersonal component of PE and demographic variables including gender, education, and income.

No study to this point has explicitly tested the relationship between PE and its components to social class or SES. The theoretical relationships between social class and conceptualizations of empowerment are complex. Empowerment theory emerged from the human services professions and social policy as a model for responses to problems that disproportionately impact those with less power and fewer resources. In contrast to the community mental health movement, which stressed prevention for so called at-risk groups, empowerment approaches seek to achieve equal citizen representation and participation among low-income, elderly, youth, and disabled populations (Rappaport, 1981). At a broader level, empowerment ideology seeks a more inclusive and fully participating society (Newbrough, 1980), but is explicitly concerned with those excluded from mainstream society (Rappaport, 1990). On one hand, then, there is a possible contradiction within empowerment ideology based upon the idea that levels of PE might vary according to social class. On the other hand, it is logical to hypothesize that people with varying degrees of social power would think about it in different ways and assess their own ability to use it differently.

The purpose of this study is to build greater understanding of the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE in relation to hypothesized empowering (participation) and disempowering (alienation) processes. Previous studies have demonstrated that the two components of PE do not necessarily co-vary, have different relationships with predictors, and vary according to demographic variables (Peterson et al., 2002). This study extends this work by focusing explicitly on the

relationship between empowering and disempowering processes, as moderated by SES, or social class, on the components of PE. Understanding the relationship between social class and empowerment is particularly important for empowerment theory, which seeks to address power differences in society.

METHOD

Sample

Survey data were collected as part of a larger study of five different local community organizing initiatives affiliated with a national congregation-based organizing network. The survey was administered to a random sample of participants across all five initiatives ($N = 490$). The five initiatives were selected to be a part of a funded study on community organizing (Christens & Speer, in press; Speer, Peterson, Zippay, & Christens, 2010). Sites were selected for regional and urban/rural variation—one of the five sites was in the Western United States, two were in the Midwest, and two were in the Eastern United States. One of the five sites was in a major metropolitan area, three were in mid-sized cities, and one site organized across a region that comprised smaller towns and cities.

Of survey respondents, 11% were from the site organizing across smaller towns and cities, 16% were from the major metropolitan area, and respondents from the three sites in mid-sized cities composed 22%, 25%, and 26% of the sample, respectively. The sample was 67% female, 34% Black or African American, 4% Latino or Hispanic, 55% White or Caucasian, and 1% Asian. Six percent of respondents either indicated "other" or declined to provide racial or ethnic information. Eleven percent of respondents were between 18 and 34 years of age, 14% were between 35 and 44 years of age, 24% were between 45 and 54 years of age, 23% were between 55 and 64 years of age, 20% were between 65 and 74 years of age, and 7% were aged 75+ years. Household income and educational attainment for the sample are described in the measures section under social class.

Measures

Intrapersonal empowerment. Intrapersonal empowerment was measured using an 8-item version of the SPCS (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). SPCS items involve statements rated for agreement or disagreement along a 5-point Likert-type scale and represent two components: (a) policy control (e.g., "I enjoy political participation because I want to have as much say in running government as possible"), and (b) leadership competence (e.g., "I would prefer to be a leader rather than a follower"). For this sample, the mean SPCS score was 3.66 (standard deviation [*SD*] = .75, α = .69).

Interactional empowerment. Interactional empowerment was measured using a 17-item scale (Speer & Peterson, 2000) involving statements rated for agreement or disagreement along a 5-point Likert-type scale. Statements represented three components: (a) knowledge of the source of social power (e.g., "to improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual"); (b) knowledge of the nature of social power (e.g., "changing a community almost always results in conflict"); and (c) knowledge of the instruments of social power (e.g., "those

with community influence keep many issues out of the news"). For this sample, the mean score on the interactional empowerment scale was 4.03 ($SD = .51$, $\alpha = .77$).

Community participation. CP was measured using Speer and Peterson's (2000) behavioral empowerment measure, a 6-item scale designed to assess the frequency of participation in community activities focused on social change. Participatory activities (e.g., "attended a meeting to gather information about a neighborhood issue" or "attended a meeting to pressure for city or county policy change") were rated for frequency and ranged along a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*about weekly*). In the current study, the mean score on the CP scale was 1.69 ($SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .83$).

Alienation. Alienation was measured using a brief version of Dean's (1961) scale with seven statements rated for agreement or disagreement along a 5-point Likert-type scale assessing three components: (a) social isolation (e.g., "I don't get to visit friends as often as I'd really like"); (b) powerlessness (e.g., "it is frightening to be responsible for the development of a child"); and (c) normlessness (e.g., "people's ideas change so much that I wonder if we'll ever have anything to depend on"). For this study, mean alienation score was ($SD = .73$, $\alpha = .57$)

Social class. SES was calculated by combining a measure of household income and level of formal educational attainment into a single score. Income was measured by asking participants to indicate their approximate annual household income on a 7-item scale, with values ranging from 1 (*less than $15,000*) to 7 (*more than $70,000*), with an additional option (*rather not say*). Of the respondents, 19.4% chose not to indicate their household income. For the remaining 80.6%, household income was distributed as follows: 7.6% < $15 k; 9.6% $15 k–24 k; 17.7% $25 k–34 k; 12.7% $35 k–44 k; 15.4% $45 k–54 k; 14.2% $55 k–69 k; 23% > $70 k/year). Educational attainment was measured using a 5-item scale, with values ranging from 1 (*some high school*) to 5 (*graduate degree*), with an additional option (*rather not say*). Few participants (1.2%) did not respond. For the remaining 98.8%, educational attainment was distributed as follows (5% some high school; 16.5% high school graduate; 25% some college; 27.7% college graduate; 26% graduate degree). Both scales were standardized to means of zero and standard deviations of one. They were then summated to generate the measure for SES.

Procedures

Data were collected as part of a larger study evaluating community-organizing initiatives in five cities. The sampling frame was defined as individuals who had participated in one or more community organizing activities within each initiative over the 2 years before data collection. Trained surveyors administered surveys over the telephone. Each telephone survey lasted approximately 20 minutes. The response rate was 47%.

RESULTS

Sets of hierarchical regression analyses were performed for both the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE. Independent variables were added in blocks: (a) CP and alienation, (b) *SES*, and (c) interaction effects with SES (SES by CP and SES by alienation). The interaction between CP and alienation was tested but was not a significant predictor for either of the components of PE.

Intrapersonal Empowerment

Models for the intrapersonal component of PE (see Table 1) predicted 21.8% of overall variance. CP was a significant ($p < .001$) positive predictor for the intrapersonal component of PE in all models. Alienation was a significant ($p < .001$ Model 1; $p < .01$ Models 2 and 3) negative predictor of the intrapersonal component of PE. The addition of SES in Model 2 significantly increased overall goodness of fit (R^2 change = .074). SES was positively related to the intrapersonal component of PE. Adding interaction terms for SES by CP and SES by alienation did not significantly enhance overall fit. Therefore, Model 2 provided the most parsimonious fit to the data for the intrapersonal component of PE.

Interactional Empowerment

Models predicted 10.6% of the variance in the overall measure for the interactional component of PE. CP was not a significant predictor of the interactional component of PE. Alienation was a significant positive predictor of the interaction component of PE in all three models. Adding SES to the model did not significantly improve model fit. Two interaction effects between independent variables (SES by CP and SES status by alienation) were detected that significantly improved the model's ability to predict variance in the interactional component of PE. Adding these two interaction terms significantly improved model fit (R^2 change = .023), leading to the conclusion that Model 3 provided the best fit to the data for the interactional component of PE.

To understand the moderating relationships in the models for the interactional component of PE, variables with significant interaction effects were transformed into tertiles (low, medium, high) and conditional means were plotted for the interactional component of PE (see Figs. 1 and 2). As depicted by Figure 1, the relationship between CP and interactional empowerment was strongest for individuals with lower SES. The relationship between CP and the interactional component of PE was slightly negative for individuals with higher SES. Figure 2 depicts the relationship between alienation and interactional empowerment, which was positive for individuals with all levels of SES, but most pronounced among individuals with higher SES.

DISCUSSION

Rappaport (1990) conjectured that empowerment processes may be different for groups with less access to resources or for society's outsiders and that interventions which fail to recognize or leverage those critical differences may miss the mark and thereby risk being ineffective. These ideas imply that variables such as social class and alienation might moderate or alter the relationship between processes that might be empowering, such as individuals' participation in community groups and activities, and the level of empowerment they may have achieved. Few studies, however, have empirically tested how complex interactions between the characteristics of individuals and the community processes in which they might participate affect empowerment. The purpose of this study was to test specifically the relationship between CP and the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE as moderated by alienation and social class. Our findings confirm the positive relationship between social class and the intrapersonal component of PE and the negative relationship between social class and the interactional component of PE. We also found that both social class and alienation

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of the Intrapersonal and Interactional Components of Psychological Empowerment on Community Participation, Alienation, SES and Interaction Effects (SES*CP, SES*Alienation)

	Coefficients (SE)					
	Intrapersonal component of PE			Interactional component of PE		
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Community participation	.244*** (.03)	.235*** (.03)	.235*** (.03)	.021 (.02)	.023 (.02)	.024 (.02)
Alienation	−.183*** (.05)	−.145*** (.05)	−.138** (.05)	.226*** (.04)	.219*** (.04)	.232*** (.04)
SES		.135*** (.02)	.061 (.09)		−.027 (.01)	−.157* (.07)
SES*participation			−.003 (.02)			−.03* (.01)
SES*alienation			.028 (.03)			.062** (.02)
R^2	.143	.217	.218	.076	.083	.106
R^2 change		.074***	.001		.007	.023*

Note. SES = socioeconomic status; CP = community participation; SE = standard error; PE = psychological empowerment.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
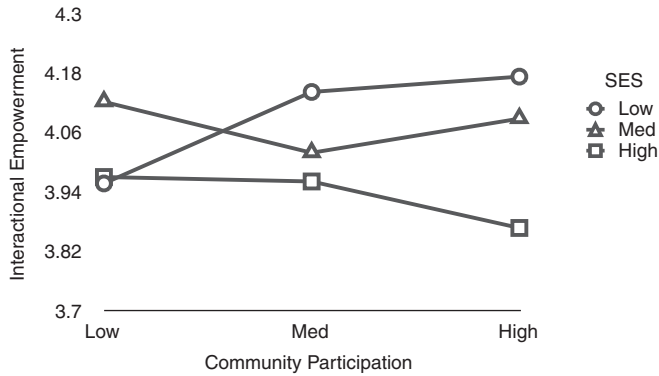
Figure 1. Interaction between community participation and socioeconomic status on the interactional component of psychological empowerment.
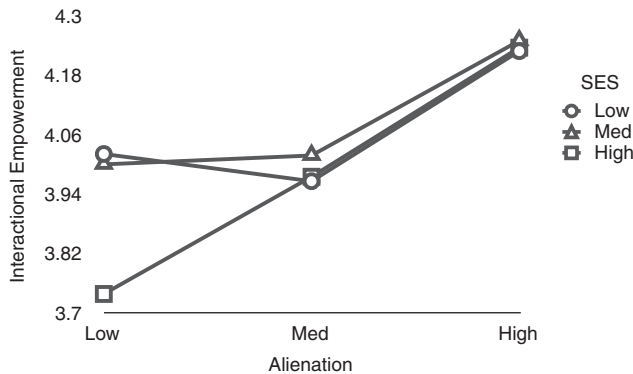
Figure 2. Interaction between alienation and socioeconomic status on the interactional component of psychological empowerment.

moderate the relationships between CP and the interactional component of PE, but not intrapersonal PE. These findings have vital implications for empowerment theory and practice.

Implications for Empowerment Theory

Previous studies have shown that the different components of PE do not necessarily co-vary or have similar relationships with CP and other predictors (Speer & Peterson, 2000; Peterson et al., 2001). This study extends the empirical work on PE in relation to demographic characteristics and other psychosocial variables. Specifically, this study found a positive relationship between social class and the intrapersonal component of PE and a negative relationship between social class and the interactional component of PE, suggesting that these two components of PE operate differently among those with resource and educational advantages than they do among disadvantaged populations. The intrapersonal component of PE measures perceived control in the sociopolitical domain, so it is not entirely surprising that individuals with higher incomes and levels of formal education would perceive themselves as having more sociopolitical control. The interactional component of PE measures cognitive understandings and critical analysis of the source, nature, and instruments of social power. It also stands to reason that relatively disadvantaged individuals would have, on average, a keener analysis of

social power because they are more likely to have personally experienced injustices. Drawing on these findings, we submit that those who possess higher relative levels of social class are less likely to critically analyze social power but are more likely to feel confident that they can operate with power in the sociopolitical sphere.

In these findings, self-perceptions of sociopolitical control (intrapersonal component of PE) were negatively related to alienation, but cognitive understandings of social power (interactional component of PE) were positively related to alienation. The conclusion that we draw from this finding is that the process of gaining greater understanding of the source, nature, and instruments of social power can be alienating because it brings unjust social policies and practices into sharper focus. The fact that the positive relationship between alienation and the interactional component of PE is strongest for those with relatively high levels of SES suggests that these individuals have the most at stake psychologically as their worldviews are altered. Indeed, Figure 1 shows that the participants in this study with the lowest levels of alienation were individuals with higher SES and low levels of the interactional component of PE.

Finally, this study's finding on CP and the moderating effect of SES sheds light on a lingering issue in the measurement and conceptualization of PE and its components. Previous studies have consistently found a positive relationship between CP and the intrapersonal component of PE, but they have not found a similarly consistent relationship between CP and the interactional component of PE (Peterson et al., 2002). This has been particularly troublesome because CP has sometimes been theorized as a third (behavioral) component of PE (Zimmerman, 1995). Like previous studies, the present study did not find a significant relationship between CP and the interactional component of PE, but it tested and found a significant interaction effect between SES and CP on the interactional component of PE. This moderation effect suggests that although individuals with lower SES are more likely to score higher on the interactional component of PE as they participate more in community activities, a corresponding increase in participation by those with relatively high levels of SES does not produce this increase in interactional empowerment.

Implications for Social Policy, Community Interventions, and Evaluation

Psychological empowerment is more than a measure or a personality variable. It is a component of empowerment, which has been defined as a process by which individuals, organizations, and communities gain greater control over issues of concern to them (Rappaport, 1987). The lack of covariance between the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components of PE has been discussed in relation to the true goals of empowerment theory and practice: promoting greater control over issues of concern to individuals, organizations, and communities, particularly those which are relatively disadvantaged (Peterson et al., 2002). A key question for practice, policy, and evaluation is how to cultivate empowerment, particularly for those most marginalized and oppressed in society. Heretofore, empowerment has had a focus on how to simultaneously maximize CP, perceptions of sociopolitical control, and cognitive understandings of social power. Findings from this study and others suggest that empowerment approaches face a challenge in simultaneously maximizing all three components of PE. This study provides further insights into how that challenge may vary according to population characteristics.

Our findings suggest those with relatively high income and levels of formal education are more likely to believe that they can exercise control in the sociopolitical

sphere but are less likely to have a keen understanding of the source, nature, and instruments of social power. Moreover, individuals with higher SES are unlikely to gain such an understanding as they participate more in community activities. In cases when they do possess a keen understanding of social power, they are likely to be appreciably more alienated than other members of their social class. Conversely, those with relatively low levels of income and formal education are less likely to believe that they can exercise control in the sociopolitical sphere, yet they are more likely to have a keen understanding of the source, nature, and instruments of social power, particularly if they are highly engaged in community activities.

Empowerment interventions and policy should be tailored to different community and organizational contexts. In settings populated by individuals with higher SES, policy and intervention should focus more on building cognitive understandings of social power among participants. Promising interventions for these contexts might specifically target the development of critical consciousness (Gutierrez, 1995). Care should be taken in these policies and interventions to guard against potential negative effects from relatively sharp increases in alienation that accompany gains in interactional PE for individuals with higher SES. In other words, it must be recognized that alterations of worldviews will require corresponding alterations in the identities of individuals (Christens, Hanlin, & Speer, 2007). Interventions, then, should take a developmental approach to sociopolitical awareness (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

It may be helpful for program developers or evaluators to recognize that in settings that are populated by individuals with lower levels of income or education, there may be relatively less need for policies and interventions to target the development of cognitive understandings of social power, because these capacities are more likely to exist already. There is a greater need for individuals with lower SES to develop understandings of self that incorporate the capability of effectively wielding social power and exercising community leadership. Both the present and previous research suggests that increasing CP is an effective strategy for producing such self-perceptions. Furthermore, this study suggests that for individuals with lower SES, there is also the potential for increases in cognitive understanding of social power as CP increases. Therefore, CP should be the preferred target of intervention for increasing PE in community and organizational settings with individuals with relatively low levels of income or formal education.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of this study is that the sample was drawn from organizational settings of a particular type: congregation-based community organizing initiatives. Because it is conceptualized to include behaviors, beliefs, and skills, PE has been particularly resistant to universal formulations and measures (Zimmerman, 1995). Indeed, PE is almost certainly a context and population-specific construct. Therefore, future studies should explore the multiplex relationship between social class and the components of PE in other community and organizational settings. A second limitation of this study is that it is cross-sectional. Future studies should explore the relationship between social class and empowerment over time.

Finally, this study seeks to open a larger discussion around the conceptualization and measurement of the different components of PE. The fact that the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE do not co-vary—and have different relationships with CP, alienation, and *SES*—must either be more thoroughly reconciled with

empowerment theory or addressed in terms of the construct validity of the measures currently in use for PE. We would suggest that the lack of co-variance between the intrapersonal and interactional components of PE is not necessarily an indicator of a lack of validity in the measures, because empowerment processes are complex and paradoxical by their very nature (Rappaport, 1981). Specifically, we should not assume that cognitive and emotional changes will occur synchronously or evenly across different populations or settings. These issues of conceptualization and measurement of PE—a central construct for community psychology—should be a subject of ongoing discussion in the field.

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