Toward a Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment

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SUMMARY. This article contributes to the development of a critical social theory of youth empowerment which emphasizes collective efforts to create sociopolitical change. It draws upon analysis of four youth empowerment models, and upon findings from a participatory research.
study which identified key dimensions of critical youth empowerment: (1) a welcoming, safe environment, (2) meaningful participation and engagement, (3) equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, (4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change, and (6) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment. It concludes with discussion of the measurement of outcomes, and the challenges and opportunities for empowerment in youth organization.

KEYWORDS. Youth, youth empowerment, model development, participatory research, critical social theory

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to support youths’ healthy development and integration into the community have experienced several shifts in focus over the past few decades (Small, 2004). Historically, a primary function of youth programs was rehabilitation or containment (e.g., keeping youth off the streets). An initial shift from these risk-based preventive approaches was in the direction of fostering healthy youth development and capacity building through active community participation (Kim, 1998; Small, 2004). More recently, positive youth development approaches have been expanded to incorporate a focus on youth empowerment.

Empowerment is a multi-level construct consisting of practical approaches and applications, social action processes, and individual and collective outcomes. In the broadest sense, empowerment refers to individuals, families, organizations, and communities gaining control and mastery, within the social, economic, and political contexts of their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life (Rappaport, 1984; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). The concept of empowerment has been addressed at both theoretical and practice levels in specific reference to youth.

The aim of this paper is to contribute toward the development of a critical social theory of youth empowerment. We begin with a theoretical overview of empowerment and an examination of four conceptual
models of youth empowerment identified through an extensive review of the literature, from multiple disciplinary perspectives. While recognizing that additional research examines dimensions of youth empowerment and informs our analysis of these models (e.g., Heath, 1991; Heath, 1994), we focused our search and examination specifically on conceptual models of youth empowerment.

Drawing on our analysis of these existing models and our participatory research, we identify and discuss six essential dimensions of Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE). We propose CYE as a conceptual framework based on the integration of youth empowerment processes and outcomes at the individual and collective levels. These occur within welcoming, youth-centered environments, through meaningful engagement and knowledge, skill, and leadership development, critical reflection on societal forces and power relations, and active community participation, leading to change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms, or images. The final sections present our discussion of the challenges and opportunities for incorporating the dimensions of CYE within youth organizations, issues of measurement, and potential benefits of CYE for youth and communities.

MODELS OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a social action process that can occur at multiple levels, e.g., individual, family, organization, and community. Theorists and researchers across multiple disciplines have examined and analyzed empowerment and linked it to individual and collective health, well-being, and environments (Freire, 1970; Jones, 1993; Pinderhughes, 1995; Rappaport, 1987; Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 1988). Rocha (1997) proposed empowerment as a continuum or ladder, with Atomistic Individual Empowerment (focus on changing the individual) and Political Empowerment (focus on changing the community) as the two endpoints. Such a continuum focuses on only one dimension of empowerment—the level or subject (individual vs. collective). At the individual level, psychological empowerment focuses on individual-level capacity-building, integrating perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). Collective empowerment occurs within families, organizations, and communities, involving processes and structures that enhance members’ skills, provide them with mutual support necessary to effect change, improve their collective well-being, and strengthen intra-
and inter-organizational networks and linkages to improve or maintain the quality of community life.

Conceptualizing youth empowerment as a bipolar continuum does not reflect other key dimensions of this complex social action process, such as the philosophy and values underlying youth programs and initiatives, the dynamics of youth-adult relationships within these initiatives, and individual and collective processes of critical reflection and reflective action to address social injustice and inequities. Rissel (1994) emphasized the integrated and sociopolitical dimensions of empowerment, noting that “community empowerment includes a raised level of psychological empowerment among its members, a political action component in which members have actively participated, and the achievement of some redistribution of resources or decision making favorable to the community or group in question” (p. 41). In the following sections we examine four models, both theoretical and practice-based, that have been developed to explain and guide youth empowerment efforts within communities.

Adolescent Empowerment Cycle

The Adolescent Empowerment Cycle (AEC) is a model developed by Chinman and Linney (1998). The AEC is based on psychological theories of adolescent development and describes processes aimed at preventing a sense of rolelessness and enhance self-esteem. Chinman and Linney linked AEC to the developmental process of social bonding, leading youth to bond to positive institutions through action, skill development, and reinforcement. Positive social bonding can prevent youth engagement in negative social activities. Given its theoretical basis, the AEC centers on three dimensions: adolescent participation in meaningful activities, such as community service, that provide opportunities for skill development and positive reinforcement and recognition from adults throughout the process. The authors argued that for adolescents experiencing a period of identity crisis and formation, participation in meaningful activity may contribute to role stability, offsetting a general lack of purpose or direction many adolescents experience.

Chinman and Linney (1998) offered the example of older high school students mentoring incoming freshmen regarding their transition to high school as an illustration of how the processes of the AEC might be realized. They noted that participation in peer mentoring activities could provide adolescents with meaningful roles and organizational and communication skills that will be useful in later life. Positive recogni-
tion by adults of the youth mentoring roles and activities would have beneficial implications for youths’ maturing self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, the authors did not provide details about youths’ roles and responsibilities nor did they describe how adults engage in this process with positive reinforcement, a critical feature of the AEC model.

**Youth Development and Empowerment Program Model**

The aim of the Youth Development and Empowerment (YD&E) is to guide youth empowerment initiatives within the context of substance abuse prevention programs (Kim, 1998). Similar to the AEC model, the YD&E goes beyond the prevention of risky behaviors and is based on meaningful participation of youth in community service projects. A key to the YD&E process is the enhancement of positive social bonding and preparation for participation and involvement in the socioeconomic and public affairs of the community. The model is grounded in social control theory, social learning theory, and expectations-states theory.

In their presentation and discussion of the YD&E model, Kim and colleagues (1998) described the features of youth empowerment processes and specified core structural components that support these processes. The model explicitly incorporates dimensions of both individual empowerment and community engagement, or community partnership. The central tenet of YD&E is the recognition that youth are assets and resources that should be called upon to participate in community and social affairs. However, the YD&E process requires strong social support from caring and supportive adults who place high expectations on youth participants and reinforce achievement. The authors envisioned participation in youth-determined community service projects as meaningful opportunities for youth to learn life skills that have vocational implications, take responsibility, and demonstrate their abilities and success. The accomplishments also need to be recognized and celebrated by significant others in the community.

Within the YD&E model, the role of the adult leader is to serve as a guide and facilitator, allowing the youth leader to take on leadership responsibility for the ensuing activities. As projects are completed, participants evaluate their efforts, determine future directions, recognize everyone’s contributions, and celebrate their success. Desired youth outcomes include the development of positive relationships with both peers and adults, participation in social/public affairs, and demonstration of success in solving real community problems and issues (Kim et al., 1998).
As an example of a context for the realization of the YD&E process, Kim and colleagues (1998) described youth participation in a community-based task force made up of representatives from social agencies and organizations. The task force would provide leadership, expertise and community resources to youth teams engaged in community service projects. The teams would be led by youth-adult pairs trained in core skills, such as team-building, communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal social skills. In turn, the youth-adult dyads would train youth team members in the same core skills as they work together to develop team-determined service projects. Ideally, such projects would have career-building potential and address local social concerns (e.g., a drug-free public awareness campaign, an anti-tobacco media promotion). In the process, youth members would practice the core skills while creating, planning, and evaluating their activities with shared responsibilities. When needed, youth teams would draw upon the sponsoring task forces for further training and support. Youth participation in making regular presentations to the task forces would serve to send an ongoing message that youth are important and valued by the community and also reinforce youth achievements.

The Transactional Partnering Model

A longitudinal qualitative study of a community-based youth empowerment program in Canada resulted in the development of a Transactional Partnering (TP) model (Cargo 2003). An inner-city community health promotion intervention aimed at youth engagement with local quality of life (QOL) issues was the context of this research project. The study examined the process of adult practitioners supporting youth participants in assessing their own QOL issues, developing action plans, and implementing solutions. In contrast to the AEC and YD&E models, which were based on existing theories of youth development and psychology, the TP model of youth empowerment was developed as part of a qualitative research project. However, there are some similarities and overlap across these models.

In the TP model, youth empowerment is conceptualized as a mutual process of transactional partnering between adults and youth (Cargo et al., 2003). Key to this process is the role of adults in creating an empowering and welcoming environment and facilitating and enabling youth. The findings from the qualitative research described various ways in which adults enabled youth. These included ensuring youth had the skills and knowledge they needed to participate in community change.
efforts through adult facilitating, teaching, mentoring, and providing feedback. One strategy adult facilitators used was to provide youth participants with a roadmap to guide their assessment of QOL issues, develop action plans, and implement solutions. The researchers noted that over time, “adults incrementally gave up responsibility for voicing, decision making, and action, making it available for youth to take” (p. S70). Adult practitioners apparently needed to determine the amount of support required “without undermining the very autonomy enablement is intended to foster” (p. S70) and incrementally transferred responsibility and decision making power to youth as they gained competence and confidence.

Another central tenet of the TP model is the notion of the inter-relatedness of individual and community-level empowerment outcomes. Youth are expected to experience individual outcomes incrementally through participation and success in community change efforts. These outcomes include increased self- and community-esteem, confidence, and competencies such as voicing one’s opinion and leadership. Participants also achieve community-level empowerment and develop participatory competence, or the ability to work successfully with others through cooperation, compromise, and appreciation. Youth control is manifest through youth taking responsibility, voicing their opinions, making decisions, and taking action to achieve their goal. The TP model reflects the premise that exposing youth to opportunities and challenges within a safe and supportive environment, and the resulting engagement and reflection, can result in learning and empowerment (Cargo et al., 2003).

In describing the context of the research from which the TP model developed, the authors did not provide descriptions of specific youth activities, projects, or organizational outcomes. However, they outlined processes that supported youth empowerment, defined as “healthful adaptation of youth to confronting challenges associated with directing a youth-defined agenda” (Cargo et al., p. S73). The researchers observed a variety of youth outcomes, including positive self-attributions (self-esteem) and group attributions (collective esteem) in response to achieving success; expressions of increasing confidence over time; evidence of clearer understanding of the workings of local community affairs (raised consciousness); development of voice and advocacy competencies by “talking with greater openness in a group of peers and adults” (p. S75); and increased participatory competence (e.g., cooperating, compromising, appreciating diverse viewpoints, and abandoning stereotypes). The authors argued that TP supported not only youth de-
development (e.g., autonomy, identity, expansion of life chances) but also opportunities to become more socially integrated into the community.

The Empowerment Education Model

Working with community adult literacy programs in Brazil, Freire (1970) developed and applied his theories of critical social praxis. The premise of his work is that liberating and empowering education is a process that involves listening, dialogue, critical reflection, and reflective action. Freirian concepts of conscientization, liberation, praxis, and empowerment education have been incorporated into various health education initiatives and models. In developing a youth empowerment model for an adolescent health program, Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, and Velarde (2005) linked Freirian concepts and practices with protection-motivation behavior change theory. The resulting Empowerment Education (EE) model specifically emphasizes the development of skills and knowledge that support youth efforts toward social action and change and links individual empowerment to community organizing. The authors envisioned the ultimate outcomes of the EE processes as increased self-, collective-, and political-efficacy, resulting in both self-protective individual behaviors as well as other-protective socially responsible behaviors. By fostering the development of empathy and active participation in critical analysis of societal forces within a safe group context, EE can bridge individual behavior change and group efforts for social change.

The EE model guided the development and implementation of a community health prevention program serving predominantly Native American, Hispanic, and low-income Anglo communities in New Mexico (Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Velarde, 2005). The program offered small groups of youth the opportunities to interview and interact with hospital patients and prison inmates with personal experiences related to drug, tobacco, and alcohol abuse, interpersonal violence, HIV infection, and other high-risk behaviors. The program facilitators were trained university graduate students who followed an extensive curriculum and engaged youth in a Freirian listening-dialogue-action-reflection cycle. The EE process involved story-telling, listening, and sharing of life experiences between the youth and the hospital patients and prison residents. These personal interviews and interactions were followed by participation in group sessions of structured reflection and discussion revolving around the personal, social, medical, and legal consequences of risky behaviors, and the exploration of action
strategies to help participants make “healthier choices for themselves and their communities” (p. 220).

Through these dialogue cycles, youth engaged in critical reflection, or conscientization, analyzing the societal context for personal problems and their own role in working on the problems. Protection-motivation variables were integrated throughout the dialogue cycles. For example, as youth listened to the patients’ and prison residents’ stories, the EE processes facilitated cognitive awareness of precursors to and consequences of alcohol problems, leading youth to conduct a personal coping appraisal. Facilitators also used an inductive questioning guide in order to engage youth in different levels of critical thinking and help participants acquire beliefs in their ability to help themselves and others. Participants engaged in dialogue about their own personal lives, relationships, and communities and were guided to develop an awareness of school and neighborhood resources in order to build socially responsible behaviors. Facilitators led the dialogue sessions but also engaged with youth as “co-learners,” offering youth the experience of contributing to adults’ learning through their participation.

The aim of youth participation in these interactions, reflections, and dialogues was praxis, “an ongoing interaction between reflection and the actions that people take to promote individual and community change” (Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Velarde, 2005, p. 221). Toward the end of the program, youth moved from reflection to action by engaging in community action projects. Participants chose to engage in presentations and peer teaching or in community-based organizing, such as production of “community murals, and ethnic-cultural institutes that reflected their community, culture and the voice of local youths” (2005, p. 225). Other examples of the outcomes of the EE processes included the creation of videos for use in educational efforts in neighborhood schools and community centers and a local youth-produced series of television programs on teen life. Several participants also joined with larger community initiatives to develop tobacco policy recommendations.

In summary, our examination of these four models yields a composite view of youth empowerment. As underscored in the AEC and YD&E models, youth empowerment involves a participatory cycle that engages youth in a safe environment and meaningful activities where they can learn skills, confront challenges, demonstrate success, and receive support and positive reinforcement for their efforts, can lead to empowerment on an individual level. The YD&E model also emphasizes the importance of youth serving in leadership roles, although this
is limited to those youth paired with adult leaders of the task forces. The TP model captures the attribute of shared power among adults and youth members to a greater degree than the other models. It also offers a process for developing youth-led community-change activities that provide all youth participants with leadership opportunities. Finally, by emphasizing critical reflection and structural level change, the EE model represents specific components of youth empowerment that distinguish it from the other models.

TOWARD A CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Critical social theories are interdisciplinary in origin and focus on emancipatory processes that give rise to community actions and the promotion of social justice (Campbell, 1991). To further critical social theory and practice around youth empowerment, we propose that critical youth empowerment (CYE) encompasses those processes and contexts through which youth engage in actions that create change in organizational, institutional, and societal policies, structures, values, norms, and images. CYE builds on, integrates, and expands existing conceptual models of youth development and youth empowerment. The aim of CYE is to support and foster youth contributions to positive community development and sociopolitical change, resulting in youth who are critical citizens, actively participating in the day-to-day building of stronger, more equitable communities (Jennings & Green, 1993).

We bring to this discussion the findings from our participatory research with community youth organizations (Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005; Royce, 2004; Royce, April 2004). The research was developed within a community-based, participatory framework (Wallerstein, 2002; Cheatham, 2003). The purpose was to gain the perspectives of youth participants and the adult leaders in order to develop program model guidelines for youth empowerment. Four community youth programs participated as research partners. The research processes included in-depth interviews with adult leaders, intensive on-site observations of the youth programs, youth engagement in a photo essay exercise, and adult and youth participation in a Youth Empowerment Program Summit.
DIMENSIONS OF CRITICAL YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Taken together, our examination of these four models and the results of our research with youth empowerment program, offer insights regarding six key dimensions of CYE:

- A welcoming and safe environment;
- Meaningful participation and engagement;
- Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults;
- Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes;
- Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change; and
- Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment

Table 1 indicates which of these dimensions are highlighted across the four models, illustrating that each of the initial four models contains some of the dimensions in varying degrees, whereas the CYE model integrates all six. It is important to note the interrelated, dynamic nature of these six dimensions of CYE. In the following sections we examine each dimension in greater detail, discuss roles of adults and youth, and address potential challenges, opportunities, and benefits of the application of CYE in practice.

A Welcoming and Safe Environment

A welcoming and safe social environment where youth feel valued, respected, encouraged, and supported is a key to CYE. Such an environment allows participants opportunities to share their feelings, take risks, and feel as if they belong to a family-like community (Heath, 1991). A welcoming and safe environment is a social space in which young people have freedom to be themselves, express their own creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try out new skills and roles, rise to challenges, and have fun in the process.

Environments conducive to CYE are those in which youth have a sense of ownership and yet are challenged and supported to move beyond their usual comfort zone; such environments are co-created by youth and adults. Although adults are often instrumental in bringing youth into programs and helping sustain their interest and participation, these activities and roles are not the exclusive domain of adults. For youth to fully participate and have ownership of the process, adults need to be able to ensure the necessary level of support, trust, and encourage-
Ideally, as Wallerstein et al. (2005) pointed out, youth and adults experience many opportunities to interact as co-learners. From a CYE perspective, a welcoming safe environment is one in which youth have the opportunity to experience both success and failure. In the youth programs we observed, adults assumed the primary responsibility for ensuring the creation of the physical, social, emotional, and creative spaces where youth could explore and try out new skills, build personal and collective capacities, experience success, or make mistakes (Messias et al., 2005). A key role for adults is to ensure that failures do not lead to negative outcomes such as decreased self-esteem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>AEC</th>
<th>YDE</th>
<th>Transactional Partner</th>
<th>Empowering Education</th>
<th>Critical Youth Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe, supportive environment</td>
<td>Adults provide positive reinforcement.</td>
<td>Adults, family support via high expectations, positive reinforcement.</td>
<td>“Welcoming social climate” emphasized.</td>
<td>Supportive environment emphasized.</td>
<td>Environment must be safe, supportive, fun, caring, challenging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Participation</td>
<td>Meaningful participation is critical for positive social bonding.</td>
<td>Opportunity to learn skills, assume responsibility, participate in public affairs.</td>
<td>Structured process to develop and implement a youth-defined, community-based agenda</td>
<td>Structured experience includes interviewing, critically reflecting, and social action project</td>
<td>Opportunities for youth to develop capacities in meaningful forum with youth responsibility and decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Power</td>
<td>Shared power mentioned but not included in model.</td>
<td>Shared power mentioned but not included in model.</td>
<td>Incremental transfer of power to youth as they gain competence and confidence.</td>
<td>Adults and youths are co-learners; shared leadership discussed but not emphasized in model.</td>
<td>Shared power critical, incremental transfer of power to youth as they gain capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-political change goals</td>
<td>Contribute to community affairs but not for goals of social change.</td>
<td>Contribute to community affairs but not for goals of social change.</td>
<td>Dialogue stage includes societal analysis and leads into social action projects.</td>
<td>Programs emphasize societal analysis and encourage social change goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reflection</td>
<td>Critical awareness mentioned but not demonstrated.</td>
<td>Critical awareness and reflection mentioned but not demonstrated.</td>
<td>Dialogue stage includes societal analysis through structured questions.</td>
<td>Critical reflection integral to CYE through varied youth-based approaches.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bold:** emphasized in model.  
**Plain:** mentioned in article but not emphasized as a dimension of the model.  
**Blank:** not mentioned in article.
or confidence (Cargo, 2003). Direct and indirect support, encouragement, and feedback from adults contribute to maintaining an environment conducive to youth actualization processes, especially when activities or events fail. An important implication for CYE is that when adults recognize that constructive learning can arise from failure as well as success, they may need to monitor their own behaviors, presence, and activities in order to let youth experience the consequences of their own actions (Messias et al., 2005).

A supportive environment also includes promoting the positive potential and actual achievements of youth within the community (Kim, 1998; Cargo, 2003). Youth recognize that adults have power and the value of using adult power to support their own causes. For example, youth participants in our research commented that adult leaders could provide “clout” for the youth and their community-based efforts in a society that is otherwise skeptical of the capabilities and intentions of teenagers (Royce, 2004; Royce, April 2004).

**Meaningful Participation and Engagement**

Opportunities to engage in meaningful activities through which youth make an authentic contribution are essential to CYE efforts. Participation in community affairs provides opportunities for youth to learn and practice important leadership and participatory skills (e.g., planning, organizing, oral and written communication) and try on different roles and responsibilities. Youth need to engage in activities relevant to their own lives, ones that excite and challenge them and “count as real” (Heath, 1994, p. 289). Kim et al. (1998) stressed the notion that activities need to promote underlying competence and intrinsic motivations of youth so that they can test and master their own interests, develop skills, and gain confidence. Teen organizations often experience a high turnover rate. Meaningful participation can contribute to more sustained and prolonged engagement, necessary for skill development and mastery and positive youth identity development (Cargo, 2003).

Contributing to the larger community through authentic engagement can help adolescents to combat rolelessness; in turn, meaningful roles can provide youth with opportunities to develop a positive self-identity, increased sense of self-worth, and enhanced self-efficacy (Chinman, 1998). Cargo et al. (2003, p. 577) argued that meaningful participation includes facing and overcoming challenges:
Youth capacity was enhanced through healthful adaptation to those challenges associated with taking responsibility for their quality of life issues. Challenge is essential for human development as it allows people to actualize their potential as they respond and adapt to difficult situations.

Meaningful participation and engagement goes beyond simply “being present” at school or community-based activities. Engagement in community service and/or community change is only part of the process of meaningful participation. Wallerstein and colleagues (2005) demonstrated how in addressing health issues, youth were first actively engaged by interviewing, critically reflecting, and dialoguing about health issues, a process that prepared them to participate in community efforts with richer insights and capacity for action.

CYE emphasizes the need for authentic, youth-determined activities that challenge youth to engage in new roles and develop new skills and insights while also engaging in critical reflection and action. For youth to have meaningful experiences of leadership there must be varied opportunities to engage in, practice, and apply specific leadership skills. This includes having the responsibility for decision-making. Thus, meaningful participation is intricately enmeshed with another dimension of CYE, that of equitable power-sharing between youth and adults.

**Equitable Power-Sharing Between Youth and Adults**

Several models addressed opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles (Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et al., 1998), which supports development of valuable leadership skills; however, many leadership roles in youth organizations come with little decision-making power, an additional factor important to consider. Power is a paradoxical, systemic phenomenon that permeates human functioning and interactions at multiple levels (Pinderhughes, 1995). In a society where adults hold legitimate power and are ultimately responsible for decisions and actions, creating equitable power-sharing within the contexts of youth empowerment programs is a challenge. For CYE to transpire, organizations need to examine attitudes, ideas, and activities related to power and power-sharing. In theory, youth-center power is associated with youth empowerment programs. However, in practice it is often difficult to achieve and maintain an equitable balance of decision-making and power within youth programs. Adults may believe that they are sharing power by assigning youth participants to committees. However, as Checkoway (1998) noted,
agencies may favor such apparently safe methods because they tend to provide positive public relations and serve administrative ends. Yet such token participation rarely results in effective transfer of power to youth participants or real opportunities for youth to influence organizational decision-making.

Youth-determined and youth-directed activities are essential for CYE, but these rarely occur without some level of adult support and guidance. From a CYE perspective, a role of adult leaders is to create and maintain a balance of providing support without domination. In practice, this was observed as having high expectations for youth to take the lead, yet being available and providing guidance and support when needed. Such support is important if youth are to stretch to take on new responsibilities, try out new ideas, reach out into the community, and begin to make important decisions on behalf of the group.

Enacting shared leadership with youth takes commitment, effort, and insight about shared power. As described in the TP model, shared leadership may require considerable flexibility to effectively facilitate, teach, guide, mentor, encourage, provide feedback, keep youth focused and on task, yet exert authority and control when needed, without dominating and discouraging youth. In order to promote CYE, youth programs need to find ways of taking advantage of the experience and knowledge offered by adult leaders and structure the program in ways that enhance youth decision making and leadership.

Maintaining a delicate balance of overt support and covert control is a significant challenge for adults working towards CYE. We have noted considerable variation in the extent and visibility of adult power and control within youth programs. However, even in programs where the extent of adult power and control was not clearly visible, our participatory observations over time and in-depth interviews with adult leaders revealed ways in which they wielded power and control in each of the programs. Examples of strategies aimed at managing or controlling youth behaviors and activities included formal behavioral contracts, activity monitoring, and communication of specific program guidelines and expectations (Messias et al., 2005). We also observed a few seasoned adult leaders providing much support and guidance throughout a project and then fading into the background when it came to youths’ public presentation, although this critical balance was difficult to achieve consistently.

One strategy for promoting CYE is for adults to transfer decision-making gradually over time (Cargo et al., 2003). In turn, youth need time and support to learn how to effectively harness power that they
may have never had before (Zeldin, 2003). By creating opportunities for youth to develop competency in planning and implementation responsibilities, adults can then balance their role more towards an active enabler in planning an implementation “rather than being the ‘well-intentioned practitioner’ doing for youth” (Cargo, 2003, p. S70).

Our research suggested that shared power may come most readily in smaller, localized sites where youth are fully engaged in the local community and risks are lower than in larger organizations (Royce et al., 2004). For example, in the case of a state-wide diversity initiative, youth had more decision-making power in their school-based task force groups than they did at the state-level of the organization. Similarly, youth in a church-based anti-drug program had little effective decision-making power except in the context of a small improvisation theatre group, where participants made decisions about the content and style of their anti-drug skits. Smaller, localized efforts such as these may be a starting point for changing the fundamental structures of governance needed to support young people in leadership and decision-making roles.

Wheeler (2003) suggested that “each structural change addresses a fundamental shift in assumptions about adult privilege and youth responsibility, a shift that must occur in order for youth to participate genuinely in leadership and civic engagement” (p. 7). Structural formats that may need to be addressed or changed include modes of communication (i.e., adults tend to value the telephone whereas youth may rely more on email), executive leadership membership (i.e., including youth as full-fledged board members) and scheduling (i.e., inability of students to attend meetings due to time restrictions during the school day). Those with international experience in youth governance practices have suggested that such changes in structure will only come about when scholars and policy makers work with adult leaders to “persuade them of the benefits of a more open and democratic relationship with children and young people” (Lansdown, 2001; Zeldin, 2003, p. 13).

Engagement in Critical Reflection on Interpersonal and Sociopolitical Processes

Critical empowerment involves multi-level processes through which individuals and communities become emancipated from conscious or unconscious constraints and engage in negotiated actions to build community life (Ray, 1992). If the goal of CYE is to transform people’s lives and communities, inclusion of critical reflection in a youth em-
powerment effort is imperative. However, of the key dimensions of CYE, critical reflection is perhaps the one that has received less emphasis in practice. Of the four models we analyzed, only the EE model stressed development of critical awareness and reflection with a focus on social and political processes and structures. The other three models incorporated other processes of critical reflection and analysis to varying degrees. These included the need for increasing youths’ understanding of community, institutional, and bureaucratic structures; participation in assessment of community resources; and reflecting on challenging events in order to form subsequent actions.

The relative lack of examples of socially transformative youth projects may be explained by the fact that, prior to engaging in effective sociopolitical action, critical reflection is required to help youth come to see and understand the very structures, processes, social values and practices that they seek to alter. As Freire (1970) argued, if people are not critically aware of the visible and invisible structures and processes that make up social institutions and practices, nor of their own role and actions within these institutions and practices, there is little room for empowerment. In this same tradition, Purdey, Adhikari, Robinson, and Cox (1994) argued that “capacity-building results from an ongoing and repetitive process of analysis, action, and reflection. The term *empowerment* is a reflexive verb, signifying that individuals can only empower themselves” (p. 330).

The development of social responsibility “requires critical thinking and ongoing support to maintain the commitment to work on problems over the long term, despite having an appreciation for the difficulties of both personal and social change” (Wallerstein et al., 2005, p. 229). Youth programs tend to focus on activities, leaving little time or space for reflection. Although reflecting on a program’s activities is important, the challenge is to provide youth opportunities to engage in an integrated participatory cycle of critical reflection and reflective actions with the goal of creating change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms, and images. This type of critical reflection requires time, space, and commitment. It also requires adult leaders who are attuned to the sociopolitical realities of the topic at hand, and who have the skills and knowledge needed to guide youth in such critical examinations. For example, in the EE projects, the researchers were integrally involved in the design and day-to-day activities of the youth empowerment program. They provided ongoing training and supervision to adult facilitators (graduate and undergraduate students who earned course credit) in guiding youth through critical reflection activities through which young
people sought deeper understandings of the social and political processes that underlie addiction (Wallerstein, 1999). Youth-centered opportunities for guided reflection and discussion can be both enjoyable and intellectually challenging (DiBenedetto, 1992). In addition to developing skills in facilitating critical reflection, adult leaders need to consider methods that appeal to young people. Photography, music, theater, and graphic arts can serve as triggers for reflection as well as the medium through which youth can express their views and messages regarding social issues (Messias et al., 2005).

**Participation in Sociopolitical Processes in Order to Effect Change**

Essential to CYE is the notion that youth participation within the community includes engagement in sociopolitical processes and social change. This does not exclude youth participation in civic service, but rather incorporates social change efforts within such service. For example, youth serving as reading tutors might organize around issues of poverty and literacy, seeking to address structures and processes that result in illiteracy in low income communities and the need for tutors in the first place. The difference between civic service and critical social engagement distinguishes CYE from youth development, which emphasizes helping “adolescents become competent, engaged, and responsible adults” (Roth, 1998, p. 423). From a CYE perspective, youth are not truly empowered if they do not have the capacity to address the structures, processes, social values and practices of the issues at hand. As Zimmerman (1995) argued, empowerment is about gaining mastery within a given social environment. Such mastery entails understanding the underlying processes and practices of that environment and how to best influence them.

CYE involves youth gaining a critical understanding of the underlying processes and mastery through participation in transformative social action. In both the EE and TP models, youth empowerment was envisioned as occurring through participation in social actions. However, the notion is not necessarily fully realized in community practice with youth. Wallerstein and colleagues (1994, 2005) described several community action projects that seek to change policy (e.g., youth recommendations to their tribal council to address alcohol-related problems) or to critically educate the broader public about an issue through student-developed films or plays. However, other projects based on the EE model, such as developing a youth center or becoming peer educa-
tors, while important and worthwhile actions, were not representative of actions that result in systemic change.

Although transformative engagement is difficult to locate in adult-sponsored youth organizations, there is a growing body of research beginning to document the potential for youth to contribute to social change. For example, participants in the Long Beach Health Opportunities, Problem-Solving, and Empowerment (HOPE) project for Asian American girls received leadership training that involved researching a social issue of their choice in their local community. The resulting policy recommendations for addressing sexual harassment were implemented throughout the school district (Cheatham, 2003). In a summary report, Zeldin et al. (2003) provided examples in which youth engagement in community action benefited the youth and the community, leading to increased resources and opportunities, and a community more responsive to the needs of a diverse public. Our research with youth organizations exemplified empowerment that can arise from effecting change of social images, values, and norms. In the process of developing photo essays on the theme “how youth make a difference in the community,” some of the youth participants purposefully addressed specific community actions to counter negative societal images of youth.

**Integrated Individual and Community-Level Empowerment**

Critical youth empowerment integrates opportunities and results in positive change at both individual and community levels. Programs that empower youth need to provide opportunities for development at both individual and community levels. All four models illustrated the value of providing individual youth with opportunities for personal development through learning and applying valuable skills for navigating adult worlds, thereby increasing self-efficacy. It is also important that youth experience opportunities for engagement with diverse sectors within the local community. As Zimmerman (2000) noted, empowering processes at the community level include access to resources, tolerance for diversity, and open governance structures. Many youth empowerment programs offer civic service opportunities for youth that provide them with stronger ties to the community, a greater understanding of other people’s needs, and a commitment to making that community a better place. Such opportunities can promote collective- and political-efficacy in addition to self-efficacy.
Furthermore, the community is improved when a more diverse representation of citizens is engaged in building civil society. Integrated community-level outcomes include effective and active organizational coalitions, pluralistic leadership, and increased participatory skills among individual community members. For example, Zeldin et al. (2003) found that youth engagement in community organizations produced “ripple effects” throughout the community. As some of the organizations gained visibility through their youth engagement and community outreach efforts, they established new standards for other organizations and local foundations. Cargo et al. (2003) described a similar progression of social integration that ultimately results in social bonding, a progression predicted by the YD&E model. Once youth gained access to traditionally adult-run committees, over time there was a shift in community norms toward an expectation that youth would sit on the committees.

Critical social empowerment involves both individual and group level change: enhancing the capacity of individuals to contribute to and work in collaboration with others to effect social change. It is important to recognize the capacity of youth to contribute to the benefit of the communities within which they live—school, neighborhood, city, state, and even national and global communities (Zeldin et al., 2003). However, if being empowered means having agency, then youth need to develop a critical awareness of processes, structures, social practices, norms, and images that affect them, so that they can determine how to live productively within those social spaces or, better yet, how to change them for the benefit of all. As evident in Rissel’s (1994) work, most definitions of critical change focus upon changing policies and institutional structures. A CYE framework envisions the capacity for change to organizational, institutional, and societal policies, structures, processes, social values, norms, and images.

From the perspective of critical social theories, youth empowerment is not complete without critical reflection, reflective action, and social change at individual and collective levels. Youth may be able to address community problems, but if they do not have opportunities to examine the sociopolitical processes that underpin and created these community problems, then they lack the insight needed to become effective agents for altering the status quo (e.g., Freire, 1970). For example, youth might determine that too many teens smoke, leading them to develop a campaign to reduce smoking among their peers. However, such actions do not lead youth to understand the sociopolitical forces that encourage teen smoking, such as marketing strategies by tobacco companies that
target youth, nor do these actions lead youth to develop the requisite skills and knowledge for altering the sociopolitical forces.

One particular challenge for CYE is effectively integrating individual, community, and political empowerment among groups of low-income and minority youths. Formation of community partnerships is one approach that has led to successful programs in establishing networks among community agencies which serve high-risk populations (Kim et al., 1998). Focusing these efforts on sociopolitical issues would enhance CYE.

Benefits and Outcomes

When these six dimensions are fully integrated within youth programs, there are numerous potential benefits to youth and communities. Individual-level developmental outcomes for youth include increased self-efficacy and self-awareness as well as positive identity development, positive social bonding, awareness of organizational operations and interpersonal relations, and a sense of purpose (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2005). Inter-personal outcomes include opportunities for adults and youth to spend time together, recognize each other’s strengths and assets, and value partnership and collaboration, thereby bridging existing divides and further integrating young people into larger social worlds (Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et al., 1998). Community engagement provides benefits of social integration and expansion of life chances and social networks and also enhances participatory competence, such as the capacity to cooperation, compromise, and appreciate diverse perspectives (Cargo et al., 2003).

Finally, there are several outcomes of community-level empowerment. CYE promotes self-, collective-, and political-efficacy through youth-led community engagements that focus on sociopolitical change (Wallerstein et al., 2005). From a CYE perspective, youth are not truly empowered if they do not have the capacity to address the structures, processes, social values and practices of the issues at hand. Socially integrating youth in responsible roles with shared power encourages community development that better serves not only the needs of youth, but potentially the needs of all community members (Zeldin et al., 2003). CYE potentially benefits youth and community in numerous ways, through empowering processes that lead to both individual- and community-level empowerment. Assessment and measurement of these
outcomes and processes is one of the challenges of youth empowerment programs.

**Measuring Critical Youth Empowerment**

In evaluating the impact and outcomes of youth empowerment programs, it is useful to make the distinction between empowerment as a process and an outcome. An empowering process is a series of experiences where youth, adults, organizations and communities engage in collective action for social change. The six dimensions described here provide a frame of reference for creating these opportunities for youth and can also guide evaluation efforts. It is important to note that empowering processes occur at multiple levels (individual, organizations, community) and each level will have related outcomes. This is complicated by the fact that empowerment is not experienced in the same way by individuals, organizations and communities. Therefore, the development of a global measure of empowerment is not an appropriate goal (Zimmerman, 2000). In the area of youth empowerment research, measurement of psychological empowerment is a fairly well developed area. However, progress in assessment of community outcomes presents more complex methodological challenges, such as multi-method triangulation. However, addressing community evaluation as a participatory process in which youth are actively engaged in the design, implementation, and analysis of evaluation studies should be considered an opportunity for meaningful engagement and empowerment. As such, empowerment evaluation is a promising area for future community-based, youth-centered research.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

This examination of existing models of youth empowerment has laid the groundwork for an expanded, integrated theory of youth empowerment from a critical social perspective. Yet further conceptualization and research is needed on the multiple, complex processes and the intergenerational nature and sociopolitical change goals of CYE.

A major practice implication is the need for education and training of adults with the aim of increasing conscious power-sharing, guiding youth and adults through critical reflection activities, and supporting the broad goal of critical social youth empowerment. It has been suggested that youth and adults would benefit from training that focuses on build-
ing youth-adult partnerships (Sherrod, 2002), although existing models of youth empowerment have not provided details about how to support adults in developing this balance. Research is needed to examine and illustrate processes of supporting adult leaders in striking a balance between guiding and directing (Zeldin et al., 2003).

Further practice-based research is needed to further understand how engagement in CYE may influence youth differentially. Individual youth, youth groups, and communities, will not experience empowerment in the same way. The intersections of other potential power inequalities and differentials (e.g., race, class, gender, culture, language, immigration status, sexuality) are another area for further examination within the CYE framework. Development and evaluation of effective community-based practice and research is a promising and critical opportunity to further the goal of CYE to promote participatory processes in which adults and youth work collectively to change the status quo toward more equitable, just, healthy processes, practices, structures, images and social values.

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