

Conceptualizing Youth Empowerment Within Tobacco Control

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This article presents a conceptual framework that was developed to guide a national evaluation of the American Legacy Foundation's (Legacy) Statewide Youth Movement Against Tobacco Use (SYMATU) program. This program was designed to develop youth-led, youth-directed initiatives within local communities. Two evaluation studies were designed and implemented from 2000 through 2003: a cross-site study that collected standard data elements across all 17 programs and a case study of five programs that collected formative data on variables thought to affect program implementation. In developing the youth empowerment (YE) conceptual framework, the authors started by reviewing literature to identify the concepts necessary for these types of initiatives and present a summary of their findings here. This article focuses on the development of the authors' overarching conceptual framework used to guide their evaluation studies. Other articles contained within this special issue present results from each of the SYMATU evaluation studies.

Keywords: *youth empowerment; tobacco control; theory-based evaluation; participation; involvement*

During the past decade, comprehensive strategies have come to dominate local and state tobacco control programs. This approach extends the traditional individual-focused strategies to encompass coordinated, multicomponent interventions that aim to promote community-level attitudes, norms, and behaviors against tobacco use by altering the surrounding social and physical environment. This upsurge in comprehensive tobacco control programs has been bolstered by federal and private foundation-supported demonstration programs (e.g., Community Intervention Trial for Smoking Cessation [COMMIT]),

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Smokeless States) and through the development and dissemination of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office on Smoking and Health's (OSH) *Best Practices in Comprehensive Tobacco Control*.¹ More recently, new sources of funding through increases in excise taxes on tobacco products, as well as funds obtained through settlements of lawsuits against the tobacco industry by individual states and culminating in the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, have had a tremendous impact on increasing focus on developing comprehensive and coordinated tobacco control initiatives.

An important aspect of OSH's *Best Practices* is active youth participation. It details youth-led and youth-focused programming across the country, in community and school-based prevention activities, such as underage tobacco purchasing sting operations, development of statewide countermarketing campaigns, and political advocacy for smoke-free laws and restrictions on youth access to tobacco products.¹ In an effort to involve youths in community action against tobacco, the American Legacy Foundation (Legacy) initiated its Statewide Youth Movement Against Tobacco Use (SYMATU) in 2000 as a 3-year cost-sharing program with 17 states to support youth-led and youth-driven initiatives and ultimately contribute to opportunities for positive youth development.

The evaluation plan for the SYMATU program was designed to collect rich descriptive data on program implementation at the state and local levels. There was no expectation that our evaluation design would be able to detect a program effect on adolescent tobacco behavior, because that is a longer term outcome than this study collected and was only a secondary goal of the SYMATU programs. Instead, the emphasis has been on descriptive analysis that explores possible empirical regularities between characteristics of the participants, group structure, participation, and youth-initiated tobacco control-related activities. Theoretical work on empowerment²⁻⁶ and community coalition building⁷ offered attractive conceptual foundations for understanding the role of youths in tobacco control efforts. Although there are a few models that link empowerment theoretically to positive youth development,⁸⁻¹⁰ the research literature offers little direct guidance for extending the application of youth empowerment (YE) to youth-led tobacco control initiatives.

Consequently, a panel of experts in the field was convened as Legacy's YE Work Group to develop a conceptual model that would define the key conceptual components of YE as applied to tobacco control and identify a corresponding set of operational measures. This article presents the conceptual framework that resulted from this process. The first section of this article situates current tobacco control programs within the emergence of community-based approaches to health promotion more generally. The next section defines empowerment and summarizes the major theories that have been used to understand and explain this construct and its application to youths. We then provide details of our conceptual framework and each of its components, with a brief summary of relevant domains and attributes that were used to conduct a national evaluation for SYMATU.

BACKGROUND

YE programs are an offshoot of what may be regarded as the second generation of community-based prevention. The first generation of community-based interventions^{11,12} introduced to public health theory-driven, multicomponent, multichannel community interventions. Community participation was an integral part of these programs, but community input was typically limited to advisory roles and volunteer work in program implementation. A mechanism for engaging communities in health promotion was

through the development of local coalitions. As community participation in health promotion programs has grown, so has the number of coalitions.¹³ Community participation is now considered important to program success, and coalition building is one technique to facilitate this process. The overall mission of the program and the evaluation design of first-generation community interventions remained firmly under the control of researchers and intervention experts who are typically from outside the community. Wallerstein and Duran¹⁴ refer to this as the problem-solving utilitarian tradition of community participation. This tradition presumed that researchers and communities share an understanding of the community's problems and share a common purpose in solving these problems.

The second generation of community-based interventions that emerged in the 1990s moved toward an emancipatory tradition of community participation. Within this tradition, the "most important issue for community based participatory research is the relationship between the outside researchers and community members" (p. 32).¹⁴ Community participation now adopted a more critical, self-conscious process of redressing the power imbalance between the community and the researcher. Empowerment is closely tied to the emancipatory tradition as community control of the process of health promotion is hypothesized to have a salutary effect on both the community member participants and the larger communities they represent. The recent shift from a utilitarian to a more emancipatory tradition of community participation¹⁴ is paralleled in a shifting conception of the role of youths in the field of prevention from a risk factor paradigm to an empowerment paradigm. As Kim et al. state, the focus of the field of prevention has begun moving away from preventing something negative from happening to "a new paradigm, which emphasizes the need to promote positive youth development via youth empowerment" (p. 5).¹⁰ The YE model regards youth not as a community problem in need of prevention but as community assets who are empowered to better their own lives as well as that of the larger community.

As detailed below, our YE conceptual framework strives to promote many of the principles that underlie the emancipatory tradition of community-based participatory research. In developing the evaluation measures, we incorporated the principles of participatory research where possible.¹⁵ Through a series of focus groups with involved youths, interviews with key state program staff, and ongoing refinement of our conceptual framework, we attempted to incorporate both the theory from this area and the practical knowledge from the field into our operational definitions. The evaluation design adopted a mixed-method strategy that combined survey research questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, record abstraction, and case study methodology.

The YE model presented in this article is intended to bring some conceptual organization to what we anticipated would be a diverse realization of this concept. It presents a framework for comparing implementation of local YE groups along key dimensions of policy and theoretical interests. It offers a unifying framework for guiding multiple descriptive analyses that map out the implied interrelationships in the conceptual model intended to link group structure and process to youth participation and in turn, the positive individual and group outcomes hypothesized by empowerment theorists.

Definition of Empowerment and Its Components

The conceptual model formulated for the SYMATU program draws on general formulations of empowerment theory^{3,4,16} and its application to positive youth development.^{9,10} Although we recognize that there have been other attempts to define and operationalize

empowerment,¹⁷ including theories pertaining to youth development,¹⁸ we found the selected models to be most applicable to the evaluation of the SYMATU program.

Empowerment refers to the process by which individuals gain influence of events and outcomes of importance to them.^{16,19} Empowerment embodies an interaction between individuals and environments that is culturally and contextually defined. Consequently, the manifestation of empowerment will look different for different people, organizations, and settings. For some people, the mechanism of empowerment may lead to a sense of control; for others, it may lead to actual control, resulting in the practical power to affect their own lives.

YE, following positive youth development approaches, views youth as a resource, rather than as a collection of problems, and focuses on fostering support in developmentally appropriate experiences and resources as the primary route for positive outcomes.¹⁸ Youths develop a stable, positive identity when they are provided an opportunity to participate through a variety of roles that allow them to experiment and better define their identity.⁹ In this way, they are able to build their self-confidence and become bonded to the group through their involvement in positive activities and organizations. As a result of this bonding, youths will feel more confident and in control, will have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, and therefore will be positively empowered. It follows that youth-empowering interventions provide youths with opportunities to learn skills, to assume responsibilities, and to participate in social and public affairs of importance to them.¹⁰

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF TOBACCO CONTROL

Central to YE is the creation of opportunities for active group participation that are consistent with positive youth development. Consequently, concepts and measures of individual and collective participation are placed at the center of our conceptual model as summarized in Figure 1. Here, we briefly describe the research findings that guided our multidimensional set of measures for participation as enumerated in Table 1. Although many domains within our framework have been studied in other contexts, several did not seem specific to our project and are not presented here. In areas with limited findings specific to the SYMATU program, we drew on the expertise of Legacy's YE Work Group to help us sift through the research findings and fill in gaps in research to select the final set of indicators incorporated into each domain.

Participation is both a manifestation of empowering processes and the direct cause of empowerment outcomes. The model links the quality and nature of youth participation to constructs related to group climate and structure as well as the attributes that individual youths bring to the group. Adult involvement is indirectly linked to youth participation through influences on group structure and climate. Finally, youth participation is connected to changes in self-concepts among participating youths as well as their potential to act as social change agents affecting tobacco control efforts aimed at both adults and youths.

Role of Participation in Achieving Empowerment

The National Commission on Resources for Youth²⁰ defines youth participation as "involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose

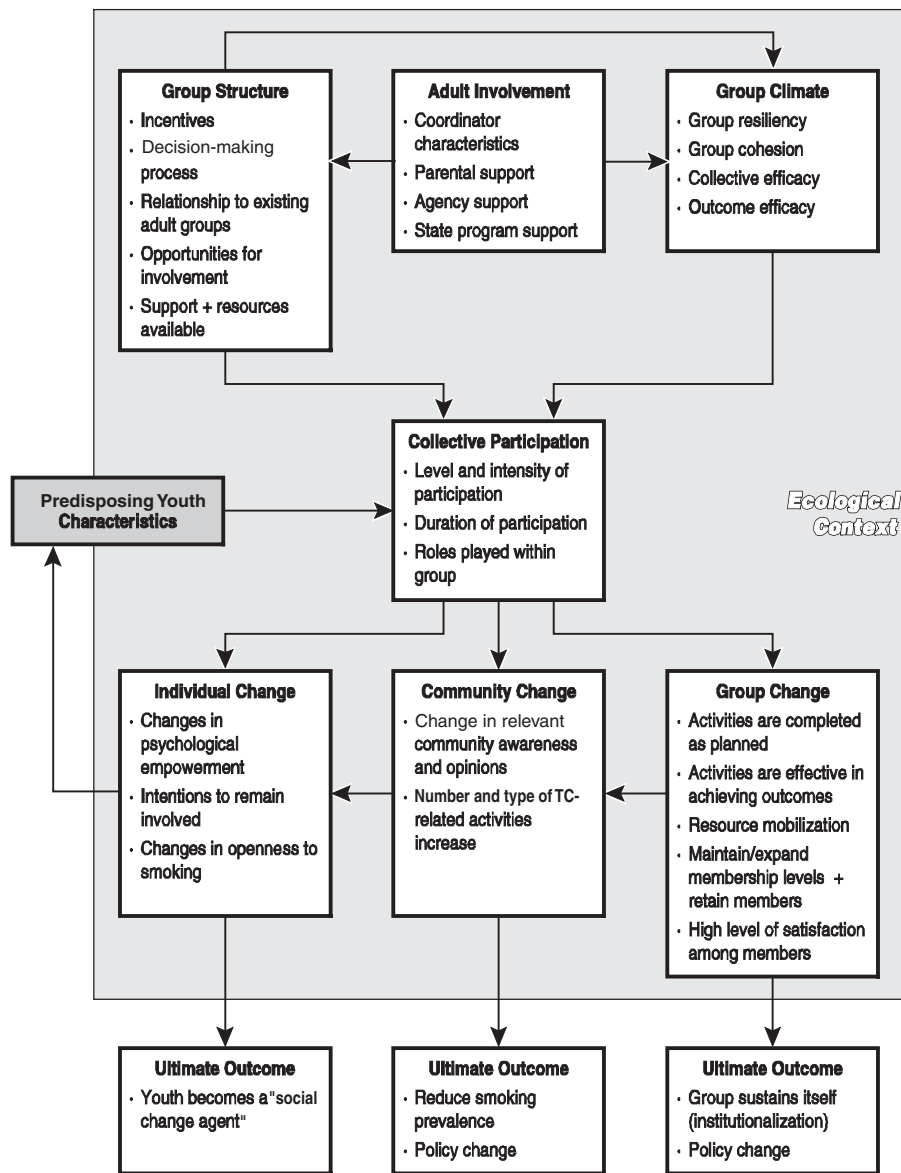


Figure 1. Youth empowerment conceptual framework.

impact or consequences extend to others” (p. 25). Implicit in this definition is a focus on the empowerment of youth participants and a clear distinction between youth participation and simple attendance at, or hours spent on, activities. This definition focuses on the “quality” of participation.

Winston and Massaro²¹ emphasized the importance of addressing both the quality and quantity of involvement in their definition of *intensity of involvement*. Intensity of in-

Table 1. Summary of Major Domains of the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework

| Domain | Attributes | Definitions |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Predisposing characteristics | Reason for joining/motivation | The “cue to action” that precipitated the youths to become and stay involved |
| | Demographic characteristics | Qualities of youths involved |
| | History of involvement in similar groups | Experience working in similar groups |
| | History of involvement in tobacco control | Previous experience working in tobacco control |
| Collective participation | Smoking environment | Exposure to smoking of others |
| | Duration | How long involved in group |
| | Level and intensity of participation | Total hours and amount of involvement, types of events attended |
| | Roles played by youths | Types of roles played by youths |
| Group structure | Opportunities for involvement | Types of opportunities provided to youth members |
| | Incentives provided | Monetary or other incentives provided |
| | Decision-making process | Extent to which youths are able to make group decisions |
| | Relationships to existing groups | Support and integration with existing resources |
| Adult and institutional involvement | Opportunities for involvement | Diversity of roles youths can fulfill |
| | Available support and resources | Quantification of support and resources available to group |
| | Adult coordinator characteristics | Personality and/or management-style characteristics of adult leader |
| | Parental support | Extent to which parents provide visible support |
| Group climate | Agency support | Extent to which sponsoring agency provides support |
| | Support from the state program | Extent to which the state program is involved in the local group and provides support |
| | Group resiliency | Ability of a group to thrive in the face of adverse circumstances |
| Group climate | Group cohesion | Tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrument objectives |
| | Collective efficacy | A group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute their action plans |
| | Outcome efficacy | A group’s estimate that their behavior collectively as a group will lead to certain outcomes |

involvement is “the product of the interaction of the quality and quantity of effort” associated with involvement (p. 171).²¹

Youth participation in structured, organized activities has been linked to a range of positive outcomes related to self-identity and social achievement. These include enhanced sense of self-esteem accompanied by an increased sense of competence and control²²⁻²⁴ and increases in personal and social skills.²³ Outcomes of participation have included reduced rates of school dropout,²⁵ improved academic performance and engagement,^{26,27} reduced delinquency,^{26,27} increased civic engagement,²⁸ and decreased substance use.²⁹

Drawing on Winston and Massaro's²¹ concept of intensity of involvement, we have included within the collective participation domain constructs and related attributes to capture both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of participation. In their definition, the quantity dimension refers to the amount of time devoted to an activity. The quality dimension encompasses an assessment of the degree of psychological investment in the success of the organization or activity and the active contribution an individual makes at group meetings or in making decisions. Therefore, high-intensity of involvement "results when there is considerable expenditure of time and quality of effort, when a student is committed enough to the group or organization to invest his or her time, psychic energy, and physical activity to further its purposes" (p. 171).²¹

Although other measures are available for participation,^{8,26} we found the Extracurricular Involvement Inventory (EII) developed by Winston and Massaro²¹ to be a more comprehensive measure for assessing involvement in organized student organizations, similar to the SYMATU. This inventory collects information on demographic characteristics and the total number of extracurricular organizations or groups the student had been involved in during the past 4 weeks. The quality measure is derived as a scaled score of five items meant to assess the individual's role within the youth group or organization (e.g., "when I attended meetings, I expressed my opinion and/or took part in the discussions," "I fulfilled my assigned duties or responsibilities to the group/organization on time"). The quantity dimension was reflected by the approximate number of hours spent with the group or organization in the past 4 weeks.²¹

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

As shown in Figure 1, we propose that psychological empowerment is manifested as a process, through participation, and can be measured as an "individual change" outcome of being involved in these group efforts. In designing the evaluation studies for SYMATU, we needed to also operationalize the influences that we expected these groups to bring to bear on YE. In the following section, we provide a summary of the key components of our conceptual framework. For each domain of our model, we thoroughly reviewed the literature and present relevant citations here. Although work has been published for several of these domains, only citations that were used to direct our work are presented. Table 1 summarizes the domains of our conceptual framework and their corresponding operational definitions.

Predisposing Youth Characteristics

We recognized that there are particular characteristics of youths that will influence them to potentially become involved in these local efforts to address tobacco control.

Some important factors include their motivation for joining the group and the extent to which they have been involved in similar or related initiatives. We propose that these “predisposing youth characteristics” will have a direct impact on whether youths participate in groups specific to tobacco control. Through input from the YE Work Group, we narrowed the list of predisposing characteristics to the following:

- History of being involved in other, similar group efforts,²¹
- Reason for becoming involved in the local group (e.g., they were personally motivated through the desire to change their smoking environment or due to the history of a loved one dying from a smoking-related illness, versus joining to spend time with friends),³⁰
- Demographic characteristics (e.g., age, grade level, performance in school, plans for attending college), and
- Smoking environment at home and among friends.^{12,28}

Group Characteristics

Early on in the development of our framework, we learned that the SYMATU programs were consistently establishing their statewide efforts through local “groups.” They all identified their structure as more of a reliance on groups of youths versus an organized local coalition. These groups could be affiliated with local schools or could be more community based. We reviewed the literature on group characteristics and incorporated the variables that seemed to be the most influential in this setting for ultimately affecting youth involvement or participation. These characteristics include features of the group’s structure and the group’s climate as described below.

Group Structure

During several discussions with the YE Work Group, we identified a number of group characteristics that may affect the extent to which youths are truly leaders within the group and actively involved in decision making. Although limited research is available to specify which characteristics are important to assess for topics addressed by our study, we learned through interviews with the SYMATU staff factors that they believed to be influencing the extent to which youths become involved with the programs. We then shared this feedback with the YE Work Group and identified the following group structure attributes that needed to be operationalized (see Table 1):

- Incentives: What type of incentives, if any, are being provided to youths for both their recruitment and promoting ongoing participation?^{8,31}
- Decision-making process: To what extent are youths leading the decision process within each group?^{6,32,33}
- Relationship to existing adult groups: Are groups in areas with preexisting adult support better able to achieve their outcomes and promote youth participation?³²
- Opportunities for involvement: What are the opportunities for youths to be involved (e.g., are there specific roles for youths to be leaders and decision makers)?¹⁸
- Support and resources available: What kinds of resources and support are available to each youth group?⁴⁻⁶

Group Climate

We hypothesized that there are four key attributes of group climate that may influence whether youths become and remain involved in these local tobacco control efforts: (1) group resiliency, (2) group cohesion, (3) collective efficacy, and (4) outcome efficacy (see Figure 1). Below, we briefly summarize prior research on each of these four components and how they have been operationalized for the national evaluation study.

Group Resiliency. The challenge in operationally defining resiliency is that although many researchers have proposed characteristics and traits of resilient individuals, little empirical work has been done to verify these ideas or to apply them to group settings.³⁴ Some research has proposed a theory of resilience that suggests that responses to stress are based on one's reaction to the situation and the ability to understand the experience and incorporate it into one's belief system.³⁵ Thus, resilient people are proposed to be resourceful, decisive, altruistic, and optimistic, among other qualities.

For our conceptual framework, we were only concerned with whether groups manifest characteristics of resiliency. We thought it was important to know, if a group works hard to accomplish a goal or objective but subsequently fails, to what extent it is able to continue to persevere. We operationalized this attribute through the following research questions:

- To what extent do groups persevere even after failing to reach an objective?
- How does their confidence in working through problems as a group affect the overall group climate reported by participants or their individual participation in the group?

Group Cohesion. Carron et al. define group cohesion as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs" (p. 213).³⁶ Components of group cohesion that have been used in recent work are interpersonal attraction, commitment to the task, and group pride.³⁷ Using the available literature and input from the Legacy YE Work Group, we operationalized group cohesion as follows:

- Do group members report that the group is united in reaching goals?
- How committed are group members to achieving common goals?
- To what extent do group members spend time together outside of formal group events/meetings?

Collective Efficacy. Collective efficacy is defined as being "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (p. 477).³⁸ Collective efficacy is positively correlated with such properties as group goal seeking and motivational investment in coordinated activities, group resiliency, and performance accomplishments.³⁹ Bandura asserts that "perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results" (p. 449).⁴⁰ Using a similar process, we defined collective efficacy as Bandura did and operationalized this measure as follows:

- To what extent do members of the group think they can or do work well together?

Outcome Efficacy. Outcome efficacy describes the belief that a certain behavior will result in a specified outcome.³⁸ As a concept that grew out of social learning theory, outcome efficacy shares a strong theoretical link with the notion of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to carry out courses of action that are necessary to achieve a desired outcome. This is represented within the framework of outcome efficacy by the concept of *efficacy expectancy* (i.e., the belief that one can perform the necessary behavior to produce the desired outcome).³⁸

Levels of efficacy expectations are useful in predicting several important properties such as the difficulty level of the activities in which the individual (or group) undertakes, how much effort is invested in the actions that are necessary to bring about the desired outcome, and the duration of time that effort is made in the face of difficulties and obstacles.⁴¹

In our conceptual framework, the distinction between collective and outcome efficacy was an important step to take in operationalizing our measures. Where collective efficacy focuses on the extent to which the group members believe they can work together toward a common goal, outcome efficacy is believed to be the extent to which group members believe that they can achieve the goals they set out to accomplish (see Table 1). Using these definitions, we developed the following research questions for this attribute:

- How confident do members feel that their group can influence both how adults and other youths in their communities feel about tobacco?
- How confident do members feel that their group can reduce the amount of tobacco use in their community?

Adult Involvement

Through our initial contacts with the SYMATU programs, we quickly learned that the role of adults in the development of these local youth groups was key to their ongoing success.³² To better understand the relationship between adults and youths in the SYMATU programs, we conducted a series of focus groups with involved youths from three SYMATU programs in order to gain insight into their perspectives on the roles adults should play in establishing and maintaining these groups. Through these focus groups, we learned that one particular aspect of adult involvement that is important to the youths are the characteristics of the adult coordinator working with the groups. Youths reported that coordinators who could relate to them, listened to their ideas, were open to new and innovative approaches, and generally respected what the youths had to say were the ones who helped to facilitate the ongoing involvement of the youths. Through these discussions, as well as input from the SYMATU program staff, we also acknowledged that key support that adults could provide to these youth groups was through the parents of the involved youths (e.g., through the provision of transportation to youth events, support and encouragement to be involved in this type of initiative), the agency that was “hosting” the group (e.g., if a school group, space for meetings was provided), and the support provided by the sponsoring agency (e.g., extent to which the agency promoted “empowering” structures for the groups). All of these attributes were operationalized into our evaluation measures to determine the indirect impact adult involvement may have on collective participation.

OUTCOMES OF THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

Individual Level

As previously described, the primary individual outcome hypothesized to result from participation in these local youth groups was characteristics of psychological empowerment. We defined psychological empowerment as the process by which youths become active participants in the planning and implementation of tobacco control activities within their state and communities. As Zimmerman^{3,4} suggests, psychological empowerment occurs through a process of change at the individual level. In the context of tobacco control, these changes typically occur as a result of youth participation in organized groups, although action as an individual, apart from a group, can also result in empowerment. However, empowerment most often occurs after youths make a personal commitment to become involved in an organized effort to address tobacco control, and it is through this collective participation that change occurs. Specific characteristics that are indicative of the outcomes of the empowerment process include changes in youth attitudes and beliefs (e.g., domain-specific efficacy, perceived sociopolitical control, and participatory competence), specific knowledge (e.g., knowledge of available resources), and skills in acting as effective social change agents (e.g., assertiveness and advocacy). We operationalized psychological empowerment through these constructs, using Zimmerman's intrapersonal and interactional components of psychological empowerment.⁴²

Other individual-level outcomes that were expected as a result of participation in SYMATU included a reduction in the youths' reported "openness to smoking" (i.e., whether they think they will smoke anytime in the future) and whether they stated an intention to remain involved in the group (i.e., if they plan to remain involved, then the group is successful in maintaining membership).

Community Change

Through our evaluation design, our ability to measure community-level change was limited. Our evaluation studies were designed to address YE and determine both youth- and group-level outcomes, and they were therefore not outcome studies of impacts at the community level. However, we believed that there would conceivably be changes in the perceptions of involved youths and adults of local support for their tobacco-related initiatives. We also believed it would be important to assess the number and type of tobacco control-related activities to determine if there had been an increase during the period that SYMATU was active in the community.

Group Change

In our conceptual framework, we acknowledged that there would be key attributes associated with group-level change that would help to determine which groups were successful in meeting their goals and maintaining membership. These attributes included

- whether activities were completed as planned,³²
- whether activities seemed to be effective in achieving specific outcomes,⁴¹
- the group's ability to mobilize existing resources in conducting activities,^{3,4}

- the extent to which youth membership had been maintained and individual members had been retained in the group,³⁷ and
- whether youths reported high levels of satisfaction in their group participation.³²

Ecological Context

Throughout our discussions with the YE Work Group, we acknowledged that there would be a number of factors associated with the environment that these youth groups are functioning in that would affect their ability to meet their goals. Although our evaluation design limited our ability to assess these factors, we attempted to describe them through a case study of selected programs. Attributes of the ecological context that seemed particularly important to understand as identified by the YE Work Group included

- climate for tobacco control in the local community,
- local opinion and orientation toward involving youths in these types of efforts,
- community structure that would affect how the activities are implemented or what is done locally, and
- other health promotion or education activities in the state or local community.

APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Through development of the domains and attributes important to the SYMATU program, it was decided that standardized, quantitative data collection methods would be appropriate for some measures, whereas qualitative data collection methods would be appropriate for others. The national evaluation of this program therefore included two studies: a cross-site study that collected common data elements across all of the program grantees and an in-depth case study to collect qualitative information from selected sites, in hopes of informing program development and understanding the context within which these youth groups operated.

Our conceptual framework was used to provide guidance for the development of the evaluation plan and required data collection at four levels: individual, program, youth group, and community. At the individual level, a Youth Group Member Survey (YGMS) was developed, reviewed by experts, and pilot- and field-tested as recommended in the field. This survey measures YE at the individual level as well as some of the attributes of the group climate and structure and adult involvement. The finalized survey was distributed to all eligible states in fall 2001 and again in fall 2002. Five grantee programs were selected in December 2000 to participate in our in-depth study. Data from this study were collected through local focus groups (from spring 2001 through spring 2003) with youths involved in the program and from quarterly telephone interviews with state and local program staff. Much of the data collected through these focus groups captured the youths' perspective on how their programs were functioning, what did and did not work well, and other measures for our conceptual framework.

At the program level, grantees' program materials were reviewed and early discussions held with each grantee to define their plan for implementing the YE program. We worked with Legacy to develop a progress reporting system that obtained detailed information from all of the grantees on a quarterly basis. To understand the programs further, our team conducted quarterly key stakeholder interviews, youth and adult focus groups, and annual site visits of the case study sites. We also participated in all annual program

meetings sponsored by Legacy by providing preliminary evaluation findings and obtaining grantee input into their interpretation.

At the local youth group level, the YGMS previously noted provided some information on youths' perceptions of their local group and the local projects in which they participated. In addition, a Youth Group Adult Coordinator Survey (YGACS) was developed to collect data on youth group characteristics from an adult's perspective. This survey obtained detailed information on the group's structure, characteristics of youths involved, collaborations with other local groups, level of support among key community members, and descriptions of the planned activities. This survey was simultaneously administered with the YGMS.

Although community-level influences on tobacco use were recognized among our team members as critical to public health intervention research and evaluation, we were unable to incorporate standardized community measures into our evaluation design. We did include some measures for level of community support for the local group activities in the YGACS and obtained feedback from key stakeholders on important community-based measures through the in-depth case study.

DISCUSSION

This article presents a process for conceptualizing YE within the context of tobacco control. In an attempt to enhance community participation around tobacco control, Legacy designed the SYMATU programs as a way to engage youths in this important issue by enabling their participation and leadership in these efforts. It was hoped that their involvement would achieve empowerment both of the individuals involved and of their groups and surrounding communities. With a variety of methods, including expert panel input, literature review, focus groups with youths, interviews with SYMATU staff, and record abstraction, we developed a conceptual framework for YE that is comprehensive in scope and logical in application. We used this conceptual framework to guide the development of our evaluation design and methods.

There are a number of limitations to the implementation of the SYMATU evaluation studies, many of which are addressed in other articles of this special issue. However, several limitations are worth noting here. Although this study was ideal in many ways by allowing the authors the time and resources necessary to develop our conceptual framework through the input of a panel of experts, many aspects of the design are problematic. Our studies were relatively thorough in examining the impacts of SYMATU on the involved individuals but could not adequately address how these efforts affected their local environment. Although we did collect data on the perspectives of adult coordinators,⁴³ these findings were specific to the respondents and do not portray what the communities actually thought of SYMATU and the degree to which outsiders supported their work.

In addition, actually implementing the two evaluation studies often resulted in streamlining what outcomes we could assess. As an example, to obtain Internal Review Board approval to survey youths in the 17 states, we had to ultimately guarantee anonymity of the youths. This concession was made primarily with the goal of increasing our response rate because we would not be required to obtain parental consent. We knew that obtaining parental consent for these youths, whom the states often did not have home addresses for, would be quite challenging. We therefore decided to obtain anonymous data such that we could make comparisons over time only at the group level and not the individual level.

Although we were disappointed in not being able to follow individual youths over time, we felt this method would provide a good representation of youths within each group that our results seem to indicate. Other difficulties we experienced in implementing this theory-driven study was that there was at times a disconnect between how SYMATU programs defined empowerment⁴⁴ and how we operationalized it. We also recognize that we have only collected data on youths involved in a SYMATU group at two points in time, and resources did not allow for a follow-up mechanism to collect data from youths who had dropped out of the groups. Therefore, all of our data presented in this special issue are from either youths or adults involved with the program at one data collection point in time. Other limitations are more thoroughly discussed in the individual articles within this special issue.

This special issue presents some selected findings from the evaluation studies conducted for SYMATU in an attempt to inform the field on how best to incorporate youths into community-based programs that address important health issues affecting their peers. These studies provide a rich and complex set of data to understand these programs and apply this knowledge to the field. Future work will need to focus on how best to incorporate this work into other areas of health promotion work that benefits from youth participation and energy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Through the evaluation planning for SYMATU, we were able to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework drawn from the literature and then informed by the field. This framework thus provides a practical conceptualization of how these types of local efforts can best function to achieve outcomes such as empowered youth and community support. Although this framework was designed to be sensitive to the context of tobacco control, much of what is presented can be used as a guide in developing any local program efforts that involve youths. Key group characteristics that we propose to be important in designing these initiatives include the structure and climate of the groups, as well as the role of adults in initiating and maintaining these groups. Specific guidance for the characteristics that seem particularly important to program development is presented in other articles within this special issue. We believe much of the work presented here can also be translated for use in developing youth-led and youth-directed initiatives within other content areas of public health. We propose that all of the domains presented here—the impacts of group structure and climate, and the role of involved adults—are important to consider when developing any local initiative that includes youths and hopes to achieve both their growth as individuals and successful group efforts for all involved.

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