

## EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT FACTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT IN GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

*The article is devoted to revealing external environment factors of psychological empowerment in grassroots community organizations. A theoretical model was developed and used to delineate contextual factors which are related to members' psychological empowerment. Leaders and members of USA grassroots non-profit self-governing associations were surveyed to identify the factors that advance their work to address collective interests.*

**Key words:** *psychological empowerment, civic organizations, external environment factors, meaningfulness, competence, autonomy, impact, relational factors, resources.*

### Introduction and problem formulation

Essential for democratic practice within a strong civil society is the existence, along with the government agencies and businesses, of a powerful "third" public sector – a network of non-profit civic associations that engage in collective initiatives to satisfy the public's needs. On one hand, this public sector can provide an outlet for mighty constructive energy of citizens and enhance social capital; on the other it is a force to control and deter the abuse of power by the other two sectors.

The importance of civic engagement and psychological aspects of community has become evident among scholars from different countries. Societal activity, involvement and participation are directly associated with the concept of empowerment, a participatory-developmental process involving active and sustained engagement, and resulting in community growth and capacity. Empowerment is researched within management, sociological, psychological and other sciences. But relatively little is known about the factors that affect psychological empowerment in community organizations and civic behavior. Better understanding of these factors can facilitate the implementation of more purposeful community development strategies.

The first steps towards participatory democracy are being made in Ukraine. The Constitution and relevant laws entitle citizens to participate in the local level affairs. But the legal opportunities are not used fully, the practice of collaboration between the authorities and the public is not common or usual practice at the local level in Ukraine. A study of factors that influence the empowerment of members of NGOs in the United States can potentially provide models for fostering participatory democratic principles in Ukraine.

**Purpose of the research** – to reveal external environment factors of psychological empowerment in grassroots community organizations.

The research was conducted within the US government program Fulbright Scholar Program 2014.

### Results of theoretical research

*Approach to psychological empowerment.* Empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept, it occurs within economic, organizational, sociological, psychological and other dimensions. Within modern management theory and practice empowerment refers to power division: it is considered as synonymous with peoples' participation: a process, through which power is divided among the individuals [12], granting more organizational power to employees [13; 16]. J. Rappaport [17] defined empowerment as a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues which are of concern to them.

Psychological approach representatives consider empowerment as motivational and cognitive concept (psychological empowerment). In our research psychological empowerment is considered as the belief by organization members in their ability to use their expertise and experience to complete successfully their responsibilities with a relatively comfortable degree of independence, making positive impact on their lives and lives of wider community members.

Four components of empowerment [18; 19] are:

1. **Meaningfulness** – the value of a work goal or purpose judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards. The proposed verbal representation for it is "It's important for me to get power and work to improve life of community and my own life through it".

2. **Competence** – a belief in a person's ability to perform activities with mastery and skill [7]. Verbal representation: "I am capable to complete my tasks in the organization".

3. **Self-determination (autonomy)** – a sense of choice in regulating actions [6], reflecting autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behaviors and processes; making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort [2]. Verbal representation: "I have the freedom and choice about how to do my work".

4. **Impact** – the perceived ability to make a difference in the larger system. Verbal representation: "My work contributes to positive changes".

Theoretical analysis of the existing works enables to identify three groups of *factors that affect psychological empowerment*:

1) Participant characteristics; e.g., demographic characteristics; economic resources, sense of community; knowledge and skills [1; 8; 9; 14; 15; 18].

2) Physical environment of the organization, e.g., defensible space, greenspace, litter, vandalism, dilapidation [14].

3) Internal environment of the organization, e.g., leadership, role structure, relationships, organizational climate, learning opportunities, reward systems [3-5; 10; 11; 15; 18; 20].

The author suggests one more – fourth group of factors:

4) External social environment of the organization, including:

a) Relational factors (relationship with external social environment representatives characterized by dichotomies: Independence – Dependence, Constrain – Support, Dissatisfaction – Satisfaction). b) Access to resources (quantity and quality of financial and material, human resources and information).

In the empirical research the author focused on the relationship between social external environment factors and psychological empowerment in grassroots community organizations.

**Method.** The Psychological empowerment survey measures the general level of psychological empowerment and its four principal components defined above was constructed. Three levels of perceptions were measured: 1) perceptions of oneself and one’s activities in the organization; 2) perceptions of one’s colleagues and their activities; 3) perceptions of the organization as a whole. The External factors survey was constructed by the author based on the theoretical model above. Five point Likert scales were used in both surveys. Variables of age, gender, length of participation and participation intensity were also included. In addition, a semi-structural interview with the leaders of the organizations included questions about the role of external factors in achievements and challenges of the organizations, and motivators of the civic participation.

**Participants.** 173 leaders and active members of 61 grassroots community organizations of Charlotte, NC area, the USA – nonprofessionally self-governed non-for-profits working for members’ collective self-interest – participated in the research. 114 of them represent 34 neighborhood / homeowners associations, 59 represent 27 organizations aiming improvement of particular field of community life (ecological organizations, organizations advocating voting and civic rights, helping particular society groups, non-profits of ethnic groups). 22 leaders of 20 grassroots organizations participated in the semi-structured interview. *Gender distribution:* 55% – females. *Age groups:* 18-25 y.o. – 1.7%, 26-39 – 24.9%, 40-54 –30.1%, 55-65 – 21.4%, over 65 – 22%. *Duration of participation:* less than 3 months – 6,4%, 3 months to 1 year – 13.9%, 1 to 3 years – 27.2%, 4 to 7 years – 21.4%, more than 7 years – 31.2%. *Intensity of the participation:* leaders – 52%, participant of majority recent meetings and events – 27.7%, participant of some meetings and events – 22.3%.

**Results of the empirical research**

1) Mean level of *psychological empowerment* (max–140, min–28) and its 4 components (max–35, min–7) is stated in the Table 1.

Table 1

**Level of psychological empowerment**

| № | Scales                    | Points |
|---|---------------------------|--------|
| 1 | Psychological Empowerment | 119.7  |
| 2 | Meaningfulness            | 30.6   |
| 3 | Competence                | 30.1   |
| 4 | Autonomy                  | 29.6   |
| 5 | Impact                    | 29.4   |

We can see from the Table 1 that the general level of psychological empowerment is high – the participants are optimistic about their competency, autonomy and impact on community life, the work they do is meaningful to them. We can also see that all the components of psychological empowerment are represented equally. Interviewed leaders pointed out positive changes in the community as the result of the organization's activity, including a sense of community of the members, their personal interest, positive organizational climate, need to help other people.

2) Nature of *relationship of the grassroots community organizations with the other community groups and institutions* can be seen from the Table 2.

The data prove that US grassroots organizations function in rather a favorable social environment, supported by other community groups and receive positive feedback from them. The members of the grassroots community organizations believe that they are most dependent on clients, served people and collaborating organizations, who support them most and are satisfied with their activities more than the other community groups. 77 % of the interviewed leaders admitted that the biggest achievements of their organizations were not the merit exclusively of their members. Among the major contributors they mentioned collaborating non-profits and businesses (62%) and city government agencies (38%).

Table 2

**Relationship of the grassroots community organizations with the other community groups and institutions**

| № | Community groups interacting with the organization  | Independent – Dependent<br>min 1 – fully dependent,<br>max 5 – fully independent | Constrain – Support<br>min 1 – constrain strongly,<br>max 5 – support strongly | Satisfied – Dissatisfied<br>min 1 – fully dissatisfied,<br>min 5 – fully satisfied |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| 1 | Clients, people served by of the organization   | 2.27   | 4.14   | 4.27   |
| 2 | Other members of the community. people from neighborhood, not those directly served by the organization | 2.71   | 3.71   | 3.88   |
| 3 | Collaborating organizations   | 2.72   | 3.91   | 4.03   |
| 4 | Other community organizations   | 3.05   | 3.75   | 3.84   |
| 5 | Government agencies   | 2.87   | 3.41   | 3.72   |
| 6 | Funding agencies (private, non-governmental)  | 3.05   | 3.38   | 3.5  |
| 7 | Political parties   | 3.94   | 3.02   | 3.21   |
| 8 | Businesses  | 3.03   | 3.61   | 3.71   |
| 9 | Consultants. other professionals  | 3.31   | 3.53   | 3.52   |
|   | <b>General index (max – 45, min – 9)</b>  | <b>26.95</b>   | <b>32.46</b>   | <b>33.68</b>   |

3) The External factors survey measured participants' estimations of the *resources their organizations receive from the external environment* (Table 3).

Table 3

**Resources the organizations receives from the external environment**

| № | Types of resources the organization receives | Points (max–5, min–1) |
|---|--|-----------------------|
| 1 | Financial and material resources             | 3,8                   |
| 2 | Human resources – Quantity                   | 3,46                  |
| 3 | Human resources – Quality                    | 4,2                   |
| 4 | Information – Quantity                       | 4,4                   |
| 5 | Information – Quality                        | 4,4                   |
|   | <b>General index (max–25, min–5)</b>         | <b>20,26</b>          |

The organizations in general succeed in obtaining the necessary resources from the external environment. The biggest problem is with the quantity of human resources – number of people willing to participate in organizations' activities. As the biggest challenges faced by organizations (55%), according to interviewed leaders, was that not enough people were willing to participate. They primarily view this problem as the result of their need to engage members in the activities of the organization.

4) Correlation analysis was used to determine influence of *relational factors on psychological empowerment* (Table 4).

Analysis of the data from the Table 4 lead to the following conclusions:

1. The participants stated different rates of dependency of their organizations on various community groups but their level of psychological empowerment is not affected by it.

2. The level of psychological empowerment of leaders and members of grassroots community organizations depends on the support of the following representatives of external environment:

- 1) clients, people served by of the organization;
- 2) other members of the community, people from neighborhood, not those directly served by the organization;
- 3) collaborating organizations.

3. Positive feedback from the majority representatives of external environment contributes to psychological empowerment of leaders and members of grassroots community organizations.

Table 4

**Influence of relational factors on psychological empowerment**

| № | Representatives of external environment   | Significance of correlations |               |               |
|---|---|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
|   |   | Dependency                   | Support       | Satisfaction  |
| 1 | Clients, people served by of the organization   | -                            | .312**        | .448**        |
| 2 | Other members of the community, people from neighborhood, not those directly served by the organization | -                            | .158*         | .319**        |
| 3 | Collaborating organizations   | -                            | .253**        | .340**        |
| 4 | Other community organizations   | -                            | -             | .235**        |
| 5 | Government agencies   | -                            | -             | .189*         |
| 6 | Funding agencies (private, non-governmental)  | -                            | -             | .315**        |
| 7 | Political parties   | -                            | -             | -             |
| 8 | Businesses  | -                            | -             | -             |
| 9 | Consultants, other professionals  | -                            | -             | .167*         |
|   | <b>General Index</b>  | -                            | <b>.259**</b> | <b>.369**</b> |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5) *Influence of resources factors on psychological empowerment* can be seen from the Table 5.

Table 5

**Influence of resources factors on psychological empowerment**

| № | Types of resources the organization receives | Significance of correlations |
|---|--|------------------------------|
| 1 | Financial and material resources             | .162*                        |
| 2 | Human resources – Quantity                   | .297**                       |
| 3 | Human resources – Quality                    | .470**                       |
| 4 | Information – Quantity                       | .501**                       |
| 5 | Information – Quality                        | .438**                       |
|   | <b>General index</b>                         | <b>.461**</b>                |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

We see that perception of the available resources necessary for the activity of grassroots community organizations as sufficient and of good quality directly influences the level of psychological empowerment of their members.

6) *Influence of demographic and participation factors on psychological empowerment* can be seen from the Table 6.

Table 6

**Influence of demographic and participation factors on psychological empowerment**

| № | Demographic and participation variables  | Significance of correlations |
|---|--|------------------------------|
| 1 | Age  | -                            |
| 2 | Gender   | -                            |
| 3 | Length of participation  | -                            |
| 4 | Intensity of the participation (leader, participant of majority recent meetings and events or participant of some meetings and events) | $p \leq 0,01$                |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The data prove that more intensive participation in grassroots community organizations contribute to higher level of psychological empowerment. Influences of age, gender and length of participation are not significant.

### **Limitations of the research**

The research is focused primarily on the organizations of urban area. The organizations of rural districts may have some specificity in their external relationships and access to the resources.

### **Discussions and future perspectives**

As the subjects of participatory democracy, the civic organizations provide direct citizens' participation in the affairs of their local communities and direct influence on the government policy. The strength of civil society is defined by a wide, well-developed, independent and viable net of self-governed volunteer-based grassroots community organizations. Empowerment of the members is the one of the principle keys to their survival, functioning and development.

The research demonstrated that the US NGOs do not operate as closed systems, but actively interact and have close relationship with various community groups and institutions of their social environment. Participants' perceptions of the external environment signals result in not only organizational changes but also in changes of their cognitive, motivational structures and mental states, including empowerment. The support they receive from their communities and collaborative organizations significantly increases their level of psychological empowerment. The grassroots actively build partnerships to influence the common interest community issues through the joint efforts but in general they tend to be rather independent. The other relational factor that significantly influences psychological empowerment in grassroots community organizations is the satisfaction – positive feedback from the other community groups and institutions. For NGOs' leaders and members it is the signal of their success in achieving the social goals justification of their "raison d'etre". Also all the explored resources factors turned out to affect psychological empowerment – the empowered people can identify the necessary resources in the external environment, know how to access, use and multiply them.

Thus, based on the results the author proposes strategies that can promote empowerment and greater citizen participation:

#### *For the leaders of grassroots community organizations:*

1. Building partnerships inside the community and with the other organizations of various types which can contribute to completion of your organization's goals. The partnerships should not ruin the identity of your organization or limit its independence.
2. Members of the organization should be aware of its achievements, successful partnerships with powerful collaborating organizations, any positive feedback from the external social environment representatives.
3. Using team work for identifying and getting access to the resources of external environment and inside the community. Special attention should be paid to human resources (engaging volunteers, training of the members etc).
4. Informing the members about the organizational resources available (financial, information, opportunities etc).

#### *For the government officials working with community organizations and interested in enhancing civic engagement:*

1. Establishing long-term partnerships with the grassroots community organizations.
2. Promoting establishing partnerships between NGOs.
3. Giving positive feedback about the grassroots' achievements and success (including awards, using mass media, visiting their meetings etc).
4. Informing the leaders of the grassroots about the resources available.
5. Identifying the need of the NGOs in resources and helping to access them.

The psychological empowerment factors model can be used for by the NGOs for analysis internal and external environments of the organization and its impacts.

Analysis of the received data and the authors' observation of the community processes during the attended events and meeting of the organizations-participants suggest that the US grassroots community organizations have a well-defined "niche" in the society. They are the integral part of a social system with their particular interests, goals, means, traditions and problems. Their right to do what they do is unquestionable and their contribution to the development of the country is hard to overestimate. The American society is often considered as individualistic, but centuries of democracy evolutions, understanding the common vital interests, constant searching for the opportunities to make the life better, taking real responsibility for one's life enable uniting efficient collective actions and, together with all that, respecting the individual rights and values.

In Ukraine during the decades of Soviet Union period all the civic initiatives had been restricted, the generations of people had been raised as obedient implementers of the ruling political party's orders. After the USSR collapse the new political forces consisting of the former soviet leaders, representatives of oligarchic and

criminal structures were not interested in democratic changes and sharing the power with the citizens. The post-soviet Ukrainian communities possessed the features of social passivity, conflicts and confrontation in their relations with the powerful politics and business elites instead of necessary dialogue and cooperation. Ukrainian researchers noted the low level of public participation, ignoring public opinion by the authorities, poor public awareness of the community management processes. Recent "Revolution of Dignity" and enhancing of volunteer movements opposing the external invasion threat in Ukraine have shown that at difficult for their homeland time the citizens are able to unite and radically influence the issues that affect the fate of the country. The new elite declared the democratic changes as the main government policy course. However, at the same time, nowadays it is hardly possible to state "maturity" of modern domestic third sector and its significant impact on public life, compared to government institutions and business. Particularly, it concerns civic associations and organizations of "grassroots" level, life in local communities.

Nowadays Ukrainian (as well as all post-soviet) community psychology is just beginning to form. The USA practice shows that this field could play an important place in maintaining the research basis for community development and practical implementation of democratic changes. US-Ukraine community psychology partnerships could promote mutual enrichment of theory and practice as well as understanding the specificity and importance of cultural context in planning the strategies. Knowledge of the psychological conditions which affect civic participation in communities of the USA as a country of developed democracy will help to use the advantages (strong points) in Ukraine, of course, taking into account native peculiarities.

It is planned to carry out cross-cultural research of the factors that affect psychological empowerment – the author will continue the empirical research in Ukrainian NGOs and compare the results.

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### ЗОВНІШНЬОСЕРЕДОВИЩНІ ЧИННИКИ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОГО ЕМПАУЕРМЕНТУ В ГРОМАДСЬКИХ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЯХ

*Стаття присвячена виявленню зовнішньосередовищних чинників психологічного емпайерменту в громадських організаціях. Автор розглядає психологічний емпайермент як переконаність учасника організації у своїй здатності використовувати свої вміння та досвід у певному робочому середовищі для успішного і відносно автономного виконання значимих для нього завдань, при сприйнятті результатів як таких, що покращують його власне життя та життя спільноти. До зовнішньосередовищних чинників психологічного емпайерменту в громадських організаціях автор відносить стан стосунків громадської організації з іншими організаціями та соціальними групами спільноти, а також наявність у зовнішньому середовищі достатніх і якісних ресурсів для успішного здійснення її діяльності.*

*З метою перевірки впливу зазначених чинників на рівень психологічного емпайерменту було опитано лідерів та членів низових некомерційних самоврядних об'єднань США.*

*Дослідження показало, що американські громадські організації не є закритими системами, вони активно взаємодіють з різноманітними установами та суспільними групами соціального оточення. Сприйняття їх учасниками сигналів зовнішнього соціального середовища має результатом не лише організаційні зміни, але й зміни їх когнітивних, мотиваційних структур, у тому числі і психологічного емпайерменту. Підтримка, яку вони отримують від своїх громад та організацій-партнерів підвищує рівень їх психологічного емпайерменту. Іншим чинником групи "стосунки", що має стимулюючий вплив, є задоволеність – позитивний зворотній зв'язок від інших груп та інституцій громади. Для громадських організацій це є мірилом успіху у досягненні соціальних цілей, виправданням самого їх існування.*

*Також значимим виявився вплив на психологічний емпайермент чинників групи "ресурси", що говорить про важливість здатності їх ідентифікувати, отримувати до них доступ, використовувати і примножувати їх.*

**Ключові слова:** психологічний емпайермент, громадські організації, чинники зовнішнього середовища, прямий та непрямий вплив, значимість, компетентність, автономія, впливовість.

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