EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Youth Empowerment and High School Gay-Straight Alliances

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Abstract In the field of positive youth development programs, "empowerment" is used interchangeably with youth activism, leadership, civic participation and self-efficacy. However, few studies have captured what empowerment means to young people in diverse contexts. This article explores how youth define and experience empowerment in youth-led organizations characterized by social justice goals: high school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). Through focus group interviews, fifteen youth leaders of GSAs from different regions of California explain what they think empowerment means and how they became empowered through their involvement with the GSA. Youth describe three inter-related dimensions of empowerment: personal empowerment, relational empowerment, and strategic empowerment through having and using knowledge. When these three dimensions are experienced in combination, GSA leaders have the potential for individual and collective empowerment as agents of social change at school. By understanding these youth's perspectives on the meanings of empowerment, this article clarifies the conceptual arena for future studies of socially marginalized youth and of positive youth development.

Keywords Empowerment · Gay-straight alliance · School club · LGBT youth

Introduction

Some of the earliest writings on the period of youth or adolescence focus on examples of the civic engagement and political participation of young people (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). It is during adolescence that major moral developmental changes begin; it is also a period during which many individuals first become engaged in community roles or collective struggles (Yates and Youniss 1998). One characterization of these experiences and related processes is "empowerment," a popular term in the field of youth development programs (Huebner 1998). While the theoretical and empirical notion of empowerment and its dimensions are well documented for adults (Zimmerman 2000), studies of youth empowerment blur this concept: it has come to mean the same thing as youth leadership, civic engagement (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Yates and Youniss 1998), self-efficacy, or youth activism (Huebner 1998). Further, prior analyses have largely ignored the multi-layered social contexts in which empowering processes take place for young people. Although there is a range of possible definitions of youth empowerment, its

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meaning as understood by marginalized young people has not been fully explored.

Without question, most of what has been written about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) youth has focused on non-normative development or risk outcomes (Russell 2005). This focus has overshadowed the ways that LGBT young people and their allies are actively engaged in creating positive change for themselves and their peers; for many youth, this active engagement is achieved through involvement and leadership in high school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (Fields and Russell 2005; Herdt et al. 2007). In this paper, we examine and analyze the meanings and experiences of empowerment from the perspectives of youth leaders of GSAs. Our goal is to better understand the meanings and definitions that youth ascribe to "empowerment" and their explanations of the experience of empowerment through the GSA.

GSAs as a Context for Youth Empowerment

Social justice related to sexuality has become an important contemporary site of activism for young people (Fields and Russell 2005; Russell 2002). Growing out of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, the women's and feminist movements of the 1970s, and the gay rights movements of recent decades, sexuality, gender, and race have become driving forces in the social justice arena for youth. Prior research shows that involvement in school-based clubs that target marginalized populations, such as those for ethnic minority students, provides participants with positive feelings of inclusion (Tatum 1999) and engagement with community (Inkelas 2004). One of the most visible manifestations of the contemporary movement for social justice is in the emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) across the United States (Herdt et al. 2007). These school-based clubs are partnerships between sexual minority and heterosexual students with the purposes of promoting sexual justice, supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students and their allies, and promoting positive change in the school climate (Griffin et al. 2004).

GSAs emerged from community-based programs that were formed in the 1980s and 1990s to provide for the unique needs of LGBT youth (Herdt and Boxer 1993). These community-based organizations served as the first support organizations for gay youth, and were followed by pioneering counseling groups in schools (Uribe 1994). The first school-based GSA clubs were formed by adult counselors and teachers who wanted to provide support to LGBT students within the educational setting. Over the course of the last ten years, the GSA movement has transformed from adult-initiated school clubs into youth-led organizations aimed at activism for sexual justice

(Herdt et al. 2007). During this period, education laws and policies that protect the rights of students to form GSA clubs in schools have been adopted in many local school districts and several states (Miceli 2005). With the development of state and national advocacy organizations to provide support, GSAs are now more likely to be organized and sustained by students than by adult school personnel (Griffin et al. 2004), although supportive adults serve as mentors and links to the larger GSA networks. Contemporary GSAs provide a unique, youth-driven context for the development of youth leadership, activism, and engagement in social change (Lee 2002).

Although GSAs continue to provide support for LGBT students, they have evolved into organizations with several purposes. Some continue to function as counseling or support-groups, others are social organizations, and many have become clubs engaged in educational and activist activities aimed at challenging homophobia in schools (Griffin et al. 2004). Many GSAs exist as an alternative social environment in the school, a place to "hang out" that is safe and supportive for a wide range of "alternative" students who do not fit in to the dominant culture of the high school. Activist GSAs focus their attention on sexual justice by working to change the gender and sexual orientation climate of their high schools. To these ends, GSA club activities include displaying posters that challenge heterosexism, hosting a queer prom, organizing a day to recognize the silence that has characterized attention to sexual minorities called "Day of Silence," holding training for teachers on LGBT issues and homophobia in the school, and surveying fellow students and school personnel administrators to report on the school's LGBT climate. Through these efforts, GSAs work to increase visibility of LGBT people and issues in their schools (Griffin et al. 2004; Miceli 2005). Recent evidence suggests that GSAs do make a difference in school climates and for individual students (Lee 2002). In schools that have GSAs, students and school personnel report more supportive climates for LGBT students (Szalacha 2003); further, sexual minority students in schools that have GSAs report lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow et al. 2006).

We turn to GSAs as an important contemporary example of a site for youth empowerment. The institutional framework for GSAs was shaped by adults who were committed not only to the formation of alliances across sexual orientation, but also to stepping aside so that organizations would be primarily initiated and led by youth. Youth may be empowered through their experiences in multiple contexts; we argue that GSAs are unique not only because they challenge cultural and institutional heterosexism and sexism, but also because as organizations they typically are led by youth rather than by adults (Miceli 2005). Specifically, youth leaders of GSAs not only confront heterosexism and

homophobia among their peers; they often confront bias and discrimination on the part of the institution of the school (its policies and practices), and of the adult authorities in schools. GSAs offer an opportunity to understand youth engagement in activities that often directly challenge or resist hegemonic structures that characterize adolescents' lives—the gender and sexual orders of their schools. GSAs are a strategic location for the study of empowerment.

Definitions, Levels and Processes of Empowerment

Most previous studies of empowerment focus on adults; the discussion of empowerment has been constructed according to adult frames of reference and experiences (Foster-Fishman et al. 1998; Speer et al. 2001; Spreitzer et al. 1999; Yowell and Gordon 1997; Zimmerman 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Researchers in the field of community psychology introduced empowerment as an alternative approach to social and policy change in the early 1980s. This shift was an attempt to move away from prevention-based approaches in which professional experts act as leaders to a collaborative model in which community members provide solutions to community problems (Rappaport 1981; Zimmerman 2000). Rappaport (1981) writes: "empowerment is the goal of enhancing the possibilities for people to control their own lives" (Rappaport 1981, 15). This concept of empowerment has both a value orientation and a theoretical component (Zimmerman 2000). The value orientation of working in the community promotes goals, aims, and strategies for implementing change. The theoretical component acknowledges that many social problems exist because of larger structural inequalities.

Empowerment can occur on psychological, organizational, and community levels (Zimmerman 2000). Psychological empowerment, which is the most common approach to studies of empowerment, is the expression of the construct at the level of individual persons (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Empowerment at this level includes beliefs about competence and efforts to understand and control the sociopolitical forces, which collectively impact the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of individuals (Speer 2000; Zimmerman 2000). At the organizational level are empowered and empowering organizations. Empowered organizations successfully thrive among competitors, meet their goals, and develop in ways that enhance their effectiveness, but may not necessarily empower its members. An empowering organization may not necessarily impact policy, but provides members with opportunities to develop skills and feelings of control in settings where people with similar interests share information and experiences and develop a sense of identity with others (Zimmerman 2000). Finally,

community empowerment is reflected by a structure that incorporates interconnected coalitions promoting involvement and resources for its members and attention to community issues (Speer and Hughey 1995; Zimmerman 2000).

Most studies of empowerment focus on psychological empowerment. The concept of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman et al. 1992) includes intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioral components. The intrapersonal component refers to how people think about their capacity to influence social and political systems. The interpersonal component addresses how individuals interact within their environments to successfully master social or political systems (including knowledge of resources and critical awareness and development of problem solving skills). The behavioral component refers to individual acts that influence the social and political environment via participation in community organizations and activities. Much of the theoretical and empirical research on empowerment examines the link between interpersonal, intrapersonal, and behavioral components, namely participation (Le Bosse et al. 1998; O'Donoghue et al. 2002; Speer 2000; Speer et al. 2001; Zimmerman 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). This research indicates that those who indicate a higher degree of empowerment participate in more community activities and are more likely to have a critical awareness about how to exert power to create change in their community environment (Speer 2000; Speer et al. 2001; Zimmerman 2000).

Empowerment is not wholeheartedly accepted as a positive theoretical model. One of the primary critiques of empowerment theory is that psychological empowerment needs to be linked with actual manifestations of power and equity (Riger 1993; Speer and Hughey 1995). Also, empowerment has been approached from an individualistic perspective, while power is a social phenomenon (Speer and Hughey 1995). Instead of focusing on individual mastery, researchers propose that more useful studies of empowerment would measure how empowerment brings about social cohesion (Riger 1993), apply ecological paradigms to the study of community organizing (Speer and Hughey 1995), or apply a feminist or marginalized perspective in understanding mutual empowerment within interpersonal relationships (Sprague and Hayes 2000).

Empowerment and Youth

Most research fails to recognize that existing models and definitions of empowerment are adult-specific: how does empowerment apply to young people? Psychological empowerment, or interpersonal and intrapersonal empowerment experiences, should be possible and important in adolescence, and should be the basis for examples of

behavioral and felt empowerment among youth. However, given their social position as young adults ("pre-citizens"), we should expect limited opportunities for empowerment at organizational and community levels.

Several studies have proposed models for youth empowerment. Theoretical and practical approaches to youth empowerment mirror the efforts, frameworks and critiques in the adult field with some additional issues that are central to research on adolescents. Most studies of youth empowerment focus on "at-risk" populations (Einspruch and Wunrow 2002; Kim et al. 1998; Tierney et al. 1993), and usually do not incorporate issues of power into the analysis. Positive youth development frameworks like those employed by Chinman and Linney (1998) offer a model designed as a prevention/intervention strategy for youth risk behaviors. The model proposes an adolescent empowerment cycle in which youth engage in a process to develop a stable, positive identity by experimenting with roles and incorporating the feedback of others. Participation in positive, meaningful activities, learning useful and relevant skills, and reinforcement (being recognized for contributions) are the basis for an ongoing cycle which leads to empowerment. As a result of the bonding development process (action—skill development—reinforcement), this empowerment model predicts that adolescents will feel more confident, and have critical awareness and self-efficacy.

Other frameworks emphasize theories of organizational and community participation for youth empowerment and incorporate a discussion of "power-sharing" with adults. In particular, Dibennedetto's (1991) framework identified three interacting components that aid in the development of psychological empowerment: youth's shared power with adults, emotional nurturance, and intellectual stimulation. In situations where these three components are present, intellectual challenge is developed and youth receive sophisticated training and education which builds critical analysis and fosters the development of their voice. Dibennedetto's framework is representative of a burgeoning field of community youth development practices in which young people and adults share power, influence, and decision-making in equitable positions of authority (Camino 2000).

Just as in the adult literature, most youth empowerment models do not sufficiently capture young people's experiences in their efforts to resist oppression and create social change (Prilletensky 2003). The term "youth empowerment" has been critiqued in its implication that well-intentioned adults can "empower" powerless young people (Hefner 1998). Overall, there is scant literature on youth's experiences of empowerment in the context of being engaged in and instrumental to social change brought about through social justice organizations and movements.

Further, adults are prominent in all prior conceptualizations of youth empowerment; there have been few examples of youth-initiated and youth-led activism.

The Current Study

This paper is an effort to bring the voice of youth activists to the discussion on empowerment in the context of their efforts in a movement for social justice. We interviewed leaders of youth-led GSAs, organizations whose primary goals were sexual justice through social and institutional change, primarily change in the social and administrative climate at schools. We anticipated that GSA leaders would describe empowerment in psychological terms consistent with prior conceptualizations, perhaps with reference to interpersonal, intrapersonal, and behavioral dimensions (Zimmerman et al. 1992). Because GSAs are often guided by youth operating independently or with other youth (rather than with adults and sometimes in opposition to some adults), and because they are situated within schools in which adults retain authority, we expected that definitions of organizational and community empowerment might be less prominent in their descriptions of empowerment. Ultimately, our goal was to examine and describe the ways that young people articulate their understandings of and experiences with empowerment.

Methods

Participants, Context, and Procedures

Focus groups, each including five participants, were conducted in late 2001 and early 2002 in three California communities (in order to include students from all areas of the state, one focus group each was conducted in Northern and Southern California, and one in the Central Valley of California). The participants were student leaders of high school GSAs; most were presidents and/or founders of their GSAs. They were recruited for participation in the study through their involvement in a statewide youth advocacy network that supported the rights of LGBT youth in schools. We did not ask participants to disclose their sexual or gender identities because the general practice of GSAs is that students are not required to disclose this information; in the course of discussion, some of the participants identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, some as straight allies, and one student identified as transgender (female to male). Approximately half of the youth participants were White; three identified themselves as Latino or Latina, one as Asian American, and three as Black.

We chose a qualitative method because we wanted to elicit rich understandings of empowerment from GSA

youth leaders. We chose focus groups because, unlike one-on-one interviews, participants in focus groups discuss and co-create meaning (Krueger and Casey 2000); this allows youth who may feel less comfortable in a one-on-one setting to contribute, and provides opportunities for elaboration or extension of ideas suggested by others (Hoppe et al. 1995). The focus group discussions took place within two years of the passage of California Assembly Bill 537 (AB 537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, January, 2000). Organized groups of young people played a major activist role in passage of AB 537, and there were significant efforts to organize youth in California in the years that followed. These efforts focused on the rights of students and responsibilities of schools to create safe environments for all students without regard to actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including the right for GSA clubs to exist in schools. Most of the focus group participants had attended state or regional youth organizing and activist conferences (either as participants or as conference organizers), and all were participants in regional coordination among GSA youth leaders through regular communication and periodic in person regional meetings.

All participants consented to participation in the focus groups; those under age 18 were required to provide parental consent in order to participate. The participants (and parents) were informed that the focus group conversations would be tape recorded by the researchers, that the information would be used for research and in public presentations of research, and that individual participants would remain anonymous. Present in the focus groups were the participating youth GSA leaders, one moderator, and two graduate student researchers who took notes during the session. The moderator posed questions to the participants, kept the discussion on topic, encouraged discussion, and provided follow-up prompts. The graduate student researchers also asked follow-up questions. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours, and followed a similar format. First, the moderator asked each of the participants to introduce themselves and to explain the length of their involvement and role in the GSA (e.g., founder, president, etc.), and their original motives for joining or founding the GSA. The participants were then asked what empowerment meant to them, and whether involvement in the GSA or in regional GSA leadership coordination made a difference in their empowerment. We focus our attention on the definitions of and discussions about empowerment; however, following that discussion, subsequent questions focused on the role of the GSA for youth with different personal characteristics: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning youth and their allies; and youth from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (see Herdt et al. 2007).

Analytic Approach

The tape recorded conversations were transcribed. Although the focus groups covered a range of topics, we focus on the discussions of empowerment for the purposes of this analysis. Our premise is that the subjective experiences of empowerment are an important starting point for understanding the experiences of the GSA leaders. We employ an interpretive phenomenological perspective to position the perspectives and voices of youth as authorities on their empowerment, acknowledging that the daily experiences of individual youth are fundamentally linked with larger social, cultural, and political contexts. In addition, an interpretive phenomenological approach does not negate the use of a conceptual framework as a component of inquiry (Lopez and Willis 2004). In exploratory research interviews with young adult staff of a non-profit organization that works to support youth in creating and maintaining high school GSAs in California, empowerment clearly emerged as an intentional and conscious dimension of the training of the regional youth leaders of GSAs. Based on this preliminary work, we anticipated that "empowerment" would be part of youths' narratives of GSA activism.

In analyzing the transcript data, principles of the grounded theory approach to qualitative research were used. This method uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1998). As such, the transcripts were coded by identifying the prevalent and meaningful themes that emerged from the data. Three of the authors (two of whom facilitated the focus group data collection) coded the transcript data, looking for common or repeated themes. The coders independently categorized the data into provisional themes, or "open coded" the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and then met in person to compare the consistency of the coding. We include responses to the question about empowerment, as well as other evidence or examples of participants' perspectives on empowerment that appeared in other portions of the focus group discussions. The coding scheme was then adjusted according to the consensus opinion of all three coders; subsequently, the data were recoded. The purpose of using this process of data analysis was to ensure a degree of reliability with interpreting the data. Thus, the goal of our method of coding and interpretation was to attempt to consolidate the potential multiple meanings that emerged from the data (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

We approached the study with an understanding of critiques of youth empowerment, with an expectation that the young people we interviewed would have some understanding of empowerment, and from a commitment to positioning youth voices as expert in articulating

empowerment in adolescence. While our approach was a grounded one, we were attuned to key principles from prior work in our focused conversations with youth, and in our analysis. We anticipated that youth would describe intra-personal, interpersonal, and behavioral dimensions of psychological empowerment, particularly in regard to experiences with peers. In addition, a guiding interest for us was the degree to which, in their position as youth and students in adult-administered schools, these young leaders would describe adult interpersonal empowerment, or empowerment in relation to social change within their educational institutions.

Results

Overall, GSA members' conceptions of empowerment and narratives of empowering experiences were contextually grounded in their broader goals of social and sexual justice, as well as social and institutional change. GSA activists spoke about three dimensions through which empowerment was experienced: empowerment through having and using knowledge, personal empowerment (much like the intra-personal empowerment discussed by others), and relational empowerment (much like interpersonal empowerment). In the sections that follow, we describe each dimension of empowerment, followed by discussion of how the inter-actions between these dimensions produced empowering experiences.

Throughout our analyses, we were sensitive to possible differences in discussions of empowerment based on the youths' social locations (that is, their region of California). While in other work we have shown that there are impor-tant regional differences in the structure and functioning of GSAs (Herdt et al. 2007), there were no clear regional differences in discussions of these dimensions of empow-erment. The only notable difference was that students in the Central Valley of California more often described experiences of empowerment with explicit reference to homophobic and heterosexist environments; we note those distinctions in our presentation of results.

Empowerment as Having and Using Knowledge

GSA leaders experienced empowerment as "having and using" knowledge and other resources. The participants described GSA leadership and participation as providing the knowledge they need to more effectively organize for sexual justice. Specifically, they described knowledge about their rights as students and about organizing and activism as crucial resources for creating social change; empowerment was described as times when they had and used their knowledge to create change.

The primary way knowledge was identified as a struc-tural resource was in discussions of using education to fight ignorance: "All of those little cliché phrases are really true because, you know, you're not going to end ignorance unless you start the education, the bottom line." In this case, knowledge was used as a tool to counter heterosexism and homophobia. Another activist connected the knowl-edge received from GSA leadership to larger movements for social change:

> I think a large part of empowerment is not only experience but also knowledge, and I know that a lot of us here, who, from GSAs have a lot of experience and knowledge around GLBTQ issues, so that I think by running GSAs, you take part in the GLBTQ movement that it really empowers all of us.

This individual identified knowledge as leading to par-ticipation in the larger movement for sexual justice; this connection to a larger movement beyond the individual high school was empowering. GSA leaders also discussed the connection between knowledge and empowerment as having greater resources to effect change in their school settings. As one participant explained:

> To me it [empowerment] is…having the knowledge to help others and knowledge is empowerment because most…discrimination is based on ignorance, and so just to get that ignorance out of people who…are supportive, but are…ignorant…. [A]lso hopefully fix the school climate.

According to this GSA leader, knowledge and fighting ignorance were not only linked, but having and using knowledge was a possible means to changing the school climate. One GSA president stated: "I guess empowerment [is] being able to create change and having awareness and knowing what kind of tools you have available." This student described attending a speech about student rights given by a state senator, and receiving a student guide for implementing AB537. Learning about the available insti-tutional mechanisms to aid in the struggle for sexual justice was a common way that the GSA activists characterize empowerment.

Others acknowledged that empowerment comes from having access to and knowing how to strategically use information. A GSA activist provided the following description of empowerment:

> It's knowing what you're talking about. It's having the resources and having the information around you and saying, I have this and you can't tell me that I can't start the club because I have AB537 and the Federal Legal Access Act behind me…. They thought maybe you wouldn't know what you're talking about,

and it's this powerful feeling when you can say, "I know what I'm talking about." And you can kind of laugh in their faces for thinking that you didn't.

This comment exposes two interacting elements of the role of knowledge in empowerment. First, this individual identified the ability to use knowledge about legal protection as an important element of empowerment. Second, great emphasis was placed on the sense of empowerment that resulted in exceeding expectations about young people; this participant identified empowerment as both having as well as using knowledge. Finally, one young person described the empowerment that comes with knowledge as related to understanding and respecting people whose opinions differ from one's own:

> It's all about education, and I think empowerment is like being able to be open minded and accepting of like everyone, and still being able to like understand people for who they are, and like respect them, even though you don't really agree with them.

For this young person, the knowledge that is gained through empowerment includes the possibility to take the perspective of others' knowledge and experiences, including those with whom one disagrees.

The emphasis the GSA youth leaders place on having and using knowledge helps to illustrate the important role of knowledge in promoting youth empowerment. According to the focus group participants, one must have knowledge to be empowered, and one must be empowered to challenge the status quo. The focus on knowledge as an integral part of youth empowerment may reflect the structural limitations of adolescence who have limited recourse in pursuing sexual justice through other means. As such, having and using knowledge was the vehicle recognized to enable youth to participate in social and institutional change in the service of social and sexual justice.

Personal Empowerment

The second dimension of empowerment described by GSA members was personal (or intrapersonal) empowerment—a personal sense or feeling of empowerment. Three themes emerged from the discussions: feeling good about oneself, having a voice, and having control or agency.

Participants often described feeling personally empowered within the context of the GSA. Such feelings often were expressed in terms of feeling good about oneself, in contrast to the way they sometimes feel as sexual minority youth living in a heterosexist society. For example, one GSA member from the Central Valley explained:

To me, empowerment is having the ability to feel good about who you are and what you do, and that's a very difficult thing for a lot of people because everyday hearing the way gay and lesbian and transgender are used in everyday conversations…negativity that connotes around it. You begin to think that what you're doing is wrong … that's the thing that cuts out the feet of empowerment, it just takes them out from under it. And with this organization, it gives you another voice that says "what they're saying is wrong," and when you hear someone telling you that what they're doing is wrong, it then empowers you to feel good about yourself, and I think that's a lot of what this organization does….

Other participants identified the GSA as providing a context in which they felt they could be themselves, which led to feelings of personal empowerment. For instance, one female participant described how being part of a GSA made her feel empowered:

> …And so like just my feeling like there's others out there to support you, you have a little more empowered that way, and then act more yourself, like you want to hold like your girlfriend's hand or something, you feel like, I know there's others out here that will support me in this, moment, just let me know it's okay.

Participants also described an intrapersonal sense of empowerment as having a voice. "Having a voice is being empowered, being heard is being empowered." The GSA participants indicated that in being heard, they could make a difference as individuals. For instance, one member explained:

> Empowerment to me is when you feel like you have a voice and you feel like you make a difference. Even though you are just one person. When you feel heard and you feel respected, that shows you how much you can make a difference, even if you are just one person, you know, you can influence so many people just by what you say, about how you act, or how you treat other people.

Thus, the empowerment of "having a voice" is connected to being heard and being respected such that an individual can influence the struggle for social justice.

Participants also spoke about empowerment in terms of personal agency. One GSA leader described empowerment at the personal level, with action directed at improving the personal situation for others:

> I'm a lot more comfortable with myself than just my ability to stand up and talk to people…like if I see someone…if they're still eating lunch by themselves,

or they're walking home by themselves… just being able to recognize that and understand what that was like … [to] know the steps that I could take to help them feel more comfortable.

Thus, personal empowerment led to empathy for others who are isolated, and produced the feeling that an individual can make a difference for other individuals.

In other instances, the youth articulated a version of empowerment that can be characterized as agency at the institutional level. This sense of agency or control was expressed with reference to a deep sense of connection to the GSA through individual initiative and effort:

Being the president of a GSA is really empowering to me, it gives me a lot of control and…I know it sounds really terrible, but it's not…it's something that I really worked for … the GSA is like my baby. I am so scared to leave it this next year because I've worked so hard for everything that we've achieved, whether or not the list is ten feet long or half a paragraph, I've devoted a lot of time to it, and that's empowering, knowing that like I have the power to make this change in my school.

Personal feelings of control and agency allowed the participants to pursue the greater goals of the GSA, as illustrated by the following participant:

I feel empowerment is being able to influence people and either, verbally or having experience to be able to let people know what's going on, how to fix things, getting a lot of people involved in your cause, and making things better.

This young person described empowerment as the product of an individual's action and the role of that action in "making things better," or creating social change. Another GSA leader described personal agency in terms of a commitment to both the GSA organization and to other GSA members. The commitment was described as a recurring process by which an individual participant acts as a representative of the organization in order to further the goals of a particular GSA. In the following instance, a GSA leader's commitment to the organization led to both personal and organizational progress:

Looking back like on the course of the past two years since that day when I wrote the petition, through the two months that it took for the club to be approved at my school, and…a training that I attended last year as a participant, and then I facilitated this year … being able to be there and…take the opportunity to look at everything that I had done and what had happened to me, and because of me, over the course of the year, it was like really amazing…because when you're going

through the things, like when you're having to go up against your administration, and when you're having to talk to your school site counsel it doesn't feel empowering at all. But when you can…look at a year and feel like, well I made it through all that, and I'm only 17, it's a really good educational experience to be… leaving high school and really feeling like I got so much more out of it than my education ever could have given me.

According to this participant, commitment to the GSA ultimately provided a greater sense of personal control and accomplishment to promote change, which is characterized as empowering. The effect of such an empowering process was that personal as well as organizational progress was visible to this individual. While the focus here is on individuals' feelings about their personal role in creating social change, these quotes also point to the connections between the personal and relational in producing empowerment.

Relational Empowerment

A third component that promotes the goals of liberation is described in terms of relational or interpersonal empowerment. Many of the participants characterized the sense of empowerment they gain from being a GSA leader as situated in different relational processes: group membership, commitment/passing on the GSA legacy, and empowering others.

For these youth, group membership referred to the feelings of empowerment the GSA leaders gain by being part of a larger community. Being a member of a group provided the social support necessary to pursue liberation. For example, one participant from the Central Valley discusses the support gained from GSA membership:

I've never, ever felt guilty for what I'm doing. …but it's, it does get hard as far as everybody else is against you it seems like and it's like, don't you see this? So it's good to have a group to be with. I do feel really empowered and good about GSA.

This individual indicated an unwavering pursuit of liberation, yet also admitted that it is difficult to shrug off diverging opinions. Accordingly, in providing contact with other like-minded individuals, the relationships formed in the GSA enabled empowerment. Such sentiments are related, in part, to alleviating feelings of isolation. Another participant explained:

One of the slightest things of empowerment is just being around other people that I feel I can connect with. …[O]ne, I'm not the only one and two… we all have this silent understanding of what we're going through, what we've been through, where we are…

so that's always empowering, just to feel that collectiveness.

This young person attributed the felt sense of solidarity with other sexual minority youth and allies in the GSA. As part of a collective group, this individual felt empowered, not only because of the mutual understanding shared with the other members, but also because the group broke the feeling of solitude.

Related to the idea of the "collectiveness" of the GSA was the interpersonal process involved in passing the legacy of GSA on to future members. Several of the participants admitted that they wanted to see the work they had put into leading their GSAs benefit the future leaders: "I think we did something really of pride for me, being that it's never been done, and for people younger than me to keep it going would be incredible. Just to keep it maintained. To know that's what I did." For this GSA leader, empowerment came from having created the GSA and knowing (or hoping) that it would continue beyond their time in high school.

A final interpersonal component of empowerment was the GSA leaders' desire to empower others, specifically other current or potential GSA members. One participant defined empowerment as "…like the belief that you can, can change something. You can change the institutions; you can make things better for yourself and your peers." Another participant shared a similar perspective:

> To empower someone else is to well, literally, it's to give them power, but…I think it goes like hand in hand with encouragement, because you can't be empowered and stay empowered for very long if you're not … connected with other people.

Here, empowerment was defined by interpersonal connections, both in sustaining a feeling of empowerment and in facilitating the empowerment of others. Many participants perceived that the connection to other people, as well as to resources that the GSA provides, was a route to empowerment. As one GSA leader from the Central Valley explained:

> Every time I come to a [regional GSA] workshop, I feel empowered again to take action and change authority and I hope that I can help other members to do it, because I think most of the teachers are feeling empowered now. They have been itching to do something like this…that's why so many of them have been coming up to the advisor and just thanking her for being the advisor [for the GSA]. And saying "How did you have the courage to do that, especially here?" But I think it makes it really good for the teachers to have the posters that say like lesbian, gay, everything, up on campus at school… that's creating

awareness already and I think that's making a lot of people feel safer.

Not only did this individual feel more empowered by connecting to the larger network of GSA members; both GSA members and teachers also shared these feelings of empowerment due to the presence of a GSA on their campus. It is noteworthy here that this leader points to the transformative effect of the GSA and its activities on teachers (adults). Overall, empowerment is a feeling that motivates GSA leaders to persist in their efforts toward social change that benefits themselves and others, and that has the potential to transform not only the school's student climate, but also the adult school leadership as well.

Interactions across Dimensions of Empowerment

We argue that empowerment for GSA youth leaders takes place at the intersections of knowledge with personal and relational empowerment. As others have shown, personal and relational dimensions of empowerment are often interconnected (Le Bosse et al. 1998; O'Donoghue et al. 2002; Speer 2000; Speer et al. 2001; Zimmerman 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988); we heard examples of this in our discussions. A recurrent pattern observed in the interactions between the personal and relational was the description of personal empowerment that happens through affirmation of oneself which was closely tied to being a member of a group, an interpersonal dimension. One youth put it this way: "Empowerment to me is standing up for your beliefs and getting other people to stand up with you…." Another young person (from the Central Valley) described her involvement in a way that illustrated the interconnection of the intrapersonal and interpersonal:

> I think empowerment is also to…be who you want to be, act the way you want to act, that's empowerment. When you're not ashamed to be who you are in this group. I feel it helps people to do that. I'm straight, but I feel like…being here helps me…it's kind of hard for me to explain…at school, it's almost socially unacceptable to be seen sometimes to associate with gay people…and I find that horrible.… I view empowerment as being able to be here, be able to say what I want to say…and I find that helps me out and helps out other people.

For this student, empowerment is defined by experiences that help the individual as well as other people. Another youth describes being part of a group that helps you to be yourself:

> Going to GSA…you don't feel alone. …there's others out there to support you, you have a little more empowered that way, and then act more yourself, like

you want to hold like your girlfriend's hand or something, you feel like, I know there's others out here that will support me in this…let me know it's okay. That's empowering to just be yourself.

Partly because they are the foundations for personal and relational empowerment, knowledge and resources are assumed in the discussions that highlight the links between the intra- and inter-personal. There were a few explicit statements in which the three dimensions of empowerment were holistically linked. One youth said:
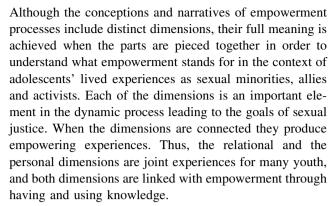
I empowered myself by attending the workshops, but I also empowered the people around and got them into the activism because I realized, I made them realize that it wasn't just a gay issue. It affected everyone in every walk of life… the Bible study club, I went to that and said, "Look, you may not like the fact that this law covers gay people, but it covers you and your right to practice free speech on this campus, you're allowed to pray on this campus because this law covers you; and if people want to say something bad about your club they can't really do that. And so, you just have to make people aware… because education is power and knowledge is power.…

Through attending trainings, this young person's empowerment was both personal and relational. The skills and knowledge gained from the workshop led to empowerment that was characterized by activism among peers, as well as feelings of personal power.

Discussion

Adolescence is an important developmental period for individual engagement in community and social concerns; the notion of empowerment suggests that young people discover their capacity to become agents of change in issues and causes that they care about. Sexuality activism has emerged as an important arena for youth activism (Fields and Russell 2005), and offers a unique context in which to study youth empowerment. We investigated understandings and experiences of empowerment among young leaders of high school Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. We identified three major dimensions of empowerment: (1) having and using knowledge; (2) personal empowerment; and (3) relational empowerment. Together, these dimensions provide the possibility for young people to have direct influence on social and sexual justice through social and institutional change, primarily through changing their schools.

Empowerment is said to be contextually embedded: it changes from one context to another (Zimmerman 1995).

Although the conceptions and narratives of empowerment processes include distinct dimensions, their full meaning is achieved when the parts are pieced together in order to understand what empowerment stands for in the context of adolescents' lived experiences as sexual minorities, allies and activists. Each of the dimensions is an important element in the dynamic process leading to the goals of sexual justice. When the dimensions are connected they produce empowering experiences. Thus, the relational and the personal dimensions are joint experiences for many youth, and both dimensions are linked with empowerment through having and using knowledge.

Many studies of youth empowerment focus on vulnerable populations (Einspruch and Wunrow 2002; Kim et al. 1998; Tierney et al. 1993), but this work does not critique the dominance of heterosexism, gender, or social class that fundamentally shapes youths' interactions with the social institutions that shape their lives; only recently has research on youth empowerment addressed unique experiences of diverse ethnic groups (Ginwright 2007). Our focus on GSA as a location for empowerment through activism for social justice is historically unique. Same-sex sexuality is among the most hotly contested contemporary social issues; the youth we interviewed have inserted themselves into local struggles, and some clearly connected their activism at school with the larger movement for social justice for LGBT people. Of course, their unique context potentially limits the generalizability of their experiences of youth empowerment to youth in other social locations or who are becoming empowered and engaged in relation to other social issues.

Our study is clearly limited to this distinctive social and historical moment, and to the experiences of youth in California. The changes in state legislation that provided protection for GSAs in public schools had been passed only two years before. Our study is limited to a small number of student leaders, and to those who were most active as participants in a statewide youth advocacy network. We conducted only three focus groups, yet included most of the active student leaders in the state at that time. Thus, they cannot be said to be "representative" of GSA members, or even typical GSA student leaders. In fact, not every school club is actively engaged in social change; some simply are social or recreational clubs for students (Griffin et al. 2004), and thus may not be sites of empowerment.

In spite of these limitations, we argue that the unique experiences of these youth offer the opportunity for new perspectives on youthful empowerment. Empowerment is understood as being context and community specific (Foster-Fishman et al. 1998; Zimmerman 2000), and GSAs are specific examples, rooted in a specific historical time, in specific places, and influenced by contemporary social movements that are in constant flux. We do not argue that

the experiences identified in these GSAs would be similar to those in other youth activist organizations, or to other GSAs in 5 or 10 years; however, we argue that the dimensions that we have identified in these youths' understandings of empowerment may be relevant for youth in other contexts or programs that aim to bring about social change. Studies of empowered youth who are working for social change in other settings will allow an analysis of the degree to which these findings apply to the empowerment of youth in other settings and in other circumstances. Other work on empowerment has focused primarily on adults, and has conceptualized empowerment at the psychological, organizational, and community levels (Zimmerman 2000). We bring youth's experiences and perspectives about empowerment to add to the existing perspectives—but what is different or distinct about youth empowerment? We found that youth's experiences and perspectives are consistent with earlier conceptions of intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of empowerment that include beliefs about one's competence, efforts to exert control and the knowledge or critical awareness of the socio-political environment. At times the GSA leaders described organizational empowerment; they identified the GSA's role in social change in the school atmosphere and in empowering youth. However, much of the focus of their discussions was on personal and relational empowerment and thus focused on individual youth leaders and their relationships rather than on the organization, school, or larger community. In fact, given the prominence of the role of adults in prior conceptualizations of youth empowerment, it is notable that school teachers and administrators were not mentioned by the participants as directly relevant to their empowerment (the exception was in situations where empowerment came specifically through resistance or opposition to adult authorities or institutional policies).

We suspect that the intra- and interpersonal dimensions of empowerment may be particularly relevant and accessible to young people. First, personal and relational empowerment may be more accessible than organizational or community forms of empowerment because of the developmental and social position of youth in society; by definition, youth have limited access to creating change in the social institutions that characterize their lives. Second, the personal and relational may be particularly relevant to adolescents (Chinman and Linney 1998). Perceived control and self-efficacy were central to youth's descriptions of personal empowerment, as was "feeling good about yourself" or "being yourself," concepts that are fundamental to notions of identity development in adolescence. Although these characterizations of personal empowerment are not necessarily unique to adolescents, their salience for young people may be particularly important in defining empowerment. Finally, "voice" was also important to these young

people; their socio-political marginalization—both as adolescents and as sexual justice activists—may make having a voice particularly salient. These dimensions of empowerment that may be particularly relevant or salient for adolescence deserve further investigation.

Our results also point out two nuances of relational empowerment that may be distinct in adolescence. First, Zimmerman's (2000) notion of interpersonal or what we call "relational empowerment" relates to how people understand or think about their social environment and includes the critical awareness and understanding of available resources that was captured by "having and using knowledge." We believe it was useful to separate the knowledge and relational dimension because they emerged as distinct dimensions for youth; having and using knowledge appeared to be a clear and important basis for relational empowerment experiences. It is critical to note that the existence of state laws and educational policies that support the rights of California students to form GSAs provided structural support that became the basis for their activism and empowerment. We argue that having and using that knowledge emerged as distinct because of the multiple ways that young people typically are not users or producers of knowledge. As one young leader mentioned, youth often have to combat adult notions that they "don't know what they're talking about." For young people, knowledge can be a transformational tool to bridge inequitable power structures once they have the critical awareness that these inequities exist (having it) in the institutions that they navigate (using it). The importance of knowledge for youth empowerment may not be restricted to social justice contexts but to organizational and community change processes that involve youth (Camino 2000). This has implications for adults' debates on whether youth need to "know" about organizational policies and missions in order to take on authentic leadership roles in these contexts.

We point out a second nuance of relational empowerment that may be distinct for youth. Empowering others emerged as an important characteristic of relational empowerment as defined by GSA leaders. It is interesting to note that on a theoretical level the idea of "empowering others" (that is, that others can be "given" empowerment) has been criticized (Crenshaw et al. 2000). However, this critique may be revised in the case of youth peer-to-peer empowerment. According to the youth participants in our study, the experiences associated with empowering another can be empowering. The youth activists we interviewed bring an important perspective to the earlier argument; while it arguably may be counterproductive to define empowerment as empowering others, it is also important not to discount the idea that part of being empowered means "bringing others along with

you." Such relational processes may be particularly important to young people for whom social relationships are central, and possibilities for authentic social leadership are often truncated.

Our study offers insight into the ways that empowerment may be experienced differently among youth as compared to adults. At the same time, it pushes existing models of youth empowerment in new directions. Prior work suggests that shared power with adults is an important dimension of youth empowerment (Dibennedetto 1991). The youth in our study did not share power with adults at their school; rather, most were engaged in challenging the adult-defined school systems. This points to the importance of the context of empowerment, and highlights the GSA as a unique historical moment in which, in many cases, young people are leading adults rather than partnering with them. These youth talk about empowering peers and adults (such as school teachers) both at personal levels as well as through the presence of the organization. This has important implications for the power of youth-led organizations in creating social change that influence not only other youth but adults as well (for example, Ginwright and James 2002). We believe our study offers insight about the notion of youth empowerment from the perspectives and experiences of youth activists in the GSA. Further studies on youth's understandings and experiences of empowerment in other contexts would be valuable to add to this discussion. Such research can deepen understandings of youth leadership and the active engagement of adolescents in a changing society.

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