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ABSTRACT

Empowerment theory suggests that changes in beliefs and attitudes contribute to the participation of individuals in social change. It assumes that in order for individuals to work for the collective good, they must develop a sense of critical consciousness. This study uses experimental methods to test the application of this theory to the Latino community. Participants were a random sample of 73 Latino undergraduates at a large midwestern university. Twenty-three students participated in a control condition and were asked about their experiences as Latinos at the school. Fifty students were assigned to one of two experimental focus groups, one designed to arouse participants' feelings of ethnic identification and one to arouse ethnic consciousness. Results suggest there is a direct effect of consciousness on the cognitive aspects of political empowerment, but no effect on its behavioral component. This supports the assumptions of empowerment theory and suggests a need for a more complex understanding of this concept. Five tables and two figures present study findings. (Contains 38 references.) (Author/SLD)

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EMPOWERMENT AND THE LATINO COMMUNITY: DOES CONSCIOUSNESS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Abstract

Empowerment theory suggests that changes in beliefs and attitudes contribute to the participation of individuals in social change. It assumes that in order for individuals to work for the collective good, they must develop a sense of critical consciousness. This article uses experimental methods to test the application of this theory to the Latino community. Results from an experiment affecting Latino ethnic identity and consciousness suggest a direct effect of consciousness on the cognitive aspects of political empowerment, but not on its behavioral component. This supports the assumptions of empowerment theory and suggests a need for a more complex understanding of this concept.

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Empowerment involves the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations. It has become a popular concept in the social work, community psychology, and health care fields which present it as a means for addressing the problems of powerless populations and for mediating the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating social problems (Fagan, 1979; Gutiérrez, 1990; Rappaport, 1987; Solomon, 1976; Swift & Levin, 1987). Within each field empowerment has been described as a new way of thinking about developing programs, policies, and services.

Although the social work literature on empowerment describes it as a method which can incorporate multiple levels of intervention, most of the current work has focused on methods for individual or interpersonal empowerment (Parsons, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1990; Simon, 1990; Solomon, 1976; Staples, 1991). This literature has described processes and methods for moving individuals to gain personal power or to develop the ability to influence others. Very little systematic or empirical research has focused on the political dimensions of empowerment and ways in which it can contribute to collective action or social change. This study is one attempt to investigate how a psychological process can contribute to political empowerment.

The Psychological Process of Empowerment

Theories of empowerment focus on how beliefs about the self can contribute to individual, community, and social change (Gutiérrez, 1989; Kieffer, 1984; Swift & Levin, 1987; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Several psychological processes which involve changing perceptions of the self in society have been identified as contributing to empowerment (Gutiérrez, 1990; Kieffer, 1984; Swift & Levin, 1987). These processes are:

Group Identification, which includes identifying areas of common experience and concern, a preference for one's group's culture and norms, and the development of feelings of shared fate. For these individuals, group membership becomes a central aspect of one's self concept (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980);

Group Consciousness, which involves an understanding of the differential status and power of groups in society. For members of oppressed groups, this leads to feelings of relative deprivation, power discontent, and a tendency to blame the system for problems related to group membership. This understanding is one way of drawing connections between personal problems and social structure (Gurin, et al., 1980; Klein, 1984); and

Self and Collective Efficacy, which refers to beliefs that one is capable of affecting desired changes in one's life (Bandura, 1982). In the literature on critical consciousness it is described as perceiving one's self as a subject (rather than object) of social processes who is capable of working to change the social order (Fay, 1987; Freire, 1973; Gutiérrez, 1989a).

Empowerment theory suggests that these three components often develop sequentially and, once developed, can be mutually reinforcing. Group identification is a necessary but not sufficient condition for group consciousness. Both group identification and consciousness are necessary, but not sufficient, for the development of collective efficacy. Once an individual has developed a sense of critical consciousness, feedback loops exist which allow the experience of group consciousness to heighten a sense of group identification or the exercise of collective efficacy to deepen a sense of group consciousness (See Figure 1). In these ways critical consciousness is at once process and a cognitive state.

How can critical consciousness contribute to empowerment? The tie between efficacy and empowerment is clear: individuals and groups which believe in their ability to affect change are more likely than others to make efforts to increase their power. The role of the other processes is less direct, but crucial: in order for individuals and communities to understand that their problems stem from a lack of power they must first comprehend the structure of power in society. An understanding of how group membership can affect life circumstances is crucial for identifying powerlessness as a source of problems.

Empowerment and the Latino Community

Latinos,¹ people of Latin American descent, provide both a challenge and opportunity for the study of empowerment. Latinos comprise one of the fastest growing and most economically deprived ethnic groups in the United States. Latinos lag behind the rest of the population in terms of median years of education and participation in higher education. The median income of Latinos is only slightly higher than African Americans, they are concentrated in the secondary labor market, and their rate of poverty is double the national average (Rochin, 1989). Research on the Latino community has found that for the two largest Latino subgroups - Mexican American, Puerto Ricans- these status and income trends do not improve substantially for succeeding generations in the United States (Moore & Pachon, 1985)

Despite their disadvantaged condition, the human service literature on Latinos has most typically focused on cultural factors in the development and provision of service (Ghali, 1982; Gomez, 1983; Queralt, 1984; Rogler, Malgady, Constantino, Blumental, 1987; Vega & Miranda, 1985; Watkins & Gonzales, 1982). The goal of this approach is to create or recreate programs and services that will be more responsive and responsible to cultural differences. The focus of this model has been on understanding one's own personal attributes and values, gaining knowledge about the culture of different groups, and developing skills for cross cultural work (Chau, 1990; Gallegos, 1982). It is based on the notion that the nature of our society is multi-cultural and that positive gains can result from learning about different cultural groups and incorporating culture into agency procedures, structures, and services (Devore & Schlesinger, 1987; Gallegos, 1982).

¹This paper uses the term Latino, rather than Hispanic, to describe a population of individuals living in the United States whose ancestry is from Latin America.

The empowerment perspective on practice expands the cultural competence model by focusing on how Latinos have experienced racism and discrimination based on their national origin (Longres, 1982; Portes, Parker, & Cobas, 1980). It is based on the assumption that the condition of Latinos in our society will change only if they gain greater power in political and social arenas. The role of community organizations would go beyond service provision to developing the means for Latinos to work together to overcome conditions of powerlessness.

Empowerment theory suggests that if Latinos are to become politically empowered, they must develop a sense of group identification and consciousness. Research suggests that the development of an ethnic consciousness is dependent on a number of factors. Contact with other Latinos, from different subgroups, can provide a means for perceiving common cultural and political interests (Gutiérrez, 1989; Hayes-Bautista, 1974; Padilla, 1985; Rodriguez, 1986). Contact with non-Latinos can contribute to the development of feelings of relative deprivation and power discontent (Portes, Parker, & Cobas, 1980). The effects of these types of contact can be strengthened through group discussion or participation in intergroup conflict (Crosby & Clayton, 1987; Padilla, 1985; Tajfel, 1981). In that context, intragroup similarity and intergroup differences can become more salient and central to the self. As ethnic consciousness becomes more central, it will have more effect on subsequent attitudes and behaviors, including the empowerment process (Hurtado, 1982; Padilla, 1985). These studies suggest that group contact and discussion can be particularly important to the development of a Latino ethnic consciousness.

The purpose of this study was to assess and test the assumptions regarding the development and impact of a group consciousness. It focuses particularly on whether ethnic consciousness can contribute to the empowerment process of Latinos or other groups. The major questions involve the following:

1. How can ethnic consciousness be developed among Latinos?

2. To what degree does ethnic consciousness among Latinos contribute to the belief that *specific* individual, interpersonal, or community problems are related to group status and power?

3. To what degree does ethnic consciousness among Latinos affect the types of strategies endorsed for solving *specific* individual, interpersonal, or community problems?

4. To what degree does a sense of ethnic consciousness contribute to an interest in political participation and social change?

Method²

The literature on empowerment has been primarily descriptive and qualitative in nature or based on case studies or surveys of individuals already involved in community action (c.f. Checkoway & Norseman, 1986; Friere, 1973; Kieffer, 1984; Maton & Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Methods for developing critical consciousness and assessment of its effects on the process of empowerment have not been studied empirically. This study uses a completely randomized one-factor, parallel groups experimental design in an effort to test the effects of participation in groups on the development of an ethnic consciousness and the effects of ethnic consciousness on empowerment.

Participants for the experiment were a random sample of 73 Latino undergraduate students attending a large midwestern university. A listing of all Latino undergraduates (N=677) was provided by the university. A random sample, stratified by sex, was selected from this list. These participants were contacted individually by phone and invited to participate in a study of the experiences of Latino students at the university. Those who agreed (77% of those contacted) were randomly assigned to one of three groups: two experimental and one control. Efforts were made to balance all groups by gender in order to encourage the full participation of both men and women. All participants received reimbursement for their time.

²For more information regarding the sample, design, and measures see Gutiérrez, 1989a

The sample was composed of almost equal numbers of men (48%) and women (52%). The average age was 19 and most (70%) were in their freshman or sophomore years. Most participants were born in the United States (78%) and grew up here (75%). All major Latin American groups were represented: 34% were Mexican origin, 18% S. American, 7% Puerto Rican, 6% Central American, 4% Cuban, 51% not specifying a national origin. Over half (58.8%) described themselves as having more than one ethnic background, however the majority (72%) identified primarily with their Latino heritage. In terms of language use, 60% said that their first language was English and 66% described English as the primary language they use today. Cross tabulations and chi-square tests of association found no significant differences between participants in the different experimental groups. This suggests that any differences found after the experiment was not caused by some preexisting socio-demographic factor which could influence the development of an ethnic consciousness such as social status, gender, or nativity.

Twenty-three participated in condition one, the Control group. These participants came to an office individually and were administered the dependent measures on an individual basis by the investigator or a research assistant. After completion of the questionnaire there was an opportunity to ask questions about the study. All participants received a list of university based Latino resources and social activities/

Fifty participants were assigned to one of two experimental groups: one group was developed to arouse participant's feelings of ethnic identification (Ethnic Identity group) and the other to arouse ethnic consciousness (Consciousness Raising group). These groups were conducted using a Focus Group method (Kreuger, 1988). Each focus group was attended by an average of 12 participants, was two hours in length, and was co-led by two Latino graduate student facilitators, one male and one female, who represented different Latino nationality groups.

In condition two - the Ethnic Identity group, the leaders focused on the meaning of Latino identity and identifying shared values and feelings. The discussion of Latino

identity was primarily positive and dealt with commonalties between Latino students on campus and in the larger society. If the discussion turned to negative experiences on campus, these problems were dealt with through a discussion of the different resources and services available to Latino students.

In condition three - a Consciousness Raising Group, the leaders focused specifically on how Latino status has affected their experiences at the university and on how group efforts for change could be developed and utilized. Each group session began with a discussion of commonalties between Hispanics, but moved quickly to a compilation of problems faced by Latinos at the university and how societal values and conditions contributed to there problems. The problems most commonly mentioned were negative stereotyping and the lack of contact between Latino students. The end of each session was devoted to a group problem solving process which examined how individual Latino students could be involved in ameliorating the situation.

Measures. Measures of ethnic consciousness consisted of a summary scale based on subscales measuring *Action Orientation*, *Power Discontent*, and *Perceived Discrimination*. Previous research on ethnic consciousness among Mexican Americans has found these scales to be valid and reliable measures of the concepts in question (Gutiérrez, 1989a; Hurtado, 1982; Rodriguez, 1986). Alpha coefficients for these scales with this mixed Latino group were above .75.

Direct and indirect measures were developed to assess different aspects of empowerment: *Problem Construal*, *Personal Empowerment*, and *Political Empowerment*. Indirect measures were based on responses to situations presented in six problem vignettes, based on actual experiences of university students, written to have different levels of ambiguity regarding the degree to which the situation was caused by individual or structural factors. Both male and female actors were used for each level of ambiguity. The following is an example of a high ambiguity vignette:

Roberto Jimenez is just starting his sophomore year at the [university]:. When he was in high school he did very well - he had a 3.8 GPA, was in the top 10% of his class, and got over 1200 on the SATs. Yet since he has entered college, he has done less well - his average is only 2.7 and he has taken many incompletes. He is starting to wonder if he is really good enough to make it at the university.

This is in contrast to the following low ambiguity vignette:

Belinda Garcia and her friends have been active in organizing a series of speakers on Latino issues for the campus community. One evening they work hard, putting up posters on the major central campus buildings. She goes to bed that evening, satisfied with a job well done. However, the next morning as she walks to class, she notices that most of the posters have been pulled down and those that remain are covered with ethnic slurs.

In order to measure *Problem Construal*, participants responded to a scale which asked them to identify the primary cause of the problem presented in each vignette. *Personal empowerment* was measured by coding open ended responses to these vignettes according to the amount of action advocated (1= no action, 5 = social mobilization). These responses were then summarized into a scale with an Alpha coefficient of .49.

Direct measures of *political empowerment* were measured by expressed interest in activities to improve the status of Latinos at the university. Participants were asked to indicate their level of interest in specific activities involving the Latino community. Results from a factor analysis on these items generated a two factor solution: a cluster of cultural activities and a cluster of activities requiring involvement and action. Based on these results, six activities (Tutoring, Picketing, Recruiting, Meeting, Demonstrating, and Orienting) were summarized into a Political Empowerment scale. The alpha coefficient for this scale was .87.

The proposed model suggests that ethnic consciousness can result from participation in discussion groups oriented toward developing a heightened sense of ethnic identity, understanding the connection between personal and group problems, and analyzing how individuals can play a role in social change. It is assumed that discussion of cultural similarity between Latinos will produce less ethnic consciousness than a discussion

which involves both cultural similarity and an analysis of group based problems and solutions. The direct effects of group condition on the consciousness and empowerment measures were analyzed using ANOVAS and planned comparisons.

The second part of this model suggests that developing an ethnic consciousness, regardless of its origin will contribute to the empowerment process. A full test of this model would require a longitudinal design. However, multivariate techniques can be useful for showing the magnitude of the relationships between these different variables. This relationship between ethnic consciousness and empowerment, across groups, was tested through multiple regression and path analysis.

Results

Analyses to assess the relationship between participation in the three different groups and ethnic consciousness and empowerment used oneway analysis of variance with one set of *a priori* orthogonal planned comparisons and a polynomial test of linearity. The *a priori* planned comparisons assessed the statistical significance of any observed differences between the Control group and the two experimental groups and between the Ethnic Identity and the Consciousness Raising group. The model predicted that the two experimental groups together would have higher scores than the control group and that a significant linear trend would be found in the results (Controls < Ethnic Identity < Consciousness Raising).

The first analysis looked at the group effects on the measure of ethnic consciousness (see Table 1). Results supported the prediction that the highest levels of ethnic consciousness would be associated with the consciousness raising group and the lowest levels with the control group [$F(2,72) = 9.96, p < .001$]. A statistically significant difference was also observed between the Ethnic Identity and Consciousness Raising groups together in contrast with the Control group, [$F(70) = 2.16, p < .05$].

In investigating the effects of the experimental groups on empowerment the first analyses considered group effects on the construal of situations in the problem vignettes and the second assessed group effects on personal empowerment. The hypothesis predicted that individuals in the Consciousness Raising group would be the most likely to construe problems as relating to Latino status, rather than personal characteristics or behaviors of the actors. An ANOVA on Problem Construal by Groups supported this prediction (See Table 2). Participants in the Consciousness Raising Group were more likely to relate personal problems to structural factors than those in the Ethnic Identity or Control groups [$F(2,70) = 4.86, p < .05$]. The planned contrast between the Ethnic Identity and Consciousness Raising group was also statistically significant, [$t(70) = 2.29 p < .03$]. The greatest difference was between the Consciousness Raising group and the other two groups .

Results on Personal Empowerment were also in the expected direction (Table 3). Participants in the Consciousness Raising group had higher scores on Personal Empowerment than did those in the Control Group or the Ethnic Identity group [$F(2, 72) = 10.76, p < .001$]. The primary difference was between the Control and Ethnic Identity groups and the Consciousness Raising group.

Analysis of Variance on the Political Empowerment (Table 4), showed that participants in the Consciousness Raising group had higher scores than those in the Control or Ethnic Identity groups. These trends were not significant at the .05 level.

The relationship between ethnic consciousness and empowerment was tested with regression and path analysis. An additive model was developed to test the effects of Ethnic Consciousness, Problem Construal and Personal Empowerment on Political Empowerment:

$$\text{Political Empowerment} = \beta + \text{Ethnic Consciousness} + \text{Problem Construal} \\ + \text{Personal Empowerment} + e$$

Results from this regression analysis indicate that the only significant predictor in this equation is Ethnic Consciousness (Table 5). The overall regression model accounted for 39% of the variance in Political Empowerment and is significant at the .001 level.

Empowerment theory suggests that the connection between ethnic consciousness and empowerment may be mediated by ways in which problems are construed and through the development of a sense of personal empowerment. This assumption was examined through a path model which looked at the interrelationships among Ethnic Consciousness, Personal Empowerment, Problem Construal, and Political Empowerment.

In order to plot out the relationships among these three predictor variables, regression analyses were run which looked at the joint effects of Ethnic Consciousness, Personal Empowerment, and Problem Construal on Political Empowerment and which looked at the effects of Ethnic Consciousness on the mediating variables of Personal Empowerment and Problem Construal. Partial betas were then entered into the model.

Results from this Path Model (Figure 2) indicate that Ethnic Consciousness had statistically significant effects on both Problem Construal and Personal Empowerment, but the direct and indirect influences on each dependent variable differ. Most of the change in Political Empowerment can be accounted for by the direct effect of Ethnic Consciousness, this suggests that the effects of Problem Construal and Personal Empowerment are minimal when predicting behavioral intention.

Discussion

What do these results from the experiment tell us about the empowerment process? Taking each research question separately, the following pattern of results emerges:

1. How can ethnic consciousness be developed among Latinos?

Data from the ANOVAs suggest that group discussion and problem solving processes can contribute to the development of a Latino ethnic consciousness. Participants in the Consciousness Raising group had a higher overall mean score on Ethnic

Consciousness, than those in the other two groups, with participants in the Control group with the lowest levels of Ethnic Consciousness and participants in the Consciousness Raising group with the highest. This suggests that in order for Latinos to develop a sense of ethnic consciousness, simple group contact or discussion concerning ethnic identity will not be as influential as discussion which involves a critical appraisal of the social situation and the generation of solutions to problems related to Latino status.

2. To what degree does ethnic consciousness among Latinos contribute to the belief that specific individual, interpersonal, or community problems are related to group status and power?

Data from the ANOVA on Problem Construal suggests that developing an ethnic consciousness can encourage individuals to attribute problem situations to group status. Participants in the Consciousness Raising group were much more likely to attribute the cause of specific problems to the social system than those in the Control and Ethnic Identity groups. The greatest difference was between the Consciousness Raising group and the two other groups.

3. To what degree does ethnic consciousness among Latinos affect the types of strategies endorsed for solving specific individual, interpersonal, or community problems?

Results from the ANOVA and regression on Personal Empowerment indicates that ethnic consciousness can encourage individuals to develop action oriented and group based strategies to problems. Participants in the Consciousness Raising group were more likely than those in the other two groups to suggest collective strategies for change.

3. To what degree does a sense of ethnic consciousness contribute to Political Empowerment?

Results from this study supported the theoretical proposition that ethnic consciousness can contribute to political empowerment. Path analysis and regression analyses indicated that for the total sample Ethnic Consciousness accounted for most of the variance in Political Empowerment.

Conclusions

Results from this experiment supported the theoretical propositions regarding the process of consciousness raising and the importance of ethnic consciousness to empowerment. Participants in the consciousness raising condition had the highest scores on ethnic consciousness, were more likely to attribute problems of Latinos to social structural factors and to suggest collective solutions to individual problems. Participants in all group sessions, regardless of group content, were more likely to indicate an interest in activities to benefit the Latino community. Multiple regression and path analysis indicated a strong direct effect of ethnic consciousness on political empowerment.

Although this group of students is not representative of the Latino population at large, this study is a first step in identifying how the empowerment process can take place. For those interested in creating methods for empowerment these findings suggest that efforts should involve a group context in which consciousness raising techniques are employed. This experiment suggests that group contact alone is sufficient for increasing an individual's intention to become more politically involved. However, the impact of raising consciousness on problem construal suggests that its potential influence on the direction of that involvement can be significant. Additional research is needed which can further investigate the influence of ideology, analysis, and consciousness in interaction with efficacy on the process of political empowerment.

The empowerment perspective presents one way in which the social work profession can reconcile the often competing goals of individual casework and social change. This study suggests that this reconciliation can result in a vital practice integration of the personal and the political. In the consciousness raising session, participants in this study were able to move quickly from a consideration of common cultural traits and values to an awareness of the political nature of their status as Latinos. This was accomplished with a group process which focused simultaneously on group commonalty, group status,

and group problem solving. This suggests that empowerment need not only be a goal for social work with Latinos: it can become a method of practice.

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Table One: Mean Ethnic Consciousness Scores by Group:

Scale	Groups			Grand Mean (n=73)
	1 Control (n=23)	2 Ethnic Identity (n=24)	3 Consciousness Raising (n=26)	
M	2.63	2.97	3.24	2.96
SD	.80	.58	.61	.67

Note: higher scores indicate greater levels of ethnic consciousness.

Table Two: Mean Scores on Problem Construal Scale by Group:

Scale	Groups			Grand Mean (n=73)
	1 Control (n=23)	2 Ethnic Identity (n=24)	3 Consciousness Raising (n=26)	
M	2.85	2.88	3.39	3.05
SD	.93	.85	.77	.85

Note: higher scores indicate interpretations focused on larger system responsibility.

Table Three: Mean Scores on Personal Empowerment Scale by Group

Scale	Groups			Grand Mean (n=73)
	1 Control (n=23)	2 Ethnic Identity (n=24)	3 Consciousness Raising (n=26)	
M	2.70	2.62	3.13	2.83
SD	.47	.50	.40	.51

Note: higher scores indicate strategies involving larger system change.

Table Four: Mean Scores on Political Empowerment Scale by Group

Scale	Groups			Grand Mean (n=73)
	1 Control (n=23)	2 Ethnic Identity (n=24)	3 Consciousness Raising (n=26)	
M	2.75	3.24	3.28	3.10
SD	1.22	.96	.83	1.02

Note: higher scores indicate greater interest in involvement in Latino community.

Table Five: Multiple Regression Model of Ethnic Consciousness and Political Empowerment

$R^2 = .3986$ $R^2_{adj} = .3725$ $F = 15.24$ $p < .000$

Predictor	B	Beta	t
Ethnic Consciousness	.8641	.5971	5.938
Personal Empowerment	.0091	.0044	.046
Problem Construal	.0950	.0817	.0877

Figure One: Components of Critical Consciousness

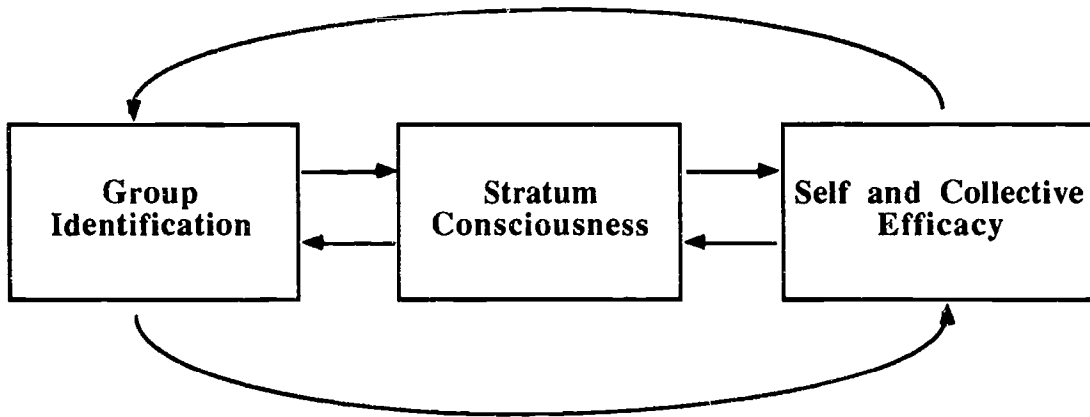


Figure Two: Path Model: Connection between Consciousness and Political Empowerment

