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The Ecology of Empowerment: Predicting Participation in Community Organizations

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The community empowerment model of grassroots organizing is briefly described. A particular ecological framework of physical, economic, and social environmental predictors of citizen participation in grassroots community organizations is presented. Individual and block-level (contextual) survey and observational data from New York City, Baltimore, and Salt Lake City were used to predict residents' participation in such organizations, cross-sectionally and after a one-year time lag. Longitudinal data from one city were used to predict the viability of block associations seven years later. Crime and fear were unrelated to participation. Defensible space, territoriality, and physical incivilities were sometimes negatively and sometimes positively related to participation. Income, home ownership, minority status, and residential stability were positively, but inconsistently, related to participation. Community-focused social cognitions (organizational efficacy, civic responsibility, community attachments) and behaviors (neighboring, volunteer work through churches and other community organizations) were consistently and positively predictive of participation at both the

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individual and block levels. The model explained up to 28% of the variance in individual participation and up to 52% of the variance in block-level participation. Implications for theory, research, and community organizing are discussed.

The local community is an important level at which to understand grassroots organizing. Interest in participation in community organizations has increased as an antidote to the alienating and disempowering growth of our mass society and its institutions (Perkins, 1995). Theoretically, citizen participation fosters self-efficacy as residents work collectively to solve community problems. Its mandate by liberals in federal legislation and grants and its confusion with antigovernment voluntarism by conservatives has given participatory community interventions in crime prevention, health care, and other services uncommon bipartisan political support. Furthermore, community participation and empowerment are seen as having great heuristic value for applied psychological theory, research, and practice across many settings and levels of analysis (Perkins, 1995; Zimmerman, 1990). Thus, it is essential to understand why some individuals and communities participate more actively than others.

Citizen participation is important to all kinds of grassroots organizing, but is especially vital to the community empowerment model. This can be understood fully only in the broader context of different types of grassroots organizations, including groups tied to particular social movements or issues, political pressure groups, locally organized community action groups and pseudogovernmental councils, and self-help, mutual assistance, or group pride associations. Kahn (1991) identifies three kinds of grassroots organizing: (a) labor organizing; (b) issue, or advocacy, organizing (i.e., not necessarily tied to a particular locale); and (c) community organizing (i.e., for social, economic, and environmental development). Eliciting and maintaining active participation among members, potential members, and even leaders of the organization is one of the biggest challenges of grassroots organizing of all kinds (Kahn, 1991).

In contrast to labor unions, "special interest" advocacy organizing has increased in terms of the number of organizations, their nominal membership (more so than the actual level of grassroots participation), and their clout. But issue organizations, even (perhaps especially) those advocating on behalf of the disenfranchised, typically rely on professional lawyers and lobbyists to advocate *for* the membership, or more general classes of people, rather than actively involving and empowering the majority of those whose issues are advocated. Furthermore, they usually focus on changes in particular laws or policies, but not necessarily on changing the basic power relationships between the grassroots and decision-making bodies (Perkins, 1995).

Community organizing has maintained more of an emphasis on the mobilization and active participation of rank-and-file membership than either labor or issue organizing. Citizen participation in grassroots community organizations

can be viewed as either an integral component of empowerment or as both a cause and effect of empowerment (Perkins, 1995; Zimmerman, 1990). In either case, the two concepts are closely linked. Political organizers on virtually every issue and at every level of policy-making share a growing affinity for the populist rhetoric of empowerment (Boyte & Riessman, 1986). But it is small community-based organizations and service-delivery programs that actually apply empowerment concepts most clearly (Perkins, 1995). The crucial early stages of community organizing and later organization and leader development all involve important processes of citizen participation and empowerment (Florin & Wandersman, 1990).

Professional organizers from the Midwest Academy in Chicago and Citizens Committee for New York City have identified six basic steps to organizing. Each step relies heavily on a democratic process (or even consensus) among members of the affected community. The steps are (a) identify problems in the community or organization (needs assessment), (b) turn the problems into issues (i.e., make the issues concrete and specific, prioritize them, and choose one that is "winnable" and that people will rally around), (c) develop a flexible strategy and specific tactics, (d) involve a sufficient number of people for the strategy, (e) look for a reaction to the strategy (evaluate), (f) build on that reaction to maintain and increase participation and momentum of the organization.

The Ecology of Community Grassroots Participation and Empowerment

This article uses an ecological perspective to examine predictors of individual participation in community-based grassroots organizations and, at the aggregate level, the viability of grassroots block and neighborhood organizing. In the present studies, we use "ecological" to mean sensitivity to measuring the phenomena of interest at multiple levels of analysis, over time, and by focusing on its multifaceted (physical, economic, and social) environment.

Previous research shows that participants' economic resources or investment (e.g., home ownership) and the material benefit of protecting those investments are important reasons for participating in grassroots community organizations (Hyman & Wright, 1971; Prestby et al., 1990). We systematically examine these and, in particular, some of the more malleable and communitarian reasons that might allow all communities, especially ones with fewer material resources, to increase grassroots participation. We will draw from extensive, longitudinal survey data collected across three studies (in New York City, Baltimore, and Salt Lake City) to determine the relative importance of various community environmental, economic, and social-psychological causes of citizen participation in grassroots community improvement organizations.

Community organizing typically involves residents acting collectively, with little or no professional help, to take control of their neighborhoods and obtain

better city services, to fight crime, to engage local youths in prosocial activities, to protest and clean up environmental problems, or merely organize a block party (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). In our research, relevant grassroots organizations are those engaged in these sorts of broad-based, community development activities. These organizations include block and neighborhood voluntary associations that work, usually in cooperation with city government agencies, to improve the social and economic climate and beautify the physical environment of the community, and to empower residents to gain control over crime, housing, and other neighborhood problems. This definition is consistent, on a general level, with the international community development literature (Craig, Mayo & Taylor, 1990; Friedmann, 1992) and with the other articles in this section.

Self-interest vs. community interest. Although Americans have long been characterized by a rugged individualism, that identity masks an even older tradition of communitarian commitment, assistance, and participation. Indeed, more than 150 years ago, Tocqueville (as cited in Bellah et al., 1986) untangled this apparent paradox by recognizing our moral and practical interdependence (one principle of what we would now call the social ecology of the community) and suggesting that it is precisely Americans' unique sense of personal efficacy and self-interest that continues to make us participate, more than most countries, in civic associations engaged in solving community problems (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978).

But are self-efficacy and economic self-interest the only, or even major, causes of citizen participation? Research has uncovered information on other individual psychological dimensions (e.g., skills, attitudes, self identity) and intra- and intergroup processes (e.g., communication and group dynamics, group identity, coalition building) of participation in grassroots community organizations (Alford & Scoble, 1968; Bettencourt, Dillman, & Wollman, this issue; Kroeker, this issue; Pratkanis, & Turner, this issue; Zander, 1990) and of empowerment, more generally (Perkins, 1995; Yeich, this issue; Zimmerman, 1990).

Participation in formal grassroots organizations is distributed in fairly uneven demographic and geographic patterns (Perkins et al., 1990). Due perhaps to a combination of few material resources and severe problems, many (especially lower income and rental) neighborhoods have difficulty recruiting and maintaining participation. This lends some urgency to the search for accurate and useful community-focused predictors of participation.

The study of grassroots citizen participation and empowerment is clearly a complicated enterprise. In the present study, similar to community development itself, community predictors of participation can be divided into social, economic, and physical environmental characteristics and the relative stability or transience of those characteristics. Relatively stable factors, such as the built environment and community economic and demographic characteristics, are seen as

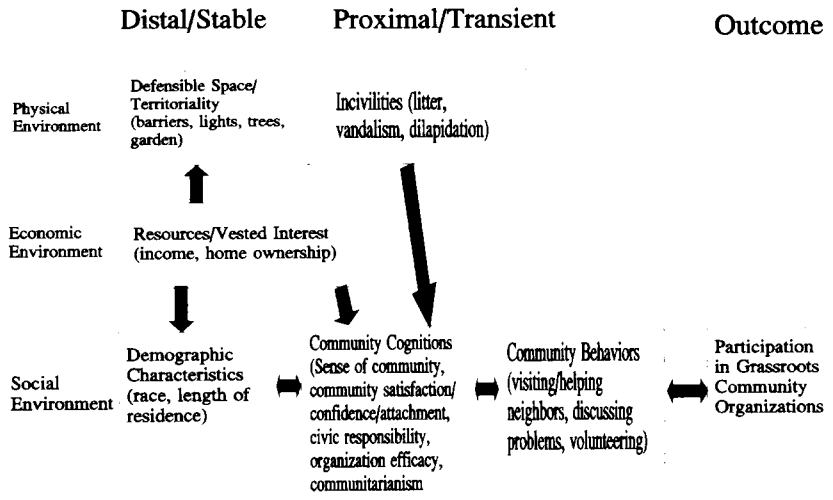

Fig. 1. An ecological framework for participation in grassroots community organizations.

important shapers of more transient features of the physical environment; of residents' community-focused behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes; and of the social climate those psychological attributes create at the block and neighborhood level. We would argue that these social and community psychological characteristics are, in turn, key predictors of the development of grassroots community organizations (or lack thereof). Figure 1, adapted from Perkins et al. (1990), outlines the proposed theoretical framework. The five broad clusters of predictor variables are explained below.

First, people come and go, but the *physical environment* contains some of the most stable attributes of a community and the theory's most distal correlates of participation. Architectural and urban planning features of the built environment that facilitate social interaction and a proprietary sense among residents and that reduce crime may increase participation. These features have been labeled "defensible space" (Newman, 1972) and include narrower streets with less automobile traffic (Appleyard, 1981), outdoor lighting, and real and symbolic barriers that define shared private space. Defensible space features often overlap with territoriality, in which residents come to define spaces as important and controllable extensions of themselves. Territorial behaviors also include personalizations (e.g., a well-maintained garden, decorations; Brown, 1987; Taylor, 1988). Territorial markers are thought to enhance, as well as symbolize, social cohesion (Brown & Werner, 1985) and may therefore increase participation. More transient than most defensible space features are physical signs of disorder, or "incivilities" (e.g., litter, graffiti, unkempt or dilapidated property), which have been related to fear of crime (Perkins & Taylor, 1996). Many residents join

neighborhood improvement associations in order to reduce physical incivilities on the block. Although the physical environment is *typically* stable, that does not imply that it is unmalleable. The important implications of this for grassroots community change are addressed in the Discussion.

Until recently, research on civic participation concentrated mainly on demographic correlates. Blocks and even neighborhoods sometimes undergo rapid change. But more often, the economic characteristics and social demography of a community evolves slowly. At the individual and household level, these variables are, of course, very stable, if not permanent. With regard to *economic factors,* those with more resources (household income) and vested interest in the community (home ownership) may be more concerned with neighborhood maintenance and improvement. In the face of community problems, they may also be more likely to either organize (Hyman & Wright, 1971; Milbrath, 1965) or move.

Regarding *social demographics,* African Americans have been found to participate in grassroots voluntary associations more than Whites at the same income level (Williams, Babchuk, & Johnson, 1973). Minorities experience more discrimination and a higher rate of social, economic, and environmental problems. They also may be less likely to have informal connections to power. Both of these disadvantages make grassroots activity more necessary in minority communities. Another social demographic variable, length of residence, may encourage stronger community-focused cognitions and behaviors (below) and motivate residents to participate in grassroots community activity.

The most proximate ecological correlates of grassroots participation consist of residents' individual and collective *community-focused cognitions and behaviors.* In general, we believe that community social cohesion, which promotes and reflects greater social interaction, information sharing, and feelings of solidarity, makes residents more likely to solve their problems collectively. This is discussed below in the context of two previous studies. One other possible predictor of participation that has not been examined yet in those studies is residents' sense of civic responsibility.

The Nashville and New York City studies. There have been two major studies that have addressed community-focused predictors of citizen participation in block associations. Unger and Wandersman (1983) examined neighboring behavior (such as loaning a tool or looking after each other's house) on residential blocks in Nashville, Tennessee, and found that informal assistance facilitated block organizing. They also found that once a block organized, association members engaged in more social interaction, which may lead to more neighboring.

From the same study, Florin and Wandersman (1984) derived person—community predictors of participation based on cognitive social learning vari-

ables (CSLVs; Mischel, 1973). Their version of the CSLV "expectancies" includes self- and collective efficacy, which are similar to the concept of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990). Although empowerment is thought not only to lead to participation in community organizations but to result from it, expectancies did not enter Florin and Wandersman's individual-level stepwise discriminant analysis. Instead they found "encoding strategies" (residents' perception of and dissatisfaction with community problems) to be a better predictor of participation. One problem with this finding is that community satisfaction and perceptions may be related to participation in different ways (Perkins et al., 1990). Residents may be satisfied with their community as a place to live and, at the same time, critical of community problems. Satisfaction *alone* may *encourage* participation by enhancing other social cognitions and behaviors. Being satisfied with one's community may give residents a greater sense of community and collective efficacy and may result in more neighboring behavior, all of which are predicted to lead to greater collective participation. Thus, community satisfaction is used in the present studies without perceived problems.

A psychological sense of community is also important to neighborhood organization (Ahlbrandt, 1984). Chavis and Wandersman (1990) have clarified this process at the individual level (in the Nashville data) by showing that, over time, a sense of community can lead, through greater self-efficacy, to collective participation. Their results also suggest that participation itself further enhances an individual's sense of community.

The second major study of block associations (Perkins et al., 1990) was conducted in New York City and provided the conceptual foundation for the present article. It was the first study to systematically examine both the physical and social context of crime, fear, and citizen participation in community organizations. But its analyses were entirely cross-sectional and at the block level. Despite substantial block-level variability, reported crime, perceived crime problems, victimization, fear, and informal social control were all not significantly related to participation. The built environment, territoriality, neighboring, block satisfaction, and organizational efficacy, however, were significantly related to block association participation, even after controlling for income, length of residence, and race. Their results suggest that perceived and actual problems, or deficiencies, in the physical environment may serve as catalysts for participation, but that community social cohesion may be an even more effective enabler of participation. Blocks with more neighboring, satisfaction, and perceived block association efficacy had significantly greater participation.

From the same study, Prestby et al. (1990) found that active members and leaders were more likely to be homeowners and long-term residents and have more material resources, skills, education, satisfaction, and benefits from the organization, social/political contacts, and involvement in other community organizations than nonmembers. It is still unclear how voluntary service activity

through particular *kinds* of community organizations (e.g., the most common one being religious organizations) might be related to participation in grassroots organizing. Does it reduce the time available for grassroots activity or does it attract volunteers, with their enhanced skills, interests, and awareness of social problems, to grassroots participation?

The practical literature on community organizing, participation, and empowerment has considered many of the above predictors, often in different terms (Kahn, 1991). But much of the literature is based on anecdotal evidence lacking quantitative empirical support. We hope to offer a more complete, empirically sound as well as practical understanding of many of the reasons why some grassroots community organizations flourish while others, perhaps most, disband, become dormant, lose momentum, or fail to materialize. We further hope that this understanding will be generalizable to at least three urban areas and possibly others. Any differences found between cities will also be important.

In spite of its promise as an area of both study and intervention, truly ecological studies of community organizing and participation have been few. Most studies of grassroots participation have been based on cross-sectional surveys and have ignored the temporal dimension and objective, nonparticipant observations. Multilevel analyses are also rare. But it is important to know whether a given predictor of participation operates (and operates the same) at the individual level, the group level, or both levels. For example, if a given social or physical predictor is more strongly associated with participation at the individual level, it suggests that residents' perceptions of that predictor are subjective and may be more determinative of participation. If, however, that predictor is more strongly associated with participation at the community level, then it suggests not only real physical or social ("climate") differences between communities, but also that participation has to do, at least in part, with those differences. Without a better, more generalizable understanding of the individual and contextual reasons for residents' participation or nonparticipation over time, it is difficult to design programs or policies to encourage the development and maintenance of grassroots organizations that can help improve the quality of community life.

The Present Studies

This article examines resident survey data and independent observational ratings of the physical environment to predict residents' participation in grassroots community organizations in the form of voluntary associations engaged in block and neighborhood improvement activities. Data are from three studies in three different cities (Salt Lake City, Baltimore, and New York City), analyzed at the *individual* and (aggregated) *block level* (i.e., the addresses fronting on both sides of a street bounded by cross streets, considered by residents and researchers as a more ecologically valid social unit than square census blocks; Perkins et al., 1990). In Salt Lake, just one wave of data has been collected so far. In Baltimore

and New York, a 12–15 month follow-up survey was conducted. In New York, seven-year follow-up interviews were conducted with organization leaders.

The organizations vary slightly within and between the cities (see Table 1). But all are small, local private, nonprofit organizations that are organized and staffed by volunteer local residents. Their leadership is elected by the members. They are formally independent of, but sanctioned by, cooperate with, and may receive small grants or other help from local government. They are all explicitly multiissue organizations that try to address whatever shared community problems arise, including crime, drug-dealing, youth gangs, graffiti, city planning and zoning, housing and community development issues, traffic, parking, public eyesores and nuisances, and organizing block parties and recreation activities.

Sampling. A multistage cluster sampling procedure was used in all three cities. Blocks with fewer than eight homes, public housing projects, large-scale apartment complexes, and predominantly commercial blocks were excluded. In Salt Lake and Baltimore, blocks were selected at random with probability proportionate to size. Every third household up to eight per block was selected. A random adult was chosen within each selected household. In New York, clusters of block associations were recruited to participate and then nearby nonorganized blocks were selected for comparison. On New York blocks, all homes with published phone numbers were included in the sample frame.

Resident surveys. All the surveys include a series of questions that create a scale of residents' local *grassroots community organization participation.* It includes attending a meeting in the past year (or two) of the local community improvement voluntary association or of a crime/gang/graffiti-prevention project (which are run by the voluntary associations), and/or doing any work for those kinds of organizations in the past year (or two). To create a more valid dependent variable, block-level participation in New York includes activity level of the organization based on a separate survey of organization members (at 0 years) and leader interviews (at seven years, see below) as well as the resident survey items used in the other studies. Because Salt Lake City has a lower level of participation than the other two cities, we included "contacted the government or community council about a neighborhood problem in the past 12 months" as part of the dependent variable in that study. (New York had the highest level of participation, but it was not a random sample.)

In addition to economic (*income, home ownership*) and social demographic predictors (*race, length of residence*), the other surveyed predictors of grassroots participation used in the present analyses include a variety of questions about respondents' *community-focused cognitions and behaviors* (listed in Results under "Data Reduction"). The surveys also include various questions about block and neighborhood physical and social problems (e.g., unkempt property, crime, etc.). The wording and composition of measures in all three studies were pur-

Table 1. Three Studies of Participation in Grassroots Community Organizations

Variable	City					
	I. Salt Lake City	II. Baltimore		III. New York City		
Type of organization	Community councils	Neighborhood associations		Block associations		
Year	1994–95	1987	1988	1985	1986	1992
N of individuals	282	412	305	1,081	438	33 in depth, 22 brief
N of blocks	60	50	50	47	47	44
N of neighborhoods	2	50	50	3	3	3
Respondents/block	4.7	8.2	6.1	23	9.3	1.25
Survey response rate	60%	72%	74%	57%	43%	89%
Survey format	Phone/in person	Phone/in person		Telephone (1992: phone/in person)		
% Ethnic minority	21% Hispanic[a], 7% other	52% Black, 2% other		49% Black, 4% other		
% Home owner	71%	58.5%		62%		
SES	Working class	Cross-section of city		Poor→lower middle		
EI raters paired?	Yes	Yes		No		

[a]Spanish translation of survey used as needed in Salt Lake City.

posely kept either identical or very similar. The scales (all based on standardized scores) were established in the New York and Baltimore studies using principal components (PC) analysis. The internal consistency of scales was generally high (Cronbach's alpha $> .70$). Secondary PC analyses determined the variables used here and are explained in the Results section.

Some questions were not included in all three studies but are comparable to questions from the other studies. In New York, sense of *civic responsibility* ("for what happens on the block") loaded as a factor with *perceived efficacy* of block associations. In the present analyses, a composite of those two variables were used in New York; perceived efficacy of local community organizations was used in Salt Lake; responsibility for what happens in front of one's house was used in Baltimore. As a proxy for the independent variable *voluntary community service work in other organizations,* church group meeting attendance was used in Salt Lake; work done for a church or synagogue group was used in Baltimore; and membership in "any organizations other than a block association that are concerned with solving community problems" was used in New York.

The assumption that residential blocks are an ecologically valid and theoretically important unit of analysis and that the social climate variables represent legitimate block-level constructs was verified using the New York data. Individual-level analyses of variance comparing the blocks as a group effect confirmed that on each survey variable, individuals were found to be nonindependent of their block (justifying aggregated block-level analysis of the data).

Environmental inventories (EI). These instruments are a departure from the common practice of relying solely upon the subjective reports of residents, which may be subject to method bias. The purpose of the EI is to measure, as objectively as possible, the physical environment of urban residential blocks. The procedure involves observation by trained raters of two broad categories of physical cues on both nonresidential and, in the present analyses, residential property that have been associated with crime, fear, and indicators of neighborhood vitality or decline (Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Perkins & Taylor, 1996): (1) *Defensible space* includes outdoor lighting, fences and other barriers on residential property, and at the block level in New York and Baltimore, the narrowness of the street. In the present analyses, defensible space also includes territorial markers (gardens, shrubbery, trees), which symbolize the demarcation and control of outdoor space, especially private property. (2) *Incivilities* include symbolic signs of community disorder, such as litter, graffiti, and dilapidated or unkempt property. The selection of items for the present analyses was determined by environmental cues that have been linked, theoretically or empirically, to citizen participation (Perkins et al., 1990). In the present analyses, incivilities combines resident perceptions from the survey and EI ratings except at the individual level in New York, where only resident perceptions of block incivilities were available.

In New York, which is organized at the block level, raters and telephone interviewers were "blind" to whether a particular block was organized. Interrater reliability, or agreement, has been a problem for many observational measures. There was only one rater per block in New York, but in pilot-testing with three raters on 10 blocks and 120 properties, interrater agreement was high for most items. Pairs of raters were used in the other two studies. Interrater agreement was measured in Baltimore and found to be high at both the property and aggregated block level. For more information on this measure, see Perkins et al. (1992).

Block Booster Study revisited. In 1992, seven years after the initial data collection, a follow-up study was conducted on the same blocks from the New York study. An assessment was made of whether there was currently a block association on each block and its level of *participation, activity, and viability.* In many cases, block associations had disbanded or become less active. In others, previously unorganized blocks had organized block associations.

These block-level assessments were based on semistructured interviews with 33 current or former block leaders and on field notes from brief, impromptu interviews with other residents on 44 of the blocks. The status of the remaining 3 blocks could not be determined. Responses to questions about the current level of block association activity, the frequency and recency of meetings and other activities, and attendance at the most recent meeting and activity were content analyzed by two raters.

Blocks were coded on a 4-point scale as follows: blocks with no active organization (no meetings for over a year and nobody believes the organization is still active) = 0; dormant organization (no meetings in the past 12 months, but leader or residents believe it is still viable) = 1; moderately active (meetings held within the past year, but irregularly) = 2; active (meeting regularly—either monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly) = 3. The two ratings for each block were averaged. The two rates correlated $r = .91$. The mean across all 44 blocks was 1.5.

Results

Our present goal is to broaden our understanding of the factors related to grassroots community participation and empowerment and to examine the predictive value of those factors across different cities, levels of analysis, and time lags. The data encompass approximately 2500 interviews with residents of 150 blocks in three cities, at both the individual and block levels of analysis, and over time lags of zero, one, and seven years.

Data reduction. Given the limited block-level sample sizes (ranging from 44 to 60), it was necessary to reduce the number of independent variables for regression analyses. This was accomplished three ways. First, variables were excluded if they were not measured in all three studies and there were no proxy

variables to substitute. For example, communitarianism (the importance people place on the community and on working to improve it) was not measured in Baltimore, but correlated positively with participation in New York and Salt Lake. The question as to whether neighbors watch after each other (or go their own way) was asked only in New York and was consistently and positively correlated to participation, especially at the block level, cross-sectionally (r = .52), after one year (r = .50), and after seven years (r = .20). Education and recent major home improvements and repairs were measured in two cities and were inconsistently correlated with participation.

A second rationale for reducing one whole class of predictors was that, despite considerable individual and block-level variation in crime and victimization, *none* of the crime-related indicators, perceptions, or fears were consistently correlated with participation in any city, at either level of analysis. The only significant crime-related effect was that (at the individual level in Baltimore and block level in New York) those who felt their neighborhood was becoming more dangerous were *less* likely to participate.

The third method of data reduction was to create composite variables. The physical environmental variables were combined on an a priori basis into two variables: defensible space (including territorial markers) and incivilities (which includes resident perceptions as well as independent ratings). A secondary PC analysis of the remaining social environmental variables resulted in fairly consistent factors across all three cities. One factor, labeled *community attachments,* includes the social cognitions sense of community, place attachment, satisfaction with one's block and confidence in its future, and knowing one's neighbors. A *neighboring* factor includes the social behaviors assisting (e.g., watching a neighbor's home while they are away, lending a neighbor food or a tool), visiting, and discussing a neighborhood problem with one's neighbors. Other variables failed to load with either of those factors and were used separately. As explained above, sense of *civic responsibility* was used in Baltimore. *Perceived efficacy of local community organizations* was used in Salt Lake. And because those two variables loaded together in the New York PC analysis, they were combined in that study. The final variable, *other voluntary community service work* loaded by itself in Baltimore and New York and so is used separately in the following analyses.

Individual and Block-Level Correlations and Multiple Regressions

Table 2 reports individual-level correlation and multiple regression coefficients, and Table 3 reports block-level coefficients, predicting participation in grassroots community organizations across the three studies and up to three time lags. Path analysis was not used because of the low block/variable ratio and the large number of data sets to present.

The physical environmental predictors were entered first in the clustered

Table 2. Individual-Level Correlations and Multiple Regressions Predicting Participation in Grassroots Community Organizations from the Economic, Social, and Physical Environment Across Multiple Cities and Time Lags

	City				
	I. Salt Lake	II. Baltimore		III. New York City	
		Time Lag			
	0 years (n = 282)	0 years (n = 412)	1 year (n = 305)	0 years (n = 1081)	1 year (n = 438)
Cluster	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$
Variable	r/β	r/β	r/β	r/β	r/β
Physical environment[a]	.01	.07**	.04*	.01**	.02**
Defensible space	.06/−.01	**.26**/.12	**.21**/.08		
Incivilities	.08/.06	**−.13**/.09	−.11/.09	**.12**/.07*	**.15**/.14**
Economic environment	.06**	.08**	.04**	.05**	.01
Household income	**.21**/.18**	**.33**/.18**	**.24**/.07	**.10**/.05	−.03/−.05
Home ownership	**.15**/−.01	**.28**/.08	**.22**/.06	**.22**/.06	**.12**/−.03

Social environment					
Social demographics	.06**	.00	.00	.03**	.05**
Race (% nonwhite)	**−.17**/−.02	−.06/.08	−.09/−.00	**.13**/.12**	**.20**/.19**
Length of residence	**.26**/.16**	.07/−.00	−.00/−.11	**.21**/.07*	**.16**/.09
Social cognitions[b]	.03*	.05**	.08**	.07**	.07**
Efficacy/responsibility	**.19**/.07	**.22**/.03	**.26**/.12	**.24**/.13**	**.22**/.12**
Community attachments	**.17**/−.07	**.33**/.20**	**.30**/.20*	**.20**/.12**	**.18**/.15**
Social behaviors	.16**	.04**	.04**	.09**	.05**
Church/other service[c]	**.38**/.29**	**.16**/.08	**.16**/.10	**.23**/.15**	**.19**/.12**
Neighboring	**.39**/.30**	**.34**/.19**	**.34**/.19**	**.39**/.26**	**.31**/.20**
R^2	.31	.25	.21	.25	.21
Adjusted R^2	.28	.22	.17	.24	.19
F	10.2**	8.1**	5.4**	29.3**	11.8**

Note. Significant r's ($p < .05$, two tailed) in bold. Significance levels for R^2 change and final betas and Fs: $*p < 0.5$, $**p < .01$.

[a]Incivilities = perceived and objective litter, graffiti, unkempt property. Defensible space = outdoor lights; barriers on residential property; trees, shrubs or garden. In Study III, only resident perceptions of block incivilities available at individual level.

[b]Perceived *organizational* efficacy (I); civic responsibility (II); composite of both (III). "Community attachments" include sense of community, block attachment and satisfaction, and knowing one's neighbors.

[c]Church/other service = attend church group meeting (I); church work (II); member of other organization (III).

Table 3. Block-Level Correlations and Multiple Regressions Predicting Participation in Grassroots Community Organizations from the Economic, Social, and Physical Environment Across Multiple Cities and Time Lags[a]

	City					
	I. Salt Lake	II. Baltimore		III. New York City		
	Time Lag					
	0 years (n = 60)	0 years (n = 50)	1 year (n = 50)	0 years (n = 47)	1 year (n = 47)	7 years (n = 44)
Cluster	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$	$R^2\Delta$
Variable	r/β	r/β	r/β	r/β	r/β	r/β
Physical environment	.06	.20**	.14*	.16*	.16**	.12*
Defensible space[b]	−.09/−.04	**.44**/.19	**.37**/.16	**−.34**/−.37*	**−.33**/−.26*	**.29**/.43*
Incivilities	**−.22**/−.00	**−.32**/.09	**−.28**/.04	**.28**/.11	**.29**/.15	.12/.19
Economic environment	.07	.09*	.07	.04	.10*	.01
Household income	**.27**/.27*	**.46**/.27	**.39**/.24	−.09/−.11	**−.24**/−.17	−.10/.18
Home ownership	.14/.06	**.42**/−.05	**.36**/−.06	.12/.22	**.19**/.04	.11/−.46*

Social environment	.00	.03	.01	.01	.09	.22**
Social demographics	−.06/.03	−.06/.19	−.10/.08	**.20**/.04	**.31**/.07	**.29**/.46*
Race (% nonwhite)	.03/−.01	.03/.05	.04/.08	.09/−.26	**.30**/.11	**.28**/.41*
Length of residence	.13*	.05	.03	.25**	.23**	.06
Social cognitions[c]	**.29**/.15	**.38**/.14	**.38**/.25	**.41**/.35**	**.48**/.45**	**.42**/.18
Efficacy/responsibility	**.42**/.14	**.43**/.21	**.34**/.03	**.28**/.19	**.20**/.09	.10/.20
Community attachments	.22**	.03	.02	.13**	.06*	.01
Social behaviors	**.40**/.26*	**.27**/.16	.18/.16	**.50**/.38**	**.35**/.04	**.26**/−.04
Church/other service[d]	**.54**/.37*	**.44**/.16	**.36**/.08	**.46**/.06	**.54**/.27*	.09/.16
Neighboring	.49	.41	.28	.59	.63	.43
R^2	.38	.26	.09	.48	.52	.25
Adjusted R^2	4.5**	2.7*	1.5	5.3**	5.6**	2.4*
F						

Note. Significant r's ($p < .10$, two tailed) in bold. Significance levels for R^2 change and final betas and Fs: $*p < .10$, $**p < .01$.

[a]Block-level participation in Study III includes activity level of the organization.

[b]Outdoor lights, barriers on residential property, trees, shrubs and gardens, and (except in Study I) street narrowness and street lighting.

[c]Perceived *organizational* efficacy (I); civic responsibility (II); composite of both (III). "Community attachments" include sense of community, block attachment and satisfaction, and knowing one's neighbors.

[d]Church/other service = attend church group meeting (I); church work (II); member of other organization (III).

hierarchical regression analyses both because they are among the most stable variables in the model and because, unlike the survey variables, they share little method variance with the dependent variable. The second cluster included the two economic variables, income and home ownership. The social environmental predictors were then entered in three clusters: first the more stable social demographics (race and length of residence), then the community-focused cognitions, and finally the behavioral variables, which Fig. 1 shows as the most proximal predictors of participation.

Not surprisingly with 11 independent variables, many of which were intercorrelated, there were many significant zero-order correlations but relatively few significant betas in the final regression equations. This was especially true at the block level, with its smaller n. As is sometimes prescribed for more stable, aggregated data (Kenny & Lavoie, 1985), the significance criterion was relaxed to $p < .10$ at the block level. All five equations in Table 2 and five of six equations in Table 3 explained a significant amount of variance in grassroots participation (ranging from adjusted R^2s of 17%–28% at the individual level and 25%–52% at the block level).

The physical environment and participation. In Table 2, individual-level analyses of defensible space test the relationship between citizen participation and objective observations of the survey respondents' *own* property, not their reactions to their neighbor's environment. The latter relationship, i.e., the block physical environment as a catalyst of grassroots activity, is examined through the block-level correlations and the incivilities variable, which includes perceived incivilities at both the block and individual level.

The physical environment cluster significantly predicted grassroots participation in 9 of the 11 analyses in Tables 2 and 3. Only in Salt Lake was it nonsignificant. Both kinds of environmental features were significantly related to participation. The correlations were greater at the block than individual level and, except in Salt Lake, were greater for defensible space than incivilities. In New York, the block-level associations between defensible space and participation were negative at zero years and one year, but positive at seven years. This change was a surprise, even after a long lag, because the environment and its effects are generally assumed to be fairly stable. Among the components of defensible space, in New York the correlation for trees, shrubbery, and gardens with participation went from negative (at 0 years) to positive (at 7 years). The correlation for yard barriers went from strongly negative to nonsignificant. Street narrowness was positively correlated at both lags in Baltimore but *negatively* correlated at all three lags in New York. Possible interpretations are presented in the Discussion.

Block-level resident and independent rater perceptions of physical incivilities, such as litter, graffiti and dilapidation, were correlated with participation

negatively in Baltimore and positively in New York. Yet only at the individual level in New York, with its larger sample of respondents and use of survey data without the observational measure, do we find significant (positive) betas for resident perceptions of incivilities predicting participation. In all cities, incivilities correlated with living on a poor, minority block with high turnover. Yet it is interesting to note that those demographics are not responsible for the nonsignificance of incivilities in the block-level New York regressions. Partial correlations between incivilities and participation, controlling for the two economic and two social demographic variables, were near zero in Baltimore but remained significant in New York. Incivilities' strong negative correlations with community-focused social cognitions reduced the final betas for incivilities in all cities.

The economic environment and participation. The economic environment cluster was significant in 6 of the 11 analyses. Household income was positively related to grassroots participation in Salt Lake City and Baltimore. In the New York City data, four of the five correlations between income and participation were *negative* (although none of the betas were significant). This result, and a similar one for race (see below), may be due to the nonrandom selection of neighborhoods in New York and perhaps the nature of problems being addressed. The two most actively organized neighborhoods, both dealing with serious crime and gang problems, were working class and mostly African American and Afro-Caribbean. The third neighborhood was middle class and mostly White.

As expected, home owners were more likely to participate in all three cities, but the only final beta that was significant (Table 3, New York City, seven-year lag) was a suppression effect. The higher block-level than individual-level correlations in Baltimore suggest that, at least in that city, grassroots organizations *may* be less viable in neighborhoods with more rental property.

Social demographics and participation. The social demographics cluster added significantly (beyond the first two clusters) to 4 of the 11 analyses. The effect of race was negligible, especially in Salt Lake and Baltimore. As explained above, minorities were more likely to participate in New York, an effect that held up even after seven years.

Residential stability predicted participation in New York, especially at the lagged block level. Length of residence was also related to participation in Salt Lake at the individual level but not at the block level. It was not a significant predictor at either level in Baltimore. Scatterplots of length of residence in the neighborhood with participation using the individual-level Baltimore data reveal two possible explanations for that surprising noneffect. First, there appeared to be some slight curvilinearity, with most of the very active participants having lived in their neighborhood from 5 to 30 years and both the very new and very old residents less likely to participate at all. Given the large number of new

residents who were completely inactive, one might still expect a significant positive correlation, but, second, the plots also reveal several relative newcomers (less than 5 years) who were very active participants. New residents may also participate in Salt Lake and New York. But the organizations we dealt with in those cities also seem to have many very active, very long-term residents.

Social cognitions and participation. As expected, all four of the community-focused cognitions and behaviors were positively related to participation, although many of the betas were nonsignificant at the block level. The social cognitions cluster was significant in 8 of the 11 analyses, even after controlling for the influence of the first three clusters. The coefficients also clearly suggest that these cognitions define relevant block-level social climates for grassroots organizing, especially in New York, where they explained an additional 25% (0-lag) and 23% (one-year lag) of the variance in participation, and an additional 6% (ns) of the variance in block association viability seven years hence.

At both the individual and block levels, the perceived collective efficacy/civic responsibility factor was positively related to participation, although the betas were significant only in the first two years in New York. Civic responsibility had the largest of any zero-order correlation with block association viability seven years later. [The separate correlations for the components of this composite variable were $r = .42$ ($p < .01$) for civic responsibility and $r = .19$ ($p = .10$) for organizational efficacy.] Even after controlling for the economic and social demographics, it was a significant predictor ($pr = .32$, $p < .05$).

The composite variable "community attachments"—made up of residents' sense of community with their neighbors, their satisfaction with and confidence in their block, feeling attached to one's block as a place to live, and knowing one's neighbors—correlated positively with participation in each city, at both levels of analysis and both cross-sectionally and after a one-year lag. But its beta was significant only at the individual level and not in Salt Lake.

Social behaviors and participation. The community-focused behaviors cluster was significant in 8 of the 11 analyses, even after controlling for the influence of the first four clusters. In Salt Lake, these two variables explained an additional 16% of the variance in organizational participation at the individual level and an additional 22% at the block level. Involvement in religious and other community service organizations was positively related to grassroots participation at both levels and in all three cities, although the Baltimore betas and two of the block-level New York betas were nonsignificant.

Neighboring was also positively related to grassroots participation at both levels and in all three cities, although, at the block level, the Baltimore betas and two of the New York betas were nonsignificant. Across all cities and lags, the

mean zero-order correlation of this variable with participation was $r = .35$ at the individual level and $r = .41$ at the block level.

In sum, the results reveal some interesting patterns across the various data sets. Despite the heavy involvement of the grassroots organizations in all three cities in collective crime and youth gang prevention activities and the inclusion of such activities in our operationalization of participation, crime victimization, perceptions and fears were *not* significantly related (not at either level, not over time, not even cross-sectionally) to participation in any of the cities. Community-focused social cognitions and behaviors were consistently and positively correlated with participation at both the individual and block levels. In most of the equations, these clusters and two or more of the four variables in them added significantly to the prediction of participation. There were also many significant correlations with variables from the physical environment and economic and social demography. But fewer of these resulted in significant betas and the relationship of these three spheres with participation was less consistent, with the size and even the valence of many coefficients changing from city to city.

The overall model explained up to 28% of the variance in individual participation and up to 52% of the variance in block-level participation. Social cognitions and behaviors were responsible for most of that in four of the five individual-level data sets. At the block level, however, the physical, economic, and demographic environment contributed even more than the cognitive and behavioral variables to the Baltimore and seven-year lagged New York equations.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this paper was to explore, across three different cities and studies, the various ecological factors that might help explain why some individuals and communities never participate in grassroots organizing, while others try but give up after a time, and a few manage to build organizations that last. Despite the emphasis on breadth over depth, the present analyses have important implications for grassroots participation and organizing practice, individual and community empowerment, psychological theories of motivation (e.g., self-interest vs. altruism), and future research.

The number of significant ecological predictors of participation that were found is noteworthy, especially given a structural disadvantage in the Salt Lake and Baltimore data. A few of the Baltimore blocks in the study had some block-level grassroots activity. Otherwise, in those two cities, grassroots community development associations are organized at the neighborhood rather than the block level. The rate of participation in community councils (Salt Lake) or neighborhood improvement associations (Baltimore) is generally much lower than in block associations (New York). Furthermore, the variables were aggregated to the block, not the neighborhood, level. And almost all the community-focused

survey questions asked about the block, not the neighborhood. Hence, it was not initially clear whether individual and block-level attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and physical and demographic characteristics would be related to participation in neighborhood-level organizations. It appears that they are, to a great extent.

Another important result was the prediction of block association activity in New York over seven years later. We know of no other study that has examined the viability of grassroots voluntary associations over that long a period of time. This is perhaps due, not only to the difficulties of long-term follow-up research, but also to the short life span of many such organizations. Some variables that predicted participation cross-sectionally or after a one-year lag failed to do so significantly after seven years, whereas the demographic variables seemed to become more important over time. And so what may increase participation in the short run may not in the long run. But the most viable organizations in 1992 were on blocks that seven years earlier already had more long-term residents, more trees, gardens, and outdoor lighting, and were more likely to be in minority neighborhoods and have residents with a sense of civic responsibility and organizational efficacy.

Two of the most consistent predictors across all three studies were informal neighboring and involvement in religious and other community organizations. This finding is noteworthy because it clearly suggests that other ways of helping one's neighbors do not replace participation in multiissue block and neighborhood organizations (which would have resulted in negative correlations). Rather, the more individuals and blocks get involved in helping their neighbors, informally or through religious and other service organizations, the more they also get involved in grassroots community action, perhaps through seeing and sharing other people's problems and concerns.

The results for the physical environmental predictors are a little more difficult to interpret. Defensible space was positively related to participation in Baltimore but, in New York, changed over time from a negative to a positive predictor. It is possible that, in both cities, the *lack* of transient defensible space features, such as shrubs and gardens, acted as a catalyst for grassroots organizing (negative correlation) and the organizing led to more such features (positive correlation) prior to data collection in Baltimore and between years one and seven in New York. Another possibility is that New Yorkers have so many barriers on their property compared to Baltimore that it kept neighbors from getting to know one another until, after seven years, residents overcame those literal obstacles. Street width was negatively related to participation as expected (Appleyard, 1981) in Baltimore but was positively related in New York, where traffic may act as a catalyst to participation.

The effect of incivilities, such as litter, graffiti, and dilapidated property, was also somewhat perplexing. In New York, perceived incivilities appear to act

as a catalyst for greater grassroots participation. In Baltimore and at the block level in Salt Lake, however, the *r*'s for incivilities are significant and negative (some of the betas are positive but nonsignificant). This appears to be largely explained by the significant correlations between incivilities and the economic and social demographics, however. Since crime and fear were unrelated to participation in all three cities, it might make more sense for organizations to focus on reducing physical incivilities than on fighting crime. Although the effects of incivilities on participation were inconsistent, it *may* serve as a catalyst and is probably more winnable than the war on crime, drugs and gangs.

Given these inconsistent findings, depending on the city, level of analysis, and time lag, the model presented in Fig. 1 requires further testing and elaboration. In order to specify the conditions under which a particular variable will have a positive, null, or negative effect on grassroots participation, this and other models should be tested using analytical strategies that better account for group or community and individual-level influences (e.g., Kenny & Lavoie, 1985; Perkins & Taylor, 1996), for the dynamic and bidirectional nature of grassroots participation over time, and for the wealth of qualitative information available in in-depth case studies of grassroots organizing (e.g., Kroeker, this issue).

This research, and this issue of the journal, also have implications for one's approach to data collection. The "Block Booster" (New York City) data are a good example of empowering research design, in which community leaders participated in a collaborative process with researchers in the development of measures and the collection of data (Chavis, Stucky, & Wandersman, 1983). It was also an example of action research (Lewin, 1946) insofar as reports of the data were presented to a portion of the community in user-friendly form as an impetus for their interpretation and action planning. In New York City, the two follow-up data collections can be viewed as a test of that data feedback intervention.

For social psychologists interested in studying grassroots community organization formation and functioning, many underexplored applications of theory and research remain (Zander, 1990). Promising areas of psychological research on grassroots participation include motivation (e.g., resource exchange, costs and incentives; Prestby et al., 1990) and cognitive social learning theory (e.g., self efficacy, organizational expectancies; Florin & Wandersman, 1984). For example, the degree of control residents feel they have over the direction their life is taking or the decisions that affect their life *should* be an important predictor of grassroots participation, since locus of control and participation are both integral dimensions of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990). In the two present studies that measured locus of control, however, internality was not significantly related to participation in Salt Lake and only modestly so in Baltimore. Along with the inconsistent relationships found with the economic variables, this would seem to undermine the assumption by many, starting with

Tocqueville (Bellah et al., 1986), that participation is based largely on a combination of self-efficacy and self-interest.

In contrast, the ecological context of the community, and individuals' attitudes toward it, were generally much greater predictors of participation. This is an important finding for grassroots organizations, because there is little to nothing that one can do to change one's personality or demographic profile. But residents can and often do react to and enhance the more transient social and physical environment of their community by organizing a block party, cleanup or other grassroots activity.

In conclusion and in spite of a few variations in the proposed model across multiple cities, organizations, methods, levels of analysis, and time lags, the present results lend substantial validity to the proposed ecological framework for predicting participation in, and hence the viability of, grassroots community organizations.

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