

Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment Pyramid

✘ The Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid describes three categories of youth participation in organizational and community decision-making—Adult Control, Youth Control, and Shared Control—and contends that shared youth-adult control may be ideal for positive youth development and empowerment

In the ***American Journal of Community Psychology*** in 2010, Naima Wong, Marc Zimmerman, and Edith Parker proposed the Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid, an evidence-based model that extends previous participatory frameworks—specifically, Sherry Arnstein’s **Ladder of Citizen Participation** and Roger Hart’s **Ladder of Children’s Participation**, Phil Treseder’s **Degrees of Participation** (see Figure 2), and Harry Shier’s **Pathways to Participation**—by incorporating findings in positive youth-adult participation research that had not yet emerged when those four foundational models were developed.

As the authors write, “The proposed typology further builds on the youth-focused participation models by incorporating intergenerational linkages and considering recent research developments in youth-adult partnerships.”

“In recent years, researchers have begun to shift from seeing youth (i.e., children and adolescents) as problems to viewing them as resources for participatory action and research. Likewise, child and adolescent health promotion is gaining recognition as a viable approach not only to preventing youth problems, but also enhancing positive development. Prior to this shift, young people were rarely asked to voice their opinions or participate in the development of research and programs designed for them.... The appeal of these approaches is that they both build on young people’s intrinsic strengths and actively involve them in addressing issues that they themselves identify. In addition, the issues young people identify may also be community concerns; thus, the potential to influence positively both adolescent and community development can be encouraged by actively engaging with youth.”

*Naima Wong, Marc Zimmerman, and Edith Parker, “A Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment for Child and Adolescent Health Promotion,” *American Journal of Community Psychology**

One of the primary rationales for developing the new model, according to the authors, was to avoid a common misinterpretation of developmental models of participation that are presented in graduated hierarchical or vertical formats:

“In Hart’s model, the placement of youth-driven participation at the top of the ladder can undervalue the contributions and power-sharing adults can lend to youth and community development. That is, the lack of adult involvement in youth-driven participation may hinder rather than encourage optimal adolescent development and empowerment. The assumption that youth-driven participation is ideal for empowerment overlooks how youth status plays out in broader social structures.”

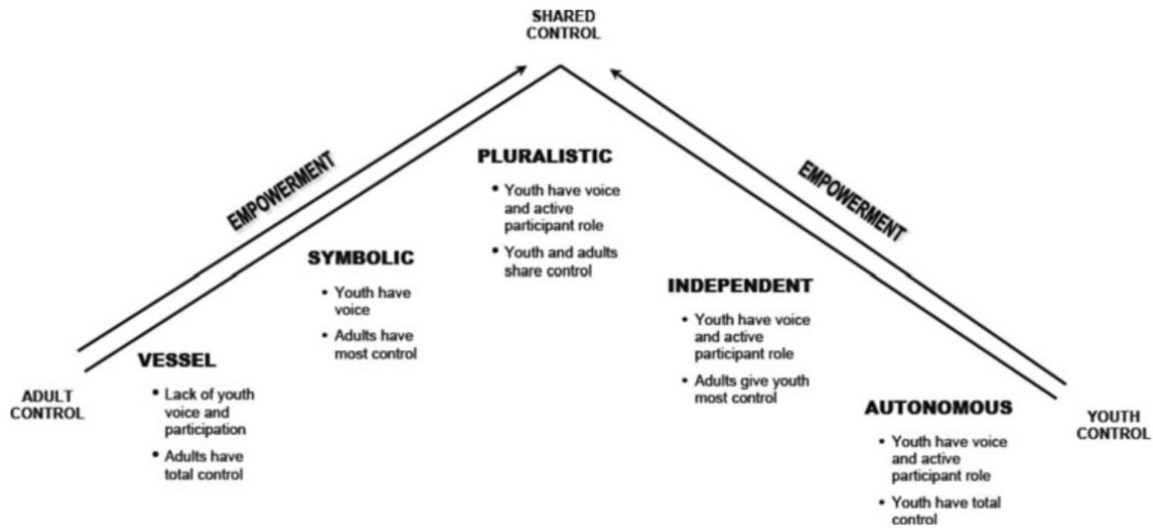
More specifically, some youth-driven forms of participation can actually be harmful because, in certain circumstances, they can place “a disproportionate burden on young people to assume roles they may not be able to fulfill by virtue of their minor status, limited experience with the conventions of program and research operations, and potential developmental capabilities.”

In other words, without appropriate emotional, educational, technical, or developmental support from adult allies—in the form of, for example, political education, skill-building practice, confidence-building encouragement, or assistance understanding and navigating adult power structures—self-organized, youth-led activities may actually result in youth *disempowerment* because “youth may lack the skills, expertise, and connections to social capital that may be required to successfully conduct research or an activity, which can lead to frustration and unintended disempowering outcomes.” As the authors contend, “Shared youth-adult control in participatory research and action may be ideal for positive youth development and empowerment rather than youth-driven participation.”

Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid

According to the authors, “The TYPE Pyramid combines three characteristics that distinguish it from other frameworks. These characteristics are the explicit use of a theoretical empowerment framework, emphasis on both youth and adult involvement, and five participation types that articulate varying degrees of empowerment and positive youth development.”

The TYPE Pyramid diagrams three categorical types of participation—*adult control*, *youth control*, and *shared control*. *Adult control* and *youth control* are placed on the same level, suggesting relatively equal levels of empowerment on a continuum, while *shared control* is elevated above youth and adult control, suggesting—importantly—that degrees of empowerment increase for both youth *and* adults as participatory activities ascend toward more optimal forms of youth-adult partnership. In addition, the model’s pyramidal presentation is intentionally designed to “avoid the assumption that youth-driven participation is ideal,” which was a common misinterpretation of earlier ladder-based models of participation and empowerment.



Developed by Naima Wong, Marc Zimmerman, and Edith Parker, the Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid provides an evidence-based model of youth-adult participation that builds on previous civic-engagement frameworks but incorporates more recent findings in positive youth-adult participation research. The model illustrates three categorical types of participation—Adult Control, Youth Control, and Shared Control. Adult Control and Youth Control are placed on the same level, indicating relatively equal levels of empowerment, while Shared Control is elevated above youth and adult control, indicating that degrees of empowerment increase for both youth and adults as participatory activities ascend toward more optimal forms of youth-adult partnership.

Within the overarching framework, the authors identify five types of youth participation:

Adult-Driven Participation Types: *Vessel* and *Symbolic*

Adult-driven forms of youth participation, according to the authors, are merely or largely “aesthetic,” and young people may be “skeptical of adult motivations” as a result. (These types mirror the *manipulation*, *decoration*, and *tokenism* levels in the [Ladder of Children’s Participation](#).) Whether adults maintain full control over youth activities or cede some level of management and decision-making to youth, adult-driven youth-participation modes do not allow youth to “genuinely partake in planning activities, decision-making, or contributing their views. Instead, young people are present because it may be perceived as politically correct, project a particular image, or make an organization feel good. This, in effect, works counter to what adults may have originally intended and can serve to exacerbate social dynamics that disempower youth on a whole.”

The two adult-driven participation types:

1. Vessel

Modes of youth participation at the *vessel* level occur when adults retain full control over youth activities. The term *vessel* symbolizes how modes of youth participation often become “containers” for adult motives and agendas: “This participation type describes a traditional youth-adult relationship that is adult-driven, demanding little to no input from young people.... Under these circumstances, [adults] are the trained experts with authority; learning and development are mediated by adult-determined lessons and agendas.... Although youth may be able to learn skills and acquire useful knowledge, little opportunity exists for young people to contribute their own ideas. In effect, this limits potential for co-learning with adults towards critical consciousness or awareness, a key part of the empowerment process.”

2. Symbolic

Modes of youth participation at the *symbolic* level occur when adults allow youth voice and agency to inform participatory agendas or processes, but adults retain at least partial control over youth activities: “In this type of participation, youth have the opportunity to voice their perspectives about problems and their potential solutions, and be heard by decision-makers. Adults may, for example, set up formal or informal structures for youth to express their opinions and experiences. Youth positions on organizational boards, advisory committees, research projects, and in advocacy work often fall into this participation type. The participation arrangement is symbolic or representative of democratic processes; however, in the end, youth often do not have much power in the decision-making or agenda-setting process.”

Youth-Driven Participation Types: *Independent and Autonomous*

Youth-driven forms of participation, according to the authors, can be “initiated by young people or adults, but it is youth who serve as the major decision-makers.” While many forms of youth-driven participation can be healthy and empowering for youth and communities, and adults often create opportunities youth-driven participation because they want to develop youth agency or because they genuinely believe that youth can contribute meaningfully to their schools and communities, ceding control to youth is often “predicated on the notion that to eliminate the power differential adults need to give up their power so that youth may gain power.”

The authors contend, however, that “researchers find when adults cede power to youth it may have unintended negative effects,” in part because the adult rationale for giving power and control to youth is based on the flawed assumption that “power is a zero-sum phenomenon. That is, power is *power over*, it exists in limited supply and can only be gained if it is taken or another gives it up.” Consequently, adults may misclassify *all forms* of shared youth-adult control over youth participation

as disempowering, paternalistic, or inauthentic.

The two youth-driven participation types:

1. Autonomous

Modes of youth participation at the *autonomous* level occur when youth have full control over participatory agendas and processes. This participation type “describes scenarios where youth have taken measures to create their own spaces for voice, participation, and expression of power regardless of adult involvement. This type of youth participation operates without consent or guidance from adults. Youth may create spaces to address their own needs—which can potentially be empowering—but without adult guidance these spaces can potentially be detrimental for healthy development.”

To illustrate their point, the authors provide an example of a harmful form of autonomous youth participation: “Oppositional youth culture such as youth gangs can illustrate how this type of participation may impede positive youth development and participation. Young people in gangs might organize to develop independence from adults, gain a sense of cohesion, and participate in decision-making roles; however, the delinquent and criminal behavior associated with youth gang activities hinders positive development.”

Yet even in less extreme cases, “autonomous” youth participation may remain problematic because young people “may not be able to benefit from the knowledge adults can possess about community or organizational history, best practices, and lessons learned. In this case, the opportunity to pass along intergenerational memory is lost, diminishing young people’s abilities to connect their circumstances to the historical narratives of their communities. This youth-adult segregation can disempower and stunt the development of both youth and communities.”

2. Independent

Modes of youth participation at the *independent* level occur when youth have some degree of control over participatory agendas and processes, but adults retain at least partial control, such as the ability to veto youth decisions. “Some adults have taken the approach that they must give up their power for youth to gain power,” the authors write. “Adults will, for instance, create a space or make resources available for youth to conceptualize and implement their own programming.

Although this approach has been recognized for enhancing youth independence, it has also been

criticized for lack of adult involvement. Young people, for example, may have plenty of creative ideas for programming, but may lack expertise on how to develop and implement a strategic plan. Youth who are left to their own devices miss out on the skills and experience that adults can bring to the table.... Young people may also not be aware of or connected to resources that could make their planning and activities more efficient. Furthermore, when adults step aside with the intention to empower youth, they could inadvertently alienate them instead.”

Youth-Adult Shared Control Participation Type: *Pluralistic*

1. Pluralistic

Pluralistic modes of youth participation appear at the apex of the pyramid, symbolizing the highest level of potential youth-adult partnership and empowerment. According to the authors, “Although youth-adult partnerships may have varying degrees of youth and adult control within them, shared planning and decision-making is what differentiates the pluralistic type from other participation types in the pyramid. The shared control between youth and adults provides a social arrangement that is ideal for positive youth development and empowerment. In this type, adults are involved at a level where the purpose of their presence is to maximize conditions and opportunities for youth to engage in pro-social activities, yet are not overly dominant or under-involved to a point where they hinder youth development or empowerment.”

Model Limitations

In their article, the authors describe several limitations of the *Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment* model:

- The model does not take into account every possible type of youth participation, including participatory modes that blend the different categories and forms of youth participation described in the model: “The TYPE Pyramid is not designed to be a rigid framework, but rather used as a heuristic device to challenge investigators, practitioners, and youth alike when developing research projects and youth programs.”
- The model does not illustrate different stages of cognitive and emotional development or the ways in which “older youth can serve as an intermediary between younger adolescents and adults.” Although the authors note that “younger children may be less prepared cognitively and emotionally to share equal responsibility with adults,” researchers have recognized that “theories about developmental capacities at various life stages are often socially and culturally bound,” and therefore “socio-cultural expectations of childhood and adolescence may have more bearing on the capacity to achieve a pluralistic participation

type than actual innate cognitive abilities.” When using the model, practitioners need to be mindful of developmental needs, abilities, and limitations by, for example, not applying the framework blindly to all youth regardless of whether they are preschool-aged children or adolescents.

- The model does not take into account cultural dissimilarities, and therefore different levels of relevance and applicability for different cultural groups, or the harmful and limiting effects that factors such as trauma, discrimination, or violence can have on youth development and participation. According to the authors, for example, “African American, Latino, urban, and impoverished communities are disproportionately affected by violence. The violence and crime that afflicts some of these neighborhoods may not readily lend themselves to be safe spaces for participatory youth research and community action intervention. In this context, beginning youth-adult partnerships requires a critical mass of dedicated adults to reclaim public spaces for safe youth involvement. Adults who work towards reclaiming these spaces need to consider that the process warrants time for community buy-in, gaining trust, and building relationships.”
- While research on positive youth participation is providing a wealth of emerging insights, the authors note that “researchers still have a limited understanding of what core elements are necessary to make youth-adult partnerships successful.” Although the TYPE Pyramid provides a useful, evidence-based framework for thinking about youth participation, youth-adult empowerment, and youth-adult partnerships, more research is needed to help practitioners determine, more precisely, what to do and how best to do it.
- Although the authors note that the typology “could be used to guide the design of a participatory evaluation tool,” the TYPE Pyramid, as presented, is intended to be used as a descriptive, analytic, and strategic tool, not an evaluative instrument.

Acknowledgments

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References

Wong N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. A. (2010). **A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion**. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46, 100-114.

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