



Testing Underlying Assumptions of the Family Empowerment Perspective

Source: Cunningham, P. B., Henggeler, S. W., Brondino, M.J., & Pickrel, S.G. (1999). Testing underlying assumptions of the family empowerment perspective. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 8 (4), 437-449.

In this study, Cunningham and colleagues examined whether a family-based treatment model termed multi-systemic therapy (MST), is successful at empowering families when compared to other community services. This article presents findings about linkages between increased family empowerment and improved family functioning and youth behavioral functioning, in addition to identifying associations between empowerment and family and youth outcomes.

The two underlying assumptions that were the basis for this research are:

- Well-validated family-based treatment that explicitly aims to empower caregivers can do so.
- Increased caregiver empowerment should be associated with improved youth and family functioning.

Participants included 118 juvenile offenders meeting DSM-III-R criteria for substance abuse or dependence and their families. Participants had a mean age of 15.7 years. Of the sample, 79% were male, 50% were African American, 47% Caucasian, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Native American. Additionally, 72% met criteria for comorbid disorders and 60% were poly-substance abusers. Families were considered economically disadvantaged based on family income and parental education history.

The participants were divided into two groups and evaluated over three time periods. There were several instruments that were used to evaluate key constructs, which focused on family empowerment and aspects of youth and family psychosocial functioning. Three areas of empowerment were measured using the Family Empowerment Scale (Koren, et al., 1992) which includes subscores of empowerment in family systems, service systems, and political/community systems. The authors hypothesized that because the family-based treatment model (MST) is aimed at empowering caregivers to resolve family difficulties, engaging families in treatment and obtaining favorable outcomes, that MST will improve empowerment at the family and service levels but not at the community/political levels. Under the empowerment perspective, it was also anticipated that increased family and youth functioning would result.

Findings indicated that, consistent with the hypothesis, MST significantly increased caregiver empowerment at the family and service system levels. These findings strongly support the perspective that the family-based treatment model increases caregiver empowerment, which in turn is directly associated with improved youth and family functioning. These findings are significant and have impact in all aspects of system of care reform. By linking empowerment to improved functioning we are able to ensure development of mental health services that enhance consumer satisfaction, and direct vital resources to those systems and programs that advocate for and provide family-based treatment options.

Reference: Koren, P.E., DeChillo, N., & Friesen, B. (1992). Measuring empowerment in families whose children have emotional disabilities: A brief questionnaire. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 37 (4), 305-321.

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