

## **How Quality of Group Relationships Influences Empowerment among Members of KUNITA (Fishermen's Wives Association) in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined association between quality of group relationships and empowerment among 213 women who were members of KUNITA (Fishermen's Wives Association) in Malaysia. Almost all of these women were Malays and Muslim and have low education level. Quality of group relationships was assessed in terms of perceptions of closeness and similarities and level of interactions. Empowerment was assessed in terms of self-determination, self-efficacy and self-esteem across various domains of life including economic and social. Findings indicated there was a general significant relationship between quality of relationships and empowerment, particularly with the esteem's component of empowerment. More detailed analysis indicated that each element of quality of relationships had a significant correlation with each component of empowerment. This study found evidence on the benefit of joining an organization for women from the disadvantaged groups and contributes to the development of more localized theory and knowledge related to group relationships and empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Women's organization, Relationships, Empowerment, Closeness, Similarities, Social interactions

### **1. Introduction**

In general, collective action can be seen as emphasizing on the elements of involvement between groups of people. The groups most often have shared interest in which collection action can be viewed as common action taken to achieve these shared interest (Acharya, 2012). Marshall (1988) defined collective action as an action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organization) in pursuit of member's perceived shared interests. Embedded within collection action is the concept of interpersonal relationships.

While working together in some forms of collective action, members of the group interact at a personal basis and most likely to form some friendships. In fact, for certain people, formations of friendships can be among the motivating factors to participate in collective action (Abdul Wahid, 2005). Looking at collective action within the context of interpersonal relationship, it becomes possible to study quality of interpersonal relationships that occurred between members of the group.

Literature on assessment of quality of relationships most often focus on close and intimate relationships such as married or romantic couples (Renshaw, McKnight, Caska and Blais, 2011; Hasserbrauck and Fehr (2002). In their research in 2002, Hasserbrauck and Fehr tested and identified 4 broad dimensions of relationship quality namely intimacy, agreement, independence and sexuality. These dimensions were also associated with more specific features such as similarities, intimacies and various forms of interactions including talking and listening to each other. Renshaw et al (2011) on the other hand suggested the possibility of using relationship quality scales across various types of relationships. In their research, they tested the utility of Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) to several categories of relationships including romantic partners, parents, friends and relatives. They found evidence for the reliability and validity of a generic form of RAS (Renshaw et al, 2011).

The above discussion provides evidence on the appropriateness of using broad dimensions of relationship quality to assess relationships that occur among people who work together in a group. Relying on dimensions of quality of relationships as conceptualized for close relationships as discussed earlier, quality of relationships in this study are divided into three major elements: 1) perceptions of closeness, 2) level of interaction and 3) perceptions of similarities. Perceptions of closeness refer to how close a person perceives him/herself to be to another person(s). Level of interaction represents the frequency of interaction including meetings and common activities. Perceptions of similarities refer to how much similarities he or she shared with another person (s). These include similarities in terms of values and beliefs. These dimensions are somewhat consistent with Hasserbrauck and Fehr's (2002) broader conceptualizations of intimacy and agreement.

This study is looking at quality of group relationships formed between women who were members of KUNITA (Fishermen's Wives Association). KUNITA is an organization established by Malaysian Fishery Development Authority (LKIM) designed to enhance the socio-economic status of fishermen's families (Nor Hafizah, Intan Hashimah, Salfarina, Juliana, 2010). One way to achieve this objective is by enabling them to undertake various collective action projects involving entrepreneurship activities. In these activities, members of KUNITA have to work together on projects that can generate some income. In this context, close relationships are formed and in this study, these particular close relationships are being examined.

## **2. Literature Review**

A great deal of literature on women's organization has documented the link between collective action and the increased sense of empowerment (OECD, 2011). For example in Africa, Steady (2005) has demonstrated how women have utilized collective action to influence development and achieved empowerment in education, politic and economy. Placing quality of group relationships within collection action, it is also likely that quality of group relations can have some influences on people's sense of empowerment. In a study on the mediating role of trust in the supervisor with the empowerment of 183 Hong Kong investment-banking personnel, Wat and Shaffer (2003) found a strong support for direct effects of trust in the supervisor with the psychological empowerment related to organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB). This provides evidence on the importance and the positive effect of interpersonal relationships on a person's sense of empowerment. In this study, similar aspect is being explored.

This study is looking at how quality group relationships, in the form of closeness, frequency of interaction and perceptions of similarities, influence empowerment. Maholtra (2003) identified six commonly-used dimensions of empowerment. They include economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political and psychological. In this study, empowerment is considered from a combination of these three dimensions; economic, socio-cultural, and psychological. Using economic dimension, women's control over income and access to family resources are important dimensions that indicate empowerment. Socio-cultural dimension of empowerment includes women's freedom of movement and women's visibility in and access to social spaces. From psychological perspective, self esteem, self efficacy and self-determination are all legitimate indicators of empowerment. Specifically dimensions of empowerment used in this study are divided into three major themes: self-determination; self efficacy and self esteem.

Self-determination represents the power to decide and to determine actions, self efficacy refers to perceptions of capabilities and self esteem is defined as the perceptions of self worth. All of these indicators have economic and social-cultural dimensions.

What is it about people working in a group that can lead to the experience of empowerment? Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson and Rapley (2005) studied the phenomenology of empowerment and suggested how collective self-objectification (CSO), unity and supports predict positive emotions and subsequent participations in collective action. CSO is defined as an action that actualizes participants' social identity against the dominant power and collective actions can be associated with positive emotions and experience of empowerment. In their study, they interviewed 37 social activists who were asked to describe their experiences of feeling empowered. CSO appeared significantly in participants' descriptions of empowering episodes (Drury et al, 2005). In addition, unity in the form of solidarity and supports as related to unity (the feeling of being in one unified group) are also two other elements that have been reported to be associated with the experience of being empowered. This finding suggests the importance of collective identity, solidarity and support as important elements in collective action that can contribute to the feeling of being empowered.

This conceptualization of relationship between collective action and empowerment is somewhat consistent with our approach of examining collective action from the interpersonal relationship perspective. In their framework, collective action leads to collective identity, solidarity and support and these constructs are what associated with empowerment. In our conceptualization, quality of group relationships in the form of closeness, frequency of interaction and perception of similarities are elements of 'successful' collective action that can contribute to the experience of being empowered. The main objective of this study is to examine the relationships between quality of group relationships and level of empowerment among members of KUNITA.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

Two-hundred and thirteen women from 8 branches of KUNITA in three states in Malaysia took part in this study. Four of these branches were in Selangor, one in Kedah and three in Pulau Pinang. Out of 213 participants, 73 were from Selangor, 57 were from Kedah and 89 were from Pulau Pinang. Mean of age of the women in this sample was 47.5 (SD 11.1). Almost all of these women were Malays and Muslim and have low education level with 92.4% have secondary school level and below.

#### **3.2 Procedure**

The research procedure began with identifying suitable branches for the data collection. The aim was to choose a branch that was not too active and not too passive and had a relatively large number of members. Once potential branches had been identified, the officer-in-charge of that particular branch was contacted. Upon agreement to participate, the officer suggested a date for interviews. The date selected usually coincided with the activities of the groups. On the set date, researcher and research assistants attended the meeting/activities and approached the potential participants. Upon agreement from the participants, interviews were carried out. Participants were given a token of appreciation for their time and effort.

#### **3.3 Semi-structured Interview**

The original semi-structured interview were divided into 5 sections. However, this paper only focused on analysis from Part 1, Part 4 and Part 5.

##### **Part 1: Background information**

This section assessed personal background information including age, occupation and information about husband and children.

##### **Part 2: Involvement with KUNITA**

This section focused on information about involvement with KUNITA including duration and reasons for joining.

##### **Part 3: Relationship of KUNITA with other agencies**

This section assessed knowledge and awareness of KUNITA members about its relationship with relevant government agencies such as LKIM.

#### Part 4: Collective Action/Quality of group relationships

This section focused on collective action. The overall construct was divided into 4 indicators which are cooperation, voluntary, boundedness of group and social capital. However, within the perspective of this study, the focus is on quality of group relationship. Quality of group was further divided into three components: perceptions of closeness, level of interaction and perceptions of similarities.

Table 1 indicates the items.

**Table 1: Items for Quality of Group Relationships**

Components	Example of the items
Perception of closeness (6 items)	My relationships with other members are very close I understand other members well We share personal information with each other
Level of interaction (4 items)	I frequently communicate with other members We always have a meeting
Perception of similarities (4 items)	I share similar values with other members I share similar beliefs with other members

#### Part 5: Level of Empowerment

Part 5 assessed participant's level of empowerment across economic, psychological and social domains. In this study, indicators of empowerment are divided into three components: self-determination (the power to decide and to determine actions); self efficacy (perceptions of capabilities) and self esteem (perceptions of self worth). Respondents who scored high on these three indicators of empowerment are considered as having a high level of empowerment.

### 4. Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Correlation between Empowerment and Indicators of Empowerment and Quality of Group Relationships**

	Quality of group relationships
General empowerment	.36(**) N=161
Self determination	.36(**) N=166
Self efficacies	.32(**) N=167
Self esteem	.39(**) N=167

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From Table 1, there were significant relationships between empowerment and indicators of empowerment with quality of group relationships. Participants who reported high level of quality group relationships also reported high sense of empowerment. The relationship between self esteem and quality of group relationships was particularly strong compared to other indicators. Self efficacies had weakest relationship with quality of group relationships.

**Table 2: Correlation between Quality of Group Relationships and Components of Group Relationships and Empowerment**

	Empowerment
Quality of group relationships	.36(**) N=161
Perceptions of closeness	.36(**) N=166
Level of interaction	.38(**) N=166
Perceptions of similarities	.37(**) N=166

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From Table 2, there were significant relationships between quality of group relationships and its components and empowerment. Level of interaction had particularly strong relationship with empowerment compared to other components.

**Table 3: Correlation between Indicators of Empowerment and Components of Group Relationships**

	Self-determination	Self efficacies	Self esteem	Perceptions of closeness	Level of interaction
Self efficacies	.89(**) N=212				
Self esteem	.86(**) N=212	.89(**) N=213			
Perceptions of closeness	.34(**) N=166	.31(**) N=167	.39(**) N=167		
Level of interaction	.36(**) N=166	.34(**) N=167	.40(**) N=166	.96(**) N=167	
Perceptions of similarities	.36(**) N=166	.31(**) N=167	.39(**) N=167	.95(**) N=167	.97(**) N=167

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From Table 3, there were significant and strong relationships between various components of empowerment and quality of group relationships suggesting them as parts of the same construct. Looking at various correlations between components of quality of group relationships and indicators of empowerment, strongest relationship can be observed between self esteem and level of interaction.

From findings, it can be concluded that quality of group relationships in general has an impact on an individual's empowerment. Perceptions of high quality group relationships can be associated with high level of sense of empowerment. This is consistent with previous findings, particularly Steady (2005) of the positive influence of collective action in general and group relationships in particular in increasing one's experience of empowerment. This is also somewhat consistent with findings by Drury at al (2005) which illustrated how the experience of empowerment is associated with collective self objectification, solidarity and supports. In our study, we found that quality of group relationships in the form of perceptions of closeness, level of interaction and perception of similarities are all connected to empowerment.

A closer analysis showed that quality of group relationships has particularly strong association with the level of self esteem but not so much with the level of self efficacies. Group relations may be more successful at boosting KUNITA member's self esteem but not so much as their sense of self efficacies. Level of interaction in particular has a stronger relationship compared to other components of quality of group relationships. This provides support that any effort to increase a person's sense of empowerment using group relationships must focus on the attempt to increase the level of interactions. This can be achieved by arranging for more meetings and activities among KUNITA members.

## 5. Conclusion

This study focused on just one particular women's organization in Malaysia. This organization was established within a governmental agency and therefore is likely to be heavily influenced by organization and rules as set by that agency. Future studies may concentrates on other types of women's organizations that can be more flexible in nature and as such may tell a different story about the relationship between collective action, group relationships and empowerment. However, as a conclusion, this study found evidence on the benefit of joining an organization for women from the disadvantaged groups and contributes to the development of more localized psychological theory and knowledge. The more theoretical implication of the study is the importance of unpacking elements of collection actions. Instead of focusing on the more general relationships between collective action and empowerment, it is important to understand the more specific aspects of collective action that can influence the more specific aspects of empowerment.

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