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Individual, Job, Organizational and Contextual Correlates of Employment Empowerment: Some Greek Evidence

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Abstract

This study is part of a larger project exploring the usefulness of the empowerment construct in the Greek context. Using a sample of 154 mature working students we examined the influence of demographics (gender, age and work experience), personality traits (locus of control), job factors (managerial status), organisational attributes (size), and contextual variables (industry type) on psychological empowerment and its four dimensions: meaning, competence, self determination and impact. Findings provide partial support for the investigated research hypotheses. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Employee empowerment; Greece

Introduction

In recent years the issue of employee empowerment has received increasing attention (Zani and Pietrantonio, 2001). Despite its popularity though relatively little rigorous empirical research has been conducted on its antecedents and consequences (Menon, 2001, p.154). Identified 'determinants' of empowerment may be distinguished into four major categories (see Table 1): person factors, comprising employee demographics (Mainiero, 1986; Spreitzer, 1996; Zani and Pietrantonio, 2001) and psychological variables (Dimitriades, 2002; Honneger and Appelbaum, 1998; Menon, 2001; Menon and Hartmann, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995); job and/or work role factors (Cagne Senecal and Koestner, 1997; Hayes, 1994; Spreitzer, 1996; and Savery and Lucks, 2001); organisation factors (Menon, 2001; Menon and Pethe, 2002; Sagie, 2002; Siegall and Gardner, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995;1996); and context factors (Cunningham, Hyman and Baldry, 1996). While reported outcomes of employment empowerment include job involvement (Menon, 2001; Menon and Pethe, 2002); job satisfaction (Hayes, 1994; Savery and Lucks, 2001); organisational commitment (Menon, 2001); and extra-role behaviour (Menon, 2001).

Empowerment research has highlighted a number of issues that warrant further investigation. Specifically, mixed findings have been reported on the relationship between gender and empowerment (Honneger and Appelbaum, 1998; Mainiero, 1986; Sagie, 2002; Spreitzer, 1996; Zani and Pietrantonio, 2001) as well as between age and empowerment (Honneger and Appelbaum, 1998; Sagie, 2002; Spreitzer, 1996), while available evidence on the influence of job level (Honneger and Appelbaum, 1998), organisation size (Spreitzer, 1996; Wyer and Mason, 1999) and industry type (Cunningham et al, 1996) is at best limited and inconclusive.

The purpose of this paper is to support and extend existing empowerment research by further illuminating the link

between employment empowerment and the aforementioned individual, job, organisational and contextual influences.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Conceptualising Empowerment

Major approaches to conceptualising employee empowerment according to Menon (2001) can be classified into three major categories: "Empowerment has been considered an act: the act of granting power to the person(s) being empowered. It has been considered a process: the process that leads to the experience of power. It has also been considered a psychological state that manifests itself as cognitions that can be measured" (opcit, p. 157).

Psychological empowerment has been defined by Spreitzer as "a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444), whereas

Meaning is "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards"... Meaning involves "a fit between the requirements of a work role and beliefs, values and behaviors" (1995: 1443).

Competence, or self efficacy, is "an individual's belief in her capability to perform work role activities with skill" (1995: 1443).

Self-determination is "an individual's sense of having choice in initiating and regulating actions" (1995: 1443), while

Impact is "the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative or operating outcomes at work" (1995: 1443-1444).

Hence according to Spreitzer empowerment, as a psychological state, is an 'active work orientation where an individual wishes and feels able to shape his/her work role and context' (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444).

Hypotheses

Building on previous research find-

ings, we suggest that three demographic variables (gender, age and work experience), a personality trait (locus of control), job level, organisation size and industry type may be expected to be related to psychological empowerment.

Gender. The belief that, in general, men hold more power in organisations than women is widely accepted (Mainiero, 1986, p. 633). In an effort to explain gender differences in power, two perspectives have been developed: the socialisation perspective, suggesting that women and men differ in their attitudes and behaviour (empowerment strategies) as a result of their learned experiences and that these differences will appear regardless of structural inequities; and the structuralist perspective maintaining that the lack of information and support that accompanies low-power jobs will cause all such job-holders, regardless of gender, to feel disempowered and to behave in a powerless manner (ibid, p. 633). Based on the socialisation perspective gender may be expected to be positively associated with self-report feelings of empowerment, with male employees feeling more empowered than their female counterparts. Thus,

H1a: Positive associations are hypothesised between (male) gender and all empowerment dimensions, as well as between gender and overall empowerment.

Moreover, in line with the structuralist perspective,

H1b: gender and management level should be unrelated.

Age. As the workforce grows older its needs and interests may change: many will become bored with their present jobs and/or careers and will desire different challenges (Mondy, Noe and Premeaux, 2002, p. 43). Hence aging may influence perceived empowerment although the direction of the relationship remains unclear.

H2: Psychological empowerment is hypothesised to be related to age (two-tail).

Work Experience. Interpersonal sources of power in organisations comprise reward power; coercive power; legitimate power; expert power; and referent power (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1995, p. 499). Expert power is "an individual's ability to influence others' behavior because of recognized skills, talents, or specialized knowledge" (ibid, p. 500). Work experience may be assumed to contribute to the development of expert power; therefore,

H3: positive relationships may be hypothesised between total work experience and all dimensions of subjective empowerment.

Locus of Control. Internal locus of control is a personality trait that explains "the degree to which people believe that they, rather than external forces, determine what happens in their lives. Individuals with an internal locus of control regarding life in general are more likely to feel capable of shaping their work and work environments and hence to feel empowered" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1446). Thus,

H4: Internal locus of control is expected to be positively related to all dimensions of psychological empowerment.

Job Level. According to Emerson (1962) individuals who are in a position to have others dependent on them are considered powerful, while those who are dependent are considered relatively powerless. Consequently,

H5: Job level (managerial status) is expected to be positively correlated with all empowerment dimensions, as well as with overall empowerment.

Organisation Size. As organisations progress through the life cycle, growing larger and more complex, they usually take on bureaucratic characteristics potentially threatening basic

personal liberties (Daft, 2001, p. 289). Based on this line of reasoning, large organisation size may be seen as disempowering. Yet, this hypothesis was not supported by findings reported by Spreitzer (1996) who concluded that "results also indicate that large units are not necessarily seen as disempowering" (ibid, p. 499).

Interestingly, Wyer and Mason (1999) recently argued that "small businesses are potentially ingrained with disempowering structures, many of which derive from owner-manager and size-related characteristics. For example, one can expect to find that owner-manager attitudes and motivations in many small firms centre around independence, autonomy and control manifesting in an autocratic management style whereby any form of delegation or empowerment are kept to a minimum" (Wyer and Mason, 1999, p. 190). Moreover, the authors go on, "examples of size-related characteristics and constraints are limitations relating to the small business ability to offer career paths or reward packages equitable with large organisations which can marginalise the small firm in relation to the labour market and the attraction of quality workforce" (opcit, p. 182). Thus,

H6: A positive association is proposed between all empowerment dimensions and large organisation size.

Industry Type. Employee empowerment has been shown to be more common in manufacturing industries compared to services (Cunningham et al, 1996, p. 147). However the special nature of services, in particular the simultaneity of production and consumption, is one of the major reasons why contact employees should be allowed a degree of discretion when dealing with customers (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1998). This is particularly true in view of the key role that employees play in modern service organisations as the empowered service employee is said to "respond more quickly to customer service requests, act to rectify complaints and be more engaged in service encounters" (Lashley, 1999). Hence,

H7: Feelings of empowerment may be hypothesised to be positively associated with industry type (services).

Method

Procedure and Sample

The non-probability sample used in this study consisted of Greek employed students enrolled in two tertiary education institutions in the metropolitan Athens and Thessaloniki areas during Spring semester, 2001. A total of 270 self-administered surveys were distributed by the researchers to mature working students attending eight business-oriented postgraduate programmes at the aforementioned universities. Participation in the study was voluntary, participants' identities were anonymous and confidentiality of responses was assured. Since English is a commonly used language, especially in professional and managerial circles, the survey was in English and no translation was required.

A total of 163 questionnaires were returned within one week, yielding a response rate of 60.4 percent. A second attempt to collect additional surveys yielded none. One hundred and fifty four questionnaires were found acceptable to use in the analysis. Surveys that were rejected were due to important missing data such as demographic information or entire sections of the survey that had been left incomplete. A number of comparisons were made in order to establish the similarity of the two samples. No differences were found for sampling by gender. Yet, the Thessaloniki sample consisted of slightly more mature individuals in terms of age and work experience

(mean age was 31 years compared to 28 years in the Athens sample, while total work experience was 7.9 years in relation to 5.6 years, respectively). However, these differences were not significant and therefore the two samples were combined for the purposes of data analysis. In the overall sample, 55% of respondents were male, participants' mean age was 29.5 years whereas average full-time work experience and job tenure were 6.8 years and 4.7 years, respectively. 77% of the subjects were employed in service industries, while 49% of the sample worked for organisations with less than 100 employees. 56.6% of the participants held supervisory positions. Because no surveys were collected in the second attempt, comparison with non-respondents was not feasible.

Measures

Psychological Empowerment. Empowerment was assessed using the instrument developed by Spreitzer (1995). Spreitzer's measure, comprising four 3-item subscales, taps the empowerment dimensions of meaning (e.g. "The work I do is very important to me"), perceived competence (i.e. "I am confident about my ability to do my job"), self-determination (e.g. "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job") and impact (for example, "My impact on what happens in my department is large") by asking respondents to indicate their degree of agreement, or disagreement, with 12 Likert-type statements. In the present study responses were recorded on a seven-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

Demographics. The three demographic items examined gender, age and total work experience. Two of these variables, age and experience, were measured using a ratio scale with the remainder being measured by use of a nominal scale.

Locus of Control. Sapp's and Harrod's (1999) three-item measure was used to assess internal locus of control by asking respondents to indicate on a seven-point Likert-type scale the degree of their agreement or disagreement with the following items: "My life is determined by my own actions"; "I am usually able to protect my personal interests"; "I can pretty much determine what will happen in my life". Unfortunately, the alpha coefficient of reliability for this scale was very low (.50) and therefore this variable was excluded from subsequent analysis.

Job Level, Size and Industry Type. All three variables were tapped via use of nominal scales.

Analysis and Results

To investigate the multidimensional nature of the empowerment construct in the Greek context -and the discriminant validity and reliability of its basic dimensions- confirmatory principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. The orthogonal varimax rotation was preferred because the dimensions of empowerment are envisaged to be conceptually distinct (Siegall and Gardner, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995). The results of the factor analysis are reported in Table 2. Further, correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between empowerment and hypothesised antecedents. Results are cited in Table 4.

Reliability and Validity of the Empowerment Measure

As may be noted from Table 2, in the initial unrestricted solution all four dimensions of psychological empowerment (i.e. impact, self-determination, competence and meaning) seem to emerge fairly clearly. However, in the case of items Meaning1: "The work I do is very important to me" and Competence1: "I

am confident about my ability to do my job" not only do these items have fairly low loadings on their associated factors (Factor 4 and Factor 3, respectively), they also have relatively high loadings on other components. Hence, refinement of the original 12-item measure involved the exclusion of these two items. All remaining items had strong loadings on their associated components and weak loadings on all other factors.

On the ground of these findings a three-factor solution was retained explaining 60.3% of variance and corresponding to the three dimensions of impact, perceived competence and meaning with eigen values of 2.92, 1.59 and 1.52 respectively. The first factor extracted accounting for 29.2% of variance was identified as impact. The second factor which accounted 15.9% of variance was labelled perceived competence and the third factor explaining 15.2% of variance was termed meaning. The fourth dimension, self-determination, was subsumed by impact - potentially denoting a conceptual overlap between these two dimensions (in line with findings reported by Siegall and Gardner, 2000).

Based on the results of the last factor analysis three scales were defined by summing and averaging respective items. An overall empowerment score was also computed by summing up the three subscales. Descriptives are cited in Table 3.

Correlation Analysis

The existence of a link between empowerment, its subscales and hypothesised antecedents was explored via correlation analysis. Results are cited in Table 4. As may be noted from Table 4, research propositions were only partially supported by current findings. As expected, job level was positively associated with the empowerment dimensions of impact ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), perceived competence ($r = .19$, $p < .05$) as well as with overall empowerment ($r = .44$, $p < .001$) but was unrelated to the empowerment dimension of meaning. Moreover positive associations were identified between age, perceived impact ($r = .22$, $p < .01$), perceived competence ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) and overall empowerment ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) as well as between work experience, perceived impact ($r = .23$, $p < .01$) and overall empowerment ($r = .18$, $p < .05$). Unexpectedly, large organisation size was significantly negatively correlated with the meaning dimension of empowerment ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$); hence, rather than being viewed as disempowering, small organisations seem to provide more meaning to individuals. Further, contrary to expectations, employees in service industries were not found to be more empowered compared to their counterparts in manufacturing. Finally, (male) gender was unrelated both to empowerment and to job level in the present sample.

Discussion and Study Contribution

This research takes an initial step towards exploring the link between employment empowerment and individual, job, organisation and industry factors in the Greek context. Confirmatory factor analyses of Spreitzer's measure revealed a conceptual overlap between the dimensions of impact and self-determination, in line with findings reported by Siegall and Gardner (2000). Moreover, the alpha coefficients of the perceived competence and meaning subscales were marginal.

The correlation analysis results provide support for some of the investigated research propositions. It is clear that job level is moderately positively correlated with overall empowerment and two of its dimensions (perceived impact and competence), but is unrelated to meaning. These findings contradict those reported by Honneger and Appelbaum (1998), who found no relation-

ship between empowerment and position level (managerial status). One possible explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the nature of the samples studied. Thus the Honneger and Appelbaum study was organisational, exploring empowerment among professional nursing staff in a small healthcare institution; whereas the present study was cross-sectional, comprising employees from a variety of organisations.

In line with expectations, empowerment was found to be correlated with two employee demographic variables: age and work experience. Current findings regarding age support results reported by Spreitzer (1996), who also identified a positive relationship between age and perceived competence ($r = .19, p < .01$), but are contrary to conclusions reached in the Honneger and Appelbaum (1998) study on the link between empowerment and age.

An interesting finding relates to the relationship between organisation size and employment empowerment. Hence, both in the Spreitzer (1996) and in the present study size was significantly related to the meaning dimension – only in the adverse direction. Thus while in the Spreitzer investigation larger organisations seemed to provide more meaning to individuals, the reverse was true in the present survey – contrary to expectations. This may be explained either by the contingency approach to “empowering management processes” within growth-oriented small businesses whereby dualistic paradigms may be evident (Wyer and Mason, 1999, p. 191); and/or by the structure of the Greek economy, consisting primarily of small business organisations (see *The Greek Economy in Figures*, 2002).

Unexpectedly, gender was not related to empowerment in the present sample – contrary to findings reported by Mainiero (1986) and Zani and Pietrantonio (2001). However, although these studies are not directly comparable, it should be noted that their findings were somewhat contradictory. Thus while Mainiero found that males employed different employment strategies than females, with women tending to use an “acquiescence strategy” (i.e. accepting the power imbalance and acting in a helpless,

dependent way) to a greater extent than men (Mainiero, 1986, p. 633), Zani and Pietrantonio revealed that women scored higher than men in empowerment with respect to meaning and perceived competence (Zani & Pietrantonio, 2001, p. 43). Hence, the relationship between gender and employee empowerment remains unclear and warrants further investigation. Further, in the present sample men and women were not found to differ in the relative power of the jobs they held (i.e. in terms of managerial status) – in line with findings reported by Mainiero (1986, p. 633).

Finally, although in the expected direction, no statistically significant relationships were identified between industry type (services) and employment empowerment.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Embedded within the study lie several methodological limitations. First, although results seem to be in line with some of the existing findings, it would be difficult to generalise beyond this sample without further testing both within Greece and other countries. Second, given the relatively weak reliabilities of two of the Spreitzer subscales in the present investigation respective findings should be interpreted with caution.

Despite the acknowledged limitations, this study represents an attempt towards illuminating the link between empowerment employee demographics, job level, organisation size and industry type in the Greek context and also indicates some questions for future research. Future research should aim to refine the discriminant validity of Spreitzer’s subscale of self-determination and to further explore present inconclusive findings on the link between (a) empowerment and gender and (b) empowerment and industry type as well as replicating the identified relationship between empowerment and service employment.

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Appendix I

Table 1. Identified Correlates of Employee Empowerment

ANTECEDENTS	
PERSON FACTORS	ORGANISATION FACTORS
<p>Demographics</p> <p>-- Gender (Mainiero, 1986; Spreitzer, 1996; Zani & Pietrantonio, 2001)</p> <p>-- Age (Spreitzer, 1996)</p> <p>Psychological Attributes</p> <p>-- Self-Esteem (Menon, 2001; Spreitzer, 1995)</p> <p>-- Locus Control (Honneger & Appelbaum, 1998)</p> <p>-- Cultural Values (Dimitriades, 2002)</p> <p>-- Career Values (Menon & Hartmann, 2000)</p>	<p>-- Culture (Sagie, 2002)</p> <p>-- Climate (Menon & Pethe, 2002; Spreitzer, 1996)</p> <p>-- Centralization (Menon, 2001; Sagie, 2002)</p> <p>-- Leadership Behaviour (Menon, 2001; Sagie, 2002)</p> <p>-- Communication Practices (Siegall & Gardner, 2000; Spreitzer, 1996)</p> <p>-- Reward Systems (Spreitzer, 1995)</p> <p>-- Size (Spreitzer, 1996)</p>
JOB/WORK ROLE FACTORS	CONTEXT FACTORS
<p>-- Job Characteristics (Hayes, 1994; Cagne et al, 1997)</p> <p>-- Role Ambiguity (Spreitzer, 1996)</p>	<p>-- Industry Type (Cunningham et al, 1996)</p>
OUTCOMES	
<p>-- Job Involvement (Menon, 2001; Menon & Pethe, 2002)</p> <p>-- Job Satisfaction (Hayes, 1994; Savery & Lucks, 2001)</p> <p>-- Organisational Commitment (Menon, 2001)</p> <p>-- Extra Role Behaviour (Menon, 2001)</p>	

Table 2. Factor Analysis Results – Spreitzer's Scale

A. Principal components with varimax rotation – unrestricted

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Meaning 3:	.23	-.02	.11	.75
Meaning 1:	.31	.05	.55	.49
Meaning 2:	.04	.23	.08	.82
Competence 1:	-.16	.61	.41	.36
Competence 2:	.12	.19	.78	.17
Competence 3:	.13	-.01	.81	.05
Self-Determination 1:	.20	.81	-.01	.12
Self-Determination 2:	.28	.60	.26	-.24
Self-Determination 3:	.34	.64	-.02	.08
Impact 1:	.75	.30	.13	.18
Impact 2:	.72	.27	.26	.12
Impact 3:	.89	.01	.09	.10
Eigen Value	2.31	2.06	1.92	1.77
% variance (cumulative)	19.2	36.4	52.4	67.2

B. Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation – retained solution

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Impact1:	.74	.18	.23
Impact3:	.69	.16	.18
Impact2:	.68	.34	.20
Self Determination1:	.71	-.03	.06
Self Determination3:	.69	-.02	.10
Self Determination2:	.62	.28	-.25
Meaning3:	.04	.18	.83
Meaning2:	.18	.09	.78
Competence3:	.05	.85	.08
Competence2:	.20	.76	.16
Eigen Value	2.92	1.59	1.52
% Variance (Cumulative)	29.2	45.1	60.3

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Scale	Mean	SD	Alpha
Overall Empowerment	1 – 7	4.88	.88	.79
Impact	1 – 7	4.73	1.09	.80
Competence	1 – 7	5.42	1.09	.60
Meaning	1 – 7	4.87	1.37	.61
Gender	0 - 1	0.55	.50	-
Age	23 - 53	29.55	6.95	-
Experience	1 - 28	6.85	6.33	-
Level	0 – 1	0.60	0.50	-
Size	1 – 3	1.89	0.93	-
Sector	1 – 2	1.77	0.42	-

Table 4. Correlations of Empowerment with Antecedent Variables

Antecedent Variables	Empowerment Subscales			
	Impact	Competence	Meaning	Overall Empowerment
Gender	.06ns	.01ns	-.06ns	.03ns
Age	.22**	.17*	-.00ns	.20*
Work Experience	.23**	.13ns	-.03ns	.18*
Job Level	.48***	.19*	.15ns	.44***
Size	-.11ns	.05ns	-.21**	-.13ns
Sector	.07ns	.13ns	.05ns	.11ns

N = 154

ns = non significant

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Appendix II

Spreitzer's Empowerment Scale

Meaning

Meaning 1: The work I do is very important to me.

Meaning 2: My job activities are personally meaningful to me.

Meaning 3: The work I do is meaningful to me.

Competence

Competence 1: I am confident about my ability to do my job.

Competence 2: I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.

Competence 3: I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.

Self-Determination

Self-Determination 1: I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.

Self-Determination 2: I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.

Self-Determination 3: I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job.

Impact

Impact 1: My impact on what happens in my department is large.

Impact 2: I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department.

Impact 3: I have significant influence over what happens in my department.

Source: Spreitzer, G.M. (1995). Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace: Dimensions, Measurement and Validation. *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38, No 5, 1442-1465.

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