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TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EMPOWERMENT AND JOB PERFORMANCE IN PROJECT TEAMS

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Emerging project delivery arrangements, increasing complexity of projects and client requirements, are having substantial impact upon the roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams across the entire construction supply chain. Individuals and teams deployed at the inter-organizational interface at the project level are increasingly assuming greater responsibility for strategic aspects of projects. The concept of employee empowerment has thus been emphasized as key to engendering performance at the project level. Despite its long history however, empowerment still remains a diffuse concept, a characteristic that has retarded its development and appropriate use. An integrative conceptual framework of the empowerment process is developed as an interaction between employee cognitions (psychological empowerment) and empowerment climate, created by the dynamic interplay of contextual factors emanating from the individual, team, organization and project levels. Empowerment is then construed as a constellation of employee cognitions of autonomy and the capacity to perform meaningful work that can impact project and organizational goals. Ultimately, enhancing the job performance of individuals and teams through empowerment will depend on a better understanding of what empowerment entails and the mechanisms through which empowerment influences performance.

Keywords: job performance, motivation, psychological empowerment, social cognitive theory (SCT), structural empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The realization of construction projects, involving multiple constituents with conflicting goals, values and perceptions, often require a dynamic structuring of power among the major actors (Walker and Newcombe 2000, Liu *et al.* 2006). This arises from the mismatch between responsibility and power, perpetuated by the procurement and contract strategies often adopted. Indeed, Loosemore (1999) found rather ironically that, parties that shoulder responsibilities within project organizations often appear to be selected on the basis of their lack of power rather than their expertise. A perpetual power-gap is then created between the amount of power granted by the positions of individuals, teams and organizations, and that actually required to get their jobs done (Rudolph and Peluchette 1993). Rudolph and Peluchette (1993) suggests that such power-gaps can be bridged through the mechanisms of *power-sharing* or *power amassing*. This accords with Loosemore's (1999) assertion that the uncertainty in construction activities creates continually changing patterns of responsibility that require a corresponding continual redistribution of power, to ensure that project participants can move out of the

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ascendancy to match their pattern of responsibility. In project context, while expert power base of participants is often strong and pervasive, project leaders rarely possess all the expertise required in project execution; the resulting power-gap, tend to be adjusted through behavioural shifts from power-sharing to power-amassing (Liu and Fang 2006). However, manager's power-sharing behaviours, rather than power-amassing, have been found to significantly relate to project participant's motivation and performance (Liu and Fang 2006); resonating prior findings of the productive nature of power-sharing and the appropriateness of such leadership behaviours in complex and uncertain work settings such as construction (c.f. Kanter 1977).

Power-sharing behaviours encapsulate the notion of employee *empowerment*, a concept with a long history, but yet a diffuse meaning. Empowered working is however deemed inherent in the way projects are run as autonomous profit centres (Loosemore *et al.* 2003), with the industry's project-oriented structure particularly providing a theoretically suitable context for the implementation of strategies consistent with empowerment (Dainty *et al.* 2002). Ironically, the Movement for Innovation Working Group on "*Respect for People*" contend that, the lamentable performance record of the construction industry reflects an underutilization of empowerment, contrary to the popular perception that the industry has often empowered its workforce and project delivery teams (M4I 2000). Evidently, lack of empowerment of key project participants has been cited as a problematic issue in successful partnering and other collaborative practices been advocated (c.f. Ng *et al.* 2002). This may stem from the lack of clarity as to what empowerment entails and how it relates to performance behaviours of individuals and teams. Consequently, this paper outlines an integrative conceptual framework of empowerment and job performance. First, the empowerment concept is conceptualized as comprising two distinct and complementary perspectives within a process approach, and thus takes the meaning of empowerment beyond the traditional view of power-sharing. A behavioural perspective of the job performance concept is then presented, enabling the theoretical and empirical underpinning of the empowerment-job performance relationship to be explored. Finally, drawing on social cognitive theory (SCT) an integrative framework is outlined and a research agenda consequently proposed.

DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualization of empowerment

Empowerment as a management concept lacks a unified conceptualization in both academic and management practice discourse. It is therefore still used loosely to describe a very wide range of schemes that, it is sometimes unclear if we are comparing like with like (Wilkinson 1998). Yet, some researchers argue that seeking to attach only one understanding to the empowerment construct will ultimately hinder research and practice (Bartunek *et al.* 1997). Indeed, Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) caution that, defining empowerment narrowly will not only limit its explanatory power across a range of outcomes, but could lead to omitted variable biases and misleading conclusions. Generally, two distinct perspectives have evolved over the years within the extant management literature and have often been studied separately; structural and psychological empowerment. *Structural empowerment* refers to organizational policies, practices and structures that grant employees greater latitude to make decisions and exert influence regarding their work (Liden and Arad 1996, Eylon and Bamberger 2000, Mills and Ungson 2003). This view of empowerment captures the power-sharing notion. Legge (1995) submits that structural empowerment be viewed

in terms of a power redistribution model, whereby power equalization produces trust and collaboration. Consequently, researchers in this perspective have identified organizational practices and structures that grant power in its many guises through knowledge and skill development, access to information, support, resources and responsibility as empowering (Kanter 1977, Eylon and Bamberger 2000). Their empowering nature stems from their ability to create an “*empowerment climate*” (c.f. Seibert *et al.* 2004) in which employees have greater autonomy in the performance of their work roles. Mills and Ungson (2003) however argue that structural empowerment represents a “*moral hazard dilemma*” for managers, as its success or failure depends on the ability of managers to reconcile the potential inherent loss of control with the fundamental organizational need for goal congruence. This perspective of empowerment is also criticized for its failure to address the cognitive state of those being empowered. Thus, in some situations, power, knowledge, information and rewards have been shared, yet employees still evinced disempowerment, and in other situations all the objective features of an empowering work climate were absent, yet employees felt and acted empowered (Spreitzer and Doneson 2005). These concerns cumulated in the development of the psychological perspective of empowerment as discussed next.

The *psychological empowerment* perspective proposes that empowerment is a constellation of experienced cognitions (Thomas and Velthouse 1990, Spreitzer 1995a). Building on Conger and Kanungo’s (1988) initial conceptualization of empowerment essentially as a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and subsequently Spreitzer (1995a), described psychological empowerment in terms of intrinsic task motivation manifested by four dimensions. An employee is then psychologically empowered when he or she; i) finds *meaning* in his or her work role, ii) feels *competent* with respect to his or her ability and capacity to perform, iii) has a sense of *self-determination* with regard to achieving desired outcomes, and iv) believes that he or she has *impact* on the larger work environment (Thomas and Velthouse 1990, Spreitzer 1995a). Critics of the psychological perspective of empowerment however point out that, it ignores substantive changes in organizational policies, practices and structures. More importantly, they question its practical value, as organizations have little capacity to influence employee’s inner workings that psychological empowerment appeals to.

Although the structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment are conceptually distinct and provide different lenses for understanding empowerment in the work place (Spreitzer and Doneson 2005), their complementarities are apparent and particularly support an integrative approach. Indeed, Eylon and Bamberger (2000, p. 356) point out that “it is just as difficult to view the construct as a cognition to be experienced independent of managerial action, as it is to view it as some objective shift in the structural characteristics of the organization that almost by definition ‘enables’ job incumbents”. In the same vein, Conger and Kanungo (1988) and subsequently Spreitzer (1995a) both contend that management practices or structural changes are only one set of conditions that may, but not necessarily empower employees and thus suggested that employees’ perceptions of empowerment may even be more important than management practices aimed at empowerment. This is supported by the assertion of Holt *et al.* (2000) that, employees’ cognitive growth controls their fundamental behaviour within the work environment and that positive employee perception is an integral part of successful empowerment. Liden and Arad (1996, p. 208) are unequivocal about the link when they state that “psychological

empowerment may be interpreted as the psychological outcome of structural changes designed to provide power". The key role of interpretation in psychological empowerment is therefore apparent, and is believed to occur when employees add meaning to relatively factual data or events within the work environment (Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Consistent with this view, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) identified three interpretive processes; *evaluation*, *attribution* and *envisioning*, as influencing the level of individual psychological empowerment or disempowerment, through the setting-up of self-enhancing or self-debilitating cycles. This notion of interpretations particularly provides a key integrative mechanism between structural and psychological empowerment, and offer a plausible explanation to the question of why employees may evince disempowerment even when features of an empowering climate exist, by attributing this to the degree of interpretation of such organizational policies and structures by job incumbents. Viewed in this context, empowerment reflects an interactive process between person and organizational environment in which the individual's feeling of empowerment (psychological empowerment) is either facilitated or inhibited by the subjective interpretations of salient, environmental events (structural empowerment).

Conceptualization of job performance

Job performance has behavioural and outcome perspectives (Campbell *et al.* 1993, Sonnentag and Frese 2002). The behavioural perspective defines job performance in terms of the measurable behaviours that are relevant to the achievement of organizational goals (Campbell *et al.* 1993). The outcome perspective refers to the objective consequences of behaviour (Sonnentag and Frese 2002). Thus, in project context, the outcome perspective will suggest the assessment of performance on the basis of project outcomes such as out-turn costs, quality and time. Proponents of the outcome perspective argue that objective measures have the advantage of limiting the biases inherent in the subjective evaluation of performance behaviours. Tying performance to behaviour rather than the distal outcomes of such behaviour however, has practical and conceptual advantages (Motowidlo 2003), and the project context particularly provides a *prima facie* case for such a conceptualization (c.f. Dainty *et al.* 2003). First, the behavioural perspective ensures that external factors (e.g. adverse weather conditions or poor design/estimates) which affect performance outcomes are excluded from the performance criteria.

Second, from a managerial point of view, the behavioural approach has diagnostic advantages, as it allows early interventions by way of constructive feedback, to safeguard performance, rather than depending on outcomes which give no clues as to the underlying causes of poor or good performance (Motowidlo 2003). Lastly, since the value of performance behaviours in this approach are evaluated in terms of expected consequences but not actual outcomes, job performance can be determined by measuring valuable behaviour without requiring information about the actual consequences of that behaviour (Motowidlo 2003). This approach is particularly useful in assessing performance in the project setting where objective measures will not become known for several years when the project is actually completed.

Job performance is therefore conceptualized here as behaviours relevant to the achievement of organizational/project goals, in line with Campbell *et al.* (1993), and Motowidlo (2003). This is also consistent with Dainty *et al.*'s (2003) call for a shift towards more balanced human performance criteria that considers the softer aspects of behaviour necessary for achieving project success. The multi-dimensional perspective

of job performance is further adopted in which “task performance”, valuable behaviours that contribute to the core technical activities of the organization/project is distinguished from “contextual performance”, behaviours that maintain and enhance the psychological, social and organizational context of work (Borman and Motowidlo 1993).

Linking empowerment and job performance: theory and empirical evidence

A key presumption of empowerment theory is that empowered individuals or groups should perform better than those relatively less empowered (c.f. Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Such a premise is implicit in work design theory, upon which the empowerment concept is deeply rooted. For example, the sociotechnical systems approach emphasis the joint optimization of the social and technical subsystems through autonomous work-group designs that promote minimal work method control, allows control of variance at source, as well as multi-functional and multi-skilled work roles (Trist and Bamforth 1951). Performance gains are believed to arise from the flexibility that results from the efficiency of having problems resolved at source, rather than escalating to specialists or senior management (Parker and Turner 2002). Hackman and Oldham’s (1976) job characteristic model also posits that job characteristics (comprising, skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) should enhance work performance through three psychological states (experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility and knowledge of results). These job characteristics and psychological states are respectively synonymous with the structural and psychological empowerment concepts discussed earlier. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) particularly opined that empowered individuals should exhibit proactive behaviours characterized by flexibility, initiation, resiliency and persistence. From this motivational perspective then, the link between empowerment and performance is axiomatic. The theoretical expectation that the empowerment of employees should lead to high performance therefore appears strong. But, is there empirical evidence to corroborate such theoretical predictions? We examine this next.

Empirically, positive relationships have been found between empowerment and various conceptualizations of performance; managerial effectiveness (c.f. Spreitzer 1995a), innovative behaviour (c.f. Spreitzer 1995a, Eylon and Bamberger 2000), organizational citizenship behaviour (c.f. Menon 2001) and job performance (c.f. Eylon and Bamberger 2000). Albeit these positive results, marginal relationships have also been reported, reminiscent of mixed effects in this regard. In their study of empowerment that considered the relationship of both structural and psychological empowerment on individual and work-unit performance, Seibert *et al.* (c.f. 2004) found significant and positive relationships between empowerment climate and work-unit performance ($r=0.33$, $R^2=22\%$), but not individual performance. They also found psychological empowerment positively and significantly related to individual performance ($r=0.15$, $R^2=32\%$). In a related study, Chen *et al.* (2007) found that, while individual psychological empowerment significantly predicted individual performance ($\beta=0.11$), neither empowering leadership climate nor team empowerment were significantly related to team performance. In a recent empirical review of the empowerment effects on critical work outcomes, that explicitly analysed the magnitude of the relationships, Dewettinck *et al.* (2006) concluded that whilst psychological empowerment has a significant and considerable relationship with employee affective outcomes, empowerment only marginally explains the variance in employee performance. Across the studies reviewed, empowerment consistently explained only about 6% of the variance in employee performance. An examination of

the distinct contribution of the four dimensions of psychological empowerment to performance revealed that whilst the competence and impact dimensions significantly explained between 1 and 3% of the variance in performance, the self-determination and meaning dimensions did not significantly explain any variance in performance. However, a recent construction industry specific study of structural empowerment and performance by Liu and Fang (2006) revealed that power-sharing significantly predicted team member's performance through the team members' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation ($R^2=69\%$).

Taken together, there appear to be a strong theoretical support for the role of empowerment in engendering performance in the work place, however, the empirical evidence discussed above suggests that such a relationship is inconsistent, and is at best modest in some cases. In the following section, plausible reasons for the inconsistencies are suggested and discussed. Consequently, a conceptual framework and research agenda are proposed.

Proposed conceptual framework and research agenda

From the foregoing discussion, two fundamental assumptions in most research approaches which appear to be at variance with the theoretical basis of the empowerment-performance relationship are apparent, and may account for the inconsistent empirical findings. First, most studies posit a direct relationship between empowerment and performance despite theoretical evidence of empowerment being related to key intermediate performance determinants. For example, the motivational basis of empowerment is prominent in empowerment theory (c.f. Thomas and Velthouse 1990, Spreitzer 1995a), as well as the theoretical frameworks, such as job design, upon which empowerment is deeply rooted. Thus, empowerment may actually not have a direct relationship with performance but may have performance consequences through its motivational effects. The motivational basis of performance has a long history, from Vroom's (1964) classic conceptualization of performance as a function of motivation and ability. Similarly, Blumberg and Pringles (1982) proposed that performance be viewed as a function of willingness, capacity and opportunity to perform. From this perspective then, ability/capacity and opportunity emerge as other plausible mechanisms through which empowerment may engender performance. While support for the role of ability and motivation in performance is particularly profound, that of opportunity is often less explicit. However, as pointed out by Peters and O'Connor (1980) and subsequently Blumberg and Pringles (1982), in many work situations persons who are both willing/motivated and able/capable of successfully accomplishing tasks, may either be inhibited in or prevented from doing so due to situational characteristics beyond their control. Since empowerment is particularly purported to remove such organizational constraints, opportunity to perform may therefore be a key emergent outcome of empowerment and thus, a mediating variable in the empowerment-performance relationship. The mediating role of these three variables have been echoed recently by Wall *et al.* (2002) as well as Parker and Turner (2002). They argued that inconsistent findings suggest that the link between empowerment and performance is both indirect and contingent, and thus proposed similarly, the mediating role of opportunity, knowledge development and application (capacity/ability), and proactive orientations (willingness/motivation). Following these arguments then, it is proposed that both structural and psychological empowerment will influence performance by first engendering motivation, ability and opportunity to perform in job incumbents. Indeed, Liu and Fang's (2006) preliminary findings provides a *prima facie* case for this mediating expectation in the project context.

Secondly, there appear to be an implicit assumption of universality of the empowerment-performance relation. This is apparent from the discourse of some practitioners and researchers alike, regarding the application and the outcomes empowerment is purported to engender (Wall *et al.* 2002). Most scholars however agree that empowerment perceptions are affected by a variety of individual, interpersonal and positional variables, and that such contextual factors have not been consistently identified and accounted for in empowerment studies (Loosemore *et al.* 2003). Taking Johns' (2006, p. 386) view of context as the "situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behaviour as well as functional relationships between variables", the vital role of context in determining the level of employee empowerment achieved or perceived is particularly imperative. Indeed, projects as socio-technical systems create platforms for employee behaviour and attitudes to be affected and shaped through their involvement in work spanning organizational, geographical, cultural and temporal boundaries. From this perspective, four different contexts particularly emerge from which contextual factors can be examined; organizational, team, individual and the project. Although space will not allow a discussion of plausible contextual factors in each proposed context, such factors could conceivably be identified by taking a grounded research approach. An exposition of the contextual influences of empowerment could curb the disappointments that often arise when organizations simply follow the zeitgeist and thus should allow the full potential of empowerment under conditions where it is appropriate to be achieved (Wall *et al.* 2002).

To draw together the arguments so far, social cognitive theory (SCT, Bandura 1986), emerges as an appropriate framework to simultaneously tie the process view of empowerment and the behavioural view of performance. Indeed, Dewettinck *et al.* (2006) contend that applying such an interactionist lens could help in gaining a more profound understanding of how the empowerment process unfolds. SCT explains human functioning in terms of a triadic model of reciprocal interaction between behaviour, individual cognitive factors and the environment. Interpolating the arguments so far into this view of SCT, behaviour becomes synonymous with job performance, individual cognitive state with psychological empowerment and the environment with structural empowerment. Viewed in this manner, SCT suggests that taken alone, the structural or psychological perspectives provide only partial and incomplete picture of the empowerment journey. Thus, an interactional process as depicted in Figure 1 below is advocated, in which the perception of empowerment (psychological empowerment) is shaped through interaction with environmental factors (structural empowerment and contextual influences), to produce the behavioural outcome of job performance. As discussed earlier we acknowledge the role of individual interpretations of the contextual influences and structural empowerment in shaping psychological empowerment (denoted by the broken lines). Also depicted is the earlier argument that empowerment effects on performance may not be direct, but may operate through motivation, ability and opportunity to perform.

A research agenda along three main themes is thus evident from the discussion so far and can help illuminate a better understanding and enhancement in practice of the empowerment – job performance relationship; i) specific contextual factors (from the individual, team, project and organizational levels) that may influence empowerment

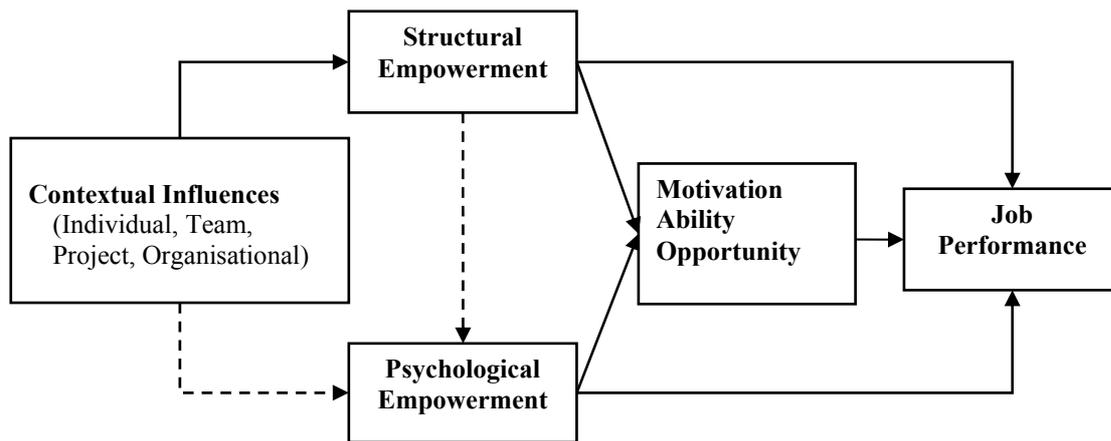


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework of empowerment and job performance

and its consequences should be identified and their impact assessed, thereby going beyond mere assertions by researchers that context is important in the empowerment process, ii) the proposed mediational role of motivation, ability and opportunity, should be empirically tested, and, iii) a multi-level research design that test both the direct and cross-level effects of individual and team level empowerment on the job performance of individuals and teams should be undertaken, with the hope of helping organizations achieve an optimal fit between individual and team empowerment in project settings. These three themes are the focus of an ongoing research project that employs a triangulated methodology, within a three-pronged research design. Preliminary interviews are been conducted with the aim of identifying key contextual factors and their impact on the empowerment of individuals and teams. An industry wide questionnaire survey, supplemented by carefully selected longitudinal case studies will then be undertaken to measure and test the proposed relationships among the key constructs outlined in the framework above.

CONCLUSION

A conceptual framework that advances our understanding of the empowerment process and the consequential job performance behaviours has been developed. By bringing together structural and psychological empowerment, a more unified explanation of empowerment in the workplace and the perceptual environmental appraisals that influence feelings of empowerment among organizational members have been offered. Tested empirically and refined, the proposed framework could serve as a diagnostic model, by providing managers with targets of concrete interventions to promote employee empowerment and job performance in project settings.

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