AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE CONTEXTUAL MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF EMPOWERMENT IN PROJECT TEAMS

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Empowerment means different things to different individuals. The factors that engender feelings of empowerment and the consequences that ensue are thus multifarious. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) in semi-structured interviews with project participants in Hong Kong, the contextual meaning and consequences of empowerment are explored. Two broad categories of meanings were ascribed to the concept "empowerment" and related to "what individuals or teams feel or experience" and "what organisations or leaders do", confirming the extant literature's dichotomous conceptualisation of empowerment into the structural and psychological perspectives. Positive and negative consequences of empowerment and disempowerment were evident. The need to capture the different individual conceptualisations of empowerment in the implementation of empowerment initiatives is shown and that a contextual fit is essential for empowerment to take place.

Keywords: Critical Incident Technique, empowerment, Hong Kong, project team.

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry exhibits certain characteristics that make it an ideal climate for the empowerment of employees (Greasley et al., 2005). These characteristics include; its project/site-based nature, complexity, uncertainty, poor communication (i.e. timing, extent and content), inadequate co-ordination (i.e. of organisations and activities) and inadequate integration (i.e. of tasks, organisations and personnel). Indeed, empowered working is inherent in the way projects are run as autonomous profit centres (Beardsworth et al., 1988, Loosemore et al., 2003, Walker, 2002). Empowerment as a concept however remains diffuse and poorly defined (Dainty et al., 2002), widely misunderstood (Rudolph and Peluchette, 1993) and predisposed to conflicting interpretations in both academic and management practice discourse. As Simon (1990) points out, that empowerment is a concept that confuses even as it inspires. The lack of clarity as to what empowerment entails and how it manifests itself is further compounded by its apparent neglect (i.e. taken for granted), making it an empty rhetoric or a fortunate by-product (Psoinos and Smithson, 2002).

A concomitant problem in most empowerment research therefore is that the empowerment construct is hardly directly examined or clearly defined. Within the construction industry context in particular, empowerment research is still piecemeal

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and fragmented, often characterised by exploratory one-off case studies. Findings regarding how empowerment manifests as well as how it impacts work outcomes are either unavailable or unreliable. Noteworthy efforts in this direction are however beginning to emerge (e.g. Greasley et al., 2008, Greasley et al., 2005, Liu et al., 2007). In support of this growing effort, this study set out to explore the contextual meaning of empowerment in project settings and to examine the consequences attributed to empowerment.

Within the extant literature, empowerment is distinctively conceptualised as a structural concept and as a psychological concept. As a structural concept empowerment is deeply rooted in job design and is deemed to occur through objective and often formal organisational changes that grant individuals greater latitude to make decisions and exert influence regarding their work (Eylon and Bamberger, 2000, Ford and Fottler, 1995, Liden and Arad, 1996). Eylon and Bamberger (2000) describe structural empowerment as "empowering acts/practices" while Seibert et al (2004) describe it as "empowerment climate" which arises from the purposeful manipulation of structural and contextual factors of the work environment, its policies and practices. Consistent with this view, opportunity, power (formal and informal) sources, access to information, support, resources and responsibility have been identified as central explanatory dimensions of an empowering organisational/work-unit environment (Bowen and Lawler, 1995, Eylon and Bamberger, 2000, Kanter, 1977). The psychological perspective on the other hand proposes that empowerment is a constellation of experienced cognitions. According to Spreitzer and Quinn (2001, p. 13-14) psychologically empowered individuals "see themselves as having freedom and discretion (self-determination), as having a personal connection to the organisation (meaning), as confident about their abilities (competence), and as able to make a difference in the system in which they are embedded (impact)". These four dimensions therefore combine additively to create an overall gestalt of psychological empowerment so that lack of any single dimension will deflate, but not completely eliminate, the overall degree of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995a).

While the extant literature has distinguished the two facets of empowerment as outlined above, it is unknown whether in project settings what empowerment entails or how it manifests itself will be consistent with this theoretical view. Indeed, considering that these conceptualisations have been developed from a mainly western perspective, empowerment may mean different things in a Chinese context. Examining how empowerment manifests itself among project participants in a mainly Chinese context therefore has both theoretical and practical significance. To extend empowerment theory and encourage empirical enquiry, the meaning of empowerment as perceived by project participants in their work role in Hong Kong and the consequences that can arise are explored. The study was guided by two broad propositions:

> *P1: Empowerment means different things to different individuals and,*

> *P2: The empowerment of individuals and teams in project settings has consequences.*

In the sections that follow, the research method for the study is outlined followed by the discussion of the findings arising. We conclude by outlining the implications of the findings for research and practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

The interpretive and exploratory focus of this study favours a qualitative approach and the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was identified as a suitable method to employ. CIT was originally developed in the 1950s by John Flanagan and his colleagues through various studies at the Aviation Psychology Program of the US Army-Air Forces. Essentially, CIT consists of a set of procedures that enable the direct observations of human behaviour or the elicitation of experiences referred to as 'incidents'. An incident in this regard refers to "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). The analysis of critical incidents so gathered allows for the emergence, rather than the imposition of an evaluative schema and focuses on the events and dimensions of the respondent's experiences that are most salient, memorable, and most likely to be retold to others (Ruben, 1993). The practicality of CIT in construction research has been demonstrated in several studies (e.g. De Saram *et al.*, 2004, Kaulio, 2008). Its use here therefore arises from its appropriateness for the problem of study and the demonstrated reliability, validity and practicality, especially in construction specific studies.

Design of interview

A semi-structured face-to-face interview mode was adopted as it afforded greater flexibility and the opportunity to probe for clarifications and deeper insight. Although retrospective empowering and disempowering experiences were solicited, the premise was that recollections were less likely to be distorted due to their 'critical' or 'extreme' nature and the reference to a relatively short time-frame (i.e. within last 6 months) and discrete events (Flanagan, 1954). The respondent's conceptualisation of empowerment was sought through the elicitation of incidents using a 4-part question format;

a. What does empowerment mean to you in your work role?
b. The critical incident identifier statement (Campbell and Martinko, 1998), which read, "*Think of a personal experience during a current or recent project (within the last 6 months) when you felt particularly empowered or disempowered in the performance of your work role*";
c. The grand tour statement (McCracken, 1988), which read, "*Please describe this experience in as much detail as you can remember*"; and,
d. Planned prompts and probes as necessary (McCracken, 1988).

The above approach was repeated to elicit individual and team experiences.

Sample and responses

Sample size in CIT studies is determined by the number of critical incidents required to achieve adequate coverage of the subject of study and this in turn also depends on the complexity of the problem under investigation (Flanagan, 1954). For most purposes, however, a minimum of hundred incidents are considered sufficient (Flanagan, 1954) or incidents are collected until redundancy occurs (Woolsey, 1986). Thirty respondents and a minimum of 4 critical incidents per respondent were targeted (i.e. a pair-wise design of one each of an empowering and a disempowering personal experience as well as one each of an empowering or disempowering team experience). A purposive sampling technique was employed, to maximize quality of information. Ten respondents each from contractor, consultant and client organisations were selected. Typical targets were site/project managers, engineers, quantity surveyors,

designers/architects, etc. This diversity of respondents was to ensure that incidents collected are comprehensive in their coverage of diverse perspectives represented in project settings (c.f. Flanagan, 1954). The respondents comprise 5 females and 25 males and their average tenure in the industry is 9 years. All the respondents are Chinese and have a Bachelors degree or higher.

Analysis strategy

No *a priori* framework was specified in analysing the responses regarding the meaning of empowerment and how empowerment and disempowerment manifest. This was consistent with allowing the different meanings that different individuals ascribe to empowerment to emerge. Thus, category formation was employed initially to explore the data and to subsequently establish if any pattern was discernable among the themes. The classification was facilitated by employing the QSR NVivo 8.0 software for qualitative data analysis. This was used to code (i.e. assign themes to describe phrases or sentences), organize and link (i.e. group and merge) the emergent antecedents under each frame of reference. In the following section, we present the results of the analysis, first about the meaning respondents ascribed to the empowerment and then the emergent consequences of empowerment and disempowerment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

What does empowerment mean to project participants?

In response to the question "*what does the <u>empowerment</u> mean to you in your work role?*", the responses where unsurprisingly varied. As expected, empowerment meant different things to different people. To some it was about respect;

"…other team members are now more respectful towards me, since I have the right to check and endorse their submissions" [Project Engineer, Client].

To others it was about responsibility and authority;

" [I am] *given responsibility and authority to make all necessary decisions related to delegation, control, problem solving, actions necessary for efficient management of the process with the consultants, client and hotel operator, without the need to refer to higher authority for making decisions*" [Project Manager, Contractor].

Yet, to others, empowerment was also about how power and responsibility is defined and distributed in the organisation. Two broad categories were however apparent from the different meanings ascribed to the concept 'empowerment'; *what individuals or teams feel or experience* and *what organisations or leaders do*. We depict the identified sub-themes under each category in Figure 1 below. Incidentally, this dichotomy of meanings mirrors the distinction between *structural empowerment* (*empowerment climate*) and *psychological empowerment* in the extant literature (c.f. Conger and Kanungo, 1988, Kanter, 1977, 1993, Liden and Arad, 1996, Spreitzer, 1995a, Spreitzer, 1996, Spreitzer, 1997, Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). More specifically, seven themes as depicted in Figure 1; being independent, having flexibility, having decision-making authority, having power, self-control of outcomes, processes and resources relate to the self-determination dimension of psychological empowerment. Being motivated, respected by colleagues and a sense of being trusted and recognized also correspond to the meaning dimension. The self-confidence and sense of responsibility themes may be interpreted as being aligned with the competence dimension. Lastly, only one theme, having influence over organizational

procedures, reflects the impact dimension of psychological empowerment. Evidently, respondents tended to associate feelings of empowerment with self-determination and meaningfulness as evident by the number of themes in these categories compared with those related to competence and impact. The greater emphasis on empowerment as self-determination which is more aligned with power may not be surprising given the high power-distance context of the study (c.f. Hofstede, 1980) in which social hierarchy, order and certainty reign supreme. Many respondents may therefore have perceived their jobs as lacking self-determination and thus, view power redistribution as a means of enhancing their sense of empowerment. The themes related to what organisations or leaders do, and thus aligned with the structural perspective of empowerment comprised; *definition and distribution of responsibility, delegation, devolution of power*; *level of direct supervision or interference, provision of opportunity, organisational support, resource availability* and *distribution of responsibility*. These themes mirror the dimensions of empowerment climate proposed by both Kanter (1977, 1993) and Seibert *et al* (2004). The themes in this category particularly reflect acts that are more amenable to manipulation by leaders through organisational policies.

Taken together, the manifestation of empowerment is largely consistent with conceptual expectation. Greasley *et al* (2005) also identified similar themes relating to what empowerment meant to senior industrialists in the Netherlands. However, in a recent study by Greasley *et al* (2008) in the UK, non-managerial employees appeared not to recognise the term empowerment or were unable to ascribe direct meanings to it. Spreitzer (1997) also found in an earlier study that individuals had difficulties defining empowerment but had little problems describing personal episodes of empowerment. All the studies however converge on one central finding that, the term empowerment means different things to different individuals.
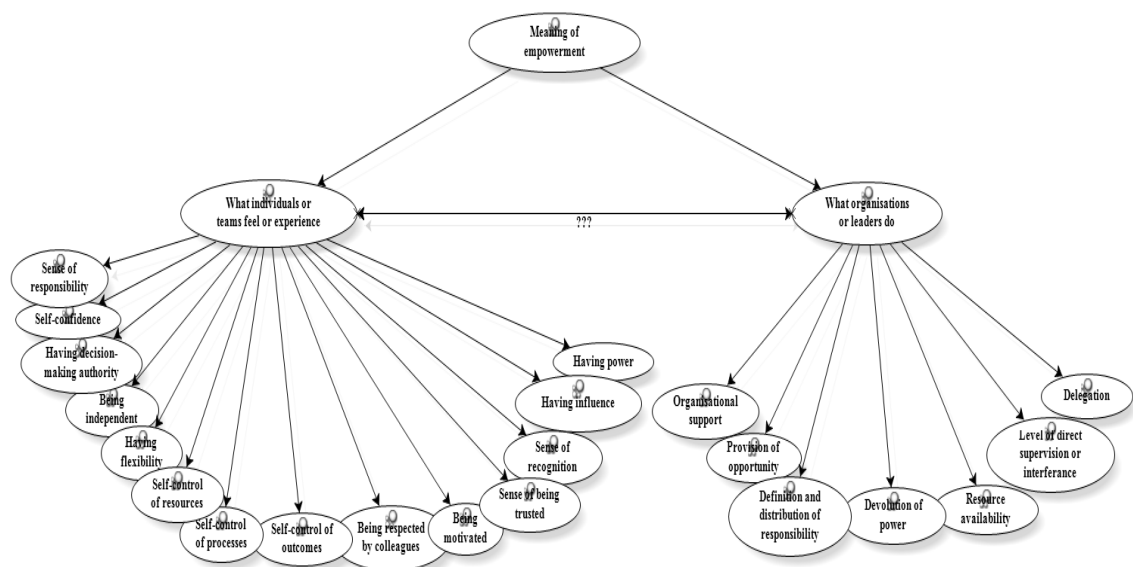

Figure 1: What empowerment means to project participants (QSR NVivo Output)

Consequences of empowerment and disempowerment

Several themes relating to perceived consequences of empowerment or disempowerment were apparent from the critical incidents described. The themes related to consequences are shown in Figure 2. Four positive consequences were

attributed to empowerment; project success, job satisfaction, teamwork, savings in time and rapid decision-making. Interestingly, poor work quality also emerged as a possible outcome of empowerment. Poor quality of work was specifically linked to lack of experience;

"the quality of work may be reduced due to less experience in doing a particular task, for example, submissions procedures in this case" [Site Agent, Contractor]

This reinforces the importance of making sure that only capable and experienced employees are empowered for positive outcomes. Regarding project success, several experiences highlighted the fact that empowerment can lead to top management establishing a clear direction for the project and allowing the project team to decide what operational tasks are required to achieve the overall aims of the project. By doing this, top managers are freed from the daily site operations so that they can concentrate on more strategic issues. The experience of a senior engineer is illustrative of this view;

"as the team was empowered to handle the individual design issues in our discipline, the project manager did not need to take care of the discipline design issues. This saved time for other management work that can contribute more to the success of the project" [Senior Engineer, Consultant].

Teamwork was also perceived as an outcome of empowerment;

".....following this [an empowering experience], *there was great teamwork spirit distributed all over our team. All team members were willing to put in extra effort to complete their tasks and leave together as a team"* [Quantity Surveyor, Contractor].

This is a particularly interesting finding in project settings that are so dependent on teamwork for task accomplishment. Yet, 'real teamwork' has eluded many project organisations as initiatives such as partnering have often failed to achieve the needed change as a result of the lack of empowerment of key project participants (Ng et al., 2002). Empowerment may therefore hold a key to engendering real teamwork in project settings. Indeed, in a related empirical study, Tuuli and Rowlinson (2009) found empowering work climate and team psychological empowerment positively and significantly related to teamwork.

Empowerment was also viewed as engendering job satisfaction, time saving and rapid decision-making as a result of less hierarchies, reduction of red-tape procedures, greater direct involvement and engagement of employees. These outcomes have also been identified in other empirical studies. In particular, empowerment has consistently been found to be positively and significantly related to job satisfaction (c.f. Aryee and Chen, 2006, Koberg et al., 1999, Seibert et al., 2004, Spreitzer, 1997, Thomas and Tymon, 1994) and productivity (c.f. Chang and Liu, 2008, Kirkman and Rosen, 1999).

Three outcomes associated with disempowerment were also recurrent; slow work pace, blame from others for inaction and a sense of withdrawal. The slow work pace was linked to unavailability of resources and the lack of decision making authority. These invariably led to blame from others for inaction. This view is illustrated by the response of a consultant's resident engineer;

"If I had been empowered to handle the redesign, there will be less complaints about our slow response to the client's requests.......and the progress will be smooth as the redesign work would have been completed at an earlier time" [Resident Engineer, Consultant]

The experiences also show that project participants react to disempowerment with a sense of withdrawal or resignation.

"In a recent project when the endorsement of materials was done by the senior supervisor and I had almost no authority, I paid no attention to the details of the materials submitted and didn't even bother to check them either." [Senior Engineer, Contractor]

This finding is also in accord with that of Aryee and Chen (2006) who found that empowerment can ignite excitement about one's work and therefore result in reduction in psychological withdrawal behaviours.
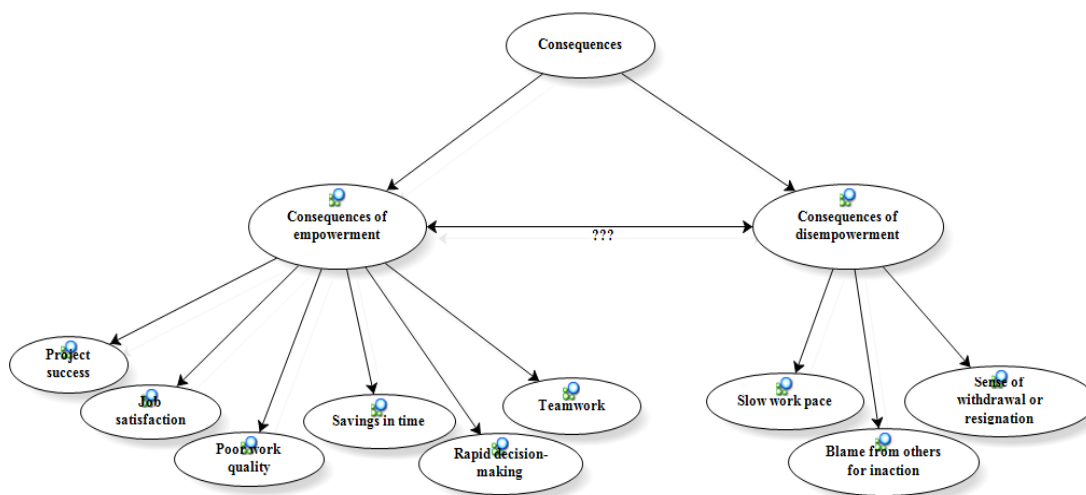

Figure 2: Consequences of empowerment and disempowerment (QSR NVivo Output)

CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment means different things to different individuals. This stems from the different socialisation and the varied interpretations individuals make regarding actions, policies and practices within their work environment. Indeed, as Spreitzer and Doneson (2008) point out, in some situations power, knowledge, information and resources are shared, yet employees still evince disempowerment, and in other situations all the objective features of an empowering work climate are absent, yet employees feel and act empowered. Thus, the finding that employees ascribe different meanings to empowerment which were classified into two broad categories, reiterates the dual role of the organisations or leaders and the employees themselves in the success of any empowerment process. This also reinforces earlier conclusions in a quantitative study by Tuuli and Rowlinson (2009) that it is only by simultaneously creating an empowering work climate that engenders feeling of empowerment that the full benefits of any empowerment intervention can be achieved in project settings.

Interestingly, we found that empowerment is not associated with only positive consequences but can be counterproductive if the individual and organisational circumstances are not fully examined and properly built into the empowerment process. Thus, a contextual fit must be targeted. Empowerment however has the potential to engender job satisfaction, teamwork and productivity that have eluded many project organisations. Organisations must however guard against disempowerment as it can lead to alienation of employees, reduce productivity and

even engender the creation of a blame culture as employees increasingly become helpless.

This study advances empowerment theory in several fronts. First, it provides evidence of convergent validity in support of the distinctiveness of the structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment. Given the Chinese as well as construction project context of the study, external validity is also evident. Methodologically, this study adds to the work of De Saram *et al* (2004) and Wong (1999) in demonstrating the practicality of the CIT in construction specific research.

This study however has several limitations which deserve highlighting. First, the respondents in this study were purposively selected partly because of their willingness to share their experiences. It is therefore plausible that they demonstrated higher levels of awareness of their level of empowerment or disempowerment and hence the conditions that perpetuate such feelings. A related limitation is the possibility of self-serving attribution bias, which manifests itself in the tendency to take credit for successes and blame others for failure (Bradley, 1978, Miller and Ross, 1975). By not asking respondents to describe their perceived level of empowerment at the time of the experiences, we were unable to test whether respondents less empowered made external attributions of their disempowerment or whether those more empowered made internal attributions regarding their empowerment.

By employing the CIT, the study also inherited its several limitations. For example, the possibility that respondents misunderstood the phenomena they were required to describe is high. In particular, the reliance on recollection of incidents introduces a bias towards more recent incidents. In this study incidents were limited to only those that occurred within the last 6 months. A further potential limitation for this study and studies using interviews is the problem of verbal skills and the amount of verbalisation respondents are capable of within the interview period. This is particularly pronounced in this study where the interviews were conducted in English which is not the primary language of the respondents. The requirement of respondents to recall incidents and describe them in as much detail as possible may have overburdened some respondents. While the higher educational level of respondents was expected to attenuate the effect of verbal skills, we still checked its effect by comparing the frequencies of the identified themes by respondents versus by incidents (c.f. Campbell and Martinko, 1998) and found no significant differences in the proportions. However, it was clear that respondents who provided more incidents or more detailed descriptions were more likely to generate more themes, thus having a greater influence on the results.

These limitations however highlight avenues that future research might pursue. Replications of this research with further improvements in the research design to address the limitations outlined above will advance research and practice in this area of research. Finally, this study has provided a crucial first step in further clarifying how project participants perceive empowerment and the consequences that can ensue from empowerment in project settings and should therefore contribute to a better understanding and design of empowerment initiatives in construction project organisations.

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