# Taking Stock: A Review of More Than Twenty Years of Research on Empowerment at Work[1]

Gretchen Spreitzer

Today, more than 70 per cent of organizations have adopted some kind of empowerment initiative for at least part of their workforce (Lawler et al., 2001). To be successful in today's global business environment, companies need the knowledge, ideas, energy, and creativity of every employee, from front line workers to the top level managers in the executive suite. The best organizations accomplish this by empowering their employees to take initiative without prodding, to serve the collective interests of the company without being micro-managed, and to act like owners of the business (O'Toole and Lawler, 2006).

So what do we know about empowerment in work organizations? In this chapter, I will conduct an in-depth review of the literature on empowerment at work. I start by framing the two classic approaches to empowerment – social-structural and psychological – before outlining the current state of the literature. I then close the chapter by discussing key debates in the field and emergent directions for future research.

## CLASSIC EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES

Over the last two decades, two complementary perspectives on empowerment at work have emerged in the literature (Liden and Arad, 1996). The first is more macro and focuses on the social-structural (or contextual) conditions that enable empowerment in the workplace. The second is more micro in orientation and focuses on the psychological experience of empowerment at work. The two perspectives can be distinguished by

a focus on empowering structures, policies, and practices and a focus on perceptions of empowerment (which focuses on individual's reactions to the structures, policies, and practices they are embedded in; Eylon and Bamberger, 2000). Each perspective plays an important role in the development of a theory of empowerment and is described in the sections below.

## Social-structural empowerment

The social-structural perspective on empowerment is rooted in theories of social exchange and social power. The classic study in the development of a social-structural theory of empowerment was Kanter's (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation*, an award-winning ethnographic study of an industrial organization conducted at a time when more women were entering work organizations. Kanter showed how women were often 'tokens' as a function of their small numbers and as a result their successful advancement was impeded as they lacked access to 'power tools' – defined as opportunity, information, support, and resources. Kanter's original research has now served as the foundation of the large body of empowerment research from a social-structural perspective described below.

The social-structural perspective is embedded in the values and ideas of democracy – where power ideally resides within individuals at all levels of a system (Prasad, 2001; Prasad and Eylon, 2001). Employees at low levels of the organizational hierarchy can be empowered if they have access to opportunity, information, support and resources. Even the secretary, mail clerk, or janitor has potential in an organization with democratic principals. Of course, in contrast to a formal democracy, where each person has an equal vote in the system and the majority rules, most organizations stop short in behaving as a real democracy (Eylon, 1998). Yet, employees at all levels can still have a voice in a system even if they don't have a formal vote when they have access to opportunity, information, support and resources.

The essence of the social-structural perspective on empowerment is the idea of sharing power between superiors and subordinates with the goal of cascading relevant decision-making power to lower levels of the organizational hierarchy (Liden and Arad, 1996). Empowerment from the social-structural perspective is about sharing power (i.e., formal authority or control over organizational resources; Conger and Kanungo, 1988) through the delegation of responsibility throughout the organizational chain of command. By sharing decision-making power, upper management may thus have more free time to think strategically and innovatively about how to move the organization forward. In this perspective, power means having formal authority or control over organizational resources and the ability to make decisions relevant to a person's job or role (Lawler, 1986). Relevance is key – empowered employees have the power to make decisions that fit within the scope and domain of their work. For example, manufacturing employees might not be making decisions about firm strategy but instead make decisions about how and when to do their own work. Thus, social-structural empowerment is about employee participation through increased access to opportunity, information, support and resources throughout the organizational chain of command.

The social-structural perspective focuses on how organizational, institutional, social, economic, political, and cultural forces can root out the conditions that foster powerlessness in the workplace (Liden and Arad, 1996). Practically, organizations can change organizational policies, processes, practices, and structures away from top-down control systems toward high involvement practices where power, knowledge, information and rewards are shared with employees in the lower echelons of the organizational hierarchy (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). For example, management can change practices to allow employees to decide on their own how they will recover from a service problem and then surprise-and-delight customers by exceeding

their expectations rather than waiting for approval from a supervisor.

Specific practices that indicate a high involvement or self-managing system include the following.

- Participative decision-making: Employees and/or teams may have input into and influence over decisions ranging from high-level strategic decisions to routine day-to-day decisions about how to do their own jobs (Lawler, 1986). Increasing self-managing teams are the mechanisms for building authority and accountability (Gibson et al., in 2007).
- Skill/knowledge-based pay: Employees share in the gains of the organization and are compensated for increases in their own skills and knowledge.
- Open flow of information: This includes the downward flow of information (about clear goals and responsibilities, strategic direction, competitive intelligence, and financial performance in terms of costs, productivity, and quality) and the upward flow of information (concerning employee attitudes and improvement ideas). The point is to create transparency so that employees have 'line of sight' about how their behavior affects firm performance (Gibson et al., 2007). Those with better information can work smarter and thus make better decisions.
- Flat organizational structures: Empowering organizations tend to be decentralized where the span of control (more subordinates per manager) is wide (Spreitzer, 1996). It becomes very difficult to micro-manage when managers have many people to manage (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997).
- Training: Educative efforts enable employees to build knowledge, skills, and abilities – not only to do their own jobs better but also to learn about skills and the economics of the larger organization (Lawler, 1996).

Each of these practices contributes to employee empowerment by increasing access to opportunity, information, support, or resources.

Research has found that any one of these practices by itself will have only a marginal effect on empowerment. The real impact comes from the interaction and reinforcement among these practices (Lawler, 1996; MacDuffie, 1995).

In summary, then, the social-structural perspective on empowerment is embedded in theories of social exchange and power. However, while this perspective has garnered much attention from practitioners because it links specific managerial practices to performance, it is limited because it provides an organizationally-centric perspective on empowerment. It does not address the nature of empowerment as experienced by employees. This is important because in some situations, all of Kanter's empowerment tools – power, knowledge, information and rewards – have been provided to employees, yet they still feel disempowered. And in other situations, individuals lack all the objective features of an empowering work environment yet still feel and act in empowered ways. This limitation helped to spur the emergence of the psychological perspective on empowerment which is described in the next section.

### *Psychological empowerment*

Psychological empowerment refers to a set of psychological states that are necessary for individuals to feel a sense of control in relation to their work. Rather than focusing on managerial practices that share power with employees at all levels, the psychological perspective is focused on how employees experience their work. This perspective refers to empowerment as the personal beliefs that employees have about their role in relation to the organization.

The paper that motivated researchers to think differently about empowerment was a conceptual piece by Conger and Kanungo (1988). They argued that a social-structural perspective was incomplete because the empowering managerial practices discussed above would have little effect on employees if they lacked a sense of self-efficacy. To them, empowerment was a 'process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification [and removal] of conditions that foster powerlessness' (Conger and Kanungo, 1988: 484).

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) extended Conger and Kanungo's ideas with the development of a theoretical framework articulating empowerment as intrinsic task motivation

manifest in four cognitions that reflect their orientation to work. Rather than a dispositional trait, Thomas and Velthouse defined empowerment as a set of cognitions or states influenced by the work environment that helps create an active-orientation to one's job.

To ensure that these four dimensions truly captured the essence of empowerment, Spreitzer (1997) distilled the interdisciplinary literature on empowerment, drawing on psychology, sociology, social work, and education. She found wide support for these four dimensions of empowerment across these disparate literatures. Based on these results, she further refined these four dimensions as follows.

- Meaning involves a fit between the needs of one's work role and one's beliefs, values and behaviors (Hackman and Oldham, 1980).
- Competence refers to self-efficacy specific to one's work, or a belief in one's capability to perform work activities with skill (Gist, 1987; Bandura, 1989).
- Self-determination is a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's actions (Deci et al., 1989). It reflects a sense of autonomy or choice over the initiation and continuation of work behavior and processes (e.g., making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort; Bell and Staw, 1989).
- Impact is the degree to which one can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (Ashforth, 1989).

Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than passive, orientation to one's work role. In other words, the experience of empowerment is manifest in all four dimensions – if any one dimension is missing, then the experience of empowerment will be limited (Spreitzer, 1995). For example, if people have discretion to make decisions (i.e., self-determination) but they don't care about the kinds of decisions they can make (i.e., they lack a sense of meaning), they will not feel empowered. Alternatively, if people believe they can make an impact but don't feel like they have the skills and abilities to do their job well (i.e., they lack a sense of competence), they will not feel empowered either. Thus, employees

feel psychologically empowered when they experience all four psychological states. In this way, empowerment is the 'gestalt' of the four dimensions.

As discussed above, while the social-structural perspective is limited because it is organizationally-centric, the psychological perspective is also limited because it is individually-centric. A complete understanding of empowerment at work requires the integration of both perspectives. We need to understand how social-structural empowerment can enable psychological empowerment – as well as understand how beliefs of psychological empowerment can enable the development of more social-structural empowerment through proactive behaviors aimed at changing the systems.

In the next two sections, we describe the key research findings on the two empowerment perspectives with an eye to research which might help us bring the two perspectives closer together.

## RELEVANT RESEARCH ON EMPOWERMENT

### Social-structural empowerment findings

Much of the research on social-structural empowerment has been conducted under the terms high involvement work practices and high performance work systems (see the chapter on high performance work systems in this volume) and has focused largely at the unit (e.g., MacDuffie, 1995) or firm level (e.g., Lawler, et al., 2001; Gibson, et al., 2007; Staw and Epstein, 2000). Programmatic research on high involvement work practices has been conducted by researchers in both industrial relations and human resource management. This research has shown that high involvement practices which involve sharing power, information, knowledge, and rewards with employees at all levels often have positive outcomes for organizations, particularly in terms of improvements to employee quality of work life, the quality of products and services,

customer service, productivity, and reduced turnover (Lawler et al., 2001).

Broader research in the area of high performance work systems (these include employee involvement but also things like long-term job security, flexible scheduling, and multiskilling) shows similar findings (Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Wright et al., 2003). Research in this area also documents the higher labor costs that are incurred with these practices (Cappelli and Neumark, 2001) but that those costs are offset by the higher productivity these firms generate (Pfeffer, 1996). Yet, other studies have shown marginal or mixed effects (Huselid and Becker, 1996; Staw and Epstein, 2000). It may be that there are tradeoffs inherent in implementing the high involvement practices. For example, Gibson et al. (2007) found that different high involvement or empowering practices were related to distinctively different outcomes (information sharing → financial performance, boundary setting → customer service, and team enabling → quality). No single practice was related to more than one dimension of performance.

A significant body of research has focused on structures, systems, and processes for building empowered or self-managing teams. An alternative to traditional hierarchical management, these empowered teams can be cross-functional and often operate virtually (where team members are not co-located and may even be located across different time zones and continents; Cohen and Bailey, 1997). Empowered teams direct and control their own work, having the responsibility for scheduling work hours and vacations, placing orders, hiring and firing team members and determining wages (Lawler, 1986). Thus, managers of empowered teams need to play quite a different role from traditional managers in helping these teams be effective.

To this end, Arnold and colleagues (2000) conducted a qualitative study to determine the key roles for leaders of empowered teams. They found that empowering team leaders:

(1) coach;
(2) inform;
(3) lead by example;
(4) show concern; and
(5) encourage participative decision-making.

They then developed and validated a measure of empowering leadership, showing that it explains more than traditional leadership measures such as the Self-Management Leadership Questionnaire (Manz and Sims, 1987). Using this newly created measure with a sample of senior leadership teams of hotel properties, Srivastava et al. (2006) found that empowering team leadership is associated with more knowledge sharing and team efficacy, which in turn predicted unit performance. Burpitt and Bigoness (1997) found that empowering leader behavior was also related to team innovation among professional project teams as well as perceptions of fairness by team members (Keller and Dansereau, 1995). This is likely because those subordinates are involved in decision-making and thus have a say about what is fair.

Other researchers focus more on the relational aspects of empowerment (Fletcher, 1998). Derived from a woman's experience in relationships, this relational perspective on empowerment focuses on forming mutual and meaningful connections with others. It is through these connections that people are empowered and grow and develop as human beings (Walsh et al., 1998). This is a provocative addition to the social-structural perspective, but has received rather limited attention in the literature thus far.

In summary, many researchers have examined the empowering characteristics of systems and structures as well as the leaders who design them. In looking across this stream of research on social-structural empowerment, it appears that empowering systems and structures, while often more costly to implement, for the most part have positive outcomes for organizations in terms of firm, unit, and team performance. Interestingly, this stream of research pays less attention to their effects on individual employees. The second stream of empowerment research – on psychological empowerment – seeks to fill that void. In this way, it helps identify

the mechanisms by which empowerment structures and practices impact organizational behavior and performance.

## Psychological empowerment findings

### Measuring psychological empowerment

Unlike the social-structural perspective where there are many different instruments which have been used to measure empowerment, a single 12-item (3 items per dimension) measure of psychological empowerment developed by Spreitzer (1995) has been used predominately in empirical research. Using a 7-point Likert scale, the measure of psychological empowerment assumes that empowerment is continuous rather than dichotomous – employees may perceive different degrees of empowerment rather than feeling empowered or not. A second-order confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the four dimensions are distinct but do contribute to an overall sense of empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) also found that the measure was not susceptible to social-desirability bias. The measure was further validated at the individual level by Kraimer et al. (1999) and at the team level by Kirkman and Rosen (1999). Both convergent and discriminant validity of the four dimensions have been established, the structure of the measure has been shown to be invariant across gender (Boudarias et al., 2004), and the measure has been translated and validated in Chinese (Aryee, and Chen, 2006). It has also been used across cultures in Turkey (Ergeneli et al., 2007), the Philippines (Hechanova et al., 2006), Singapore (Avolio et al., 2004), the UK ( Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2003), Australia (Carless, 2004), and Canada (Laschinger et al., 2004). The team version of the psychological empowerment instrument (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999) has been translated into Flemish and Finish as well as used in the Philippines (Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001).

This measure of psychological empowerment has been used and found to be valid in a variety of different contexts – a sampling includes big box retail (e.g., Chen, et al., 2007); the insurance industry (e.g., Spreitzer, 1995), teams of engineers (Seibert et al., 2004), high tech project teams (Chen and Klimoski, 2003), sales and service teams (Kirkman et al., 2004), the hospitality industry (e.g., Corsun and Enz, 1999; Sparrowe, 1994), manufacturing (e.g., Spreitzer, 1996), health care (e.g., Koberg et al., 1999; Kraimer, et al., 1999), aerospace (e.g., Mishra et al., 1998), and education (Moye et al., 2004). It is interesting to see that findings about empowerment appear to generalize across so many different work contexts.

Having a well-validated, theoretically-driven measure has allowed this substantive stream of research to flourish because researchers can build on each others' work. This stands in contrast to the social-structural perspective where empowerment has been measured in many different ways (high involvement practices, participation, and empowering leadership to name but a few). As such, this variety of measures of social-structural empowerment has made it more difficult to build a cohesive body of empirical findings.

Psychological empowerment studies have focused on several different levels of analysis including individual (e.g., Spreitzer, 1996), team (e.g., Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Kirkman et al., 2004; Srivastava, et al., 2006), and work unit level (e.g., Seibert et al., 2004). Both team and unit level studies have conceptualized team or unit empowerment as shared perceptions of experienced empowerment. For example, for team empowerment, all four dimensions are conceptualized as team level constructs (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999):

(1) team meaningfulness is defined the team valuing its tasks as important and worthwhile;
(2) potency, or competence, is the collective believe the team can be effective;
(3) autonomy involves the team members experiencing substantial freedom and discretion in their work; and
(4) impact is about the team producing work that is significant and important for the organization.

Recent research has provided a multi-level design to examine the interaction between team and individual empowerment (Chen et al., 2007). This is important because of the need to determine whether it is the team as a whole or the individual team members who are empowered differentially. Moreover, we do not know whether a different set of practices empower individuals in contrast to those that empower teams. Their research found that team empowerment was strongly related to individual empowerment – and that team empowerment moderated the relationship between individual empowerment and performance.

In the next sections, we review recent research findings undergirding the nomological network of psychological empowerment at work.

### Who is empowered?

Research indicates that certain types of people are likely to report stronger feelings of empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) found that those with stronger self-esteem scores reported more empowerment, while locus of control appeared to have no relationship to empowerment. In terms of demographics, employees with higher levels of education, more tenure, and greater rank report more feelings of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). At the team level, racial diversity on a team, and between the team leaders and their teams, was found to be negatively related to empowerment (Kirkman, et al., 2004). Yet other forms of demographic diversity, such as gender, tenure, and age diversity, had no bearing on empowerment. Drawing on social categorization theory, it may be that these other sources of diversity are less 'visible' than race and thus have less bearing on power sharing in the workplace

### Antecedents of empowerment

Contexts  Are there certain kinds of work conditions where empowerment plays a particularly important role? Empowerment is especially important in virtual settings where team members do not have face-to-face interactions and must work independently (Kirkman et al., 2004). Empowerment has also been shown to be particularly important to preserve the hope and attachment of survivors during times of organizational downsizing (Brockner et al., 2004; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). These findings indicate that empowerment helps employees adapt in weak situations – where they need to be more proactive in making sense of the situation and determining the appropriate course of action.

The role of leadership  Kark et al. (2003) found that transformational leadership was associated with more follower empowerment (defined narrowly as self- and collective-efficacy) among bank employees. Transformational leaders (who show consideration and inspire followers to become empowered at work) created more social identification with the group which in turn helped the bank employees feel more empowerment. The relationship between transformational leadership and follower empowerment was replicated by Avolio et al. (2004) and Fuller et al. (1999).

Employees who have developed better relationships with their leader (i.e., higher leader-member exchange (LMX) (Aryee and Chen, 2006; Chen et al., 2007; Chen and Klimoski, 2003; Liden et al., 2000; Wat and Shaffer, 2005), with their team members (i.e., higher team-member exchange (TMX) (Chen and Klimoski, 2003), and with customers (Corsun and Enz, 1999) report more empowerment. Wallach and Meuller (2006) found that supervisory and peer support were associated with stronger feelings of empowerment.

Trust in one's leader was also found to have an important relationship to experienced empowerment. Trust in one's manager was found to be particularly potent for empowerment – cognition-based trust predicts meaning and competence while affect-based trust predicts impact (Ergeneli, et al., 2007). Also, teachers who had higher interpersonal trust with their principals reported that they found their work

more meaningful and had significant self-determination and impact (Moye, et al., 2004). Looking across these findings, it becomes evident that a supportive, trusting relationship with one's boss or leader (and to a lesser extent with team members and customers) is important for individuals to experience empowerment at work. Relationships matter for empowerment.

Job characteristics Kraimer et al. (1999) linked Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics to the four dimensions of psychological empowerment. Where Hackman and Oldham's characteristics are considered to be objective features of the job, the dimensions of psychological empowerment are conceptualized as psychological states or cognitions which are shaped by one's relationship to work. Kraimer et al. (1999) found that job meaningfulness was related to the experience of meaning, job autonomy was related to the experience of self-determination, and task feedback was related to more feelings of competence and impact. Other job characteristics are also related to empowerment. Contrary to much of the popular literature which assumed that more organic or loose systems were empowering to employees, Spreitzer (1996) found that role ambiguity was related to lower levels of empowerment. Wallach and Meuller (2006) replicated the negative effect of role ambiguity and also found that role overload reduced feelings of empowerment in social service employees. Taken together, it appears that empowering jobs have an inherent tension in them (Spreitzer and Quinn, 2001). Empowering jobs provide autonomy but mitigate the ambiguity that can come from having less direction from others by also providing feedback about how ones' work is going. These kinds of tensions are elements of a weak situation where employees need to be proactive to make sense of the situation and determine the appropriate course of action.

### Outcomes of empowerment

Findings across a wide range of studies show that both employees and their organizations can benefit from empowerment. When people feel empowered at work, positive individual outcomes are likely to occur. The finding that empowered employees report high job satisfaction has been consistent across a large number of studies for both individuals (e.g., Aryee and Chen, 2006; Carless, 2004; Koberg et al., 1999; Liden et al., 2000; Seibert et al., 2004; Sparrowe, 1994) and teams (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). Empowered employees also report higher levels of organizational commitment (Avolio, et al. 2004; Liden et al., 2000) and less propensity to turn over (Sparrowe, 1994; Koberg et al., 1999). Empowered employees also reported less job strain (Spreitzer et al., 1997).

Some research has investigated how each of the four dimensions of empowerment predicts these outcomes. The meaning and to a lesser extent competence dimensions inherent in empowerment appear to be driving the strong and consistent relationship with job satisfaction (Spreitzer, 1997). Kraimer et al. (1999) found that the meaning and competence dimensions predict career progression intentions while the self-determination and impact dimensions predict organizational commitment. The fact that different dimensions of empowerment are related to different outcomes supports the notion of a 'gestalt' of empowerment being necessary to achieve the range of outcomes. No single dimension of empowerment affords the range of outcomes that have been shown to link to overall construct of psychological empowerment.

But empowerment is not only related to positive work attitudes, it has also been found to be related to positive work performance – more specifically, managerial effectiveness (Spreitzer, 1995), employee effectiveness (Spreitzer et al., 1997), employee productivity (Koberg, et al., 1999), and newcomer role performance (Chen and Klimoski, 2003). Employees who feel more empowered are more motivated to perform effectively (Chen et al., 2007; Chen and Klimoski, 2003; Liden et al., 2000; Seibert et al., 2004). Do certain dimensions drive the link to performance? In a sample of managers, Spreitzer et al. (1997) found that the competence and impact

dimensions were most strongly related to managerial effectiveness. It may be that competence is necessary for performance (competence indicates the skills and abilities necessary to do one's job well) and that impact comes from strong prior performance (employees have seen that their effort has made a difference in the past so they feel they can have impact moving forward as well). These results suggest that psychological empowerment likely enhances performance because people go above and beyond the call of duty and are more influential and innovative in their work.

Empowerment also enables proactive behaviors that may lead to more effectiveness at work. Spreitzer and Quinn (1996) found that when stimulated in a leadership development program, empowered middle managers engaged in more transformation change initiatives than less empowered middle managers who were more transactional in their change approach. Spreitzer et al. (1999a) found that supervisors who reported higher levels of empowerment were seen by their subordinates as more innovative, upward influencing, and inspirational. Empowerment is also associated with more innovation at work (Spreitzer, 1995) and with more organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Wat and Shaffer, 2004). Wat and Shaffer (2004) found that different empowerment dimensions are related to different elements of OCBs:

(1) the meaning dimension relates strongly to courtesy;
(2) the competence dimension relates to both conscientiousness and sportsmanship;
(3) the self-determination dimension relates to altruism; and
(4) the impact dimension relates to conscientiousness.

Again, each dimension of empowerment contributes to different outcomes. No single dimension captures the gestalt of empowerment in terms of influencing OCBs.

Research on empowered teams also indicates positive outcomes. More empowered teams have better work-unit performance (Seibert, et al., 2004), productivity (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999), team process improvement (Spreitzer et al., 1999b), customer satisfaction (Mathieu et al., 2006) and team effectiveness (Chen et al., 2007; Kirkman et al., 2001). Empowered team members are also more proactive, satisfied with their jobs, and committed to the team and the organization (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). For virtual teams, more empowerment facilitates more process improvement and higher customer satisfaction (Kirkman, et al., 2004) – especially when they didn't have an opportunity to interact face-to-face at regular intervals.

# FINDINGS LINKING THE SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EMPOWERMENT

In the last few years, it has been exciting to see more research examining the relationship between different elements of social-structural empowerment and the psychological experience of empowerment. A natural first step in this regard was to examine the extent to which Kanter's (1977) elements of social-structural empowerment are related to feelings of psychological empowerment. Spreitzer (1996) found that Kanter's power tools including sociopoliticial support, access to information, and access to resources was related to the psychological empowerment of middle managers. Other research has replicated a strong positive relationship between Kanter's power tools and psychological empowerment (Siu et al., 2005), even in longitudinal research (Laschinger, et al., 2004).

Moving beyond operationalizing social-structural empowerment as Kanter's power tools, Wallach and Meuller (2006) found that actual participation in decision making (both decisions that shape the direction of the organization and decisions pertinent to one's own work) were related to stronger

feelings of psychological empowerment in human service agency employees. Similarly, Spreitzer (1996) found that employees in units with a more participative work climate, wider spans of control, and performance-based pay reported higher levels of psychological empowerment. While no study looks at the full set of social-structural empowerment elements, findings do suggest that social-structural empowerment is related to psychological empowerment at the individual level.

At the team level, leaders who

(1) encourage the team to set its own goals and self-manage its tasks (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999);
(2) coach, inform, and show concern for the team (Arnold, et al., 2000); and
(3) create the structures, policies, and practices that support team empowerment (Seibert et al., 2004)

were found to be related to psychological empowerment of the team. In particular, team-based HR practices like cross-training, team-based pay, and participation in hiring, developing, evaluating, and firing team members have been found to be related to team-level psychological empowerment (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999), particularly in terms of the self-determination dimension of empowerment (Mathieu, et al., 2006). These team-level findings also indicate that social-structural empowerment is related to team-level psychological empowerment.

A limitation of the research discussed thus far is that it has been conducted at either the individual or the team-level of analysis. More recently, two studies have taken a multi-level approach to understanding the relationship between social-structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. First, Seibert et al. (2004) conceptualized social-structural empowerment as unit empowerment climate. They then linked empowerment climate (measured as shared perceptions among members of the unit of information sharing, boundary setting, and team accountability) to work unit performance as well as to enhanced feelings of psychological empowerment at the individual

level of analysis. In turn, they hypothesized a link between psychological empowerment and increased individual performance and job satisfaction. They found strong support for the cross-level model of empowerment at work. This research provided an important contribution in showing how macro-level empowerment practices (i.e., empowerment climate) do influence micro-level feelings of empowerment (i.e., psychological empowerment) – both of which impact key organizational and individual outcomes (unit and individual performance as well as job satisfaction).

Second, Chen et al. (2007) examined how two empowering leadership practices, one at the team level (empowering leadership climate) and one at the individual level (LMX), affected both individual and team empowerment. They showed that team empowerment impacted team performance and that individual empowerment impacted individual performance – especially when team interdependence was high. Their research also makes an important contribution in developing an integrative multilevel model of leadership, empowerment, and performance.

Thus, there is clear evidence that core elements of social-structural empowerment are associated with psychological empowerment – and that both in turn are related to performance, whether at the individual, team, or unit level. Interestingly, in many of the studies, psychological empowerment is modeled as a mediator between social-structural empowerment and key individual or organizational outcomes (Morgeson and Campion, 2003). Psychological empowerment is conceptualized as a key mechanism that explains how social-structural empowerment contributes to improved satisfaction, performance and the range of other outcomes examined. What is perhaps most surprising is the consistency in findings across a wide variety of studies with very different operationalizations of social-structural empowerment – psychological empowerment has been found to be a significant mediator time and time again.

## KEY DEBATES REGARDING EMPOWERMENT

As research on empowerment at work has blossomed, a number of debates, controversies and questions have emerged. These are indicative of the deep discourse in the field about what empowerment means and why it matters. Each is outlined below.

### Where is the power in empowerment?

Critical and postmodern empowerment scholars often argue that empowerment is a ruse the managers use to get more out of their employees without increasing wages or real power. They argue that without formal power structures of direct worker ownership (like ESOPs) and representation (like labor councils and worker cooperatives in Europe), most empowerment interventions are, in fact, disempowering to employees because power remains centralized at the top echelons of the organization (Boje and Rosalie, 2001; Wendt, 2001). All too often, discussions of power are conspicuously absent in the discourse on empowerment (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Jacques, 1996).

Critical theorists recognize how programs espousing empowerment often create more controls over employees through peer monitoring. For example, Barker (1993) found that an intervention focused on empowering employees through self-managing work teams, resulted in extensive peer pressure, which left employees feeling even more controlled and disempowered.

While empowerment may have had its roots in real power from its genesis in the civil and women's rights movements, Lincoln et al. (2002) argue that empowerment is a 'term with a radical left-wing lineage which has been transformed into right-wing management discourse' (pp. 272–273). Indeed, in a longitudinal analysis of empowerment across a variety of disciplines over the last 25 years, Bartunek and Spreitzer (2006) found that as the meaning of the term empowerment has evolved over time, it has focused more attention on issues of fostering productivity and less on enabling human or societal welfare. Real empowerment, according to critical theorists, comes from real ownership and control of the firm (O'Connor, 2001) – something most organizations in the developed world are far from implementing.

### Is the potency in empowerment in the gestalt or the individual dimensions?

Reviewing the literature, most of the research on psychological empowerment modeled empowerment as an overall construct composed of the four dimensions. The idea here is that empowerment is the gestalt of the four dimensions. The essence of empowerment is the interplay between the four dimensions rather than just the independent effects of each dimension.

Yet, some studies have modeled empowerment as four separate dimensions (e.g., Ergeneli, et al., 2007; Kraimer et al., 1999; Moye, et al., 2004; Spreitzer, et al., 1997). These studies help specify more of the mechanisms underlying the relationships of interest. They indicate how different dimensions of empowerment are predicted by different antecedents and predict different outcomes. In terms of antecedents, Ergeneli et al. (2007) found that cognition-based trust of immediate managers relates to the meaning and competence dimensions of empowerment while affect-based trust related to the impact dimension. In terms of outcomes, Spreitzer et al. (1997) found that while impact was related to work effectiveness, meaning and competence were related to increased satisfaction and reduced strain. Future research can help elucidate how the interaction of the four dimensions enables the gestalt of empowerment.

### The dark side of empowerment

Empowerment represents a kind of moral hazard for managers (Pfeffer et al., 1998). Empowerment depends on the ability of the

manager to reconcile the potential loss of control inherent in sharing power with the need to empower employees for higher levels of motivation and productivity that often come with empowerment (Mills and Ungson, 2003). To reduce the risk of the moral hazard, managers and organizations can:

(1) set clear limits and boundaries as to what level of empowerment is appropriate so employees know what is acceptable (Blanchard et al., 2001; Seibert et al., 2004);

(2) build trusting relationships in which employees are less likely to operate on self-interest (Mishra et al., 1997); and

(3) measure and reward key performance goals to ensure that individual and organizational goals are aligned (Spreitzer and Mishra, 1997).

Moreover, while most research has found positive outcomes of empowerment at work, other research has found some trade-offs regarding empowerment. For example, Spreitzer et al. (1997) found that those who reported more of the meaning dimension in their work also reported more strain. They speculated that those who felt a closer connection to their work, took it more seriously and thus experienced more stress in their jobs.

It may also be that employees who are too empowered become disempowered over time because their bosses are threatened by their empowerment (Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996). Their bosses may worry about 'loose cannons' who are not aligned with the needs of the organization and take too many risks. Managers often act in risk-averse ways that work against more democratic work practices such as empowerment (O'Toole and Lawler, 2006).

## EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDA

### Directionality of empowerment relationships?

The findings discussed above focus on how social-structural empowerment enables psychological empowerment which in turn is related to key outcomes. Yet, the directionality of the relationships between empowerment and performance may also go the other way. Understanding the possibility of reverse causality can be a fruitful area of research because it can help to uncover the deviation-amplifying and temporal dynamics of empowerment at work. For example, when they are performing well, employees may be given more autonomy, and even idiosyncrasy credits to take initiative beyond that accorded by their formal authority (e.g., Hollander, 1958). Idiosyncrasy credits are earned from one's boss by showing competence in helping to achieve the units' task goals and commitment to the units' norms. Those credits may then be drawn upon to take more innovative actions. Signs of competence and commitment enable initiative and nonconformity to be better tolerated. Thus, leaders of higher performing employees may give those employees more latitude and voice in how they do their work (i.e., create more social-structural empowerment) which enables more psychological empowerment. Said differently, better performance may lead to more social-structural empowerment which, in turn, contributes to more psychological empowerment.

In addition, until now most research has posited and found support for how social-structural empowerment enables psychological empowerment. However, employees who experience psychological empowerment may also enable more social-structural empowerment through their actions. Empowered employees may seek out and shape their work contexts to further enable their empowerment. To date, we don't know much about this relationship but the evidence that empowered employees behave in more transformational ways (Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996) suggests this may be a fertile direction for future research. Researchers might draw on recent research on job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) to show how self-determination can lead workers to define their work in new ways.

One recent study offers some insight into how individuals may enable their own empowerment. It focuses on the role of

reflection in sustaining psychological empowerment, particularly during difficult times (Cyboran, 2005). Using an experimental design with a control group, this study had knowledge workers in a software company keep guided journals of their learning activities for three months. The findings suggest that reflection through guided journaling helped sustain employees' feelings of empowerment during difficult transitions in the company.

### Dispositions at play?

With one exception, namely Spreitzer's (1995) study showing that high self-esteem individuals were more like to feel psychologically empowered, there has been very little research that has examined how dispositions influence empowerment. Dispositions may either predict or moderate empowerment. Proactive personality (Bateman and Crant, 1993) is the stable tendency to effect environmental change through one's actions. Because empowerment is defined as a more active orientation with respect to one's work, proactive personality may predict who feels more empowered in a given situation. A more proactive personality leads to more personal initiative (Frese and Fay, 2001) and proactivity (Grant and Ashford, in press). Empowerment may be an important mediator for how and why a proactive personality manifests in more personal initiative and proactivity.

Dispositions can also play the role of moderators in empowerment research. Growth-need-strength (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) is defined as the preference for stimulating and challenging work, which has some similarity to a promotion-regulatory focus. People with a promotion-regulatory focus are 'motivated by growth and development needs in which they attempt to bring their actual selves in alignment with their ideal selves' (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). It can be contrasted with a prevention focus where people are more security focused. Those with a higher promotion focus and with a higher growth-need-strength may be more likely to seek out opportunities for empowerment at work. Future research can also examine the Big 5 personality variables in relation to empowerment. For example, those who are conscientious may have a greater sense of the competence dimension because they bring order to situations with ambiguity. Those who are open to experience may see more of the impact of what they do because they find ways to learn from their experiences. Those who are neurotic may experience less empowerment because they are threatened by even ordinary situations. Neurotic individuals may miss opportunities to see the meaning in their work and may see themselves as more incompetent than competent. In summary, these Big 5 dimensions may be moderators describing who is likely to experience psychological empowerment amidst social-structural empowerment conditions.

### Culture as a boundary condition?

While empowerment research has looked within different cultures (e.g., China, Israel and the Philippines) to demonstrate the validity of the four dimensions and pieces of the nomological network, only limited research has looked across cultural boundaries. One initial step would be to look in depth at the meaning of the four dimensions within a culture outside the US. A good model of this kind of research would be the qualitative work by Farh et al. (1997) who found that only three of the five dimensions of organizational citizenship were valid in a Chinese culture: courtesy and sportsmanship were two dimensions that had a very different meaning within this culture. It may be that a dimension like impact looks very different in a collectivist culture where groups are more important. In collectivistic cultures, the impact dimensions may have more of a group referent than an individual referent. Similarly, the self-determination dimension may look different in a culture with a high power-distance. In high power-distance cultures, it may be culturally inappropriate for employees at low levels of an organizational hierarchy to have a significant say in their work.

In addition, cultural values may also be a moderator on how people experience social-structural empowerment. For example, Seibert et al. (2004) suggest that individuals from a high power distance or uncertainty avoidance cultures may react to an empowering climate with feelings of stress and withdrawal. In this vein, Robert et al. (2000) found that empowering leadership was negatively related to job satisfaction in India (a high power distance culture) while empowering leadership was positively related to job satisfaction in the US (low power distance), Mexico (moderate power distance), and Poland (moderate power distance). And in a study of work teams in Belgium, Finland, the Philippines, and the US, Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) found that teams with higher collectivism and a more 'doing-orientation' reported more empowerment.

Culture may also moderate the effectiveness of employee empowerment (Eylon and Eu, 1999). It may be that employees with high levels of self-determination and impact are perceived as threatening to bosses in high-power distance cultures and thus not viewed as high performers. Clearly, future research on the cultural boundaries of empowerment can contribute to the body of knowledge on empowerment.

## A broader range of outcomes associated with empowerment

Thus far, most research on the impact of empowerment has examined organizational performance and individual attitudes, behaviors, and performance. My hope is that future research will explore a broader range of impacts including societal and health outcomes.

### Societal
Some recent research gives us some clues about the societal affects of empowerment. Feldman and Khademian (2003: 358) take a cross-level approach in examining how organizational empowerment can create 'dynamic potential in the relationship between the individual, organization and community.'

They show how more empowerment can create positive spirals that rejuvenate and enliven communities to action. Spreitzer (2007) also examines an interesting society outcome – peace. In a country-level analyses, she demonstrates how countries that embrace empowering organizational leadership have less social unrest and lower levels of corruption. She asserts when employees develop skills to have voice at work they are also likely to exercise that voice in civic and political domains which in turn contributes to a more democratic and peaceful society.

### Health
With health care costs escalating, organizations are increasingly interested in the health implications of work. To date, there is little direct research linking psychological empowerment and health. A substantial body of research has linked lack of control at work (e.g., job insecurity, low decision latitude) with health problems including exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular disease (Karasek, 1979; Kuper and Marmot, 2003). But what about the other dimensions of empowerment? Recent research with call center employees in the UK found that psychological empowerment (especially the meaning, self-determination, and impact dimensions) had a small direct effect on mental and physical health but an even bigger indirect effect through enhanced job satisfaction (Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2003).

Most of the research above has investigated how a lack of empowerment can impair health. Future research might focus more on the converse – that is, how can empowerment nurture and sustain positive health? There are emerging clues as to how psychological empowerment may enable positive health outcomes. For example, Turner et al. (2002) suggest that healthy work is enabled by work designs that engage employees. Keyes et al. (2001) suggest that positive health outcomes result from leadership that involves and respects employees. Future research can look at how empowerment may be related to indicators that capture notions of positive

health, like flourishing and thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Empowerment may also enable individuals to be resilient in the face of difficulty or threat (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Empowerment may be a resource that buffers individuals and helps them to bounce back from extraordinary physical and financial devastation and loss of human life (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003). Through empowerment, individuals experience the purpose and efficacy to allow them to persevere. Empowerment can facilitate a sense of real hope that things will get better in the future (Spreitzer and Mishra, 2000). For these reasons we believe that the links between empowerment and resilience may also provide fertile ground for future research.

## CONCLUSION

The last two decades have brought a substantial body of new research in understanding empowerment at work. The biggest contribution has been more integration of the social-structural and psychological perspectives on empowerment. That integration highlights that need to further develop a more comprehensive theory of empowerment at work. Thus far, we have many of the pieces of this theoretical puzzle but a theory would articulate how the pieces fit together into a whole. A theory would specify more than definitions, measures, and the antecedents and consequences of empowerment. It would identify the mechanisms and processes of empowerment, and specify the individual and organizational boundary conditions of when and under what conditions empowerment has potency. We have come a long way over the last two decades, but there is still work to be done in integrating the current knowledge base toward a more holistic theory of empowerment at work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## NOTE

1 This review of empowerment builds on two earlier reviews: (1) Empowerment at work, forthcoming in the *Encyclopedia of Industrial/Organizational Psychology*, Sage Publications and (2) Musings on the Past and Future of Empowerment, Forthcoming, *Handbook of Organizational Development*, Sage Publications.

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