SOCIAL STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

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A set of hypotheses based on emerging theory on high-involvement systems describes expected relationships between social structural characteristics at the level of the work unit (perceptions of role ambiguity, span of control, sociopolitical support, access to information and resources, and work unit climate) and feelings of empowerment. The hypotheses are examined with data on a sample of middle managers from diverse units of a Fortune 50 organization. A work unit with little role ambiguity, strong sociopolitical support, access to information, and a participative unit climate is found to be associated with managerial perceptions of empowerment, as is working for a boss who has a wide span of control.

In the past decade, organizations have embraced notions of empowerment in the workplace (e.g., Kanter, 1983). Although organizational researchers have begun to reach consensus on conceptualizing empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), little research has examined explicitly the influence of organizational context on individual empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The purpose of this article is to examine the work unit design characteristics of an empowering system. First, empowerment is defined and distinguished from notions of job enrichment. Then, hypotheses that build on theories of high-involvement systems (Lawler, 1992) relate social structure to empowerment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

A Definition of Empowerment

Although notions of empowerment have been implicit in research on alienation (Seaman, 1959), participation (Lawler, 1992), and job enrichment (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), the construct has only recently received rigorous

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conceptualization and measurement. Building on the work of Conger and Kanungo (1988), Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined empowerment as intrinsic motivation manifested in four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his or her work role. The four cognitions are meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact.

*Meaning* involves a fit between the requirements of a work role and a person's beliefs, values, and behaviors (Brief & Nord, 1990; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). *Competence* refers to self-efficacy specific to work—a belief in one's capability to perform work activities with skill (Gist, 1987)—and is analogous to agency beliefs, personal mastery, or effort-performance expectancy (Bandura, 1989). *Self-determination* is a sense of choice in initiating and regulating actions (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Self-determination reflects autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behavior and processes; making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort are examples (Bell & Staw, 1989). Finally, *impact* is the degree to which a person can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (Ashforth, 1989). The notion of impact has been studied implicitly in research on learned helplessness (Martinko & Gardner, 1982); definitions of learned helplessness emphasize a lack of perceived influence over workplace forces built upon a history of past experiences. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that the four dimensions combine additively. In earlier research (Spreitzer, 1992), I found that a more complex multiplicative formulation of the four dimensions had no better predictive validity than a simpler additive formulation. Thus, the focus of this article is on a psychological definition of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995).

Although it has common roots with job enrichment theory (Lawler, 1992), this multidimensional conceptualization of empowerment extends notions of job enrichment in a number of ways. First, it is based on the assumption that individuals can have a high level of "voice" in shaping and influencing organizational activities. The impact dimension of empowerment extends the notion that individuals have some control over their own jobs to imply that they have some influence over larger organizational matters (Ford & Fotller, 1995). Second, the four dimensions of empowerment are viewed from the perspective of the individual; these cognitions complement the more objective, job-oriented characteristics and individual differences developed by Hackman and Oldham (1980). Consequently, from this cogni-

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1 A number of the dimensions are similar to elements of Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job characteristics framework: Meaning is synonymous with their "meaningfulness of work"; competence is similar to their "knowledge and skill," though they refer to objective knowledge and skills rather than the perceptions of knowledge and skill that the competence dimension reflects; and self-determination is similar to their "autonomy." However, where "knowledge and skill" is an individual difference moderator and "autonomy" is an objective job characteristic, competence and self-determination are both cognitions. Furthermore, no element of the job characteristics framework is consistent with the impact dimension of empowerment.
tive perspective, it is possible for individuals to experience empowerment even if their "objective" job characteristics are not enriched, and vice versa. Third, empowerment is focused at the level of the individual in relation to his or her work environment, but notions of job enrichment are frequently applied to both the individual and the team level of analysis (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). However, because the four dimensions reflect the individual's relationship with his or her work unit, which may include teams, team dynamics can contribute to feelings of empowerment. Thus, in these ways, this conceptualization of empowerment draws on and extends earlier work on job enrichment.

**Work Unit Design and Empowerment**

In a theoretical model of empowerment in the workplace, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggested that the organizational environment can have a powerful influence on cognitions of empowerment. This research extends their work by specifying the content and nature of an empowering environment in an initial theoretical framework. One way to view an organizational environment is in terms of the constraints or opportunities it presents for individual cognitions and behavior (Blau, 1987; Mowday & Sutton, 1993). For example, excessive bureaucratic constraints inadvertently condition passive mind-sets and behavior in employees (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Martin & Gardner, 1982). A basic proposition undergirds the hypotheses developed below: an empowering design provides opportunities for, rather than constraints on, individual mind-set and behavior (Torbert, 1991). High-involvement (Lawler, 1992) or commitment-based (Walton, 1985) designs reflect less constraining situations. These approaches support the transmission of extensive information, resources, and power throughout an organization to enable employee influence in organization decision making (Lawler, 1992).

Such high-involvement systems have been the recent focus of empirical research related to organizational performance (Arthur, 1994). The influence of high-involvement systems on empowerment is both cognitive and motivational (Locke & Schweiger, 1979). Cognitively, high-involvement systems enable employees to better use information and to understand how they can influence organizational activities (Miller & Monge, 1986). From a motivational perspective, high-involvement systems facilitate employees' trust in an organization and increase their sense of control, ego involvement, and identification with it (Locke & Schweiger, 1979). Below, I specify the nature of the relationship between high-involvement designs and employees' perceptions of empowerment.

**The importance of perception.** In his model of human agency, Bandura (1989) suggested that, rather than being completely free from, or determined by, their environments, people actively perceive those environments and are influenced by their perceptions rather than by some objective reality. Likewise, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggested that individuals' judgments about observable organizational conditions are shaped by their inter-
pretations, which go beyond verifiable reality. For individuals to feel empowered, they must perceive a role environment to be liberating rather than constraining (Deci et al., 1989). For example, resources may be decentralized in objective reality, but if employees are not informed that those resources are available for their use (a perceptual reality), then access to resources will have little influence on feelings of empowerment. Consequently, it is the individuals’ perceptions of their working environments that shape empowerment rather than some objective reality. Further, because empowerment is defined as a set of cognitions, it too must be assessed through perceptions (Walsh, 1995). For these reasons, perceptions of both empowerment and social structural characteristics were the primary focus in this study.

Influence of the work unit context. The design characteristics of interest in this study are those in the immediate vicinity of the individual—the characteristics of work units. I chose the work unit as the design referent for two reasons. First, the departments of an organization, especially a large and complex one, tend not to be homogeneous. As Comstock and Scott noted “Most research rests on an implicit assumption of homogeneity (Scott, et al., 1972), positing uniformity of work and structural forms across participants and departments, although we know that differentiation is characteristic of complex organizations. Large variations in units within organizations have been documented by Hall (1962) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967)” (1977: 178). Second, because the intent of the study was to understand empowerment within a work role, and because work roles are specific to a particular context, the work unit rather than the total organization was the appropriate context to examine (House, 1988).

Direction of influence. The relationship between social structure and empowerment may not be unidirectional. Over time, empowered individuals can also affect their environments through proactive behaviors (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Thus, the association between what individuals perceive to be an empowering environment and their cognitions of empowerment may be mutually reinforcing through a feedback loop between empowered behaviors and work context (Bandura, 1978). However, reciprocity does not mean that different influences are of equal strength (Brief & Aldag, 1981), nor do reciprocal influences occur simultaneously. “It takes time for a causal factor to influence and to activate reciprocal influence” (Wood & Bandura, 1989: 262). Except in contexts like organizations undergoing metamorphic change or entrepreneurial start-up firms, where individuals can have considerable leverage, the environment will generally tend to have a more powerful effect on individuals than the converse. Such theories as learned helplessness (Martin & Gardner, 1982) and organizationally induced powerlessness (Ashforth, 1989) support this assertion.

Hypotheses

Building on notions of high-involvement systems (Lawler, 1992), I suggest that six work unit social structural characteristics create a work context
that facilitates empowerment: (1) low role ambiguity, (2) working for a boss who has a wide span of control, (3) sociopolitical support, (4) access to information, (5) access to resources, and (6) a participative unit climate.

**Role ambiguity.** Role ambiguity occurs when an individual is unsure about others' expectations of him- or herself. According to role theory, every position in a formal organizational structure should have a clear set of responsibilities in order for management to provide appropriate guidance and direction and to ultimately hold subordinates accountable for their performance (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). If people do not know the extent of their authority and what is expected of them, they will hesitate to act (i.e., lack self-determination) and thus feel unable to make a difference (i.e., lack impact) (Sawyer, 1992). Moreover, the boundaries of decision authority must be clear so that individuals can feel confident (i.e., competent) about their decisions, rather than fearful about potential repercussions for decisions made under ambiguous authority (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). More specifically, clear task requirements and low levels of uncertainty are purported to be related to feelings of competency (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) because individuals understand what needs to be done. Previous research has also found role ambiguity to be related to low levels of intrinsic motivation (Sawyer, 1992); only when individuals understand their roles in organizations can those roles take on personal meaning. Thus, role ambiguity is argued to be a constraint on cognitions of empowerment.

_Hypothesis 1: Individuals who perceive a high degree of role ambiguity in their work will report a lower level of empowerment than those individuals who perceive less role ambiguity._

**Span of control.** Span of control denotes the number of people supervised by one manager. Narrow spans allow for close control of subordinates because supervisors have few employees to monitor. In contrast, wide spans of control make it difficult to monitor subordinate decisions because of information-processing limits (Hill & Hoskisson, 1987). Narrow spans of control are associated with centralized decision making (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Decentralized control helps subordinates feel able to make decisions under their domains of responsibility, promoting self-determination. Decentralized control also helps employees feel that they are contributing to the operations of their organization, promoting their sense of having impact (Martinko & Gardner, 1982). Previous research has found that people working under conditions consistent with micro-management, or a supervisor's narrow span of control, or both tend to feel that management does not trust their skills and abilities; these feelings culminate in a sense of personal incompetence (Lawler, 1992). Furthermore, individuals working under supervisors with narrow spans of control are less intrinsically motivated (experience less personal meaning) than those working under wide spans of control because their bosses specify much of their work behavior (Lawler, 1992). Thus, a wide supervisory span of control is argued to facilitate subordinates' cognitions of empowerment.
Hypothesis 2: Individuals who work for a boss with a wide span of control will report a higher level of empowerment than those who work for a boss with a narrow span of control.

Sociopolitical support. Sociopolitical support is defined as endorsement or approval from or legitimacy granted by organizational constituencies and is typically gained from membership in organizational networks (Kanter, 1983). Social networks define the social fabric of an organization, providing members with key channels for getting work done (Brass & Burkhart, 1993; Ibarra, 1993). Relevant support networks include an individual’s boss, peers, subordinates, and the members of his or her work group. Membership in support networks increases social exchange with key organizational constituencies and thus enhances a sense of personal power (Crozier, 1964); such personal power can be manifested in enhanced feelings of both self-determination and impact. In contrast, a lack of support from key constituencies may lead to feelings of low competence (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Walton (1985) suggested the importance of organizational support, specifically mutual trust, as a means for breaking down forces of domination in organizations. Westley (1990) found that empowered managers are included in strategic conversations with their co-workers and bosses. Vogt and Murrell (1990) posited that interdependence and collaboration facilitate individual empowerment and advocated “helping networks” for creating empowerment within an organizational context. Thus, sociopolitical support is argued to facilitate cognitions of empowerment.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals who perceive that they have a high degree of sociopolitical support from key organizational constituencies will report a higher level of empowerment than individuals who perceive that they have low support.

Access to information. Support for the relationship between access to information and empowerment abounds in both academic and practitioner literatures. Kanter suggested that in order to be empowering, organizations “must make more information more available to more people at more levels through more devices” (1986: 5). Such information might include data about work flow, productivity, the external environmental, competition, and firm strategy (Lawler, 1992). Access to organizational information allows individuals to see the “big picture” and develop alternative frames of reference for understanding their roles in the organization’s operations (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). In order for individuals to feel empowered, they must understand the goals of their work units and how their own work can contribute to those goals. Social cognition theory suggests that access to information facilitates self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Access to information also facilitates “sense-making,” which is especially important during times of high uncertainty (Weick, 1979). Information about organizational vision is important because it helps to create a sense of meaning and purpose (Conger & Kanungo,
and enhances an individual's ability to make and influence decisions that are appropriately aligned with an organization's goals and mission (Lawler, 1992). Nonaka (1988) considered the sharing of information freely across levels and functions to be a critical ingredient for individual autonomy. Block (1987) argued that to create an empowering environment, managers should ensure that information cascades throughout an organization. Thus, organizational information should facilitate cognitions of empowerment.

**Hypothesis 4:** Individuals who perceive that they have a high degree of access to information will report a higher level of empowerment than those who perceive they have less access to information.

**Access to resources.** In Kanter's terms, "[Access to organizational resources] means more general managers working through smaller business units: more project teams that have budgets; special resource pools of unallocated funds that people can tap to solve problems. In short, they make it easier for people to tap locally what they need to get things done" (1986: 6). Examples of resources include funds, material, space, and time. A lack of access to critical organizational resources contributes to powerlessness and dependency (Homans, 1958). Access to resources enhances an individual's sense of self-efficacy and control over environmental contingencies (Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Walton (1985) described an empowering system as one in which individuals have the appropriate authority to allocate spending and approve budgets. The outcomes of such systems are highly energized individuals who assume responsibility for and ownership of their roles (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). In Nonaka's (1988) system of "middle-up-down management," top management is responsible for determining the overall direction of a company. Beyond that, each individual has the authority to determine internal time lines and other resource allocation issues such as staffing, which enhances their sense of empowerment. Thus, access to resources is argued to facilitate cognitions of empowerment.

**Hypothesis 5:** Individuals who perceive that they have a high degree of access to resources will report a higher level of empowerment than individuals who perceive they have less access to resources.

**Participative unit climate.** Climate is defined as the characteristics describing the personality of an organization and influencing the behavior of its members (James & Jones, 1974). Climate provides a frame of reference through which individuals make sense of organizational life; it shapes behaviors and molds attitudes (Joyce & Slocum, 1984). In participative climates, the acknowledgment, creation, and liberation of employees are valued, whereas in nonparticipative climates control, order, and predictability are valued (Evered & Selman, 1989). Furthermore, participative climates emphasize individual contribution and initiative rather than top-down command and control (Lawler, 1992). Such a climate recognizes the critical value of
human capital to the success of an organization and the importance of employees’ creativity and initiative for organizational responsiveness in a competitive external environment (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Thus, a participative climate is argued to facilitate cognitions of empowerment.

Hypothesis 6: Individuals who work in departments that have a participative climate will report a higher level of empowerment than individuals who work in departments with nonparticipative climates.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

Survey data were collected from a sample of 393 middle managers representing diverse units of a Fortune 50 organization. This sample is an interesting one in which to study empowerment because the traditional function of middle managers is being challenged as organizations struggle to respond to a competitive environment (Dopson & Stewart, 1990). In an article on the changing role of middle managers in the United States, O’Reilly discussed how organizational changes exacerbate issues of empowerment for middle managers: “We hear over and over again that [middle] managers are feeling increasingly disenfranchised. Decision-making is moving higher and higher. Companies talk a good game about employee empowerment, but as times get tough, top management calls the shots” (1992: 46). Middle managers are also interesting theoretically because their work varies from relatively structured to highly unstructured in different contexts (Johnson & Frohman, 1989). Further, middle managers have access to more resources and information than lower-level managers but less control over resources and information than upper-level managers (e.g., Izraeli, 1975).

The mean age of sample members was 45.9 years; 93 percent were men, and over 85 percent were Caucasian. More than 70 percent had at least a college education, and almost 50 percent had a graduate degree. Mean company tenure was 13 years, and mean position tenure was about 3 years. Though fairly homogenous, the sample seems to be generally representative of the national population of middle managers (Johnson & Frohman, 1989). The respondents were assured of complete confidentiality. Surveys were returned directly to me for processing, and only aggregate results were reported back to the organization. The data were collected at the beginning of a managerial development program. Over three years, all middle managers in the company participated in the program. After the middle managers provided information on their availability, participants for each administration of the program were selected by a training manager to ensure stratification across functions, locations, and divisions. Thus, the participants in each administration of the development program were a microcosm of the general population of middle managers at this organization. The data for this study were collected from a subset of managers who participated in the program during late 1991 and early 1992.
This mode of data collection had certain advantages. First, because all middle managers participated in the program over the three-year period, selection bias was minimized. To check for selection bias (as evidenced by significant differences between the managers in the sample and the managers who had completed the program but were not in the study), I conducted mean difference tests across these two groups on effectiveness and demographic variables. No significant differences were found. Second, because the data were collected at the beginning of the program, a 100 percent response rate was obtained, reducing the potential for bias. Third, multiple assessments of a participative unit climate were collected from the middle managers' subordinates, reducing the potential for common method bias.

**Measures**

The four dimensions of empowerment were measured with multiple items developed and validated in earlier research (Spreitzer, 1995). All measures were self-assessments and used a seven-point Likert response format. Sample items include "The work I do is meaningful" (meaning), "I am confident about my ability to do my job" (competence), "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job" (self-determination), and "My impact on what happens in my department is large" (impact). The results of a second-order confirmatory factor analysis of the empowerment items were presented in validation research on empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) and demonstrated that each item loads on its appropriate factor and that the four dimensions contribute to an overall construct of empowerment. All loadings were significant, indicating that each element provided important information in an overall empowerment construct. Finally, I created a scale for each dimension by taking the mean of the appropriate items.

The social structural variables were measured with multiple items at the work unit level of analysis (see Table 1 for the individual items). Three items from Zanzi's (1987) organic structure scale tap into elements of role ambiguity. Less rigid lines of authority and low goal and task definition indicate higher role ambiguity and are consistent with well-established measures of role ambiguity (Rizzo et al., 1970). The items used a five-point Likert response format. To measure supervisor's span of control, I asked each middle manager how many individuals directly reported to his or her immediate superior.

Because no suitable measures of sociopolitical support, access to information, and access to resources were found in the literature, items were developed for use in this study. Four items measuring perceptions of the extent of sociopolitical support received from subordinates, peers, work group, and superior were created. Three items assessing perceptions of the extent of access to information and three items on access to resources were also created. Each employed a seven-point Likert scale.

Five items from the competing values model of organization culture (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1991) were used to assess participative climate. Though the items were developed to measure culture, for purposes of this study,
### TABLE 1
Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis of Social Structural Items with Oblique Rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Sociopolitical Support</th>
<th>Work Climate</th>
<th>Role Ambiguity</th>
<th>Access to Resources</th>
<th>Access to Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have the support I need from my subordinates to do my job well</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the support I need from my workgroup or team to do my job well</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the support I need from my peers to do my job well</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the support I need from my immediate superior to do my job well</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and open discussion</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and decentralization</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing employee concerns and ideas</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative problem solving processes</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human relations, teamwork, cohesion</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines of authority are not precisely defined</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most tasks performed at the lower levels of the total unit are not well defined</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals are not well defined for the total unit</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can obtain the resources necessary to support new ideas</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.95</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I need additional resources to do my job, I can usually get them</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.91</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because the items examine the influence of the work unit context on individual mind-set (Denison, 1993), they more appropriately tap components of climate rather than culture. Culture research tends to be macro in orientation, linked to such outcomes as organizational performance (Denison, 1993). Because climate is most appropriately measured using collective perceptions (Joyce & Slocum, 1984), the items were assessed by a group of each middle manager’s subordinates, who described the work unit managed by the middle manager’s boss. I used subordinate perceptions of work climate rather than peer or boss perceptions because subordinates were part of the same work units as the middle managers. The data support the use of subordinate assessments: the middle managers’ own perceptions of climate were significantly correlated with their subordinates’ perceptions of climate ($r = .18, p < .01$). An $F$-test ($F = 1.92, p < .001$) indicated general consistency of subordinates’ responses within a given work unit and supported their aggregation, given that the within-group variance was smaller than the between-groups variance (George, 1990).

To collect data on unit climate, each middle manager was instructed to distribute the surveys to a subset of subordinates with whom he or she interacted frequently on the job and who knew him or her well (this last criterion was important for other measures in the survey, such as leadership ability, which were not used in this study). Completed questionnaires were returned by mail to my university for processing. All subordinates were assured of confidentiality, as only aggregate data would be fed back to the organization. Good cooperation was obtained; an average of four subordinates per middle manager responded to the questionnaire, with a range of from zero to eight. There were 21 middle managers with fewer than two subordinates
responding to the climate measure. Thus, these managers were not included in the analysis, and the resulting sample size was 372.

Because the measures of empowerment and five of the six social structural characteristics were measured using self-reports, I sought to formally assess the impact of common method bias. Following Podsakoff and Organ (1986), I conducted a confirmatory factor analysis with the individual empowerment measures and the sociopolitical support, information, and resource measures. One would expect that if common method bias were a serious problem, these self-report measures would load onto a single second-order factor representing such bias. However, the fit of this second-order model is not acceptable ($\chi^2 = 664.17$, $df = 175$, $p < .001$, AGFI = .82, CFI = .88 [calculated from null of $\chi^2 = 4.293.55$, $df = 260$]), suggesting that common method bias is not unduly problematic.

**Analytical Procedures**

Because three of the five social structural variables were new, I conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to ensure that they were independent of one another. The eigenvalue criterion for determining the appropriate number of factors was used in conjunction with an oblique rotation, given that the social structural variables were expected to be related to each other. The hypotheses were examined using ordinary-least-squares regression analysis in which a single dependent variable was created from the mean of the four dimensions of empowerment.

Three demographic variables (gender, age, and education) were controlled for in the regression because of possible relationships to empowerment. Previous research has found that female managers receive less sociopolitical support than male managers (Kanter, 1977). Older managers can be plateaued and thus receive less sociopolitical support, information, and resources than others (Ettington, 1993). Well-educated workers may feel more competent. I controlled one contextual variable, the size of the unit managed by the middle manager’s boss,\(^2\) to take into account possible relationships with the social structure variables. Larger units may tend to be more bureaucratic than smaller ones, yet they may be the source of more resources and more support networks. Thus, the effect of unit size on empowerment is not specified a priori.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Unit size is distinguished from span of control. Whereas span of control reflects the number of individuals directly reporting to the middle manager’s boss, unit size reflects the total number of the employees in that unit, including the middle manager’s subordinates, the subordinates’ subordinates, and so forth.

\(^3\) Although data on the function of each manager were available in the data set, no significant differences were found across the different functions with respect to empowerment. Because significance was lacking and sample size limitations made it unwieldy and inappropriate to include the more than ten different dummy variables, function was not included in the analysis.
RESULTS

Exploratory Factor Analysis

As expected, five factors were derived from the EFA of the items from the five social structural measures with multiple measures. The appropriate items loaded on each factor (see Table 1). Primary loadings exceeded .50, with the exception of one information item, with a loading of .49, and all cross-loadings were low (the highest was .20). The five factors explained almost 70 percent of the common variance. Adequate reliability (α > .70; Nunnally, 1978) was achieved for all but the role ambiguity factor, which had a Cronbach alpha of .61.4

I computed scales for each of the factors using the mean of each construct’s multiple items. Because many of the measures of the social structural characteristics were obtained from one source (the exception was the climate measure, which was assessed by each manager’s subordinates), it was important to demonstrate that the characteristics were different from each other. Table 2 indicates that the correlations among the social structural variables are moderate but clearly distinct from unity. Moderate correlations (.50–.57) were found between sociopolitical support, information, and resources. Since each of these variables reflects different elements of general organizational support, these correlations were not surprising. However, multicollinearity is not typically considered to be problematic until correlations reach about .75 (Ashford & Tsui, 1992).

Results on the Hypotheses

The structural analysis provided general support for every hypothesis but Hypothesis 5 (see Table 3). As expected, role ambiguity was found to be negatively related to empowerment (β = -.20, p < .001), and a wide span of control (belonging to a focal manager’s boss) (β = .09, p < .05), sociopolitical support (β = .15, p < .01), access to information (β = .19, p < .01), and unit climate (as assessed by a manager’s subordinates) (β = .12, p < .01) were found to be positively related to empowerment. Unexpectedly, access to resources was not related to empowerment. Two of the four control variables were also found to be significant: Larger units (β = .09, p < .05) were found to be related to empowerment; rather than being viewed as bureaucratic, larger units provide more meaning to individuals. Finally, those with more education (β = .13, p < .01) were found to be more empowered.5

DISCUSSION

First, exploratory factor analyses identified a five-factor model of empowering social structural characteristics. Measures for three of the variables

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4 A confirmatory factor analysis (AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95) replicated the five-factor structure of the EFA.

5 These findings were replicated in a LISREL analysis conducted with a second-order empowerment factor (composed of the four dimensions) as the dependent variable (AGFI = 0.90; CFI = 0.94).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<td>1. Role ambiguity</td>
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<td>2. Span of control</td>
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<td>5.92</td>
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<td>4. Sociopolitical support</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Access to resources</td>
<td>4.19</td>
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<td>-0.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Access to information</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Work climate</td>
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<td>0.77</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
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<td>8. Meaning</td>
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<td>9. Competence</td>
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<td>11. Impact</td>
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<td>12. Gender</td>
<td>1.96</td>
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<td>-0.01</td>
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<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>13. Age</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.34</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>14. Education</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>1.63</td>
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<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
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<td>-0.11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Cronbach alpha reliabilities where applicable are reported in parentheses along the diagonal. Correlations above .10 are significant at p < .05; correlations above .13 are significant at p < .01.

* Unless otherwise noted, all variables were measured on seven-point scales. Role ambiguity was measured on a five-point scale. Gender was a dichotomous variable where 1 = woman, 2 = man. Age and education were each measured with eight categories of responses.
TABLE 3
Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variable: Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit size</td>
<td>.09*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Predictor variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role ambiguity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Span of control</td>
<td>-.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical support</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to information</td>
<td>.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to resources</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work climate</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7.79***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standardized regression coefficients are reported. N = 372.
  * p < .05, one-tailed test
  ** p < .01, one-tailed test
  *** p < .001, one-tailed test

(information, resources, and sociopolitical support) were new to this study and required validation before substantive tests of hypotheses could be conducted (Schwab, 1980). All three new measures achieved appropriate levels of reliability and were able to be discriminated from other, better established social structural characteristics.

Second, the results provide support for some key contextual factors associated with empowerment perceptions by middle managers. Role ambiguity was found to have the strongest relationship to empowerment. A highly flexible goal or task injects uncertainty and ambiguity. For example, a lack of goal definition may result in goal conflict across various stakeholders. Similarly, imprecise lines of authority may create uncertainty as individuals attempt to fulfill the expectations of numerous stakeholders in an organization. Research has shown that role ambiguity threatens personal control and creates stress (Sutton & Kahn, 1987). Conversely, goal clarity has been found to be an important determinant of work effectiveness (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). In general, individuals seem to perceive flexible authority relationships and minimal goal-task formalization as disempowering. Thus, creating clear goals, tasks, and lines of responsibility are key factors related to empowerment in the workplace.

The results also indicate that when a manager’s boss had a wider span of control, he or she was less likely to micro-manage the actions of subordinates, possibly because it is more difficult to closely monitor a large number of subordinates than a small number. Even if a boss does not want to delegate decision making, the greater the number of subordinates that report to him or
her, the more difficult it becomes to make all decisions for each subordinate. Consequently, subordinates are likely to feel more empowered in their work roles because their boss is not monitoring their actions.

Sociopolitical support was also related to empowerment. Empowered employees see themselves as integrated into the key political channels for getting work done in organizations. Contemporary management practices, such as self-managing or cross-functional teams, are likely to enhance perceptions of sociopolitical support (Manz, 1990). Through endorsement, approval, or legitimacy, individuals feel a sense of mutual trust that breaks down forces of domination in a work unit and enhances empowerment. Providing access to information about the strategy and goals of an organization was another key contextual factor associated with empowerment. By gaining knowledge about where an organization is headed and how it relates to its external environment, individuals feel a sense of ownership regarding the company and can begin to understand how their work roles and behavior affect its success (Frey, 1993). Information helps reduce uncertainty and equivocality by providing individuals with a strong understanding of their work environment (Sutton & Kahn, 1987).

A participative climate was related to empowerment as well. The climate of the work unit defines what is valued, what should be cared about. A participative climate helps employees believe that they are important assets in the organization and that they can make a difference. Mission statements emphasizing employees as critical organization assets send a signal to employees about how they are valued in the company. The participative actions of senior management indicate critical values, further contributing to the climate of the organization.

Contrary to expectations, access to resources was not found to be significantly related to empowerment. Although some research in nonbusiness contexts has suggested that individuals can be empowered in spite of limited resources (Freire, 1970; Hoffman, 1978), two alternative explanations may account for the statistically insignificant finding. First, the correlation among the information, sociopolitical support, and resource scales ranged from .50 to .57. The moderate correlations among these three variables may have suppressed the effect of resources on the dependent variable. Second, the type of resources was not made explicit in the resource survey items (see Table 1). Some people may have interpreted and thus responded to the resource items using ideas of information and support. Thus, the information and support scales may be inadvertently tapping some of the effects of the resource construct. Clearly, future research on the effect of resources, independent of sociopolitical support and information, is necessary before any firm conclusions on the role of resources as a condition important for empowerment are drawn.

The two significant control variables suggest some implications for empowerment. Higher levels of education are critical for enhancing empowerment, particularly in terms of providing skills and abilities individuals need to feel competent. Training and development programs are likely to have
parallel effects on empowerment. The results also indicate that large units are not necessarily seen as disempowering, though the correlations do not suggest that such units are sources of greater resources or support, as argued above. It appears that the significant relationship between unit size and empowerment is driven by the meaning dimension.

In sum, support for the hypotheses regarding role ambiguity, span of control, sociopolitical support, access to information, and work unit climate provides a clearer understanding of some social structural factors associated with managerial cognitions of empowerment. In support of the general proposition posited in this article's theoretical development, a high-involvement work unit design provides opportunities for individual behavior and mindset and is viewed by middle managers as empowering. In other words, a high-involvement system provides an environment in which individuals can assume a more active, rather than passive, role in an organization.

As was acknowledged, elements of the theoretical framework may be mutually reinforcing (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Because the data are not longitudinal, I cannot conclude that the social structural factors examined in this study "cause" managers to feel more empowered. Although the theoretical framework draws on previous research suggesting that social structure influences cognitions (Ashforth, 1989; Martinko & Gardner, 1982), a cross-sectional design can only demonstrate that managers who perceive a high level of empowerment tend to report more involving social structural elements in their work units than those who perceive a low level of empowerment. It may be that empowered managers themselves create an empowering social structural context through their behavior (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The causality of the relationships might be more clearly examined in future research addressing change in empowerment cognitions following some kind of structural field intervention or laboratory experiment that changes all or some of the following: the design of work, span of control, resources, information, support, and organizational climate.

CONCLUSION

Contributions

This research contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, it goes beyond conceptual work on empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) by demonstrating how empowerment draws on and extends earlier work on job enrichment. Where job enrichment limits employee voice to the immediate work role, empowerment defines a set of cognitions that provide more extensive employee voice in decision making. Second, it theoretically extends the nomological network of empowerment in the workplace by articulating the content and nature of the relationship between social structural context and empowerment. The social structural characteristics examined in this research reflect characteristics of a high-involvement work design (Lawler, 1992) and the conditions Aktouf (1992) argued are necessary for "vital work." Drawing on the "soft constructionist"
approach of Thomas and Velthouse (1990), this work contributes to the literature by articulating the importance of perceptions in the interpretation of the work environment as either empowering or disempowering to individuals. Third, this research contributes to the literature by providing one of the first empirical examinations of the relationship between social structure and empowerment. There has been a dearth of such theory-driven meso-level research examining the relationship between organizational social structure and individual cognition (Rousseau, 1985). This study supports the proposition that high-involvement social structures (specifically, low role ambiguity, wide supervisory spans of control, sociopolitical support, access to information, and a participative climate) create opportunities for empowerment in the workplace. In spite of these contributions, the study has a number of limitations and raises questions for future research on the nature of the relationship between social structure and empowerment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Embedded within the study lie several methodological limitations. First, given the marginal reliability of the role ambiguity scale (α = .61), the role ambiguity findings should be interpreted with caution. Second, allowing the middle managers to choose the subordinates who would assess work unit climate might have introduced some bias into the analysis. However, because I would expect that all managers (not just those who are empowered) would choose subordinates tending to have favorable assessments of the work unit, the extent of the bias should be minimal.

Third, the use of self-report measures can create common method variance. However, six of the ten variables in the structural analysis have low susceptibility to common method bias. Crampton and Wagner (1994) found demographic and organizational structure variables to be relatively free of percept-percept inflation. Moreover, the climate variable was assessed by the middle manager’s subordinates and hence was not susceptible to common method bias. Four of these variables—participative climate, unit size, span of control, and education—were found to be significantly related to empowerment, suggesting that the results are not entirely the result of common method. Moreover, the confirmatory factor analysis results reported in the Measures section suggest that method variance between the self-report independent and dependent variables is not unduly problematic. A final weakness is that the cross-sectional research design does not permit an assessment of causality between the social structural factors and empowerment.

This research represents some helpful first steps toward understanding the social structural factors associated with empowerment, but it also indicates some questions for future research. Future research must begin to explore the relationships between each of the social structural characteristics and each of the four dimensions of empowerment to determine which work-unit elements affect which dimensions. The effects on empowerment of other contemporary design features such as leadership, skill development through training, rewards, and team structures should also be examined. The interac-
tion between organization and work-unit-level social structure may ultimately provide the most explanatory power in understanding empowerment. As discussed in the theoretical development, though social structure is posited to influence empowerment, there is likely to be a weaker, reciprocal link from empowerment back to social structure through behavior. Longitudinal studies will ultimately be necessary to clarify the nature and magnitude of these potentially reciprocal linkages.

Future research should also examine the joint effects of design and dispositional characteristics on empowerment. An understanding of the interactions between social structure and disposition will extend knowledge of macro-micro links in organizations. The hypotheses should be examined across levels of hierarchies (for instance, line workers could be included), in more demographically diverse samples (e.g., those with high representations of women and minorities), and across different contexts (e.g., service or cross-cultural contexts) in order to assess issues of generalizability. The theoretical framework should be expanded to examine the behavioral and organizational outcomes of empowerment. As Bowen and Lawler suggested, "there is still precious little research on the consequences of empowerment...more systematic research must examine whether this array of benefits and costs fully captures the 'whys' (and 'why nots') of empowerment" (1992: 35).

Clearly, the empirical study of empowerment is in its infancy. This research takes some initial steps toward explaining the relationship between social structure and empowerment. My hope is that clarifying these relationships will encourage more organizational scholars to embark on substantive research addressing the dynamics of empowerment in the workplace. These research findings will provide guidance to practitioners as they endeavor to create empowering organizations.

REFERENCES


Gretchen M. Spreitzer is an assistant professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California School of Business Administration. She received her Ph.D. degree in organizational behavior and human resource management from the University of Michigan. Her current research interests include macro-micro linkages in organizational behavior, organizational change and effectiveness, high-involvement organizations, and managerial development.