



Empowerment and creativity: A cross-level investigation

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon social learning and self-determination theories, we hypothesized and tested a chain mediating process linking empowerment to employee creativity. Based on data from 385 employees working with 104 supervisors in multiple organizations in China, we conducted cross-level path analyses and found that (1) structural empowerment partially mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and psychological empowerment, (2) psychological empowerment fully mediated the relationship between structural empowerment and creativity, and (3) structural and psychological empowerment sequentially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and creativity. This study integrated different perspectives of empowerment and provides important insights into the mechanisms linking empowerment with creativity.

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1. Introduction

Because of the demonstrated relationship between employees' creativity and organizational innovation, performance and survival (Amabile, 1996; Nonaka, 1991; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004), numerous studies have examined the direct and indirect impact of personal and contextual variables on employees' creativity in the workplace (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Roden & Galunic, 2004; Shalley et al., 2004; Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Creativity refers to the production of novel and useful ideas by an individual or by a group of individuals working together (Amabile, 1988; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). Among these prior studies, an important stream of research highlights different perspectives of empowerment on employee creativity. For example, researchers have found support for the positive effect of transformational leadership (Shin & Zhou, 2003), delegation (Chen & Aryee, 2007), and psychological empowerment (Alge, Ballinger, Tangirala, & Oakley, 2006) on employee creativity.

In terms of motivational effects on employees, empowerment has been examined in the literature in three broad categories (Leach, Wall, & Jackson, 2003; Menon, 2001; Spreitzer, 1995): leadership, structural, and psychological perspectives. From the leadership perspective, the emphasis has been on the energizing aspect of leaders' empowering styles and behaviors. Supervisors can energize and empower their subordinates to perform by providing an exciting vision for the future. Through *transformational leadership*, leaders inspire subordinates to participate in the process of transforming the organization (Menon, 2001; Yukl, 1989). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Kirkman, Chen, Rarh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Shamir, Zakay, & Popper, 1998), we conceptualize transformational leadership as a group-level phenomenon.

From the structural perspective, *structural empowerment* focuses on policies and practices enacted by management aimed at cascading power, decision-making authority and responsibility down to lower levels of the organization (Blau & Alba, 1982; Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Eylon & Bamberger, 2000; Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006; Spreitzer, 2007).

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Seibert, Silver, and Randolph (2004) conceptualized structural empowerment as empowerment climate, representing employees' shared perceptions of managerial structures, policies, and practices related to empowerment (Biron & Bamberger, 2010; Tuuli & Rowlinson, 2009). Consistent with this conceptualization, we use structural empowerment and empowerment climate interchangeably in the present study. We also follow prior research (e.g., Seibert et al., 2004) to treat structural empowerment as a work-unit level construct.

From the psychological perspective, *psychological empowerment* has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct manifested in four cognitions (Spreitzer, 1996): meaning (i.e., value of work goal or purpose), competence (i.e., self-efficacy), self-determination (i.e., autonomy in initiation and continuation of work behaviors), and impact (i.e., influence on work outcomes). As a psychological state, psychological empowerment has been treated as an individual-level variable.

Despite past research efforts linking empowerment to creativity, two critical questions remain unanswered. First, a major inconsistency across these three streams of research on empowerment is that these perspectives identify empowerment at two different levels of analysis, i.e., either individual level or group level. Researchers have called for theoretical integrations of these different levels in empowerment research (e.g., Menon, 2001) and some have attempted to build a linkage between them (e.g., Alge et al., 2006; Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Mathieu et al., 2006; Ozaralli, 2003; Seibert et al., 2004). However, questions remain regarding how to “determine the specific impact of empowerment at multiple levels of analysis and thus identify optimal levels of empowerment” (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). Little research to date has provided an integration of these three perspectives of empowerment at multiple levels of analysis. Furthermore, there is a demand for future research to consider the multilevel nature of empowerment, particularly regarding the specific situations and contexts in which there is a need for employees to be creative (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Second, prior research on creativity has largely been guided by intrinsic motivation theory (Amabile, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1995; Shin & Zhou, 2003). Along this vein, intrinsic motivation is considered a mediating variable through which contextual factors contribute to creativity (Amabile, 1988; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shin & Zhou, 2003). However, results of testing this claim have been inconsistent (Amabile, Goldfarb, & Brackfield, 1990; Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001; Shin & Zhou, 2003). Thus, it is important to examine other potential mediators (Shalley et al., 2004) for explaining the relationship between contexts and employee creativity.

To address these research gaps, we draw upon social learning theory and self-determination theory to hypothesize that (1) structural empowerment has a mediating effect on the relationship between transformational leadership and psychological empowerment, (2) psychological empowerment mediates the effect of structural empowerment on employee creativity, and (3) structural and psychological empowerment sequentially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity. This study contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, by examining structural empowerment as a mediating variable in the transformational leadership–psychological empowerment relationship, this study extends previous research that has primarily examined the direct or main effect of transformational leadership on psychological empowerment (e.g., Avolio et al., 2004). Understanding the mediators of this relationship provides theoretical insights into the mechanism through which transformational leadership affects psychological empowerment. Although the relationship between leadership and group climate has been extensively examined, the present study is among the first to examine the effect of transformational leadership on structural empowerment (which is operationalized as a climate variable). Second, this study extends the stream of research on the impact of transformational leadership on creativity. It provides an alternative mechanism (i.e. other than intrinsic motivation) to account for the influence of transformational leadership on employee creativity (Shin & Zhou, 2003; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Specifically, we examine the potential mediating effect of psychological empowerment. Fig. 1 depicts our conceptual model.

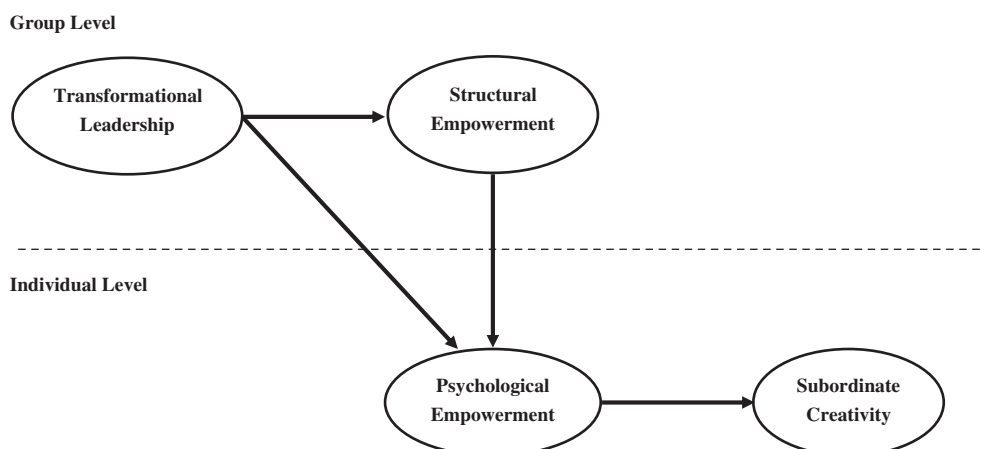


Fig. 1. A multilevel model of empowerment and creativity.

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