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EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ALONG THE POWER DISTANCE DIMENSION

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ABSTRACT. *This exploratory study investigates empowerment in a cultural context. One hundred and thirty-five MBAs participated in a management simulation. Results suggest differences based on participants' cultural background. Specifically, as a result of the empowerment process participants from both high and low power distance cultures were more satisfied with their job in the empowered condition and less satisfied in the disempowered condition. Individuals from high power distance cultures did not perform as well when empowered as when disempowered. Participants from low power distance cultures performed similarly, regardless of the empowerment process. Implications of these findings for empowerment programs and future research are discussed. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved*

KEY WORDS. *Empowerment, power distance, ethnic differences, cross-cultural, disempowerment, performance, satisfaction.*

Recently, 'empowerment' has come into vogue among general and international business practitioners (Rehfeld, 1990; Shipper & Manz, 1992;

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Wellins & Sykes, 1994). The emotional and ideological appeal of empowerment has led to a confusing proliferation of use and definitions (Shipper & Manz, 1992). In addition, despite the increase in international business, to date, there has been no investigation regarding the impact of culture on empowerment, even though it should be a key consideration as 'there are no such things as universal management theories' (Hofstede, 1993:81). Concepts and theories developed in Western societies are by no means pan-cultural (Bond, 1988).

MANAGING IN AN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SETTING

Existing studies indicate that we cannot expect managerial practices to transfer across ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries (for reviews see Bond & Smith, 1996). For example, when investigating the impact of management styles on job performance, Black and Porter (1991) found that managerial behaviors with a positive impact in the United States did not achieve the same results in Hong Kong. Recent studies also show significant differences in peoples' philosophy and values (Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993) as well as their cognitive styles (Abramson, Lane, Nagai, & Takagi, 1993). These differences not only contribute to how people respond to managerial styles but also to which styles are prevalent in different countries. For example, Morris and Pavett (1992) identified that Mexicans use an authoritative management style, whereas Americans prefer a system based on consultative management (using Likert's System 4 Theory). Overall, these studies highlight why investigating work empowerment across cultures should be of paramount interest for those engaged and concerned with understanding empowerment, as well as for those involved with developing successful management practices across cultures.

The purpose of the present study is to understand how cultural differences influence the perception and response to work empowerment. More specifically, we investigate empowerment differences along the cultural power distance dimension (Hofstede, 1980). To do so we first define empowerment and offer hypotheses concerning its effects across cultures.

EMPOWERMENT

Conger and Kanungo (1988) were among the first to conceptualize the empowerment construct in the workplace. They suggested that empowerment is a motivational phenomenon related to expectancy and self-efficacy theories. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) also focused on the

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