



The moderating effect of collectivistic orientation in psychological empowerment and job satisfaction relationship

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the moderating effect of collectivistic value on the relationship between psychological empowerment and job satisfaction. Specifically, we propose that the multi-dimensional psychological effects of empowerment (i.e., meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact) on job satisfaction differ between high and low collectivistic employees. Data collected from hotel employees in Canada ($n = 193$) and China ($n = 371$) revealed that collectivistic orientation elevated (attenuated) the effect of self-determination (impact) on job satisfaction. However, no significant results were found with respect to meaning and competence. Research and practical implications for the findings as well as directions for future research are suggested.

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1. Introduction

Empowerment that provides employees with greater decision-making ability and discretionary power over how they perform their work and serve customers is considered an important management tool in the quality of service provision (Spreitzer, 1995; Hancer and George, 2003). In the hospitality industry, frontline employees act as boundary spanners and are often torn between a myriad of supervisor's and customers' demands, affording them with considerable latitude, flexibility, and power over the content of their interactions with customers and how work is accomplished can induce a sense of personal achievement and job satisfaction, subsequently reduce the potential for stress (Chiang et al., 2009; Chow et al., 2006; Hancer and George, 2003). Despite its potential benefits, studies of psychological empowerment are rather limited in the hospitality industry (Hancer and George, 2003).

While the idea of providing employees with flexibility, autonomy, and discretion to serve customers is intuitively appealing, empowerment is an approach which is not universally embraced by all countries (Hui et al., 2004a; Randolph and Sashkin, 2002). Cross-cultural studies (e.g., Hirst et al., 2008; Hui et al., 2004a; Robert

et al., 2000) have established that congruence between employees' cultural values and management practices is fundamental to their successful implementation. For example, the unique norms and values inherent in different cultures affect the way employees are motivated (Chiang and Birtch, 2007). In Western cultures (typically highly individualistic), theories about performance tend to focus on the individual dispositional attributes and competencies (Betancourt and Weiner, 1982; Staw, 1980). By contrast, Asian cultures (typically collectivistic) tend to value harmonious working relationships and view performance a result of joint responsibility and team effort (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, previous cross-cultural studies have alerted us the potential impacts of cultural values on the effectiveness of empowerment. Hui et al.'s (2004a) study found that the effects of empowerment on job satisfaction vary according to an individual's power distance value. Robert et al. (2000) similarly found a negative effect for empowerment in India versus other countries sampled. These studies highlight the fact that empowerment practices considered as effective in one country may not be suitable in another cultural setting. Some authors (e.g., Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001; Robert et al., 2000) have therefore called for additional work that explicates and extends earlier efforts to the cross-national setting. Our purpose is to address these calls for the empirical examination of empowerment under the moderation of the collectivistic values.

Since the seminal work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995), psychological empowerment is defined as consisting of four components: meaning (perceived work value), competence (feeling of self-efficacy), self-determination (sense of control), and impact (ability to influence). While research sup-

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ports this multi-dimensional conceptualization (Fulford and Enz, 1995; Hancer and George, 2003), inconsistent results were found between the individual dimensions of empowerment and job satisfaction. For example, Liden et al. (2000) investigated the mediating effects of empowerment on the relationship between job characteristics and satisfaction among service employees. Only the dimensions of meaning and competence were found to be significant. Fulford and Enz (1995) reported in their study of service employees that self-determination had no effect on job satisfaction while meaning and impact were significant predictors. Ambivalent findings imply that the four dimensions of psychological empowerment exhibit differential influences on employees' job satisfaction and, hence, merit further investigation. In addition, inconsistent findings may be due to the moderating influence of employees' value orientation (Robert et al., 2000). Given that empowerment's conceptualization has been acknowledged as being bounded by cultural differences (Hui et al., 2004a; Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001), examining its dimensions independently is likely to improve our understanding of which specific component(s) of empowerment that is/are (not) motivating. These findings are particularly important to international hotels as they attempt to empower employees across different cultural settings. They also allow hotels to tailor their programs to suit different cultural requirements.

2. Psychological empowerment and cultural value

Psychological empowerment is defined as a motivational construct manifested through a constellation of experienced psychological cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). Meaning is defined as the fit between job task requirements and one's own values, beliefs and behaviors. Competence is the self-belief that one possesses the skills and abilities necessary to perform a job well. Self-determination is the feeling of having choice and control over one's work. Finally, impact is the belief that one has significant influence over strategic, administrative, or operational outcomes at work.

According to Thomas and Velthouse (1990), the level of psychological empowerment is subject to how individuals interpret their work tasks and how they form cognitions from their objective reality. As they claimed (1990, p. 669), "Interpretative cognitions go beyond the perception of facts to provide additional, needed meaning for an individual". Some individuals may feel psychologically empowered when they interpret and perceive their work as meaningful, feel free and competent to determine their work, and envisage success with sound impacts. Others may feel disempowered as a result of different interpretations such that they perceive their work tasks as meaningless, "can't do", or redundant. In particular, individuals with different value orientations may have different styles and tendencies in their task interpretation process.

Given the interpretative and cognitive nature of psychological empowerment, individuals with different collectivistic values are expected to differ in the way they react to and process information in relation to their work environment. A collectivistic value predisposes individuals towards construing themselves as being interdependent or part of a group (Magnini, 2010; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, individuals with a high collectivistic orientation are more aligned with a group-based as opposed to an individual-based perspective. According to Nisbett et al. (2001), collectivists interpret information in such a way as to take into account their entire environment. They process work related information in a manner that combines both attributes of the task with those of the social context, reflecting a context-dependent processing style. In contrast, low collectivistic individuals see themselves

as unique and independent. When processing work related information, they focus solely on the attributes of the task and in doing so detach from the context, reflecting a context-independent processing style. As a result, individuals with high versus low collectivistic values should differ in their interpretations of psychological empowerment and its effects. That is, the collectivistic orientation will attenuate or strengthen the effects of the four dimensions of psychological empowerment on job satisfaction.

2.1. Work meaning

The dimension of meaning represents an individual's intrinsic care about a task and is evaluated in relation to one's own standards (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). When employees are able to derive personal meaning from their job, they will be motivated and a higher level of job satisfaction will be resulted (e.g., Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990).

However, cultural values influence a person's work values and expectations and that in turn affect their interpretation of task value (White, 2006). High collectivistic individuals may attach different meaning to work based on their cultural orientations (Hofstede, 2001). For high collectivists, work is not viewed as an independent entity but embedded in relationship context (Triandis et al., 1988). They are motivated by relational oriented job factors, such as group relationships, cooperation, and harmony (Triandis, 1994). Work meaning is likely to be derived from the group (versus the individual) values. Job satisfaction is derived from group recognition and interpersonal relationships. Since people with a high collectivistic orientation are more oriented toward teamwork and group attainment and less on the inner self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), their sense of individual ownership of the work goal and task performance itself may not be as strong as the social expectations that accompany those tasks (Kim, 1994). This view is supported by Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) who found that collectivistic individuals tended to set aside their own self-interest for the benefits of the group. They valued mutual support, interdependence and cooperation. This is in contrast to people with low collectivistic orientation, whose priority is task over relationship (Singelis et al., 1995). Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize that:

H1. The effect of the work meaning dimension of psychological empowerment on job satisfaction will be weaker for employees with a high collectivistic orientation than for those with a low collectivistic orientation.

2.2. Competence

The dimension of competence is a belief that one possesses the skills and abilities necessary to perform a job well (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). A feeling of lower competence leads to anxiety and avoidance behavior while a high level of self-efficacy often results in initiating behavior and work enjoyment (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Gist, 1987). Unlike meaning which influences job satisfaction derived from work nature, competence affects employee satisfaction level by altering their interpretation of the level of difficulty they encounter during the course of work. A satisfactory work experience results when employees feel that they are capable of handling assignments from customers or supervisors independently.

We posit that the influence of competence may have a more pronounced impact on highly collectivistic employees. High collectivistic employees often interpret work tasks from a group perspective (Triandis, 1994), prefer to work in teams, and tend to evaluate task difficulty according to the capability of their group (Earley et al., 1999). Performance is oriented to benefit and meet the expectations of significant others (Markus and Kitayama,

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