
An examination on the elusiveness and charm of empowerment via the managerial lenses

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Abstract:

The empowerment notion, albeit being around for many years, has been described as highly elusive, loose and attractive in the academic literature. Its intellectual influence spans both the business management and non-business management domains. In this paper, the empowerment notion is examined based on a literature review, including newspaper article study, and a Facebook-based questionnaire survey on its perceptions. By doing so, it further clarifies the essence of the empowerment notion as well as informs learning and practices in the business and non-business sectors. Overall, the paper mainly examines the empowerment notion from the managerial perspective. Finally, the article recommends mastery of literature review skills, e.g., on learning empowerment, to strengthen an individual's managerial intellectual learning capability.

Key words: Delegation; Empowerment; Facebook-based questionnaire survey; Literature review; Newspaper article study

Introduction

The notion of empowerment comes up in the literature of business management as well as other social sciences, e.g., housing studies, from time to time. It catches the writer's attention in his teaching activities, especially with one of the writer's student doing a final-year dissertation on this topic. On

top of that, as an intellectual concept, empowerment is said to be “highly elusive”, “attractive” and “loose” (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002). This sets up the context that motivates the writer to conduct a literature review and a Facebook-based questionnaire on empowerment. Specifically, the paper aims at:

- (1) reviewing the essence of the empowerment notion
- (2) examining people’s perceptions on and experience with the empowerment

Achieving these two aims should inform the theoretical development of the empowerment concept as well as students in social sciences, e.g., management and housing studies, to learn this concept. The two aims are also related: knowledge on the essence of the empowerment notion enables a better evaluation of people’s empowerment perceptions and experience. The present study, nevertheless, is done mainly via the managerial lenses so as to make the scope of study manageable.

The empowerment notion and its associated concepts

The empowerment notion, according to Lee *et al.* (2014), can be traced back to the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. In the business management field, the notion is part of the management trend that challenges Taylorism and scientific management (Collins, 1995). For such a rich concept, the academic publisher Emerald has a journal called *Empowerment in Organizations* from 1993 to 1998 and another one called *Participation and Empowerment* in 1999. Nevertheless, the concept remains influential, with derived research themes such as empowered culture (Bagali, 2002; Sigler and Pearson, 2000), employee empowerment (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014; Pelit *et al.*, 2011), and empowering leadership (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Sims Jr. *et al.*, 2009). Its significance is also evidenced by contemporary newspaper articles related to it in the business management domain, for examples:

South China Morning Post news 1: “Firm takes creative steps to retain staff” by (Gyopos, 2008): “..The focus at AXA is to engage each employee and enhance their sense of belonging and pride in the company... by offering employees the unique AXA Employee Value Proposition, which comprises the key elements of empowerment, reward and recognition, learning and development, and respect and values...”

South China Morning Post news 2: “Building trust with staff is a must” (Wong, 2007): “Five ingredients to being an effective middle manager... Passion Attitude ...Integrity ...Creativity ...Empowerment Middle managers need to give directions and provide guidelines that lead staff to take action on their own... Edge in a competitive environment...”.

South China Morning Post news 3: “Smooth flight out of turbulent skies” (Taylor, 2005): “Drastic plan ... returns beleaguered carrier to profitability.... The board approved the plan ... giving Mr Hogan a mandate to implement changes across the business... This would require ... the empowerment of employees to restore pride in their jobs...”.

At the same time, the empowerment notion also comes up often in non-business management domains, for examples:

South China Morning Post news 4: “Rising Asia is letting its women fall behind” (Tuminez and Desai, 2012): “..Rising prosperity has narrowed the gender gap in many countries. Women are making progress on health and survival, educational attainment, economic opportunity and political empowerment..”.

South China Morning Post news 5: “Sisters still waiting for respect” (Shamdasani, 2004): “Empowerment has come a long way, but more work lies ahead. Women have made considerable progress in their quest for equality... But nowhere in the world have they achieved equality in terms of respect, opportunity and status...”.

The five newspaper articles illustrate that the empowerment notion is indeed employed in a range of business

and non-business subjects. This point has been noted by Lincoln *et al.* (2002); more importantly, these writers describe the empowerment notion as attractive, loose and elusive. Specifically, the empowerment notion is considered by its proponents as “a humanistic device to improve the quality of working life for ordinary employees” while conceived as “the latest management ruse to intensify work and shift risk” (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002). The following are some of the definitions of empowerment in the literature, which gives an impression of its diverse meanings:

Definition 1: Empowerment “refers to employees being more proactive and self-sufficient in assisting an organization to achieve its goals” (Herrenkohl *et al.*, 1999).

Definition 2: Empowerment is “recognizing and releasing into the organization the power that people already have in their wealth of useful knowledge and internal motivation” (Randolph, 1995).

Definition 3: Psychological empowerment is “the perception that workers can help determine their own work roles, accomplish meaningful work, and influence important decisions” (Yukl and Becker, 2006).

Definition 4: Empowerment refers to “a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilization that challenge the basic power relations in our society” (Bookman and Morgen, 1988: 4). It is “a process by which the oppressed may become free” (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002).

Definition 5: Empowerment involves two constructs; it can be treated as (i) a relational concept to “describe the perceived power or control that an individual actor or organizational subunit has over others” and (ii) a motivational concept which postulates that people have a need for power.

Such a need is met when people's self-determination and self-efficacy¹ belief is strengthened (Conger and Kanungo, 1988).

Definitions 1 to 3 are similar in meaning with emphasis on motivation; they are different from definition 4 which is attentive to the issues of power distribution and liberation for the oppressed. As to definition 5, it is also sensitive to the power issue, but the two constructs remain managerial in orientation basically. In short, definitions 1, 2, 3 and 5 are more occupied with employee empowerment² and related management techniques. As a topic of intellectual investigation, notably with definitions 1, 2, 3 and 5, empowerment is connected to a set of management concepts and issues from the humanistic or 'soft' human resource management standpoint (Lashley and McGoldrick, 1994). This standpoint is underlined by the eight critical empowerment principles of Harley, i.e., (i) "protect the dignity of all employees", (ii) "manage perceptions, not just the "facts"", (iii) "use organizational authority to release rather than inhibit human potential", (iv) "use consensus decision making", (v) clarify vision, mission, objectives, goals, and job descriptions", (vi) "unshackle the human desire to be of service to others", (vii) "come from values" and, finally, (viii) "provide the feedback requested by the employees". In this regard, the writer finds that two models are especially informative for capturing the main associated concepts and issues, namely, the integrative model of Robbins *et al.* (2002) and the process model of Conger and Kanungo (1988). First of all, Robbins *et al.* (2002)'s integrative model explicitly considers the following concepts and issues:

- i. Organization context
- ii. Intervening perceptions and attitudes, i.e., opportunities, support, commitment and trust

¹ *Self-efficacy* is a psychological term that describes an individual's belief in his/her own effectiveness (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002).

² *Employee empowerment* topics can be on employees in general (Nykodym *et al.*, 1994), managers (Newton and Wilkinson, 1994), disadvantaged employees (Echiejile, 1994) and teams (Brower, 1995).

- iii. Individual differences
- iv. Local work environment and human resource practices
- v. Psychological empowerment, comprising the four factors of impact, competence, meaning and self-determination
- vi. Empowered behavior

As to Conger and Kanungo (1988)'s empowerment process model, the process has five stages, with empowerment concepts and issues noted:

Stage 1: Conditions leading to powerlessness, i.e., organizational factors, supervision, reward system, nature of job

Stage 2: Employment of managerial strategies and techniques, i.e., participative management, goal setting, feedback system, modeling, contingent/ competence-based reward and job enrichment

Stage 3: Provision of self-efficacy information with four sources, i.e., enactive attainment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, plus elimination of stage-1 conditions

Stage 4: Experience of empowerment by subordinates, i.e., strengthened belief in self-efficacy

Stage 5: Empowered behaviors, i.e., heightened initiatives and persistent task-oriented behavior

These two models of Robbins *et al.* (2002) and Conger and Kanungo (1988) synthesize in a comprehensive way the main management concepts and issues from the academic literature associated with the empowerment notion. Their models convey in a comprehensive way the essence of the empowerment notion, primarily in the management context. Indeed, much empirical research effort has been made by researchers to figure out the cause-effect relationships among all the concepts and issues identified in these two models and then reported in academic journals. On the negative side, the empowerment

notion has been complained as passive, i.e., “passive roles are ascribed to those supposedly empowered” (Collins, 1995). This indicates controversy around the concept in the academic community. As this paper mainly examines the empowerment notion via the managerial lenses, the literature review on definition 4 of the empowerment notion is not further pursued here.

On the relationship and differences between empowerment and delegation

It has been the writer’s personal observation in his working and teaching experience that many managers and students have difficulties to tell the difference between the empowerment concept and the delegation concept. Thus, explaining the differences between empowerment and delegation also helps in clarifying the empowerment notion itself. Simply, delegation is “the assignment of responsibility or authority to another person (normally from a manager to a subordinate) to carry out specific activities... Delegation empowers a subordinate to make decisions” (Wikipedia, 2015). For Gazda (2002), there are two types of delegation, namely, delegating for results and delegating for employee development. When effective, delegation is able to boost up “morale”, “manager productivity” and “organizational success” (Gazda, 2002). The nature of delegation is further manifested in Myrna (2010)’s progress accelerator model of delegation. The cyclical model of Myrna involves four steps: step 1: agreement; step 2: accountability; step 3: action; finally, step 4: assessment. It makes up an ongoing managerial control and enabling learning loop. From these writings on delegation and the literature review on the empowerment notion, the writer offers the following 3 propositions on the relationship and differences between empowerment and delegation:

Proposition 1: Delegation can be considered as a relevant example on empowerment practice. It is, like management by objectives and employee involvement, a forerunner of the empowerment concept (Lashley and McGoldrick, 1994).

Proposition 2: As a concept, delegation is simpler than empowerment; delegation has much fewer associated concepts and issues than empowerment. The concept of delegation is basically not that “elusive”, nor “loose” when compared with the empowerment notion.

Proposition 3: The delegation notion is compatible in a crude way with the organizational metaphors³ of machine, culture and psychic prison, while the empowerment notion makes use of a much broader range of organizational metaphors in a more sophisticated way.

Having done a literature review on the empowerment notion, this paper moves on to present and discuss some findings on people’s perceptions on the empowerment notion based on the writer’s recent Facebook-based questionnaire survey.

Findings from a Facebook-based survey on perceptions of the empowerment notion and experience with empowerment

A Facebook-based questionnaire survey was conducted by the writer with his “friends” on his Facebook. Most of them have been or are the writer’s students. The survey questionnaire was constructed using Kwiksurveys.com’s survey tool, which is free of charge. A review of the Facebook-based questionnaire survey method was provided in Ho (2014), thus not repeated here. At the time of the survey, there were 1,574 “friends” on the writer’s Facebook. With invitation to participate in the survey via Facebook messages, the writer was able to collect 103

³ Interested readers are referred to Morgan (1986) and Flood and Jackson (1991) for further discussion on the topic of organizational metaphors.

questionnaire replies from April 18 to 23, 2015. Male respondents make up 46.6% of the total while female respondents represent 53.4% (re: question 1 of the survey; see appendix 1). 72.9% of the respondents either have an undergraduate degree or a post-graduate degree (re: question 3). 82.5% of them are within the age range of 28 to 47 (re: question 2). The survey questions and response statistics are provided in the appendix of this paper. Briefly, there are 14 questions in the survey questionnaire (appendix 1). Questions 1 to 4 covers the basic profile of the respondents, while questions 5 to 14 learn the respondents' perceptions and experience related to empowerment. Below are the main findings from the survey. They include basic findings as well as additional findings via data analysis with the Excel function of data filtering⁴.

(i) Findings from basic survey statistics

Finding 1 (re: questions 5 and 6): While 82.1% of the respondents are either familiar with the concept or have some vague idea about it, 62.7% of the respondents either strongly feel or mildly feel that the empowerment concept is complicated. This reflects the elusiveness of the empowerment notion.

Finding 2 (re: question 7): 59.8% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that the empowerment concept is controversial and 20.6% of the respondents express no idea on this question regarding controversy. Again, the elusiveness of the concept is felt by many of the respondents.

Finding 3 (re: question 8): 42.2% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that the empowerment concept is the same as the delegation concept while 42.3% of the respondents do not feel this way. The rest of the respondents

⁴ The survey data collected with the Kwiksveys tool can be exported to Excel for further analysis.

(15.5%) have no idea on this question about empowerment and delegation.

Finding 4 (re: questions 9 and 10): 56.8% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that they have experienced psychological empowerment in their work settings, while 22.5% of them do not feel this way (re: question 9). On a related topic (re: question 10), 55.4% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that their organizations have an empowering culture while 29.1% of them do not feel this way.

Finding 5 (re: question 11): 73.7% of the respondents think that an organization with an empowering culture has higher organizational effectiveness. The rest, at 26.3%, either do not feel so or have no idea. In this case, the empowerment notion looks attractive to the majority of the respondents.

Finding 6 (re: question 12): 65.1% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that it is desirable for their organizations to adopt empowerment practices. The rest, at 34.9%, either do not feel this way, or have no idea, or feel that the question is not applicable to their cases.

Finding 7 (re: question 13): 64.1% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that the empowerment concept is highly applicable in non-business management settings. The rest, at 35.9%, either do not feel this way or have no idea with the question.

Finding 8 (re: question 14): 80.4% of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that they are interested to learn more about the empowerment concept in the near future. The rest, at 19.6%, either do not feel so or have no idea with the question. This reflects the attractiveness of the concept to most of the respondents.

The survey figures portray the respondents' overall perceptions on various questions related to the empowerment notion. The figures are more revealing when compared across the questions raised. For example, while 73.7% of the respondents think that an organization with an empowering

culture has higher organizational effectiveness (re: finding 5), 65.1% (which is less than 73.7%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that it is desirable for their organizations to adopt empowerment practices (finding 6). That means that some respondents have some reservation on the desirability of implementing empowerment in their organizations. It would be interesting to find out the respondents' specific concerns in this case. As another example, with 82.1% of the respondents either familiar with the concept or having some vague idea about it (finding 1), 80.4% of the respondents remain either strongly or mildly interested to learn more about empowerment in the future (finding 8). This suggests that many respondents are interested in managerial intellectual learning.

(ii) Additional findings with the Excel analysis tool of data filtering

Finding 9 (re: questions 1 and 9): The following table examines whether gender (question 1) affects respondents' experience with psychological empowerment in their work settings (question 9). The figures in the cells represent number of people while those in brackets are percentage figures with reference to each row. For example, 24% (for male who feel strongly) is $10 / (10+21+7+4) \times 100\%$. The table (re: Table 1) indicates that female respondents experience less psychological empowerment than male respondents. The finding reveals issues that are associated with empowerment definition 4 as well as South China Post news 4 and 5.

Table 1

Gender	Feel strongly	Feel mildly	Do not feel so	No idea
Male	10 (24%)	21 (50%)	7 (17%)	4 (10%)
Female	3 (6%)	24 (47%)	16 (31%)	8 (16%)

Finding 10 (re: questions 4 and 9): The following table (re: Table 2) examines whether employment sector (question 4) affects respondents' experience with psychological empowerment in their work settings (question 9). While more respondents in the private sector feel strongly that they experience psychological empowerment than those in public sector, more respondents in the public sector feel mildly that they experience psychological empowerment than those in the private sector. The reasons behind the pattern of the figures need to be further investigated via future research works.

Table 2

Employment sector	Feel strongly	Feel mildly	Do not feel so	No idea
<i>Private sector</i>	10 (15%)	32 (49%)	16 (25%)	7 (11%)
<i>Public sector</i>	1 (7%)	10 (71%)	1 (7%)	2 (14%)

Finding 11 (re: questions 12 and 14): The following table (re: Table 3) examines whether perceived desirability to adopt empowerment practices (question 12) affects respondents' interest to learn empowerment in the near future (question 14). The figures indicate that those who strongly feel that it is desirable for their organizations to adopt empowerment practices also tend to have a strong interest to learn empowerment in the near future. As to those who have no idea whether it is desirable for their organizations to adopt empowerment practices, they also have no idea whether they would be interested to learn empowerment in the near future.

Table 3

Perceived desirability of empowerment adoption	Feel strongly	Feel mildly	Do not feel so	No idea
<i>Feel strongly</i>	19 (76%)	5 (20%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
<i>Feel mildly</i>	11 (27%)	22 (54%)	6 (15%)	2 (5%)
<i>Do not feel so</i>	7	10	3	0

	(35%)	(50%)	(15%)	(0%)
<i>No idea</i>	0 (0%)	5 (42%)	1 (8%)	6 (50%)

Finding 12 (re: questions 5 and 13): The following table (re: Table 4) examines whether perceived familiarity with the empowerment notion (question 5) affects respondents' view that the empowerment concept is highly applicable in non-business management settings (question 13). The figures indicate that those who consider themselves familiar with the empowerment concept also have a higher tendency to feel strongly that the empowerment concept is highly applicable in non-business management settings than those who are not familiar, i.e., those having some vague idea or having no idea. The answer for question 13 is quite clear based on the empowerment literature: the empowerment concept is indeed highly applicable in non-business management settings. Thus, the pattern of figures of the table appears normal, when viewed with the literature's knowledge on question 13.

Table 4

Familiarity with the empowerment concept	Feel strongly	Feel mildly	Do not feel so	No idea
<i>Familiar</i>	11 (41%)	10 (37%)	2 (7%)	4 (15%)
<i>Have some vague idea</i>	14 (25%)	25 (45%)	11 (20%)	6 (11%)
<i>No idea</i>	1 (6%)	3 (17%)	3 (17%)	11 (61%)

Overall, the majority of the respondents have some ideas about empowerment (re: findings 1, 2 and 3), how it can be employed to make sense of real-life organizational practices (re: findings 4, 5, 6, 7) and have expressed interest to learn more about the empowerment notion (re: finding 8). The findings also indicate that personal profiles and work settings of the respondents affect their perceptions, learning interest and experience with empowerment (re: findings 9, 10, 11 and 12). As most of the

respondents are not scholars or scholar-practitioners, it is unrealistic to expect them to be well informed with the empowerment literature. The survey findings also indicate that they are not in this case. Nonetheless, it is argued by Ho (2015) that mastery of literature review skill, e.g., on learning the empowerment notion, is vital for managerial intellectual learning and continuous professional development. And, indeed, many of the respondents are interested in managerial intellectual learning, based on survey finding 8.

Concluding remarks

Via the literature review, the image of the empowerment notion being “highly elusive”, “loose” and “attractive” is rendered. It is plausible that the notion, being elusive, is charming to different people for dissimilar reasons. Admittedly, more literature review effort can be made on definition 4 of the empowerment notion (as related to the theme of political activities and liberation) to make the review exercise more comprehensive; since this paper mainly studies the empowerment notion via the managerial lenses, this is not done.

The literature review exercise, including the newspaper article study, enables the writer to make a more informed study of the Facebook-based questionnaire survey findings. In general, the survey findings are roughly in line with the discussion in the empowerment literature. The findings also point to the need and expressed interest by the survey respondents to study the empowerment notion. In this regard, the paper does not only have some academic value but also delivers pedagogical value to those who feel that the concept is attractive to learn and apply in their work and non-work settings. Finally, as a systems theorist, the writer recognizes the desirability of cross-fertilization of intellectual ideas between the empowerment and the critical systems thinking fields (see Flood and Jackson (1991)).

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Appendix

Appendix 1: The Facebook-based survey questions (14 questions) and responses statistics.

<i>Survey questions</i>	<i>Survey statistics</i>
Question 1: What is your gender?	Male: 48 (46.6%) Female: 55 (53.4%)
Question 2: What is your age?	18 to 27: 8 (7.8%) 28 to 37: 43 (41.7%) 38 to 47: 42 (40.8%) 48 to 57: 10 (9.7%) 58 to 67: 0 (0.0%) 68 or above: 0 (0.0%)
Question 3: What is your education background?	Not yet a degree-holder: 28 (27.2%) Finished University Undergraduate Degree study: 60 (58.3%) Finished Master Degree study: 15 (14.6%) Finished Ph.D. Degree study (or equivalent): 0 (0.0%)
Question 4: What is your employment status?	I am employed in the private sector (full-time): 71 (68.9%) I am employed in the public sector (full-time): 16 (15.5%) I do not have a full-time paid job: 8 (7.8%)

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	It is complicated: 8 (7.8%)
Question 5: Are you familiar with the concept of empowerment?	Yes, I am familiar with the concept: 27 (26.7%) I have some vague idea about it: 56 (55.4%) I have no idea what the concept is all about: 18 (17.8%)
Question 6: Do you feel that the concept of empowerment is complicated?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 18 (17.6%) I mildly feel this way: 46 (45.1%) I do not feel this way: 24 (23.5%) No idea: 14 (13.7%)
Question 7: Do you feel that the concept of empowerment is controversial?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 16 (15.7%) I mildly fee this way: 45 (44.1%) I do not feel this way: 20 (19.6%) No idea: 21 (20.6%)
Question 8: Do you feel that the concept of empowerment is the same as the concept of delegation?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 11 (11.3%) I mildly fee this way: 30 (30.9%) I do not feel this way: 41 (42.3%) No idea: 15 (15.5%)
Question 9: Do you experience psychological empowerment in your work setting?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 13 (12.7%) I have this feeling mildly: 45 (44.1%) I don't feel this way: 23 (22.5%) No idea: 12 (11.8%) Not applicable: 9 (8.8%)
Question 10: Do you feel that your organization has an empowering culture?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 22 (21.4%) I have this feeling mildly: 35 (34.0%) I do not feel this way: 30 (29.1%) No idea: 10 (9.7%) Not applicable: 6 (5.8%)
Question 11: Do you think that an organization with an empowering culture has higher organizational effectiveness?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 43 (41.7%) I have this feeling mildly: 33 (32.0%) I do not feel this way: 17 (16.5%) No idea: 10 (9.7%)
Question 12: Do you feel that it is desirable for your organization to adopt empowerment practices?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 25 (24.3%) I have this feeling mildly: 42 (40.8%) I do not feel this way: 20 (19.4%) No idea: 12 (11.7%) Not applicable: 4 (3.9%)
Question 13: Do you feel that the empowerment concept is highly applicable in non-business management settings?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 27 (26.2%) I have this feeling mildly: 39 (37.9%) I do not feel this way: 16 (15.5%) No idea: 21 (20.4%)
Question 14: Do you feel that you would be interested to learn more about the concept of empowerment in the near future?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 38 (37.3%) I have this feeling mildly: 44 (43.1%) I do not feel this way: 12 (11.8%) No idea: 8 (7.8%)

Appendix 2: Response statistics over time, from April 18 to 23, 2015.

