

## Research Articles

## Empowering Employees: Structural Empowerment as Antecedent of Job Satisfaction in University Settings

Alejandro Orgambidez-Ramos\*<sup>ab</sup>, Yolanda Borrego-Alés<sup>b</sup>

[a] Department of Clinical, Experimental and Social Psychology, Huelva University, Huelva, Spain. [b] Research Center for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics (Foundation for Science and Technology), Faro, Portugal.

### Abstract

With more organizations looking for employees who take the initiative and respond creatively to the challenges of the job, empowerment becomes important at both individual and organizational levels. Empowered employees are generally more satisfied with their work, committed and effective at work. According to Kanter's structural empowerment, this study examines the role of access to opportunity, resources, support and information, and two types of power, formal and informal, as antecedents of job satisfaction. A cross sectional study using questionnaires was conducted. The sample consisted of 226 Spanish university teachers. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses have revealed that intrinsic job satisfaction was significantly predicted by formal power and access to opportunity, and job satisfaction with supervisor was predicted by informal power, and access to resources, information, and support. Results support Kanter's theory of structural empowerment, and suggest strong relationships between job satisfaction and structural empowerment. It is a link between empowering work settings and organizational outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, effectiveness). On a practical level, Kanter's structural empowerment theory provides a framework for understanding empowering workplaces and empowered employees.

*Keywords:* empowerment, power, resources, support, information, opportunity, job satisfaction

Psychological Thought, 2014, Vol. 7(1), 28–36, doi:10.5964/psyct.v7i1.88

Received: 2013-08-27. Accepted: 2013-10-16. Published (VoR): 2014-04-30.

Handling Editor: Stanislava Stoyanova, Department of Psychology, South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

\*Corresponding author at: Campus de Gambelas, 8005-139, Faro, Portugal. E-mail: alejandro.orgambidez@dpsi.uhu.es



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Empowerment in the workplace is a popular idea that has permeated both the popular and scientific literature (Laschinger, Finegan, Shamian, & Wilk, 2001, 2004). The concept of empowerment is closely aligned with this thrust to gain organizational effectiveness through the wise utilization of human resources (Siegall & Gardner, 2000). Conger and Kanungo (1988) pointed out that empowerment "is a principle component of managerial and organizational effectiveness... [and] empowerment techniques play a crucial role in a group development and maintenance" (p. 471). With more organizations looking for employees who take the initiative and respond creatively to the challenges of the job, empowerment becomes important at both individual and organizational levels. Unfortunately, empowerment programs have not always been proven effective (Siegall & Gardner, 2000); therefore, a better understanding of which organizational factors positively influence empowerment would be useful.

One of the earliest proponents of empowerment was Kanter (1993). She argued that characteristics of the organization determine empowerment. More specifically, she argued that both formal job characteristics and informal alliances affect the ability of employees to accomplish their work. Similarly, organizational mobility and the possib-

ility for personal growth influence job accomplishment. These factors together determine the degree to which a person feels empowered. Empowered employees are generally more satisfied with their job (Laschinger et al., 2001, 2004; Wagner et al., 2010). According to Kanter's structural empowerment framework, we examined the impact of access to opportunities, information, support and resources, and two types of power, formal and informal, on intrinsic job satisfaction and job satisfaction with supervisors.

### **Kanter's Structural Empowerment Theory**

Kanter (1993) expresses the characteristics of a situation can either constrain or encourage optimal job performance, regardless of personal tendencies or predispositions. According to Kanter (1993) power is defined as the "ability to mobilize resources to get things done" (p. 210). Power is 'on' when employees have access to lines of information, support, resources, and opportunities to learn and grow. When these 'lines' or sources are unavailable, power is 'off' and effective work is impossible. These lines of power are sources of 'structural' empowerment within the organization (Greco, Laschinger, & Wong, 2006; Laschinger et al., 2001, 2004).

According to Kanter, these lines of power emanate from formal and informal systems within organizations. Jobs that are highly visible, permit discretion or flexibility in how work is accomplished, and are central to the overall purpose of the organization, describe positions that are high in formal power. When positive relationships among superior, peers, and subordinates are encouraged, the resulting alliances confer informal power. High levels of formal and informal power facilitate access to the lines of power and opportunity that enable employees to accomplish their work in meaningful ways. Formal power is derived from specific job characteristics such as; flexibility, adaptability, creativity associated with discretionary decision-making, visibility, and centrality to organizational purpose and goals. Informal power is derived from social connections, and the development of communication and information channels with sponsors, peers, subordinates, and cross-functional groups (Kanter, 1993; Laschinger et al., 2001, 2004).

High level of structural empowerment come from access to these structures (Kanter, 1993; Laschinger et al., 2001, 2004):

1. Access to opportunity refers to the possibility for growth and movement within the organization as well as the opportunity to increase knowledge and skills.
2. Access to resources refers to one's ability to acquire the financial means, materials, time, and supplies required to do the work.
3. Access to information refers to having the formal and informal knowledge that is necessary to be effective in the workplace (technical knowledge and expertise required to accomplish the job and an understanding of organizational policies and decisions).
4. Access to support involves receiving feedback and guidance from subordinates, peers, and superiors.

According to Kanter, the mandate of management should be creating conditions for work effectiveness by ensuring employees have access to the information, support, and resources necessary to accomplish work and that they are provided ongoing opportunities for development. Employees who believe their work environment provide access to these factors is empowered (Greco et al., 2006; Kanter, 1993; Mendoza-Sierra, Orgambídez-Ramos, León-Jariego, & Carrasco-García, 2013; Wong & Laschinger, 2013).

The focus of Kanter's theory is on the employees' perception of the actual conditions in the work environment, and not on how they interpret this information psychologically. This 'structural' empowerment has been found to predict job satisfaction (Lautizi, Laschinger, & Ravazzolo, 2009; Wong & Laschinger, 2013), organizational com-

mitment (Smith, Andrusyszyn, & Laschinger, 2010), leadership practices (Davies, Wong, & Laschinger, 2011; Wong & Laschinger, 2013), and job stress and burnout (Laschinger, Wong, & Grau, 2013) on nurse staff.

Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between structural empowerment and job satisfaction (Lautizi et al., 2009; Wong & Laschinger, 2013). Wong & Laschinger (2013) observed that the more nurses perceive they have access to workplace empowerment structures, are more satisfied with their work, and report higher performance. Access to opportunities to learn and grow in the job is particularly important to job satisfaction (Lautizi et al., 2009). An employee can be satisfied with the basic content of the job, but may be frustrated if it does not allow one to grow or move in to roles in others areas of the organization. Access to opportunity to learn and grow is an important component of structural empowerment (Laschinger et al., 2004; Lautizi et al., 2009).

Structural empowerment is also associated with nurses' sense of autonomy and control over their practice. Sabiston and Laschinger (1995) found that nurses who considered their work environments empowering felt a greater sense of power and autonomy at work. Numerous studies have established nurse autonomy as a key predictor of nurses' satisfaction (Wagner et al., 2010).

Finally, workplace empowerment has also been linked to stress and burnout, specifically among nurses (Greco et al., 2006; Laschinger et al., 2013). Greco et al. (2006) examined the impact of empowerment on person-fit and work engagement/burnout among staff nurses. The study showed that empowering leaders could enhance person-job fit and prevent burnout. Manojlovich (2007) expresses that powerless nurses are ineffective, less satisfied with their jobs and more susceptible to burnout and depersonalization.

In summary, there is evidence in the nursing literature that empowerment is significantly related to nurse autonomy, stress and job satisfaction. However, it is important to investigate whether or no Kanter's theory is generalizable to other professional staffs, like university teachers staff. The European context of the Bologna innovative teaching creates new requirements to the university staff, and the need of structural empowering workplaces. In this sense, this study aims to investigate the relationship between structural empowerment and job satisfaction in a sample of Spanish university teachers. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H1.* Formal and informal power will positively predict job satisfaction.

*H2.* Access to opportunities, support, information, and resources will positively predict job satisfaction.

## Method

### Design and Participants

A cross sectional study using paper-and-pencil questionnaires was conducted. A three-page survey questionnaire in Spanish was utilized as the survey instrument. All participants were required to have a minimum of one years' experience in their professional positions.

The sample consisted of 226 university teachers from a Spanish public university. As for the sample's socio-demographic characteristics, 51.8%% were men, with an average age of 44.24 years old ( $SD = 8.55$ ). Most responders were married (65.9%) and have finished their PhD thesis (60.4%).

## Instruments

All the constructs included in the analysis were assessed with perceptual self-report measures based on multi-item scales whose psychometric properties are well established.

*Socio-Demographic Information.* In this section, participants were asked to report their age, gender, marital status, professional role and educational level.

*Structural Empowerment.* Structural empowerment was assessed with the Spanish version of the Conditions for Work Effectiveness Questionnaire (CWEQ-II) (Laschinger et al., 2001). The 19 item scale is designed to measure the four empowerment dimensions: access to opportunity (3 items), support (3 items), information (3 items) and resources (3 items) in an individual's work setting; and two types of power that enhance access to empowerment structures, formal (3 items) and informal power (4 items). Responses to all items were made on a 5-point *Likert* scale (1 = None and 5 = A lot). The alpha coefficient for the scale was .89.

*Job Satisfaction.* Job satisfaction was assessed by using a 10-item scale from the Job Satisfaction Questionnaire (Meliá et al., 1990), distributed into intrinsic job satisfaction (4 items) and job satisfaction with supervisors (6 items). Responses to all item were made on a 7-point *Likert* scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .87.

## Procedure

The field research was conducted over a three months period from September to December 2012. For scale administration, the personnel in charge of data gathering moved to each department and personally gave a copy of the battery of questionnaires and a self-adhesive envelope to each participant. They were informed of the study's objective and the confidentiality of their data, and they were asked to consent to participate. Once completed, each participant introduced the questionnaire inside the envelope, sealed and put inside an urn used for this purpose.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 20.0 statistical package for Windows. The reliability coefficients of dimensions and the correlations between the punctuations of the different instruments were obtained using Pearson's correlation and the coefficients of measurement. Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to assess the ability of structural empowerment to predict levels of job satisfaction.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

First of all, before testing the regression models, we examined the measurement models with all study variables: structural empowerment and job satisfaction. Harman's one-factor test was conducted to test the presence of common method effect (CMV). All the variables were entered into an exploratory factor analysis, using unrotated principal components factor analysis, and forcing to extract one factor. The factor merged accounted for less than 50% of the variance (34.7%). Thus, no general factor is apparent (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). While the results of this analysis do not preclude the possibility of common method variance, they do suggest that common variance is not a great concern and thus is unlikely to confound the interpretations of the results.

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations** — Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, kurtosis and skewness, and intercorrelations of all study variables. All structural empowerment dimensions and both types of power were positively related to intrinsic job satisfaction and job satisfaction with supervisor ( $p < .01$ ), so that the higher levels of structural empowerment and power in organizations, the higher job satisfaction.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of All Study Scales*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Opportunity	1							
2 Information	.25	1						
3 Support	.30	.32	1					
4 Resources	.14	.23	.41	1				
5 Formal power	.37	.37	.52	.40	1			
6 Informal power	.47	.38	.53	.34	.56	1		
7 Intrinsic satisfaction	.57	.27	.29	.25	.45	.44	1	
8 Satisfaction with supervisor	.26	.38	.46	.38	.34	.56	.32	1
<i>M</i>	4.35	2.91	2.83	2.84	3.10	3.36	5.37	4.55
<i>SD</i>	0.64	0.86	0.97	0.88	0.78	0.86	0.83	1.18
<i>Kurt</i>	-0.98	0.03	0.10	0.35	-0.32	-0.26	-0.84	-0.47
<i>Skew</i>	0.82	-0.40	-0.45	-0.32	-0.07	0.01	3.05	0.54

Note. All correlations coefficients are significant ( $p < .01$ ).

### Testing the Hypotheses

To test our hypotheses we conducted a series of multiple and hierarchical regression analyses. Regression models were used to assess the ability of structural empowerment (access to opportunities, information, support, resources) and power (formal and informal) to predict levels of job satisfaction (intrinsic and supervisor). Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity.

*Intrinsic Job Satisfaction.* First, it was tested the ability of both formal and informal power to predict levels of intrinsic job satisfaction. The total variance explained by the Model 1 as a whole was 25.1%,  $F(2, 223) = 37.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Both formal and informal power measures were statistically significant, with formal power recording a higher beta value ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than informal power ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Next, hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of access to opportunity, information, support, and resources to predict intrinsic job satisfaction after controlling for the influence of formal and informal power. Formal and informal powers were entered at Step 1, explaining 25.1%. After entry of access to opportunity, information, support and resources at Step 2, the total variance explained by the Model 2 as a whole was 41%,  $F(6, 219) = 24.81$ ,  $p < .01$ . Access to opportunity explained an additional 15.4% of the variance in intrinsic job satisfaction, after controlling for the influence of formal and informal power,  $R$  squared change = .15,  $F$  change (4, 219) = 14.16,  $p < .01$ . In the final model, only formal power and access to opportunities were statistically significant, with the access to opportunity measure recording a higher beta value ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the formal power measure ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Job Satisfaction With Supervisor.* It was tested the ability of both formal and informal power to predict levels of job satisfaction with supervisor. The total variance explained by the Model 1 as a whole was 31%,  $F(2, 223) = 49.87, p < .01$ . Only informal power measure was statistically significant, recording a beta value of .53 ( $p < .01$ ).

Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of access to opportunity, information, support, and resources to predict job satisfaction with supervisor after controlling for the influence of formal and informal power (Table 2). Formal and informal powers were entered at Step 1, explaining 31%. After entry of access to opportunities, information, support and resources at Step 2, the total variance explained by the Model 2 as a whole was 38.1%,  $F(6, 219) = 22.38, p < .01$ . Access to information, support, and resources explained an additional 7.1% of the variance in job satisfaction with supervisor, after controlling for the influence of formal and informal power,  $R$  squared change = .07,  $F$  change (4, 219) = 6.28,  $p < .01$ . In the final model, informal power, access to information, support, and resources were statistically significant, with the informal power measure recording a higher beta value ( $\beta = .40, p < .01$ ) than the access to support measure ( $\beta = .18, p < .05$ ), the access to resources measure ( $\beta = .17, p < .01$ ) and the access to information measure ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ).

Table 2

*Hierarchical Regression Results for Job Satisfaction*

	Intrinsic job satisfaction			Satisfaction with supervisor		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>
<b>Step 1</b>						
Cte	3.52	.22		1.89	.30	
Formal Power	.32	.07	.30**	.08	.10	.05
Informal Power	.26	.07	.27**	.72	.09	.53
<b>Step 2</b>						
Cte	1.68	.32		1.35	.46	
Formal power	.22	.07	.21**	-.13	.11	-.08
Informal power	.08	.07	.09	.55	.10	.40**
Opportunities	.57	.08	.44**	-.01	.11	-.01
Information	.04	.06	.04	.16	.08	.12*
Support	-.04	.06	-.04	.22	.08	.18*
Resources	.07	.06	.08	.23	.08	.17**
	$R^2 = 25.1\%$ for Step 1, $\Delta R^2 = 15.4\%$ for Step 2			$R^2 = 38\%$ for Step 1, $\Delta R^2 = 7.1\%$ for Step 2		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

The current study investigated the relationship between structural empowerment and job satisfaction, and its role as antecedent of job satisfaction. The results of this study support Kanter's theory of structural empowerment (Kanter, 1993; Laschinger et al., 2004) in a Spanish university sample - a previously unstudied population.

These results are in line with other research studies (Laschinger et al., 2004; Lautizi et al., 2009; Wong & Laschinger, 2013), which have shown a strong relationship between high levels of structural empowerment and job satisfaction. Our results corroborate these findings and provide further evidence that structural and social factors in the workplace

are important conditions for empowering employees (Laschinger et al., 2004; Lautizi et al., 2009). There seems to be a link between work settings and organization outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and effectiveness.

Job satisfaction is an important predictor of negative attitudes and behavior in the work context. Given the negative consequences that may come with a low level of job satisfaction, it is necessary an analysis of the factors that determine job satisfaction, as well as the creation of programs that increase job satisfaction reducing, as a result, negative work behaviors. This is particularly important in the European university context, with new innovative and professional requirements for both teaching and non-teaching employees. Job satisfaction is essential in providing a teaching quality in universities.

This study suggests that access to opportunity is a key predictor of intrinsic job satisfaction. Intrinsic job satisfaction has its origins in the characteristics of the job itself (for example, its content, autonomy, responsibility, achievement, variety, interesting work). Access to opportunity to learn and grow in the job implies the use of the personal skills and abilities, fostering a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. As a result of this process, when employees feel they have autonomy and perceptions of self-efficacy at work, their levels of intrinsic job satisfaction will grow up. Therefore, structural empowerment is also related to sense of autonomy and control over the work. Different research studies have verified autonomy and self-efficacy as key predictors of intrinsic job satisfaction (Laschinger et al., 2004; Lautizi et al., 2009). The autonomy and self-efficacy could be also seen as a result of formal power. Formal power is related to flexibility, adaptability, creativity and decision-making, all aspects associated to access to opportunity.

With regard to job satisfaction with supervisor, supervisors have an important role in the access to resources, information and support. Supervisors allow employees to have access to the financial means, materials, time and supplies to do the work (access to resources), to the formal and informal knowledge necessary to be effective in the workplace (access to information) and the feedback and guidance for the tasks (access to support). If employees perceive that their supervisor facilitates them more organizational resources, information and support, they will experience higher levels of job satisfaction with the superior. Also, empowering leaders and supervisors can enhance person-job fit and foster job satisfaction (Laschinger et al., 2013; Wong & Laschinger, 2013).

Similarly, informal power enhances access to empowerment structures. This power is derived from social connections, and the development of communication and informal channels with sponsors, peers, supervisors, subordinates, and cross-functional groups. When positive relationships among superiors, peers, and subordinates are encouraged, the resulting alliances confer informal power that facilitates access to resources, information, and support (Laschinger et al., 2004). It also could be said that the more feedback and guidance from superiors leads to developing greater job satisfaction.

However, some limitations need to be taking into account when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow us to draw conclusions on causal terms. Second, this study relies on self-reports, which might increase the risk of common method variance (CMV). Harman's one-factor test, however, indicated the CMV did not significantly influence our results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, the sample size, among others factors, may affect sizes and the power of the results. Future studies are to examine this model of structural empowerment in other contexts and at different organizational levels, as well as in different samples. In future research, larger samples would allow more sophisticated statistical analyses.

To sum up, empowering university staff is both a challenge and a necessity. With universities coping with major changes and less resources, new solutions are needed. On a practical level, [Kanter's structural empowerment theory \(1993\)](#) provides a framework for understanding empowering workplaces and empowered employees. This framework could be useful in designing models and strategies for which empowering employees may be advantageous to improving the quality of services, while at the same time increasing employees' job satisfaction and well-being. Finally, Kanter's theory offers guidance to managers interested in creating structures that support employees access to information, support, opportunity and resources necessary to achieve their work goals.

## Funding

This paper was partially financed by FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology (Portugal).

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

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## About the Authors

**Alejandro Orgambidez-Ramos** works at Department of Clinical, Experimental and Social Psychology, Huelva University, Huelva, Spain, and also at Research Center for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics (Foundation for Science and Technology), Faro, Portugal. He is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Clinical, Experimental and Social Psychology at the Huelva University. His research interests include both basic and applied research on empowerment in organizations, work engagement and passion for work.

**Yolanda Borrego-Alés** works at Department of Clinical, Experimental and Social Psychology, Huelva University, Huelva, Spain. She is an Associate professor at the Department of Clinical, Experimental and Social Psychology at the Huelva University (Faculty of Human and Social Sciences). Her research areas are psychological risk at work, empowerment in organizations and work engagement.