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A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH AND THE NEED TO DRAW KNOWLEDGE FROM SOCIAL WORK TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is a high level of consensus in the management literature that employee empowerment is necessary for the survival and success of organisations. It is a management response to an increasingly complex and competitive external environment, and its popularity has been enhanced by the quality movement in general, and by Total Quality Management (TQM) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model in particular. However, there are still considerable gaps in our knowledge and understanding of a range of issues concerning employee empowerment, both at the conceptual and practice levels (Huq, 2008). These gaps need to be filled, as the danger is that organisations may attempt to implement employee empowerment without a clear understanding of what it means, its complexity, or how to implement it. The knowledge drawn from the management literature review proved unsatisfactory, so it was deemed necessary to draw knowledge from another discipline, social work (Huq and Hill, 2005; Huq, 2015), where empowerment is an important construct: “the practice of empowerment is now a central paradigm...” (Adams, 1996, p. xv).

Key words: Human resource management, model of employee empowerment, social work and empowerment, power-sharing and powerlessness and empowerment and disempowerment

BACKGROUND

Despite the virtues of employee empowerment that have been extolled and the perceived need to implement it at the work place, there is concern in the management literature regarding the lack of published research findings, which has led to significant weaknesses and gaps in the existing body of knowledge on this subject (Huq, 2008; 2010; 2015).

Several authors are concerned about the paucity of research on employee empowerment, both at the theoretical and practical levels (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Lashley and McGoldrick, 1994; Keller and Dansereau, 1995; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer, 1996; Thorlakson and Murray, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998; Hales, 2000; Denham Lincoln et al., 2002; Seibert et al., 2004; Greasley et al., 2005; Logan and Ganster, 2007).

Conger and Kanungo (1988, p. 480) state: “Although empowerment has been discussed by several management scholars, little empirical work has been performed.” There are also significant concerns that the lack of research on employee empowerment has resulted in “the divergence between the widespread rhetoric of empowerment and limited reality of empowerment programmes” (Hales, 2000, p. 501). Indeed, Morrell and Wilkinson (2002) caution that “the term (empowerment) is complex and subject to different interpretations. The implications of this are that it will not be perceived in the same way by different organisations, nor will people within the same organisation think of empowerment in the same way” (p. 121). Thus, our understanding of employee empowerment is restricted in both theory and practice (Conger and Kanungo, 1988, p. 471-472).

This paper explains the reasons why it was important to conduct a multi-disciplinary literature review, grounded on my doctoral thesis, “An Investigation of What Employee Empowerment Means In Theory and in Practice” (Huq, 2008). This research was conducted in

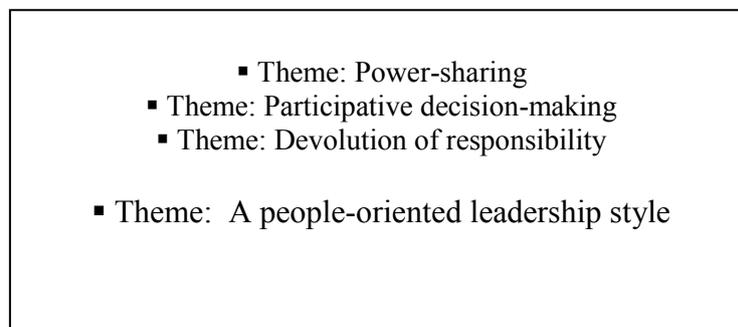
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UK and comprised of two case studies. One was a publicly owned subsidiary of a multinational communications company, and the other a privately owned manufacturing company.

Ambiguity regarding the concept of employee empowerment in the management literature led to the need for an investigation into what employee empowerment means in another discipline, social work. In this body of literature, empowerment is central to social work theory and practice: “Without empowerment, it could be argued that something fundamental is missing from the social work being practised” (Adams, 1996, p. 3).

Several contributors to the body of management literature are concerned that the term employee empowerment is used “loosely” (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990, p. 666). Furthermore, lack of appropriate definitions and frameworks for implementing employee empowerment has caused considerable confusion in organisations.

After a review of the management literature, it became clear that employee empowerment is multi-dimensional and consists of several themes (Huq, 2015). I have attempted to draw out four of those key themes: power-sharing, participative decision-making, devolution of responsibility and a people-oriented leadership style (see Huq’s Model A: Huq, 2015).



Themes of employee empowerment emerging from the management literature

Figure 1: Huq’s Model A

A review of the management literature alone did not reduce the conceptual ambiguity of employee empowerment, either at the conceptual and practice levels. This author felt the need to delve into the social work literature, the purpose of which was to understand what is meant by empowerment in social work. What are the methods used from the practising point of view, and (more importantly) what knowledge can be drawn?

A multi-disciplinary approach is also advocated by a number of authors as necessary to put employee empowerment in a richer, contextual setting (Zimmermann, 1990; Collins, 1996; Denham Lincoln et al., 2002). Hence, key concepts of empowerment in social work are examined to gain knowledge and increase our understanding of this subject, as mentioned earlier.

It is essential to note that, in the management literature, the concepts of power and oppression are rarely examined. In this respect, the social work literature is an important discipline through which to learn about empowerment and disempowerment.

Enablement, a crucial theme of empowerment that is not discussed in the management literature, is also examined. The social work literature argues that there are two other themes necessary in the practice of empowerment, which are again missing in the management literature: access to information and collaboration. These, too, are discussed.

The main argument of this paper is that there is a need to address the gaps in knowledge in the management literature regarding what employee empowerment means at the conceptual and practice levels. Thus, in an attempt at enlightenment, the secondary research for the study has drawn on the social work literature (Huq, 2015), where there is a strong consensus that empowerment is not only a “goal for client groups” (Frans, 1993, p. 312), but also a central paradigm. Adams (1996, p. xv) states that “the practice of empowerment is now a central paradigm”.

KNOWLEDGE DRAWN FROM SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE

Several authors in the social work literature note that there is a significant paradigm shift in practice, which is increasingly moving towards empowerment (Stanton, 1990; Parsons, 1991; Frans, 1993; Sheppard, 1995; Adams, 1996; Guterman and Bargal, 1996; Kirst-Ashman, 2003).

There is a high level of consensus that empowerment is central to social work theory and practice: “Without empowerment, it could be argued that something fundamental is missing from the social work being practised” (Adams, 1996, p. 3). Undoubtedly, as Adams (1996) states, “the development of an empowering practice in social work is a professional necessity” (p. xvi).

There has been a significant paradigm shift regarding the practice of social work that is increasingly moving towards empowerment. Adams (1996) explains that empowerment in social work is now a central paradigm that has replaced the old paradigm of “client treatment” (p. xv) which dominated social work in the past, and adds that the empowerment of service users is becoming “*the* central, energising feature of social work” (Adams, 1996, p. 2-3).

In social work, empowerment is viewed as a process (Adams, 1990; Beresford and Croft, 1993; Frans, 1993) which enables people to take greater control of their lives. According to the body of social work literature, empowerment can enable individuals, groups and/or communities to achieve goals and control their lives, thereby achieving empowerment from within (Adams, 1990; Frans, 1993; Parsons, 1991; Huq, 2015).

Interestingly, at the practice level, although empowerment is viewed as a means whereby social workers, groups of people and/or communities are enabled to take control of their lives, the growth of the individual is also considered important (Rappaport, 1987; Adams, 1990).

The concept (of empowerment) suggests both individual determination over one’s own life and democratic participation in the life of one’s community (Rappaport, 1987, p. 121). Hence, empowerment needs to be understood at both an individual and a collective level (Rappaport, 1987; Adams, 1990 and 1996); again, something that is not emphasised in the management literature. Beresford and Croft (1993) define “empower” to mean “making it possible for people to exercise power and have more control over their lives” (p. 50), which also defines enablement. Hence, having some control over people’s lives and situations is regarded as crucial in social work (Adams, 1990; Prestby et al., 1990; Zimmerman, 1990 and 1991; Beresford and Croft, 1993; Lord and Hutchison, 1993; Sheppard, 1995; Adams, 1996; Adams, 2003; Kirst-Ashman; 2003; Dubois and Miley, 2005).

The diverse meanings of empowerment in social work are captured by Rappaport’s (1987) definition, which demonstrates that empowerment is not just an individual construct, or for one group of people. Rather, it is diverse and global:

Empowerment is not only an individual psychological construct, it is also organisational, political, sociological, economic and spiritual. Our interests in racial and economic justice, in legal rights as well as in human needs, in health care and educational justice, in competence as well as in a sense of community, are all captured by the idea of empowerment (p. 130).

One observation from the review of the management literature and the findings of this study is that employee empowerment is always a top-down management agenda in organisations. In contrast, in the social work literature, there is a shift in attitude/viewpoint. Kirst-Ashman (2003) advocates that empowering people needs a “bottom-up” approach. A “grassroots, bottom-up approach” means that people at the bottom of the formal power structure, such as ordinary citizens, band together to establish a power base (Ashman, 2003, p. 203).

By taking such a “bottom-up” approach, service users collectively and individually challenge authorities and attempt to bring about change in their lives. This has resonance with the definition of empowerment offered by “The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Work” (2000): “For service users, *empowerment* means challenging their disempowerment, having more control over their lives, being able to influence others and bring about change” (p. 116). It is worth noting that this kind of attention to employees having control over their working lives at the “grassroots” level is largely missing in the management literature.

Power, oppression and powerlessness

Discussions regarding power, oppression and powerlessness are rarely found in the management literature. However, in social work literature, this issue is paramount. Parsloe (1996, p. 56) states that “it is the conception of power that gives life to empowerment.”

Without the sharing of power, empowerment in social work is viewed as having no meaning. It is worth noting the theory of empowerment described in the “Dictionary of Social Work”:

Theory concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives, so as to achieve their interests as a group, and a method by which social workers seek to enhance the power of people who lack it (Thomas and Pierson, 1995, p. 134).

However, powerlessness can be a common experience of many groups discriminated against by society, such as women, the aged, ethnic minorities and the disabled. From the results of their study on the process of empowerment, Lord and Hutchison (1993) report how participants experienced extensive powerlessness in their lives, and they described in great detail “the anguish” of powerlessness (p. 9). The authors also note that “no single factor or experience created a sense of powerlessness; rather, it was a build-up of factors and experiences that developed into a disempowering situation” (Ibid: 9). This is parallel to my findings regarding the plight of “agency workers”, who suffer intense feeling of powerlessness (Huq, 2010 and 2015).

Feelings of powerlessness occur when people believe they are unable to cope with the physical and social demands of the environment (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995; Greenberg and Baron, 2000). This feeling is damaging in a variety of situations, including the workplace, as it creates stress (Spreitzer, 1995; Greenberg and Baron, 2000), leading to further feelings of powerlessness. The danger is that disempowered employees can begin to feel disenfranchised, and Peters (1994) emphasises that the “central ethical issue in the workplace should be protection and support for people who are unempowered, especially the frontline worker” (p. 87).

Employee empowerment can be enhanced if organisations remove all impediments that lead to a sense of powerlessness, such as unnecessary rules and regulations and limited participation. It is surprising how many of the aforementioned impediments still remain in organisations; as Pearlstein (1991) in the management literature notes, many organisations are so bureaucratic that even routine actions need some form of permission or approval from the top.

It is generally recognised that individuals and groups have unequal power in society, and with this in mind, Parsons (1991) argues that the common goal of social work activities must be the empowerment of service users. Braye and Preston-Shoot (1995) emphasise the need for an “organisational change”, advocating power-sharing with service users:

For empowerment in social care to have meaning, the organisational culture must move away from that of power (control of the expert) and role (emphasis on given tasks and procedures) to that of community (learning with users) (p. 115).

A number of authors agree that inequalities in power come from oppression, and therefore there is a need to address power imbalances (Freire, 1972; Friedmann, 1992; Breton, 1994; Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Sheppard, 1995; Parsloe, 1996; Kirst-Ashman, 2003). This is highly essential, as disempowered people lack control over their lives, in part because they lack control over the decisions and the resources that affect the quality and direction of their lives. In management, this is crucial for leaders to take into account, particularly if front-line employees or agency workers are to be empowered.

The next section discusses the key themes of empowerment that are seen to be essential regarding empowerment in social work – access to information, collaboration and enablement.

Access to information

Although access to information seems obvious, as people must have information to be empowered to make choices and decisions, information can surprisingly often be the most difficult thing to access (Huq, 2015). In many cases, this is due to a lack of planning regarding who the information is for (target audience), what it should contain and how it should be disseminated (Pierson and Thomas, 2002). It is essential to remember that social work deals with a diverse group of individuals from different backgrounds, and it is vital to tailor information to suit the needs of various groups.

It is worth noting the psychological benefits that can also be gained from having access to information, such as self-confidence: “One of the results of gaining more information ... was that people felt more confident” (Wilson, 1995, p. 84). An important point to note is that it is not just service users, but professionals working in the discipline of social work who need access to information, otherwise they too can suffer from disempowerment.

Collaboration

It is important to understand what collaboration means and how it can play a part in the process of empowerment. It has already been noted that The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Work (2000) offers the following definition of collaboration: “Collaboration refers to working together to achieve common goals” (p. 67). In a similar vein, The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976) also explains “to collaborate” as meaning to “work jointly” (p. 196). These definitions help one understand what an important role collaboration plays in the empowerment of people in social work (Mattaini et al., 1998; Kirst-Ashman, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2003; DuBois and Miley, 2005).

Collaboration is an important part of empowerment, as “much social work involves collaborating with organisations and communities to improve social and health services” (Kirst-Ashman, 2003, p. 5). In a similar manner, DuBois and Miley (2005) state: “Empowerment-oriented social workers work collaboratively with their clients. They focus on clients’ strengths and adaptive skills as well as clients’ competencies and potential” (p. 27).

To enable and maximise service users’ capabilities, it is imperative that social workers do not assume the role of experts. Breton (1994, p. 29) highlights: “If professionals accept that they don’t know best, and if they accept to let go of the role of expert, they will be able to engage in a genuine dialogue with the oppressed and will be ready to learn from them. This necessitates a non-authoritarian approach – not easy for practitioners who find themselves in more or less authoritarian settings.” Hence, social workers need to “replace paternalistic and elitist forms of intervention (those that assume the worker knows best) with approaches that maximise people’s rights, strengths, and capabilities” (Mattaini et al., 1998, p. 221). Similarly, DuBois and Miley (2005, p. 27) warn: “The embedded patriarchal organisational culture of social service delivery thwarts collaborative work with clients”.

Another important point is that not only do social workers need to collaborate with their service users, they also need to collaborate with the different service agencies responsible for providing services for the users. In this case, too, social workers need to collaborate with service providers to get the best outcome possible for the individuals and groups they are trying to empower. Hence, it is imperative that they “work jointly” with service providers to enable their service users to achieve their needs and feel empowered.

From the aspect of collaboration, if organisations want to practise employee empowerment, then leaders/managers need to work in collaboration (jointly) with all employees (management and non-management personnel) to achieve common goals. In such cases, a command and control culture is disempowering and disabling, and thus works against the practice of employee empowerment.

Enablement

Enablement is a process that empowers people to take greater control over their lives (Adams, 1990; Beresford and Croft, 1993; Frans, 1993), hence it is an important concept in social work regarding empowerment (Kieffer, 1984; Adams, 1990; Frans, 1993; Means et al., 1993; Adams, 1996; Parsloe, 1996; Mattaini et al., 1998; Kirst-Ashman, 2003; Zastrow, 2003). The problem in the management literature is that the majority of management researchers refer to empowerment in the sense of delegation rather than in the sense of enabling (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). It is useful to note the definition of “enable” in The Concise Oxford Dictionary: “Authorize, empower, (person *to* do); supply (person etc.) with means *to* (do); make possible” (p. 340).

Zastrow (2003) emphasises that one of the roles social workers must assume is that of an “enabler”, which resonates with the above definition. The role of the enabler is to help, facilitate, or make it possible for the person concerned to achieve his/her goals.

In this role a worker *helps* individuals or groups articulate their needs, clarify and identify their problems, explore resolution strategies, and select and develop their capacities to deal with their own problems more effectively. (Zastrow, 2003, p. 13).

It is important to note from the social work literature that there are two elements of enablement. One is giving people more control over their lives; the other is to help them exercise this control effectively. In this sense, facilitation becomes an important skill for social workers, as enabling is not only about equipping people with the skills to control their lives. Sometimes, social workers also have to act as facilitators to help achieve this (Kieffer, 1984).

While we cannot stimulate or cognitively duplicate the fundamental dynamic of empowering learning, we can actively facilitate individuals, or citizen organisations, in their own critical and constructive examination of their efforts towards changing social and political situations. (p. 28).

Just by telling people they are empowered does not necessarily produce results, there must be strategies to enable employees to be and feel empowered. Empowerment needs to be supported by leaders; providing resources and training are also necessary, as these are seen as enablers of the empowerment process in practice.

It is instructive to learn that key themes emanating from the social work literature regarding empowerment that are largely missing in the management literature. These include access to information, collaboration and enablement, which are referenced as (Huq’s Model B):

- Theme: Access to information
 - Theme: Collaboration
 - Theme: Enablement

Themes of empowerment emerging from the social work literature**Figure 2 (Huq's Model B)**

The combined themes from the management literature and the social work literature formed A “*kaleidoscope of themes*”, Huq's Model C (Huq, 2015, p. 209-10):

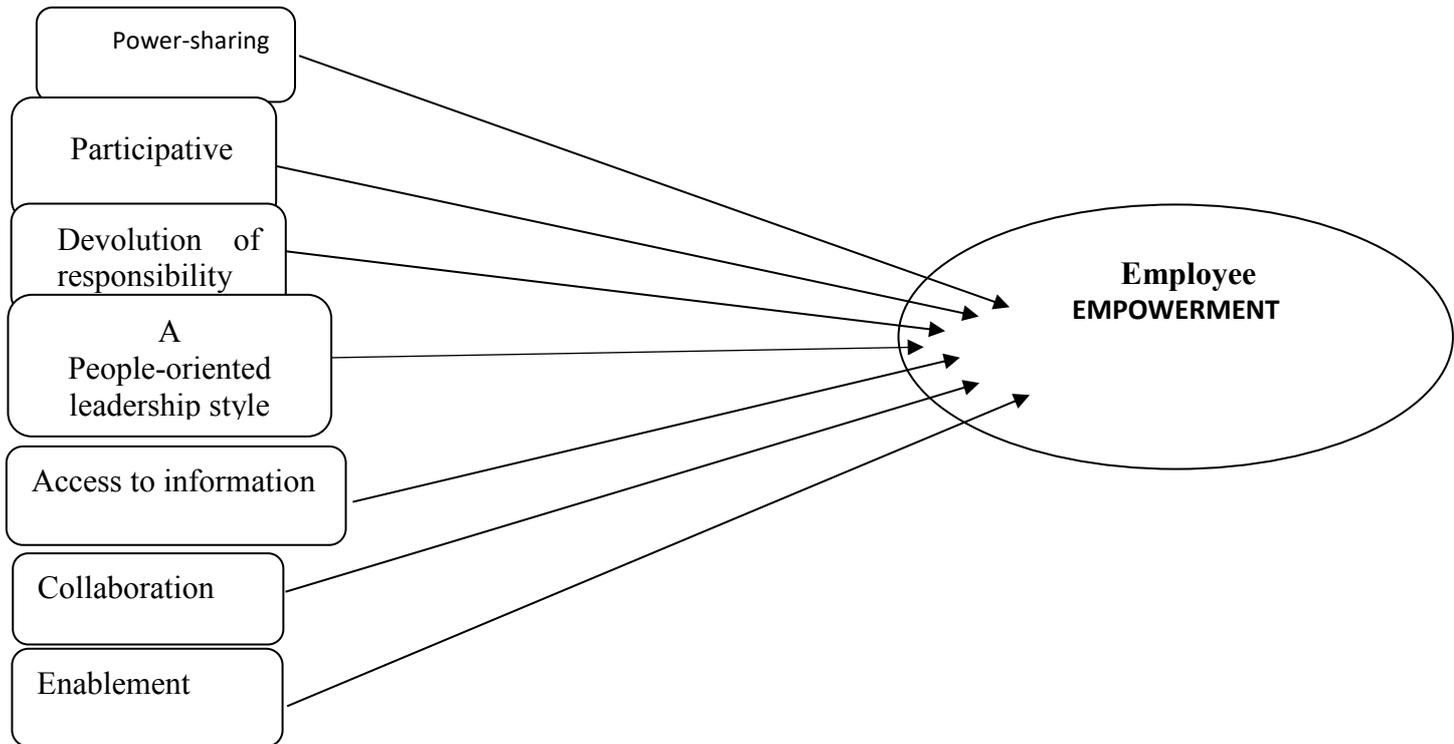


Figure 3. Huq's Model C: A “*kaleidoscope of themes*” of employee empowerment

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an insight into the knowledge derived from social work literature, and attempts to bridge some of the gaps in management literature with regards to empowerment. It assists in contributing and adding to the existing body of knowledge, particularly touching on themes that are largely missing in management literature, thus enhancing our understanding of empowerment.

The development of an empowering practice is regarded as an important “value” in social work and a “professional necessity” (Adams, 1996, p. xvi). Clearly, there is a high level of consensus in social work literature regarding a significant paradigm shift in practice, which is increasingly moving towards empowerment. In view of this, knowledge drawn from the social work discipline might inform management thinking, aid understanding about empowerment and help reduce some of the confusion and ambiguity in the management domain, thus bringing our attention to the need to develop an employee empowerment practice as a *professional necessity*.

This research attempts to develop knowledge by synthesising learning from reviewing both bodies of literature (management and social work). It presents the key themes of employee empowerment – power-sharing, participative decision-making, devolution of responsibility and a people-oriented leadership style – emerging from the management literature (Huq's

Model A), and combines them with access to information, collaboration and enablement, the key themes emerging from social work literature (Huq's Model B). These themes comprise Huq's Model C: A "kaleidoscope of themes" of employee empowerment, which was used to evaluate the employee empowerment strategies and practices of the two case organisations, Large and Small, in my research.

Note: A framework for the implementation of employee empowerment in organisations, Huq's Model of Employee Empowerment, (Huq's Model D) is offered by this author. Due to lack of space, Huq's Model D could not be included.² *

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² Full details of Huq's Models A, B, C and D are available in *The Psychology of Employee Empowerment. Concepts, Critical Themes and a Framework for Implementation* (<https://www.routledge.com/products/978140944890>).

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