Empowerment and control dynamics in project teams: a multilevel examination of the antecedents and job performance consequences [abstract of doctoral thesis]

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Abstract of thesis entitled

“Empowerment and control dynamics in project teams: A multilevel examination of the antecedents and job performance consequences”

Submitted by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at The University of Hong Kong

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Construction projects are characteristically complex and uncertain undertakings whose successful realization requires interdependent effort and rapid decision-making. Yet, the project organizational structures resulting from the procurement arrangements in use perpetuate a mismatch between responsibilities and power, stifling flexibility and proactivity. Empowerment has therefore been advocated as a key to closing the emergent power-gaps, curbing the growing powerlessness and engendering the performance of individuals and teams. Empowerment, however, remains a diffuse and widely misunderstood concept, receiving only a piecemeal and fragmented focus in construction-related research. Evidence regarding the level of empowerment of individuals and teams in projects or how empowerment manifests itself is either unavailable or unreliable. To date, research within the construction industry context has yet to provide a coherent conceptualization and operationalization of empowerment and to empirically explore its antecedents and outcomes. This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap.

A three-pronged research plan is employed which draws upon the ontology of critical realism, consistent with the methodological pluralism perspective adopted. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), supplemented with a comprehensive literature review, the manifestations of empowerment and its antecedents from the analysis of 122 critical incidents from 30 preliminary interviews are explored. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provides an appropriate theoretical framework to weave together a process view of empowerment, the antecedents and job performance behaviours of individuals and teams, into a multilevel
tripartite model of the empowerment process. Using survey responses from 380 individuals nested in 115 project management teams, and a combination of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression models and Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM), the relationships delineated within the research model are explored. To further capture an emic manifestation of empowerment and control dynamics in project settings, case studies of 5 project management teams in 2 ongoing construction projects are undertaken.

The triangulated findings show that empowerment means different things to different individuals. The different manifestations, however, converge into two distinct and complementary perspectives; empowerment climate/structural empowerment and psychological empowerment which are impacted by different antecedents from the individual-, team-, organization- and project-level. The findings establish that empowered individuals are more motivated to perform, have greater opportunity to perform and are more able to perform. Empowered individuals and teams also exhibit superior performance behaviours (i.e. in-role and extra-role) compared with those relatively less empowered. The findings further indicate that empowerment in project teams manifests itself as self-control, within a portfolio of control modes comprising both formal (i.e. outcome-based and behaviour-based) and informal (i.e. clan and self-control) control mechanisms. This thesis breaks new ground in clarifying the conceptualization of empowerment and exploring its antecedents and outcomes from an integrative multilevel perspective. The study also advances empowerment theory regarding its generalizability beyond the domain of permanent organization settings and the mainly Western context of previous research. Practically, the study provides targets, by way of antecedents, of concrete interventions by leaders to foster empowerment and job performance in project teams. Methodologically, this thesis is one of the first multilevel analysis studies in the construction management field and therefore makes a unique contribution in this regard. It is also exemplary of methodological pluralism in which qualitative and quantitative research designs are blended to address different and complementary aspects of a problem of inquiry. However, the focus on project management-level staff means that the generalizability of the findings across other levels within project organizations needs to be verified.

Supervisor: Professor Steve Rowlinson