

---

# Empowerment psicologico

## *Un obiettivo del counseling*

---

Marta Llorente-Alonso<sup>1</sup>, Gabriela Topa<sup>2</sup> e Cristina García-Ael<sup>2</sup>

### Sommario

Questo articolo mira a fornire una panoramica della ricerca attuale sulla teoria dell'empowerment psicologico nell'ambito della Psicologia del Lavoro e delle Organizzazioni. Nello specifico, viene presentata una rassegna della letteratura sulla teoria dell'empowerment di Spreitzer (1995), discutendo i diversi risultati ottenuti nelle più recenti meta-analisi sull'empowerment ed esplorando i fattori di moderazione che intervengono nella relazione tra l'empowerment psicologico e i suoi antecedenti e outcome. Vengono identificate anche possibili future prospettive di ricerca sull'empowerment e sui fattori correlati. La review della letteratura rivela che l'empowerment psicologico è un importante fattore motivazionale che funge da predittore di fattori legati agli atteggiamenti e risultati organizzativi. Studi recenti hanno evidenziato che alcuni fattori individuali, sociali e organizzativi precedono una maggiore empowerment dei lavoratori; a sua volta, la percezione soggettiva dell'empowerment psicologico porta a un miglioramento sia dei risultati che dei fattori affettivi e relativi agli atteggiamenti nei membri dell'organizzazione. Inoltre, è stato riscontrato che altri fattori, come la professione o l'origine culturale dei partecipanti, influiscono sui punteggi dell'empowerment psicologico. Di conseguenza, i manager nelle organizzazioni devono considerare tutte le variabili coinvolte nel processo di empowering dei lavoratori, poiché ciascuna può influire sul modo in cui un lavoratore può essere reso empowered.

### Parole chiave

Empowerment psicologico, Antecedenti, Conseguenze, Fattori moderatori, Outcome organizzativi.

---

<sup>1</sup> Complejo Hospitalario de Soria, Gerencia Regional de Salud de Castilla y León (Sacyl).

<sup>2</sup> National Distance Education University (UNED), Faculty of Psychology, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology.

---

# Psychological empowerment

## *An objective of counseling*

---

Marta Llorente-Alonso<sup>1</sup>, Gabriela Topa<sup>2</sup> and Cristina García-Ael<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

This paper aims to provide an overview of current research into Psychological Empowerment Theory within the field of Work and Organizational Psychology. Specifically, we present here a review of literature on Spreitzer's empowerment theory (1995), discussing the different results obtained in the most recent meta-analyses on empowerment and exploring the moderating factors that intervene in the relationship between psychological empowerment and its antecedents and consequents. We also identify possible future avenues of research into empowerment and its related factors. The literature review reveals that psychological empowerment is an important motivational factor that acts as a predictor of attitudinal factors and organizational outcomes. Recent studies have found that certain individual, social and organizational factors precede greater worker empowerment; and in turn, the subjective perception of psychological empowerment leads to an improvement in both outcomes and affective and attitudinal factors among members of the organization. Moreover, other factors, such as the profession or cultural origin of the participants in the studies, have been found to affect psychological empowerment scores. Consequently, organizational managers must consider all the variables involved in the process of empowering workers, since each may impact the way in which a worker can be empowered.

### Keywords

Psychological Empowerment, Antecedents, Consequents, Moderating Factors, Organizational Outcomes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Complejo Hospitalario de Soria, Gerencia Regional de Salud de Castilla y León (Sacyl).

<sup>2</sup> National Distance Education University (UNED), Faculty of Psychology, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology.

## Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the term «empowerment» has been used in different disciplines, including counseling (McWhirter, 1991). Indeed, it has often been used «to describe the goal of counseling or the end result of other helping relationships» (McWhirter, 1998, p. 12). According to McWhirter (1991), the use of this concept in counseling Psychology is related to its own meaning, which implies processes of growth and change. In this sense, empowerment is defined as the process by which people, organizations or groups that are powerless or marginalized: a) become aware of the power dynamics that operate in their life context; b) develop the skills and ability to obtain some control over their lives; c) exercise said control; d) without infringing the rights of others; e) coinciding with support for the empowerment of others in their community.

In the field of work and organizational psychology, the term «empowerment» was coined by Kanter in 1977. Kanter believed that socio-structural empowerment improved the quality and service of an organization and resulted in increased flexibility in worker behaviours. According to this theoretical perspective, empowered workers have more information about the organization and more control over resources, resulting in better organizational outcomes. According to Kanter, these structures and practices are indicators of empowerment, although other authors have identified these same elements as antecedents of empowerment, rather than components of it (Seibert et al., 2004).

Thus, the first empowerment theory did not focus solely on organizations. Indeed, authors such as Rappaport (1984) and Zimmerman (2000) see this concept as a key mechanism of community psychology, the process by which people, organizations and communities gain greater control over their own lives (Rappaport, 1984). According to Zimmerman (2000), empowerment is a multi-level structure that can be analysed in terms of the individual, the organization or the community. Moreover, empowerment can be understood as both a process and an outcome. From this perspective, psychological empowerment refers to the individual level of analysis.

The concept of psychological empowerment was first developed by Conger and Kanungo (1988) as a means of differentiating between empowerment based on management and social impact literature and that based on psychology. According to these authors, empowerment is a relational structure in management practice. It characterizes the process by which a leader shares power with their subordinates in dynamic relationships. They also suggest understanding empowerment as a motivational construct, as a process for intensifying feelings of self-efficacy among members of an organization. They therefore distinguish between two different meanings of empowerment: in management terms, as

an effort to delegate or share power, and in psychological terms, as a means of motivating by enhancing personal efficacy.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) developed a model which viewed empowerment as a motivational factor linked to intrinsic task motivation and comprising a set of four cognitive components: impact, competence, meaning and choice or self-determination. Impact refers to the way in which a behaviour can obtain positive results, standing out from the rest. It is a way to obtain excellence in a specific activity. Competence refers to the degree of skill that an individual exhibits in a required task and is consistent with the structure proposed by Bandura (1977), called self-efficacy (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Meaning is the value a worker assigns to a goal based on their own standards, and represents the mental energy devoted to a task. Finally, self-determination is the perception of having a choice regarding one's actions and involves causal responsibility.

Psychological empowerment was further conceptualized by Spreitzer (1995 a), who focused on the workplace, building on previously published research by Thomas and Velthouse (1990).

Spreitzer developed a questionnaire encompassing the four dimensions outlined above, corresponding to the intrapersonal component defined by Zimmerman (1995), arguing that psychological empowerment is a motivational construct that reflects a person's positive orientation and self-perception of their ability to shape their job role (Spreitzer, 1995b). She also posits that each of the four dimensions proposed for assessing psychological empowerment contributes to building global empowerment. However, while the lack of any one dimension may weaken empowerment, it will not eliminate it entirely.

In light of the above, psychological empowerment may be considered a powerful tool in the field of counseling. All definitions converge in stating that an empowered worker takes advantage of the resources provided by the organization to achieve control and develop the skills and abilities required to perform tasks with high intrinsic motivation. According to McWhirter (1991), the concept of empowerment in counseling encompasses individual growth in skills, awareness of how power dynamics are performed in the context of one's life, development of a sense of identity with similar others, social and community participation, and support for the empowerment of others.

Consequently, in this paper we aim to provide an overview of current research into Psychological Empowerment Theory within the field of Work and Organizational Psychology. We review the extant literature on the theory of psychological empowerment, discussing the different results obtained in the most recent meta-analyses. We also analyse the moderating factors that intervene in the relationship between psychological empowerment and its antecedents and consequences.

## Antecedents of Empowerment

Spreitzer (1995a) was the first author to develop a comprehensive model of intrapersonal empowerment in the workplace. This model posits that empowerment mediates the relationship between the socio-structural context and behavioural outcomes. The socio-structural context is operationalized as role ambiguity, sociopolitical support, access to strategic information and resources, and work unit culture. Other personal or characteristic personality factors have also been found to influence perceptions of empowerment and may generate greater intrinsic motivation (Spreitzer, 1995b). Seibert et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis encompassing a wide range of theoretical, socio-structural, psychological, and team empowerment perspectives. Antecedents of psychological empowerment were divided into contextual antecedents and individual characteristics. Maynard et al. (2012) also conducted a meta-analysis focused specifically on team empowerment. These authors used the team empowerment model proposed by Kirkman and Rosen (1999), which in turn was based on Spreitzer's theory (1995b) and espoused a similar vision of empowerment. Maynard et al. (2012) argued that «the psychological state of team empowerment is a product of situational and contextual factors, in addition to the required (but not sufficient) condition of structural empowerment». The contextual antecedents proposed by Maynard were organizational support, external managerial support, team competencies and structural empowerment. Based on the above, we have identified two categories of factors associated with the antecedents of psychological empowerment: 1) psychosocial and organizational factors, and 2) individual worker characteristics.

### Psychosocial and organizational factors

#### *Structural empowerment practices*

According to Maynard et al. (2012), the most proximal antecedent to team psychological empowerment is structural empowerment. These authors (2012) argue that structural empowerment should be considered an isolated antecedent factor, whereas Seibert et al. (2011) also include high performance management practices in this category. Factors included in this group refer to management practices designed to provide employees with more resources and information, greater access to opportunities and more support in general and for innovation and organizational learning. In this category, managers provide workers with opportunities in relation to the different variables mentioned. Interventions that increase structural empowerment or high-performance managerial practices

result in greater worker motivation and psychological empowerment (Seibert et al., 2011; Laschinger et al., 2001).

### *Leadership*

Leadership factors include all those practices or forms of leadership that aim to motivate workers and empower them psychologically. According to Davies et al. (2011), the quality of the relationship between the leader and their followers (leader-member exchange) determines how workers respond to their work environment. Seibert et al. (2011) argue that positive forms of leadership increase employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment. Maynard et al. (2012) include leadership in a factor called external managerial support, which also encompasses the empowering characteristics of leaders (for example, leader consideration, leader team orientation, experience, capability, credibility, creativity and confidence).

### *Social support and trust in the organization*

This category includes sociopolitical support, support from the organization, incentives or income, and trust in the organization. It refers to an individual's perception of actual rewards, trust and support, beyond the opportunity to acquire certain elements. According to Spreitzer (1995b), personal incentives enhance empowerment by recognizing and strengthening individual capabilities and providing individuals with the motivation to influence the decision-making process at work. Spreitzer (1996) argues that certain management practices that may increase sociopolitical support encourage people to trust each other, which in turn increases empowerment. Seibert et al. (2011) called this category sociopolitical support, whereas Maynard et al. (2012) refer to it as organizational support.

However, these authors include rewards in different categories: Seibert et al. (2011) in high-performance managerial practices, and Maynard et al. (2012) in the present category.

### *Work role and work content*

This category includes variables that explain job characteristics and role clarity. A job role includes a set of tasks that an individual is expected to perform. When roles are unclear and tasks are not clearly defined, employees cannot attain psychological empowerment. Moreover, high-stress jobs characterized by high demands and low control are associated with lower levels of psychological empowerment among workers (Laschinger et al., 2001).

### *Individual worker characteristics*

Seibert et al. (2011) included two factors in this category: positive self-evaluation traits and human capital and gender, hypothesizing that those with higher positive self-evaluations would report feeling more psychologically empowered and that other individual characteristics would also correlate positively with empowerment since they reflect the individual's productive capabilities. Maynard et al. (2012) created a category called team competencies in which they included not only members' knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also their tenure within the organization and within their team. This category therefore includes individual characteristics such as organizational rank, organizational tenure, education level and personality factors (locus of control, attributional style, self-control, etc.).

## **Consequence of Empowerment**

Three categories of consequents can be identified: workers' attitudinal responses, workers' affective responses, and actions or behaviours resulting from empowerment. Seibert et al. (2011) focused on attitudinal and behavioural consequences and Maynard et al. (2012) on performance variables and affective reactions.

### *Workers' attitudinal responses*

Allport (1935) defined attitudes as a state of mental readiness, organized through experience, that directly affects one's behaviour. This tendency to act in a certain way is thought to be directly influenced by motivational variables. We include organizational commitment and turnover intention in this category, with higher levels of psychological empowerment being associated with greater organizational commitment (Ahmad & Oranye, 2010), and lower turnover intention (Islam et al., 2016).

### *Workers' affective responses*

This category includes variables linked to emotional reactions stemming from high psychological empowerment at work, such as low job strain, high intrinsic motivation, and high job satisfaction. Laschinger et al. (2001) suggested that greater psychological empowerment strongly influenced both the degree of occupational strain felt by workers and their job satisfaction.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that the four components of empowerment are a proximal cause of intrinsic task motivation and satisfaction.

*Worker actions/behaviours*

Three categories of worker actions and behaviours can be identified: innovation behaviour, work performance and organizational citizenship behaviour. Empowerment mediates the relationship between socio-structural antecedents and innovative behaviour (Spreitzer, 1995a). People who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to be innovative because they feel less constrained in terms of rules-based work (Amabile, 1988). Furthermore, empowerment encourages team members to contribute to common activities in different ways (Spreitzer et al., 1999). Consequently, more empowered individuals are expected to perform better and engage in more organizational citizenship behaviour (Spreitzer, 2008).

### **Moderating Factors involved in employee empowerment and implications for counseling**

Seibert et al. (2011) found strong positive effects of psychological empowerment across different industries, occupations, and culturally distinct geographic regions, suggesting that the benefits of empowerment extend across a wide range of contexts. For their part, Maynard et al. (2012) studied the type of team, the type of measurement or instrument used, and the team size, but with limited success. In this regard, more research is required that focuses on the moderating variables of empowerment, including certain understudied factors, such as age and gender. It is important for organizational managers to consider all the variables involved in the process of empowering workers, since each may impact the way in which a worker can be empowered.

Our review of the literature found few studies linking counseling psychology and psychological empowerment. Grützmacher and Schermuly (2021) have suggested that an empowering counseling style may be positively associated with psychological empowerment during the job search process, and it is also likely that empowering people would help create a motivating workplace. Consequently, counseling psychologists must be able to empower workers, using mechanisms present in their work context, striving to enhance workers' individual characteristics and implementing training programmes designed to reinforce motivation and empowerment.

### **Conclusions**

«Empowerment» is often used to describe the objective of counseling (McWhirter, 1998). Psychological empowerment is a motivational construct that



reflects a person's positive orientation and self-perception of their ability to shape their job role (Spreitzer, 1995b). After reviewing the literature, we have found that the subjective perception of psychological empowerment leads to an improvement in both outcomes and affective and attitudinal factors among members of the organization. Therefore, psychological empowerment may be considered a powerful tool in the field of counseling. Counselors are committed to the growth and development of the clients they serve. For this reason, empowering workers is associated with positive human growth and change processes (McWhirter, 1991). An empowered worker takes advantage of the resources provided by the organization to achieve control and develop the skills required to perform tasks with high intrinsic motivation. Counseling psychologists should focus their actions on empowering workers. In addition, organizations should implement programmes focused on the education and training of counseling psychologists to achieve worker empowerment.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## References

- Ahmad, N., & Oranye, O. (2010). Empowerment, job satisfaction and organizational commitment: a comparative analysis of nurses working in Malaysia and England. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 18, 582-591. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2834.2010.01093.x>
- Allport, G. W. (1935). Attitudes. In C. Murchison (Ed.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 798-844). Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.
- Amabile, T. M. (1988). A model of creativity and innovation in organizations. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*, 10, 123-167. JAI Press.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1988). The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice. *Academy of Management Review*, 13, 471-482. <https://doi.org/258093>
- Davies, A., Wong, C.A. & Laschinger, H. (2011). Nurses' participation in personal knowledge transfer: the role of leader-member exchange (LMX) and structural empowerment. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 19, 632-643. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2834.2011.01269.x>
- Grützmacher, L., & Schermuly, C. C. (2021). Psychologically empowered during the job search: How empowering counseling affects job search process quality. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 73(3), 251-270. <http://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000199>
- Islam, T., Khan, M. M., & Bukhari, F. H. (2016). The role of organizational learning culture and psychological empowerment in reducing

- turnover intention and enhancing citizenship behavior. *The Learning Organization*, 23(2/3), 156-169. <https://doi.org/10.1108/tlo-10-2015-0057>
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kirkman, B. L., & Rosen, B. (1999). Beyond self-management: antecedents and consequences of team empowerment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 42(1), 58-74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256874>
- Laschinger, H.K, Finegan, J., Shamian, J., & Almost, J. (2001). Testing Karasek's Demands-Control Model in Restructured Healthcare Settings. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 31(5), 233-243.
- Maynard, M., Mathieu, J., Gilson, L., O'Boyle, E., & Cigularov, K. (2012). Drivers and outcomes of team psychological empowerment: A meta-analytic review and model test. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 3, 101-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386612456868>.
- McWhirter, E. H. (1991). Empowerment in counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 69(3), 222-27
- McWhirter, E. H. (1998). An Empowerment Model of Counsellor Education. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 32(1), 12-26
- Rappaport, J. (1984). Studies in empowerment: Introduction to the issue. *Prevention in Human Services*, 3, 1-7.
- Seibert, S. E., Silver, S. R., & Randolph, W. A. (2004). Taking Empowerment to the Next Level: A Multiple-Level Model of Empowerment, Performance, and Satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(3), 332-349. <https://doi.org/10.5465/20159585>
- Seibert, S., Wang, G., & Courtright, S. (2011). Antecedents and Consequences of Psychological and Team Empowerment in Organizations: A Meta-Analytic Review. *The Journal of applied psychology*, 96, 981-1003. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022676>.
- Spreitzer, G. M. (1995a). An empirical test of a comprehensive model of intrapersonal empowerment in the workplace. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23, 601-629. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506984>
- Spreitzer, G. M. (1995b). Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Construct definition, measurement, and validation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38, 1442-1465. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256865>
- Spreitzer, G. M. (1996). Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39, 483-504. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256789>
- Spreitzer, G. M. (2008). Taking stock: A review of more than twenty years of research on empowerment at work. In J. Barling & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational behavior* (pp. 54-72). London: Sage. <http://doi.org/10.4135/9781849200448.n4>
- Spreitzer, G. M., De Janasz, S. C., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). Empowered to lead: the role of psychological empowerment in leadership. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20(4), 511-526. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1379\(199907\)20:4<511::AID-JOB900>3.0.CO;2-L](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199907)20:4<511::AID-JOB900>3.0.CO;2-L)
- Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment. *Academy of Management Review*, 15, 666-681.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581-599.
- Zimmerman M.A. (2000). Empowerment Theory. In J. Rappaport J. & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of Community Psychology* (pp. 43-63). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. [http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-4193-6\\_2](http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-4193-6_2)