The Role of Psychological Empowerment on Work Engagement: The Development of Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been growing interest in exploring work-related behaviours that go beyond the core tasks for which is voluntary effort of the employee towards the organization and eventually improves the effectiveness of the organization. Despite the importance of psychological empowerment and work engagement, researches that investigate these concepts in Higher educational sector are very limited. The main purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine the relationship between psychological empowerment and work engagement in the context of Malaysian Higher educational sector. The study intends to review the existing literature and eventually develop the conceptual framework. Consider the factors that positively influence empowerment would be useful to identify gaps in knowledge of work engagement and the aspects of academics' work engagement that requires more investigation are described. This paper serves as introduction to clarify the relationship between psychological empowerment and work engagement and to develop a conceptual framework to explain the relationship between the variables of the study.

Keywords: Psychological empowerment, Work engagement, Malaysian Higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Over the past few decades, the Malaysian higher education system has advanced better and more competent. For the last ten years alone, the system has significantly attracted more students enrolling in Malaysian universities and increased its global rank in terms of various dimensions, including research publications, patents, and institutional quality. It has also become a top destination for international students coming from various Asian countries, including Middle East countries (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025). The Malaysian government has given much attention to higher education based on the belief that this sector plays a key role in supporting its plan of transformation of the country from a middle-income country into a high income by 2020 (ETP Annual Report, 2014). In parallel with improvement of higher education, The Malaysian National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 has put forward several thrusts for future directions.

One of these important directions is establishing the country as an international hub of higher education excellence (ETP Annual Report, 2014). This has led the Ministry of Higher Education to plan several reforms in the Malaysian higher education in order to attract a large number of international students to Malaysian universities. Meanwhile, Malaysia provides a relatively excellent international education. Moreover, as noted by Migin, Falahat, Ab Yajid, and Khatibi (2015), in comparing to other countries as host countries for international students to pursue their higher education, in Malaysia, education and living costs are low. In Malaysia, higher education needs to move from being a system which is tightly controlled by the Ministry to a system in which the Ministry acts as a policymaker and regulator that just focuses basically on its role. This latter system will empower HLIs to steer their own journey of growth (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in exploring work-related behaviors that go beyond the core tasks for which is voluntary effort of the employee towards the organization and eventually improves the effectiveness of the organization (Miles, Borman, Spector, & Fox, 2002; Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2005; Podsakoff, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Maynes, & Spoelma, 2014). The increased attention on positive work related behaviour, such as work engagement and organisational citizenship behaviour inspires scholars to continuously emphasize on theory building and perform relevant research in relation to this area. Such efforts would enable more effective application of positive traits and behaviour among employees in the work place (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Recently, empowerment has received much attention from researchers due to its importance in enhancing practices of management. For example, almost 70% of organizations have implemented empowerment to their work due to its main role in affecting management practices (Lawler, Mohrman, & Benson, 2001). Previous research shows that empowerment is a common condition which has considerable impact on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, service quality, performance, effectiveness and productivity (Casey, Saunders, & O'hara, 2010; Chang, Shih, & Lin, 2010; Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011; Joo & Shim, 2010; Najafi, Noruzy, Azar, Nazari-Shirkouhi, & Dalvand, 2011; Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011; Short & Johnson, 1994).

In spite of practitioners' and researchers' increasing recognition of the importance of empowerment in enabling organizations to several emerging challenges in the business environment, the implementation of different empowerment programs in some organizations implementing failed. This failure could be attributed to neglecting the empowered people's psychological composition while implementing such empowerment (George, 2013). Similarly, Gamoran (1994) argued that although empowerment is a key element in the strategy of education reforms, it can only be archived if the practice is able to generate psychological perception of empowerment among subordinates (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998).

In this regard, psychological empowerment is described as a process in which employees' or members' feelings of self-efficacy are enhanced by identifying conditions that may create a sense of powerlessness and removal. This can be achieved using both formal and informal organizational practices and techniques as to provide information regarding self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). It is also regarded as an important factor for both individuals' and organizations' development since it potentially and positively affects the outcomes of workplace (Spreitzer, 1995). As an important motivational mechanism, psychological empowerment plays crucial role in encouraging employees to improve work related behaviors. This is evidenced several indicators, including theoretical development (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), validation of the measure of psychological empowerment construct (Spreitzer, 1995) and empirical evidence of its effect on the outcomes of workplace (Bhatnagar, 2005; Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011; Ismail et al., 2009; Joo & Shim, 2010; Marane, 2012; Seibert et al., 2011; Tuuli & Rowlinson, 2009; Wang & Lee, 2009).

In the literature, several studies have reported that there are several issues and challenges faced by Malaysian academics, particularly in public universities. These include the expansion of the Malaysian higher educational sector, internationalization of the higher educational sector, corporatization and privatization as well as quality improvement (Azman, Jantan, & Sirat, 2011; Noor, 2013; Tham & Kam, 2008). Other challenging issues are the increase in bureaucratization (Azman et al., 2011) and the increasing stress related to jobs caused by the speedy development in the Malaysian higher education sector (Ahsan, Abdullah, Fie, & Alam, 2009; Idris, 2009; Makhbul & Khairuddin, 2013; Panatik et al., 2012; Safaria, 2013; Triantoro, 2011), work-personal life balance (Noor, 2011; Shahid, Amdan, Alwi, Syazreena, & Hassan, 2016). Additionally, academics' turnover at universities was reported to be at an alarming rate (Hashim & Mahmood, 2011; Noor, 2013; Panatik et al., 2012).

Such above mentioned challenges and issues encountered by Malaysian academics are likely to have an influence on how they accomplish their work tasks and may have an impact on their positive behaviors and attitudes towards work, thus lowering their engagement in work(Byrne, Chughtai, Flood, Murphy, & Willis, 2013; Cebrián, Grace, & Humphris, 2014; Tartari & Salter, 2015). There is no doubt that recent challenges and growth in the environment require an engaged and voluntary committed academic staff in order for the universities to deliver their vision, mission and objectives (Alzyoud, Othman, & Isa, 2014; Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006; Lockwood, 2007; Sulaiman & Zahoni, 2016). According to DiNapoli, O'Flaherty, Musil, Clavelle, and Fitzpatrick (2016), Work engagement is a motivational factor, which can lead to job satisfaction and lower turnover.

1.2. Research Problem

Reviewing the literature has shown that studies on work engagement are essential. According to Alzyoud et al. (2014) high levels of work engagement can lead to greater commitment and satisfaction, lower absenteeism and quit rates, improved health and well-being, and better in-role and extra-role performance. The changes that have occurred in Malaysian higher education institutions brought about by the transformation plan have affect and influence almost all aspects of higher education work environments, including academic work engagement (Azman, Sirat, & Samsudin, 2013). In addition, Ali (2014) stated that, having a strong work engagement among

academic in Malaysia is important because it helps to improve their set of skills, promotes a good work relationship, manageable workload and positive work-balance.

A literature search reveals limited empirical studies on the issues of academics work engagement with most studies are focusing on the healthcare industry (Fiabane, Giorgi, Sguazzin, & Argentero, 2013; Gabel-Shemueli, Dolan, & Suárez Ceretti, 2017; Mauno, Ruokolainen, Kinnunen, & De Bloom, 2016; Seppälä et al., 2015; F. W. Stander, De Beer, & Stander, 2015), banking (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014; Ebrahimi & Khodaverdi, 2015; Ghosh, Rai, & Sinha, 2014), public sector (Azman et al., 2013; Guarnaccia, Scrima, Civilleri, & Salerno, 2016; Zaidi, Wajid, Zaidi, Zaidi, & Zaidi, 2013)hotel industry (Azman et al., 2013; Božac, Sušanj, & Besim, 2017; Choo, 2016; Karatepe, 2014; Karatepe, Beirami, Bouzari, & Safavi, 2014; Lee, 2015; Ling Suan & Mohd Nasurdin, 2016), and telecommunications (Li & Qi, 2015; Ten Brummelhuis, Bakker, Hetland, & Keulemans, 2012). However, the issues of work engagement among the academic staff, especially in Malaysian higher educational sector has been ignored.

Even though previous studies have suggested that psychological empowerment improves positive work outcomes such as work engagement (Bhatnagar, 2012; De Villiers & Stander, 2011; Halbesleben, 2010; Jose & Mampilly, 2015; Macsinga, Sulea, Sârbescu, Fischmann, & Dumitru, 2015; Quiñones, Van den Broeck, & De Witte, 2013; M. W. Stander & Rothmann, 2010; Taghipour & Dezfuli, 2013; Ugwu, E. Onyishi, & M. Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2014). The consequences of psychological empowerment on work engagement has not been examined in Malaysian higher education sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment of employees is one of the concepts that have been proposed for the development of human resources. The concept of empowerment was first introduced in the 1980s. The earlier definition of empowerment is delegation of authority and resource sharing and enabling means motivating through enhancing self-efficiency (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). There are different definitions and different understandings of authors about empowerment concept. The core concept of empowerment includes increased motivation of individual at his/her work through the delegation of power to the lowest level in an organization where expert decision can be made (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The key concept to empowerment is giving employees as much responsibility and autonomy which provide them with substantial amount of freedom to carry out duties (Hancer & George, 2003).

The psychological perspective of empowerment is known as Psychological empowerment. Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) look at psychological empowerment as an intrinsic task motivation which reflective of the person–environment fit. Psychological empowerment is a status of employees that is characterized by increased levels of activation and intrinsic motivation as they perform their tasks (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Moreover, it has been defined as awareness and as a commitment-based design (Spreitzer, 1995). Moreover, Conger and Kanungo (1988) define empowerment as a process of enhancing perceptions of self-efficacy through recognition of conditions that promotes powerlessness through formal and informal organizational techniques and practices. It becomes important at individual, team, and organization levels (Stander & Rothmann, 2010).

The other focus of this paper is work engagement, As defined by (Kahn, 1990), engagement refers to how members of an organization attempt to harness themselves to do their work roles. In other words, it is about how people make effort in expressing themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally while performing their roles. According to the definition of Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002), engagement is a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind which is described by its absorption, vigor and dedication. More specifically, it is an active, affective-motivational, independent and pervasive psychological state, which is an important indicator of various employee behaviour and performance-related outcomes (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002), employee engagement refers to the satisfaction, enthusiasm and involvement of a person in work.

In order to create engaged and productive workforces organizations should conduct interventions focused on the empowerment of job resources because these have been found to promote personal resources and (consequently) work engagement (Al-Maamari, 2017; Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Previous studies support the evidence that psychological empowerment and work engagement are positively related to each other. For example, in a study by M. W. Stander and Rothmann (2010), the researchers focused on the relationships among psychological empowerment, job insecurity and employee engagement. It was revealed that while three dimensions of psychological empowerment: meaning, competence and impact, had signficant relationships with employee engagement, the relationship between self-determination and engagement was statistically significant. Similar result reported by Bhatnagar (2012), which indicated that psychological empowerment among 291 managers from the Indian industrial sectors had effect on their work engagement. Moreover, it resulted into high sense of innovation while lowering turnover intention. It was added that psychological empowerment was an important predictor of work engagement. Moreover, through empirical research conducted by Al Sahi AL Zaabi, Ahmad, Hossan, and SINGH (2016) employees' work engagement was

hypothesized to be directly related to psychological empowerment. Participants in the study included 189 UAE national employees from a major organization in the petroleum sector in the UAE. Results of the direct path coefficient between psychological empowerment and the Work engagement latent construct indicates that psychological empowerment significantly and positively influenced Work engagement.

3. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The previous discussion has confirmed the relationship between psychological empowerment and work engagement. However, the findings have been generalize based on the sample on hospitality, manufacturing, sport, and telecom sectors. Thus, there is a lack of evidence about how psychological empowerment influence work engagement in the higher education context especially in the Malaysian higher education context. Thus, the following conceptual framework is proposed:
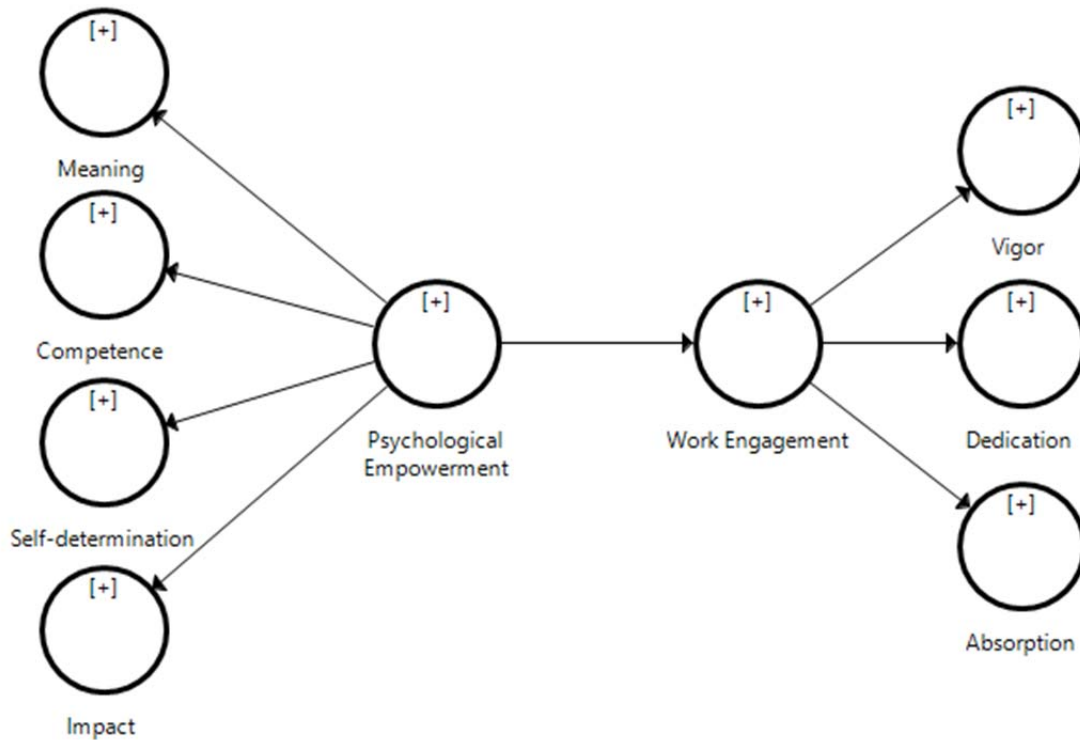

Figure 1 : The Proposed Conceptual Framework for the Study

4. CONCLUSION

This conceptual study will explain in the aspect of work engagement from a Higher education sector and will investigate the role of psychological empowerment and its effects on work engagement for academic in Higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysia government believes that higher education sector is one of the important key areas which may aid in transforming Malaysia from middle income nation into high income nation by the year 2020 (ETP Annual Report, 2014). Therefore, the significance of the present study is represented by the worthy and useful instruction the study is expected to offer to the leadership of Malaysian Higher Education. In other words, application of the expected findings of the study will assist such universities to maintain the academics' high level of work engagement and a high sense of commitment to universities, which, in turns, enhance the performance and effectiveness of Higher learning institutions.

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