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Does One Size Fit All? Investigating Different Empowerment Orientations in the Heterogeneous Workforce of the Swedish Retail Sector

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Abstract

Empowerment research and practice is guided by the idea that empowered employees perform better due to a greater sense of self-efficacy and capability. Underlying this idea, there often seem to be two tacit, unexamined assumptions: first, that employees generally would prefer an empowered workplace to a less empowered one; and second, that all employees can be empowered by means of the same measures and changes as defined by empowerment research. The main research question asked in this study is whether those aspects typically associated with structural and psychological empowerment efforts at the workplace are indeed perceived as desirable and positive by all types of employees. Employees' attitudes toward the success of empowerment efforts, and the relevance of such attitudes, are investigated by analyzing survey data from 268 employees in the Swedish retail sector. Results indicate that age and work intensity (part-time vs. full-time) as well as cohabitation have significant impacts on how empowerment efforts are viewed by employees in the sample.

Keywords: empowerment, orientation to work, preferences, attitudes, retail, survey data.

JEL: J4, J5, L0, L2, M1, Y4

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Introduction

The art of empowering one's staff has been researched extensively for several decades, both in terms of why and how to effectively empower employees, as well as what the relationship is between empowerment and attitudinal outcomes such as commitment, job satisfaction, work performance, goal orientation, and turnover intention (Bhatnagar 2012; Humborstad, Nerstad, and Dysvik 2014; Maynard, Gilson, and Mathieu 2012; Seibert, Wang, and Courtright 2011; Vecchio, Justin, and Pearce 2010). In theory, empowerment leads to positively transformed and motivated employees who engage in constructive self-leadership (e.g., Houghton and Yoho 2005; Stewart, Courtright, and Manz 2011). However, researchers have repeatedly called attention to the possibility that, in practice, empowerment efforts might not always develop into the positive work environment that change agents hoped for (Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp 2005). Maynard et al. (2007), for instance, point out the risk of employee resistance; Cordery et al. (2010) find that increased task uncertainty elicited by empowerment practices may result in decreased work performance; and Spreitzer (2008) suggests that some individuals might experience empowerment efforts as stressful rather than motivating.

Due to such hypotheses and findings, research on empowerment increasingly deals with investigating a variety of aspects that could have a negative effect on the success of empowerment efforts, for instance, in terms of cultural values along Hofstede's dimensions (Eylon and Au 1999; Hui, Au, and Fock 2004; Kirkman and Shapiro 2001), individual levels of goal orientation (Humborstad et al. 2014), or gender (Avery et al. 2013; Boudrias, Gaudreau, and Laschinger 2004).

A focus on macro dimensions, such as cultural differences, is undoubtedly valuable for understanding motivations behind behavior that derive from larger contexts beyond the individual level. Equally valuable are psychological perspectives on micro dimensions, for example, goal orientation or personality traits, that give helpful insights into employees' states of mind and handling of different change efforts (Abdel-Halim 1983; Lamm and Gordon 2010; Manojlovich and Laschinger 2002). Although these aspects shed more light on the boundary conditions for empowerment, the exploration of such factors is usually focused on the influence they exert on positive empowerment *outcomes* for management and organizations. That is, they focus on change agents' success in terms of the employees' improved performance, increased job satisfaction, greater involvement, and so on. Less focus has been put on the study of change recipients' understanding and sensemaking of, as well as their attitudes toward, empowerment efforts *in general* and *before* their implementation.

One underlying assumption in much of the empowerment literature dealing with boundary conditions appears to be that all employees can and want

to become empowered—it only seems to be a matter of finding the right components in an ocean of mediating and moderating variables. A qualitative study that challenged this assumption and used an employee-centered approach was undertaken by Greasley et al. (2008; see also Bartunek et al. 2006; Humborstad 2012). They concluded that respondents' wish to become (more) empowered varied. It depended, for instance, on questions relating to the employees' feelings of competence and whether they felt confident enough to take on more responsibility. Whether respondents wished to be empowered or not also related to feelings of possible exploitation. The authors concluded that if employees suspect that management's intention is to merely shift their own responsibility and accountability "onto employees who feel that they are not in a position or rewarded to accept this responsibility" (Greasley et al. 2008:50), then they may show lower degrees of acceptance.

Although factoring in such acceptance or "employee readiness" in empowerment research contributes to a more nuanced investigation of employees' empowerment experiences, studies still tend to assume that discrepancies between employee readiness and intended practices by human resources management (HRM) are primarily related to the workplace context and aspects such as tenure in the field or company, product knowledge, poor operationalization, and so on (Ahearne et al. 2005; Edgar and Geare 2005; Edwards 2001; Greasley et al. 2008; Khilji and Wang 2006).

To question such an approach, the present study aims at investigating the by now widely accepted assumption that employees generally can and want to become empowered, given appropriate workplace-related conditions. Inspired by Goldthorpe et al.'s (1970:27, 84) theory on orientation to work and the cash nexus, the importance of attitudinal aspects originating from *outside* the workplace context are investigated (see Furåker, Håkansson, and Karlsson 2012). Instead of assuming that all employees want more power and responsibility, this study asks whether some groups of employees might "just be in it for the money" or have other private and personal reasons for why they might or might not appreciate autonomy, freedom for creativity, participative decision making, or greater responsibilities to the extent demanded for successful empowerment change.

As a corollary, this study avoids using the assumption that calculative orientations to employers and organizations hold for all employees in all situations or that calculative orientations by definition must be *static* (see Ulfsdotter Eriksson 2012). Evertsson (2013:150), for instance, finds "a change in work commitment among new mothers" in Sweden: her data shows that new mothers report a decline of work commitment during the early parental phase, but that this decline is only temporary, with commitment returning after the first years of preschool. Thus, from a sociological point of view, it makes sense to assume that orientations to work can differ, depending on changes in individuals' private or working lives—and that

their attitudes toward empowerment change efforts might change according to their private or work–life situations.

To expand knowledge about factors influencing employees' understanding and attitudes regarding empowerment change, the theoretical motivation behind this study is guided by the idea that sociological aspects of individuals' private and working lives may have an influence on employees' attitudes toward empowerment. Taking such sociological elements into account, an investigation of employees' sensemaking strategies can shed more light on how empowerment change efforts result in differing levels of enthusiasm among the members of a heterogeneous workforce in an organization. Awareness of these attitudinal contexts may lead to an improved *communicative process* between change agents and recipients that is fitted to different employees (Weidenstedt 2016)—thus enabling more or more appropriate empowerment.

More specifically, this study looks at demographic information such as gender, age, relationship status, national origin, etc., as well as socioeconomic details on occupation, educational level, and income, and personal conditions such as health, and asks if and how orientation to work and interest in empowerment vary over the life course.

This study seeks to answer three research questions: first, do employees generally prefer empowered workplaces to less empowered ones? Second, do respondents' empowerment preferences align with their expectations concerning possible outcomes of change efforts in general? And third, do empowerment preferences correlate with respondents' current situations in their working and private lives? To answer these research questions, a questionnaire was developed and distributed among employees in the Swedish retail sector.

Empowerment in the Swedish Retail Sector

Empowerment as a change management technique aims to “unleash employees' potential, enhance their motivation, allow them to be more adaptive and receptive to their environment, and minimize bureaucratic hurdles that slow responsiveness” (Ahearne et al. 2005:945). To achieve these outcomes, empowerment is associated with practices related to high involvement and engagement: employees are given greater autonomy, more freedom in decision making, and greater responsibility within self-managing teams (Carless 2004; Humborstad and Perry 2011). Empowerment is typically differentiated into two types: structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. *Structural empowerment* focuses on the organization's role in empowerment processes, that is, changes in organizational structures and cultures, such as “facets of the job, team designs, or organizational arrangements that instill

situations, policies, and procedures” (Maynard et al. 2012:1234), which thus enable employee empowerment. *Psychological empowerment*, on the other hand, is concerned with employees’ experience and perception of, as well as reactions to, empowerment. Thus, psychological empowerment focuses on the motivational processes of empowerment and aspects such as self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, 1982; Conger and Kanungo 1988; Maynard et al. 2012).

In more concrete terms, structural empowerment has been described as frequently comprising the following organizational features: employees are able to influence their salaries through an increase in performance, skill, or knowledge; hierarchies are flattened in order to facilitate participative decision making, an open flow of information, and team-based work; lastly, employees are given education and training opportunities in order to acquire both competence and self-confidence (Spreitzer 2008:56). Psychological empowerment involves measures that aim at increasing employees’ sense of impact, meaning, competence, and self-determination (Spreitzer 1995b:1443f.).

What difference, then, could empowerment make for employees in the retail sector? Retail employees are front-line workers, who, by dealing with customers on a daily basis, have an immediate and visible impact on individual and organizational performance. Research shows that customer retention depends increasingly on excellent customer service and staff behavior rather than price (Dahle 2000; Siu and Cheung 2001; Wetzels, Ruyter, and Bloemer 2000). This underlines front-line employees’ decisive role in creating and maintaining a regular customer base.

The retail sector presents an intriguing field of study to understand empowerment due to several characteristics that are tied to the vital role of individual performance for the overall outcome of the business, which can be summarized by what Hochschild (2003:147ff.) calls *emotional labor*. First, retail employees are expected to be successful, helpful, and friendly when handling several roles at the same time (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005), whether they occur “front stage” (when responding to customers’ demands) or “back stage” (when responding to superiors’ demands) (see Wetzels et al. 2000). Second, retail employees are often “evaluated on the productivity and quality of their performance” (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005:151), thus possibly receiving more frequent feedback on their performance than do employees in other workplaces. This may result in a greater personal interest in one’s own performance than may occur in other workplaces. Third, retail employees are expected to be proficient in adaptive selling techniques (Simintiras et al. 2013), meaning they need to be able to react quickly and flexibly to different types of customers, moods, and encounters.

In terms of empowerment change, retail employees may, for instance, feel a greater sense of self-efficacy, impact, self-determination, and competence if they experience increased flexibility and freedom in decision making. Also, empowered retail employees may perceive a greater sense of meaning-

fulness and impact when they are given the opportunity to influence their salary through increased work performance. Ahearne (2005:952), for example, describes positive outcomes of an empowered salesforce as a chain reaction founded on a greater sense of self-efficacy:

An increase in a salesperson's self-efficacy increases his or her belief in being successful within the selling situation. This feeling of success allows the salesperson to be more comfortable and to use selling techniques that may not be typically used. In short, confident salespeople will be more willing to innovate and try different approaches on the fly than will less confident people. This adaptability in the selling approach will then provide the customer with a greater level of satisfaction because sales become more tailored and aligned with the customer's particular needs and wants.

The Swedish Context

As argued above, retail employees might be particularly receptive to empowerment change efforts, thus offering a rich case for studying empowerment orientation. In addition, Sweden's distinctive position in terms of its cultural characteristics serves as a further compelling context for the study. According to the World Values Surveys (Inglehart and Baker 2000:29), Sweden occupies a noticeable position on the map of cultural values: the country reflects strong secular-rational (vs. traditional) values and, of greater impact for this study, a clear emphasis on self-expression values (vs. survival). Self-expression values include, among other things, *quality of life*, *collective action*, and a *high level of trust* (ibid.:24). Hofstede's (2001) analysis of different nations' cultural dimensions complements this picture, especially in terms of his *power distance* dimension: "Power Distance has been defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede 2011:9). Sweden ranks rather low on power distance (Hofstede 2001:87). This means, for instance, that Swedish culture tends to support the ideas that all people should have equal rights, that hierarchy refers to an inequality of roles rather than existential inequality, and that the income distribution in society should be fairly even (Hofstede 2001:98; 2011:9).

Taken together, both Inglehart and Baker's as well as Hofstede's results should indicate a favorable context for empowerment efforts: since empowerment entails the transfer of autonomy and decision-making power from employers to employees (Spreitzer 2008), such a process is, by definition, based on *trust* in the employees' reliability, competence, and capability, as well as on their willingness to work in teams, valuing *collective* efforts, and appreciating a positive work environment (which relates to *quality of life*). Similarly, low *power distance* as a point of departure for empowerment efforts in organizations should enable positive outcomes, since employees are used to and value flat hierarchies and taking on responsibility.

Mirroring these value dimensions, Sweden's history of industrial democracy (Humborstad 2012; Sandberg 2013) potentially impacts the extent to which employees in this country see power sharing in the workplace as a natural part of their organizational culture. Since industrial democracy refers to a "formal, usually legally sanctioned arrangement of worker representation at various levels of management decision making" (Bass and Shackleton 1979:393), employees in Sweden may consider the idea of participating in certain decision-making processes to be self-evident and necessary rather than new and exciting.

The decision to use Sweden as the cultural background for this study has the potential to yield surprising results. In a country with a long-standing tradition of industrial democracy, it might be assumed that employees generally accept empowerment and take it for granted. But if the data reveal variations in empowerment orientation in Sweden's retail sector, can these variations be understood by using insights from sociology?

Data

For this study, a web-based questionnaire survey was developed. Since it cannot be assumed that employees know what is meant by the term "empowerment" (see Greasley et al. 2008), the use of the term in the questionnaire was avoided. Instead, the questionnaire was framed as exploring "motivation and change at the workplace." Empowerment measures were used and operationalized as described below.

For reasons of access, rather than approaching single employees, chief executive officers, human resource managers, and human resource specialists of large retail chains as well as small retail stores were approached randomly and offered participation in the survey study. Once an organization agreed to participate, an email was sent to a contact person (usually a human resources manager), which included a letter explaining the overall purpose of the study and a web link to the questionnaire. This email was then forwarded by the contact person to different units (headquarters, warehouses, stores, and so on), either via email, the intranet, or the organization's mobile app newsfeed. Approximately 1550 employees in five organizations were reached this way. Respondents were contacted again about one week after the web link was distributed and reminded to participate within the next week. Respondents thus had about two weeks to fill out the questionnaire. A total of 268 fully-completed surveys were submitted, an overall response rate of 17%.

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by gender, with 56% being men and 44% women. The average age of the sample is 41 (SD 11.6), with ages ranging from 20 to 66. The average employment period at the organiza-

tion is 9.7 years (SD 9.2). Women in the sample are, on average, younger and have less job tenure than men. About 70% of both men and women are cohabiting, and roughly 45% of both men and women have children living in the household at least 50% of the time. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents in the sample have a non-Scandinavian origin; 64% of non-Scandinavian respondents are male. In terms of self-rated health, 78% of respondents report having “good” health. Between 4.8% and 12.3% report psychosocial health issues, such as tiredness, insomnia, nervousness, and depression. Women show a slightly lower level of overall self-rated health than men, and higher levels of psychosocial health issues. Thus, overall, women rate their health as worse than men. Finally, respondents work in various types of workplaces: in warehouses (1.5%) or in stores (57%), which, for analytical purposes, are merged into a single category (warehouse or store, 58%); or in offices (36%), in both store and office (2.6%), or as traveling salespeople (2.2%), which are also merged into a single category (office and other, 41.4%).

Measures

After responding to demographic questions, respondents self-assessed a variety of dependent variables, all of which used a 5-point Likert response format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Several of these variables were used to construct scales, as described below.

Work performance and work intensity. Respondents’ current self-assessment of their work performance was operationalized using five items developed by Brown and Leigh (1996), translated into Swedish by Sverke and Hellgren (2001). An example item would be: “I strive as hard as I can to be successful in my work.” All five items were combined to create a scale that demonstrated internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.74$).

Job satisfaction. A three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.81$) assessed the respondents’ job satisfaction. The scale was comprised of two items (translated into Swedish) as developed by Hackman and Oldham (1975) in their well-established Job Diagnostic Survey. A third item was added: “I would recommend this workplace to a friend.”

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>N=268</i> | | <i>Men (n=151)</i> | | <i>Women (n=117)</i> | |
|--|--------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|
| | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| age | 41.5 | 11.6 | 43.1 | 11.4 | 39.5 | 11.5 |
| job tenure (years) | 9.7 | 9.2 | 10.3 | 9.8 | 9.0 | 8.5 |
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| family structure | | | | | | |
| <i>cohabiting</i> | 197 | 74.0 | 108 | 72.0 | 89 | 76.7 |
| <i>not cohabiting</i> | 69 | 25.9 | 42 | 28.0 | 27 | 23.2 |
| <i>children in the household</i> | 128 | 47.7 | 73 | 48.3 | 55 | 47.0 |
| <i>no children in the household</i> | 140 | 52.2 | 78 | 51.6 | 62 | 52.9 |
| origin | | | | | | |
| <i>Scandinavian country</i> | 164 | 61.4 | 86 | 57.3 | 78 | 66.6 |
| <i>other country</i> | 103 | 38.5 | 64 | 42.6 | 39 | 33.3 |
| health | | | | | | |
| <i>overall self-rated health: good</i> | 210 | 78.3 | 123 | 81.4 | 87 | 74.3 |
| <i>tiredness</i> | 33 | 12.3 | 18 | 11.9 | 15 | 12.8 |
| <i>insomnia</i> | 21 | 7.8 | 14 | 9.2 | 7 | 5.9 |
| <i>nervousness</i> | 20 | 7.4 | 9 | 5.9 | 11 | 9.4 |
| <i>depression</i> | 13 | 4.8 | 7 | 4.6 | 6 | 5.1 |
| workplace | | | | | | |
| <i>warehouse and store</i> | 157 | 58.5 | 86 | 56.9 | 71 | 60.6 |
| <i>office and other</i> | 111 | 41.4 | 65 | 43.0 | 46 | 39.3 |
| employment | | | | | | |
| <i>part-time, less than 75%</i> | 31 | 11.6 | 10 | 6.6 | 21 | 18.1 |
| <i>more than 75%</i> | 236 | 88.3 | 141 | 93.3 | 95 | 81.9 |
| <i>permanently employed</i> | 247 | 93.2 | 140 | 93.3 | 107 | 93.0 |
| <i>temporary work or other</i> | 18 | 6.7 | 10 | 6.6 | 8 | 6.9 |
| <i>leading position (at least one subordinate)</i> | 95 | 36.8 | 56 | 38.1 | 39 | 35.1 |

Psychological and structural empowerment. As developed and validated by Spreitzer (1995a; 1995b), each of the four *psychological empowerment* dimensions (meaning, competence, self-determination, impact) is represented by four items. For this study, one item from each category was chosen for the questionnaire. These four items were later used to create two scales, one for measuring the respondents' present state ("today") of psychological empowerment (alpha = 0.66; see Table 2), and the other for measuring the respondents' sense of importance of these items in general (alpha = 0.68; see Table 3a).

In order to measure the importance respondents ascribe to *structural empowerment* efforts, however, a decision was made not to use Spreitzer's (1995a) specific survey items, which were meant to operationalize structural empowerment efforts by asking respondents about the current experienced level of support, access, and culture in their organization unit. Instead, in line with the research questions posed in the present study, structural empowerment was operationalized as closely as possible to the actual structural empowerment efforts as defined by Spreitzer (2008). A five-item scale (alpha = 0.73) was developed, asking respondents the extent to which they would *appreciate* change efforts that include the following practical elements: pay based on skill, knowledge, or competency; participative decision making; flat organizational structures and teamwork; an open flow of information; and education and training.

Well-being at work and turnover intention. Eight items were developed along the lines of psychological and structural empowerment efforts to test the extent to which changes induced by empowerment efforts would lead to an increase or decrease of well-being at work, and to an increase or decrease in turnover intention. Items included, for example, "I would prefer greater freedom in how I do my work." All eight items were also asked in the reverse: "I would prefer less freedom in how I do my work," presenting an opportunity to test the validity of the original items through their reversed variations. Two scales were created: one for an increase of well-being at work (alpha = 0.79) and one for an increase of turnover intention (alpha = 0.90). Results are reported in Table 3a.

Preference for empowered jobs. Inspired by Hackman and Oldham's (1975) "job choice" format, five items were developed measuring respondents' job preferences if presented with two jobs, A and B, both of which offer positively formulated characteristics. Job A represents a structurally less empowered workplace, while job B represents a structurally more empowered workplace. All five job choice items used a 5-point Likert response format, with 1 being job A (less empowered) and 5 being job B (more empowered).

Expectations about change efforts. To measure employees' general attitudes toward change efforts, sixteen items were developed in line with psychological and structural empowerment change, representing possible out-

comes of such change (such as “room for creativity and autonomy”), while other items included more general outcomes, such as changes in power, work tasks, and workload. Respondents were asked to respond whether they thought change efforts in general would lead or not lead to *an increase* of the outcome indicated in each item. For results, see Table 4.

Results

Table 2 reports the means, standard deviation, and internal consistency for the scales related to the respondents’ current self-rated state of psychological empowerment, job satisfaction, and work performance. As inferred from the mean values, the respondents in the sample have, on average, a positive relation to their workplaces, feeling slightly psychologically empowered (mean 3.8) and satisfied (mean 3.8), and rating their work performance as very good (mean 4.6). To a certain extent, these values can be an indicator for a sample that seems generally rather happy with their work environment—a finding that will be important to consider further on in the analysis.

Table 2. Descriptives for scales measuring employees’ current state of well-being at work.

| <i>Scales</i> | <i>Mean*</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Min</i> | <i>Max</i> | <i>alpha</i> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|------------|--------------|
| psychological empowerment | 3.8 | 0.70 | 1.75 | 5 | 0.66 |
| job satisfaction | 3.8 | 1.0 | 1 | 5 | 0.83 |
| work performance | 4.6 | 0.44 | 2.6 | 5 | 0.75 |

* Measured on a 5-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree

Empowerment Preferences

The first research question explores whether employees generally prefer empowered workplaces to less empowered ones. The results on the scale measuring the importance respondents ascribe to structural empowerment efforts show a mean value of 4.0 on the Likert scale (see Table 3a), indicating that, on average, respondents do find structural empowerment efforts important. The mean value for the importance of psychological empowerment is 4.3, showing a slightly higher value than for structural empowerment. A *combined empowerment scale* was created, integrating both structural and psychological empowerment variables. The mean value for the combined empowerment scale is 4.1—again strengthening the result that respondents, on average, rated empowerment efforts as important.

Table 3a. Mean values for empowerment preference scales and job-preference variables.

| Empowerment scales: | Mean¹ | SD | alpha |
|--|-------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| importance of structural empowerment | 4.0 | 0.67 | 0.73 |
| importance of psychological empowerment | 4.3 | 0.56 | 0.68 |
| combined empowerment scale | 4.1 | 0.51 | 0.75 |
| impact of empowerment on well-being at work | 3.9 | 0.61 | 0.79 |
| impact of empowerment on turnover intention | 2.2 | 0.98 | 0.90 |
| Preference of empowered (vs. alternative) jobs: | Mean* | SD | |
| impact on salary | 3.6 | 1.41 | |
| participative decision making | 4.0 | 1.14 | |
| extended boundaries | 3.6 | 1.34 | |
| flow of information | 4.3 | 0.99 | |
| education and training | 4.0 | 1.21 | |

* Measured on a 5-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree

The tendency to evaluate empowerment efforts as positive and important is further strengthened by the results for respondents' ratings of empowerment's effects on their well-being at work as well as their turnover intention: respondents were asked to rate how much structural and psychological empowerment measures would increase their well-being at work and their turnover intention, respectively. Results show that empowerment efforts have a slightly positive outcome on employees' well-being, with a mean value of 3.9. In terms of turnover intention, respondents reported a low turnover intention in light of the proposed empowering efforts (mean 2.2). Mean values for the job choice items strengthen the finding that employees generally prefer empowered workplaces to less empowered ones, with mean values ranging from 3.6 to 4.3, as shown in Table 3a.

The results for the scales' mean values presented in Table 3a reinforce the general notion that the majority of employees find empowerment important and would like to become empowered. These results are in line with most empowerment research, which shows that empowerment is generally appreciated by employees (Maynard et al. 2012). However, since this study is equally concerned with groups of employees who may be less appreciative

of empowerment, Table 3b breaks down the results of these ratings into the percentages of respondents who assigned certain values concerning the importance of empowerment efforts: “low” refers to respondents whose index value was less than or equal to 2.5, meaning respondents did not rate empowerment as very important; “neutral” refers to all respondents whose index value was greater than 2.5 and lesser than or equal to 3.5; and “high” refers to those respondents with an index value greater than 3.5. As can be inferred from Table 3b, mean values alone may hide dispersion. In contrast to the results in Table 3a, which seem quite solid, Table 3b reveals that, although respondents did, to a large extent, rate empowerment efforts as important, the spread in “neutral” groups ranged from 13% to almost 25%. Thus, while few respondents rated empowerment as not at all important, a significant number indicated they were not particularly affected by empowerment, whether positively or negatively.

Table 3b. Percentages for low, neutral, and high ratings of empowerment-preference scales and job-preference variables.

| Empowerment scales: | % | | |
|---|------------|----------------|-------------|
| | low | neutral | high |
| importance of structural empowerment | 1.1 | 19.5 | 79.4 |
| importance of psychological empowerment | 0 | 13.0 | 87.0 |
| combined empowerment scale | 0 | 13.8 | 86.2 |
| impact of empowerment on well-being at work | 0.3 | 24.4 | 75.3 |
| impact of empowerment on turnover intention | 64.2 | 24.7 | 11.1 |

| Preference of empowered vs. alternative jobs: | % | | |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| | emp. job | neutral | alt. job |
| impact on salary | 64.2 | 22.1 | 13.5 |
| participative decision making | 77.9 | 11.6 | 10.4 |
| extended boundaries | 60.8 | 18.8 | 20.4 |
| flow of information | 81.9 | 12.4 | 5.6 |
| education and training | 73.7 | 12.7 | 13.5 |

In terms of the respondents' preferences for empowered vs. alternative jobs, results expressed as a percentage (Table 3b) once again give a more nuanced picture of results that initially seem solidly positive (Table 3a). Here, the number of respondents favoring the alternative less empowered job range from 5.6% to 20.4%, and those remaining "neutral" have a relatively large spread from 11% to 22%. Thus, far from all employees prefer an empowered job.

The aspect of structural empowerment that was *least* popular was "extended boundaries" (60.8%), which referred to the aspect of decentralization, flat hierarchies, teamwork, and shared responsibility. Respondents were asked to rate their preference for a less empowered job A (clearly delimited tasks and individual responsibility) or a more empowered job B (a variety of tasks shared by a work group/team and shared responsibility). The most *highly* valued aspect of an empowered job referred to an open flow of information between employer and employees, described in the questionnaire as a workplace where the management creates opportunities for the exchange of information, opinions, and ideas.

Interestingly, 64% of the respondents reported to be in strong favor of an empowered job that offered individual impact on salary through an increase in performance, skill, or knowledge rather than an alternative job offering equal income distribution based on union wage rates. This result conflicts, to a certain degree, with Hofstede's results for Sweden's level of the power dimension (Hofstede 2001:98; 2011:9), as mentioned above. This may indicate that employees' views on income are dependent on the sector and branch in which they work.

Expectations Toward Change Efforts

The second research question aims at investigating whether respondents' empowerment preferences are reflected in their expectations concerning possible outcomes of change efforts in general. Table 4 shows percentages for whether or not respondents thought change efforts would, in general, lead to an increase of the outcome presented in each item. Since the aim of these items was to measure employees' attitudinal point of departure about foregoing actual change efforts, some items were deliberately phrased in a way indicating less rather than more empowerment in order to get a clear impression of how positively or negatively employees viewed change efforts in general. The highlighted items are especially interesting, showing, for instance, that 56% of all respondents were not convinced that change efforts would lead to them getting more power. Continuing the line of thought of "no increase in empowering outcomes," more than half of the sample's respondents expected an *increase* in work tasks (53%), workload (47%), demands on how they do their jobs (59%), as well as demands on the quality of their work (63%). On a more positive note, 52% of the respondents thought

their own engagement and motivation would increase in the wake of change efforts. Thirty-seven percent responded that they would expect their feeling of meaningfulness as well as their impact on what happens at their workplace (38%) to increase.

As this table suggests, what employees expect from changes made in their work places is not necessarily empowerment. Despite overall positive attitudes toward empowerment in theory, about half of the respondents in the sample doubt whether change efforts indeed can and will result in positive outcomes. As will be discussed further on, this discrepancy might lead to differences in how employers and employees perceive the development of their relationship as well as whether or not they are in compliance with the psychological contract (see Paul, Niehoff, and Turnely 2000).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for change expectations.

| <i>I expect more of this:</i> | %* | | |
|---|------|---------|------|
| | No | Neutral | Yes |
| <i>Structural empowerment outcomes</i> | | | |
| demand for knowledge and competence | 18.3 | 30.2 | 44.8 |
| freedom in how I do my job | 35.8 | 32.8 | 24.2 |
| room for creativity and autonomy | 35.8 | 33.2 | 26.1 |
| responsibilities | 19.4 | 32.8 | 41.0 |
| <i>Psychological empowerment outcomes</i> | | | |
| feeling of meaningfulness of my work | 20.9 | 32.1 | 37.3 |
| impact on what happens at my workplace | 24.6 | 29.8 | 38.4 |
| own engagement and motivation | 18.3 | 23.1 | 52.2 |
| <i>Possible other empowerment outcomes</i> | | | |
| power | 55.6 | 25.4 | 11.2 |
| work tasks | 8.6 | 32.5 | 53.0 |
| demands on how I do my job | 13.1 | 22.4 | 59.3 |
| demands on the quality of my work | 14.2 | 16.8 | 63.1 |
| workload | 19.0 | 27.2 | 47.4 |

* Percentages might not add up to 100% due to missing values.

Empowerment Preferences Correlating with Work-Life Situation

The two previous research questions build a logical foundation for the third research question, asking whether empowerment orientation correlates with current work or private life situations. As mentioned above, the theoretical motivation of this study departs from the assumption that employees might rate the importance of empowerment efforts differently according to the current situation in their work or private lives. Relevant aspects, for instance, could be the respondent's workplace (office vs. store) or whether they hold a leading position and have at least one subordinate. Demographic aspects affecting respondents' preference of empowerment change efforts could be age, sex, whether respondents cohabit or not, whether they have children living at home, educational level, health, or national origin, to name but a few.

Multivariate regressions were used to test separately for respondents' ratings of the importance of *structural empowerment* efforts and *psychological empowerment* efforts. A third regression model was used to test for respondents' rating in a *combined empowerment scale*. Variables that were controlled for were sex, age,¹ cohabitation status, children, health, origin (Scandinavian countries vs. other countries), workplace (office vs. store), leadership (at least one subordinate vs. none), workplace tenure (more than ten years), and whether respondents worked part-time (less than 75%) (see Table 5).

The first column of Table 5 presents the results regarding respondents' opinions about the importance of structural empowerment efforts. Here, two correlations stood out: age and part-time employment. The estimate for age was -0.014, indicating that, for every year respondents get older, they are less likely to rate structural empowerment efforts as important. The effect is significant at the 10% level. Secondly, whether employees work part-time or not seems to have an effect on how they rate the importance of structural empowerment efforts: with an estimate of -0.430, significant at the 5% level, employees working part-time rate structural empowerment efforts as less important than employees working 75% or more.

The second column of Table 5 presents results concerning how respondents rated the importance of psychological empowerment efforts. Here, none of the included variables could help understand variations in psychological empowerment.

¹ In other models, it was also controlled for age² (squared age) to test for a curvilinear association, as well as an interaction effect between gender and having children. Both variables did not show statistically significant correlations.

Table 5. OLS regression coefficients (t-values in parentheses) for the importance of empowerment.

| | Importance of structural empowerment | Importance of psychological empowerment | Combined empowerment scale |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| age | -0.014 (2.72)** | -0.005 (0.96) | -0.010 (2.40)* |
| gender (female=1) | 0.066 (0.69) | -0.070 (0.74) | 0.001 (0.02) |
| cohabiting (yes=1) | 0.203 (1.81) | 0.179 (1.61) | 0.187 (2.07)* |
| children (yes=1) | 0.123 (1.22) | 0.158 (1.60) | 0.141 (1.75) |
| educational level (higher than high school=1) | -0.090 (0.85) | -0.054 (0.51) | -0.075 (0.88) |
| Scandinavian origin (yes=1) | -0.140 (1.48) | -0.122 (1.31) | -0.133 (1.75) |
| job tenure (in years) | 0.001 (0.17) | 0.001 (0.26) | 0.001 (0.25) |
| employment type (permanent empl.=1) | 0.082 (0.39) | 0.072 (0.35) | 0.077 (0.45) |
| working part-time (75% or less) | -0.430 (2.33)* | -0.155 (0.85) | -0.307 (2.07)* |
| inter-organizational change of position (yes=1) | 0.063 (0.56) | 0.031 (0.28) | 0.052 (0.58) |
| working in sales (yes=1) | 0.101 (0.85) | 0.007 (0.06) | 0.054 (0.56) |
| leadership position (yes=1) | -0.061 (0.54) | 0.167 (1.48) | 0.044 (0.48) |
| working overtime | 0.086 (1.20) | 0.108 (1.53) | 0.090 (1.56) |
| income | -0.047 (1.04) | -0.002 (0.05) | -0.026 (0.71) |
| _cons | 0.428 (1.22) | -0.094 (0.27) | 0.203 (0.72) |
| R² | 0.12 | 0.10 | 0.13 |
| N | 239 | 241 | 241 |

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01

Lastly, in the third column, the empowerment importance scales are combined. Again, three variables are significant, all of them at the 5% level: the estimate for age was -0.010, indicating, that structural and psychological empowerment efforts seem to be less relevant to older employees. Second, the estimate for cohabitation was 0.187. This somewhat curious result suggests that employees who are cohabiting with a partner are more likely to appreciate structural and psychological empowerment efforts. Third, the estimate for working part-time turned out to be negative at -0.307. As was the case for structural empowerment, this result implies that employees working less than 75% are more likely to rate empowerment as less important.²

Discussion and Limitations

This paper started off by asking if it is true that all employees want to be empowered at work. Judging from the results regarding a sample of retail employees in Sweden, it seems fair to conclude that, among the surveyed individuals, most do prefer empowered workplaces to less empowered ones. This result is not surprising, since research on empowerment has shown repeatedly that empowered employees report both greater well-being and improved performance at work (Bernoff and Schadler 2010; Forrester 2000; Maynard et al. 2012). Yet surveys regarding attitudes and orientations cannot investigate actual outcomes of empowerment efforts, hence the results are of a hypothetical nature: when asked about orientation to empowerment, respondents seem to prefer the idea of empowered to less empowered workplaces. That is, surveys cannot capture to what extent employees' experiences of actual empowerment efforts would match their vision of what such changes hypothetically could mean for their working and private lives.

However, looking more closely at the results of the first research question, regarding the empowerment orientation of employees in terms of *percentages*, a more nuanced picture can be drawn: in some instances, a fairly large number of employees chose to rate the importance of empowerment as neither very unimportant nor important. In the context of the employees' rather skeptical attitude toward change efforts in general, the question arises

² The 5-point Likert scales in the questionnaire were transformed into standardised scales for the OLS model. Logit as well as probit regressions were run to test for the models' robustness, recoding the standardised scales into dummy variables with $1 \leq 3.0$. For the importance of structural empowerment, both the logit and probit model showed significant results for part-time work. Although not significant, the logit as well as the probit model indicated the same direction for age but not for cohabitation. For the importance of psychological empowerment and the combined importance of empowerment, neither logit nor probit models could be run due to the rare occurrence of a negatively rated importance of empowerment and, therefore, the significant amount of omitted variables.

whether employees' previous experiences with, or prejudices against, change efforts influence their attitudes toward empowerment for the worse, or at least indifferently. Another explanation for a more neutral attitude may be found in an indifferent orientation to work in general. This suggests that employees with a certain work orientation may be hard to motivate despite empowerment changes.

Particularly in the context of the job choice items, it becomes apparent that far from all employees would prefer an empowered job to a less empowered job. Again, this attitude reflected in the data might be due to previous experiences or preconceived opinions concerning change efforts in general.

The already-mentioned finding that, despite an overall positive assessment toward empowerment, respondents are generally less likely to believe that change efforts at work would entail more empowered work for them thus may suggest a potential problem—for change efforts in general and empowerment change in particular. The problem may emanate from issues of credibility between employees and managers or employers, and their mutual expectations toward change processes (e.g. Humborstad and Kuvaas 2013). Such expectations are closely tied to unwritten assumptions entailed in psychological contracts (see Rousseau 1995). Consequently, unfavorable experiences, including disappointed expectations in the context of change, may lead to feelings of indignation, resentment, and breached psychological contracts.

Finally, asking whether empowerment preferences correlate with current work or private life situations, three significant results were revealed. First, older employees do not find empowerment efforts as relevant as younger employees. Career researchers report that career paths are typically formed up until the age of around 40, when they then transition into a "career maintenance stage" (Ng and Feldman 2008:393; Super 1980). This may be an explanation for why younger employees (aged 20–39) show a greater preference for empowerment, while older respondents (40–59) in this sample reported a slightly higher degree of current self-rated psychological empowerment and satisfaction. This might indicate that older employees, due to greater experience, competence, and thus self-confidence, experience themselves as already empowered to some degree. They might be more confident or able to use available empowering resources in an effective and satisfying manner and, therefore, not experience a desire for more empowerment.

Secondly, respondents' empowerment evaluation varied according to whether they were working part-time (less than 75%) or not. Respondents working part-time were less likely to evaluate empowerment efforts as positive for themselves than those working 75% or more. If this finding would generalize to part-time workers in general, it may be of great value in countries with a large proportion of part-time working individuals. The finding is in line with previous research: part-time workers' commitment and job satis-

faction is lower, on average, than those working full-time, and they also report lower organizational commitment. These symptoms can be linked to the issue of psychological contract fulfillment, in that less time spent in the organization can lead to a “narrower psychological contract, in the sense of fewer (perceived) mutual obligations and entitlements” (Bernhard-Oettel et al. 2017:265; Conway and Briner 2002; Giannikis and Mihail 2011; Guest, Isaksson, and Witte 2010). Furthermore, whether part-time employment is the preferred contract form or not might also play a significant role for employees’ well-being, commitment, and motivation to become empowered (Bernhard-Oettel et al. 2008). Lastly, it is also plausible that part-time employees might choose this employment type because of having an alternative orientation to work, one that is directed more clearly toward structured, pre-defined, and predictable work situations.

The third result concerns the fact that respondents cohabiting with their partners seem more likely to rate empowerment efforts as positive. Considering that a significant proportion of respondents assumed that change efforts would bring greater intensity to their daily working life in the form of more work tasks, workload, and demands, it would seem logical to expect that cohabiting respondents would find it more difficult to find a well-functioning work–life balance and to combine a more stressful working life with the demands of their private lives. However, recent research has found that young non-cohabiting professionals and managers without children struggle just as much with work–life balance issues than the more commonly researched working parents who are constantly pressed for time due to family obligations. Wilkinson, Tomlinson, and Gardiner (2017:653) found that childless “singles” can experience their intense working lives as “inhibiting their ability to form and sustain relationships, in particular friendships and intimate partnerships which may or may not open up opportunities for forming families of their own in the future.” Furthermore, while cohabiting might, on the one hand, put a strain on work–life balance, not cohabiting, on the other hand, challenges individuals both on a deeper level in terms of general emotional well-being, and on a more practical level in terms of their sole responsibility to maintain a household (ibid.; see also Allvin et al. 2011). Although Wilkinson et al.’s study only focuses on managers and professionals, their results are worth taking into consideration for non-cohabiting employees in general and extending research to study their empowerment orientations.

This study is a theoretically motivated study aimed at testing hitherto broadly accepted assumptions about attitudes toward empowerment. Hence, it is not intended to be representative of all retail employees in Sweden nor employees in general. Nevertheless, some limitations of this study and sample are too salient not to be mentioned. First, the focus on employees in the retail sector limits the insights, naturally, to this particular group of employees. Second, the response rate of 17% raises questions as to a selection bias,

possibly catching only those employees with a certain work orientation, that is, those who already feel very satisfied and empowered and who would be happy to take on more responsibility. Such employees might feel grateful or proud to fill out a questionnaire distributed by their HRM department. At the same time, the very fact that the questionnaire was distributed via the organization's own HRM department might also have excluded individuals who are least happy with their jobs and who take the opportunity to resist management by not answering. Third, as is always the case when distributing survey questionnaires in one language only, it is possible that minority groups of foreign language speakers (38.5% in this sample) are less likely to respond. The fact that there were no non-Swedish respondents in the sample who had lived in Sweden for less than ten years may indicate that the language skills of retail employees need to be on such a high level that most foreigners must spend considerable time living in Sweden before getting a job in retail. Alternatively, it may indicate that retail employees who have lived in Sweden for less than ten years were reluctant to take part in the survey due to language issues.

In summary, the analysis of the data points to some thought-provoking results that could be used to develop further studies exploring differences among employees and their understanding, sensemaking, and attitudes regarding empowerment. After all, what this study shows is that empowerment implemented along the lines of "one size fits all" may miss out on some groups of employees. More research into such differences could lead to a more refined analytical understanding of empowerment processes, in which employees are seen as individuals in a heterogeneous workforce with different orientations to work and empowerment. For managers seeking to implement more effective types of empowerment efforts, this study suggests the need to tailor communication about, and efforts toward, empowerment according to the particular composition of the workforce.

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