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Critical review on power in organization: empowerment in human resource development

Sung Jun Jo Sunyoung Park

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Sung Jun Jo
Gachon University, Seongnam, South Korea, and
Sunyoung Park
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to analyze current practices, discuss empowerment from the theoretical perspectives on power in organizations and suggest an empowerment model based on the type of organizational culture and the role of human resource development (HRD).

Design/methodology/approach – By reviewing the classic viewpoint of power, Lukes' three-dimensional power and Foucault's disciplinary power, we discuss power and empowerment in organizational contexts.

Findings – Power in organizations can be conceptualized based on the classic view, Foucault and critical view and Lukes' three-dimensional power. We found that true employee empowerment is related to the third dimension of power. The role of HRD for empowerment can be categorized into enhancing motivation and commitment in terms of psychological empowerment and bringing real power to employees. The proposed empowerment model assumes that organizational culture influences the dimensions of empowerment and the role of HRD for supporting empowerment.

Practical implications – HRD needs to critically assess the meaning of power in particular contexts (Morrell and Wilkinson, 2002) before planning and implementing specific training and development interventions for performance improvement and/or organization development interventions for innovation.

Originality/value – This study attempts to review, analyze and discuss issues regarding employee empowerment from HRD perspectives. Implications for the roles of HRD and the empowerment model are proposed.

Keywords Organizational culture, Employee participation, Classical viewpoint of power, Employee empowerment, Foucault's disciplinary power, Luke's three-dimensional power

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Empowerment as a research topic has been increasingly discussed in various management-related literature. As Oakland (2001) indicated, many successful organizations have placed great importance on empowerment initiatives because it is believed that they could be conducive to performance improvement by promoting employee commitment to and involvement in the decision-making process. Success stories in Japanese firms, where employers have assumed a paternalistic attitude toward labor and workers' participation in shop-floor management, have strongly precipitated organizations' interest in empowerment (Benton and Magnier-Watanabe, 2014; Tseo and Ramos, 1995).

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One of the most frequently cited success stories of employee empowerment is in 3M where professional staff members are encouraged to suggest new ideas for products. Those whose proposals gain executive approval may have the right to recruit collaborators from other departments at their own discretion. Since those who propose new ideas do not take any risk in case of failure of the business idea, this system has spawned over 60,000 new products in the market. Inspired by such success, 3M also introduced a shop-floor participation program for blue-collar workers, allowing them to influence the production process (Garud *et al.*, 2011; Tseo and Ramos, 1995).

The movement toward employee empowerment began with the criticism of Taylorism and scientific management, which were prevalent in the 1920s and were based on the X theory. According to Taylorism, a worker's job was broken down into small tasks and the best method for carrying out each task was determined by a scientific work study. Workers had little discretion and were alienated from their work. They worked under tight discipline and strict supervision imposed by management. While this approach was successful in improving productivity, this type of scientific management resulted in problems such as alienation of labor leading to a high turnover rate, absenteeism and strikes. In opposition to Taylorism, a new trend represented by the Human Relations School emerged suggesting that workers' involvement had strong business as well as moral benefits. It was claimed that workers would be self-motivated and carry out good work without close supervision (Wilkinson, 1998; Deetz, 2003).

With this new perspective, the focus began to shift from the technical aspects to human aspects of management. Scholars attempted to prove that productivity could be enhanced when workers were motivated to work, so job enrichment and job enlargement tactics were proposed to motivate workers to be immersed in their jobs. For instance, Herzberg's (1987) two-factor theory argued that intrinsic factors (e.g. job satisfaction) are more important motivators than extrinsic ones such as economic compensation. Herzberg claimed that an intrinsic motivator could be enriched by reintegrating maintenance tasks and providing some decision-making opportunities (Wilkinson, 1998; Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

This idea has developed into the currently popular notion of empowerment in business. With an emphasis on flexibility as a substitute for the Ford mode of production management, empowerment has been a common term since the 1990s, with the introduction of the so-called "empowerment era" (Harley, 2000). Management has increasingly been interested in improving workers' competitiveness by enhancing their participation or involvement in the decision-making process in the workplace. Union-management cooperative projects, Total Quality Management (TQM) and organizing self-management teams are typical initiatives to promote employee empowerment and have been adopted by many business firms today (Cummings and Worley, 2004). The increasing popularity of and interest in empowerment are rooted in the belief that those who work directly on any production process or directly with clients and customers tend to understand the requirements of the job better than management who are positioned further from the immediate job site (Collins, 1997).

Business firms are increasingly required to reduce the time to analyze and process the acquired information to make decisions based on that information so that they can survive in the rapidly changing environment. Thus, empowering employees is proposed as a strategic consideration rather than another human resource management tactic aimed at enhancing employee morale. However, despite the vast research on empowerment, few

research studies have been based on rigorous theoretical models of empowerment (Heller, 2003). This fundamental shortcoming can be attributed to the conceptual confusion among interpretations of empowerment and to the lack of attention to power issues in organizations. As Conger and Kanungo (1988) argued, despite the increasing focus on empowerment as a set of management techniques, researchers have not paid sufficient attention to the nature of the concept. In particular, conceptual confusion is found in the fact that many researchers have used the term "empowerment" interchangeably with "participation", "involvement" or "delegation" (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Heller, 2003; Honold, 1997; Mills and Ungson, 2003; Wilkinson, 1998).

The lexical meaning of empowerment is "giving power to someone". Thus, empowerment is associated with the extent to which employers confer their power to employees. If there is a shift in power balance between employers and employees, understanding the factors that motivate or force employers to relinquish power should be a focus of interest. It would also be of interest to understand how this shift in the power relationship has changed the way employees work and the nature of working in organizations. The purpose of this paper is to examine these topics that have been ignored by management and human resource development (HRD) literature to find the real meaning of empowerment and ultimately how HRD can best encourage empowerment in organizations.

The concept of employee empowerment signifies that employees are given the power which was originally possessed by management. Critical theorists have related empowerment to emancipation of labor and democratic control in the workplace through the examination of power relationships in organizations (Boje and Rosile, 2001). To critically analyze the notion of empowerment in management practice, researchers have investigated the nature of power and control on which such empowerment is based (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). However, they have failed to present a clear model to analyze the extent of empowerment and its practical direction.

To overcome the limitations found in the existing literature, this study attempts to review, analyze and discuss issues regarding employee empowerment from an HRD perspective. Following the review of research trends on employee empowerment, several conceptions of power proposed by Weber (1947); Parsons (1954); Foucault (1982) and Lukes (1974) are explored. From an HRD standpoint, critical issues of empowerment are identified and discussed. Lastly, an empowerment model and three implications for the roles of HRD in terms of power relationships in organizations are proposed.

Research trends

The authors' perspectives and focuses of existing research on employee empowerment vary greatly (Cicolini *et al.*, 2014; Honold, 1997; Maynard *et al.*, 2012; Menon, 2001; Seibert *et al.*, 2011; Spreitzer, 2007; Wall *et al.*, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998). For example, Honold (1997) reviews the literature on employee empowerment based on five categories:

(1) the leader's role in creating an empowering context;

(2) the individual's perspective of the empowered state;

(3) collaborative work as empowerment;

(4) structural or procedural changes as empowerment; and

(5) a multi-dimensional perspective on empowerment.

Wilkinson (1998) also identified five main types of employee empowerment including information sharing (downward, upward and horizontal communication), upward problem solving (autonomy and responsibility), task autonomy (team-managed or self-managing teams), shaping of attitudes (relationships and roles) and self-management (authority and involvement) based on the assumption that employees' and employers' interests are closely connected. Spreitzer (1996) defined psychological empowerment is defined as intrinsic task motivation in which individuals feel a sense of control in relation to their work, including meaning, competence (self-efficacy), self-determination and impact.

Although there have been numerous studies related to employee empowerment, the results of research evaluating the impact of employee empowerment on performance have been inconsistent. Some studies have discovered that one of the major effects of employee empowerment is changes in workers' attitudes (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013; Freeman and Kleiner, 2000; Kemelgor, 2015). For example, Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) confirmed that empowerment plays a significant role in enhancing innovative behavior, satisfaction with the job and organization and performance at both the team and organizational levels. Freeman and Kleiner (2000) also conducted a survey to determine the benefits of employee involvement practices including self-managed work teams, worker involvement, TQM, productivity committee, suggestion systems, information-sharing and opinion surveys. They found that employee involvement led to positive changes for employees such as improvement in job satisfaction and attitudes toward work, but they found little or no effect on firm-based productivity. Kemelgor (2015) emphasized that employee empowerment is effective in accomplishing organizational goals in small business contexts by enabling employees to have control over significant aspects of their work.

Other studies, however, found negative results of employee empowerment practices. Based on a case study with interviews and surveys, Cunningham and Hyman (1999) discussed the impact of empowerment by comparing employees' views and line managers' views. They found that both employees and managers had negative opinions about their employee empowerment programs for four reasons:

(1) lack of training and development to support the empowerment program;

(2) operational pressures overriding the initiative for empowerment;

(3) reduction in the role of the Personnel Department; and

(4) deficiencies in cultural changes.

Heller (2003) indicated that employee involvement programs that focus on the quality of work life, quality circles, representative participation and job enrichment have not always been effective and that it has been impossible to conduct a clear assessment of the effectiveness of these programs. However, he also acknowledged that some research papers have reported positive relationships between employee participation and psychological and behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction and lower turnover (Heller, 2003).

Several topics, issues and results regarding employee empowerment and the practical results of employee empowerment have produced diverse results. Inconsistency in the results accounts partly for stakeholders' conceptual confusion

about power and empowerment. For clarification, we explore these concepts through a comprehensive literature review of the key theoretical literature.

Conceptual review of power in organizations

Classic view

Weber (1947) and Parsons (1954) were pioneers of the classic perspectives on power. They viewed power as a social resource which can be acquired, distributed, allocated or transferred (Heiskala, 2001). Weber (1947, p. 152) defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests". His definition of power has been understood to reflect the distributive approach in which an increase in a party's power means a corresponding decrease in the other's power (Heiskala, 2001).

Parsons (1954, p. 391) defined power as "the realistic capacity of a system unit to actualize its interests within the system-interaction and to exert influence on processes in the system". His definition notes that power is regarded as a resultant of a specific social system rather than something to be possessed regardless of the context. Weber's and Parsons' notions of power both refer to the resources in a social system with multiple actors in the system competing to gain power. They viewed power as separate from individuals. Based on their views of power, Lukes (1974) defined power as the organizational capacity to secure performance by binding units in a system when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals.

Despite the similarities between the two views, Heiskala (2001) indicated that the demarcation between Weber and Parsons in terms of power is found in that Weber regards it as a limited resource whereas Parsons' attention was on its reproducibility and collective enhancement. It can be argued that Parsons' systemic approach formed the fundamentals to analyze how power is generated and operated. However, there are limitations in both classic conceptions of power from a critical perspective. While both theorists attempted to explain and conceptualize the power they observed, the contradiction in the power relationship or systems in which the power relationship is embedded was neglected. In that sense, the classic theory of power can be evaluated as conservative because they believed the relationship and system could be maintained.

Foucault and the critical view

Critical theorists equated power with domination and subordination. Although critical theorists focused on different epistemological purposes than classic mainstream theorists, most conceptions and analyses of power in organizations have been derived from the perspective of classical sociological and political science. In particular, the discussion has focused on power in relation to the influence on different people or groups in political processes and in the rights of individuals in opposition to a possible state of domination (Deetz, 1992).

Foucault (1982), on the other hand, provided an analytical perspective in which additional attributes of power were identifiable. He conceptualized disciplinary power, which is divided into norms and standard practices, as products of moral, medical, sexual and psychological regulations. In other words, disciplinary power resides in every perception, every judgment and every act. In its positive sense, disciplinary power enables and makes something possible, but it excludes and marginalizes people. Rather than analyzing power in the organization as if it were a sovereign state, the conception

of power has to be reformed to account for a more massive and invisible structure of control (Deetz, 2003). Deetz (2003, p. 32) demonstrates how disciplinary power is exercised in everyday work as follows:

> Disciplinary power has been present in corporations from their outset. Perhaps the clearest case is the development of the assembly line. The assembly line transformed an explicit authority relation between the worker and supervisor into a partially hidden one. Rather than the supervisor having to tell the worker how hard or fast to work and dealing with the question, "by what right?" the movement in the line already accomplished it. In doing so, the functional relation changed.

Foucault's focus was placed on how the mechanisms of power affect everyday lives (Hassard *et al.*, 2001). He denies the view of power being depicted as a commodity as in the classic perspectives in sociology. Power is not something that is acquired, seized, shared or transferred. Rather, power is seen as a product of relationships. It is not associated with a particular institution but with practices, techniques and procedures. Since power is employed at all levels and in many dimensions in the organization, the "how" of power, not the "what" issue, is the focus. He connects power and knowledge by saying, "power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen" (Hassard *et al.*, 2001).

Knowledge is the most critical attribute of power. If something is to be controlled, governed or managed, it must first be known. Identifying who is initiating a particular discourse indicates those with authority and the power to define the knowable and permissible. Thus, professional practices in management are constructed through these discourses and are therefore open to the possibility of change (Trehan, 2004). In particular, Foucault dissolved the traditional distinction between power and knowledge, whereby knowledge may lead to power, or power may be enhanced by the acquisition of knowledge. These two viewpoints are not depicted as having an independent existence; they co-exist (Hassard *et al.*, 2001).

Lukes' three-dimensional power

Lukes' conceptualization of multi-faceted power provided a synthesized discussion about the definition, function and key attributes of power. His three-dimensional model of power has played a role as the stimulus which was then followed by a series of contesting discussions.

Based on Lukes' (1974) framework of three-dimensional power, this paper discusses the power relationship between employer and employee embedded in the notion of empowerment in current management practices. The extent to which empowerment initiatives rearrange the existing power relationship depends on the organizational contexts in which the empowerment initiatives are introduced. The three-dimensional approach provides an analytical framework which allows us to examine why empowerment is adopted, how it is operated and what it produces as outcomes.

The discussion in this paper about the power relationship between employer and employee embedded in the notion of empowerment in current management practices is based on Lukes' (1974) framework of three-dimensional power. The extent to which empowerment initiatives rearrange the existing power relationship varies with the contexts where the empowerment initiatives are introduced in organizations. Thus, the three-dimensional approach provides an analytical framework through which we are

able to examine why empowerment is adopted, how it is operated and what it produces as outcomes.

The first dimension of power involves a successful attempt by one party (power holder) to get the other party (subordinate) to do something the latter would not otherwise do. Thus, its analytical focus is placed on the behavior of making decisions on issues with an observable conflict of interest. In the power relationship, identifying who prevails in decision making seems to be the best way to determine which individuals and groups have more power because direct conflict between actors presents a situation most closely approximating an experimental test of their capacities to affect outcomes (Lukes, 1974).

The second dimension of power focuses on non-decision making. While a decision is a choice among alternative modes of actions, a non-decision is a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent issue or it manifests a challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker (Lukes, 1974). Since this dimension of power works for potential challenges to the existing relationship with subordinates, power is exercised in conflict even though it is covert. If there is no conflict, overt or covert, it is presumed that there is a consensus on the prevailing allocation of values, in which case non-decision making is impossible (Lukes, 1974).

The third dimension of power focuses on the mechanism by which power domination can be sustained. Lukes (1974) observed that the bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but, most importantly, is also sustained by the socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by an individual's inaction (Lukes, 1974). The most supreme power means "not having to act" (Lukes, 2005). Lukes (1974, p. 24) further explains:

> It is the most insidious exercise of power to prevent people from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.

In sum, the three-dimensional view of power involves a behavioral focus of the first two views and allows for consideration of the many ways in which potential issues are kept out of organizational politics (see Table I).

Power dimensions and empowerment

Although existing literature has adopted the term "empowerment" with little critique, it is questionable whether empowerment interventions have really enhanced the power held by employees. The possible responses vary according to the perspectives of

Table I.
Focuses of three-dimensional power perspectives

One-dimensional view	Two-dimensional view	Three-dimensional view
Decision making	Decision making and non-decision making	Decision making and control over agenda
(Key) Issues	Issues and potential issues	Issues and potential issues
Observable (overt) conflicts	Observable (overt or covert) conflict	Observable (overt or covert) conflict and latent conflict

different dimensions of power. From the standpoint of the one-dimensional perspective of power, the answer is "yes". Employees are given autonomy and rights to design their own work and participate in the decision-making process through self-managing teams, quality circles and management councils which were not allowed in traditional organizations. From this perspective, managerial power can be seen as transferred to and taken over by employees. This perspective is consistent with the classic perspective that power can be transferred, distributed and shared (Heiskala, 2001).

Empowerment practices initiated by management, however, do not seem to concede with the second dimension of power for employees. The empowerment policies and practices mentioned above have been utilized as a mechanism to suppress and thwart potential challenges from employees. For fear of rebellious challenges from employees, employers allow limited autonomy and participation to mitigate the potential of voices calling for radical and fundamental changes in the existing relationships between employers and employees. Being involved in some specified areas means being excluded from other unspecified areas.

Empowerment practices are also used to strengthen the third dimension of employers' power and to intensify alienation of labor. Through empowerment interventions, management's interests and norms are easily passed along to workers. Employees learn and accept the norms of management and regard them as corresponding to their own interests. Empowered workers create ideas to improve productivity, effectiveness and efficiency to mobilize and monitor themselves without any outside pressure. Their own interests such as emancipation and self-fulfillment are suppressed and forgotten. That is the exercise of the employer's power which is hidden behind the illusion of empowerment.

Empowerment and the role of HRD

Although there is general agreement that empowerment is an unavoidable trend and solution, the different definitions and perspectives which are found in the existing HRD literature reflect the differences in fundamental assumptions about whose interests HRD serves. In general, within the organizational context, HRD is regarded as "a process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving individual, team, work process, and organizational system performance" (Swanson and Holton, 2009, p. 4).

The first perspective emphasizes HRD's role of increasing performance and productivity. This perspective, as an alternative to the technical approach represented by scientific management, has its basis in the motivation theory which focuses on how workers are motivated and committed to their jobs. Allowing opportunity for employees to participate in the decision-making process (Juravich, 1996), design task allocation and access to information (Freeman and Kleiner, 2000; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998) is believed to help them enhance their sense of ownership and results in high productivity and efficiency. The benefits of empowerment are attributed to employers in that if there is no advantage for the employer, empowerment would not be considered regardless of its benefits to employees. Hence, this perspective has the propensity to focus on psychological empowerment rather than an actual power shift.

The results of a survey of Fortune 1,000 companies indicate that the majority of large firms have used employee involvement programs and their practices have been successful (Ledford and Lawler, 1994). In particular, through examination of eight

industries in India, Bhatnagar (2005) concluded that psychological empowerment has a positive relationship with organizational commitment. By adopting the four dimensions of psychological empowerment suggested by Spreitzer (1996); Bhatnagar (2005) conceptualizes psychological empowerment as changes in four cognitive aspects, impact, competence, meaning and self-determination, all of which determine the motivation of individuals. Bhatnagar's (2005) findings reflect a Pygmalion effect in that perceived value of employees' work changes their behavior.

Kirman and Rosen (1999) found that more empowered teams were also more productive than less empowered teams and had higher levels of customer service, job satisfaction and organizational and team commitment. Their four constructs of empowerment also involve psychological beliefs and perceptions about potency, meaningfulness, autonomy and impact. Therefore, the practical focus in terms of empowerment is placed on how to make employees feel empowered rather than how to make them actually empowered.

What are the roles of HRD for enhancing psychological empowerment? One of the most commonly used interventions for enhancing employee empowerment and involvement is quality circle activities. Honeycutt (1989) reports that training members is a key for successful quality circle activities. Specific training for understanding quality circle principles and how to apply them properly can give employees the confidence to face challenges they may not have been able to handle before and to overcome constraints in the problem-solving process.

One of the antecedents of team empowerment is a team-based HR policy (Kirman and Rosen, 1999). Specifically, a team-based HR policy includes cross training and 360 degree assessments. Cross training among team members gives them confidence in multiple job-related skills and provides more autonomy in carrying out a wider variety of jobs. Team members also feel more autonomy through 360 degree assessments among members. Rusaw (2000) described other examples of training interventions that improve psychological empowerment including enhancing assertiveness, conflict management, strengthening informal communication and developing support groups. Based on these findings, HRD can facilitate employees' psychological empowerment through training and assessment policies.

From a critical perspective, however, criticism has been raised against the existing trend of empowerment and the role of HRD in supporting productivity and efficiency by ignoring asymmetrical power relations in organizations. Morrell and Wilkinson (2002) indicated that the term "empowerment" is framed in ambiguity that hides the fact that there is no real increase in or reconstituting of workers' power; instead, empowerment proves to be a more insidious mechanism for control. Traditional control systems may be replaced by more sophisticated measuring systems where management delegates responsibility to workers to monitor their peers using 360 degree evaluations. Employers' power shifts its dimension from the first to second or third dimension.

From a critical perspective, HRD should denaturalize existing power relations and help bring real power to employees. Francis (2007) asserts that HRD's orientation should be different in nature from managers' orientation. Rather than advocating the rhetoric of productivity and efficiency, HRD should focus on employees' interests and individual development. Francis' (2007) qualitative study found that HRD can play a role in restructuring existing power relations by advocating and signifying the discourse on employees' growth, welfare, individual dignity and fairness which opposes managers'

orientation. Training is no longer a tool for achieving management's purposes. Fenwick (2005) proposes emancipatory action-learning through which denaturalizing the existing conditions and promoting life-nurturing organizations are possible even though it may not lead to a fundamental change.

The solution, however, should be discovered at the place where empowerment benefits both employers and employees. As Turner (1997) pointed out, even employer-led pseudo empowerment can be a stepping stone for true long-term empowerment. HRD should be positioned as a bridge which interprets the context and negotiates conflicting interests. Morrell and Wilkinson (2002) suggested that empowerment be viewed as a flexible term which can be interpreted along with the context. They propose five context-sensitive ways that HRD can improve empowerment in organizations by harmonizing the interests of employers and employees in different contexts: information sharing, upward problem solving, task autonomy, attitudinal shaping and self-management. HRD professionals should interpret the context and environment before they determine which solution is introduced in their organizations.

Organizational culture and empowerment

Organizational culture can be defined as "the set of shared, taken-for granted, implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about and reacts to its various environments" (Schein, 1996, p. 236). Organizational culture positively influences employees' performance and behaviors through integrated collective values, beliefs and assumptions (Hartnell *et al.*, 2011). Since empowerment is a critical factor to improve employee performance, it has gained more attention from diverse organizations. Empowerment allows employees to enhance their autonomy and involvement in work that results in increased decision making more generally within the wider agenda and interests of the organization (Wall *et al.*, 2004).

Scholars have explored the relationship between organizational culture and employee empowerment (e.g. Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014; Baird and Wang, 2010; Çakar and Ertürk, 2010; Chiang and Jang, 2008; Khan and Rasli, 2015; Sadati, 2012; Sigler and Pearson, 2000; Seibert *et al.*, 2011). Various organizational cultures react differently to employee empowerment. For instance, an organizational culture that fosters and supports innovation, creativity and organizational effectiveness contributes to enhancing employee empowerment (Sadati, 2012). An organizational culture that promotes decision making and autonomy positively and directly influences empowerment, specifically, psychological empowerment (Chiang and Jang, 2008). A team-oriented and collaborative organizational culture strongly encourages employees to participate in the decision-making process by building trust within the leader-subordinate relationship (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2014). However, organizations that heavily rely on power-sharing organizational structures and practices are less likely to empower employees (Çakar and Ertürk, 2010; Seibert *et al.*, 2011). Thus, considering the importance and roles of organizational culture, the different dimensions of empowerment could be observed in terms of its relationship with organizational culture.

Empowerment model in organizations

Based on the power dimensions summarized in Table I, including the role of HRD in enhancing empowerment and the relationship between organizational culture and empowerment, we propose an empowerment model for organizations with different

cultures (see Figure 1). This model assumes that the organizational culture influences the dimensions of empowerment and the role of HRD in supporting empowerment. To explain the different characteristics of organizational culture, the competing values framework (CVF) is adopted as suggested by Cameron and Quinn (1999). The CVF identifies four organizational culture types: hierarchy culture, market culture, clan culture and adhocracy culture. Organizations with a hierarchy culture emphasize the classic attributes of bureaucracy (e.g. rules, procedures and control), market culture values competitiveness, profitability and productivity, while a clan culture highlights teamwork, involvement, communication and empowerment, and an adhocracy culture accentuates creativity, innovation and adaptability (Cameron and Quinn, 1999; Cameron *et al.*, 2006).

These features of various organizational cultures affect the level of empowerment and the role of HRD. For instance, organizations with an adhocracy culture are less likely to have centralized power or authority relationships and are more likely to have power flows from person to person or from team to team depending on what problem is being addressed at the time (Cameron and Quinn, 1999). In this culture, employees can be more empowered (toward Dimension 3 in Figure 1) and HRD can try to maximize employees' interests by bringing them real power. However, organizations with a hierarchy culture would not allow employees to have enough autonomy and power, because a hierarchy culture highly values clear lines of decision-making authority, standardized rules and procedures and control and accountability mechanisms (Cameron and Quinn, 1999; Cameron *et al.*, 2006). This perspective limits the role of HRD to empower employees.

Based on our empowerment model, we established the propositions which may be tested empirically in future research:

P1. The level of empowerment depends on the type of organizational culture.

In a hierarchical culture where empowerment is limited, decision authority is dominated by top management, and the discretion of lower-level employees is not the norm. In a market-oriented culture, empowerment is initiated and implemented as a method for improving productivity for the employer's interest. In a clan culture, the self-directed team setting gives employees considerable discretion and autonomy, but the nature of empowering teams does not allow emancipation of each individual. Finally, in an adhocracy culture, a very high degree of autonomy of individual workers is conferred so

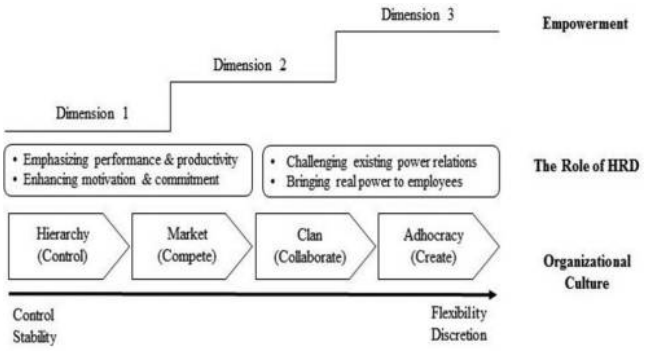

Figure 1.
Empowerment model

that most critical decisions are made by employees and, in contrast, management control is limited:

P2. The role of HRD varies depending on the level of empowerment and type of organizational culture.

In a hierarchical culture with a lack of empowerment, HRD's role is restricted to training workers for the purpose of the employer. In a market-oriented culture with limited empowerment, HRD's primary responsibility is to train employees to learn skills and knowledge that were previously only required for higher level employees. In a clan culture supported by self-directed teams, HRD tends to focus on team building so that self-directed team members operate autonomously while maintaining alignment with organizational goals. In an adhocracy culture with fully empowered employees, HRD focuses on unleashing individual worker's potential to achieve self-actualization.

Implications for HRD practice

The current paper provides a literature review on employee empowerment and presents a conceptual approach to power in organizations through the classic view, Foucault and critical view and Lukes' three-dimensional power, and then summarizes empowerment in terms of the role of HRD. From Foucault's perspective, power is a product of relationships including practices, techniques and procedures. He also points out that knowledge is the most critical attribute of power (Deetz, 2003). The discussion of this paper offers HRD professionals several implications for empowerment in practice. First, HRD should have a balanced perspective of empowerment and power dynamics in organizations. For example, HRD can arbitrate between managers and employees to set the performance standards, monitor performance, schedule the work, select their own equipment, participate in recruitment decisions and deal with co-worker discipline and absenteeism for self-managing teams. When managers work with employees to establish the appropriate performance standards, managers should make decisions regarding the organizational goals and types of compensation with the standards developed with employees. During this process, HRD should aim to strike a balance between the organization and individuals so at least both sides are involved in recognizing each other's interests and needs. Elliott and Turnbull (2003) also described the growing concern about HRD practitioners' responsibility to balance the needs of the individuals with those of the organization.

HRD also needs to critically assess the meaning of power in particular contexts (Morrell and Wilkinson, 2002) before planning and implementing specific training and development interventions for performance improvement and/or organization development interventions for innovation. Most HRD programs have focused on performance improvement through human development. For example, self-managing teams are not only designed to have responsibility for the basic work processes but should also be empowered in the stronger sense of responsibility of traditional HR functions such as recruiting, job assignments, training and evaluation (Morrell and Wilkinson, 2002). From the one-dimensional view, team members are thought to possess greater power than before. However, the training and evaluation focus for members in self-managing teams is likely to be limited to improving directly related job skills rather than developing their potential. They are more restricted in their routine jobs than ever because the behaviors and performance are monitored and evaluated by their colleagues

who are very close to them. In this situation, workers become more performance and results oriented and pay less attention to their own self-development. Thus, HRD needs to possess a three-dimensional perspective of power and empowerment. A balanced HRD perspective should be capable of seeing the hidden side of the rhetoric of employee empowerment.

Finally, HRD needs to consider and clarify its own identity and responsibilities in the process of empowerment and in power dynamics. Several studies have explained the roles and responsibilities of HRD in the context of organizational power (Kim and Cervero, 2007; Elliott and Turnbull, 2003; May *et al.*, 2003; Yang, 2003). Common implications of these studies are that:

- HRD should consider the interests and values of diverse stakeholders, including both the organization and employees; and
- HRD should help accomplish the given goals and meet the expectations of the organization with diverse approaches and strategies in the power context.

However, it seems that there is very little concern about empowerment within HRD or empowered HRD from decision makers and power holders in organization to establish a clear role of HRD in the power context, although it is taken for granted that HRD has facilitated and contributed to implementing and distributing empowerment in organizations. HRD needs to be a knowledge source for wise judgment and appropriate decisions, to recognize the current problems and situations related to empowerment and power and to be an ethical and social influencer that encourages employees to behave effectively in the context of workplace power.

Conclusions

This study reviewed research trends of employee empowerment and several conceptions of power. We also discussed issues regarding employee empowerment from an HRD perspective, and suggested an empowerment model based on power dimensions and four types of organizational culture. The type of employee empowerment that focuses on management responsibilities neglects the essential questions of distribution of authority, access to resources and the capacity to mobilize in defense of worker interests, which are crucial factors in power determination (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999). From a critical point of view, researchers need to explore the fundamental characteristics of employee empowerment to overcome the invisible power controlled by employers, beyond superficial improvement of the power relationship.

There are several limitations in this study. First, empirical research was excluded to focus on the review of research trends on employee empowerment. Second, the empowerment model did not reflect other factors influencing employee empowerment such as national culture, industry type, characteristics of employees and work and the role of leaders. The empowerment model could explain diverse dynamics of empowerment according to different models of organizational culture. Third, the subject and object of empowerment were not described in detail to explore different empowerment practices and were expressed simply in terms of employers and employees. This paper contributes to expanding researchers' and practitioners' interest in future research on employee empowerment in terms of influence and power to

employers, and in initiating research related to the power relationship of empowerment in an organizational context to seek true employee empowerment.

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Corresponding author
Sunyoung Park can be contacted at: sunypark@gmail.com