

To empower or not to empower: The case of students employed in one Midwestern university's dining services

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment research in hospitality is limited. Past researchers suggested that different subject groups in the service industry should be studied to learn more about the concept and practice of empowerment. In an attempt to address this need, the goal of this research was to study the relationship between empowerment and intent to turnover in student employees in university dining services. The moderating roles of job satisfaction and power distance were also studied. Results indicate that empowerment indirectly impacted student employee intent to turnover through job satisfaction. In addition, power distance perceptions had a direct and indirect (through job satisfaction) negative relationship with intent to turnover. Results are compared to past studies conducted in other settings and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: empowerment, turnover, job satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

University foodservice managers employ a large number of part-time employees to provide flexibility in staffing (Neumann, Stevens, & Graham, 2001). They rely heavily on student employees to fill hundreds of part-time positions (Gray, Niehoff, & Miller, 2000). However, in a study involving students employed in university dining services (UDS), Bartlett, Propper, and Scerbo (1999) stated that turnover, absenteeism, and lack of motivation were challenges facing managers. Panelists in a videoconference sponsored by the National Association of College & University Food Services stated that recruiting and retaining student employees were common problems in college and foodservice operations (Wright & Kadis, 1998). Lin (2003) found that a high level of turnover was prevalent among students employed in UDS at the university. Employee empowerment has been identified as a predictor of turnover (Hogan, 1992).

Empowerment research in hospitality and tourism is very limited (Erstad, 1997). Managerial interest in employee empowerment in the hospitality industry has been associated with gaining competitive advantage through improvements in service quality (Hubrecht & Teare, 1993). Fulford and Enz (1995) suggested that different subject groups in the service industry should be studied to learn more about the concept and practice of empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment has been described as a venue to enable employees make decisions (Bowen & Lawler, 1992) and as a personal experience where individuals take responsibility for their own actions (Pastor, 1996). The first definition puts the onus on management, and the second emphasizes the importance of the individual for successful application of empowerment. Whereas, earlier research focused on empowerment as a set of management practices to delegate authority (discretionary empowerment) (Blau & Alba, 1982), recent research has centered on psychological empowerment, focusing on employee experience (Corsun & Enz, 1999).

Kelley (1993) distinguished among three types of discretionary empowerment: routine, creative, and deviant, available during the service-delivery process. Routine discretion is implemented when employees select an alternative from a list of possible actions to do their jobs. Creative discretion is present when employees develop alternate methods of performing a task. Deviant discretion, which is not preferred by organizations, involves behaviors outside the scope of an employee's formal job description and authority. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined psychological empowerment as inherent motivation evident in four cognitions (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact) reflecting an employee's orientation to his or her work role.

Numerous studies have shown that empowerment increases job satisfaction and reduces role stress (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988). Singh (1993) found that customer-contact employees experienced less role ambiguity when their discretionary powers increased. Empowerment led to quicker resolution of customer problems because employees did not waste time referring customer complaints to managers (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1998). The authors stated that empowerment was highly crucial in situations where customer needs are highly variable, in order to enable employees to customize service delivery. Empowerment also increased the scope and opportunity for customization of service products in comparison to manufactured products.

Empowerment and power distance

Individuals in high-power distance societies have allowed inequalities of power and wealth to grow. In contrast, individuals in low-power distance societies deemphasize the differences between a citizen's power and wealth. Past studies (Eylon & Au, 1999; Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000) have concluded that individuals from high-power distance cultures performed significantly better in the disempowered situation with respect to productivity than in the empowered situation. Traditionally, U.S. has been classified as a low-power distance culture (Hofstede, 1980).

Rationale for the study

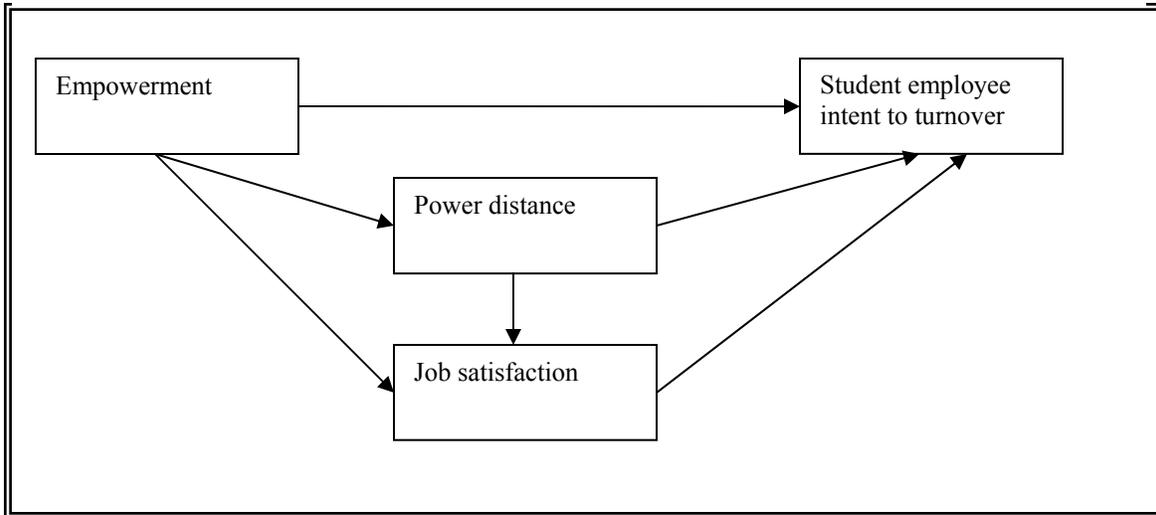
Very few studies have tested the relationship between empowerment and turnover intentions empirically in the hospitality industry. No studies were found that tested the impact of empowerment on job satisfaction and turnover intentions in part-time student employees in the UDS context. In the past, power-distance has been used as a distinguishing characteristic of a country's culture. However, it is not known if power distance perceptions vary from one ethnicity to another within the same country. Because of the increasing representation of ethnic minorities (Lum, 2003; Moore, 2002) and international students (Ginsberg & Ochoa, 2003) in university student population, it is essential to determine the moderating role played by the cultural value of power distance on the effect of empowerment on job satisfaction. Since the academic year 1982-1983, the number of international students has increased by 74% (Institute of International Education, 2003). It also is not known if perceptions of power distances will change for students who originally come from high-power distance societies as a result of working in a society with traditionally low-power distance i.e., U.S.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

An illustration of the research framework is available in Figure 1. Research propositions are as follows:

1. A negative relationship exists between student employees' perceptions of discretionary empowerment and intent to turnover in UDS.
2. Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between employee perceptions of discretionary empowerment and intent to turnover in UDS.
3. Power distance mediates the relationship between U.S. Caucasian student employees' perceptions of discretionary empowerment and job satisfaction in UDS.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the influence of employee empowerment perceptions on student employee intent to turnover mediated by power distance and job satisfaction



METHODOLOGY

Sample selection

This study focuses on perceptions of students employed in the UDS of a four-year, public, land-grant university in the Midwestern U.S. Study sample included students who only can be employed on a part-time basis (20 hours or less a week when classes are in session) in any of 21 dining locations on-campus and 18 years of age or older as of the date the survey was administered. Dining locations included cafes, bakeries, commissary kitchens, convenience stores, food court, vending, and residence hall dining centers. A most recent list of part-time student hourly employees was obtained from the human resources office of UDS.

Instrument design

Interviews were conducted with senior-level UDS managers to determine the need for and appropriateness of questionnaire items. Statements addressing empowerment and power distance were followed by statements related to respondents' job satisfaction and intent to turnover. Past studies (Brockner et al., 2001; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Lum, Kervin, Clark, Reid, & Sirola, 1998; Spreitzer, 1995) were used to develop statements measuring constructs of empowerment, power distance, job satisfaction, and intent to turnover. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a five-point Likert-type scale with 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree. Demographic questions including facility of employment, hours of employment per week, interaction time with co-workers and managers, age, ethnic background, major in college, and reasons for employment were placed at the end of the questionnaire.

Pilot study

Part-time students (n = 10) employed in the Food and Nutrition, and Patient Services departments at a university hospital in Midwestern U.S. volunteered to participate in the pilot study. A paper-version of the questionnaire was mailed to students along with a cover letter

explaining the pilot study. The web version of the questionnaire was pre-tested using students from one class in the Hotel, Restaurant, and Institution Management program at a Midwestern state university. This sample is representative of the student employee population. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and provide comments regarding content, clarity of directions, and format. Dillman (2000) identified several advantages of using web surveys including low costs (no printing, postage, and data entry costs), quicker completion time of project, and comparable response rates. Appropriate recommendations from participants were incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire.

Data collection

An email was sent to all eligible student employees (n = 849) obtained from payroll data provided by the human resources office of UDS. A reminder email was sent to participants four days after the first email. The body of the email included a cover letter explaining benefits of the study, voluntary participation, and anonymity. A hyperlink to the survey also was provided. After reading the body of the email, students who chose to participate in the study were taken to the web survey by clicking on the hyperlink. Participants were to click on the submit button upon completion of the survey. Responses were received directly by us. Because responses were not viewed by managers, anonymity was ensured. Students were given one week from first contact to respond. A total of 285 responses were received, a response rate of 33.6%. Approval from the Institutional Review Board allowed for two \$50 cash prizes to be given to participants selected in a random drawing in appreciation for participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows Release 13.0 (2004) and LISREL 8.5 were used to analyze data. Convergent validity of all scales was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Nunnally's (1978) recommendations were used as a benchmark. Descriptive statistics calculated included frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Negatively-stated items were reverse-coded prior to data analysis. "Exclude cases listwise" option was used in SPSS for data analysis. Path analysis was used to determine whether or not employee perceptions of empowerment were related directly to intent to turnover or if they were mediated by perceptions of power distance and job satisfaction.

Demographic characteristics and descriptive statistics

Demographic characteristics of respondents are in Table 1. Majority of respondents (58.3%) were female, and 97.1% were 23 years of age or younger. Almost half of respondents (47%) stated that the job at UDS was their first job in the foodservice sector; however, 91.5% indicated it was not their first job. Majors and years in college of respondents were fairly evenly distributed. Because majority of respondents (83.5%) were Caucasians, "ethnic background" was coded as "1" for Caucasians and "0" for all other categories.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Job Title		
Students w/o supervisory responsibilities	228	80.0
Students w/ supervisory responsibilities	44	15.4
Other	8	2.8
No response	5	1.8
Ethnic Background		
Caucasian	238	83.5
African-American	10	3.5
Hispanic-American	10	3.5
Asian American	7	2.5
American Indian	0	0.0
International	12	4.2
No response	8	2.8
Semesters of employment at UDS		
2 semesters or less	169	59.5
Between 2 and 4 semesters	71	25.1
More than 4 semesters	45	15.4
Semesters of employment with supervisor		
2 semesters or less	196	68.9
Between 2 and 4 semesters	71	25.0
More than 4 semesters	18	6.1
Hours of employment at week at UDS		
< 5	6	2.0
5 - 10	58	20.4
11 - 15	161	56.5
16 – 20	60	21.1
Interaction time with co-workers		
< 25%	50	17.5
25% - 50%	76	26.7
51% - 75%	76	26.7
76% - 100%	75	26.3
No response	8	2.8
Interaction time with managers		
< 25%	162	56.8
25% - 50%	67	23.5
51% - 75%	30	10.5
76% - 100%	16	5.6
No response	10	3.6

Of 21 dining locations on-campus, one location employed 28.1% of respondents. With respect to type of facility (residential dining centers, restaurants, C-stores etc.), majority of respondents (52.6%) worked for various residential dining centers on-campus. Respondents also stated that, on average, they were responsible for 66.3% of their college expenses. Financial

sources to pay for college expenses included job(s), student loans, scholarships and grants, and work study through the financial aid office.

Reasons for employment at UDS are in Table 2. The top three reasons for employment with UDS were “allows for a flexible schedule,” “place of residence is close to work,” and “hourly rate of pay.” The average hourly rate was \$10.20 with a range from \$6.75 to \$13.86. More than a quarter (26.5%, n = 72) of respondents stated that they were considering quitting. Reasons for leaving UDS are in Table 2. The top reason for considering quitting was that students disliked being employed in foodservice.

Table 2. Reasons for employment at UDS and intent to turnover

Reasons	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Reasons for employment at UDS*		
Allows for a flexible schedule	246	86.3
Lack of transportation to work off-campus	204	71.6
Place of residence is close to work	176	61.8
Hourly rate of pay	161	56.5
Employment related to major/degree	20	7.0
Can only work on-campus	19	6.7
Reasons for considering quitting UDS*		
Don't like to work in foodservice	30	10.5
Can't keep up with school work-load	18	6.3
Found another job related to major	19	6.7
Don't like work hours	16	5.6
Don't get along with supervisor	5	1.8
Don't get along with co-workers	1	.4

*Students were allowed to check all applicable reasons

Descriptive statistics of all measured constructs appear in Table 3. Cronbach's alpha was 0.61 for the intent to turnover scale. This is below the recommended level of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998) stated that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.60 was acceptable when most items in these two scales were new and formulated specifically for the research context. Hence, the intent to turnover scale was used for data analysis. The other construct reliabilities were above the recommended 0.70 level.

Table 3. Item-specific descriptive statistics and reliability

Item	Mean	Reliability
Power distance		
People at lower levels in the organization should carry out the requests of people at higher levels without questions	3.00±1.15	
People at higher levels in organizations have a responsibility to make important decisions for people below them	3.69±0.90	
Once a manager makes a decision, people working for the company should not question it.	2.68±1.06	0.74
In work-related matters, managers have a right to expect obedience from their subordinates.	3.83±0.86	
An organization's rules should not be broken, not even when the employee thinks it is in the company's best interest	3.11±0.95	
Item	Mean	Reliability
Empowerment		
I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job	3.39±0.89	
I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work	3.43±0.99	0.81
I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job	3.32±1.04	
Job satisfaction		
Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my job	3.80±1.00	
I am generally satisfied with the nature of work I do in this job	3.71±1.06	0.86
Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my manager	3.94±0.95	
Intent to turnover		
I often think about leaving the organization	2.34±1.21	
It is likely that I will look for another job outside foodservice within the next 6 months	2.84±1.53	0.61

*Denotes reverse-coded items

Responses for items ranged from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree

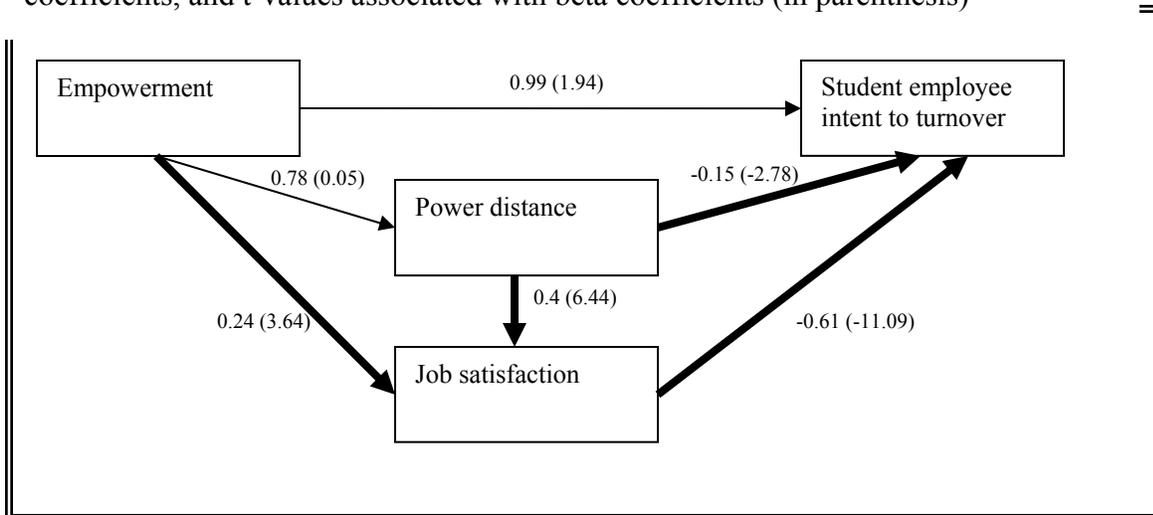
Path analysis

Path analysis (Figure 2) was used to determine whether or not empowerment impacted student employee intent to turnover directly, or if it was mediated by perceptions of job satisfaction and power distance. Path analysis results shown in Figure 2 apply only to Caucasian respondents. The initial intention was to determine if power-distance perceptions varied by ethnic group (within the U.S.) and country of origin. Also of interest was the influence of power-distance scores for members of various ethnic groups and countries on the relationship between empowerment and power distance. However, due to 83.5% of respondents being Caucasians, a meaningful comparison of power-distance scores could not be made. Hence, only Caucasian responses were included in the model to prevent any bias arising from respondents of other ethnic groups and nationalities.

Path analysis results suggest that empowerment perceptions of student employees do not directly impact their intent to turnover. The direct path was not significant ($p < 0.05$) with a t-

value of 1.94. However, the indirect path through job satisfaction was significant as indicated by the bolded arrows in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Fully recursive model showing significant paths, standardized beta coefficients, and t-values associated with beta coefficients (in parenthesis)



Note: Significant paths have been indicated through bolded arrows.

The mean power-distance score for all respondents was 3.26 and for Caucasian respondents, 3.29. It is notable that power distance did not mediate the relationship between student employee perceptions of empowerment and job satisfaction. Empowerment perceptions had a direct impact on job satisfaction (standardized $\beta = 0.24$; $t = 3.64$). These findings are contradictory to those of Hui et al. (2004). Power distance and job satisfaction perceptions also had direct significant impacts on student employee intent to turnover. Job satisfaction (standardized $\beta = -0.61$; $t = -11.09$) had larger impact than power distance. Although, power distance had a direct significant impact (standardized $\beta = -0.15$; $t = -2.78$) on student employee intent to turnover, most of the impact was indirect through job satisfaction (standardized $\beta = 0.4$; $t = 6.44$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Thus far, the relationship between empowerment and turnover has been anecdotal in the hospitality industry. The current research empirically tested this relationship using students employed on a part-time basis in UDS. The moderating effects of power distance and job satisfaction for U.S. Caucasian student employees also were tested.

Student employees were asked to share their perceptions of discretionary empowerment as opposed to psychological empowerment for two reasons. First, the focus of this research was to determine the impact of manager and co-worker behaviors on the exhibition of certain work behaviors by student employees. Although psychological empowerment refers to an employee's feelings of being informed, trusted, and in-control; discretionary empowerment includes the management practices of providing employees with latitude to exercise prudent behavior and autonomy. Second, this proposition tested the mediating role of the power-distance construct on U.S. Caucasian student employees. Hui et al. (2004) stated that Eylon and Au (1999) and Robert et al. (2000) failed to obtain support for the mediating role of power distance because

psychological empowerment that deals with internal feelings of employees as opposed to management practices was measured.

The current research found that empowerment did not directly impact intent to turnover for student employees in the sample; the relationship was mediated by job satisfaction. A highly significant negative relationship was found between job satisfaction and intent to turnover. An interesting finding was that power distance scores of U.S. Caucasian student employees did not mediate the relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction as expected. This contrasted findings of Hui et al. (2004) where power distance was found to moderate the relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction. Also, perceptions of power distance had both a direct significant negative relationship and an indirect significant negative relationship through job satisfaction, with student employee intent to turnover. However, by comparing standardized betas it can be concluded that most of the effect is indirect, through job satisfaction. Some of these differences may be explained by unique characteristics of the student population.

Another interesting finding is that the mean power-distance score for U.S. Caucasian student employees was 3.29 on a 5-point scale. A lower score was expected given that traditionally U.S. has been classified as a low-power distance culture (Hofstede, 1980).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Power distance indirectly impacted intent to turnover through job satisfaction for U.S. Caucasian student employees at one UDS in a Midwestern state university. These results imply that managers may want to provide U.S. Caucasian student employees with discretion and autonomy. The higher power-distance mean score for students indicates that student employees may not fit the traditional employee classification. The comparatively high-power distance scores could be due to low familiarity levels with foodservice jobs. Less than half (47%) of all respondents stated that their current job was their first job in foodservice. Another cause could be exposure to high-power distance cultures through interactions with student employees from traditionally high-power distance cultures. Higher power-distance scores also could be a result of changes taking place in societies over time. Another managerial implication could be that with careful initial supervision and guidance, UDS managers could provide student employees with discretion and autonomy. On-the-job and vestibule training methods would be appropriate given the slightly higher power-distance scores for U.S. Caucasian student employees. These methods would provide the initial supervision and guidance needed.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The original intent of this study was to research differences in attitudes towards empowerment based on whether UDS employees came from traditionally high- and low-power distance cultures. However, due to a relatively small response rate (16.5%) from ethnic minorities and international students, only Caucasian responses were considered when testing the relationship between empowerment and intent to turnover, with moderating roles of power distance and job satisfaction. Because the sample for this study included only part-time student employees from one UDS, results cannot be extended to UDS at other universities, other business contexts, or other types of employees.

With increasing numbers of international students in the U.S. university student population, more employees from high-and low-power distance cultures will form the workforce of UDS. Hence, it is essential to determine if empowerment will result in increased job satisfaction for members of all cultures employed in a UDS in the U.S. It also is essential to determine whether or not perceptions of power distance change for individuals from traditionally high-power distance cultures, after obtaining an education in the U.S. The ramifications of such changes, if any, should be explored to determine if these students decide to return to their home countries upon graduation or to pursue employment in the U.S.

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