

Empowerment Potential: Big-Five Personality Traits and Psychological Empowerment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between big-five personality traits and psychological empowerment to answer the question: who is empowered? The main sample consisted of 384 front-line service-workers, from which data was collected using self-reported measures within their natural work setting. The result indicated that extraverts are more empowered because they tend to find more meaning from their work, and also because they believe in their work-related competencies as service workers. In addition, conscientious employees were found to be more empowered since, like extraverts, they believed that they are capable in handling their work-related tasks. Agreeableness was related to psychological empowerment partially through leader-member exchange, customer supportiveness, and affect-based trust. By identifying empowerment-related personality traits, this study enables service-organizations to identify and select more empowered individuals, who can make a significant difference in the level of customer satisfaction.

Key words: Psychological empowerment; Big-five personality traits; Intra-organizational relationship; Service-workers

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INTRODUCTION

Empowered employees are valuable to any organizations, especially to service-organizations (Bowen & Lawler, 1992), as they positively contribute to businesses with their creativity, ideas, energy, and knowledge, which are quite important in today's global competition (O'Tool & Lawler, 2006). Few studies have provided evidence that some individuals are more empowered. For example, Laschinger, Finegan, and Wilk (2009) noted that employees high in core self-evaluation tend to feel more empowered. Yet, the research on empowerment-related personality traits has been mostly limited to those traits dealing with the perception of self-worth (e.g. self-esteem, narcissism, and core self-evaluation). Identification of empowered people is important because these individuals can reach higher level of empowerment, since, not only they respond to empowering stimuli, but also they benefit from their supporting characteristics. Thereby, this research attempts to give a fuller understanding of personality traits which support the feeling of empowerment. To do so, big-five personality traits were used as they widely describe personality variation across different cultures (Digman, 1990).

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Building upon Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) task assessments, Spreitzer (1995) developed and validated the construct of psychological empowerment using four cognitions of meaning, self-determination, competence/self-efficacy, and impact. Meaning refers to the degree to which employees perceive workplace as meaningful. Self-determination is the degree to which employees believe they have freedom in choosing how to do their

work-related tasks. The dimension of competence/self-efficacy refers to employees' notion that they can carry out their job with skill. Finally, impact refers to the degree to which employees believe that they have influence on their workplace. When these four cognitions are combined additively, they form construct of psychological empowerment which reflect the degree to which employees show active orientation toward their work role (Spreitzer, 1995).

As mentioned earlier, so far few personality traits have been tested in relation to psychological empowerment. Laschinger and colleagues (2009) and Seibert, Wang, and Courtright (2011) showed that employees high in core self-evaluation tend to experience higher level of psychological empowerment. Along with conceptualization of psychological empowerment, Spreitzer (1995) tested the relationship between locus of control and self-esteem, and psychological empowerment. However, only self-esteem was found to be significantly associated with psychological empowerment. Furthermore, Yazdi and Mustamil (2014) held that individuals with higher level of healthy narcissism experience higher level of psychological empowerment. Additionally, Hon and Rensvold (2006) conducted a dimensional analysis to assess the link between need for achievement and power and psychological empowerment's four cognitions. They noted that the need for achievement significantly predicts psychological empowerment's cognitions of meaning, self-determination, impact, and competence/self-efficacy, whereas, need for power only significantly relates to dimensions of competence.

1.1 Extraversion

Extraverts are talkative, high spirited, ambitious, and assertive individuals, who spend a lot of time in social activities (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Bruck & Allen, 2003). Extraversion is expected to be related to psychological empowerment's dimension of competence/self-efficacy for three main reasons. First, since high energy/arousal is analogous to the notion of self-efficacy (Thoms, Moore, & Scott, 1996), it makes sense that extraversion, which is strongly associated with higher level of energy (Costa & McCrae, 1992), predict self-efficacy. Second, thanks to their positive emotionality (i.e. one of the main characteristics of extraverts [Watson & Clark, 1997]), individuals high in extraversion are likely to have greater confidence in their work-related abilities (Judge & Ilies, 2002). Finally, extraverts tend to perform better in jobs that require higher level of social interaction (e.g. service jobs; Liao & Chuang, 2004). Thus,

H1: Extraversion is positively related to psychological empowerment

1.2 Agreeableness

Agreeableness is associated with kindness, altruism, sympathy, and trust (Bono & Judge, 2004). Despite the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, there are no direct

theoretical links between agreeableness and psychological empowerment's cognitions, there is a strong association between agreeableness and some of the most established antecedents of psychological empowerment (i.e. trust and intra-organizational relationships; Spreitzer, 2007).

Rooted in the role theory, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), basically represents the quality of dyadic relationship between leader and follower (Bauer & Green, 1996). On the other hand, the link between agreeableness and the quality of relationship is so strong that agreeableness is often recognized as a social trait (Judge & Bono, 2000). Establishing higher quality relationship with leaders enhances employees' access to information, which in turn, improves psychological empowerment's dimensions of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Seibert et al., 2011). So,

H2a: LMX significantly mediates the relationship between agreeableness and psychological empowerment

Customer-employee relationship in relation to empowerment has been studied using two different constructs: customer supportiveness and employee-customer value congruity (Spreitzer, 2007). Among the two constructs, Corsun and Enz (1999) only provided evidence for significant association between customer supportiveness and psychological empowerment. Customer supportiveness was operationalized as the degree to which front-line employees perceive customers as open, trusting, and honest individuals. Agreeable employees, on the other hand, generally have more affection for others and have tendency to see others in more positive lights (Kammrath & Scholer, 2011; Bono & Judge, 2004), thereby, it is likely that agreeable employees rate their customer as more open, honest, and trusting. So,

H2b: customer supportiveness significantly mediates the relationship between agreeableness and psychological empowerment

Kanter (1983) proposed that relationships within the organization, including peers relationship, tend to improve employees' access to information. By improving employees' access to information, peers relationship, similar to LMX, is expected to boost psychological empowerment's dimension of meaning, impact, self-determination, and self-efficacy/competence (Seibert et al., 2011). In addition, Wallach and Mueller (2006) maintained that higher quality exchange with peer is likely to elevate employees' perception of control (i.e. analogous to psychological empowerment's dimension of impact; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). By taking into account the innate ability of agreeable individuals to establish and maintain higher quality relationship with others (Judge & Bono, 2000; Bono & Judge, 2004) following hypothesis is proposed.

H2c: Peers relationship significantly mediates the relationship between agreeableness and psychological empowerment

Ergeneli, Saglam, and Metin (2007) found that trusting one's supervisor as a result of emotional ties (i.e. affect-based trust) positively influences psychological empowerment's dimension of impact. Trust, on the other hand, is one of the hallmarks of agreeable people (Bono & Judge 2004). Individuals high in agreeableness are both trusting and trustworthy, and they have tendency to consider others trustworthy unless proven otherwise (Driskell, Goodwin, Salas, & O'Shea, 2006; Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009). Since the trust of agreeable people is the result of their good nature and their affection toward others and not the result of logical evaluation, their trust is affect-based rather than cognition-based. In short, by trusting their supervisors, agreeable employees are likely experience higher notion of impact (i.e. a psychological empowerment' dimension). Thus,

H2d: affect-based trust significantly mediates the relationship between agreeableness and psychological empowerment

1.3 Conscientiousness

Discipline, order, and reliability are the virtues of conscientious people. Conscientious individuals are self-disciplined, responsible, punctual, purposeful, reliable, and dependable (Bono & Judge, 2004; Driskell et al., 2006). Conscientious employees were found to perform well in many job positions (Judge & Ilies, 2002), including service jobs (Liao & Chuang, 2004). So, it is expected that conscientious service-workers perceive their ability more favorably compare to service-workers low in conscientiousness. Judge and Ilies' (2002) meta-analysis of fourteen empirical studies also showed positive significant association between conscientiousness and self-efficacy (i.e. psychological empowerment's dimension). Therefore,

H3: Conscientiousness positively associates with psychological empowerment

1.4 Emotional Stability

Individuals' susceptibility to negative emotions such as anger, stress, guilt, anxiety, and fear reflects their level of emotional stability. In other words, emotionally stable individuals tend to be more secure, confident, and capable of handling stressful situations (Bruck & Allen, 2003; Kandler, 2012). Emotionally stable people were found to have higher degree of self-confidence and self-esteem (Thoms et al., 1996). Higher self-esteem, on the other hand, has been associated with psychological empowerment's dimensions of self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). Additionally, Judge and Ilies' (2002) meta-analysis also provided empirical evidence for significant relationship between emotional stability and self-efficacy. Thus,

H4: emotional stability positively relates to psychological empowerment

1.5 Openness to Experience

Open individuals are sensitive to beauty, imaginative, liberal in values, curious in nature, emotionally differentiated, and behaviorally flexible (McCrae & Sutin, 2009; Shane, Nicolaou, Cherkas, & Spector, 2010). High tendency to deal with ambiguous dilemmas accompanied by high intellectual capacity, enable open people to achieve higher efficiency (Liao & Lee, 2009). So, it is likely that employees high in openness to experience believe in their work-related competencies (i.e. higher psychological empowerment's dimension of competence). In addition, due to their high capacity to learn from new experiences, open employees are likely to perceive their work-related task as more impactful (Spreitzer, 2007). Thereby, by taking into account the theoretical link between openness to experience and psychological empowerment's dimensions of competence and impact following hypothesis was proposed.

H5: openness to experience positively relates to psychological empowerment

Figure 1 depicts the summary of study hypotheses.

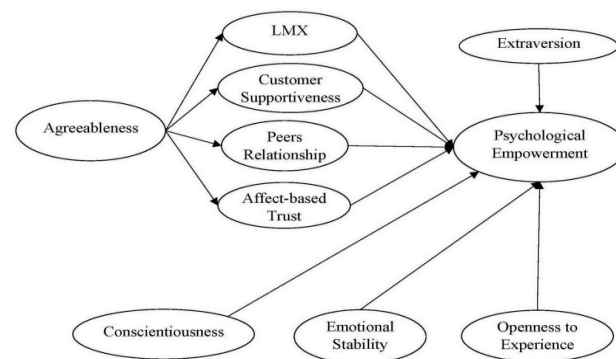


Figure 1
Theoretical Framework

2. METHODS

2.1 Sample

The primary sample used for the pilot study consisted of 44 employees working in McDonald's call center. Data from this sample were used to assess the translated instrument in terms of reliability and multivariate assumptions (i.e. homoscedasticity, normality, and linearity). The main data were collected from 384 front-line service-employees (response rate of 91%) from diverse work units representing the industries within the service sector (e.g. hospitality, health care, transportation, food, and etc.). After arranging with supervisors, questionnaires were distributed and later on, were collected by researchers from service-workers within their natural work setting. Each of the respondents was assured of the data confidentiality for both the ethical purposes and for minimizing the social desirability bias. In term of

demographics, the sample elements were largely women (55.1%), between 18-28 years old (39.5%), and high school graduates (42.5%) with average position tenure of 5 years. The majority of the sample had working experience of less than 5 years (38.7%) and worked under their direct supervisors for less than two years (56.5%).

2.2 Measures

Big five personality traits (i.e. extraversion [$\alpha = 0.798$], conscientiousness [$\alpha = 0.851$], openness to experience [$\alpha = 0.794$], emotional stability [$\alpha = 0.817$], and agreeableness [$\alpha = 0.820$]) were measured using Saucier's (1994) forty adjectives mini-markers. Affect-based trust ($\alpha = 0.832$), customer supportiveness ($\alpha = 0.847$), and peers relationship ($\alpha = 0.764$) were adopted from McAllister (1995), Corsun and Enz (1999), and Ji and Chuang (2011) respectively. Items for measuring leader-Member Exchange (LMX), comprising four dimensions of loyalty ($\alpha = 0.862$), affect ($\alpha = 0.908$), contribution ($\alpha = 0.737$), and professional respect ($\alpha = 0.900$), were adopted from Liden & Maslyn (1998). Finally, psychological empowerment operationalized by four dimensions of meaning ($\alpha = 0.819$), impact ($\alpha = 0.787$), self-determination ($\alpha = 0.735$), and competence/self-efficacy ($\alpha = 0.838$) was measured using 12 items developed by Spreitzer (1995). In total, measurement instrument comprised 79 self-assessed items, which all were in six-point scale format. After finalizing the measurement instrument, back-to-back parallel translation instructed by Brislin (1970) was conducted using professional translators in order to translate the measurement instrument from English to Bahasa Malaysia.

2.3 Controls

Since some of the empirical studies such as Liao et al. (2009) and Seibert et al. (2011) found significant relationship between gender, age, education, and work experience and psychological empowerment, and also the duration of knowing and working with peers, supervisors, and customers might have had significant bearing on and the quality of intra-organizational relationships (i.e. LMX, peers relationship, and customer supportiveness), thus, age, gender, education, work experience, position tenure, and duration of working under current supervisor were controlled for during the analysis.

2.4 Analytical Procedure

Second-order Confirmatory Factor analysis was conducted to assess the model fit, internal consistency, and construct validity. Convergent and discriminant validity were tested using Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson's (2010) instruction. For examining the hypotheses asserting the direct relationship between personality traits and psychological empowerment (i.e. hypotheses 1, 3, 4, and 5), and also for testing the proposed mediation, structural equation model was estimated using AMOS v21. For testing the hypotheses proposing the mediation between agreeableness and psychological empowerment (i.e. hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d), combination of Baron and

Kenny's (1986) three steps and Sobel test was employed. Finally, for understanding how the proposed personalities enable employees to be more empowered, dimensional analysis was conducted to assess the relationships between big-five personality traits and psychological empowerment's dimensions.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 gives the Pearson correlations, univariate statistics, and reliabilities for the main sample. Second-order confirmatory factor analysis indices (AGFI = .842, [RMSEA = .031; $P > .05$], $\chi^2/df = 1.360$, CFI = .950, and PCFI = .872) indicated a good fit between data and the hypothesized model. The result provided evidence of acceptable construct validity for all the factors. Although, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of psychological empowerment construct was marginally lower than 0.5 (see Table 2). Furthermore, measurement items loaded strongly on the corresponding factors. Harmon's single factor method was employed to ensure that common method bias is not causing problems. The result indicated that single factor explained only 14.771% of the total variance. Thus, common method bias was not found to be problematic.

3.1 Hypotheses Testing

Structural equation model for the testing the hypothesized direct antecedents of psychological empowerment (i.e. H1, H3, H4, and H5) indicated a good fit between the data and the hypothesized model (AGFI = .842, [RMSEA = .031; $P > .05$], $\chi^2/df = 1.360$, CFI = .950, and PCFI = .872). Both extraversion ($\gamma = 0.184$, $P < .01$) and conscientiousness ($\gamma = 0.162$, $P < .05$) were significantly associated with psychological empowerment. Unexpectedly, openness to experience ($\gamma = 0.129$) and emotional stability ($\gamma = 0.057$) were not found to be significantly related to psychological empowerment. Using the structural models, Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation prerequisites were tested (Figure 2). All the models indicated good fit between data and hypothesized model. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), customer satisfaction, and affect-based trust satisfied Baron and Kenny's (1986) prerequisites for mediation. Sobel test also provided more evidence for significant mediating role of LMX (Sobel test P -value = .009 < .01), customer supportiveness ($P = 0.047 < .05$), and affect-based trust ($P = 0.048 < .05$) for agreeableness-psychological empowerment relationship. Thereby, support of hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2d was found. Contrary to the expectation, peers relationship didn't significantly mediate the relationship between agreeableness and psychological empowerment.

The result of structural model for assessing the relationship between big-five personality traits and psychological empowerment's dimensions indicated that conscientiousness significantly relates to psychological empowerment cognition of competence/self-efficacy ($\gamma = 0.192$, $P < 0.01$). Openness to experience was significantly

associated with cognition of self-determination ($\gamma = 0.218$, $P < 0.001$), and extraversion was significantly related to both dimensions of meaning ($\gamma = 0.172$, $P < .01$) and competence ($\gamma = 0.237$, $P < 0.001$). Finally, agreeableness

was found to be significantly related to all four cognitions of meaning ($\gamma = 0.172$, $P < 0.01$), impact ($\gamma = 0.136$, $P < 0.05$), self-determination ($\gamma = 0.165$, $P < 0.05$), and competence ($\gamma = 0.194$, $P < 0.01$).

Table 1
Pearson Correlations and Univariate Statistics

	α	μ	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Extraversion	.798	4.13	1.037	1									
2. Conscientiousness	.851	4.69	1.006	-.086	1								
3. Agreeableness	.820	4.78	.892	.144**	.172**	1							
4. Openness to Experience	.794	4.01	.994	.049	.022	.015	1						
5. Emotional Stability	.817	4.28	1.087	.056	.265**	.206**	-.102*	1					
6. Customer Supportiveness	.847	4.55	1.135	.112*	.198**	.262**	.014	.138**	1				
7. Affect-based Trust	.832	4.10	1.178	.045	.107*	.187**	.048	.139**	.109*	1			
8. Peers Relationships	.764	4.59	1.059	.190**	.016	.025	.043	.072	-.039	.28	1		
9. LMX ^a	--	4.11	.910	.048	.051	.193**	.039	.076	.143**	.378**	.011	1	
10. PE ^b	--	4.55	.723	.163**	.188**	.225**	.117*	.129*	.201**	.258**	.060	.255**	1

Note. ^aLeader-Member Exchange; ^bPsychological Empowerment; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$.

Table 2
Indices for Construct Validity Assessment

	CR ^a	AVE ^b	MSV ^c	ASV ^d
Affect-based Trust	0.833	0.625	0.233	0.052
Extraversion	0.802	0.505	0.054	0.022
Conscientiousness	0.853	0.593	0.098	0.030
Agreeableness	0.821	0.536	0.099	0.052
Openness to Experience	0.800	0.500	0.017	0.005
Emotional Stability	0.817	0.529	0.098	0.032
Customer Supportiveness	0.849	0.653	0.099	0.036
Peers Relationship	0.766	0.522	0.054	0.009
Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)	0.799	0.503	0.233	0.049
Psychological Empowerment	0.773	0.461	0.105	0.060

Note. ^aComposite Reliability; ^bAverage Variance Extracted; ^cMaximum Shared squared Variance; ^dAverage Shared squared Variance.

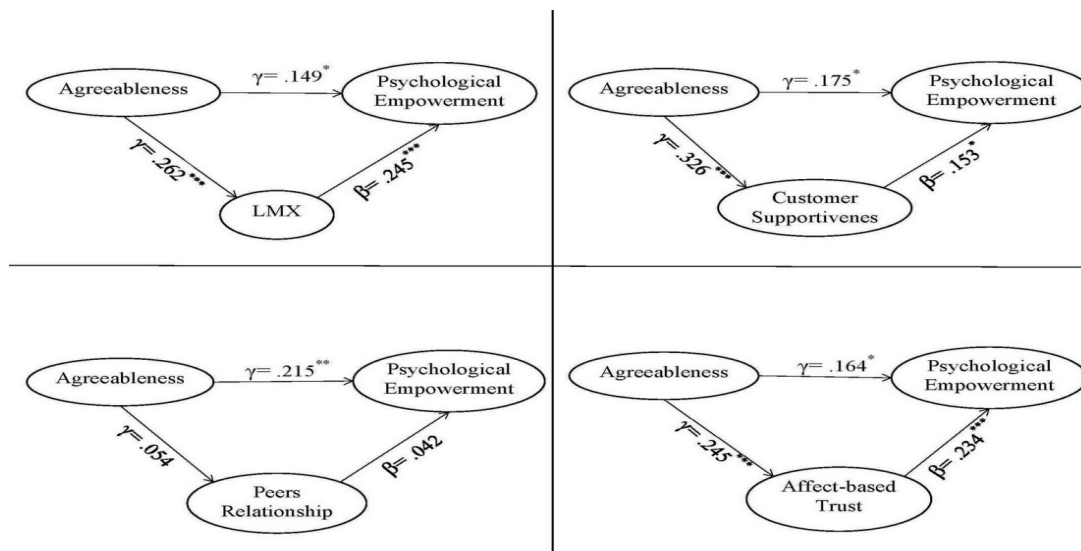


Figure 2
The Result of Structural Modeling for Assessing the Proposed Mediations^a

Note. ^aother personality traits along with control variables were omitted to simplify the depiction; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$; *** $P < .001$.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualization of psychological empowerment, which is operationalized based on individuals' notions and feeling, have opened new horizon in identification of new types of antecedents (e.g. individual characteristics). Although some studies had been carried out to clarify who is empowered, the range of tested personality traits as antecedents of empowerment was quiet limited. The purpose of this study was to develop a fuller understanding of personality traits enhancing the feeling of empowerment.

Among the proposed relationships, the links between extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (H1, H2, and H3) and psychological empowerment were supported by the data. The relationship between agreeableness was found to be partially mediated by leader-member exchanger (H2a), customer supportiveness (H2b), and affect-based trust (H2d).

Data provided evidence that extraverts are more empowered because extraversion positively influences cognitions of competence/self-efficacy and meaning. The relationship between extraversion and psychological empowerment' dimension of competence was expected, as there is strong empirical evidence suggesting this association. Extraverts are socially oriented individuals, who enjoy high level of interaction with others. Thereby, they are likely to find more meaning from the jobs requiring high level of interaction (e.g. service jobs). Since, the study sample was drawn from service-organizations, the job characteristics may account for the significant link between extraversion and the cognition of meaning. Study findings indicated that higher level of conscientiousness also boosts employees' feeling of empowerment because it enhances self-efficacy belief. The relationship between conscientiousness and the notion of self-efficacy was not surprising since, as mentioned earlier, high performance of conscientious employees in many job positions is likely to boost their confidences in their work-related competencies.

Although data was not provided evidence for the link between openness to experience and composite measure of psychological empowerment, openness to experience showed moderate to strong relationship with all dimensions of psychological empowerment except for the cognition of meaning. It is likely that the low association between openness to experience and dimension of meaning accounts for the lack of significance for the link between openness and psychological empowerment. Open employees are more liberal in values and have tendency to try new things. Thereby, it is comprehensible that they don't find meaning in job positions which doesn't allow much creativity (e.g. positions in call center).

The findings regarding the mediating role of peers relationship for agreeableness-psychological empowerment relationship was surprising. The relationship with peers was expected to enhance the feeling of empowerment as it

provides employees with more information. Better access to information, on the other hand, improves the notion of meaning and impact as it helps employees to see the "big picture" and to understand how their works contribute to that bigger picture (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Spreitzer, 1996). More information can also improve employees' level of knowledge and enable employees to decide on their own how to do their jobs (Seibert et al., 2011).

But, it is important to note that not only access to information is important for employee empowerment, but also the type of information matters. Information can provide data about performance/productivity, organizational strategy, work flow, etc. (Lawler, 1992). The lack of significant association between peers relationship and psychological empowerment can be accounted for by the fact that the type of information, which is enjoyed by employees as the result of relationship with peers, does not provide employees with the evidence of enactive mastery and also with the sense of "big picture" especially when peers are "newcomers", who don't know much about organizational goals. This may be the case since the majority of study sample can be considered as newcomers as their position tenure was less than 3 years (57%).

The low level of position tenure in the sample may also explain the lack of significant link between agreeableness and peers relationship. In a workplace, in which most of the peers change frequently, no matter how friendly an employee is, he/she may not have opportunity to develop strong relationship with peers. Moreover, in some type of service-jobs such as call centers, employees even don't know most of their peers. Thus, even high level of agreeableness may not make service employees believe that they have strong relationship with peers.

Implications

By assessing the wide range of personality traits, this study contributes to the theory by providing information to answer the question: who is empowered? By conducting dimensional analysis, this research also tried to explain how these empowerment-related personality traits boost the feeling of empowerment.

Beside the contribution to the theory, identification of more empowered individuals can help organizations, especially those within the service sector, to select prospective employees who can reach higher level of empowerment. Employees, who score higher on empowerment-related personality traits, can reach higher level of psychological empowerment, since compared to other employees, not only they are influenced by empowering stimuli, but also they benefit from their supporting characteristics.

However, identifying empowered employees is not a straight forward procedure. It is important to note that as higher level of empowerment-related personality traits enables individuals to be more empowered, lower degree of these personality traits can also make them

less empowered. On the other hand, given the fact that every individual has a combination of personality traits, it is very much possible that an individual score very high in one empowerment-related personality trait and at the same time score very low on the other. For instance, an employee may score very high on extraversion and at the same time score very low on conscientiousness. Thus, in order to truly measure individuals' potential of empowerment, a construct is needed to encompass all empowerment-related personality traits and demographics.

LIMITATION AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some methodological limitations which should be noted. First, since non-probability sampling method was employed, selection method may have introduced some bias into the result. Second, measuring the big five personality traits using Saucier's (1994) forty mini-markers may not be as accurate as measuring with more comprehensive measures (e.g. Revised NEO Personality Inventory [NEO-PI-R; McCrae and Costa, 1992]). Therefore, future research is needed to reassess the relationship between big five personality traits and psychological empowerment using more comprehensive measures of big five personality.

As it has been mentioned earlier, for deciding whether or not an individual is empowered a construct is needed that cover all the identified empowerment-related personality traits. However, some of these personality traits such as self-esteem, core self-evaluation, and narcissism overlap significantly since all of them are dealing with perception of self-worth. So, using these personality traits, future research should conduct the exploratory factor analysis along with the validity check to develop a new construct that can truly measure the individuals' potential of empowerment.

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