



A Comparative Study of the Staff's Psychological Empowerment in the Iranian Islamic Azad Universities and Universities of Canada

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 13 June 2019 Revised: 02 July 2019 Accepted: 18 September 2019 online: 6 October 2019</p> <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Psychological Empowerment, Islamic Azad University, Canada, Iran</p>	<p>The present study identifies the empowerment dimensions of the staff of the Islamic Azad University of Iran and Canadian universities through understanding the key role of staff in the success of universities. The method used in this research was comparative with a mixed approach (quantitative-qualitative) and the required data were collected through in-deep interview and a researcher-made questionnaire. The statistical sample of the qualitative section consisted of 18 experts and that of the quantitative section included all staff of the selected branches of Islamic Azad University and selected universities of Canada. For qualitative data analysis in content analysis we used Delphi technique, and the inferential statistics were used for quantitative data analysis. In the first step, through a secondary analysis of theoretical foundations and interviews with experts, a model of psychological empowerment with 14 components was identified. First-order and second-order confirmatory factor analysis was used to investigate the ideal relationship between the 14 components with the psychological empowerment construct. Based on the confirmatory factor analysis, the model for assessing the staff's psychological empowerment constructs of the studied universities had an appropriate fit (proper desirability) and the components covered the psychological empowerment construct. One-sample t-test was used to investigate the level of attention paid by the university to the staffs' psychological empowerment components. Based on the findings, both universities resemble each other in terms of the components of "effectiveness, significance, and feeling of competence, proper appreciation, job enrichment, and effective organizational communication, optimization of processes and methods, and educational processes". The research findings also explain the difference between the two universities, such that the level of attention to the components of "right to choose, organizational commitment, transparency in goals and knowledge and job experiences" at Islamic Azad University of Iran and the level of attention to the component of "work environment revitalization" in Canadian universities are poor and lower than the test value for the staff's psychological empowerment.</p>

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Introduction

Empowerment is one of the most important approaches to human resource development and the mediating variable between transformational leadership and staff efficiency. Studies pertaining to the empowerment concept mainly focus on three approaches, namely, relational, motivational, and cognitive approaches to empowerment activities, each with different perspectives towards enhancing staff's empowerment. Empowerment methods comprise activities and factors that directly and indirectly enhance the capability of the staffs to improve the organization's productivity level. The role of organizations at both the general and partial levels is mainly referred to as laying the groundwork and the context for empowerment and empowering activities. Psychological empowerment is among the types of empowerment, the most important dimensions of which include 'competence', 'autonomy', 'significance', 'effectiveness', and 'trust'. 'Competence' or 'self-efficacy' refers to a person's belief that he or she is capable of performing activities pertaining to his or her task. Efficiency expectations determine how much people will struggle to cope with adverse experiences and obstacles. Self-organization is the feeling of having the right to choose for starting and regulating one's activities. 'Significance' occurs when people feel they are pursuing important and valuable career goals. 'Effectiveness' refers to the extent to which one can affect the strategic, administrative, and operational outcomes and results of his job, and 'trust' reflects the mental space governing the relationships between managers and staffs (Ahmadi et al., 2014).

Given the literature, there is numerous study on the relationship between empowerment and organizational variables among for example hospital staff - especially nurses - it is hard to find a research that shows the relationship of empowerment with other variables among university staff. However, in the early years of the new millennium, Franz (2004) examined the predictive power of organizational and personal empowerment on affective commitment, job satisfaction, turnover intent and stress among employees of a multi-national company with participating locations in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, United Kingdom, and United States. The major empirical findings of this study were: (1) higher organizational empowerment consistently resulted in a stronger sense of justice in all countries studied; (2) organizational and personal empowerment functioned as separate constructs which interacted to explain more variance in responses of commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intent; (3) personal

empowerment consistently accounted for less predictive variance than organizational empowerment. Through two different comparative research, Gill et al. (2010; 2012) examine the effects of variables such as job satisfaction, work experience and transformational leadership on employee desire for empowerment. The main finding of these studies was that employees who exhibit job satisfaction and work experience behaviors were more likely to heighten their desires to be empowered, regardless of cultural context. Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) argue that employee empowerment seems to have a direct effect on performance and indirect effects through its influence on job satisfaction and innovativeness, two key causal pathways by which empowerment practices influence behavioral outcomes.

In Iran, research was conducted on the staff empowerment as well. A study conducted by Abdollahi and Naveh Ebrahim (2006) entitled "Designing a Model for Staff's Psychological Empowerment in the Headquarter of Ministry of Science, Research and Technology" indicated that as an independent variable, management strategies are not directly related to psychological empowerment, but it affects psychological empowerment through mediating variables, organizational conditions, and self-efficacy resources. Abed Saedi et al. (2010) found that empowered staffs are more active and energetic and have higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Hallajian, Sorayyaei, and Hosseinzadeh Ahmadi (2012) also found that among the staffs of Islamic Azad University of Mazandaran province, teamwork, delegation of authority, and information sharing and distribution played a role in staff empowerment, respectively. By studying the human resource empowerment in banks and Education Office in Isfahan, Ahmadi et al. (2014) found that the level of empowerment among bank staff was higher than the staff in the Education Office. Ghalavandi and Ashrafi (2017) investigated the relationship between psychological empowerment and knowledge management among the staff of one of the western universities of Iran (i.e., Urmia University). Given the findings, there was a positive and significant relationship between the dimensions of staff empowerment and knowledge management components. With a distance of seven years from each other, Shahrakipour (2010) and Dehghani et al. (2017) indicated that social support had a significant positive effect on quality of life and staff empowerment.

Studying the developmental process over the last century clearly illustrates the fact that achieving progress implies the existence of successful institutions and organizations with efficient and capable staff. Iran, as a developing country over the last four decades, has been

attempting to accelerate growth and development through human resources training. Accordingly, the "2025 Vision Document" approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Iran stresses that the country should achieve the leading economic, scientific, and technological status among the countries of South-West Asia by the end of this year. To this aim, the Government of the Islamic Republic and its various states sought to realize this demand through developing the higher education system. In fact, countries that want comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development need to enjoy a successful higher education system with skilled staff. In this regard, during the first two decades (1978-1998), expanding the centers of higher education and developing universities was the first practical action of the Iranian government. Islamic Azad University was one of the universities established during this period. The university was the first non-governmental university since the Islamic Revolution to establish its branches in more than 400 cities and towns, with the aid of the non-governmental sector and students' tuition. The decrease in social demand for higher education on the one hand and attention to the quality promotion of different departments of the university to increase the number of clients on the other hand in recent years has led managers and policy makers of Islamic Azad University to focus on increasing the role of staff and enhance their level of empowerment.

Considering the experiences mentioned above, the present study attempts to comparatively study the current status of Islamic Azad University in terms of empowerment components. Hence, the research questions are stated as follows:

- What are the components of the psychological empowerment model for the staff of Islamic Azad universities and Canadian universities?
- Are the components of the psychological empowerment model for the staff equally important in the Islamic Azad universities of Iran and universities in Canada?
- What are the priorities of each empowerment component for Islamic Azad universities of Canada and Iran?

Research Method

Regarding the nature of the research variable, 'empowerment', using a mixed comparative research approach could be a good approach to collect information. The strategy used for the qualitative section involves coding and analyzing the content of texts and classifying

information collected through in-deep interviews with academic experts. Qualitative data were collected in three stages: First, based on the basic conceptual framework, reviewing the theoretical foundations and preparing semi-structured questions for the interview, attempts were also made to identify the effective dimensions and indicators in developing the empowerment model. Second, in order to determine the validity of this framework, the dimensions and indicators extracted from the first stage were deeply investigated by a group of academic experts and the interviews were continued until the theoretical saturation. The present study interviewed 18 experts in the field of empowerment in six campuses of Islamic Azad University (5 people in 3 campuses in Tehran and 3 in Mashhad, Tabriz, and Shiraz) and 10 experts in Canadian universities (Montreal, Quebec, McGill, Ottawa, York, and Toronto Universities) through snowball method. In order to select the experts in the mentioned universities, criteria such as professorship in the field of Educational Management, research background on staff empowerment and executive management experience at the university were considered. Considering the researchers' financial constraints, interviews with Iranian experts were conducted in person and with Canadian experts through WhatsApp. In the third stage, to extract questionnaire's questions consisting of dimensions and empowerment indicators, new indicators were revealed, and then some items were modified or eliminated. After completing the qualitative phase, by designing a self-made questionnaire the second and quantitative phase of the research was started. The researcher-made questionnaire was also finalized in a few steps. In the first step, after analyzing the interview content, the main indicators and components were extracted from the interviews and 60 questions were prepared on a five-point Likert scale. In the second stage, in order to determine the face and content validity, four professors at Islamic Azad University (West Tehran campus) were provided with questions. At this stage, 10 questions were omitted because of similarity with other questions according to the suggestions made by the lecturers. In the next step, the questions were provided to 15 staffs in the two campuses of Islamic Azad University in Tehran, and 15 staffs of Montreal University, 2 questions were omitted and a final questionnaire was prepared with 48 questions. Then the reliability of the questionnaire was obtained 0.81 in the total questionnaire.

In the quantitative part, the authors used convenience random sampling and selected 357 people among all the selected university staff according to Cochran formula and the questionnaire was sent to their e-mail. Finally, 213 questionnaires were completed and

returned. The data were then analyzed by LISREL, SPSS, and Smart Pls software. Structural equation Models (SEM) was used to analyze the model and single group t-test was used to analyze the other research questions.

Results

A) The qualitative part

Through semi-purposeful interviews with academic experts, the researchers in this section attempted to answer the question of what constitutes a psychological empowerment model for the staffs in Islamic Azad universities and Canadian universities. The content analysis of the interviews indicated that the psychological empowerment process for the staffs of Islamic Azad universities and Canadian universities was shaped by 14 related components and indicators. Data from qualitative content analysis, including 58 primary codes were categorized through open encoding. The result of this process was the creation and identification of 50 concepts. Then, in order to complete the coding, open and similar codes were grouped at higher and more abstract levels to determine the components. At this stage, after comparing the results with the relevant literature, homogeneous indicators (48 indicators) with components (14 components) were identified and eventually finalized using Delphi technique and the opinions of academic experts (Table 1). Accordingly, the final conceptual framework of the research was developed.

Table 1. The components and indicators that constitute each component of psychological empowerment

Empowerment Components	Indicators
Effectiveness	I have a significant effect on what happens in my department
	I have a close control over what happens in my department
Significance	What I do is quite important to me
	My work activities are personally significant to me
	What I do is of particular significance to me
Feeling of competence	I'm sure of my ability to do the job
	My work is in the range of my skills and abilities
	I'm careful about what I'm doing
	I have a lot of freedom to decide how to do my job
	I am confident in my ability to do my job successfully
	I have mastered the skills I need to do my job
	I can decide how to do my work

Right to choose	It is possible for me to use my personal innovation and creativity in doing the work
	My opinion is taken into account in the decisions made in our department
Proper reward and appreciation	There is a proportion between the payment and the job
	Rewards are given based on performance
	The amenities are well distributed
	Career promotion is based on competence
Job enrichment	The immediate understanding of the effect of work performance on the organizational development process is assured
	There is public autonomy and freedom in decisions related to the work
	Substitution training is done well in the organization
	There is a sense of staff ownership feeling on the organization
Organizational Commitment	There is a culture of respect and assistance for staffs to address personal problems among managers
	The morale of the staff is always kept high
	Developing staff skills is on the agenda
	The staffs are surely willing to accept organizational values
Work environment revitalization	Attention to the safety and health of staffs in the work environment
	Providing appropriate opportunities for career promotion
	Reducing stress and tension in the work environment
Collaboration and teamwork	Applying staffs' ideas and opinions in decision making to improve and enhance the excellent affairs of the organization
	Delegation of power to staffs at different levels in line with staffs' contribution
	Involving the staff in offering suggestions for better fulfilment of the affairs
	Making the staffs to monitor their own affairs
Effective organizational communication	Easy communication and access to managers and supervisors
	Promoting an open communication culture away from organizational politics at all levels
	Informing staffs of the current affairs of the company in relation to their field of work
Optimization of processes and methods	Transparency of workflow and information in the organization
	Documentation, periodic revisions, correction, and optimization
	Simplifying things to optimize the job fulfilment methods
Educational processes	Improving the analysis ability
	Promoting teamwork performance and developing working relationships
	Teaching how to encourage communication
	In service trainings in the workplace and outside of it
Transparency in goals	Detailed information on responsibilities and job descriptions
	Awareness of organizational goals and missions and business processes assigned to staffs
Job knowledge and experience	Providing appropriate facilities for the effective development of job skill and technical information
	Laying the groundwork for creativity and innovation
	Promoting the specialized knowledge related to the job

B) Quantitative section

Considering the research purpose and the findings of the qualitative section, the results of the second question through confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model intended by experts and academic professors has the proper fit to investigate the empowerment dimensions and components in selected universities in Iran and Canada. That is, the psychological empowerment construct presented in the conceptual model of research for staffs consisting of 14 components and their constituent indicators had appropriate load factor.

Table 2. Model fit indicators

Fit indicators		Indicator values
The root mean square error of approximation	RMSEA	0.071
The root mean square of the errors	RMR	0.032
Relative amount of variances and co-variances	GFI	0.85
The same adjusted goodness of fit index GFI	AGFI	0.81

As shown in Table 2, the value of model fitting index (RMSEA) is 0.071, which is near 0.05 and it can be stated that the index has a perfect fit, but since the fit is not fully confirmed by this index alone, the model fit is also measured by other indicators as the following:

- Index of (RMR): This index equals 0.032, which is relatively small and the model has little error and the model fit is acceptable.
- Index of (GFI): This index equals 0.85, which is quite close to 1, indicating that the model along with the data has an acceptable fit.
- Index of (AGFI): This index equals 0.81, which is quite close to 1, indicating a proper model fit.

Having determined the model fit, it is necessary to answer the question whether the components of the psychological empowerment model of the staff in Islamic Azad universities and Canadian universities are equally important. To answer this question, One-group t-test was used to compare the mean of a variable with a constant value (number 3). It should be explained that one-group t-test was used to assess the importance of each component of the staffs' psychological empowerment in selected universities and in the perspective of the sample studied. In the one-group t-test, the researcher can usually compare the observed mean of the sample with a baseline number (test value), where in the five-point Likert scale, the midpoint of the test variable (i.e., number 3) is more common (Fa'al Qayyumi & Momeni, 2017).

Table 3. T-test results of comparing the mean with the fixed number of principal empowerment components in Iran

Name of the variable	Mean difference	t-test statistics	Significance level	95 % confidence interval	
				Lower bound	upper bound
Effectiveness	0.78	14.092	0.001	0.678	0.899
Significance	0.44	6.732	0.001	0.317	0.579
Feeling competence	0.24	4.160	0.001	0.126	0.353
Right to choose	0.13	1.917	0.057	-0.004	0.275
Reward and proper appreciation	0.37	5.214	0.001	0.233	0.517
Job enrichment	0.16	3.069	0.002	0.060	0.277
Organizational commitment	-0.03	0.799-	0.425	-0.126	0.054
Work environment revitalization	0.73	12.672	0.001	0.622	0.851
Collaboration and teamwork	0.31	4.559	0.001	0.179	0.453
Effective organizational communication	0.28	4.914	0.001	0.167	0.392
Optimization of processes and methods	0.16	2.274	0.024	0.022	0.315
Educational processes	0.37	5.364	0.001	0.236	0.511
Transparency in goal	0.08	1.481	0.140	-0.029	0.207
Job knowledge and experiences	-0.06	-1.488	0.138	-0.157	0.022

As indicated in Table 3, since the significance level at the error level 0.05 is rejected; thus, the mean factors of the right to choose, organizational commitment, transparency in goals, and job knowledge and experience in the selected universities of Iran are less than or equal to the test value (i.e., 3), because between the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference with the number 3, one is negative and the other is positive. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the perspective of Islamic Azad University staff, the components of right to choose, organizational commitment, transparency in goals, and job knowledge and experience are neglected at their university, while the mean of other factors was more than the test value (number 3).

Table 4. T-test results of comparing the mean with the fixed number of principal components of empowerment in Canada

Name of the variable	Mean difference	t-test statistics	Significance level	95 % confidence interval	
				Lower bound	Upper bound
Effectiveness	0.16	2.953	0.004	0.054	0.272
Significance	0.25	4.135	0.001	0.135	0.382
Feeling competence	0.38	7.373	0.001	0.284	0.491
Right to choose	0.38	7.031	0.001	0.274	0.487
Reward and proper appreciation	0.25	4.818	0.001	0.153	0.365
Job enrichment	0.37	7.190	0.001	0.275	0.482
Organizational commitment	0.59	11,786	0.001	0.492	0.689
Work environment revitalization	0.10	1.778	0.077	0.011-	0.212
Collaboration and teamwork	0.20	3.149	0.002	0.076	0.330
Effective organizational communication	0.33	5.736	0.001	0.218	0.446
Optimization of processes and methods	0.33	6.354	0.001	0.229	0.435
Educational processes	0.16	2.870	0.005	0.052	0.278
Transparency in goal	0.35	7.175	0.001	0.258	0.454

Job knowledge and experiences	0.56	11.087	0.001	0.464	0.665
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Table 4 shows that since the significance level is rejected at the error level of 0.05, among the 14 components, only the mean component of work environment revitalization in the selected Canadian universities was less than or equal to 3 (test value), because between the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference with the number 3, one is negative and the other is positive. Therefore, in the perspective of the staff in the University of Canada, the factor of revitalizing the work environment at the selected universities is not given much importance. Moreover, the mean of other factors in the target population is higher than (number 3), because between the lower and upper bounds there is a 95% confidence interval for the mean difference with the test value (number 3). Thus, it is concluded that administrators and officials give the necessary attention to other factors in Canadian universities.

Another research question is related to the priorities of each of the empowerment components for the Islamic Azad universities and Canadian universities. The data analysis of the questionnaire summarizes the priority of the components in the selected universities (Table 5):

Table 5. Estimation of proximity to ideal positive and negative solution and ranking options in the selected universities

Index	Proximity factor of Iranian University	Index	Proximity factor of the Canadian Universities
Effectiveness	0.6723	Effectiveness	0.7447
Work environment revitalization	0.6643	Effective organizational communication	0.666
Significance	0.5494	Work environment revitalization	0.6433
Educational processes	0.5301	Significance	0.6283
Reward and proper appreciation	0.53	Reward and proper appreciation	0.5779
Effective organizational communication	0.5166	Job enrichment	0.5594
Collaboration and teamwork	0.5149	Optimization of processes and methods	0.551
Feeling competence	0.5058	Feeling competence	0.5433

Job enrichment	0.4785	Right to choose	0.5289
Optimization of processes and methods	0.466	Educational processes	0.4578
Right to choose	0.4524	Organizational commitment	0.4306
Transparency of goal	0.4479	Transparency of goal	0.4186
Organizational commitment	0.4365	Collaboration and teamwork	0.3546
Job knowledge and experiences	0.4345	Job knowledge and experiences	0.3173

As indicated in Table 5, in Islamic Azad universities the index of effectiveness and the work environment revitalization with the proximity factor 0.672 and 0.664 was in the highest priority followed by the significance and the educational processes indicators with the proximity factor 0.549 and 0.530 in the next priorities. Conversely, component prioritization in the selected Canadian universities shows the effectiveness index and effective organizational communication with proximity factor 0.745 and 0.666, at the highest priority, followed by significance and proper reward and appreciation indicators 0.643, 0.628 in the next priorities. Based on the previous results and in a comparative perspective, it is now possible to investigate the status of the selected universities in the two countries of Iran and Canada based on the psychological empowerment components (Table 6).

Table 6. Implementation of Psychological Empowerment Components in Selected Universities of Iran and Canada

Universities	Number of similar components	Number of different components	Insignificant components in the university	First priority at university
Iran	10	4	Right to choose, Organizational commitment, Transparency in goals, job knowledge and experiences	Effectiveness
Canada	10	1	Work environment revitalization	Effectiveness

Conclusion

Enhancing the level of staff empowerment is one of the key missions of policymakers, decision makers, and planners through which they can fulfill their organization's objectives and missions. The Islamic Azad University lacks a long history compared to that of the Canadian universities, although it has more than 30,000 faculty members, 1,500,000 students and 400 branches in various cities across Iran. For more than three decades, the university's principal goal has been achieving quantitative goals, such as providing facilities, hiring staff, training and employing faculty members, and attracting more students. Naturally, these quantitative goals left little time for managers to think about the quality of university and issues including staff empowerment. Now under the influence of factors, such as decline in number of students, and increase in the number of competing governmental and non-governmental universities to attract students, it seems that attention to quality issues such as increase in the level of staff empowerment has become an inevitable necessity. Based on the findings of the present study, the job responsibilities of staffs and the homogeneity of ideals and standards in the task they perform require more attention to the empowerment and its components. Research also indicated that important issues such as the right to choose, organizational commitment, transparency in goals, and job knowledge and experience should somehow be addressed by the university's key stakeholders. Unless there is a fundamental change in the issues mentioned, staff should not be expected to have a firm commitment to the university and its missions. The finding revealed the value and importance of the components of "right to choose, organizational commitment, transparency in goals and job knowledge and experience", which were high among Canadian university staff as opposed to their Iranian counterparts. It is recommended that Iran's higher education policy makers and managers promote and expand professional ethics and formulate short and long-term university goals and strategies in consultation with the university staffs. They should also use successful experiences of the world's prestigious universities to witness the growth and expansion of their staff empowerment.

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