Empowering Leadership, Psychological Empowerment and Employees' Creativity: A gender perspective

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Prior research has shown that employees' creativity can contribute to the organizational effectiveness, innovation, and survival, and as that it represents an important concept to study. Not surprisingly, there has been an increasing interest in understanding factors that promote employees' creativity, and one of the persistent factors is empowerment. The present study investigates whether empowering leadership and psychological empowerment positively influence employees' creativity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, it explores whether there is a moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between empowering leadership and employees' creativity. Finally, this study examines whether there is a difference between female and male employees in empowering leadership and psychological empowerment. Field survey data collected from different companies indicates that empowering leadership and psychological empowerment are positively related to employees' creativity, while psychological empowerment has no moderating effect. Gender differences are present only regarding empowering leadership.

Keywords: empowering leadership, psychological empowerment, creativity, gender.

Introduction

A rapidly changing business environment and the constant technological change require more flexibility and adaptability from the organization in order to survive and be effective in both short and long run. Today businesses are aiming to innovate in different areas of business (Annamalah et al., 2016) by bringing, developing, and retaining the best human capital that will enable them to achieve a competitive advantage over their rivals (Knezovic et al., 2018). Several studies indicated the importance of creativity in the organization and its role in enhancing effectiveness and innovation in the workplace (Amabile, 1996). Creativity is defined as the process of generating new ideas that are potentially useful (Mann, 1959; Pirola-Merlo & Mann, 2004). There is a growing interest in investigating factors that increase employees' creativity (CR) in the workplace and many studies have examined the influence of various leadership styles on creativity among which empowering leadership (EL) was found to be a significant determinant of employees' creativity (Amabile, 1985; Amabile, 1987; Chen et al., 2011; Kirkman, 1999; Shalley, 2004).

Furthermore, due to an increased awareness of the importance for having creative employees who can adapt with the environmental changes and have the abilities and skills to come up with innovative and problem-solving ideas, companies are seeking employees who they perceive as creative. However, this process is not so easy since there is a misunderstanding of the factors that promote individual's creativity. According to Kim and Beehr (2017), modern workforce is more willing to take responsibility for their work design rather than to be a product of traditional top-down job design. Current employees in any company have the potential to be creative when the working environment supports that, meaning that employees may have smart ideas and suggestion but they are afraid to share them because their leaders are not supportive or they feel psychologically underpowered to be innovative and to take further steps beyond their work routine. Here comes the leader's role in reinforcing employees' creativity by establishing a risk tolerant and supportive working environment where employees can feel comfortable to go beyond their current limitations and contribute to achieving the organizational objectives by generating new ideas.

Empowerment has become very important in promoting particular attitudes and behaviors among the workforce from practical, and, as a very interesting variable, from a research standpoint (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Randolph & Kemery, 2011). Previous research highly prioritized the examination empowerment outcomes where creativity was one of the main employee-related outcomes (Hao, He, & Long, 2017). Furthermore, these authors emphasize that the research constructed solid theoretical background regarding the outcomes and moderating effects of particular variables. Empowering leadership involves providing subordinates with autonomy and motivating them to use their power and skills in a creative way which helps them to foster innovation and effectiveness in the organization. This type of leadership has been studied broadly over the last few decades due to its significant impact on enhancing creativity and innovation in the workplace (Amabile, 1996; Manz & Sims, 1989; Shalley, 2004). Another approach of empowerment is known as psychological empowerment which refers to the employees feeling the power and intrinsic motivation to perform tasks which have a significant influence on employees' creativity (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Recent studies have introduced psychological empowerment in explaining the relationship between empowering leadership and employees related outcomes through mediating effect (Fong & Snape, 2015; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), moderating effect (Özarallı, 2015), and as direct determinant (Bester, Stander, & Van Zyl, 2015; Wu, Ku, & Pan, 2017). On the other hand, the role of employees' gender and its impact on perceptions toward empowering leadership and psychological empowerment is yet to be researched. Also, the recent research such as the one performed by Palalic, Ramadani, and Dana (2017) indicates that there is a lack of business literature regarding gender in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to test the influence of empowering leadership and psychological empowerment on one important employee-related outcome which is creativity. Furthermore, this study examines the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between empowering leadership and employees' creativity. Finally, this study tests whether there is a difference between female and male employees when it comes to their perceptions of empowering leadership and psychological empowerment.

Literature Review

Since the role of leaders has been changing from more directive to more participative and motivating, the organizations in a contemporary business have started to look for leaders who can motivate and help employees to develop their skills, knowledge, and capabilities. The concept of empowering leadership was originally conceived by Manz and Sims (1989). At that time it was called "super leadership" and it was defined as the process of motivating others to lead themselves. This was related to the work of Frost (1987) who defined empowerment as "the use of power to create opportunities and conditions through which actors can gain power, can make decisions, can use and expand their abilities and skills, can create and accomplish organizational work in ways that are meaningful to them." (p. 539). The source of power can be obtained by organizational position, or by the individual's skills and knowledge to lead and add valuable resources to the organization. Based on this perspective of the social exchange theory, empowerment can be defined as a type of resource allocation strategy that results in decreasing the dependence on high power (Baldwin, 1979). Furthermore, empowering leadership behavior is defined as a sequence of management practices that include training, developing, decentralizing, information sharing, and participation (Liu, 2015). In the psychological literature, power and control have been studied broadly and examined by many researchers through the last few decades (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer, 1999; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). These researchers assumed that individual's power need will be obtained or met when people believe that they have the power to influence others and when they are capable of handling difficult life situations. Otherwise, people who perceive that they lack power and they are not able to handle social and psychological events that they face will not be able to meet the power need (Spreitzer, 1995). According to this perspective, power is related to person's self-efficacy or inner self-determination (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Therefore, empowerment from the psychological point of view, is defined as any management techniques or decision that leads to improving the person's inner motivation by fostering his/her self-efficacy or self-determination (Liu, 2015).

Empowering leadership (EL) is divided in the management science into two main approaches. The first type is called the rational construct, which defines EL as a type of leadership in which power is being transferred from managers to subordinates in order to enable them to take

initiatives and make decisions regarding their work activities (Ford, 1995). As the leadership is defined as the process of influencing others, empowering leadership is considered as giving subordinates the power to influence rather than to influence them. The second approach defines EL as a motivational construct that perceives empowerment as four-dimensional psychological states (Conger, 1989; Leach, Wall, & Jackson, 2003). The first dimension is competence which is the employee's confidence in his/her ability to perform tasks. The second dimension is meaningfulness which is the employees' feeling or perception that their work is important and that they are not being underestimated. The third one is self-determination which means giving employees the freedom to decide about their tasks and the way how to do it. The last dimension is the impact which demonstrates how influential the employee's role is in the organization. This motivational construct also takes some other approaches. Therefore, Konczak, Stelly, and Trusty (2000) defined six dimensions for empowering leadership behavior among which are: delegation of authority, accountability, self-directed decision making, information sharing, skills development, and enhancing innovative performance. On the other hand, according to structural empowerment theory, employees are being empowered only when they are given access to empowerment structures to accomplish their tasks (Kanter, 1997). These structures are information, opportunity, resources, support, and both formal and informal power.

Due to the fast-changing and turbulent business environment today, it is important for managers to enhance their employees' creativity and skills in order to foster innovation and productivity and to help the organization to compete and survive (Beheshtifar & Zare, 2013). Even though there are various definitions of creativity, Newell (1959) defined it as the generation of new imaginary ideas, including new innovative solutions and new problem reformulation. Creative employees possess a variety of features that sets them different from others (Amabile, 1997). Creative employees are rich in knowledge and job-related skills, and they tend to be independent, risk takers, and motivated to always come up with new ideas and new experiences. Research indicates that creativity contributes positively to organizational innovation, survival, and effectiveness (Amabile, 1988; Gehani, 2011; Strother, 1968). Creativity plays a role not only in helping the organization becoming efficient, but also in becoming more adaptive to the business environment, responsive to opportunities, and able to grow and compete (Amabile, 1988). Many organizations have realized the importance of

creativity in the modern business environment, and as a consequence, the demand for creative employees has increased.

One of the very important influencers on employees' performance is a leadership style, and, in particular, empowering leadership (Chen et al., 2011; Ekaningsih, 2014). According to Spreitzer (1995), empowering leadership represents a motivator that helps superiors to energize, direct, and sustain specific behaviors of employees that eventually result in their performance. Since this type of leadership aims to provide more authority, responsibility, and decision making power to subordinates, they "are more willing to put extra effort toward innovation and show a greater desire to engage in creative activities" (Chow, 2016, p. 202). A very recent trend in the research was actually to integrate empowerment and creativity theories (Zhang, Ke, Wang, & Liu, in press) and number of research emphasized empowering leadership as an important determinant of employees' creativity (Aburuman, 2016; Özarallı, 2015; Zhang & Bartol, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1. There is a positive relationship between empowering leadership and employees' creativity.

Furthermore, a lot of research that examines mechanisms perspectives through which empowering leadership influences creativity of employees has been done recently (Zhang et al., in press). One of the powerful mediating factors between empowering leadership and creativity is psychological empowerment (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). According to Spreitzer (1995), PE refers to the person's intrinsic motivation that is based on the belief in himself/herself in accordance with their role in work. Spreitzer (1995) stated that psychological empowerment occurs when employees feel they have some control over situations and events that happen in their lives. Conger and Kanungo (1998) defined PE as the process of fostering employee's self-efficacy and feelings within the workplace. They stated that PE is "the process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information" (p. 474). Laschinger et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of working environment by stating that if the working

environment enhances the fit between employees' expectations and working conditions, employees are expected to be more engaged in their work.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) notified that PE could not be defined by a single concept, but rather by four dimensions that influence intrinsic task motivation. These dimensions consist of competence, impact, choice, and meaningfulness. All these dimensions together reflect an active orientation to work role that indicates or shows how employees wish to shape their role in the workplace, and they are also contingent on different factors, such as task assessment, environmental events, global assessment, behavior, and interpretive style. Spreitzer (1995) used these four dimensions to develop and improve the psychological empowerment model. He renamed two of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) model dimensions by referring to meaningfulness as "meaning" and choice as "self-determination". Spreitzer (1995) defined empowerment as "an intrinsic motivation manifested in four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his or her work role" (p. 1444). Moreover, Spreitzer (1996) stated that "Resources may be decentralized in objective reality, but if employees are not informed that those resources are available for their use, then access to resources will have little influence on feelings of empowerment" (p. 579). In simple words, employees have to have immediate feedback on information that is relevant to their job.

Many organizations have failed in achieving their economic and social goals because of empowering the wrong people, and because other people were not included in the empowerment formula (Törrönen, Borodkina, & Samoylova, 2013). Further, psychological empowerment is important to achieve both economic and social goals due to the fact that all people in the organization are influenced by the organizational decisions. Therefore, they must be empowered to participate and share their in decision-making process. Without psychological empowerment, wrong behaviors and attitudes may arise from empowered persons and lead to negative outcomes. Çekmecelioğlu & Özbağ (2014) empirically investigated the impact of psychological empowerment including its four cognitions (competence, impact, self-determination, and meaningfulness) on individual's creativity. The study showed that there is a significant impact of psychological empowerment on individual's creativity which led to enhancing the firm's innovation. According to the study, it has been found that employees are

more creative and hardworking when they perceive their job as meaningful to them. It also showed that competence and impact had a positive relationship with individual's creativity. Other studies also contributed to the support of mediator role of psychological empowerment as well as the role of psychological empowerment as determinant of employee-related outcomes (De Klerk & Stander, 2014; Fong & Snape, 2015; Namasivayam, Guchait, & Lei, 2014; Özarallı, 2015; Raub & Rober, 2010), and therefore, we hypothesized as follows:

> *H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between psychological empowerment and employees' creativity.*

> *H3. Psychological (felt) empowerment moderates the relationship between empowerment leadership and employees' creativity.*

As one of the main outcomes of globalization, a diverse workforce represents a very important part of empowerment (Taneja, Pryor, & Oyler, 2012). Different people respond differently to aspects of social relationships, and this is very persistent when it comes to the difference between men and women (Collins, Burrus, & Meyer, 2014). Evans (2010) specifically states that women favor more democratic while men autocratic leadership style. Furthermore, Wolfram and Gratton (2014) state that women are more in favor of transactional and transformational leadership. While the differences among leadership styles from a gender perspective have been studied for more than few decades (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2000), the gender difference toward the perception of leadership is a relatively new phenomenon. In their study, Mroz, Yoerger, and Allen (2018) showed that gender interacts with leadership styles in a way that, unlike women, men perceived directive leaders as warmer, while regarding the participative leaders the perception was not different. On the other hand, Aldoory and Tooth (2009) found that there was a small difference in the perception of female and male employees when it comes to what effective leader is, while the perception of empowerment between male and female was insignificant in the study performed by Durrah et al. (2014). Regarding empowerment, Speer et al. (2012) state that "men and women may employ different participatory mechanisms to achieve their empowerment in community settings" (p. 104). And indeed some of the studies such as the one performed by Thani and Mokhtarian (2012) shows that there is a significant difference in empowerment indicators regarding gender. On the other

hand, the study of Boudrias, Gaudreau, and Laschinger (2004) showed invariance when it comes to PE dimensions (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact). It is obvious that the results about different perception of male and female workers toward empowering leadership and psychological empowerment are conflicting, however, Kiser (2015) statement on perceptions about leadership of men and women was that "Perceptions play a major role in how these two groups think differently, and these varied views can ultimately affect the workplace itself" (p. 599). Therefore, we argue that:

> *H4. There is a difference in empowering leadership between female and male employees.*
>
> *H5. There is a difference in psychological empowerment between female and male employees.*

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The study design is based on the primary data that was collected by cross-sectional survey. The target population included employees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the purpose of collecting the data, we used snowball sampling method and participation was on a voluntary basis. After checking data and removing incomplete responses, our final sample comprised 137 employees. The average age of participants was 29 years, and 56% of participants were females while 44% of them were males. Furthermore, most of the participants were highly-educated, and they worked across several industries: 21% in manufacturing, 27% in service, 12% in trade, and 39% worked in other categories of industry.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations

		M	**SD**	**α**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1.	EL	3.72	.93	.95	1			
2.	PE	3.99	.74	.93	.67**	1		
3.	CR	3.88	.78	.94	.52**	.67**	1	
4.	Gender	1.56	.50	-	.19*	.10	.06	1

*Note. N = 137. *p < .05; **p < .01*

The reliability test shows that all variables scored more than .90 which indicates that the scales are highly reliable (Nunnally & Bersnstein, 1994), and that the instrument provides a reliable measure of the three variables used in the study. Regarding the correlation, both empowering leadership and psychological empowerment correlate positively and significantly with the employees' creativity. More precisely, the correlation between independent and dependent variables is moderate. On the other hand, gender has a weak correlation with empowering leadership.

Instrument

The instrument was created by combining already existing constructs. Because the original instruments were in English, the questionnaire was back-translated (English-Bosnian-English) to ensure the equivalence of the content. All the variables were measured based on a 5-point Likert scale responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" regarding empowering leadership and psychological empowerment, while the creativity was measure on a 5-point scale responses ranging from "not at all characteristic" to "very characteristic". In addition, control variables included answers to questions related to age, gender, industry, maturity, age, and educational level.

Measures of Variables

Creativity was measured by using a 13-item (α=.94) scale based on Zhou and George (2001) creativity scale. Participants were responding regarding the extent they think a particular statement regarding creativity applies to them.

Empowering leadership was measured according to Ahearne et al. (2005) 12-item scale (α=.95), divided into four main dimensions: meaningfulness of work, participation in decision making, confidence in high performance, and autonomy. Each dimension was comprised of 3 items.

Based on Spreitzer (1995) scale, psychological empowerment was measured by 12 items (α=.93). This variable was developed in four dimensions: competence, impact, self-determination, and meaning. Each dimension had 3 items.

A respondents' gender was measured as a dichotomous variable where 1 was assigned to males and 2 was assigned to females. Furthermore, based on previous studies (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Zhou & George, 2001), we controlled for the effect of several variables that are related to creativity. Therefore, age was measured by years, gender as already mentioned as a dichotomous variable, the tenure of the company was measured by a log of the months that an employee has been working for the company, and educational level was measured as a nominal variable (high school, bachelor, master, or Ph.D.). Regarding the industry, respondents had 4 options: manufacturing, service, trade, and other, and four each of them we created a dichotomous variable.

Analyses

In order to test hypotheses, we used two analyses. For the first three hypotheses where we analyzed the influence of empowering leadership and psychological empowerment on creativity, as well as the moderating effect of psychological empowerment, we used hierarchical regression that included four steps. Firstly, we introduced control variables in the model. After that, we added empowering leadership (Model 2), psychological empowerment (Model 3), and moderating effect of psychological empowerment (Model 4), respectively. A statistically significant or insignificant change in R^2 represents the evidence for support or no support of the particular hypothesis. For hypotheses 4 and 5, independent *t*-test was performed in order to examine whether there is a difference between female and male employees regarding empowering leadership and psychological empowerment. Significant results in the t-test comparisons would indicate gender differences.

Results

Table 2 presents the results of hierarchal regression that was used in order to test the first three hypotheses of the study.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression for creativity

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Logtenure	.15	.11	-.02	-.02
Age	-.18	-.13	-.04	-.04
Gender	-.04	.04	.04	.04
Education	.21*	.14	.10	.11
Manufacturing	.14	.10	.03	.04
Trade	.04	.06	.00	.00
Others	-.13	-.03	-.04	-.04
EL		.47**	.10	.09
PE			.58**	.58**
EL*PE				.01
ΔR^2	.12	.19	.17	.00
R^2	.12	.31	.48	.48
ΔF	2.49**	35.35**	40.87**	.00
F	2.49**	7.18**	12.91**	11.53**

Note. N = 137. $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$

Hypotheses 1 and 2 suggested that empowering leadership and psychological empowerment positively influence employees' creativity. Model 2 indicates that EL explains 19% of the additional variance in CR ($\Delta F=35.35$, $\Delta R^2=.19$, p<.01), while PE explains 17% of the additional variance in CR ($\Delta F=40.87$, $\Delta R^2=.19$, p<.01). These results provide evidence to support both hypotheses. On the other hand, Hypothesis 3 which suggested that PE moderates the relationship between EL and CR was insignificant ($\Delta F=.00$, $\Delta R^2=.00$, p>.05). Therefore, *H3* was not supported.

The argument for hypotheses 4 and 5 was that there is a difference in empowering leadership and psychological empowerment between male and female employees. Table 3 presents the results of two-tailed t-test analysis.

Table 3. Means score of EL and PE for male and female employees

Gender, EL, and PE	*N*	**M**	**SD**	**SEM**	*t*	*df*	*p*-value
EL							
Male	60	3.52	1.03	0.13	-2.290	135	0.024
Female	77	3.88	0.82	0.09			
PE							
Male	60	3.91	0.79	0.1	-1.137	135	0.258
Female	77	4.05	0.7	0.08			

Note. N = 137. $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$

From the t-test results, we can deduce that there is a significant difference in empowering leadership between male and female employees (t=-2.290, p<.05), while there was no significant difference regarding psychological empowerment (t=-1.137, p>.05). Therefore, we can state that there was enough evidence to support *H4*, while there was not enough evidence to support *H5*.

Discussion

Although previous studies have indicated that empowering leadership and psychological empowerment enhance employees' creativity (Chow, 2017; Zhang et al., in press), a gender perspective of employees was mostly neglected. This study builds upon the work of Zhang and Bartol (2010) by examining the influence of empowering leadership and psychological empowerment on employees' creativity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then it tests for the moderating effect of psychological empowerment, and at the end, it analyses whether there is a difference between female and male employees when it comes to empowering leadership and psychological empowerment.

The results indicate that there is enough evidence to support *H1* that argues that there is a positive and significant relationship between empowering leadership and employees'

creativity. These findings are consistent with previous research that show that leaders who have exhibited an empowering leadership style by emphasizing (1) confidence in performing tasks, (2) enhancing the work meaningfulness, (3) support participation in decision making, and (4) proving the employees with autonomy can enhance their employees' creativity (Zhang and Bartol, 2010, Özarallı, 2015). Moreover, the results show evidence to support *H2* as well. Here we hypothesized that there is a positive and significant relationship between psychological empowerment and employees' creativity, and the results are in-line with Spreitzer (1996) theory about the psychological empowerment which states that there is a higher chance that given autonomy and the power to perform the task will result in higher creativity of employees in their jobs. Furthermore, employees who are given the access to the workplace's resources may perceive their psychological state as being empowered, and therefore, these findings indicate the importance of establishing an autonomous working environment to empower employees to accomplish their work creatively. However, our results did not find evidence to support moderating effect of psychological empowerment on a relationship between empowering leadership and employees' creativity suggesting that employee's psychological empowerment does not additionally strength the influence of empowering leadership on employee's creativity. Regarding gender differences between male and female employees, we found that there was a significant difference in empowering leadership (*H4*), which in this case means that female employees put more value on empowering leaders. On the other hand, there was an insignificant difference in psychological empowerment (*H5)* showing that male and female employees have no "different lenses" when it comes to feeling that they are psychologically empowered.

From a practical standpoint, we can state that regardless of the business type, managers can enhance employees' creativity by empowering them to do their work. In addition, managers could enhance employees' creativity by establishing a working environment that ensures that employees feel psychologically empowered. In order to promote creativity, leaders should enhance employee's confidence in their ability to perform tasks, make them feel that their job is meaningfulness, encourage them to participate in decision-making process, and inspire them to work autonomously and to take accountability over their tasks. Moreover, leaders who thrive to understand their followers' needs, establish a positive working environment, and promote confidence among employees contribute to a greater feeling of empowerment. On the other

hand, empowering employees may not be sufficient in its sense, and leaders must provide employees with support and access to the organizational resources. This, in turn, should translate into a higher feeling of power and finally to more creative employees and better outcomes.

The present work has shown significant findings and ways how managers can enhance employees' creativity through empowering behaviors. However, this study is subject to certain limitations as well. Firstly, the study integrates only empowerment leadership and psychological empowerment as independent variables influencing employees' creativity and neglects other types of leadership that might be applied by managers as well. Secondly, the snowball sampling method was applied, and this method affects the generalizability of results. Thirdly, the cross-sectional data may cause bias because leaders and employees at different times may demonstrate different behaviors which might affect the way they respond to the survey.

Therefore, future research might include different aspects of leadership that managers manifest, such as transformational or transactional leadership. Furthermore, we could test which leadership type has a higher influence on employee-related outcomes. In addition to that, future studies might collect data across various times in order to avoid the bias caused by collecting data at one point of time. Since responses relied only on employees, future studies may use different sources allowing us to use multi-level analysis. Moreover, the present study focuses only on the influence of empowering leadership and psychological empowerment on employees' creativity while future study could continue by exploring the influence of empowering leadership and psychological leadership on other organizational outcomes as well. Finally, the data could be collected by using a longitudinal approach in order to control for possible distraction as well as for possible reverse causality.

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