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TEAM EMPOWERMENT AND CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMWORK: INSIGHTS FROM SPANISH AND POLISH MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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Purpose: The aim of the research is to compare perceptions of empowerment among management students from Spain and Poland within academic teamwork contexts.
Design/methodology/approach: Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey conducted in October 2024 with 321 participants (76 Spanish, 245 Polish), data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U tests.
Findings: Both groups primarily associated empowerment with trust, support, and motivation in teamwork. However, significant cultural differences emerged: Polish students emphasized autonomy, collaboration, and shared decision-making, while Spanish students viewed empowerment through structured leadership and supervision. Observed empowerment behaviors included active participation, shared task responsibility, and open communication, though autonomy-related behaviors varied. Findings highlight that empowerment is culturally nuanced, shaped by educational and societal contexts. The study contributes to cross-cultural management research and suggests that academic and organizational environments should foster trust-based, participative climates to enhance teamwork effectiveness and student engagement.
Research limitations/implications: The limitations of this study include its reliance on self-reported data, potentially influenced by subjective perceptions or response biases. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the research restricts causal interpretations of empowerment's effects on team performance. Future studies could expand the scope by including longitudinal methodologies or experimental designs to better explore causality.
Practical implications: This study offers valuable insights for educators and organizational leaders. The highlighted importance of a supportive and trusting climate suggests that universities and businesses should actively foster environments characterized by open communication and mutual trust. Results indicating cultural differences suggest tailored strategies are essential when implementing empowerment-based practices across diverse student or employee populations.
Universities could utilize these findings to refine teamwork-based curricula, focusing on autonomy and collective task-sharing approaches that enhance student satisfaction and effectiveness. Furthermore, human resource professionals and managers can leverage these

insights to cultivate organizational cultures that better support autonomy, proactivity, and open communication across diverse teams.
Originality/value: This study examined cross-cultural perceptions and observed practices of empowerment among university students from Spain and Poland, offering valuable comparative insights that contribute to existing empowerment theory and practice.
Keywords: Teamwork, empowerment, cross-cultural comparison, organizational behavior, higher education.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Empowerment, a widely explored concept in organizational studies, involves enhancing autonomy, decision-making authority, and proactive behaviors among team members. It has increasingly been recognized as crucial for improving individual and team performance (Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, Rosen, 2007; Mathieu, Gilson, Ruddy, 2006). The current globalized educational and professional contexts highlight the importance of understanding empowerment through cross-cultural lenses.

Extensive literature has examined empowerment's multidimensional nature, emphasizing its structural and psychological dimensions. Structural empowerment includes managerial delegation of authority and autonomy, whereas psychological empowerment involves perceptions of self-efficacy, meaning, and personal impact (Maynard, Gilson, Mathieu, 2012; Seibert, Wang, Courtright, 2011). Empirical evidence indicates empowerment positively influences motivation, creativity, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, Gibson, 2004; Raub, Robert, 2010).

Cross-cultural studies provide insights into the varied perceptions and practices of empowerment, highlighting how cultural contexts shape organizational behaviors differently. For example, Jiang et al. (2016) indicated significant cultural moderation effects on the relationship between empowerment and team effectiveness, specifically through knowledge-sharing behaviors. Further, Hempel, Zhang, and Han (2012) found contrasting influences of organizational decentralization and formalization on empowerment perceptions across different cultures.

Despite this extensive research, gaps remain in understanding empowerment's nuanced perception among students in academic team contexts across cultures. This study addresses this gap by investigating Spanish and Polish students' conceptualizations of empowerment and their observations of empowerment-related behaviors within academic teamwork settings.

The primary objective of this research is thus to provide empirical insights into cross-cultural similarities and differences regarding empowerment, contributing theoretically and practically to empowerment literature and organizational practices. Understanding these cross-cultural dimensions holds significant implications for education professionals, organizational

leaders, and HR specialists aiming to optimize team performance and employee engagement across diverse cultural settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizations and Dimensions of Empowerment

Empowerment is widely recognized as a critical concept within organizational studies, involving psychological and structural dimensions that significantly enhance both individual and team-level performance. According to Maynard, Gilson, and Mathieu (2012), psychological empowerment includes perceptions of self-efficacy, meaning, autonomy, and personal impact, whereas structural empowerment involves organizational processes, policies, and managerial practices that delegate decision-making authority and autonomy.

Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Sands (2016) emphasize empowerment as crucial for promoting proactive employee behaviors, particularly when nurtured through supportive organizational climates characterized by clear and open communication. Furthermore, Seibert, Wang, and Courtright (2011), through their meta-analytic study, reinforced the positive relationships between empowerment and critical organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. Haas (2017) elaborated on empowerment as an essential component in granting employees decision-making autonomy and freedom of action, thus driving enhanced organizational commitment and higher job engagement.

The structural dimension of empowerment is closely linked to organizational frameworks that enable autonomy and control over work tasks through the delegation of decision-making authority. Haas (2017) argues that autonomy in decision-making fosters team effectiveness by allowing employees to take ownership of their tasks and responsibilities. This approach aligns with research emphasizing that empowerment strategies improve motivation, engagement, and adaptability in dynamic organizational environments. Studies further suggest that organizations implementing empowerment-focused strategies observe higher levels of team effectiveness, improved project outcomes, and overall performance enhancement (Allen et al., 2016; Kirkman et al., 2004; Mathieu et al., 2006).

2.2. Empowerment in Team Contexts and Performance

Empirical literature consistently highlights empowerment as a critical driver for improving team performance. Mathieu, Gilson, and Ruddy (2006) proposed a robust theoretical model that positions empowerment as a pivotal factor for team autonomy, decision-making, and proactive behavior. Similarly, Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, and Rosen (2007) highlighted empowerment's significant influence on enhancing team autonomy, ultimately contributing to higher performance through increased motivation and individual proactivity.

Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, and Gibson (2004) expanded the discussion into the context of virtual teams, identifying empowerment as crucial for enhancing performance through autonomy and efficient communication practices, particularly in remote or geographically dispersed environments. Raub and Robert (2010) further corroborated that empowered teams typically exhibit higher creativity, more effective decision-making processes, and greater resilience in adapting to organizational challenges.

Empowerment has been widely explored in human resource management as a key strategy for enhancing employee performance and organizational success. Seibert, Wang, and Courtright (2011) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that both psychological empowerment (motivation, self-efficacy, and trust) and structural empowerment (delegation of authority and autonomy) contribute significantly to job satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, Maynard, Gilson, and Mathieu (2012) emphasized that organizations adopting empowerment strategies benefit from increased employee engagement, higher adaptability, and long-term performance improvements, reinforcing its role as a competitive advantage in modern workplaces.

Moreover, empowerment is closely related to motivational aspects within organizational settings. Studies indicate that empowerment enhances intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and reduces workplace stress, thus creating more productive and positive working environments (Raub, Robert, 2010; Savery, Luks, 2001).

2.3. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Empowerment

Research consistently demonstrates the importance of cultural context in shaping empowerment perceptions and the effectiveness of empowerment practices. Jiang et al. (2016) provided empirical evidence on how empowerment positively impacts team performance, but with clear moderation by cultural variables such as knowledge sharing and intragroup conflict management practices. These authors underline the necessity of considering cultural nuances in developing empowerment frameworks, noting significant variations in empowerment implementation and outcomes across cultural boundaries.

Hempel, Zhang, and Han (2012) further demonstrated that empowerment perceptions differ significantly depending on cultural attitudes toward hierarchy, decentralization, and organizational formalization. Such findings suggest that empowerment strategies must be adapted to specific cultural contexts to maximize effectiveness and acceptance.

Given these theoretical considerations, significant gaps persist regarding empirical comparative studies explicitly addressing how empowerment perceptions and practices manifest among students within academic teamwork environments across different cultural settings, particularly within European contexts. Consequently, this study aims to fill these knowledge gaps by examining empowerment perceptions and behaviors among management students from Spain and Poland.

Based on these considerations, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: There are significant differences between Spanish and Polish students in their conceptualization of empowerment.

H2: Spanish and Polish students significantly differ in the frequency of observing empowerment-related behaviors within their teamwork contexts.

These hypotheses provide an essential analytical foundation for exploring empowerment as a culturally nuanced phenomenon, particularly within educational team contexts, thus enriching theoretical understanding and practical application in international organizational settings.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data and Variables

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design conducted in October 2024. Data were collected from a purposive sample comprising 321 management students, with 76 respondents from the University of Malaga (Spain) and 245 from Jagiellonian University (Poland). Respondent demographics showed a predominance of female students (67.2%) compared to males (32.8%). Participants were engaged in academic teamwork activities within their respective institutions, predominantly working in groups consisting of 2 to 4 members.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire specifically designed for this study, focusing on capturing respondents' conceptualizations of empowerment and their observations of empowerment-related behaviors within teamwork contexts. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: the first explored the associative strength between empowerment and various organizational concepts, measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (weakest association) to 5 (strongest association). The second section aimed at evaluating the frequency of specific empowerment-related behaviors observed by students during their collaborative project work, also employing a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated no observed presence and 5 indicated high occurrence.

3.2. Methodology

A quantitative methodological approach was adopted, utilizing descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests to analyze the data. The Mann-Whitney U test (Wilcoxon rank-sum test with continuity correction) was chosen due to its robustness for comparing ordinal data between two independent groups (Spanish and Polish students). The threshold for statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$, thus controlling the Type I error rate. Findings were interpreted using p-values, categorizing significance into three distinct levels: 95%, 99% and 99,9%.

This methodological framework aligns with best practices from existing literature on empowerment research in organizational contexts, which emphasizes clarity in defining variables and robust statistical validation (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). The selected approach also mirrors the analytical rigor demonstrated in previous empowerment studies, such as those investigating the relationship between empowerment, autonomy, and organizational behaviors in team settings (Z. Chen, Lam, Zhong, 2007; Kirkman et al., 2004; Mathieu et al., 2006).

By grounding our methodology in recognized standards and relevant empirical frameworks, this study ensures replicability and contributes valuable comparative insights into cross-cultural differences and similarities in student perceptions of empowerment within teamwork dynamics.

4. Results

The analysis revealed significant differences in how Spanish and Polish students conceptualize empowerment and the extent to which they observe empowerment-related behaviors in teamwork. Statistical significance was assessed using the Mann-Whitney U test, with a critical level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Students primarily associate empowerment with fostering a secure and supportive work environment. As shown in Table 1, the strongest association was with "creating a work environment where employees feel secure, supported, and where they can trust their managers" ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.07$). Other highly rated associations included empowerment as a motivational framework ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.07$) and as a climate that unlocks knowledge, experience, and motivation ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.99$). In contrast, the least significant associations were empowerment as a human resource management method ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.14$) and as an approach to reducing bureaucracy in decision-making ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.20$).

Table 1.
Student responses to the question: What associations (words or expressions) do you have with empowerment? (N = 321)

No.	EMPOWERMENT MEANS / IS	Mean	SD
1.1	an aspect of organizational culture	3.28	1.03
1.2	unlocking knowledge, experience, motivation	3.75	0.99
1.3	a method of HR management	3.26	1.14
1.4	a philosophy covering delegation of power	3.30	1.12
1.5	giving employees autonomy & control	3.63	1.20
1.6	eradicating fear and bureaucracy	3.26	1.20
1.7	a workplace with a climate of trust	3.66	1.13
1.8	a motivational framework in an organization	3.74	1.07
1.9	an expression of proactive mindsets	3.71	1.06
1.10	open & transparent communication	3.51	1.10
1.11	promoting teamwork and mutual support	3.64	1.12
1.12	creating a secure, supportive environment	3.81	1.07

Source: Own elaboration based on: Gémar, Stańczyk, Syrytczyk (2025).

Differences between Spanish and Polish students emerged regarding empowerment perceptions. As detailed in Tables 2 and Table 3, Polish students rated empowerment as an "organizational climate that unlocks knowledge, experience, and motivation" higher than Spanish students. Additionally, Spanish students were less inclined to associate empowerment with teamwork culture and open communication.

Table 2.
Comparative responses: Spanish students' perceptions of empowerment

No.	EMPOWERMENT MEANS / IS	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1.1	an aspect of organizational culture	3	21	46	29	1
1.2	unlocking knowledge, experience, motivation	0	9	28	55	8
1.3	a method of HR management	8	26	37	22	7
1.4	a philosophy covering delegation of power	1	16	32	37	14
1.5	giving employees autonomy & control	8	16	22	32	22
1.6	eradicating fear and bureaucracy	8	18	22	39	12
1.7	a workplace with a climate of trust	7	14	26	30	22
1.8	a motivational framework in an organization	1	11	30	34	24
1.9	an expression of proactive mindsets	1	12	17	39	30
1.10	open & transparent communication	7	17	33	28	16
1.11	promoting teamwork and mutual support	3	14	25	38	20
1.12	creating a secure, supportive environment	1	11	18	36	34

Source: Own elaboration based on survey data.

Table 3.
Comparative responses: Polish students' perceptions of empowerment

No.	EMPOWERMENT MEANS / IS	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1.1	an aspect of organizational culture	5	15	35	29	16
1.2	unlocking knowledge, experience, motivation	4	8	21	40	27
1.3	a method of HR management	7	16	31	28	19
1.4	a philosophy covering delegation of power	8	18	29	30	15
1.5	giving employees autonomy & control	7	8	24	30	15
1.6	eradicating fear and bureaucracy	8	22	25	27	18
1.7	a workplace with a climate of trust	4	9	26	32	29
1.8	a motivational framework in an organization	4	10	20	37	28
1.9	an expression of proactive mindsets	3	13	22	38	24
1.10	open & transparent communication	4	13	22	41	20
1.11	promoting teamwork and mutual support	4	15	20	33	27
1.12	creating a secure, supportive environment	3	11	22	33	31

Source: Own elaboration based on survey data.

These findings indicate that cultural and educational differences shape how students perceive empowerment, with Polish students emphasizing autonomy and collaboration-driven empowerment structures.

Students reported varying degrees of empowerment-related behaviors in teamwork. As shown in Table 4, the most frequently observed behavior was contributing actively to task completion (M = 4.32, SD = 0.87), followed by sharing tasks collectively (M = 4.25, SD = 0.89) and frequent expression of opinions (M = 4.08, SD = 0.84). The least observed behavior was experiencing high levels of stress in the university environment (M = 2.94, SD = 1.33).

Table 4.
Student responses to observed empowerment practices in teamwork (N = 321)

No.	OBSERVED PRACTICE	Mean	SD
1.1	I feel empowered to make decisions	3.50	1.12
1.2	I contribute to task completion	4.32	0.87
1.3	I can decide how to perform tasks	3.91	1.06
1.4	I have control over team activities	3.54	1.05
1.5	I am able to make my own decisions	3.72	1.03
1.6	I work independently without supervision	3.60	1.21
1.7	The team leader supports initiative	3.76	1.06
1.8	I do not fear the team leader's dissatisfaction	3.57	1.21
1.9	I experience a lot of stress in university	2.94	1.33
1.10	We share tasks to be completed collectively	4.25	0.89
1.11	I have the opportunity to access decision-making situations	3.90	0.81
1.12	Planning and organizing my work depends on me	3.95	1.00
2.13	I have the opportunity to express my opinions	4.08	0.84
2.14	My opinions influence the course of the team's work	3.84	0.87
2.15	I perceive the team leader's influence on my work as supportive and interested in the progress of the work	3.66	0.99
2.16	There are no destructive factors in the team	3.67	1.24
2.17	There is support in solving problems within the team	3.86	0.99

Source: Own elaboration based on: Gémar, Stańczyk, and Syrytczyk (2025).

The Mann-Whitney U test identified significant differences between Spanish and Polish students. As summarized in Table 5, Spanish students reported lower autonomy and independent decision-making compared to Polish students.

Table 5.
Wilcoxon rank-sum test results – Spain vs. Poland

VARIABLE	U STATISTIC	P-VALUE	SIGNIFICANCE
An aspect of organizational culture	7717	0.0185	*
Unlocking knowledge, experience	7964.5	0.0441	*
HR management method	7267.5	0.0028	**
Open and transparent communication	7886.5	0.0360	*
Sharing tasks collectively	7203.5	0.0012	**
Experiencing stress in university	10704	0.0436	*

Source: Own elaboration based on survey data.

Polish students exhibited a stronger tendency toward collective task-sharing and autonomy, while Spanish students reported experiencing greater hierarchical influence in teamwork structures. These findings suggest that Polish students are more likely to experience empowerment through autonomy and shared decision-making, whereas Spanish students tend to associate empowerment with structured leadership frameworks.

The findings indicate that empowerment is primarily associated with trust, motivation, and teamwork. Respondents emphasized the importance of a supportive work environment where individuals feel secure and encouraged to take initiative. Empowerment was also linked to fostering proactive mindsets and enhancing team cohesion, reinforcing its role as a driver of collaboration and organizational success.

Among the observed behaviors, the most prominent were active participation in task completion and teamwork engagement. Students frequently reported contributing to team efforts, sharing responsibilities, and expressing their opinions. These behaviors suggest that empowerment manifests in practice through collaboration and shared decision-making processes rather than rigid hierarchical structures.

Cultural differences played a significant role in shaping empowerment perceptions and experiences. Polish students reported higher levels of autonomy and collective decision-making compared to their Spanish counterparts, who exhibited a stronger association between empowerment and structured leadership. These distinctions highlight the influence of cultural and educational contexts on the understanding and application of empowerment within teams.

Overall, these insights provide a deeper understanding of how empowerment is perceived and practiced across different cultural settings. The findings have important implications for cross-cultural management education and leadership development, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies that recognize diverse empowerment frameworks.

5. Discussion

The results confirmed our initial hypotheses. The statistical analyses provided evidence supporting H1, indicating significant differences between Spanish and Polish students in their conceptualization of empowerment. Polish students associated empowerment more strongly with autonomy and knowledge-sharing, while Spanish students emphasized structured leadership and decision-making processes. These findings align with previous research suggesting that empowerment perceptions vary across cultures depending on organizational hierarchy and decentralization levels (Hempel et al., 2012).

Similarly, H2 was supported, as observed empowerment behaviors significantly differed between both groups. Polish students reported higher levels of collaborative decision-making and autonomy in project tasks compared to their Spanish counterparts. These results are consistent with findings from Kirkman et al. (2004), who identified that empowerment manifests differently depending on cultural and organizational settings, with greater autonomy and decision-making flexibility observed in less hierarchical environments.

The findings of this study corroborate existing literature on empowerment by reinforcing its strong association with trust, motivation, and teamwork. Prior studies have consistently highlighted the importance of psychological and structural empowerment in fostering organizational commitment and performance (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). The results indicate that students predominantly perceive empowerment as a mechanism for creating a secure, supportive, and trust-based environment, aligning with perspectives that link empowerment to increased motivation and proactive behaviors (Chen et al., 2007).

Notable cultural differences emerged, particularly in the extent of autonomy and collaborative decision-making observed by Spanish and Polish students. Polish students reported higher autonomy levels and more collective decision-making processes, which aligns with findings by Hempel, Zhang, and Han (2012), who suggested that empowerment practices are influenced by decentralization and cultural attitudes toward hierarchy. The stronger emphasis on structured leadership and supervision observed among Spanish students suggests a more hierarchical perception of empowerment, consistent with studies indicating that national culture shapes organizational behaviors and management styles (Jiang et al., 2016).

The study also found that empowerment manifests in practice through active contribution to team tasks and shared responsibility, supporting previous research that highlights the link between empowerment and improved team performance (Kirkman et al., 2004; Mathieu et al., 2006). Moreover, students from both countries identified open communication and a trust-based climate as critical components of empowerment, which aligns with literature emphasizing the role of transparent communication in fostering employee engagement and reducing uncertainty (Allen et al., 2016).

Regarding the impact of empowerment on well-being, the study revealed that stress levels were generally moderate, with Polish students reporting slightly lower stress compared to their Spanish counterparts. This finding is consistent with Savery and Luks (2001), who argued that empowerment is associated with increased job satisfaction and reduced stress when implemented effectively. However, the results suggest that cultural variations influence the extent to which empowerment mitigates stress, highlighting the need for tailored approaches when applying empowerment strategies across diverse cultural settings.

Overall, these findings contribute to the broader discourse on empowerment by providing empirical insights into its cross-cultural dimensions. They emphasize the importance of contextual factors in shaping empowerment perceptions and suggest that strategies to enhance empowerment should be adapted to specific cultural and educational environments. These insights are particularly relevant for educational institutions and organizations seeking to implement empowerment-based frameworks that promote collaboration, autonomy, and long-term engagement in diverse team settings.

6. Conclusions

This study examined cross-cultural perceptions and observed practices of empowerment among university students from Spain and Poland, offering valuable comparative insights that contribute to existing empowerment theory and practice.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes significantly to empowerment literature by providing empirical cross-cultural comparisons. It enhances understanding of how empowerment is conceptualized in different cultural contexts, particularly within educational settings. By illustrating that Spanish and Polish students associate empowerment strongly with trust, autonomy, and organizational climates promoting proactive mindsets, the study aligns with previous theoretical frameworks by Mathieu, Gilson, and Ruddy (2006) and Kirkman et al. (2004), underscoring autonomy, communication, and motivational frameworks as crucial empowerment dimensions.

Moreover, this study extends prior empowerment research by empirically examining the dimensions of empowerment specifically within academic team environments, thus opening avenues for further research on empowerment as an educational and organizational development tool.

6.2. Practical Implications

Practically, this study offers valuable insights for educators and organizational leaders. The highlighted importance of a supportive and trusting climate suggests that universities and businesses should actively foster environments characterized by open communication and mutual trust. Results indicating cultural differences suggest tailored strategies are essential when implementing empowerment-based practices across diverse student or employee populations.

Universities could utilize these findings to refine teamwork-based curricula, focusing on autonomy and collective task-sharing approaches that enhance student satisfaction and effectiveness. Furthermore, human resource professionals and managers can leverage these insights to cultivate organizational cultures that better support autonomy, proactivity, and open communication across diverse teams.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study include its reliance on self-reported data, potentially influenced by subjective perceptions or response biases. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the research restricts causal interpretations of empowerment's effects on team performance.

Future studies could expand the scope by including longitudinal methodologies or experimental designs to better explore causality. Additionally, subsequent research could explore the role of leadership styles and other contextual variables influencing empowerment perceptions and behaviors in diverse cultural and organizational contexts. Further qualitative research could also enrich understanding by exploring deeper individual experiences of empowerment in teamwork.

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