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Empowerment and initiative:
The mediating role of obligation

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which psychological empowerment and felt obligation can explain variations in personal initiative.

Design

Employees from a Scandinavian organization participated in a web-based survey.

Findings

Psychological empowerment is important for enhancing proactive behavior at work, but its dimensions relate differently to personal initiative. Felt obligation mediates the relationship between psychological empowerment and personal initiative, but only for two dimensions of empowerment (meaningfulness and competence).

Implications

The findings have implications for how managers are able to foster employees' sense of empowerment, and thus enable them to engage in proactive behavior.

Originality

The paper contributes to our understanding of how employees' feeling of obligation explains one form of proactive behavior. It also highlights the overlooked distinctiveness of psychological empowerment dimensions in predicting personal initiative at work.

Keywords:

Psychological empowerment; personal initiative; felt obligation

Psychological empowerment was first introduced as a scientific concept about forty years ago (Kanter, 1977), and has during the years been highly influential both in scientific research and in practical life. Research reveals that the phenomenon has had a huge impact on human resource management in many different types of organizations. For instance, almost all larger organizations have implemented some form of empowerment initiative (Lawler, Mohrman, & Benson, 2001; Seibert, Wang, & Courtwright, 2011). In addition, recent research reports robust positive effects of psychological empowerment across industries, occupations, and culturally distinct regions (Erdogan *et al.*, 2018; Seibert *et al.*, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2017).

Spreitzer (1995) introduced what is so far the most discussed multidimensional conceptualization for the construct. Four central cognitions were identified: meaning, self-determination, competence and impact. Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) have argued that the four dimensions of psychological empowerment are only able to function as an antecedent together. This suggests a conceptualization of empowerment as a single second-order construct made up of the four cognitions. However, other research implies that the dimensions of empowerment might differ in their predictive power and strength when coupled with work behaviors and attitudes, including initiative (Liden & Tewksbury, 1995; Shin & Kim, 2015).

Recent research reveals that empowered employees are more proactive compared to others, and thus more likely to engage in different forms of proactive behavior (Parker, 2007; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon., 2000; Shin and Kim, 2015). It has therefore been suggested that psychological empowerment is more or less a necessary condition for the existence of personal initiative (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Scant research effort, however, has been allocated to investigating this relationship. So, in this study we are particularly interested in the capacity of psychological empowerment to trigger personal initiative, which is one of the most important forms of proactive behavior.

Applying Spreitzer's conceptualization of psychological empowerment, we focus on how the construct relates to proactive behavior in the workplace. Specifically, we investigate if the four dimensions of psychological empowerment display different or similar relationships with initiative. This is important because although the literature points to a general positive relationship, it remains to be determined if and how each dimension relates to personal initiative at work. As implied by previous research (Liden & Tewksbury, 1995; Shin & Kim, 2015), personal initiative might actually not be able to capitalize equally on each dimension of empowerment. It is a major aim of the current study to clarify this issue further.

In addition to investigating the relationship between empowerment and initiative, the study also introduces the hypothesis that felt obligation will mediate the relationship. Felt obligation shares characteristics with a series of other motivational variables including psychological ownership, psychological contracts, involvement and engagement. All involve some form of bond between the employee and the work organization. Research conducted by Parker et al., (2006) and Hartog & Belschak (2007) suggests that felt obligation could be a key mediating variable in the relationship between empowerment and initiative. For instance, Parker et al. (2006) note that employees with a high felt responsibility for change often perceive taking charge positively. The explanation for this is that felt responsibility provides a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment in such a context (see also Morrison & Phelps, 1999). In addition, Frese & Fay (2001) observe that felt responsibility is also able to predict several other forms of proactive behavior. Moreover, Hartog & Belschak (2007) report that obligation explains unique variance in personal initiative. They also note that it explains variance in both self- and manager-rated initiative.

Based on these findings, we develop a model specifying the intermediate state that we think mediates the observed empowerment-outcome relationships. Direct measures of the

hypothesized mediational states allow us to shed more light than in previous studies on the mechanisms underlying the purported effects of psychological empowerment.

Theory and hypotheses

Psychological empowerment

Empowerment describes "people's belief in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over given events" (Ozer and Bandura, 1990, p.472). It comprises individual cognitions and perceptions that constitute feelings of behavioral and psychological investment in work (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). This conceptualization is distinct from a view of empowerment as simply a set of managerial practices focused on the delegation of responsibilities. Psychological empowerment refers to the psychological state that allows individuals to feel a sense of control in their work (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995, 2008).

On the basis of the work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990), Spreitzer (1995) defined psychological empowerment as intrinsic task motivation reflecting a sense of control in relation to one's work. She describes it in terms of an orientation to the employee's work role that is manifested in four cognitions: meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact. Meaning refers to the alignment between the demands of one's work role and one's own beliefs, values, and standards. Self-determination is one's sense of having choices concerning the initiation or regulation of one's actions. More specifically, it is a "perceived autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviors and processes such as making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort" (Spreitzer, 1995, p.1443). Competence refers to one's belief in one's capability to perform work activities successfully (e.g., self-efficacy). Finally, impact is one's belief that one can influence strategic, administrative, or operational

activities and outcomes in one's work. Spreitzer (1995) proposed that the highest levels of intrinsic task motivation emerge when all four cognitions are high.

Personal initiative

Today's business environment is characterized by uncertainty, greater competition, and a faster pace of innovation. In order for organizations to thrive, employees need to be adaptive, i.e., responsive to changing job requirements (Parker, 2007; Pulakos *et al.*, 2000; Shin and Kim, 2015). Thus, employees are no longer viewed solely as reactive recipients of job tasks, but proactive participants in defining their job roles and responsibilities to engage in behaviors that foster creativity, innovation, and change (Crant, 2000). The new reality has compelled researchers to suggest that work performance should encompass proactive behavior such as personal initiative (Crant, 2000; Parker, 2007; Griffin *et al.*, 2007; Grant and Ashford, 2008; Fay and Sonnentag, 2002; Pulakos *et al.*, 2000; Frese and Fay, 2001; Frese *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, scholars argue that as work becomes more dynamic, employee engagement in proactive behaviors is becoming a crucial determinant of organizational survival and the ability to sustain competitive advantage (Grant and Ashford, 2008).

Frese *et al.* (1996, p.38) defined personal initiative as a group of behaviors that are "consistent with the organization's mission, long-term focused, goal-directed and action-oriented, persistent in the face of barriers and setbacks, and self-starting and proactive." Parker *et al.* (2010) described 'personal initiative' as one of the most important active work concepts to be introduced into the literature. Indeed, a number of empirical studies and theoretical analyses have suggested that personal initiative can contribute to favorable work outcomes such as organizational effectiveness, creativity and innovation, and career management (Binnewies *et al.*, 2007; Herrmann and Felfe, 2014; Frese and Fay, 2001; Parker *et al.*, 2006; Raabe *et al.*, 2007).

In an overview of several personal initiative studies, Fay and Frese (2001) found that personal initiative as a concept is repeatedly connected to personality dimensions such as need for achievement, psychological conservatism, action orientation, job qualifications, cognitive ability, and job characteristics. It was also found that personal initiative was positively related to control aspirations, self-efficacy, change orientation, active coping, and handling errors. Put differently, taking personal initiative implies the application of a long-term focus and refraining from waiting until one must act in response to a demand or challenge. A long-term approach makes it possible for the individual to consider forthcoming things such as new demands, new problems, and emerging opportunities. It also enables the individual to do something proactive about them. As personal initiative has been linked to positive individual and organizational outcomes (Seibert *et al.*, 2011; Campbell, 2000; Frese *et al.*, 1997; Fischer *et al.*, 2014; Hong *et al.*, 2016; Erdogan *et al.*, 2018), scholarly work has emphasized the importance of creating favorable work environments to encourage and nurture proactive behavior in the workplace (Griffin *et al.*, 2007; Parker *et al.*, 2010). Crant (2000) suggests that factors like job involvement, charge taking, organizational culture, subjective norms and managerial support would all function well as antecedents/correlates to proactive behavior. Moreover, Parker *et al.* (2006) reveal that both change orientation and flexible role orientation are important drivers of personal initiative (see also Sonnentag, 2003; Wihler *et al.*, 2017; Hong *et al.*, 2016).

Psychological empowerment and personal initiative

With the changing nature of work, and hence job roles, practitioners and organizational scholars have started to recognize the importance of psychologically empowered employees. Theoretical and empirical research suggests that empowered employees are more proactive (Crant, 2000; Pulakos *et al.*, 2000), and demonstrate taking charge at work (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Dust *et al.*, 2014; Seibert *et al.*, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 1983). According to Kim *et al.* (2015)

employees who are psychologically empowered at work are more likely to be motivated to utilize the resources and opportunities to bring constructive and functional change to the job.

Cognitions about psychological empowerment represent the resources needed for personal initiatives to be able to occur. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argue that empowerment drives employee initiative and resiliency. More specifically, when employees perceive themselves "as competent and able to influence their jobs and work environments in meaningful ways, they are likely to proactively execute their job responsibilities by, for instance, anticipating problems and acting independently" (Spreitzer, 1995, p.1443). Researchers have shown that under conditions of autonomy, employees are more likely to display a series of proactive behaviors, including problem solving, idea implementation, and role expansion. Kahn (1990) suggested that meaningfulness as a psychological condition serves as an antecedent to personal engagement. Frese and Fay (2001) argue that individuals' expectations and feelings that they control the situation and have an impact on the outcomes are important for personal initiative.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between psychological empowerment perceptions and personal initiative.

Obligation as a mediator

It has recently been questioned to what extent empowerment, seen in isolation, is able to stimulate personal initiative (Fay and Sonnentag, 2002; Frese and Fay, 2001; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2006). Research has started to unravel potential antecedents and correlates of personal initiative. These new findings introduce a whole new complexity and make it imperative to further investigate the underlying mechanisms linking psychological empowerment with personal initiative. For this reason,

there has been a call for more studies that also take into account moderating and mediating effects (Parker *et al.*, 2006; Speier and Frese, 1997). For instance, contextual factors of the work environment have been observed to foster a feeling of obligation, which, in turn, stimulates personal initiative. As partial support for this reasoning, several studies suggest that felt obligation is affected by job autonomy (Dunham *et al.*, 1994; Meyer *et al.*, 1991; Parker, 2007). In addition, there is evidence that factors with a close connection to obligation, such as intention, are able to mediate relations between job autonomy and personal initiative (Shin & Kim, 2015).

When organizations provide the necessary resources (e.g., cognitive, social, material) to perform the job, the employee feels an obligation to use these resources to engage in proactive behavior. Drawing on the notions of change orientation and flexible role orientation (Parker *et al.*, 2006) as antecedents to proactive behavior, it is likely that both involve a feeling of obligation. Personal initiative as a type of proactive behavior involves an attitude of making changes and embracing a flexible orientation. This is conceptually close to "an individual's belief that he or she is personally obligated to bring about constructive change" (Morrison and Phelps, 1999, p.407). In fact, this feeling of being obliged to help the organization to obtain its goals has been identified by Frohman (1997) as an antecedent to taking personal initiative at work.

There are also other reasons why obligation is likely to be related to personal initiative. First, there is an emotional dimension tied to felt obligation that enhances affective activation. This in turn motivates employees to take action to attain the desired outcomes (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1999; Crant, 2000; Hartog and Belschak, 2007). Interestingly, Parker *et al.* (2006) report that felt responsibility for change provides a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment among employees. This most often also results in a positive attitude towards taking charge (see also Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Second, employees who demonstrate a

high degree of obligation often care about the object to which they have made the commitment. As a result, they experience a strong tie to it. Personal initiative is a sort of goal-directed behavior, and employees are likely to exert themselves towards specific goals when influenced by affective commitment (Hartog & Belschak, 2007). Consequently, it is hypothesized that the feeling of obligation explains the relationship between psychological empowerment and personal initiative (Figure 1).

Hypothesis 2: Obligation mediates the relationship between psychological empowerment perceptions and personal initiative.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Method

Research Design and Data Collection

The study was conducted using 402 responses (53% response rate) collected via a web-based survey from employees working at a Swedish multinational corporation operating in the auto industry. The majority of the participants were males with technical education (engineers) and between 25 and 45 years old. The percentage of female respondents (14%) corresponded to the publicly published percentage of female employees working in the technical units in the organization. Before conducting the research study, approval for it was obtained from the management and union representatives in the organization. All responses were collected anonymously. The collected data does not have any missing values because respondents were not able to send their answers if they failed to respond to any of the questions in the survey. To address the issue of non-response, we used the available demographic information (age

and sex) and compared early respondents with late respondents. We did not find statistically significant differences between the two groups.

Variables and Measurement

All measures used a 7-point scale, anchoring from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

Psychological empowerment was measured using its dimensions. Meaningfulness was assessed with three items taken directly from Spreitzer (1995). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .88. Competence was assessed using five items from the short version of the occupational self-efficacy scale developed by Schyns and Collani (2002) to measure job-related self-efficacy. Similar to Spreitzer's (1995) scale (which is borrowed from the self-efficacy scale by Jones (1986)), these items target competence on the individual level. This scale is broader than Spreitzer's, thus allowing an assessment of a broader sense of competence. Internal consistency for this scale is found to be satisfactory (.81). Impact was assessed with four items from Tetrick and LaRocco (1987). The items demonstrate good internal consistency (.82). Self-determination was assessed with three items adapted from the job diagnostic survey (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) and represent the exact three items used by Sprietzer (1995). The scale demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (.60).

Personal initiative was measured by the scale developed by Frese *et al.* (1997). The measure consists of seven items. These same questions were used in previous research and proved to be valid and reliable (see for instance Hong *et al.*, 2016; Wihler *et al.*, 2017). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .88. Six items from the 'felt obligation' scale developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (2001) were used to measure this concept. The scale demonstrates good internal consistency (.86).

Two control variables were included in the study. Age was measured using five categories: 1) 18-24, 2) 25-35, 3) 36-45, 4) 46-55, and 5) 56 or older). Respondents were asked to select their sex: female or male.

The questionnaire was translated from English. Back translation was conducted to ensure the rigorousness of the first translation. Some items were modified to allow for adjustment to the national and local contexts. Examples include replacing the word 'organization' with the name of the firm.

Analysis and Results

Second order analysis

Two methodological issues were assessed before testing the hypotheses. First, since the data are self-reported, the impact of potential detrimental common method bias was checked. Using the software AMOS, and following one of the procedures suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), all items were allowed to load on a common method factor. The loadings of the items from the measurement model remained positive and statistically significant after adding the new latent variable. The second issue concerns the discriminant and convergent validity of the concepts used in the study. To address the second issue, several measurement models were analyzed where the items loaded on their designated concepts in the first model and on different combinations in following models.

Empowerment was treated as a second-order construct consisting of four dimensions, rather than four separate dimensions. This decision is consistent with how we formulated our hypotheses. The results in the appendix (Table A) show that the model with empowerment as a second-order variable represents the best fit. This model was used in an additional analysis

to check if empowerment is empirically distinct from the other two concepts (initiative and obligation perceptions). The results in the appendix (Table B) support the discriminant validity of the three variables. In order to check convergent validity, composite reliability (CR) scores were calculated. Composite reliability (CR) for the latent factors in the study exceeded .77, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. Average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated and ranged between .47 for the second-order latent variable of psychological empowerment and .54 for personal initiative.

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. The bivariate correlation shows that empowerment relates positively, and statistically significantly, to personal initiative and to felt obligation. The same table shows a very weak and statistically not significant relationship between age and empowerment, and between sex and empowerment. Therefore, these two variables were excluded from further analyses.

Insert Table 1 about here

Hypothesis 1 proposes a positive relationship between empowerment perception and personal initiative. Results from structural equation modeling analysis show a positive relationship between the two latent variables representing psychological empowerment and initiative attitude ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$). So, hypothesis 1 is supported.

The second hypothesis is that obligation mediates psychological empowerment's relationship with personal initiative. To test mediation (hypothesis 2), a bootstrapping approach was used. A model where felt obligation fully mediates the proposed relationship (i.e., no direct lines were added between empowerment and personal initiative) was tested

first, followed by a test of a second model where obligation partially mediates the relationship (i.e., a direct relationship from empowerment to initiative was added). Table 2 shows statistical fit results from the two models. The partially mediated model indicates a slightly superior fit. In order to investigate if the partially mediated model represents a statistically better solution, the chi-square comparative test was used. The results indicate that the partially mediated model is better ($\Delta\chi2 = 35.21$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported. In Figure 2, the implications for the links of the conceptual framework are revealed. Table 3 shows the standardized direct, indirect, and total effects of empowerment on personal initiative.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

We also used latent variables representing the concepts in the study (four first-order empowerment dimensions, felt obligation and personal initiative) to explore the relationship between empowerment dimensions and personal initiative. Only competence (β = .51) and meaningfulness (β = .21) show statistically significant positive relationships with personal initiative (p <.01). The results show that only some dimensions of psychological empowerment are associated with taking initiative at work.

To explore if obligation mediates psychological empowerment's relationship with personal initiative, a bootstrapping approach was used. A model where felt obligation fully mediates the postulated relationship (i.e., no direct lines were added between empowerments' components and personal initiative) was tested first, followed by a test of a second model where obligation partially mediates the relationship (i.e., direct relationships from the four dimensions of empowerment to initiative were added). Fit indices from the partially mediated model ($\chi2$ = 709.33, df=335, CMIN/DF = 2.12, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .053, p<.05) indicate slightly better fit compared to the fully mediated model ($\chi2$ = 752.42, df=339, CMIN/DF = 2.22, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .056, p<.05). In order to judge if the partially mediated model represents a statistically better solution, the chi-square comparative test was used. The results indicate that the partially mediated model is better ($\Delta\chi2$ = 43.09, Δdf = 4, p < 0.001). In Figure 3, the implications for the links of the conceptual framework are revealed.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Table 4 shows the standardized direct, indirect, and total effects of empowerment dimensions on personal initiative. Starting with self-determination, no direct or indirect statistically significant relationship is found. For impact, the statistical results show no

statistically significant relationship with personal initiative. Meaningfulness has only an indirect positive relationship with initiative perception. Similarly, competence has both a direct and an indirect positive relationship with the outcome variable. Results from bootstrapping indicate that meaningfulness and competence have both a direct and an indirect relationship with personal initiative. As expected, meaningfulness is mediated by felt obligation. Competence is partially mediated by felt obligation.

Insert Table 4 about here

The results show that empowerment dimensions relate differently to personal initiative. After controlling for the other dimensions of psychological empowerment, self-determination does not relate to personal initiative. Spreitzer et al. (1997) unexpectedly found that managers' self-reported self-determination was not related to the managers' job effectiveness rated by their subordinates. Previous research indicates that autonomy perception signals to employees that they have the ability to take initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). The psychological mechanism explaining this is suggested here to be experienced efficacy (competence) (Bandura, 1997). When employees feel they can (and in fact are able to) make choices, they have a feeling that they are competent to influence outcomes. Autonomy enhances competence feeling (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which in turn helps employees to be proactive.

The bivariate correlation between self-determination and personal initiative is positive and statistically significant ($r = .62$, $p < .01$). This relationship vanishes, however, when testing the model with the four dimensions of empowerment. In order to explore empirically if competence explains this relationship, two additional analyses were conducted.

The first consisted of a model with self-determination as predictor of personal initiative. The second included competence and modelled it as a mediator between self-determination and personal initiative. The structural equation modelling results from the first analysis show that the regression coefficient of self-determination was positive and statistically significant (β = .16, p < .01). The second analysis resulted in a significant drop in the size of this coefficient (β = .02, p > .05). Competence predicted personal initiative in the second analysis (β = .45, p < .001). So, although self-determination's relationship with proactive behavior was not mediated by felt obligation, this analysis shows that competence's relationship may have been (when the other two dimensions of impact and meaningfulness are not included in the model).

The second dimension, impact, denotes perceived control on the job. In this study, limited evidence is found for a relationship between impact and personal initiative. Impact does not relate to felt obligation either. Considering the strong conceptual underpinnings of the relationship between impact and proactive behavior, underlying psychological mechanisms as potential explanations were again considered. Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 70) argue that "feelings of competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation unless accompanied by a sense of autonomy or, in attributional terms, by an internal perceived locus of causality." This perceived "locus of causality" is the perception of control or impact. If employees feel that they have a choice (e.g., to design their job roles) and they can in fact steer their jobs towards the desired outcomes (i.e., they do have an impact or influence on outcomes), this will give them confidence in their abilities and skills.

Empirically, competence's mediational role in the relationship between self-determination, impact, and personal initiative was investigated by carrying out two additional analyses. First, a structural model that has self-determination and competence as two co-varied components of psychological empowerment was tested. The concepts of self-determination (autonomy) and impact (control) are closely related and were therefore allowed

to correlate. The results show that only impact has a positive and significant relationship with personal initiative ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$). Self-determination does not. Second, competence was added to the analysis as a mediator. This addition resulted in a significant drop in the magnitude of impact's coefficient on personal initiative ($\beta = .01$, $p > .05$). Based on these analyses, it is suggested that competence mediates the relationship between these two empowerment components (self-determination and impact) and proactive behavior.

Breaking down the total effect of the two psychological empowerment dimensions, meaningfulness and competence, into direct and indirect (Table 4) shows that felt obligation mediates the relationship between them and personal initiative. This result is expected and consistent with previous research suggesting that perceptions of meaningfulness and competence constitute psychological resources (e.g., Simbula *et al.*, 2011; Chikoko *et al.*, 2014; Jerusalem *et al.*, 1992).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore felt obligation as a mediator between psychological empowerment and personal initiative in a Scandinavian multinational organization. Building on different theoretical perspectives on proactive behavior, mechanisms for how the feeling of obligation may explain the empowerment-initiative relationship are suggested. Thus, the study contributes to the understanding of how psychological empowerment's dimensions contribute to personal initiative.

The first hypothesis argued that there would be a positive relationship between psychological empowerment and personal initiative. The results demonstrated that psychological empowerment was important for enhancing proactive behavior at work. Our second order analysis thus supported the first hypothesis. However, the results from our first order analysis showed that empowerment dimensions relate differently to personal initiative.

Competence and meaningfulness correlated reliably with personal initiative, while self-determination (autonomy) and impact (control) did not. Competence was also found to drive employee personal initiative as suggested by previous research (Crant, 2000; Parker *et al.*, 2006). In addition, competence functioned as a cognitive mechanism explaining how self-determination and impact related to personal initiative.

Our second order analysis also confirmed hypothesis 2, which is that the feeling of obligation mediates the relationship between psychological empowerment and personal initiative. Seen in isolation, these findings corroborated Spreitzer's (1995) conceptualization of psychological empowerment as a single second-order concept made up of the four cognitions. However, our first order analysis uncovered the mechanisms through which empowerment relates to personal initiative on a more detailed level. Contrary to expectations, felt obligation only mediated the relationship between personal initiative and the two dimensions of meaningfulness and competence. It is not surprising that the dimension of meaning was mediated by felt obligation. Meaning constitutes the "engine" of empowerment and is therefore essential to employees' ability to get energized in their work life. It has therefore been described as the most important of the four dimensions (Wang and Lee, 2009). If employees' hearts are not involved in their work tasks, they surely will not be empowered. The same logic applies to their value systems. Hence, felt obligation appears to have had an impact on this important emotional side of empowerment. The fact that felt obligation was also able to mediate competence suggests an influence of the former factor over employees' beliefs about whether they have the capacity to do their job well. Obviously, felt obligation has the potential to influence employees' confidence in their skills, leading to a strengthened sense of empowerment. Without the feeling of obligation there is a risk that employees will perceive themselves as less adequate in their work life. The notion that felt obligation mediated neither self-determination nor impact suggests that employees' potential to see

themselves as the origin of their actions or alternatively as vital to the organization appears to have very little support from factors like felt obligation or normative/organizational commitment. To sum up, the study reveals dual mediations that explain how empowerment and proactive behavior are linked. As such, it contributes to the scant research investigating the cognitive processes underlying proactive behavior (e.g., Shin and Kim, 2015). These results shed light on the mechanisms underlying the empowerment-initiative relationships and thus respond to prior research calls (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Whitaker and Westerman, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2010).

The findings have several important theoretical implications. They contribute to the literature on empowerment, as well as to the literature on obligation/commitment and pro-active behavior/personal initiative. The conclusions of the study extend previous research on proactive behavior as part of work performance. By investigating personal initiative, as an important form of proactive behavior, this study emphasizes current organizational demands for adaptive and flexible employees (e.g., Parker, 2007; Frese & Fay, 2001; Crant, 2000). Moreover, the study extends recent research on the positive outcomes of psychological empowerment (Dust *et al.*, 2014; Jin-Liang and Hai-Zhen, 2012; Whitaker and Westerman, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). By fostering employees' senses of autonomy, control, meaningfulness and competence, organizations enable employees to engage in proactive behavior. Ethical leadership can often impact follower discretionary work behavior positively, such as extra-role behavior. This is most often achieved through felt obligation (Eisenbeiss and Knippenberg, 2015). Furthermore, the role of obligation as a cognitive mediator was conceptualized and empirically investigated. In this capacity, the findings extend recent attempts (Shin and Kim, 2015; Parker *et al.*, 2010) to understand the cognitive motivations linking contextual and individual resources to employees' proactive behavior. The implication of the results is that organizational interventions that focus on the

psychological empowerment of employees (especially meaningfulness and competence) will contribute to personal initiatives. In this context, felt obligation will most likely play a positive part. If uncertainty is high, it then becomes crucial for organizations to attend to the psychological empowerment of employees. The study also contributes to knowledge about the conditions that precede personal initiatives made by employees, and shows that dimensions of psychological empowerment play an important role in this regard.

Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) have argued that the four dimensions of empowerment (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact) are only able to function together as an antecedent. Our second order analysis provided support for this conceptualization of a single second-order construct made up of the four cognitions. However, our first order analysis questioned this position, since personal initiative was not able to capitalize equally on each dimension, and felt obligation mediated each dimension differently. We thus argue that the dimensions to some degree can be conceptualized both as antecedents and as outcomes rather than as properties of empowerment itself (Liden and Tewksbury, 1995). This interpretation explains why felt obligation did not mediate all empowerment dimensions to the same extent. Recent research implies that the classical conceptualization of psychological empowerment may not be adequate and that other alternatives to the conceptualized reflective measurement model may prove to be valid (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018).

The findings also have several important practical implications. Established research suggests that making employees feel more powerful is an important feature of leaders' ability to influence their own organization (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Hence, the practice of empowering others is an important driver of organizational effectiveness. This is especially apparent in organizations during times of change and transformation. There is also a close connection between purposeful organizational power and the sharing of power with employees (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Our findings suggest that leaders particularly should

engage in fostering such capabilities as meaningfulness and competence among their employees together with obligation in order to stimulate personal initiative. It seems that whereas these aspects of empowerment enable personal initiative, felt obligation directs attention and cognitive resources towards the needs of the organization. It is also possible to assume that meaningfulness and competence are able to involve obligation while the other empowerment dimensions are not.

However, it is important for employees to realize that both meaningfulness and competence are aspects of empowerment that they themselves must also strive to obtain (Crant, 2000; Shin & Kim, 2015). Otherwise, they will most likely miss opportunities to take responsibility for action, or to take initiative to solve problems, improve processes, and give the organization a competitive edge. By empowering themselves to achieve success and satisfaction in their work lives, employees will be able to help their organization to be more effective. This will also potentially make their jobs more interesting, motivating, and rewarding. As a result, they will probably also become more valuable to their organization. Self-empowering will, in addition, most likely lead to the employees being better able to recognize and overcome barriers to taking initiative.

The present study is not without limitations. First, cross-sectional data does not enable identification of causal relationships. Second, with single-source data for dependent and independent variables there is a risk of common method bias (CMB). However, in line with the recommendation by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), the measures of the predictor and outcome variables were separated to minimize potential weaknesses in the design. Also, the performed confirmatory factor analyses (measurement models) supported that the concepts were distinct. Furthermore, the results from common method factor analysis suggested that same-source bias is not a concern in the study. Another limitation is that some of the items used are not completely identical to those proposed by Spreitzer. Nevertheless, all the items

conceptually reflect the theoretical concepts investigated and the original scales. Taking these presented limitations into account, the findings could nonetheless be used to develop further explanatory mechanisms related to organizational climate and personal initiative. Empowerment and felt obligation should be included in future efforts to build a general theory of sources of proactive behavior in contemporary organizations. Scholars know little about whether the functionality of the variables will be context-specific or will vary across contexts. For this reason, more longitudinal and context studies are called for. Future research should also test the functionality of these variables in more diverse populations.

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FIGURE 1

Felt Obligation as a Mediator of the Relationship between Psychological
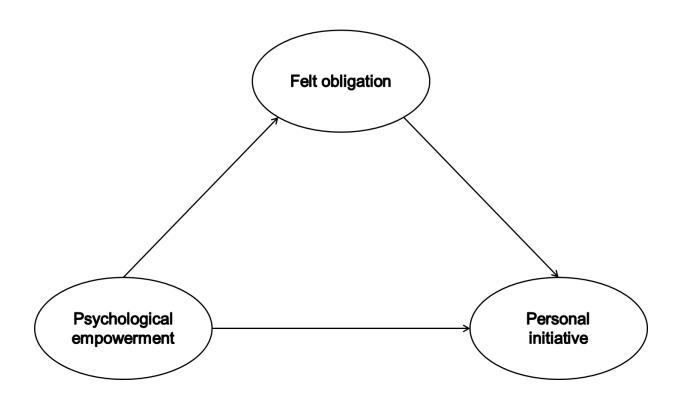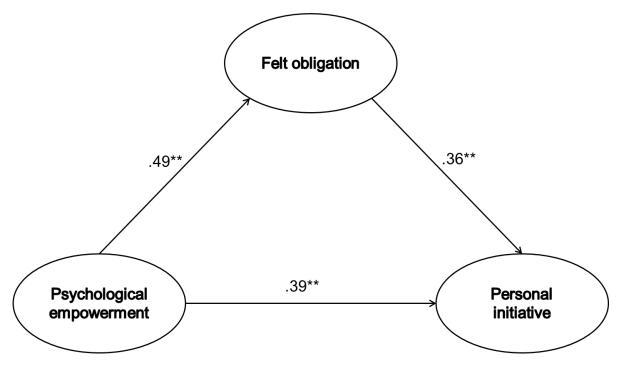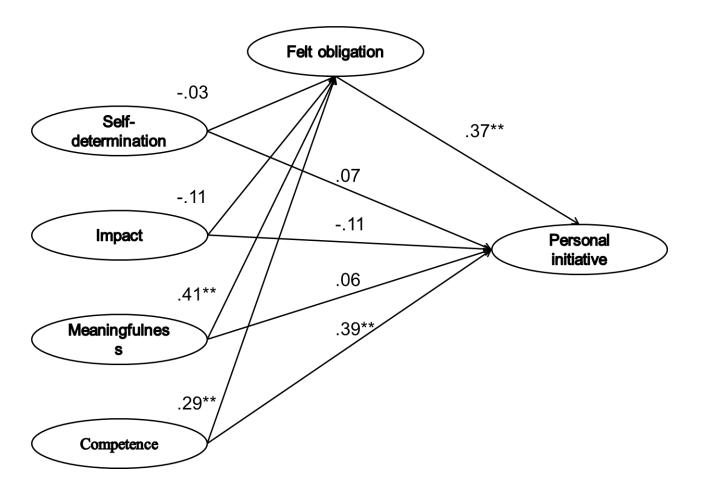
Empowerment and Personal Initiative

FIGURE 2

Felt Obligation as a Mediator

Felt obligation

.49**

.36**

Psychological
empowerment

.39**

Personal
initiative

*Note. **p<.01*

FIGURE 3

Felt Obligation as a Mediator

Note: Standardized regression coefficients. Covariations between psychological empowerment components are excluded from the figure.