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Work Motivation, Personality, and Culture: Comparing Australia and India

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Abstract

The influences of motivation and personality in relation to performance have been examined extensively in the research literature, but there has been only limited attention given to the influence of these facets on performance across cultures. There is an increasing use of international resources and alliances aimed at better economic management in many global companies, but more needs to be known about how cultural issues are related to individual motivation, personality and perceptions of performance. Moreover, there are several theories of motivation, but the transferability of these theories to different cultures has been questioned. Thus, a model of motivation, personality characteristics and cultural differences influencing performance is proposed and will be tested in a cross-cultural comparison. Specifically, motivational influences, personality characteristics and cultural differences in Australia and India will be examined in relation to performance in two contexts, the first, in the educational setting dealing with students and their attitudes and approaches, and the second, in the workplace setting dealing with workers in their attitudes and approaches. It is hoped the findings will have both theoretical implications for the model of motivation-personality-culture- performance and practical implications for selection, training, development and compensation in dealing with a global workforce. The current paper reports the main basis for the research to come, outlining the importance of understanding the India-Australia similarities and differences in personality and motivation, and indicates what the implications for cross-cultural relationships are.

There is an increasing use of international resources and alliances aimed at better economic management in many global companies, but more needs to be known about how cultural issues are related to individual motivation, personality and perceptions of performance. While it is known that individual differences and motivation are closely linked to human resource performance, what motivates one person may not motivate another and although several theories of motivation exist, the transferability of these theories to different cultures has been questioned (Hodgetts, Luthans, & Doh, 2006; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1993; Newman & Nollen, 1996; Townsend & Wrathall, 1997). Another point to consider as posited by Steers, Mowday, and Shapiro (2004) is that certain areas of management research such as leadership, groups and teams, decision making and negotiation are being conceptually developed, but theoretical development of work motivation has been left behind. It is also clear that, while theoretical development of work motivation has stagnated, organizational structure and processes have witnessed several dramatic changes. The workforce today is characterized by increased diversity; business process outsourcing has become quite common; and the challenge of managing across borders has become more pertinent. Steers et al. also foresee that in the future companies will compete on the basis of quality of technology and quality of human resources, making a motivated workforce an asset that provides a competitive edge. Research into motivation is therefore more important than ever. The study of work motivation is closely related to the study of individual differences as individuals in the workplace can differ in the ways they respond to motivational practices (Porter, Bigley, & Steers, 2003). Therefore, we have proposed and are developing a new model of work motivation commensurate with the changes in the workforce and incorporating the influences of culture and individual differences. This paper reports the foundation for future research to come.

New Directions in Work Motivation Research

Kanfer, Chen, and Pritchard (2008) postulated that progress in work motivation research needed to include a better understanding of the content of work motivation, an enhanced insight into how motivational constructs and processes operated across the working life-span and how the context in which people live and work influences the content and function of work motivation. Kanfer et al. proposed the three C's framework for work motivation research: content, context and change. Content refers to the influences of relatively stable individual differences which lead to differences in actions, settings and strategies. Context refers to the influence of various settings in which work takes place such as the larger sociocultural context or the organizational context. Change refers to the influence of time on work motivation as motivation is a dynamic process. Kanfer (2009) proposed that over the life-span, participation in the workforce may span up to five decades and during this time individuals develop and mature, and learn new skills and strategies, which needs to be captured in work motivation models. Kanfer suggested that researchers needed to use various methodologies to triangulate person-situation interactions that are most influential for work motivation and performance. Congruent with the suggestions of Kanfer et al. (2008) and Kanfer (2009), the model we propose incorporates the influences of content (individual differences), context (culture) and change, on work motivation.

Comparing Cultures: Why Australia and India?

Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2008) stated that Australia and India were natural partners due to several similarities between the countries and that the full potential of the partnership was yet to be developed. The similarities between India and Australia include that both countries are the two biggest democracies in the Asia-Pacific region, share a colonial past, enjoy a free press and an independent judicial system, and both countries share English as the main language of commerce and industry (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 1998). Despite several similarities, the two countries are also very different: Australia's population is 21,779,00 whereas India's population is 1,156,897,766 (The World Bank, 2009). Australia is classified as a developed nation with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 1,015.22 (US\$ billions), while India is classified as a developing nation with a GDP of 1,217.49 (US\$ billions) [The World Bank, 2009]. Therefore, a comparative study of Australia and India should reveal interesting information due to the commonalities and the differences between the two countries.

Relations between Australia and India were slow to develop even though the first trade link between Australia and India was established as early as 1893 when Australia imported camels from India to work in the outback. Coal was one of the earliest exports to India. Indian workers were also recruited to work in Queensland's cane fields and fruit plantations. However, neither country's government made any serious effort to encourage trade development (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 1998). Conversely, the last few years have seen a salient increase in trade relations between Australia and India (Hebbani, 2008). Kevin Rudd (2008) stated that India was Australia's fastest growing major export market, and that investments between Australia and India were also increasing. With regards to the service industry, Australia was the second most popular destination for Indian students and tourism between the countries was also growing rapidly with India being Australia's second-fastest growing tourism market. Chief Economist, Australian Trade Commission, Harcourt (2007) explained that one reason why India was a lucrative market was because India has a growing middle class of 300 million people with a growing purchasing power of approximately AUD \$85 billion. Another reason, according to Moignard (2008), Austrade's Senior Trade Commissioner for India, was that structural reforms over the past decade have aided India to become one of the fastest growing, developing economies. Parakala (2008), KPMG Australia's India Business Practice National Leader, stated that opportunities in India were emerging in the power sector, the transport sector, ports, airports and railways. However, Parakala cautioned that Australian businesses needed to move fast as they faced competition from companies from the USA, UK and Spain. Given the current emphasis on global diversity in the workplace, gaining a competitive edge was expected to require being aware of values underlying cultures, understanding basic cultural differences and respecting these differences (Hebbani, 2008).

Cultural and Cross-Cultural Psychology

In psychology studies, there are two main approaches regarding the role of culture: Cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology. In cross-cultural psychology, the generalizability of existing theories is tested in various cultures with the aim of developing a universal model which can predict human behaviour. In the cross-cultural approach culture is treated as an independent variable. For example, McCrae and Costa (1997) tested the validity of the Big Five personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) across six different cultures. In contrast, cultural psychologists derive culture specific procedures for each culture and cross-cultural comparison is not the focus of the studies. The main aim of cultural psychology is to identify the cultural foundations of psychological processes. For example, in order to assess cognitive skills Greenfield (2000) developed a task based on weaving specifically for the indigenous Maya community, as weaving was a culturally familiar activity for the community (Miller, 2002). Miller suggested that future research involving culture and psychology needed to take into account culturally based concepts, categories occurring naturally in cultures, and everyday cultural practices. Miller further suggested that in order to gain insight into culturally based concepts researchers needed to analyse open-ended free response data or naturally occurring conversational routines. We have planned to incorporate the aims and methodologies of both cross-cultural and cultural approaches in our study. In phase one of the study, semi-structured interviews will help identify what motivates people and what are the desired personality traits in each culture (congruent with the suggestions of Miller). Based on the interview responses and past literature, in phase two of the study reliable and valid instruments will be chosen to collect data for more extensive analyses. Specifically, motivational influences, personality characteristics and cultural differences in Australia and India in relation to performance will be examined in two contexts: first, in an educational setting dealing with students; and, second, in a work place setting dealing with workers. A comparison between the students and employees will throw light on changing attitudes in work motivation across time.

We hope the studies conducted will add to the theoretical development of work motivation including across cultures and will add to the body of knowledge in the area. The differences in sources of motivation, worker personality characteristics and cultural differences will have utility to expatriate managers in both countries. The findings should also be useful for organizations setting up base in either country as it can guide selection and recruitment of staff, areas for training and development, and reward systems most likely to be successful.

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