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## Romanian Employees' Folk Theory on Work: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

The study explores folk theory on work culture as seen by Romanian employees (N=146). Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to find answers to the following questions: 1) Which are the main qualities and flaws of Romanian workers? 2) What distinguishes the Romanians by others in terms of working style? The results show that the main categories describing qualities of Romanian working style are hardworking, cleverness, multitasking and creativity, while the main flaws are: “sloppy work”, lack of discipline, laziness and multi-qualification. The findings are discussed in the light of within-culture approach, along with limitations and directions for future research.

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*Keywords:* folk theory; work culture; Romanian employees; working style

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### 1. Introduction

Although the topic of work values is widely researched, little is known about work culture in Eastern Europe, and even less in Romania, a country where a mixture of traditional, modernist and postmodernist characteristics can be identified (Voicu, 2005). Lotze (2004, pp. 10-11) defines work culture as both “the set of assumptions, understandings, and beliefs shared by a working community that manifests itself with clear and distinct patterns of interaction in a particular workplace” and “as the common sense that a worker brings to work.” Furthermore, Ferri-Reed (2014) points out that the new generations of employees have different expectations related to work culture, in a direction of open and transparent working environments and a higher need for dialog and feedback. Starting with Hofstede (1980) seminal work, the variance of working values and behavior across cultures has been widely acknowledged by scholars. The main assumption underlying the cultural variation of work patterns and believes is

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the direct link between culture and the individuals' conceptualization and behavior, meaning that people may have different perceptions of work, depending on their exposure to a particular cultural context (Hansen and Brooks, 1994).

The topic of work culture has been scarcely researched in Romania, a former communist Eastern European country. Both flaws and qualities, with a prevalence of shortcomings have been found to define the working patterns in this specific cultural context (Boia, 2001; Drăghicescu, 1907; Heintz, 2002). A classic work in Romanian psychology (Drăghicescu, 1907, p. 382) shows that a "lack of discipline, order, method, regularity, the intermittent, irregular and sporadic way of working were preserved almost intact in Romanian nature." In addition to this rather negative portrait, Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy - RIES (2010) reports that 76% of Romanian employees would accept a job for which they are overqualified, 75% would accept a job that required overtime, and 56% percent would accept a low wage, below their expectations. Surprisingly, 85% of employees are satisfied with working hours and 59% are satisfied with the salary. As concluded by the RIES' researchers, it can be assumed that the Romanian work culture is still in its "primitive" phase, while "the social conscience is pre-modern, time does not mean money and work is not valued as an important source for success and prestige" (RIES, 2010, p. 3).

In order to explore some of the constituents of Romanian work culture, an exploratory study may be a useful approach to identify the categories used by Romanian employees when referring to work. A combined emic-etic perspective is seen by scholars as a best practice when investigating culture-driven constructs, within a single culture or across cultures (Caramelli and van de Vijver, 2013). Consequently, in order to explore inner-culture insights on work culture and work behavior among Romanian employees, folk theories have been considered as an appropriate framework. The term folk theory is based on anthropological and ethnographic research, being synonymous with implicit, naive, common sense, intuitive theory (Buzea, 2010; Hong, Levy, and Chiu, 2001). Along with the term "lay theory", folk theory is used to label common sense knowledge which includes wisdom and day by day experience. As Hong, Levy and Chiu (2001, p. 99) pointed out, "like scientific theories, lay theories serve the epistemic function of sense making" and "may contain a set of propositions that are coherently organized into an integrated causal structure or meaning system". Folk theories are phenomenological constructions, which lack some relevance regarding the measurement of their correctness or truth; more importantly, folk theories provide a perception of truth (Levy, Chiu, and Hong, 2006).

## **2. Objectives and Hypotheses**

Considering folk theory as a useful framework to explore some of the constituents of Romanian work culture, the current study addresses the following questions: 1) What are the main qualities of Romanian workers? 2) Which are the main flaws of Romanian workers? 3) What distinguishes the Romanians by others in terms of working style?

## **3. Method**

The purposive sampling procedure has been used in order to identify participants in the study (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Based on a minimum of two years' work experience criterion, 146 employees were selected from Brasov, an industrialized and touristic county located in the center of Romania. Ninety-three interviews were conducted and the initial number of interviews has been supplemented up until the saturation point for each category was reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Recruitment of the participants was performed by students enrolled in social science courses, using their personal networks (friends, parents, relatives). Semi-structured interviews were conducted by researcher and trained students, all interviews being recorded and fully transcribed. The interviewers followed an interview protocol; whenever necessary, during the interview, respondents were encouraged to elaborate and develop on their answers. The data analysis was performed by the author using the NVIVO software. Thus, in the first stage each interview was divided according to the three subjects: qualities and flaws of Romanian employees, and distinctive features of the working style when compared with others. Second, the text was examined in order to discover meanings, differences and similarities. Third, using open and axial coding procedures, text-driven categories and subcategories describing the inquiries under study were identified. A category was considered saturated when no new information seemed to emerge during coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A test of inter-

coder reliability was conducted for 20% of interviews (29 interviews were re-coded by a second coder), resulting in 87% inter-coder reliability (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

#### 4. Results

The main categories describing qualities of Romanian working style are: hardworking, cleverness, multitasking and creativity. Romanians are seen as people who work assiduously and invest impressive effort to achieve their goals: “Romanians are very hard working, and as long as they are trained, they are exceptional people and employees. They try to do their job as good as they can and don’t give back when hard tasks has to be performed” (male, 43 years old, engineer). The hardworking seems to be more obvious when Romanians are working abroad: “I saw that Romanians when working abroad are highly appreciated for what they do. They are hardworking, are skilled in multiple fields, and are serious. Instead, when they are at their home, in their country, they act as different people. Often, they have an opposite behavior... I do not know what would be the motivation, may be financial, it may be the money that makes them so different when working abroad, but for me is clear that in their country they are not the same people” (female, 52, accountant). This difference between the local workforce and emigrants is not surprising. After 1990, a large number of Romanians left the country looking for better job opportunities mostly in Spain, Italy or Germany. Although recent statistics (National Institute of Statistics, 2013) indicate that there are 727,500 Romanian emigrants, the same official sources point out that there is a “significant sub-recording” of this category in the last census from 2011. However, unofficial sources cited by mass-media estimate the number of Romanian emigrants to be around 3,000,000. The difference in working pattern and attitude between Romanians working abroad and those employed in Romania was explained by respondents based on two subcategories: better financial reward and pride as a general feature. Thus, Romanians try to prove that they are “better, smarter and they worth every penny” (male, 32, construction worker).

Cleverness is another category used to describe the Romanian workers: “the Romanians are smart, find solutions quickly, and accumulate knowledge. They are able to handle complicated situations and have an impressive adaptability. They are taught to manage thinks by themselves, because they know that nobody will take care in their place” (female, 28 years old, gymnasium teacher). The Romanians cleverness is seen as the capacity to use and bring resources, and to find new ways to resolve issues. In this respect, the cleverness is perceived by some respondents also as a negative trait, when ingenuity is use to reduce work effort: “every time when possible, the Romanian workers try to find easy ways to obtain results, using their intelligence and inventiveness, but often in doing so, the rules are broken and the quality is affected” (male, 68, retired). Although the capacity of performing multiple task and having knowledge and skills from different fields is considered both a quality and a flaw, most of participants consider that this characteristic brings advantages when comparing with employees from other countries: “I am a baker, but I can also work as bricklayer, I can drive a car, and I can fix the car when needed” (male, 37, baker); “they are good at many things, they know how to do almost everything. Look, in a factory, in production, a Romanian employee knows all the operations, starting from product design and ending with execution... or he/she knew it, because nowadays the education is no longer as it should be” (male, 58, mechanic).

A third main positive category is creativity or the capacity to apply inventive ways to perform the tasks with greater success: “when things seem to stiffen, Romanians find unexpected solutions, they are creative, and bring new ideas. See the information technology field or another field where Romanians are highly appreciated. I believe that this creativity was born from our need to resolve issues without resources or with scarce ones” (female, 35, lawyer). Creativity is considered as close related to cleverness, both being transformed in weaknesses when the goal is to avoid work or to shorten the work time by not following the procedures.

The multi-qualification is perceived by some respondents as a reminiscence of the communist working pattern, expressed by the model of the multi-dimensional worker trained to perform many tasks, without a proper specialization in a particular field: “We are involved in too many activities and none will go all the way right. Abroad, at least in Western countries, each person is specialized in a particular activity within a company or in a particular sector. We, unfortunately, in many companies, are involved in several sectors. For example, a person perform human resources activities, is also the manager’ assistant, works for purchasing sector and may do basic accounting activities. While in Western countries, I think, every person is in charge of a specific activity. We believe

that we are good at all, but many of us do sloppy work” (female, 42, waitress). The other negative traits refer to “sloppy work”, and the lack of discipline. The sloppy work (*munca de mântuială*) is seen as the lack of attention to details and quality. Again, this trait is seen mostly by older employees as a result of the communist working patterns, when quantity was considered more important than quality. This characteristic is resumed by the widespread Romanian phrase “no need to make it better” (“merge și așa”): “We have a problem with work discipline, meeting deadlines and keeping promises. Romanians are very inventive, they quickly find solutions, but they do everything in a hurry. When you have to follow some structure, to respect some procedures, some work instructions... We first mount something and then we take the book to see how it should be done... and we wonder that some extra screws are left aside... you know, like these are Romanians” (male, 29, engineer).

Although hardworking was listed as a positive trait, its opposite, the laziness is viewed by most of respondents as an important weakness. This characteristic is associated with the Balkan historical influence: “they believe as all Balkan people that long and frequent breaks are the main key to success... and it is also the classic style to leave an action from today to be done tomorrow, hoping that maybe tomorrow, who knows, maybe a miracle happens and not have to do it. Romanians are lazy. Many want to make fortunes, doing nothing.” (female, 48, IT specialist).

When compared to others, the traits seen as distinctive for Romanian workers are skills and handiness due to Romanian education system and a higher need for achievement. The main negative traits are the difficulties to meet deadlines and inconsistency in work behavior. All this features may be considered as subcategories of the folk theory describing the Romanian working style.

## 5. Discussion

The folk theory on Romanians’ working culture seems to have a dynamic core characterized by a mix of strengths and weaknesses, qualities and flaws. It can be seen that there is a thin demarcation between positive and negative traits, in the sense that a positive feature might be easily transformed into a flaw. Thus, multitasking and multi-qualification are viewed both as a positive and negative features, the first associated with efficiency and the second with the lack of quality. Similarly, cleverness and creativity might be easily transformed in weaknesses when the goal is to reduce work effort or to obtain quick results with less effort. Furthermore, the dual structure of the folk theories on work culture is completed by two opposite features: hardworking and laziness. The figure 1 summarizes the main attributes of the Romanian employees’ working pattern and highlights its dual design.

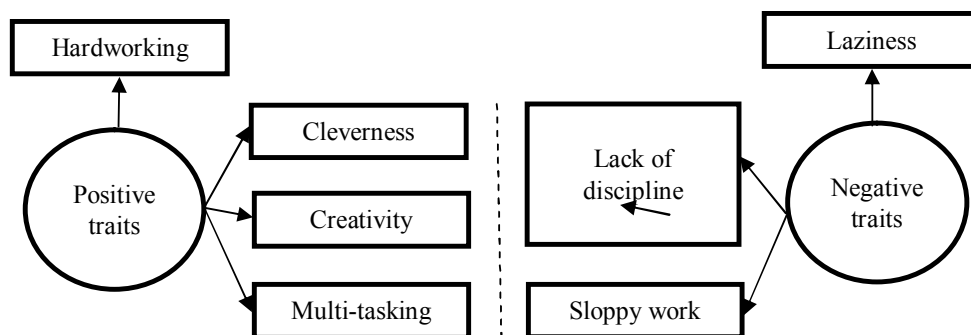


Figure 1. Categories of Romanian employees’ folk theory on work

Some of qualities and flaws identified by the current study are consistent with prior findings. Intelligence and creativity have been identified by a recent study on Romanian employees’ cultural profile (Bodea, 2011) as the third and fourth key features of Romanians’ collective identity, after family/hospitality and freedom. Some of the

weaknesses as the lack of work discipline are consistent with Heintz's results when investigated Romanians work ethics. Heintz (2002) points out that Romanians lack the time discipline with negative effects on work productivity and business in general. From a different point of view, the decreased attention to details and the work indiscipline might be considered as side effects of the political pressure during the communist regime to increase work productivity. Prior to 1989, the management's aim was to increase productivity in order to be able to report the expected results, and this approach led to lower quality standards (Voicu, B., 2005).

The lack of research concerning work culture in Romania generates difficulties in analyzing the results in a broader context. However, using folk theory to explore work culture dimensions from an emic perspective adds to the literature in two ways. First, from a methodological perspective, collecting folk theories could be a useful approach for capturing meanings and insights when developing within-culture studies. Second, the results might be illustrative, given the lack of research on this topic in Romania and in other former communist Eastern European countries. However, the results of this study should be considered with regard to several limitations. The sample size and structure along with the recruiting processes (carried on mainly in Transylvania, a historical region with distinctive characteristics) brings limitations in capturing the variability of categories. Furthermore, only limited dimensions of work culture were investigated; future research might broaden the inquiry by including additional elements. Since previous research suggested that work attitudes vary between employees from different parts of Romania (Boia, 2001), future research could develop such cross-regional comparisons.

Based on the insights that have emerged from the current study, further research could extend the investigated components of work culture concept and develop mixed-method approaches in order to test and the findings.

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