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Eastern and western happiness in work behavior

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to clarify what motivates East Asian work behavior. The research question is: How can a Western manager better understand work behavior and motivation in East Asian cultures? Knowledge about national culture, motivation and the concept of happiness are connected via deductive and comparative methods, while pointing out their new connections and relations. We argue that work motivation in East Asian cultures can be explained using the self-concept-based motivation meta-theory as it corresponds to the East Asian concept of face and that the East Asian self-concept originates with the Eastern concept of happiness.

KEY WORDS

eastern culture, western culture, work behavior, motivation, happiness

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1 INTRODUCTION

The research question addressed in this paper is to determine how a Western manager can better understand work behavior in East Asian cultures and the motivation behind it. Western cultures are meant to be countries influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, namely European and North American countries. East Asian cultures are countries influenced by traditional Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism. In particular, this includes East Asian countries with China being the main and typical representative thereof (Nisbett, 2003).

Questions regarding human resource management in the East Asian region remain important today. Despite the fact that the amount of literature focused on management in this area is increasing, further research toward understanding the regional elements of human resource management is required (Budhwar et al., 2016). China is the most important economy in the East Asian region. The more important China is in the global economy, the more important it is to understand the Chinese way of thinking (Rarick, 2009). At the same time, Redding (1993) points out that it is very difficult for Western people to understand how strongly Chinese tradition influences the everyday life of the Chinese. Regardless of historic events, traditional Chinese culture is very much alive. In order to understand Chinese organization, it is first necessary to grasp its basic unit – the Chinese individual. China significantly differs from Western countries culturally, socially, politically, and also with respect to its system of economy (Stening & Zhang, 2007). Mainly the challenge of managing people remains under the strong influence of traditional Chinese culture.

National culture is one of the dominant factors that should be taken into account while managing an organization and its workers (Thomas & Peterson, 2014; Moran et al., 2014). National culture is manifested as the predominant ways of doing things and socioeconomic traditions that are effective at the macroeconomic level of an organization (Budhwar et al., 2016). At the organizational level, it is possible to see the distribution of power and the nature of social relations or communication channels. These phenomena, however, are controlled by shared values, biased propositions, and timeless self-evident truths, which are conditioned by national culture. Culturally conditioned socially psychological specifics are historically deeply rooted and practically unchangeable (Nisbett et al., 2001).

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Steers and Sanchez-Runde (2002) claim that a person's national culture conditions three groups of factors, which influence work behavior and the motivation of its members: (a) people's self-concept, including personal beliefs, needs and values; (b) norms connected to work ethics and the essence of achievement, and (c) factors connected to the environment, such as the course of socialization and education. These groups of factors influence individuals' confidence in self-efficacy, the level of work motivation, and also what are motivators and demotivators which influence the work motivation of an individual.

2 APPLICATION OF THE SELF-CONCEPT-BASED MOTIVATION META-THEORY TO EAST ASIAN CULTURES

Based on findings made by Steers and Sanchez-Runde (2002), it can be inferred that the self-concept-based motivation meta-theory (Leonard et al., 1999) can be applied to explain work motivation in China and culturally close East Asian countries due to the fact that it takes into account factors, whose importance is firmly embedded in Chinese culture. Based on this meta-theory, an individual's self-concept is formed by three interconnected components: perceived self, ideal self, and a set of social identities.

One's perceived self represents a set of notions that an individual has of their attributes, abilities and values, which determine their behavior. An individual forms this perceived self either by comparing himself to others or by setting his own criteria and goals, and assesses whether or not he has achieved them. The ideal self is determined by such attributes, abilities and the values an individual would like to have because he considers them to be ideal. Social identities are those aspects of self-concept that are inferred from social categories, a part of which this individual considers themselves to be (e.g. man, son, manager, etc.). Social identities help individuals determine who they are.

One's self-concept is formed through interaction with social surroundings, which provides an individual with feedback. The concept of the ideal self is formed through contact with the reference group of the given individual, i.e. a group whose values and norms this individual takes on. Individuals consider the norms and values of their reference groups as ideal and adapt their attributes to them in order to receive positive feedback. This reference group can also be a work group, in which a particular individual belongs. Reference groups also influence the formation of individuals' social identities. They create expectations, norms and relational scenarios, which determine individuals' behavior in regards to their particular social identity.

Man has the need to maintain and improve the inner picture of himself and to act in accordance with how he perceives himself, thereby affecting his self-concept. It means that he chooses behavior that gives rise to positive feedback within the context of the given individual's social surroundings. In that case, their self-concept is controlled from the outside. At the same time, individuals create their own inner standards, which correspond to their ideal self. In that case, their self-concept is controlled internally. For various individuals, it is also important to know how they are evaluated by their social surroundings and how close they are to attaining their ideal self. The way an individual is perceived by their social surroundings, (i.e. the external self-concept of an individual) and the way they perceive themselves (i.e. their internal self-concept) are some of the strongest motivators. As the self-concept of an individual is formed based on interactions with their social surroundings, which reflect those values and norms considered as ideal, it is obvious that an individual's self-concept is dramatically influenced by the national culture in which he lives, since values and norms are culture-specific.

According to the self-concept-based motivation meta-theory, there are five basic sources of motivation: inner satisfaction, outer rewards, identification with goals, external self-concept, and internal self-concept. For various individuals these basic motivators have different importance, but for each individual one of them is dominant. The finding that an individual chooses behavior that induces positive feedback from the person's social surroundings is crucial in understanding what motivates work behavior in China and other East Asian cultures. The basic characteristics of traditional Chinese thinking are explained in the next part of this paper, as well as key values that prove that the position of individuals in the social relations network is of great importance in this culture. Awareness of traditional Chinese thinking and values is necessary to understand the most significant sources of motivation in Confucianism-influenced cultures.

3 TRADITIONAL CHINESE THINKING AND SELF-CONCEPT

Traditional Chinese thinking has three significant characteristics (Yuan, 2013), which can be hard to imagine for people with a Western type of thinking. These three characteristics and their Western counterparts are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Chinese and Western thinking

Characteristics of thinking	
Chinese	Western
Naive and holistic	Abstract and scientific
Fuzzy and processual	Binary and static
Indirect and long-term	Direct and short-term

Source: own research

Naive Chinese thinking is subjective, relational, and specific. It pertains to a specific phenomenon or situation which is perceived in a complicated structure of relations, and contains holistic and ambiguous phenomena. Western thinking is scientific, abstract, and oriented to measurable aspects of “unambiguous truth”, while the Chinese have no such concept. Chinese thinking lays an emphasis on holistic harmony, simplicity, and dialectical change (Hansen, 1985).

To understand the essence of man and the world, the Chinese use fuzzy and processual thinking. Western thinking is logical, unambiguous, and static. Traditional Chinese thinking represents a multivalent ambiguous nonlinear view of the world. Paradox and contradiction are considered normal and natural (Lowe, 2003). Phenomena, which are in contradiction from the Western point of view, are considered as mutually complementing in China. Chinese fuzzy thinking is based on the fact that everything is unstable, temporary, ambiguous, and changeable (Chia, 2003). Chinese thinking lays an emphasis on every experience as one of the links of a whole chain of life events, which supports its long-term orientation.

Indirectness is not just a feature of traditional Chinese thinking, but also a special way of how the Chinese express themselves. The Chinese have an innate aversion to direct confrontation and disputes. Indirectness is considered as a suitable way of expressing one’s thoughts. Therefore, Chinese culture is a high-context one, uses implicit, indirect language in which the meaning of words and phrases is derived from context (Ma, 2006).

The above mentioned characteristics of Chinese thinking are manifested in the main social values, which are:

1. Harmony (He)
2. Doctrine of mean (Zhongyong)
3. Hierarchy, seniority and loyalty
4. Personal connections and relationship, favor (Guanxi and Renqing)
5. Face (Mianzi and Lian)

These values lead to the fact that the Chinese prefer the collective and also permanent harmonious relationships among its members to the interests of an individual (Yuan, 2013). The phenomenon of He is connected to both harmony between people and nature, and harmony in the human society. Confucian harmony is the main goal of the family and organizational life (Ip, 2009). Doctrine of mean, Zhongyong, is closely connected to harmony. It is the basic Confucian ideal of balance, moderation and adequacy. The Zhongyong principle significantly influences the Chinese style of management, relationships among employees, and also relationships between superiors and subordinates.

The Confucian social hierarchical order provides a philosophical basis in order to preserve the social structure. The Chinese prefer the vertical order of the society. Managers in Chinese organizations specify clear differences between them and their subordinates (Lockett, 1988). Employees accept and respect this hierarchy and the superior – subordinate relationship. As there is no absolute authority in Chinese society as that of God Almighty, the Chinese adore concrete people, especially those from their vicinity (Redding, 1993). Thus the Chinese self is strongly embedded in social relationships, and a social network is a part of man. This fact is reflected in the phenomena of Guanxi and Renqing, and face in both its forms, Mianzi and Lian.

Guanxi mainly lies in mutual commitment and responsibility, and is the basis of Chinese relational reciprocal behavior. In Chinese organizations, formal and informal relationships ensuing from Guanxi overlap. Informal relationships are much more important than in the West (Chen, 2004). Guanxi is cultivated and strengthened through mutual exchanges called Renqing. Renqing can be of material nature, e.g. money or a gift, or of intangible and abstract nature, e.g. an activity or spiritual support. Despite the fact that Chinese Guanxi and Western social networking have some common characteristics, they are based on completely different basic principles.

The Chinese concept of face leads to the formation of a noble personality and at the same time is a way how to ensure harmonious interpersonal relationships and the right social order. Face significantly influences the superior – subordinate communication, and communication within a work group (Jia, 1998). The general concept of Chinese face has two specific meanings: Mianzi and Lian. Mianzi, the social face, means prestige or a good reputation which can be achieved through social status and success. Lian, the moral face, is represented by respect that a group pays to an individual with a good reputation. A loss of face is always a big problem that needs to be prevented.

From the comparison of the descriptions of the external and internal self-concepts and the Chinese concepts of social face Mianzi and moral face Lian it is clear that they are very similar. Thus it can be deduced that in respect to Chinese values, external and internal self-concepts are strong motivators for the Chinese. Since the loss of Lian is perceived as worse than the loss of Mianzi, it can be assumed that the internal self-concept will be the stronger of the two motivators.

Taking into account the fact that the external and especially internal self-concepts are considered to be strong motivators, it is necessary to investigate further and deeper by what they are confirmed. The realization of what makes man happy will contribute to the understanding of this since happiness is a basic human need.

4 VARIOUS CONCEPTS OF HAPPINESS

At the fundamental level, where differences such as culture, religion, gender or language play no role, all people are the same. Everyone aspires for happiness and tries to avoid suffering (His Holiness the Dalai Lama & Cutler, 2009). Although the term happiness is frequently used, it is not unambiguously defined. The same applies to the related term of well-being. These two terms are often used as synonyms. Lu and Gilmour (2006) define happiness as an aspect of subjective well-being. They emphasize that even if the experience of happiness may be universal, the cultural conceptions are different. Understanding the different concepts of happiness in Eastern and Western societies leads to a better understanding of the specifics of work behavior and the motives behind them.

According to Joshanloo (2014), to a great extent the Western notion of happiness is based on hedonism, while the Eastern notion inclines to eudaimonism. Hedonic concept claims that happiness lies in achieving delight and avoiding suffering. Eudaimonic concept claims that happiness is experienced when man acts nobly in harmony with his conscience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). While hedonism emphasizes physical delights, eudaimonism emphasizes inner well-being.

Based on an analysis of influences of East Asian philosophies and religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism among others, Joshanloo determines six elementary differences which influence the Western and Eastern concepts of happiness:

1. Whereas the Western notion of self-concept originates mainly with the ideas of individualism, Eastern traditions associate the self-concept to the collective and to the cosmos. The self is just a small part of these two other entities.
2. In the West, one's autonomy and the ability to assume control over their environment and life are appreciated. In the East, unselfishness, one's adaptability to the environment and the fulfillment of commitments ensuing from social relationships are considered as virtues.
3. In the West, man is considered to be the lord of creation with the right and ability to control the environment. In the East, mankind is considered as a small part of the cosmos that lives in harmony with nature.
4. In the West, it is desirable to achieve satisfaction in the sense of satisfying the needs and fulfilling the desires of individuals. In the East, the balance in the sense of accepting the joys and sorrows as inseparable and mutually complementing parts of life is appreciated.
5. Western cultures strive to maximize positive experiences and to eliminate the negative ones. In the East, a happy life is connected to both positive and negative experiences, with an emphasis on the need to be able to accept both.
6. In the West, which is influenced by materialism, positivism, and rationalism, it is generally accepted that satisfaction and happiness must be reached in this earthly life. In the East, the perception of life and happiness is more strongly connected to spirituality and religion, and does not place an emphasis on having positive experiences immediately.

Also according to Lu (2008a), culture is the main power influencing the way people think about happiness, and culture conditions the right ways to achieve it. The traditional East Asian self is socially oriented with an emphasis on roles, statuses, positions, commitments, and responsibilities. The essence of the East Asian self is relational. The basic goal of this self is to achieve unity with the society via self-cultivation, self-control, and self-transcendence.

The Western self is individual-oriented, emphasizing personal rights, needs, effort, potential and talent. In the West, an individual's transition from the state of dependency to the state of independence is considered as a natural development of every individual. The Western self is considered to be whole, independent and detached. Lu (2008b) denotes this Western self as individual-oriented, while the East Asian self as social-oriented.

In response to these culturally different concepts of the self, there are also culturally different concepts of well-being. Western theories of well-being are based on a strongly individualistic concept of self and on a premise that happiness is a natural and unalienable right of every individual, and that everyone is responsible for achieving their own happiness. Thus, people are supposed to actively try and achieve happiness, and this effort must not be

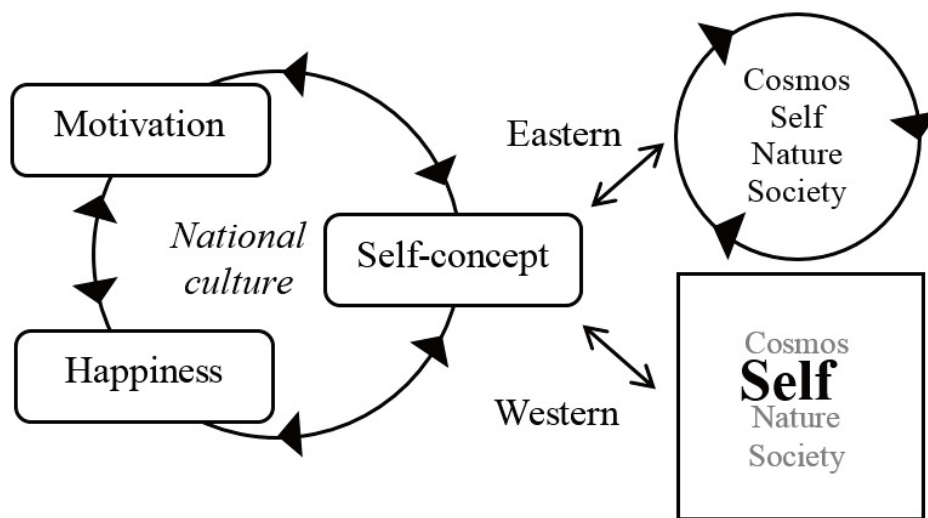
jeopardized in any way. The East Asian approach to well-being originates with a relationally understood self, according to which happiness is based on the fulfillment of duties given by social roles, and may be achieved via self-cultivation. Self-cultivation lies in realizing one’s own weaknesses, working on their removal, and the cultivation of a modest self, sensitive to the needs of the others. In Eastern cultures, people do not try to achieve extreme happiness but to achieve a deeper state of inner balance. The experience of happiness is connected to the piece of mind, which can be described as an inner state of calmness and harmony (Lee et al., 2013).

In respect to the current intensive contact between the West and China, Lu (2008b) accepts also the possibility of one’s expressing their bicultural self, namely in the sense of Western individualism penetrating the current Chinese society. There are also other authors who point out that Chinese society is becoming individualized, e.g. Yan (2010) or Lu and Yang (2006), according to whom, however, individualization in Chinese society does not mean substituting the traditionally socially oriented self with the Western individual-oriented self, rather some form of coexistence of the traditional Eastern values with the newly accepted Western values. That is why they speak of a traditionally modern bicultural self. Besides that, Faure and Fang (2008) state that the penetration of Western values into Chinese society does not mean that the Chinese are giving up on their traditional values. According to them, this process shows one of the specific features of Chinese culture – the ability to connect elements perceived in the West as incongruent.

5 HAPPINESS AND MOTIVATION BEHIND WORK BEHAVIOR

Interconnecting all the above mentioned knowledge into new relationships contributes to understanding a different motivation behind work behavior in the Western and East Asian cultures. These relationships are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The mechanism of the influence of happiness on motivation



Source: own research

In the background of national culture, which is manifested through the traditional ways of thinking and respected values, the concept of motivation, the concept of self, and the concept of happiness are being formed. There are mutual bipartisan links between these concepts. An individual is positively motivated by what confirms their self-concept. At the same time, self-concept influences what the individual is motivated by. The confirmation of one’s self-concept leads to the feeling of happiness, which is conditioned by the perceived self-concept. Perceived happiness conditions work motivation, and, at the same time, a motivated person feels happy. The place where cultural differences are manifested the most in this mechanism is self-concept.

Self-concept is formed in interaction with social surroundings. The influence of social surroundings is more important in East Asian cultures, which is projected into the concept of face - both the social face Mianzi, and namely the moral face Lian. Both are strong motivators in East Asian cultures. In order for an individual to gain Mianzi and Lian, they behave in such a way as is expected in their social surroundings. As the conceptions of happiness are, at the same time, moral judgments on what leads to it, this individual behaves in such a way to be happy. This mechanism works analogically in Western cultures, too. Therefore it is necessary to analyze and compare different Eastern and Western concepts of happiness.

Simply put, we can say that the Western concept of happiness is connected to individualism, hedonism, autonomy, maximization of positive experiences, and immediate satisfaction. The Eastern concept of happiness is connected to the pertinence of an individual to a society, to eudaimonism, social relationships, balance, and humbleness. The corresponding Western and East Asian (Eastern) self is shown in the right part of Figure 1. The Western self is shown in the foreground of the diagram, in the background of which there are the other elements of the society, nature and the cosmos. This situation is perceived as stable (at least in the sense of the ideal), and at the same time as final (it ends in the death of an individual). The Eastern self is a part of a wide relational complex of the other beings, nature and the cosmos. This complex is constantly changing and is infinite. These different self-concepts lead to differences in work behavior and the motivation behind it. Behind this general statement it is necessary to see what specifically conditions the feelings of happiness in individual cultures, and adapt one's motivation behind work behavior accordingly.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper intends to contribute to the understanding of work behavior in East Asian countries and the motivation behind it. It widens the existing literature in the area of intercultural management and HRM. Managerial literature is mainly based on Western theories, which, however, do not capture the specifics of traditional East Asian thinking. When members of the Western and East Asian cultures collaborate, misunderstandings and inefficiencies occur. In order to acquire new comprehensive knowledge, it is necessary to combine findings from more areas - those of management, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. In this way we can understand the behavior of an individual, which is conditioned by deep cultural influences, and is demonstrated in their intuitive side.

The basic finding being submitted is that in order to understand work behavior and the motives behind it, it is first necessary to understand what makes an individual happy. Happiness is a basic culturally non-conditioned need. Culturally conditioned are factors that lead to subjectively perceived happiness. Therefore it is necessary for Western managers to understand the traditional East Asian thinking and values, and also realize that the Western and Eastern concepts of happiness are different. Thanks to this knowledge, managers can better understand work behavior of their colleagues, and can use it for effective decision making regarding the ways of motivation in an intercultural environment.

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