

## **Motivation: Chinese theoretical perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Because of the growth in its economy and the open door policy of the People's Republic of China, motivation studies within China are important. While some studies suggest that the management styles of Chinese organizations will be changing towards Western methods of management, how these changes will occur at the cultural level needs to be explored. This paper explores various motivation theories in the historical context of the Chinese workforce.

**KEYWORDS** Motivation Theories, Maslow, McGregor, Chinese Human Resource Management/History

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## THE DILEMMA OF MOTIVATION

Motivation has been recognized as a dilemma that managers must face because what motivates one individual may not motivate another. Another complication of motivation theories is that the theories were developed in the West, primarily the U.S. and Great Britain. The theories may be based upon Western cultural situations that do not necessarily apply to the rest of the world (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 1999; Adler, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2008; McKenna, Richardson, Singh, & Xu, 2010).

Motivation is defined as the force or forces that arouse enthusiasm and persistence to pursue a certain course of action (Daft & Marcic, 2008). Motivation, derived from the Latin word meaning “to move” represents those psychological goal directed processes (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2007). Needs, values, attitudes, interest, and abilities differ in each individual (Dessler, 2008; Hellriegel & Slocum, 1996). Attitude, an important concept in motivation, is defined as a response to objects, people, or events in either a positive or negative way (Dessler, 2008, Robbins & Judge, 2008).

As Child’s (1981) organizational research across various cultures revealed, organizations globally are growing more similar, while the behavior in the organizations is maintaining its cultural uniqueness. Triandis (as cited in Adler, 1991) stated, “culture’s influence for organizational behavior is that it operates at such a deep level that people are not aware of its influence. It results in unexamined patterns of thought that seem so natural that most theorists of social behavior fail to take them into account. As a result, many aspects of organization theories produced in one culture may be inadequate in other cultures” (p. 147). Even three decades later as McKenna, Richardson, Singh & Xu (2010) explore, there is still a resistance to Western human resource practices in China currently.

## MOTIVATION: NEED THEORIES

### Maslow Theory in China

As Maslow’s classic study of motivation (as cited in Matterson & Ivancevich, 1996) stated, “motivation theory is not synonymous with behavior theory. The motivations are only one class of determinants of behavior. While behavior, is almost always motivated, it is also almost always biologically, culturally, and situationally determined as well” (p. 342). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is based on two premises. First, there are innate needs in humans that motivate one to take action for that need, such as food and rest. Second, lower-order needs will dominate human behavior if they are not satisfied.

Maslow’s appeal to managers has been his contention that the higher-order needs can first be fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent through work. When the work is properly designed and the worker properly recognized and rewarded for his or her accomplishments, self-esteem or self-actualization needs are met.

Although research efforts across cultures vary on Maslow’s theory, Adler’s organizational text (1991) cites O’Reilly and Roberts as suggesting that Maslow’s theory has not been universally accepted. “Studies have found that an individual’s frame of reference will determine the order of importance of his needs. It has also been found that

his frame of reference is part determined by his culture. Therefore, it can be said that an individual's needs are partially bound by culture" (p. 154).

Other research has found Maslow's theory does not hold up across cultures. For example, workers in countries such as China that typify collective behavior, tend to focus on social needs and esteem needs over self-needs and self-actualization needs (Certo, 1997; Hofstede, 1980, Robbins & Judge, 2008). Some claim that Western society stresses individual behavior, whereas China stresses the collective one, and therefore, one cannot apply the same model to both cultures (Adler, 1991; Shenkar, 1994; Bond & Hwang, 1986; Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Suh, Diender, Oishi, & Triandis (1998) obtained two expert ratings of the individualism/collectivism dimension. Among 41 nations in their study, China had the lowest score (2.00), indicating it as the most collective country, and the U. S. had the highest score (9.55), indicating it was the most individualist country. In the cultural context, group harmony can be more important than individual goals. Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter, (1963) found that even though there are also similarities in job expectations, there are differences in perceptions of what is being received from the job.

### **McGregor's Theory X and Y in China**

McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Y described the work environment and the relationship of managers to the worker. Whereas Theory X managers believe they must direct and control workers in order to motivate them, Theory Y managers assume that employees will be more motivated if they are given freedom and autonomy in the workforce (McGregor, 1960).

In China, Theory Y managers act similarly to their U. S. counterparts, but with a different rationale. According to Oh (1976), the pre-1949 Chinese saw the satisfaction of lower needs as the main objective of the masses, with higher order needs reserved for the upper class. The workers and peasants primarily worked for their existence with any material incentives discouraged.

As Maslow (as cited in Matterson & Ivancevich, 1996) explained, "for the man that is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only food, he perceives only food, and he wants only food.... such a man may fairly be said to live by bread alone" (p. 344). Such a situation certainly fit the events of the workers that faced starvation in the economic era of Mao and The Great Leap Forward. Their efforts were focused entirely on the lower level of needs.

After the Revolution in China, two types of managers emerged: "Reds" and "Experts". Experts skilled in technical expertise used Theory X. Reds skilled in people management and possessing political and ideological expertise tended to use Theory Y. "The Reds, believing that Theory Y assumptions were closely tied to Chairman Mao, felt the workplace had to become egalitarian...that all employees had to rise together both economically and culturally" (Oh, 1976 as cited in Adler, 1991, p. 150).

This management system design gave workers' welfare prominence over the production process. It also served to discourage material incentives that promoted self-interest and competition. Managers were to stress collaboration with collective rewards, encourage decision making and emphasize democracy and decentralization. According

to Adler (1991) both Americans and Chinese agree with Theory Y, but for different reasons. The results in China were for a collective effort; whereas, the U. S. thrust was for individual self-direction and purpose.

### **McClelland's Theory in China**

McClelland's theory of motivation is an explanation of human needs that focuses on the desires for achievement, power, and affiliation that people develop as a result of their life experiences (Certo & Certo, 2008). It emphasizes three of the many needs that humans develop: the need for achievement (nAch), the need for power (nPower), and the need for affiliation (nAff) (Certo & Certo, 2008). McClelland's theory initially focused on the need for achievement as a contributing point in explaining why some societies produce more than others (Adler, 1991). According to McClelland (as cited in Matterson & Ivancevich, 1966) "n Ach produces enterprising men among labor leaders or managers, Republicans or Democrats, Catholics or Protestants, capitalists or communists" (p. 365).

McClelland (as cited in Matterson & Ivancevich, 1966) stated, "countries with many such rapidly growing firms tend to show above-average rates of economic growth" (p.365). This appears to be the reason why correlations have regularly been found between the "n Ach" content in popular literature (in children's textbooks) and subsequent rates of national economic growth. Furthermore, he quoted studies to reveal this is true of nations, whether capitalist or communist, developed or underdeveloped. However, today his theory is made less credible by failing to address the organizational aspects of motivation theory. It has also been noted that the English word of "achievement" is virtually untranslatable into other languages. (Hofstede, 1980).

### **COGNITIVE PROCESS THEORIES**

#### **China: Adams, Vecchio, and Vroom**

There are three cognitive processes of work motivation: equity, expectancy, and goal setting (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2007). Equity theory explains how people strive for fairness and justice in social exchanges or give and take relationships. Equity theory was developed by J. Stacy Adams and proposed that people are motivated to seek social equity in the rewards they expect for performance (Dessler, 2008). For example, people paid on a piece-rate basis per item produced, typically boost quantity and reduce quality when they perceive they are underpaid (Dessler, 2008). Those paid a straight hourly rate tended to reduce both quantity and quality when they think they are underpaid. Overpayment equity does not seem to have the positive effects on either quantity or quality that Adam's theory predicts (Dessler, 2008). Adam's theory states that individuals will compare their own inputs/ outcomes versus others' inputs/outcomes (Dessler, 2008).

Equity causes a person to believe that if the ratios are equal, the relationship is equitable. If the individual believes that his/her ratio is lower than another's, then inequity will occur, and thus cause dissatisfaction. Individuals who perceive inequitable treatment may reduce their inputs by giving less effort, performance, or even quitting. Another measure is that individuals may attempt to increase their outcome by making

known their concerns. Finally, restoring equity may be achieved by changing the other individual's ratio by decreasing others' outcomes.

In China, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution periods were examples of dissatisfaction in equity in the workplace. Rewards were not related to input of work, pay was not commensurate with experience and incentive, and even those at the managerial level were subjected to a decrease in rank and responsibilities. Morale suffered and productivity decreased. The environment has an effect on work ethic as well as the organization.

Robert Vecchio identified three categories of equity comparisons: (1) Other; (2) Self; and (3) System ( Certo & Certo, 2008; Daft & Marcic, 2008). Individuals compare their own level to those in similar positions rather than dissimilar—that is gender, educational level, job characteristic, etc. (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2007). Equity theorists believe that the following tendencies may influence behaviors:

- (1) An individual will attempt to maximize the amount of positive outcomes he or she receives.
- (2) People resist increasing inputs when it requires substantial efforts or costs.
- (3) People resist behavioral or cognitive changes in inputs important to their self-concept or self-esteem.
- (4) Rather than change cognitions about the self, an individual is more likely to change cognitions about the comparison about other's inputs and outcomes.
- (5) Leaving the field (quitting) is chosen only when severe inequity cannot be resolved through other methods (Opsahl & Dunnette, 1966).

Because Maoist China supported an “egalitarian” state across the levels, Vecchio's theories would seemingly not apply. However, the “egalitarian” state was not realized and people did resist increasing their inputs when it did not increase their self-concept of “more work, more rewards”. The Chinese ambassador to the U. S., refers to this period as a “cultural strait-jacket” for China (Public address to Jacksonville, FL Chamber of Commerce, 2001). However, China, currently in the process of building their workforce to compete globally, must consider these demographic comparisons in the design of an effective performance-based organizational development system.

Several research studies demonstrated that employees report greater levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and lower absenteeism and turnover when working in perceived fair conditions (Schardwald, Koslowsky, & Shalit, 1992). A practical application of equity theory is that it provides an explanation of how attitudes and behaviors affect job performance. Employees are more likely to implement changes in the workplace more readily if the changes are deemed equitable ones.

Individuals are motivated to behave in ways that produce valued outcomes.

Vroom's theory defines motivation as the decision process of effort and exertion of that effort in a specific task .The expectancy model rests on three basic assumptions:

- (1) Forces within individuals and in their job situations combine to motivate and determine behavior.
- (2) People make conscious decisions about their own behavior. For example, an individual makes the decision to come to work.
- (3) Selecting a course of action depends on the expectation that a certain behavior will lead to one or more desired outcomes instead of undesired outcomes. For example, individuals tend to behave to

achieve their objectives and avoid behavior that will lead to undesirable outcomes. (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1996).

The cognitive process theories illustrate the problems of Mao's ideology. He emphasized egalitarianism and use of moral incentives rather than material incentives in his Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Inefficiencies, lack of motivation, and loss of morale all existed during these periods contributing to a downfall in economic productivity.

Is equity theory an individual or a collective concept? Theoretically, equity is achieved in an egalitarian Maoist society by his philosophy of "all must rise together within the system". Therefore, all are treated equally. However, history is contradictory with this point of view, as the inequities in the workplace caused worker motivation and performance to decline. One problem with equity theory in its application to post-Mao China is that the theories are designed for a culture with an individual perspective with a common end goal of material rewards and material "achievement". Traditional Confucian philosophies with an end goal of harmony and "good for the people" do not easily blend with the contrasting value system of the Western world. As China advances in their market reform efforts, the cognitive process theories will become an even more important focus for Chinese managers to consider in the workforce (Lamond & Zheng, 2010; Yuan, 2010; Jiacheng, Lu, Francesco, 2010).

## **NEEDS V. VALUES IN MOTIVATION THEORY**

### **A Philosophical Viewpoint of Confucian Dynamism**

A distinction between needs and values is crucial in the determination of an effective motivational model. Maslow (1962) stated needs are the same for all humans; whereas, Locke (1976) found that values are unique to the individual. Needs are internal, belonging to each human being. They require action. Values are acquired. Therefore, values can be both consciously and unconsciously held. Values focus on an end state of being. Values tend to be long-term beliefs that represent a holistic "correct" or "incorrect" attitude or behavior for a specific culture. For example, the Chinese Culture Survey, (1987), an instrument designed for a Chinese or Eastern culture identified a new work dimension, Confucian Dynamism. The values represent a Confucian tradition of culture and values. How can a Western motivation model based on "needs" work effectively in a society with such divergent values from the Western values? Values such as "protecting your face", "having a sense of shame", or even "respect for tradition" are not reflected in the Western society.

Maslow's model of lower level needs and higher level of needs was constructed in an era when a motivational system was designed for a common Western value system. Although McClelland's work is certainly global, "achievement" is not a global need. McGregor's Theory Y cannot be supplanted to countries with a collectivist orientation without altering the intent of the theory. Cognitive process theories are construed for an individualist society and a workplace based on individual values.

Therefore, it is essential in a global market, to reconstruct the motivational system to match a world of common needs and divergent values. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, lower and higher level needs, are in reality a set of needs and values.

If his definition of “needs are common to all man”, then it is only the lowest level that is common (i.e., the basic needs, food, shelter, and biological needs). All else are values. In a consideration of conceptual developing motivation models, values are the distinguishing cultural considerations, as norms reinforce social systems of the work environment and work ethic.

Reflecting upon Maslow’s third level of needs, (social), Man is a social being. So there is some debate; is the social component a need or a value? Assuming a mature age of the individual (as at working age), it should be considered a value. Each society reflects its own values, attitudes, and beliefs. As far as (self-esteem and self-actualization), Maslow’s upper level needs, Rokeach, classified Self-respect (self-esteem) as a terminal value. Self-actualization can be viewed in many of Rokeach’s descriptors behavioral modes of instrumental values.

McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y too are truly value systems and not “needs”. McClelland’s, NACH, NPower, and NAff, also fit into the value side of the equation. As stated earlier, the cognitive process theories clearly fit an individualist culture, therefore, also making those theories, ones of value rather than need (Adler, 2008).

## SUMMARY

Motivation theories cross a boundary of complexity in the individual, the organization, and the environment. There is a lack of agreement concerning a universally accepted theoretical model of motivation. As organizations enlarge their global presence, perhaps more than one motivational model may be needed to align policies, practices, and procedures that reach the goal of a motivated workforce.

An initial approach to learning to motivate in China is to incorporate the influence of the cultural, political, and economic environment. Organizations must learn to integrate visions from motivational factors based on divergent values. One illustration of a vision of success is explored in *The Way of Lao Tzu* (Chinese leader):

I have three treasures. Guard and keep them.  
The first is deep love.  
The second is frugality,  
And the third is not to dare to be ahead of the world.  
Because of deep love, one is courageous.  
Because of frugality, one is generous.  
Because of not daring to be ahead of the world,  
One becomes the leader of the world.

(Adler, 1991, pp. 147-148).

The traditional Confucian value system of “not to dare to be ahead of the world” illustrates the importance of obeying authority and the harmony of relationships. It also serves as an example of the “looking back” rather than “looking ahead: philosophy in the society.

As Yang (1986) explained, “motivations have much to do with providing reasons for choosing different courses of actions and performing with different degrees of efforts, pertaining to Man’s desires, wants, perceived needs and thus purpose” (p.86).

However as one observer notes that multinationals will change lives; the opposite is also true (Zhichang 2000). China has needs and values systems not fully realized in industrial countries. Just as individual needs differ, so do the organization’s needs, and the environmental value system.

As the Table below illustrates, motivational models rely not only upon individual needs (micro), but also must be applied to the organizational context and cultural (macrolevel). It is that level of complexity, even more intensified in globalization efforts, that makes innovative motional models an imperative, not only for organizations in transitional economies, but for all organizations facing increasing levels of diversity.

**Table : Motivation Theories: The Individual (Micro), The Organization, and the Cultural (Environment, Macro)**

<b>The Individual: NEEDS THEORIES</b>			<b>The Organization: COGNITIVE PROCESS THEORIES</b>		
MASLOW	MCGREGOR	MCCLELL AND	ADAMS	VECCHIO	VROOM
Physiological	Theory X Employees dislike work & must be coerced to perform	“NAch” The drive to achieve	Equity Theory Input/Output	Equity Theory	Equity Theory
Safety		“Npower” The desire to have impact & control others		Other	Expectancy
Social	Theory Y Employees like work & can self-direct	“Naff” The desire to be accepted by others		Self	Instrumentality
Esteem				System	Valence
Self-Actualization					

**The Environment: THEORIES**

Child—Globally, organizations are growing more similar; whereas behavior within remains culture-specific (1981). (Convergence v. divergence)  
Triandis—culture operates at a subconscious basis; therefore, organizational theories produced in one culture may be inadequate in other cultures (1995).



Hofstede—National culture explained more of the differences in work-related values and attitudes than demographic variables (1980). Achievement is an English word, virtually untranslatable into other languages. (1980a)

Adler—Motivational theories do not offer universality, but rather, reflect the value systems of Americans (1991).

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