

Cultural Orientation and Proactive Behavior: Mediating Roles of Perceived Performance and Image Values

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Abstract

This study examines how individual cultural orientations influence proactive behavior at work, to determine if subordinates' cultural orientations (i.e. psychological collectivism and power distance) facilitate proactive behavior (feedback seeking, giving voice, and rational issue selling) through perceptions of its performance and image value. Among a sample of 204 supervisor–subordinate dyads from a multinational company located in Hong Kong, psychological collectivism was positively related to both perceived values of proactive behavior, whereas power distance was related negatively to perceived performance value and positively to perceived image value. In turn, perceived performance value encouraged feedback seeking, but perceived image value exerted a negative effect on all three types of proactive behavior. The authors also confirm a mediation model, linking employees' proactive behavior to cultural orientations through their perceptions of the values of proactive behaviors. These findings have notable implications for corporate human resource practitioners.

Keywords: Cultural Orientation, Perceived Value, Proactive Behavior

1. Introduction

Today's complicated, dynamic work environments increase the need for employees' proactive behavior (Belschak, Den Hartog, & Fay, 2010), defined as anticipatory actions in which employees "take initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones, which involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions" (Crant, 2000 436). Research consistently demonstrates the positive consequences of employees' proactive behaviors, such as higher performance ratings (Fuller & Marler, 2009) and increased organizational effectiveness (Crant, 2000).

Most studies on proactive behavior focus on the influence of individual personality and show that certain personal traits (e.g., proactive personality, desire for control, learning goal orientation) motivate employees to perform proactive behaviors (Crant, 2000; Parker & Collins, 2010). However, few studies consider the role of individual cultural orientations. According to the review of Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou (2007), cultural orientation shapes how employees behave. We predict that the extent to which a person values the goal, that is perceived value of proactive behavior, mediates the cultural orientation–proactive behavior relationship. In line with extant literature (e.g. Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Fuller, Barnett, Hester, & Frey, 2007), we also define the perceived value of proactive behavior as a two-dimensional construct, comprising (1) perceived performance value, which corresponds to performance enhancement goals, such as performing better and accomplishing tasks, and (2) perceived image value, or impression management goals related to protecting or enhancing others' impressions.

In turn, this study seeks to answer two questions: (1) Does proactive behavior differ among employees with different cultural orientations? (2) What role does the perceived value of proactive behavior have in the relationship between cultural orientations and proactive behavior? By answering these questions, we make two main contributions. First, this study extends literature on proactive behavior, which mostly focuses on individual personality and organizational characteristics as antecedents and ignores employees' cultural orientation, by empirically exploring how cultural orientation affects proactive behavior in a mono-cultural setting with a bicultural influence. Second, by considering the mediating influence of the perceived value of proactive behavior, we clarify the mechanisms underlying the effects of individual differences, through a cultural lens.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Cultural Orientation and the Perceived Value of Proactive Behavior

2.1.1 *Psychological collectivism*

Using Hofstede (1980) individualism–collectivism dimension, Jackson, Colquitt, Wesson, and Zapata-Phelan (2006) developed a new construct that they call psychological collectivism. Research findings support the construct validity of the new measure and illustrate the potential value of psychological collectivism as a predictor of individual behavior and group member performance (Hui & Yee, 1999; Jackson et al., 2006). According to this measure, more detailed, highly collective people, who view themselves as members of in-groups, are motivated primarily by the norms of their in-groups. Therefore, they prioritize the goals and well-being of in-groups over their individual self-interest and

emphasize their connectedness with in-group members. In contrast, people with low psychological collectivism regard themselves as independent and are concerned with personal achievement, placing their personal goals above in-group benefits (Triandis, 1995). Because high psychological collectivists set their work goals according to their teams' needs and are willing to cooperate and sacrifice their own interests, they view group membership as more long-term and permanent than low psychological collectivists (Earley & Gibson, 1998). Most of their behaviors similarly reflect a long-term perspective. The success of work groups relies on the efforts of all members; as members of a team, collectivists endeavor to enhance their personal and group performance through proactive behaviors, which they regard as a vehicle to achieve the aims and strategic goals of their in-groups. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1a: Psychological collectivism is positively related to the perceived performance value of proactive behavior.

People with higher psychological collectivism also emphasize personal and group images (Earley & Gibson, 1998; Triandis, 1995). Because collectivists put the benefit of the group first, they tend to achieve better images of themselves through the development of the group image. Therefore, they use impression management tactics, such as seeking feedback from their direct supervisor (or indirect managers), interacting with coworkers or colleagues from other departments, proposing innovative suggestions for the organization, and presenting strategic ideas to the organization (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2000). Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin (1991) revealed that collectivists tend to be more concerned about mutual "face-saving" and "face-giving," whereas individualists emphasize self-oriented face concern over concern for others' face. Those with a high collectivism orientation seemingly should value the impression management function of proactive behavior for both the in-group and themselves. Psychological collectivists should conduct more proactive behaviors when they perceive the image value of proactive behavior as higher.

Hypothesis 1b: Psychological collectivism is positively related to the perceived image value of proactive behavior.

2.1.2 Power distance.

Power distance refers to the extent to which people accept unequal power distributions (Hofstede, 1980). Those with low power distance scores accept and respect power difference to a lesser degree than those with high power distance scores, such that they assume their supervisors are open and accessible (Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009). People who score low on power distance also are more prone to proactive behavior, including more interactions between employees and supervisors/coworkers. For example, Morrison, Chen, and Salgado (2004) found that MBA students from the United States (low power distance) demonstrated greater feedback seeking behavior than students from Hong Kong (high power distance). Even with the provision of feedback, in high power distance settings, a unilateral interaction is likely (Morrison et al., 2004), and the content may appear less informative or detailed. These feedback seekers thus may reject the comments or information contained in the feedback. That is, both the usefulness of feedback information and the perceived value of feedback for performance improvement may seem less important to high power distance people. In contrast, when power distance is low, employees exercise less restraint and feel less hesitant to confront their supervisors or colleagues, which enables them to acquire resources and support to enhance their

performance through proactive behaviors.

Hypothesis 2a: Power distance is negatively related to the perceived performance value of proactive behavior.

Greater power distance between supervisors and subordinates also creates a greater hurdle for effective communication. Employees who accept high power distance regard their supervisors as inaccessible and less willing to devote time to subordinates (Kirkman et al., 2009), which may make their impression management tactics more obvious. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) examined the role of impression management in feedback seeking behavior and demonstrated that the frequency of feedback seeking increases seekers' standing in the eyes of observers, as long as those seekers possess a superior performance history. Ashford et al. (1998) also proposed that impression management concerns are relevant to individual issue-selling decisions and found direct and indirect effects of image risk on willingness to sell issues. Thus:

Hypothesis 2b: Power distance is positively related to the perceived image value of proactive behavior.

2.2 Perceived Value of Proactive Behavior and Proactive Behavior

Rational people make choices that benefit them and do not harm others. That is, they make decisions in an attempt to achieve preferred outcomes, which include not only economic gains (Quackenbush, 2004) but also the significant meanings and behavioral goals of the action. As noted, performance enhancement involves obtaining favorable and avoiding negative performance judgments, such that it represents one form of the regulation of employees' proactive behaviors in organizations (Parker et al., 2010). Employees highly value performance, which offers a direct signal of their earnings, power, and position in the organization. With their greater emphasis on job performance, employees who believe that they can attain performance enhancement through particular actions are more motivated to conduct these specific behaviors. Thus, employees' perceived performance value of proactive behavior directly determines how frequently they perform proactive behavior. This association is driven by their desire for self-enhancement, such as to improve job performance or foster career development (Ashford et al., 2003; VandeWalle et al., 2000). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3a: The perceived performance value of proactive behavior is positively related to proactive behavior (feedback seeking, voice, and rational issue selling).

Beyond their performance-related motives, people may attempt to pursue impression management goals through proactive behavior. They want to know how others perceive and evaluate them, especially to maximize their expected rewards and minimize potential punishments (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In so doing, they can achieve and maintain a positive self-concept, which results in better self-esteem and self-confidence (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Scholars confirm that people perform proactive behavior for impression management reasons; for example, Morrison and Bies (1991) recognize that the motive to manage impressions plays a key role in the decision of whether to inquire for feedback. Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, and Wierba (1997) suggest that a manager's choice to sell an issue depends on the perceived image benefit or risk of doing so. Fuller et al. (2007) also propose that voice behavior represents an impression management tactic employees use for self-promotion. In

summary, all three types of proactive behavior represent channels employees use to manage their impressions in the organization. However, no study examines the role of perceived image value on proactive behavior empirically. We argue that if the employee regards the perceived image value of proactive behavior as high, he or she should be more motivated and exhibit more willingness to behave proactively. Thus:

Hypothesis 3b: The perceived image value of proactive behavior is positively related to proactive behavior (feedback seeking, voice, and rational issue selling).

2.3 Mediating Role of the Perceived Value of Proactive Behavior

According to a cultural self-representation perspective, combined with the notion of identified regulation of proactive behavior, we argue that employees use proactive behaviors to obtain two expected outcomes (i.e., performance enhancement and impression management), and the perceived value of these outcomes determines the frequency of proactive behaviors. However, this mechanism should differ for people with different cultural orientations. We thus combine our predictions that cultural orientations affect the perceived values of proactive behavior, our prediction that the perceived values of proactive behavior influence proactive behavior, and prior findings regarding the impacts of cultural orientations on proactive behavior (Chelminski & Coulter, 2007; Ling, Floyd, & Baldrige, 2005; Morrison et al., 2004), to propose that the perceived value of proactive behavior mediates the relationship between cultural orientation and proactive behavior.

Hypothesis 4: The perceived values of proactive behavior (perceived performance value and perceived image value) mediate the relationship between cultural orientation (psychological collectivism and power distance) and proactive behaviors (feedback seeking, voice, and rational issue selling).

3. Method

3.1 Sample and Procedures

We collected data from the Hong Kong branch of a multinational logistics corporation, one of the industry's largest in terms of volume and turnover. This corporation employs more than 380,000 people, operating in more than 220 countries and territories worldwide. In total, 795 participants were invited to participate; we received responses from 97 of 188 supervisors (response rate = 51.6%) and 243 of 607 subordinates (response rate = 40%). Among these responses, we identified 204 supervisor–subordinate dyads. This sample consisted of 61.3% female supervisors and 55.9% female subordinates. Furthermore, 57.0% and 56.9% of the supervisors and subordinates, respectively, had a tertiary or higher education level. Their mean ages were 37.4 and 31.5 years, respectively, and their average tenures were 11.0 and 6.0 years.

3.2 Measures

The cultural orientations (i.e., psychological collectivism and power distance) and the perceived value of proactive behavior were rated by the subordinates. The frequencies of proactive behavior were

rated by their immediate supervisors.

Psychological collectivism. We used Jackson et al. (2006) 15-item scale to measure employees' level of psychological collectivism ($\alpha = .91$).

Power distance. We used a seven-item scale, derived from the eight-item scale developed by Earley and Erez (1997) and validated by Morrison et al. (2004), to measure employees' psychological orientation toward power distance ($\alpha = .79$).

Perceived value of proactive behavior. We adopted and modified Ashford's (1986) measure of the perceived value of feedback seeking to assess how employees valued the two goals related to their proactive behavior at work. We selected and modified three items to measure the perceived performance value of proactive behavior ($\alpha = .93$) and another three questions to assess the perceived value of proactive behavior for impression management ($\alpha = .77$).

Proactive behavior. To measure feedback seeking behavior, we adopted three items from VandeWalle et al. (2000) and Lam, Huang, and Snape (2007) feedback-seeking scale ($\alpha = .91$). For voice, we adopted four items from the voice scale of Van Dyne and Lepine (1998) to measure voice ($\alpha = .89$). Finally, we used a three-item scale developed by Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) and validated by Grant, Parker, and Collins (2009) to assess rational issue selling ($\alpha = .88$).

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Analyses

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to check statistically for discriminant validity, using AMOS 19.0. And the results showed good discriminant validity among the measures.

We present the means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations of all the key variables in Table 1.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities ^a

Key Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Psychological collectivism	5.31	.74	(.91)						
2. Power distance	4.02	.91	.14	(.79)					
3. Perceived performance value of proactive behavior	5.47	1.00	.37**	-.20**	(.93)				
4. Perceived image value of proactive behavior	4.36	.97	.20**	.33**	.17*	(.77)			
5. Feedback seeking behavior	2.72	1.19	-.13	-.20**	.17**	-.14*	(.91)		
6. Voice	5.68	.89	.07	-.11	.01	-.14*	-.02	(.89)	
7. Rational issue selling	5.38	.94	.01	-.11	-.15*	-.18**	-.06	.74**	(.88)

^aN=204 (supervisor-subordinate dyads). Coefficient alphas are shown along the diagonal in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Two-tailed.

4.2 Hypotheses Tests

We tested the proposed model using structural equation modeling in AMOS 19.0. We first contrast the fit indicators of a fully mediated model with those of a partially mediated model. The two models both achieved acceptable goodness-of-fit levels. The fit statistics for the fully mediated model were as follows: CFI = .95, TLI = .94, IFI = .95, RMSEA = .05, $\chi^2 = 881.64$, $df = 613$, $\chi^2/df = 1.44$. The fit statistics for the partially mediated model instead were CFI = .95, TLI = .94, IFI = .95, RMSEA = .05, $\chi^2 = 875.58$, $df = 607$, $\chi^2/df = 1.44$. Because the indicators refer to the same level and the coefficients from cultural orientations to proactive behaviors in the partially mediated model are non-significant, we accept the fully mediated model, as shown in Figure 1. The numbers along the paths represent standardized regression coefficients that are statistically significant.

According to Figure 1, the relationships of psychological collectivism with the two perceived values of proactive behavior were both significantly positive ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$), in support of H1a and H1b. The path coefficients from power distance to perceived performance value ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$) and perceived image value ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$) of proactive behavior also were statistically significant, so we confirm H2a and H2b.

The path coefficient from perceived performance value to feedback seeking behavior ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) was significantly positive, but its relationships with voice and rational issue selling were not, in partial support of H3a. The path coefficients from perceived image value to feedback seeking behavior ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .01$), voice ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$), and rational issue selling ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$) were all significantly negative, contradicting Hypothesis 3b.

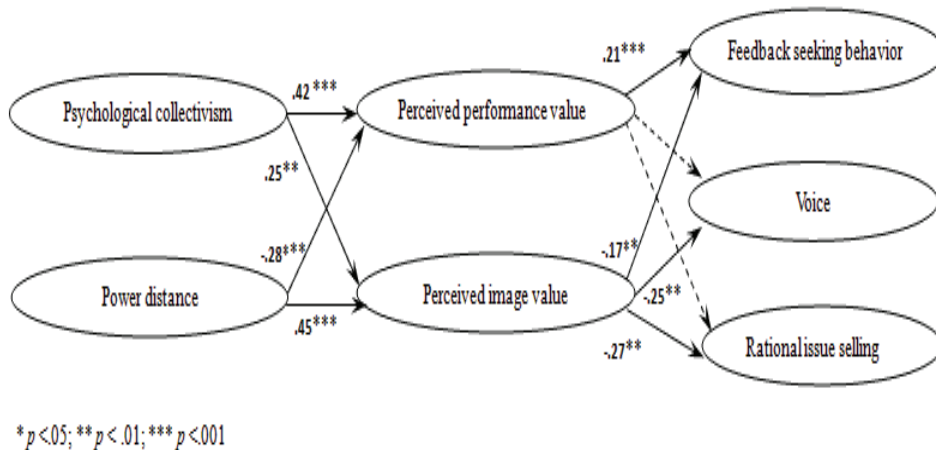


Figure 1 Structural Equation Modeling

Hypothesis 4 pertains to the mediating effect of perceived value on the relationship between cultural orientation and proactive behavior. According to MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002), mediation can be verified when the indirect effect of the predictor on the outcome is significant, which indicates that both the effect of the predictor on the mediator and the effect of the mediator on the outcome are statistically significant. Thus, we found support for H4.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to extant literature in two ways. First, it contributes to knowledge about the link between employees' cultural orientations and proactive behavior, by considering the mediating effects of two motivational processes on the relationship. The findings indicate that people's greater tendency toward psychological collectivism makes them more likely to appreciate the goals of proactive behavior (performance enhancement and impression management) and thus behave more proactively. In contrast, the findings reinforce the notion that greater power distance poses obstacles to performance-oriented proactive behavior (Morrison et al., 2004), such that it pushes people toward an impression management mentality. We also found that perceived performance value significantly and positively predicted feedback seeking behavior, in support of our argument that performance is highly valued by employees, and they seek feedback from their supervisors in an effort to enhance or improve their job performance. With regard to voice and rational issue selling, they are more relevant to the changes in group- or organizational-level issues, rather than individual performance (Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998), which may explain why they do not directly point to individual performance-related goals related to proactive behavior.

An unexpected, interesting finding is that the perceived image value of proactive behavior relates negatively to the three types of proactive behavior, which implies that high image value is not enough to guarantee the occurrence of proactive behavior. Rather, when this perceived value is too high, workers even may feel hesitant or decrease their proactivity, because of the risks involved in proactive behavior. Furthermore, we confirm the mediating effect of the perceived performance and image values of proactive behavior on the culture–proactive behavior relationship, which has been missing from existing literature.

Second, we help facilitate understanding of the role of culture at the individual level, not just at the country level, on proactive behavior. This study validates the belief that cultural values vary among citizens within a country; the traditional method of using country as a proxy for cross-cultural research thus demands caution, because it may hinder a deeper understanding of specific organization phenomena (Wang & Yi, 2012). Many scholars call for cross-cultural research into organizational behavior (e.g. Ng, Chen, & Aryee, 2012; Tsui et al., 2007); we further recommend that researchers choose carefully whether they will treat culture as a nation-level or individual-level variable. Their choice then will determine the appropriate methodological applications and theory for investigation and explanation. By carefully positioning and examining cultural orientation variables, we propose a vision of a new, robust development of cross-cultural management research.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study help raise and address several important personal management issues. In particular, supervisors cannot assume identical levels of cultural orientations among employees of the same nationality. As our study shows, cultural value differences arise at the individual level. Accordingly, managers should be better trained and equipped to deal with subordinates by recognizing how and why they engage differently in proactive behavior, depending on their individual cultural orientations.

Managers might develop specific HR management practices to balance the influence of individual cultural orientations on proactive behavior. Employees engage in diverse forms and varying degrees of proactive behavior, so training programs and incentive systems should promote the advantages of proactive behavior, according to employees' specific cultural orientations.

By understanding why employees proactively act, according to different motives, supervisors can judge more accurately the various motives that underlie their proactive behaviors. However, perceptual biases, stereotypes, and misunderstandings also are likely to affect supervisors' evaluations of their subordinates. Leadership development programs should encourage supervisors to be open to subordinates' proactive behavior in general, as well as find ways to develop both supervisors' and subordinates' communication skills to facilitate their mutual understanding.

5.3 Limitations and Further Research

Two major limitations deserve discussion and highlight some further research directions. First, the cross-sectional design of our study hinders the formulation of firm conclusions about the causal direction of the paths we tested. A longitudinal research design, including an examination of the boundary conditions and possible significant moderators of the research model, therefore is required to provide stable evidence of causality (Fedor, Rensvold, & Adam, 1992).

Second, because we collected our data from the Hong Kong branch of a single multinational corporation, we cannot guarantee that our findings represent other organizations or cultural settings. Additional studies should include a larger, more diverse sample to extend cross-cultural research on employee proactive behavior.

Despite these limitations, our study provides new insights into the relationship between individual cultural orientations and proactive behavior and the underlying mechanisms by which they function. The findings suggest that people perform proactive behavior differently, according to their cultural orientations, because of the variance in their perceptions of the performance and image value of proactive behavior.

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