Contextualizing Cultural Orientation and Organizational Citizenship Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts a more contextualized approach to examining organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Borrowing from theory in international and cross cultural management as well as organizational behavior, context is conceptualized as multi-level and as a shaper of meaning and variability in employee citizenship behaviors. By centralizing the unique socio-cultural, political and historical national context (i.e., omnibus context) of Lebanon at the core of our theorizing, we hypothesize, contrary to previous research, a positive relationship between idiocentrism and employee engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors. Furthermore, we explore the influence that unit level OCB (i.e., discrete context) has on the idiocentrism–OCB relationship. Our analysis confirms the positive relationship between idiocentrism and OCB in this unique context. In addition, our cross-level analysis suggests that in workgroups with higher levels of unit level OCB, idiocentrism is more strongly related to employee engagement in OCB. The findings highlight the value added in contextualizing research on OCB and employee behavior in general.

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1. Introduction

There has been a growing interest in contextualizing research on employee behavior (Rousseau and Fried, 2001). This is of particular importance in the field of international management as it is becoming more and more apparent that as workplaces become more global and as MNCs function in a greater variety of geographical locations, a change in context or contextual variables can have profound effects on the meaning and manifestation of employee behaviors, such as Organizational Citizenship Behavior — OCB (Paine and Organ, 2000). Understanding OCB in an international arena requires an understanding of what contextual variables are important as determinants of workplace perceptions and behaviors, as well as understanding the extent to which theories developed in one specific context may be applicable to other contexts. Without examination, it would be premature to assume that OCB models and theories developed in the West can be directly applied to contexts outside the West. Rather, for such knowledge to contribute to international management it must be empirically examined in, and possibly adapted for, a variety of cultural contexts and a variety of workplace settings. Such efforts are indispensable for the generation of a solid body of management theory that is truly international and valuable in its day-to-day application.

In this paper we focus on a more contextualized examination of the antecedents of organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Ehrhart and Naumann, 2004; Fischer et al., 2005), specifically recognizing that engagement in OCB is strongly affected by the context within which an employee works. Consider the case of Maya who decides to fill in for a colleague at work. If Maya works in a cultural context where the expectations for helping others are salient, or in a department where it is quite the norm to engage in OCB, her behavior is likely to be perceived as less praiseworthy than when doing so is unexpected or unusual. Considering context makes our interpretations more accurate (Schneider, 1985) and our understanding of OCB more informed.

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Organizational citizenship behaviors are behaviors that support the broader organizational, social, and psychological environment in which employees work (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993; Organ, 1997). These behaviors tend to be perceived as extra-role and tend not to lead to formal organizational rewards (Organ, 1997). The demonstrated positive relationship between OCB and productivity at both the employee and organizational levels (Dunlop and Lee, 2004; Koys, 2001; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Podsakoff and Mackenzie, 1994; Podsakoff and Mackenzie, 1994) has catapulted it to top research topic status. To capitalize on this positive and important link, many have turned their research attention to the potential antecedents of OCB (for reviews see Podsakoff et al., 2000; Van Dyne et al., 1995). The antecedent of particular interest for the current study is an employee's cultural values (Triandis, 1989, 1996) and more specifically his/her allocentric and idiocentric orientations.

Allocentrism and idiocentrism have each been conceptualized as separate but related individual difference constructs (Triandis, 1989). Allocentrism, on the one hand, can be defined as an individual's cultural value orientation towards viewing the self as inseparable from other ingroup members (Triandis, 1989). Idiocentrism, on the other hand, is an orientation towards viewing the self as separable from others (Triandis, 1989). Taking these cultural values as well as contextual considerations into account, our general research question is: *How does context influence the relationship between an employee's cultural values (*i.e.*, allocentrism and idiocentrism) and his/her engagement in OCB.* More specifically, our research focuses on two types of contexts, asking: *To what extent does the larger societal culture affect this relationship?* and *To what extent does the context within the organization (*i.e.*, the perceived behavioral norms) affect this relationship?*

To begin to answer these questions we borrow from the work of Johns (2006) who defined context in terms of situational opportunities and constraints and who identified two important levels of context for organizational research: *Omnibus* and *Discrete.* On the one hand, we conceptualize omnibus context as the environment broadly defined — the socio-cultural, political and historical environment that characterizes a nation. Our aim is to select an omnibus context that is unique when compared to previous OCB research environments, thus contributing to the body of international management research by contextualizing and extending previous findings. We choose to focus our research within Lebanon and hope to theoretically suggest how its uniqueness may influence the meaning, manifestation, and certain nomological relationships of OCB.

Discrete context, on the other hand, refers here to specific unit level behavioral characteristics within the organizational setting; such as, unit level OCB (Ehrhart, 2004; Ehrhart and Naumann, 2004). Theorized in this way, unit level OCB may serve as a contextual variable that moderates the relationship between an employee's allocentric and idiocentric values and his/her level of OCB. Based on this therefore we approach our research question by examining descriptively how the omnibus environment may shape (1) the relationship between cultural values (i.e., allocentrism and idiocentrism) and employee engagement in OCB as well as (2) the cross level relationship between discrete context (unit level OCB), cultural values (i.e., allocentrism and idiocentrism), and OCB.

1.1. Review of the literature

1.1.1. The central relationship of interest: an employee's cultural values and OCB

If we examine the nomological network of OCB, we note that there are a number of individual difference antecedents that researchers have examined (Van Dyne et al., 2000). However, a close look at these antecedents reveals that research linking culture as an individual difference variable to OCB have not been frequently explored. There are however some exceptions. For example, a few studies have examined the relationship between an individual's cultural beliefs (Ersoy et al., 2010) or an individual's cultural values (Moorman and Blakely, 1995; Ramamoorthy and Flood, 2004; Van Dyne et al., 2000) and OCB. Cultural values (Triandis, 1989) are linked conceptually to the work of Hofstede (1984) on collectivism and individualism. More specifically, the terms allocentrism and idiocentrism were coined by Triandis (1989) to represent the individual level conceptualization of Hofstede's nation level constructs.

As separate but related individual difference constructs, allocentrism and idiocentrism are useful in capturing a person's cultural value orientation (Triandis, 1989). Allocentrism, on the one hand, can be defined as an individual's cultural orientation towards viewing the self as inseparable from other ingroup members (Triandis, 1989). Allocentrics have a tendency to (1) have personal goals that are compatible with ingroup goals; (2) emphasize norms, duties, and obligations when making decisions about how to behave or act; and (3) give priority to relationships and the needs of other ingroup members even at the expense of their own needs (Triandis and Bhawuk, 1997, p. 15). If allocentrics tend to emphasize ingroup goals and give priority to ingroup member needs, then it is likely that they will engage in behaviors that support and aid coworkers. Allocentrics will likely engage in this behavior even if it is not an in-role requirement and not formally rewarded. Such behaviors clearly fall within the content domain of OCB. Peer-reviewed empirical research provides support for the positive link between allocentrism and OCB (e.g., Moorman and Blakely, 1995; Van Dyne, et al., 2000).

Idiocentrism, on the other hand, can be defined as an orientation towards viewing the self as separable from others (Triandis, 1989). Idiocentrics have a tendency to (1) have personal goals that are not necessarily correlated with the ingroup's goals; (2) emphasize personal attitudes, needs, rights and contracts when making decisions about how to behave or act; and (3) weigh carefully the costs and benefits of any relationship (Triandis and Bhawuk, 1997, p. 15). Applying the above theoretical link between allocentrism and OCB to the case predicting the relationship between idiocentrism and OCB, it is clear that the opposite would be expected. That is, if idiocentrics tend to view themselves as autonomous and tend to emphasize personal goals and needs, then it is less likely that they will engage in OCB. In fact, Ramamoorthy and Flood (2004) demonstrated that an idiocentric orientation is negatively related to the engagement in OCB.