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Romanian Employees' Folk Theory on Work: A Qualitative Study

Carmen Buzea^{a*}

^a*Transilvania University of Brasov, Erolor 29 500036, Romania*

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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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

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40-268-413-000; fax: +40-268-410-525.

E-mail address: carmen.buzea@unitbv.ro

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-

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