The Relationship Between Collectivism and Climate: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Collectivism is one of the well-researched dimensions of culture that pertains to an individual's relationship to an in-group. Organisational climate, on the other hand, is predominantly defined as the shared perceptions of employees about their working environment. In spite of the long tradition of both constructs in the literature, the conceptual relationship between collectivism and climate has oftentimes been neglected. This paper explores this relationship by presenting (1) the conceptual overlap between culture and climate; (2) the congruence between collectivism and climate in terms of levels of conceptualisation and analysis; (3) the apparent influence of collectivism on organisational processes and practices that have been the domain of climate studies; and (4) the apparent influence of collectivism on climate outcomes. This paper also offers some recommendations to guide future studies including suggestions to have more empirical investigation to strongly establish the relationship between collectivism and climate, to investigate facets of climate simultaneously, to extend the link between climate and other work outcomes, to engage in multi-level research, and to explore how collectivism influences climate formation and change.

Introduction

Collectivism is the most commonly researched dimension of culture. It has received considerable attention since the seminal of work Hofstede (1980) and has attained the status of paradigm in the social sciences. Collectivism is a construct that focuses on how integrated a person is towards an in-group (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). The in-group can be the family, neighbourhood, or other social groups. An individual's identity is defined in part by the membership in any of these in-groups.

Collectivism has also been studied within the organisational context. The literature shows that collectivism influences organisational practices and behaviours. For example, Ramamoorthy and Carroll (1998) studied collectivism in relation to human resources management practices such as selection, performance appraisal, reward system, training, employment security, and career management practices. In another study, Gibson (1999) found support for the moderating influence of collectivism on the relationship between group efficacy and group effectiveness such that when collectivism was high, group efficacy was positively related to group effectiveness. Van de Vliert et al. (2004) also found that when it comes to the interpretation of supervisory feedback, collectivists responded more positively to group-focused than individual-focused feedback. While these studies have demonstrated collectivism as a viable construct in the organisational literature, there is still a dearth of studies that look into collectivism and how it relates to organisational members' perceptions of organisational processes, practices, and experiences. This paper explores the relationship between the constructs of collectivism and organisational climate and demonstrates how collectivism can influence perceptions of working environment and experience.

Collectivism

Triandis (1995) explained the four defining attributes of collectivism in terms of: (1) how individuals perceive and define themselves, (2) how they relate to others, (3) the structure of goals they follow, and (4) the determinants of their social behaviours. First, collectivists generally view themselves as interdependent with others which is accompanied by sharing of resources. This can be manifested in defining oneself like "I am a member of my family, a member of my community, a member of my church". The feature of interdependence

is similar with Markus and Kitayama's (1994) claim that some cultures have distinct conceptions of individuality that focuses on the underlying principle of relatedness of individuals to each other. Fischer et al. (2009) posited that interdependence may be the core feature of the collectivism construct considering the centrality of the self for human agency. Second, collectivists give importance to unconditional relatedness among members of the in-groups. The in-group can be any group (e.g., family, neighbourhood) where one exhibits loyalty and mutual interdependence. As Kim (1994) describes it, collectivism emphasises a "we" versus "they" distinction. Third, for collectivists, goals are usually consistent with the goals of the in-groups to which they belong. Personal goals are typically in consonance with the goals of the in-group. Lastly, social behaviours among collectivists are typically determined by duties and mutual obligations. Personal choices and decisions can be set aside to give way to the choices and decisions of the in-group. Fulfilling one's duty is somehow complementary with vertical collectivism which according to Triandis (1995) involves a sense of serving the in-group and could mean giving up and sacrificing one's preference for the sake of fulfilling obligations and duties to the in-group.

Climate

The interest in climate dates back from the time of Kurt Lewin who developed the classic formulation of behaviour being a function of the person and his/her psychological environment: B = f (P, E) (Lewin, 1951). Litwin and Stringer (1968) then explained that their climate model "hopes to provide a quantification, or rather, a diagram of the total situational variables – a diagram that is relevant to the analysis and prediction of the total effects of the environment on groups of individuals" (p. 38). Another conceptualisation was made by Howe (1977) who referred to climate as a wide array of organisational and perceptual variables that reflect individual-organisational interactions. These interactions are said to affect individuals' behaviour in organisations (Jones & James, 1979; Schneider, 1975). Over the years, organisational climate has been dominantly defined as the shared perceptions of employees about their working environment (Schneider, 1975; Schneider & Reichers, 1983; Schneider & Snyder, 1975). These perceptions were assumed to be primarily descriptive of organisational practices and processes. Recent works on climate have expanded the descriptive view and highlight the evaluative and affective nature of organisational climate (e.g., James, James & Ashe, 1990; Patterson, Warr, & West, 2004; Langford, 2009) and linked these collective work perceptions with work outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, well-being, motivation, and performance (e.g., Parker et al., 2003).

The Relationship between Collectivism and Climate

Despite a long presence in the literature on both collectivism and climate, the relationship between these variables is not clear and often neglected. In the succeeding section of this paper, we explore the conceptual relationship of these two constructs and explain how collectivism can influence perceptions of the working environment and experience. We present four reasons why collectivism and climate are related. These include (1) the conceptual overlap between culture and climate; (2) the congruence between collectivism and climate in terms of levels of conceptualisation and analysis; (3) the influence of collectivism on climate domains; and (4) the influence of collectivism on climate outcomes.

The Conceptual Overlap between Culture and Climate. Culture and climate in organisational contexts are known to be rooted in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Interestingly, culture and climate did not come into prominence at the same time. Organisational climate was introduced some 25 years before organisational culture came to prominence. As explained earlier, climate is part of Lewin's (1951) formulation of the field theory. The main interest of field theory is to understand the individual and group phenomenon and its interaction with the organisational context. Climate studies became popular in the fields of industrial and organisational psychology and organisational behaviour. Rensis Likert invented the Likert scale for measuring attitudes and perceptions of managers (Likert, 1961). Likert's scale and his survey methodology became the common technique used to describe perceptions of processes within organisations.

By the 1970s, organisational culture started to attract attention among scholars mainly in the field of anthropology. As such, organisational culture was conceptualised in relation to systems of meanings and values. Organisational culture was initially defined as a common set of shared meanings or understandings within a group or an organisation. It is along these lines that Hofstede (1980) explored culture as the manifestation of

symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. He described culture as the "collective programming of the mind" and explored how nations are different from one another in terms of systems of meanings and values. He further identified the dimensions of culture including the well-researched construct of collectivism.

Ashforth (1985) argued that culture and climate are related in such a way that culture informs climate in two ways: (1) it directly helps individuals in defining what is important and in making sense of their organisational experiences, and (2) it informs climate indirectly through its impact on the objective work environment which may become the norm because of the underlying cultural assumptions and values. However, the different scholarly traditions and perspectives used in conceptualising organisational culture (including collectivism as one of its dimensions) and organisational climate led to constant confusion and frequent erroneous use of the constructs. In an effort to end the paradigm war between culture and climate, Denison (1997) made a strong proposition which clarified that culture and climate are two distinct but related constructs. He further explained that climate differs from culture in such a way that the former refers to a situation and its relationship to thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals in organisations while the latter refers to an evolved context within which a situation may be embedded. He argued that the difference lies more in the interpretation rather than differences in phenomenon and further explained that both constructs share a common goal which is to determine the influence of the individual and social contexts in organisations. He highlighted that the common ground calls for greater integration than differentiation. Given these arguments, we can assume that collectivism, being a dimension of culture, is conceptually related to climate.

The Congruence between Collectivism and Climate in terms of Levels of Conceptualisation, Measurement, and Analysis. Aside from the conceptual link between collectivism and climate, it is evident in the literature that the levels of conceptualisation, measurement, and analysis for both constructs are congruent. Collectivism was initially conceptualised at the national level (also referred to as the societal level). As mentioned earlier, in the seminal work of Hofstede (1980), country-level variables were measured, individual responses were averaged within each country and the findings demonstrated differences among nations in terms of how individuals are related and integrated into an in-group. The conceptualisation of collectivism has been extended to include the individual and psychological level. Triandis (1995) conceptualised collectivism at the individual level where he argued that collectivism can be reflected in the dimensions of personality which he referred to as allocentrism. Allocentrism is characterized by interdependence, belongingness to in-groups, and subservience to the wishes of the in-group (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clark, 1985). Oyserman and Uskul (2008) describe collectivism at the individual level to imply that the self is socially sensitive, malleable, context-dependent, and group memberships are ascribed and fixed. Collectivism has also been conceptualised at the organisational level. Robert and Wasti (2000) posited that collectivism is a meaningful dimension of organisational contexts. They developed and coined the term "organisational collectivism" which they had argued to be observed across a wide range of organisations.

In a similar manner, climate also has two levels of conceptualisation, measurement, and analysis: (1) psychological climate which refers to the individual perceptions of the work environment and (2) organisational climate which refers to the collective perceptions of the work environment and experience. Psychological climate has been conceptualised as a molar construct comprising an individual's psychologically meaningful representations of proximal organisational structure, processes, and events (James, Hater, Gent, & Bruni, 1978; Rousseau, 1988). It has been posited that such psychological representations are an interpretation of organisational processes and practices that is based on an individual's knowledge structure (James & Sells, 1981). On the other hand, organisational climate can have either a subjective or objective focus (Ekval, 1987; Glick, 1998; James, Joyce, & Slocum, 1988; Rousseau, 1988). The subjective perspective posits that organisational climate is an aggregated and collective construct through which organisation members' understand and make sense of organisational events. The objective perspective represents the employee's descriptions of a particular process or practice and such can be viewed as a property of the organisation which distinguishes one organisation from the other. Although climate is not conceptualised at the societal level, the congruence in how collectivism and climate are conceptualised, measured, and analysed (at both individual and organisational levels) leads us to

think that these constructs share salient characteristics and features.

The Apparent Influence of Collectivism on Organisational Processes and Practices that have been the Domains of Climate Studies. Kuenzi and Schminke (2009) comprehensively reviewed the climate literature and found climate studies on diversity, ethics, involvement, justice, and leadership. While none of these climate studies have directly included collectivism, we can see in the literature an apparent influence of collectivism on organisational processes and practices that have been the domain of climate studies. For example, Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, and Neale (1998) demonstrated that the extent to which an organisation emphasised collectivistic values interacted with demographic composition to influence social interaction, conflict, productivity, and perceptions of creativity. In another study, Jackson (2001) found that there is some variation among national groups in the difference between self-judgments of ethicality and respondents' perceptions of others' judgments of ethicality. In addition, the phenomenon of rating others less leniently than oneself was found to happen more among collectivists. Meanwhile, Beekun, Stedham, and Yamamura (2003) found that Brazilians (collectivists) evaluate and judge the content of actions and decisions more ethically than Americans (non-collectivists) when utilitarian criteria are applied. They argued that utilitarianism (pursuit of common good) is related to collectivism as it is characterized by the common good of the in-group. In a related study, Gomez, Kirkman, and Shapiro (2000) showed that after controlling for country, collectivism (measured at the individual level) had a positive relationship with the evaluation of a teammate. Furthermore, the evaluation was higher for in-group members among the Mexican respondents than among the US respondents. Another study by Ramamoorthy and Flood (2002) indicated that the dimension of collectivism moderated the relationships between equity perceptions and effort and equity perceptions and obligations towards teamwork.

Other studies showing the apparent influence of collectivism on organisational processes and practices that have been the domains of climate studies include the study of Galang (1999) who showed that Philippine samples (collectivists) registered more positive reactions to participation in decision making than Canadian samples (non-collectivists). In a related study, Lam, Chen, and Schaubroeck (2002) found that allocentrism moderated the relationship between perceptions of group participative decision-making opportunity and group performance. Meanwhile, in terms of justice, Murphy-Berman and Berman (2002) examined cross-cultural differences in perceptions of distributive justice from two collectivistic cultures: Hongkong and Indonesia. They found that Hong Kong respondents viewed the use of merit as fairer than the use of need. On the contrary, the Indonesian respondents saw the use of need as fairer than the use of merit. They suggested the need for a nuanced differentiation among nations generally belonging to the same cultural cluster. Perceptions of leadership are also found to differ across cultures. Ensari and Murphy (2003) found that leaders' prototypical characteristics were more effective in the formation of leadership impression in a non-collectivistic culture (US). Meanwhile, company performance was more effective in leadership attributions in a collectivistic culture (Turkey). These findings in the literature lead us to think that collectivism has a role to play in influencing organisational processes and practices that have previously been the domain of climate studies.

The Apparent Influence of Collectivism on Climate Outcomes. Recent works have linked the collective perceptions of work environment with outcomes (e.g., Parker et al., 2003). In a recent review of climate studies, Kuenzi and Schminke (2009) found common work outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intentions to be part of organisational climate models.

Studies have shown that job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intentions are influenced by collectivism. For example, Hui and Yee (1999) demonstrated that a positive workgroup atmosphere resulted in low satisfaction among individualists but not among collectivists. They also found a positive correlation between collectivism and job satisfaction but only among members of congenial workgroups. In another study, Wasti (2003) found that satisfaction with one's supervisor was found to be a significant commitment antecedent over and above satisfaction with work and promotion, among employees with collectivist values. Huang and van de Vliert (2003) examined the moderating role of collectivism in the relationship between job characteristics and job satisfaction using a sample comprising 49 nations. They found a strong relationship between intrinsic job characteristics and job satisfaction in less collectivistic countries. Ramamoorthy, Kulkarni, Gupta, and Flood (2007) examined the effects of collectivism on affective commitment,

normative commitment, extra effort, and tenure outcome. Results showed that Indians (collectivists) exhibited greater commitment to the organisation and more willing to demonstrate extra effort than the Irish employees (non-collectivists). At the individual level, the study indicated that individuals with collectivist values tended to exhibit higher commitment to their organisations, tended to have lower turnover intentions, and were likely to exert more effort on the job. These findings clearly demonstrate that collectivism plays an important role in influencing work outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intentions. Since work outcomes have become an integral part of organisational climate models, we can argue that collectivism can influence climate through its influence on work outcomes.

Recommendations

This paper explored the conceptual relationship between collectivism and climate. Both constructs have been in existence in the literature for many decades now. However, the conceptual relationship between the constructs has oftentimes been neglected. In this paper, we explained four main reasons to examine the relationship between collectivism and climate: (1) the conceptual overlap between culture and climate; (2) the congruence between collectivism and climate in terms of levels of conceptualisation, measurement, and analysis; (3) the apparent influence of collectivism on organisational processes and practices that have been the domain of climate studies; and (4) the apparent influence of collectivism on climate outcomes.

Now, we would like to offer some recommendations for how this relationship can guide further studies. First, it is necessary to further investigate the influence of collectivism on facet-specific climate. Facet-specific climates are those related to a particular aspect of the organisational context including diversity, ethics, involvement, justice, and leadership, which have been mentioned earlier. But other than these facet-specific climate studies, it may also be important to extend empirical tests of the influence collectivism has on other facets and domains of organisational climate. For example, it may be relevant to conduct studies on the influence of collectivism on climate for safety or climate for innovation. Doing so can bring greater clarity to our understanding of the extent to which collectivism influences other facets of organisational climate.

Second, aside from extending empirical tests to other facets of climate, it may also be interesting to investigate the influence of collectivism on the various facets of climate simultaneously. This means studying one facet of climate alongside the others. Kuenzi and Schminke (2009) explain that "exploring single climates in isolation is unlikely to be the most productive path to creating a full and accurate understanding of how work climates affect individual and collective outcomes within organisations" (p. 706). Investigating climate simultaneously can reveal some interesting interactions between and among various facets of organisational climate. The recent works that have compressed the wide variety of perceptions on work practices and outcomes (e.g., Langford, 2009) can pave the way for this kind of simultaneous investigation.

Third, we have seen that climate has been linked with work outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turn-over. The link between work practices and work outcomes already represents advancement in the field. It responds to the recommendation of Kraut (2006) who highlighted the importance of demonstrating and determining the relationship between work practices and outcomes. But in spite of these advances, it is also important to explore the relationship of collectivism to other work outcomes that focus on non-employee factors such as organisation objectives, change and innovation, and customer satisfaction.

Fourth, as we have discussed earlier, there is congruence between collectivism and climate in terms of the level of conceptualisation, measurement, and analysis. Collectivism which was originally conceptualised at the societal level has also been conceptualised at the individual and organisational level. The same is true for climate which has been conceptualised at both individual and organisational levels. With these levels of conceptualisation and measurement, it is now possible to explore and engage in multi-level designs to study the relationship between collectivism and climate. Adopting multi-level designs can yield interesting patterns and results potentially revealing how the constructs interact at different levels of analysis.

Finally, it may be interesting to explore how collectivism influences organisational climate formation and change. Schneider and Reichers (1983) offered the structural approach as a potent explanation for under-

standing organisational climate formation and change. The structural approach basically posits that changes in organisational structures and settings can influence and change organisational member's values, beliefs, and perceptions of organisational events. In exploring this approach, it may be interesting to determine how collectivism plays a role in the formation and change of organisational members' perceptions of the organisational environment.

In summary, this paper identifies the need to conduct more empirical investigations to more strongly establish the relationship between collectivism and climate; the need to investigate facets of climate simultaneously; the need to extend the link between climate and other work outcomes such as organisational objectives, change and innovation, and customer satisfaction; the need to engage in multi-level research; and the need to explore how collectivism influences climate formation and change. Through this paper, we hope to stir some fresh and new insights as well as renew enthusiasm towards the seemingly old but robust and promising constructs of collectivism and climate.

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