Personality and Values at Work

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Abstract

Individuals' personality and values have important implications in the workplace and can be used in conjunction with other metrics to predict outcomes relevant to organizations, such as job performance. Instruments for assessing personality and values can thus be potent tools in hiring and promotion processes. In this article, we review the history of research surrounding personality and values in the workplace, discuss recent contributions to the literature, and identify existing issues and areas of future research.

Two decades ago, noted organizational scholar Adrian Furnham lamented that "organizational behavior theorists and management scientists have neglected to examine individual differences in any systematic way … while personality theorists have been eager to examine clinical, educational, medical and social correlates of individual differences/personality dimensions, they have consistently ignored occupational/organizational correlates" (Furnham, 1992: p. 2). A surge of research over the last 20 years has addressed this oversight. Hundreds of empirical studies and dozens of meta-analyses have explored relationships between individual differences, such as personality and values, and a vast array of important workplace attitudes and behaviors.

In this article, we explore the roles of personality and values in the workplace, their impact on work outcomes, and implications concerning organizational policies, practices, and systems. We define personality as the relatively enduring structures and propensities within individuals that explain their generalized affective, cognitive, and behavioral tendencies (Hogan et al., 1996). Values reflect preferences for certain situations, objects, goals, or behaviors over others (Schwartz, 1999). A subtle yet important distinction between personality and values is that the former describes one's social reputation, whereas the latter describes one's preferences. In the following sections, we review the literature regarding these two individual difference variables, focusing on empirical findings, recent developments in paradigmatic focus, and practical implications. We also highlight existing questions, emerging issues, and areas in need of future research.

Personality

The History of Personality in the Workplace

The above-mentioned dearth of empirical research relating personality to workplace outcomes through the late 1980s could be attributed to several causes. Critics of personality (with roots traced to behavioralism) argued that individual behavior was a function of the situation rather than any internal forces, that researchers overestimated behavioral consistency, and that relationships between personality traits and behaviors were illusory in nature. In addition, reviews of what little empirical evidence existed offered rather disappointing conclusions. For instance, Guion and Gottier (1965) analyzed the literature regarding the use of personality tests in organizational contexts and concluded, "It is difficult in the face of this summary to advocate, with a clear conscience, the use of personality measures in most situations as a basis for making employment decisions about people" (p. 160).

At least three factors have accounted for increased optimism and research regarding the role of personality in the workplace. First, longitudinal studies revealing the stability of personality over time and the impressive relationships between personality and outcomes measured years apart put to rest several criticisms regarding the illusory nature of this construct. For instance, Finn (1986) found considerable stability in personality traits across a 30-year span. Moreover, Judge et al. (1999) found childhood measures of personality to predict career success assessed 50 years later.

Second, a taxonomy of personality traits – referred to as the 'Big Five' or 'Five Factor Model' for its aggregation of personality into five broad trait domains (see **Table 1**) – gained widespread acceptance in the field of personality psychology (*see* Five Factor Model of Personality, Facets of). Before the introduction of the Big Five to the organizational sciences, the accumulation of

Table 1 The Big Five personality traits

Personality trait	*Basis*	*Facets*
Conscientiousness	Need for achievement and commitment to work	Competence; order; dutifulness; achievement striving; self-discipline; deliberation
Agreeableness	Quality of social interaction	Trust; straightforwardness; altruism; compliance; modesty; tendermindedness
Emotional stability	Propensity toward negative emotions and anxiety	Anxiety; hostility; depression; self-consciousness; impulsiveness; vulnerability to stress
Openness to experience	Appreciation for art, emotion, and new things	Fantasy; aesthetics; feelings; actions; ideas; values
Extroversion	Preferred quantity of social interaction	Warmth; gregariousness; assertiveness; activity; excitement-seeking; positive emotion

personality trait findings was hampered by the vast number of different traits being investigated. Consensus regarding the nomenclature and hierarchical organization of traits allowed researchers to better aggregate and communicate empirical findings. This also led to a shift of focus from very narrow, specific personality traits optimized for predicting narrow behavioral facets to broad personality domains seemingly better suited for predicting broad, complex work outcomes like job performance and turnover.

Finally, accompanying the emergence of the Big Five taxonomy was the introduction of meta-analytic techniques to the organizational literature (*see* Systematic Reviewing and Meta-Analysis). By organizing the vast array of personality traits into broad factors, quantitatively integrating findings, and accounting for study artifacts such as sampling and measurement errors, researchers attained stable patterns of relationships undiscovered by early narrative literature reviews. The following section highlights relationships between Big Five personality traits and important workplace attitudes and behaviors uncovered by meta-analytic reviews conducted in the time since the publication of the Encyclopedia's previous edition.

The Big Five Personality Traits in the Workplace

In terms of all Big Five traits, perhaps none is as relevant to workplace criteria as conscientiousness. Reflecting an individual's industriousness and orderliness, this trait is the strongest Big Five predictor of overall job performance, and the importance of conscientiousness generalizes across cultures, occupations, and performance criteria (Barrick et al., 2001). Conscientious employees are more likely to engage in positive citizenship behaviors by going above and beyond their job roles to help out their employer and fellow coworkers (Chiaburu et al., 2011). They are also less likely to engage in deviant behaviors at work, such as theft and property damage (Berry et al., 2007); be involved in workplace accidents (Clarke and Robertson, 2008); and voluntarily leave their jobs (Zimmerman, 2008). Conscientiousness has been shown to be an important trait in the context of leadership, though it more strongly predicts the likelihood that an individual emerges into a leadership position than the likelihood that an individual is effective in that role (Judge et al., 2002a).

Emotional stability – or the absence of neuroticism – is generally regarded as the second most important personality trait predictor of workplace outcomes. Like conscientiousness, this trait predicts overall job performance across occupations, though to a slightly lower degree (Barrick et al., 2001). Emotional stability is also negatively related to workplace deviance, accidents, and turnover. Furthermore, emotionally stable individuals are more likely to emerge into leadership positions and tend to be more effective in these roles (Judge et al., 2002a). The importance of the remaining Big Five traits tends to be much more dependent on the type of job and/or workplace criterion. For instance, extroversion is a valuable predictor of success in managerial jobs, agreeableness in jobs that require interpersonal interactions, and openness in contexts requiring training and learning as opposed to routine task accomplishment (Barrick et al., 2001; Mount et al., 1998).

Accounting for the above-mentioned relationships with workplace behaviors, personality impacts several critical work attitudes and processes. Conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extroversion all positively predict overall job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002b), and individuals with these traits also tend to be more motivated in the workplace (Judge and Ilies, 2002), as well as more resilient in the face of stress (Alarcon et al., 2009). Likewise, team performance is affected by member personalities, though the optimal configurations depend on the particular trait (Bell, 2007). For agreeableness, team performance is heavily influenced by the team's least agreeable member, as one 'bad apple' can spoil the bunch. Concerning extroversion, it may be desirable to have a heterogeneous mix of this trait so that introverted members can balance out the extroverts and vice versa (Neuman et al., 1999). However, for conscientiousness, too much heterogeneity can be a suboptimal combination (Barrick et al., 1998).

In sum, recent meta-analytic investigations have uncovered meaningful relationships between personality and a vast array of important workplace attitudes and behaviors. However, whether and how organizational decision makers can best capture and utilize personality information has been the subject of intense scrutiny and several critical questions remain. Below, we explore existing debates and future research streams.

Current Concerns and Future Research

A poll conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management in 2011 revealed that less than 20% of organizations use personality tests for hiring or promotion decisions (SHRM, 2011). Despite considerable evidence in support of statistically significant relationships between personality traits and workplace outcomes, some researchers and practitioners question whether the magnitudes of effects are practically meaningful and strong enough to justify their use in personnel selection contexts. Moreover, some scholars argue that the effect sizes of personality traits are just as disappointingly low as they were in Guion and Gottier's review, and that even with methodological improvements, individual personality traits only account for a very small portion of overall job performance.

In response, advocates of personality testing point out that meta-analytic investigations may offer conservative predictive validity estimates since they often aggregate empirical research without any theoretical reasoning to suspect that a given personality trait would be predictive in a certain context. When only specific and theoretically justified relationships between personality and performance are meta-analyzed, personality traits tend to have much greater explanatory power (Hogan and Holland, 2003). In addition, organizations rarely assess just one personality trait in testing contexts, so the composite validities of multiple traits may be a more appropriate metric. Research shows that simultaneous analysis of all Big Five traits greatly improves the prediction of job-related outcomes, making personality about as predictive as other important job-selection constructs, such as cognitive ability and job experience (Barrick and Mount, 2005). In addition, the Big Five traits generally do not differ systematically across racial and ethnic groups, which can help promote hiring practices that foster a diverse workforce (Barrick and Mount, 2005).

A second obstacle to the widespread acceptance of personality testing in the workplace is the issue of responder faking. In high-stakes contexts, where hiring or promotion decisions depend on the outcome of personality tests, applicants may be especially motivated to distort their responses in order to appear more attractive to employers. Organizations have several options to combat faking. First, they might attempt to reduce applicants' desire to fake by requiring applicants to elaborate on their responses (e.g., by providing specific examples of situations where they exhibited a trait) or simply by warning applicants not to fake. Second, organizations might reduce applicants' ability to fake. Forced-choice inventories require applicants to select from equally desirable options (e.g., "do you describe yourself as ambitious or helpful?"), making it difficult for test-takers to ascertain the 'correct' response. In addition, conditional reasoning tests require applicants to justify their actions in certain situations; personality trait scores are inferred based on the applicants' underlying reasoning processes. Finally, techniques exist to identify individuals who fake. One such technique relies on 'lie scales' – items included in the assessments that are designed to measure the likelihood that respondents are purposefully distorting responses on the actual personality tests. More advanced techniques involve measuring individual item's response times or tracking test-taker's eye movements, and are currently being developed with preliminary success (van Hooft and Born, 2012).

Some researchers contend that the issue of faking is much ado about nothing, as the opportunity to fake does not necessarily make it impossible to extract meaningful information from personality test scores. For starters, they argue that even though faking is possible, the actual prevalence is lower than presumed (Hogan et al., 2007). Moreover, the occurrence of faking alone is not necessarily harmful to personality test validity. For instance, if all applicants fake (to a similar degree), then the rank-ordering of applicants by personality test scores will remain consistent even though response distortion occurs. Alternatively, if different people fake to a different extent, but the factors that impact the magnitude and direction of faking are themselves organizationally desirable, then response distortion may not necessarily invalidate assessment results. For instance, motivated individuals may be more likely to engage in impression management and intelligent individuals may be better at distorting responses in the organizationally desired direction. In regard to these issues, empirical evidence shows that the predictive validity of the personality tests remains substantial despite the threat of faking (Ones et al., 2007).

The current state of research has experienced a shift in focus from examining if personality is worthwhile to examining how to maximize its predictive power. One stream of research is revisiting the notion that the Big Five represents the optimal operationalization of personality traits. Recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that assessing personality at a level of specificity narrower than the Big Five might increase criterion-related validity (Judge et al., 2013). In addition, several broader, compound traits – integrity, proactive personality, core self-evaluations – increase predictive validity in certain contexts (Ones et al., 2005). Then there are other traits, for example, Machiavellianism and Narcissism, that do not quite fit within the construct domain of the Big Five and yet deserve increased empirical attention.

A second approach to increasing the effectiveness of personality testing involves contextualizing such assessments. Respondents are asked to rate not their general or global personality but their personality specifically in the workplace. The evidence to date suggests that providing respondents with a frame of reference increases both the reliability and predictive validity of personality assessments (Lievens et al., 2008).

Finally, recognizing the limitations of self-report assessments of personality (such as faking or a lack of self-awareness), researchers continue to explore alternative means of collecting applicant personality information. Some fruitful avenues of research entail acquiring personality ratings from coworkers, spouses, and independent raters. Moreover, independent raters might evaluate personality from information collected via observation, interviews, application materials, or even publicly available online social profiles. Oh et al. (2011) meta-analyzed the predictive validity of observer ratings of personality and found that they were between 30 and 340% higher than self-ratings, depending on the traits being rated.

Summarizing the literature, Judge et al. (2008: p. 1983) remarked: "From the vantage point of today, that personality has shown itself relevant to individual attitudes and behaviors as well as team and organizational functioning seems an incontrovertible statement." Despite the progress made since publication of this Encyclopedia's previous issue, additional work is needed to understand the dynamic processes through which personality shapes workplace attitudes and behaviors and vice versa. In addition, future research will continue to refine and innovate assessment techniques to overcome current limitations and maximize their predictive validity.

Values

Values are "conceptions of the desirable that guide the way social actors (e.g., organisational leaders, policy-makers, individual persons) select actions, evaluate people and events, and explain their actions and evaluations" (Schwartz, 1999: p. 24–25). Like personality, values shape how people perceive and respond to the external environment. However, two features distinguish values from personality: (1) personality reflects behavioral reputations, whereas values describe preferences and intentions; and (2) personality traits vary in terms of how much of a particular characteristic is present/absent in an individual's reputation, whereas values vary in terms of the relative importance of a given preference over other values (Bilsky and Schwartz, 1994). Like early personality trait research, the accumulation of knowledge regarding the importance of work values is hampered by the multitude of values and value typologies being examined. In the following section, we outline two distinct streams of research. The first explores the role of employee–organization value congruence – that is, the match between the values employees consider most important and those that are able to be satisfied by the organization. The second explores the role of national culture on shaping the values of a workforce.

Value Congruence

A well-established maxim in the organizational literature is that employees are most engaged in their work when there is a sense of compatibility between their values and the work environment. Whether conceptualized as congruence with one's job, work unit, supervisor, or organization, value congruence has been meta-analytically linked to outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, performance, and turnover (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). More recently, scholars have begun integrating parallel streams of congruence research. For instance, one paradigm conceptualizes value congruence in terms of complementary fit, where the organization provides what the individual most values. A second paradigm conceptualizes congruence in terms of supplementary fit, where the employee's values are consistent with those of the organization (or existing organizational members). Empirical evidence suggests that both conceptualizations of congruence contribute independently – and with similar magnitudes – to work outcomes (Cable and Edwards, 2004).

A second recent advancement within this literature is a deeper examination of the impact of misfit. Whereas traditional theoretical and empirical approaches treated all types of misfit as equally suboptimal, recent developments suggest more complex models. Relying on polynomial regression and surface plot analysis methodologies, several scholars have uncovered asymmetrical misfit effects. An oversupply of particular values – getting more than one might desire – is less detrimental than an undersupply and, in many cases, leads to more positive outcomes than exact correspondence between values (Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011).

Cultural Values

Whereas personality research is predominately concerned with individual differences, there is an extensive and growing body of literature on the impact of national culture on the values of employee populations. Broadly speaking, cultural values shape how people prefer to manage and be managed, as well as their attitudes toward work. Several common frameworks exist for understanding cultural values. Schwartz's (1999) theory of cultural values suggests that all cultures are confronted with three social issues and the institutions developed to resolve these issues impact member values. The first issue is the need to define the nature of the relationship between the individual and the group. How cultures resolve this affects values concerning conservatism, intellectual autonomy, and affective autonomy. The second need is to ensure responsible behavior that will maintain social order. Resolution of this issue influences member values concerning hierarchy and egalitarianism. Finally, cultures must address the relationship between humankind and the natural and social world. The institutions designed to address this need are reflected in mastery and harmony values.

Perhaps the most well-known and widely used framework for studying national culture was developed by Geert Hofstede and published in 1980. Hofstede analyzed the values of thousands of IBM employees from dozens of countries and came up with a framework based on four dimensions: individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity–femininity. Individualism–collectivism reflects the extent to which people prefer to act on their own or as part of a group. In individualistic societies, organizations can expect higher levels of competition and self-interested actions, whereas harmony and loyalty may be the norms in collectivistic societies.

Power distance refers to what extent a society accepts the unequal distribution of power. In low power-distance cultures, managers socialize with subordinates and often involve them in decision-making processes. In high power-distance cultures, superior–subordinate relations are very formal; subordinates are expected to obey their superiors without questioning. Uncertainty avoidance reflects the extent to which people feel threatened by situations that are ambiguous or have unknown outcomes and subsequently act to avoid or control such circumstances. In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, there is a strong preference for formal rules and guidelines; deviance from established behaviors is regarded negatively. In cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, employees are more apt to take risks and be more tolerant of behaviors and opinions that are different from theirs. Hofstede's masculinity–femininity dimension refers to certain sets of values preferred in a society. Masculine societies favor assertiveness, performance, success, money, and materialism. Feminine societies emphasize a friendly environment, job security, cooperation, quality of life, warm personal relationships, and caring for the weak. Masculine cultures are more likely to divide work and social tasks along gender lines, differentiating between jobs meant for men and those meant for women.

A third typology for distinguishing the impact of national culture on individual values is the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research) project, which defines nine distinct cultural dimensions theorized to impact how leaders manage and structure their workforce. Building on Hofstede's typology, the GLOBE dimensions include uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and collectivism. However, they distinguish between two forms of collectivism: societal collectivism and in-group (e.g., family and/or organization) collectivism. Hofstede's masculinity/femininity is likewise split into a gender egalitarianism dimension and an assertiveness dimension. Finally, GLOBE adds dimensions for future orientation, performance orientation, and humane orientation, representing the degree to which individuals engage in future-oriented behaviors, reward performance improvement, and value fairness, respectively.

Cultural Values and Work-Related Behaviors

The effects of national culture on work-related behaviors are well documented. A meta-analysis by Taras et al. (2010) found Hofstede's cultural dimensions to predict a variety of organizational outcomes including job performance, absenteeism, turnover, organizational commitment, citizenship behaviors, organizational identification, and team attitudes. While cultural values accounted for relatively low amounts of variance in specific behavioral outcomes, their predictive power concerning emotions, attitudes, and perceptions rivaled – and in some cases surpassed – those of personality and general mental ability.

In their review of empirical studies using Hofstede's framework, Kirkman et al. (2006) summarized findings regarding culture's influence on individual styles of change management, conflict management, human resource management, negotiation, reward allocation, decision making, and leadership. In addition, culture was examined as an antecedent of organizational justice, work-related attitudes, and employee motivation.

Of the four dimensions, not only was individualism–collectivism the most frequently investigated, but comparatively, it tended to be the most powerful predictor of workplace outcomes. Collectivist values are associated with increased cooperation and positive attitudes regarding teams. Additionally, individuals from collectivist cultures tend to prefer nondirective leadership that emphasizes participation and teamwork. On the other hand, individualism is associated with increased conflict, and those from individualist cultures tend to use personal experience rather than formal rules to manage conflict. Individualism is positively associated with avoiding unethical behavior and preferring paternalistic leadership, and negatively associated with concern for others' interests in conflict management (Kirkman et al., 2006; Taras et al., 2010).

Individuals from high power-distance cultures tend to have higher organizational commitment, person–organization fit, and a preference for directive leadership; however, they are less likely to avoid unethical behavior and seek feedback (Kirkman et al., 2006; Taras et al., 2010). The value of uncertainty avoidance is strongly associated with an individual's team commitment and a preference for directive leadership, and negatively associated with innovation and a preference for participative leadership (Taras et al., 2010). Finally, masculinity is positively associated with a preference for a compromising conflict management style and social avoidance, and negatively correlated with a preference for an avoidance conflict management style and the value of individual equality (Taras et al., 2010).

Cultural values can also shape individual personality. In their literature review, Heine and Buchtel (2009) discussed the differences in personality across cultures, especially between Eastern and Western cultures. In Eastern societies, perceptions of the self tend to be more fluid, context-specific, and dependent on others. Easterners are more likely to have contradictory views of themselves, and they may change the way they act based on the situation. Because of the collectivist nature of many Eastern cultures, Easterners tend to act in ways that promote harmony with others. They are less likely than Westerners to engage in self-enhancing activities, perhaps because collectivist cultures may punish such actions more than individualist cultures. Western, individualist cultures, on the other hand, may provide benefits of self-enhancement that outweigh the costs, leading to its greater prevalence as a personality trait in such countries. Additionally, Westerners tend to view their personalities as stable and believe they act somewhat consistently across different situational contexts.

Despite extensive research, there remains much to do to better understand the influence of values at work. While a considerable amount of research has accumulated regarding some cultural values (e.g., individualism), others have been less explored. Moreover, paralleling the personality literature, researchers have begun to call for an exploration of more narrowly defined value facets than the broad dimensions conceptualized in the dominant typologies. In addition, process models accounting for how values develop, change over time, and impact attitudes and behaviors are needed to clarify our existing empirical findings.

See also: Big Five Factor Model, Theory and Structure; Cross-Cultural Psychology; Culture: Contemporary Views; Five Factor Model of Personality, Assessment of; Five Factor Model of Personality, Facets of; Organizations and Culture; Personality Assessment, Faking And; Personality Assessment, Forced-choice; Personality Assessment: Overview; Personality Assessment; Personality, Trait Models of; Personnel Selection, Psychology of; Systematic Reviewing and Meta-analysis; Values, Psychology of; Values, Social Psychology of; Vocational Interests, Values, and Preferences, Psychology of.

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