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Learning Goal Orientation and cultural diversity:

Unveiling the impact across generational cohorts

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Importance and Key Contribution. Though research on learning goal orientation (LGO) abounds in developmental and education literature, research on its content and meaning in the workplace is comparatively limited. The purpose of this study was to address these neglected areas by analyzing the influence of generational groups and national culture (e.g., performance orientation) on LGO in the managerial population. We found support that the youngest generation of managers in our sample had the highest LGO. Moreover, with a multilevel framework national culture is a cross-level moderator; there is a tendency for managers in younger generations in performance oriented countries to be higher in LGO than managers in younger generations in low performance oriented countries. This is one of the first studies to provide evidence of LGO in the workplace and in a managerial population across countries.

Theoretical Base

Learning goal orientation is the belief that individuals hold on how to approach goals and originates from the idea that increased effort usually leads to increased learning and improved

ability (VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Those with a learning goal orientation believe abilities are malleable, yearn to develop and refine skills and want to increase learning or mastery in new activities (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; Dweck, 1986, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988); they also believe in incremental improvement.

In the workplace, LGO is associated with positive outcomes, such as performance, self-efficacy and creativity.

As a result, some recommend that in order to be successful in the workplace, employees need to have an LGO and organizations themselves need to increase/strengthen their LGO. The aim of our study is to fill a gap in the literature necessitated by the demographics of the current workforce. We examine generational and cultural differences in LGO in the workplace in a sample of managers. We examine first the associations between generational groups and LGO and then, using a multilevel framework, we examine the cultural dimension of Performance Orientation as both a cross-level main effect on LGO and as a moderator of individual-level relationships.

Research Questions

LGO across Generational Groups

A workforce including employees who range in age from those in their 70s to those in their 20s is a reality in many organizations (Harris, 2005). This raises interest on generational differences, as talent developers, managers and researchers must realize how to effectively motivate and develop employees from different generations.

According to generational cohort theory (e.g., Edmunds & Turner, 2005), generations develop attitudes, values, and beliefs based on the economic, political and social events that took place during their formative years (Daboval, 1998). Thus, each generation is shaped

collectively, and therefore its members have similar thought processes and behaviours beliefs (Horvath, 2011).

It is through this theoretical lens that we discuss generational differences in LGO. In line with the literature, we divided the managerial workforce into four groups: Early Baby Boomers (born 1946-1951), Late Baby Boomers (born 1952-1959), Early Generation X (born 1960-1970), and Late Generation X (born 1971-1980).

Important changes in the labor market took place beginning in the 1980s, which changed the experiences, values and opinions of managers/workers. Baby Boomers joined the workforce when most western countries were progressing widely and offering full employment and well-defined career structures (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). In comparison, Generation X experienced fewer employment opportunities, and faced tendencies of downsizing and re-engineering. This has shaped their psychological contract. Indeed, Generation X considers taking personal responsibility for career development, commitment and adaptability to work and global mobility in exchange for development opportunities, challenging assignments, and the guarantee of employability rather than job security (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999). This generational cohort, contrarily to Baby Boomers, does not expect lifetime employment. It places less importance on job security and rather seeks for more opportunities for development. Thus:

H11: GenX Managers will have a higher LGO than managers in older generations.

LGO Across National Cultures

Research examining how national culture shapes learning goal orientation is scant. Studies have hinted that learning varies across cultures (Geppert, 2005; Joy & Kolb, 2009), but how and why LGO may differ across cultures needs further investigation.

National culture pertains to how a group of people organizes and perceives the world and seeks to simplify/describe groups' differences . One of the more recent ways to measure culture is the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004). Consistent with Parboteeah et al. (2005), we identified Performance Orientation (PO) as the most relevant variable in connection with LGO. PO refers to the extent to which a collective (either organization or society) encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2008).

The goals of high PO cultures (e.g., value of training and development, achievement, belief that anyone can success if they try) are congruent with high LGO (understanding something new in training and education, belief that skills/ability can be improved). This means alignment between LGO and the value high PO cultures place on training, attitude, and initiative.

Thus:

H2: LGO will vary across national cultures, such that managers in high Performance Oriented national cultures will have a higher LGO than managers in low Performance Oriented national cultures.

Performance Orientation provides a direct conceptual linkage with the notion of LGO. As a result, we believe that Performance Orientation will act as a cross-level moderator between generational cohort and learning orientation. Thus:

H3: Performance Orientation will be a cross-level moderator of the relationship between generations and LGO; managers in younger generations in higher Performance Oriented cultures will have the highest LGO.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

We used information from an archival database about managers around the world, and focused on demographics, interests, leadership development and attitudes of age groups/generations in the workplace. The total database included 6200 respondents from all continents. Due to sample size requirements for the data analysis, the present study included 3657 respondents from 20 countries in 5 continents, as we could only use managers from the database that (a) were from countries used in the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004); and (b) numbered at least 20 in each country.

In total, 11.6% were Early Boomers, 27.5% were Late Boomers, 44.1% were Early GenX and 16.8% were Late GenX.

Measures

Learning goal orientation. To measure LGO we used a 3-item scale (D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008). Participants indicated the extent of their agreement to the survey items on a scale ranging from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*. The internal consistency in the research sample was $\alpha=.73$.

Performance Orientation. We used the cultural practices scores of PO from the work of the GLOBE research (cf. House et al., 2004). Consistent with past research (e.g., Parboteeah et al., 2005; Parboteeah, Cullen, & Lim, 2004), we used the societal practices scores (i.e., “what is” judgments; the way things are) because our research is interested in how the perceived culture (i.e., what a culture is) relates to LGO.

Analysis

Analyses were performed with hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to determine whether PO as a Level-2 variable (the published societal practice score for

PO assigned as a “Level-2” country variable) acts as a cross-level main effect on LGO, and whether it is a cross-level moderator of the Level-1 relationship between generational cohort and LGO.

Findings and Implications

To test H1 we conducted a one-way ANOVA. The grouping variable was generational cohort. The outcome variable was LGO, with higher scores relating to higher LGO. The ANOVA was statistically significant, $F(3, 3653) = 6.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$. Post-hoc LSD tests show that the Late GenX was significantly higher in their LGO than each of the other generations was. Early GenX was significantly higher in LGO than Early Boomers. Boomers according to the post-hoc LSD test were statistically the same in LGO.

Our next analysis tested H2, whether PO had a main effect on LGO (i.e., is PO a cross-level main effect). Given that we found differences in LGO among generational groups from results of H1, we controlled for generational groups in this HLM intercepts-as-outcomes analysis. Results of our *intercepts-as-outcomes* analysis reveal that PO did not have a cross-level main effect on LGO, $\gamma_{01} = -0.08, t(18) = -1.07, p = .298$. Thus, H2 is not supported.

To test H3 we ran an HLM intercepts- and slopes-as-outcomes model, controlling for generations. The test for H33, $\gamma_{11} = 0.14, t(18) = 2.52, p = .022$ is statistically significant. PO is a Level-Two cross-level moderator. This relationship is shown graphically in Figure 1, using the societal practices centered-score for one standard deviation above and below the mean. Younger generations are higher in LGO in high PO countries than low PO countries.

The results will be discussed against the theoretical foundations, together with implications for research and practice, limitations and future studies.

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Table 3

HLM Cross-Level Results of Performance Orientation on Learning Goal Orientation

Hypothesis 2 – Intercepts-as-Outcomes					
Level 1	Learning Goal Orientation _{ij} = $\beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$ (Generation) + e_{ij}				
Level 2	$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$ (Performance Orientation) + u_{0j}				
Level 2	$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}$				
Fixed Effect	Coefficient	se	t-ratio	df	p-value
γ_{00}	4.37**	0.03	160.52	18	0.000
γ_{01}	-0.08	0.08	-1.07	18	0.298
γ_{10}	0.03	0.02	1.36	19	0.191
Random Effect	Variance Component		χ^2	df	p-value
u_{0j}	.008		58.76	18	0.000
u_{1j}	.002		36.03	19	0.011
e_{ij}	.387				
Hypothesis 3 – Intercepts- and Slopes-as-Outcomes					
Level 1	Learning Goal Orientation _{ij} = $\beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$ (Generation) + e_{ij}				
Level 2	$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$ (Performance Orientation) + u_{0j}				
Level 2	$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}$ (Performance Orientation) + u_{1j}				
Fixed Effect	Coefficient	se	t-ratio	df	p-value
γ_{00}	4.37**	0.03	163.27	18	0.000
γ_{01}	-0.08	0.08	-1.02	18	0.320
γ_{10}	0.01	0.02	0.78	18	0.443
γ_{11}	0.14*	0.06	2.52	18	0.022
Random Effect	Variance Component		χ^2	df	p-value

u_{0j}	.008	57.93	18	0.000
u_{1j}	.000	28.35	18	0.057
e_{ij}	.387			

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. The moderating effects of PO on the relationship between generational cohort and LGO.

