

## **FOLK THEORY AND WORK MOTIVATION RESEARCH**

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**Abstract** The present paper sets forth a new approach to the research of work motivation, by integrating three backgrounds of knowledge: that of the subjects of motivation (employees), that of the client of the motivating process (managers) and, finally, that of the people who conceive, design and apply the results of the study (the investigator). We demonstrated the need for "a paradigm shift" within the research of motivation by means of a qualitative and exploratory research. We identified the folk theories of human resource managers on motivation and supported the need to reconsider the epistemic foundation of the research in this field.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The studies on work motivation include some approaches that move from the extreme of considering this psychosocial process a focal point of the organizational behavior, up to extreme of considering motivation a managerial fiction. Clearly, the large number of studies can not be ignored. The more so as the connection of motivation with job satisfaction and job performance has opened prolific areas of research. The beginnings of systematic study of motivation can be traced to the early twentieth century in the works of psychoanalysts and behaviorists. For a hundred years this area has seen a rapid development, being recognized as one of the most prolific in which the number of publications is concerned. However, paradoxically, in the early twenty-first century the area is considered mainly a-theoretic, concurrent and low predictive [1,2,8,13].

Theories of work motivation generate a set of implications and employments undoubtedly useful in the organizational environment. In fact, some of these theories were born following an approach of solving a definite problem within the business environment. In this context, one should reissue the problem of suitability of the positivist model and technical rationality to the social and human sciences type of knowledge.

Approaching the issue of human motivation by applying the scientific method raises a series of epistemological uncertainties: how many of the motivation theories are scientific theories, which are middle range theories and which are grand or macro-theories, which are the criteria of classifying the motivation theories, which are the criteria of establishing whether or not a theory is about motivation. These questions generate a direction of research that seems not to lead to constructive or at least useful consequences for the development of field. A postmodern paradigm approach, both for the use of the existing theories and especially for the "inventing" (not "discovery") of new ones, seems a direction better calibrated to the peculiarities of the field.

The number of publications in this respect indicates a constant interest of researchers and practitioners. Yet, there is a fundamental amendment, emphasized by Steers, Mowday and Shapiro: the number of publications that include core theoretical studies has drastically decreased after the "golden age" of the period 1960-1970. The scientific publications include "minor extensions, empirical tests, or applications of existing theories" [14]. For this situation there have been advanced two hypotheses: loss of interest on behalf of the researchers (as motivation is no longer a pressing issue in the organizational environment) and the solving of the motivation issue and hence the disappearance of the need for additional research. Both hypotheses are rejected by the three authors, who claim the need to find ideas "that can push us to the next level of understanding" [14].

The last hundred years has also not recorded significant progress in terms of motivation pragmatics. The direction of development of the research regarding work motivation, subscribed to industrial/organizational psychology involves an increase in the number of the micro-organizational variables studied. There has been recorded an increase in the accuracy of measurements through the improvement of instruments of statistical analysis and data interpretation. The current state of research includes the refining of measurement instruments – which are becoming more and more analytical. Although the level of data validity and reliability increases, the motivation pragmatics is stationary.

The divergence between motivation theory and pragmatics is a characteristic of the field. The motivation methods and techniques drawn from theoretical models have a predominantly reparatory, curative character (see the theories focusing on needs). Although the motivation theory has developed in the American cultural space, which is considered eminently pragmatic, this feature does not characterize at a high level motivation research. Other features of the American culture such as individualism and hedonism are more obvious.

However, the distance between motivation theory and practice is felt by both sides. This distance is not the result of a gap (of time or level of complexity), but rather occurs as a result of the parallelism between the two levels. From work motivation theories one can deduce a series of motivation techniques and practices, which still lose their “brilliance” when applied to the organizational environment. The classical motivation techniques - goal setting, job enrichment and job enlargement, empowerment - are indisputably useful but less responsive to the complex needs and diversity of organizations.

The predictive power of motivation theories is undercalibrated in relation to the needs of the organizations. Added to this is the relatively large number of theoretical models and the diversity of conceptual schemes that hinder the integrative approaches. As Nordcraft shows: “these theories for the most part have been derived within the confines of pristine and uncomplicated research environments. Unfortunately, the world is rarely so tidy as a researcher’s laboratory, a professor’s classroom, or a textbook’s case-study” [10]. On the other hand, motivating the employees is a current management practice, the organizations applying motivation methods and techniques which are not drawn from complex theoretical models, but from the managers’ wisdom and experience as well as from the careful understanding of the parameters of the organizational environment. In this context, the divergence between motivation theory and practice raises some questions about the epistemological foundation and paradigms that have dominated the research in this area.

The motivation theories have been developed in the context of a strong positivist trend and of an orthodox implementation of the principles of scientific knowledge: realism, determinism and cognoscibility. The studies conducted within the interpretative or phenomenological paradigm are underrepresented in motivation research. The only competence background used in research approaches is that of the researcher. In this context the assertion of the “superiority” of scientific knowledge as well as the ignoring of “common knowledge” comes a priori: “motivational psychologists need to have a *better* answer to motivational questions than the layperson” [5].

## **2. A PARADIGM SHIFT**

The paradigm shift towards the use and integration in the research of more backgrounds of knowledge can offer a direction for the development of motivation pragmatics. The idea of bringing together three knowledge backgrounds is suggested by Onut as a characteristic of sociological work:

We know that in every changing action, including sociological work, more backgrounds of knowledge are involved, namely the background of knowledge of the client who ordered the change, the background of knowledge of the subjects of change, i.e. the

people who will undergo the change and, finally, the background of knowledge of the sociologist who was hired to design, project and possibly to manage the change [11].

From this perspective, the motivation research requires, similarly to any action of changing human entities, the integration of the three knowledge backgrounds: that of the client (manager), of the subjects of change (employees) and that of the person who designs, projects and implements the change (the researcher). This re-signification involves the overcoming of the dichotomy common knowledge - scientific knowledge and especially removes the possibility of relating to these forms of knowledge in appreciative terms: "better" or "worse". Also, the researcher is the one integrating the three knowledge backgrounds, which have different content, as they are written in different registers, but equally valued, none of them being "better" than the other.

The assessment of work motivation, the designing and implementation of motivation techniques and the developing of new theoretical models on motivation are steps that can be redesigned from this perspective. The two backgrounds of knowledge ignored by scientific research represent resources which can lead to closeness between motivation theory and practice. The managers' background of knowledge, their representations and theories on work motivation, together with background of knowledge of the employees' (seen not as subjects of research, but as "partners") are components that can generate a different reading of work motivation.

This does not mean lowering the level of accuracy of research or ignoring scientific theory, but a relocation of the researcher in relation to other backgrounds of knowledge about the investigated phenomenon. It also does not mean revitalizing of the so-called *bubba psychology* - of Heider's vision (1958), which supported the reduction of the role of the researcher to the systematization of utterances from naive psychology. On the contrary, the development of motivation pragmatics involves a re-reading, rearranging and increasing of the background of knowledge of the researcher on the basis on an integrative approach.

Ethnomethodology is the paradigm that can provide a framework for the development in this direction. Basically, ethnomethodology represents the study of methods by which people create and build their own lifestyle. The argument that giving meaning claims a certain order, as well as the empirical device of its acquisition are Garfinkel's (the founder of this school of thought) main contributions to the social theory development [12].

Ethnomethodology has been widely criticized, Dennis for instance holding that it "has failed to become a widely accepted approach to the solution of sociological problems *not just* because of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of its aims and objectives, but also because of internal confusions and contradictions in its own program(s)" [3]. The analysis of epistemic principles on which ethnomethodology is based as well as the analysis of the many controversies generated by this approach exceeds the area of interest of the present paper. A relevant factor in the development of motivation research and pragmatics is the placement of the researcher on a different position than the one established by conventional sociology.

Ethnomethodological principles can constitute a reference framework for redesigning motivation research. The study of motivation can not be achieved by the researcher or professional who comes in the organizational environment with a list of solutions drawn from scientific theory: first of all, because such a list is poor and sometimes inappropriate and secondly because it allows just reparatory, curative interventions. Bringing together the three backgrounds of knowledge: that of the researcher (scientific theory), of the managers' (folk theory) and finally of the employees' (folk theory) is a prolific direction that re-signifies motivation research and pragmatics concepts.

An argument in this respect is given by the results of research on folk theories of human resource managers of some organizations in Brasov (considered as clients of the

motivation process). The study results reveal the existence of a set of articulated and strongly predictive knowledge, which are currently ignored by scientific research which is conducted under positivist influence.

### **3. FOLK THEORY**

The term *folk theory* is taken from anthropological and ethnographic research, being considered by some authors as synonymous with *implicit, naive, common sense, intuitive theory* [6]. In English there are two concepts naming the theory which is not elaborated by scientists: *folk theory* and *lay theory*. *Folk theory* is underrepresented on the research agenda of sociologists. This field has generated a more obvious interest in which psychologists are concerned, as there have been debates and publishing over "folk psychology". Also, the word is again valued within cognitive linguistics and experiential currents (experiential realism), which belong to the field of social cognition.

A folk theory is used to explain and give meaning to one's own experience. Following Hong et al. [6], "a theory may contain a set of propositions that are coherently organized into an integrated causal structure or meaning system". The cited authors believe that folk theories have an epistemic function, giving meaning to reality, allowing the understanding of events and the issuing of inferences about social reality. These are distinct of isolated beliefs, consisting of complex structures of knowledge. They also differ in the type of representation they contain (experience-based narrative representation or ontological assumptions), the level of articulation, frequency of application, the applicability, level of generality [6].

Folk theory is traditionally subscribed to the discourse about the two "levels" of knowledge: common knowledge and scientific knowledge. The classical vision on the problem asserts the multitude of elements shared by the two forms of knowledge, their mutual influence as well as the virtues of common knowledge. Most of the approaches, developed within this paradigm, end by asserting more or less plainly the superiority of scientific knowledge. Folk theories are phenomenological constructions, with not so much relevance in the measurement of their correctness or truth. Their part, much more important, is that of providing a perception of truth [9].

Without developing the rhetorics on the relationship between common and scientific knowledge, or the proportion between qualitative and quantitative research, one can state that folk theory provides a radiography of the mental map, map that determines and guides the action.

### **4. RESEARCH DESIGN**

It is a truism that the human resource department or function has a vital role in the structure of an organization. In the management literature authors have stated unequivocally, especially after 1980, that human resource is the most important asset of a company. This was accompanied by repositioning the HR (human resources), which became the main department especially in organizations led by the principles of proactive management, based on a strategic approach to business.

Motivation pragmatics, in its explicit or implicit forms, is shaped according to these managers' vision, but especially in relation to their theories on what motivation and motivating the employees means. Folk theory on motivation is a form of expressing and symbolizing a mental map of HR managers regarding work motivation.

Since managers' motivation folk theories dominate motivation pragmatics, a qualitative-exploratory research was conducted focusing on identifying these theories as well as associated practices and applied to HR managers in the county of Brasov. The investigation of subjective and symbolical dimensions, such as folk theories, is

subordinated to a research approach which has developed into a qualitative paradigm. Given the classification by purpose, the research is descriptive and exploratory. We achieved data collection through the focus-group technique.

The methodological option for the focus group interview was determined by the advantages offered by this technique in comparison with the individual interview [7]. As disadvantages we can name the possibility of presenting group effects such as: polarization, the mass effect, the comparison effect, normative pressure, contagion, groupthink. Considering that human resource managers possess developed managerial skills, including networking and argumentation skills, we found that there is a low probability for such distortions to manifest.

In March, 23rd-27th 2009 we conducted three focus groups with a total of 31 respondents. As the number of three focus groups was completed, we decided that theoretical saturation was reached and that the increase in the number of interviews will not add any extra information or depth to the collected data.

Given the interrogative approach and characteristics of participants, we chose to form groups of 11 participants. Of the 33 managers who have confirmed their attendance, two announced in the day established for the focus group that they cannot attend, and the time left did not allow their replacement.

We made the selection of the respondents by applying the theoretical sampling principles, the selection criteria being derived from the purposes of research. We used four selection criteria: occupation, number of employees of the organization, geographical location and type of capital of the company.

Regarding occupation, the criterion was that of selecting people who have management responsibilities, filling HR manager/director positions or that of manager/director of the department/ office for the development of employees. In which the number of employees is concerned, we considered necessary to establish a threshold of a minimum of 30 employees. The introduction of this criterion was based on the consideration that organizations with a small number of employees typically have an organizational culture of the friendly-family type, an organizational design lacking a hierarchy and a single employee in the HR department. It is also likely that small organizations should implement management and implicitly motivation strategies which may differ from those of organizations with a greater number of employees, thus requiring a separate investigation. The third selection criterion was focused on the selection of at managers operating in Brasov County, starting from the fact that at least in terms of labor market there are local and regional characteristics. Also, managers who work in private capital organizations were selected, as the motivation issue in public institutions and services does not make the object of the present paper.

We applied the same interview guide, the tool being structured in four sections: motivation folk theories, motivation practices, the effects of the economical crisis and “the Romanian work pattern”. This paper presents the results related to the main purpose of research: identifying motivation folk theories.

## **5. RESULTS**

The spontaneous association exercise: “which is the first word that comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘motivation’?” played the part of an icebreaker and also that of introducing the theme of the interview to the subjects. Relying on a stimulus-response type of pattern, the answers were concentrated at the level of organizational factors:

... salary, work, promotion, conditions, climate, schedule flexibility, relationships, reputation of the company, productivity, personal development, career, performance, results, reality, efficiency, cause, necessity, manager, attitude, product.

Starting from defining folk theory as an integrated set of knowledge and representations,



we aimed to identify the manner in which HR managers represent themselves the concept of “motivation” and respectively, the absence of motivation. We used two sets of items, the respondents being asked to describe the profile of a motivated and respectively a non-motivated employee. Scientific theories of motivation do not capture the effects of motivation, the results of applying motivation patterns being vaguely expressed in terms such as increasing motivation, increasing satisfaction and finally increasing efficiency. Motivation output, operationalized as behavioral patterns and emotional states, are clearly represented in folk theory.

The answers clustered around three groups and one could say that the theory of HR managers on the features of motivated/non-motivated employees includes three dimensions: affective, energetic and relational. In the case of the motivated employee’s features, the affective dimension is expressed by the pleasure of working, the energetic dimension through activism, initiative and action, while the relational dimension through good relations with his superiors, colleagues and the organization as a whole.

1. Affective dimension (pleasure of work, satisfaction)

He/She comes gladly to work.

He/She comes to work smiling. And he/she comes back from work smiling.

Yes... he/she is satisfied with the place where he/she works and with his/her salary.

2. Energetic dimension (activism, initiative)

He/She is proactive, not just reactive to what is given to him/her. He/She is involved.

He/she does more than he is specifically required.

He/She develops personal projects to complement the company policy.

3. Relational Dimension

The attitude towards the others is a kind and helping one.

He/She does not de-motivate the others.

He/She is loyal... I believe this can be measured through spirit of sacrifice.

In the case of the not motivated employee, the affective dimension related to work is expressed through negative feelings associated to the state of discontent, the energetic dimension through non-involvement, reduced effort and contesting/opposition and, finally, the relational dimension especially by relating to the organization as a whole.

1. Affective dimension (feelings associated to the state of discontent)

He/She feels that he/she is being treated unfairly. He/She believes that works all the time and is paid less than his/her colleagues. It seems to him/her that he/she does not fit in the respective company... Disinterested. Depressed, finding excuses not to go, not to receive his/her tasks.

In extremis I see him/her as low-spirited... always checking the time...

2. The energetic dimension (opposition, non-involvement, reducing effort)

He/She is careless. Speaking plainly, he/she is careless in very many ways: in team working, in the deployment of normal activities.

He/She is always checking the time. He/She comes to work just to go somewhere, without being interested in what is supposed to do there but just in giving the appearance of work.

He/She does only what is precisely asked, mentioning afterwards: “I wasn’t told”, “I didn’t know”, “That’s not my job”. Especially: “that’s not my job”, “I won’t do that”, “I don’t help anyone”, “I don’t speak to anyone”, “I’m not paid to do that...”

3. Relational dimension

He/She does negative publicity on the market, gossiping his/her employer, where this is always the negative character, he/she is never guilty, but the employer, his colleagues, the situation and so on...

He/She tries to transfer his/her attitude to the others. He/She is a person who shares all sorts of nasty ideas that ruin the atmosphere.

The respondents’ folk theories on what determines an employee’s motivation (and can be considered a motivating factor) emphasize homogeneity and convergence between discourses. Differences occurred between respondents employed in international corporations and managers of Romanian organizations. Thus, managers of foreign

companies have often used concepts such as "values", "strategy", "vision", the content of their speech being characterized by a higher level of generalization, while managers of Romanian capital companies have developed a speech in a less abstract manner, emphasizing legal and contractual elements such as "employment contract", "salary". Without making value judgments, one could see the difference regarding the authenticity of discourse between the two types of participants. The "corporate" discourse is less expressive, lacking the richness, subtleness and multiple significations of a "natural language" speech.

The existence of a variety of needs among employees as well as a clear separation between motivation factors for workers (and generally for the manual workers) and the managerial staff and TESA (technical, economic and administrative staff) - are defining elements of motivation folk theory.

Scientific theories of motivation do not advocate this segregation and none of them explicitly emphasizes the separation of motivation factors in relation to different categories of jobs/employees. Folk theory operates with this distinction. Motivation current practices, including the designing of the reward system, are based on the presumption that there is a distinct set of instruments and interventions for each of the two groups of employees.

This observation is reinforced by the common practice of multinational organizations, most of them developing distinct reward systems and development policies for the two classes of employees: "white collars" and "blue collars".

To provide each participant the opportunity to express their point of view, they were asked to fill some individual sheets with their own ranking of motivation factors. There was no preexisting list of factors, each participant elaborating his/her own list and establishing a importance hierarchy of factors. As differentiating motivation factors on the class of job criterion was considered necessary by the participants, two sheets were filled: one for the manual workers and the other for the rest of staff.

Table 1 presents the rating of factors appropriate for motivating workers, while table 2 presents the rating of motivation factors regarding administrative and management staff.

**Table 1 Rating motivating factors for directly productive staff**

Motivating Factor	Score
salary	180
work environment/ conditions	115
safety / job stability	81
relationship with his chief / direct management / confidence in his chief	76
bonuses for extended program / additional compensations/ fringe benefits	57
team/ colleagues	42
schedule	30
transportation to / from work	12
job qualification mentioned in the work contract	11
company reputation	9
holidays and bonuses/ respecting the right to holidays	9
organizational culture / work climate	9
employment contract	7
work itself / activities	6
technological equipment of the department	6
clear specification of tasks	6
work protection	5
promotion	5
meal vouchers	4
help in personal problems	4
distribution of tasks	4

opportunity employment to be replaced by family members	3
accurate performance appraisal	3

**Table 2 Rating motivating factors for indirectly productive staff**

Motivating Factor	Score
reward / salary	134
relationship with the supervisor / management style / top management / manager	105
opportunity for career development / promotion	99
organizational culture / values of the organization	50
team/ colleagues relationship	48
working conditions / environment	40
job stability	38
recognition / respect / appreciation	36
communication / transparency / access to information	36
reputation / recognition of the company / brand	32
benefits: holiday vouchers, project bonuses, percentage of profit, insurance	22
training	18
autonomy of decision	15
flexible schedule/timetable	14
work itself / activities	12
opportunity for personal development	11
car, phone, laptop	8
assignments according to studies/training	7
type of organization - private / state - multinational / foreign	5
involvement in decision making	5
position / status	5
distance to the work place	4
team-building, participation in company events	2

The hierarchy is illustrative, the scores being given according to the position in the hierarchy and the frequency of a factor. The maximum score for a factor is 200 points, while the minimum is of 1 point. Regarding the motivation of workers, all participants agreed that the salary is the main motivator. After the financial reward, other emphasized factors were working conditions, job security, and relationship to direct chief and to colleagues.

In motivating indirectly productive staff (TESA - technical, economic, socio-administrative and management staff), financial factors were perceived as less important, while the relationship with the supervisor, professional and career development possibilities, type of organizational culture and climate, communication and access to information – were considered essential.

Folk theory on the motivation of employees does not include a list, a set of factors whose gratification /lack of gratification determine their motivation. What does folk theory support is a small aggregate of elements that form the hard core of motivation for two distinct classes of staff: directly productive employees and administrative and management staff. The hard core of appropriate techniques for motivating productive staff is made of intervention external to the job, while the hard core of appropriate techniques for motivating other categories of staff is located at the level of exterior factors, yet being mainly non-financially.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The subject of "employee motivation" is on the mental map of the HR managers.



Motivation folk theory can be illustrated by a concentric arrangement, which has in the centre an articulated set of representations (the hard core), around which particular, individual views are developed. A feature of these theories (and probably of folk theories in general) is clearness and low representation of uncertainty. HR managers' representations and beliefs are not isolated or simplistic, but on the contrary, rather consistent and intense. HR managers know what a motivated employee is like, what he/she does or feel, and their speech in this respect is unequivocal. The three dimensions of folk theory about the characteristics of motivated employees (which we called: affective, energetic and relational) provide an operational pattern on the effects of motivation. This pattern includes indicators to measure the current level of motivation of staff, but also for evaluating the results of applying the techniques of motivation. The profile of the motivated employee is underrepresented in scientific theory, but is clearly illustrated by the folk theory.

Motivation folk theory makes a difference within motivation techniques for different job and therefore employees categories. It asserts the need to apply a set of motivating factors for directly productive staff and another, separate, for indirectly productive staff.

The diversity of needs and sizing of motivation techniques in relation to the profile of employees is another clearly defined representation. Motivation pragmatics is considered to be a management function, responsibility being placed at the level of top management and direct managers. Motivation is seen as a continuous activity, for which the HR department is able to offer support, but which it can not accomplish independently of the will and involvement of management staff.

The research conducted at the level of HR managers of Brasov organizations has an exploratory feature. One should treat with caution the results and development of new research to increase data validity as well as in the extension of the results of research. The most prolific lines of development in research motivation (which is focused on folk theories) are given by broadening the area of research.

Given the fact that the motivation issue and in particular the responsibility for applying motivation techniques is attributed to top management, research should be extended to the level of this segment in the hierarchy. One of the assumptions that require further testing is the differentiation within folk theories of HR managers by the type of company they represent: national or multinational company, with local or foreign management.

Finally, another line of research is given by identification of employee folk theories. Their perception on motivation, but not as its subjects but as partners in implementation of the motivation process is a direction that has not yet been explored.

In this paper, we suggested the enhancing of the concept of motivation by changing the perspective of relating to this process. Following the integration of the background of knowledge of the three actors involved (researcher, managers and employees), the motivation research can be approached differently. The results of the study on the folk theory of Brasov managers indicate the existence of an articulated set of representations and meanings on work motivation. This is a first step which has to be filled by the identification of employees' folk theories. The third stage, which is also the most important, means the integration of the three backgrounds of knowledge in order to develop new theoretical models and / or new models on motivation pragmatics.

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