Working Paper

Examining the Effect of College Students' Individualism-Collectivism on Group Commitment

Introduction

Student group work has undoubtedly become one of the most important assessment components in academic programs in many universities. Through group learning, students are able to develop various skills such as collaboration, problem solving, and communication and interpersonal skills, all of which are highly valued by their prospect employers (Burdett, 2014; Fearon, McLaughlin, & Eng, 2012; Holms, 2014). However, coordinating various activities to accomplish specific goals can be challenging when a team is made up of members with diverse backgrounds (Wagner, 1995).

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory provides a conceptual framework to understand people across cultural boundaries. Generally speaking, people from Western cultures are more individualistic than people from Eastern cultures. However, there are elements of both independence and interdependence in every self and in any culture (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Abraham (1997) believed that individualism and collectivism are two coexisting driving forces embedded in organizational cultures. Even though Americans in general do appreciate autonomy and individual recognition in the workplace, they constantly engage themselves in team work and group decision making.

While both collectivists and individualists need to cooperate in order to achieve their individual goals in groups (Wagner, 1995), their views on cultural values influence their attitudes toward team work (Boros, Meslec, Cursea, & Emons, 2010; Leung, 1997). People with a stronger interdependence self place more emphasis on subjective norms and other-oriented motivation, whereas people with a stronger independence self focus more on attitudes and self-oriented motivation (Vu, Finkenauer, Huizinga, Novin, & Krabbendam, 2017; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Because of these reasons, individualists and collectivists find themselves commit to their organizations at different levels (e.g., Abraham, 1997; Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Street, 2009).

This study aims to explore the relationship between individualism-collectivism and organizational commitment, and its effect on performance. The implications may shed some insights on how to better prepare the students for future employment through effective team work.

Literature Review

Individualism-collectivism

The in-depth discussion about individualism versus collectivism can be traced back to Durkhem (1933) and Mayo (1945). In their views, an established society with dominant collectivistic characteristics would evolve to an adaptive society with prevalent individualistic traits, thus transforming the society from a form of mechanical solidarity to a form of organic solidarity. Hofstede (1980) populated the term individualism-collectivism in his groundbreaking study of cultural differences based on his IBM-based research. The construct individualism-collectivism examines the relationship between the individual and the group – while Individualists value individual freedom and personal goals, collectivists strive for collective harmony and group goals.

Hofstede's (1980) model mainly analyzes cultural differences among different cultures. However, numerous research investigations (e.g., Abraham, 1997; Boros et al., 2010; Choiu, 2001; Cukur, Guzman, & Carlo, 2004; Eby & Dobbins, 1997; Wagner, 1995; Wagner & Moch, 1986) have shown that individualism-collectivism can be studied as an individual-level construct to understand differences among people of the same national culture (Gundlach, Zivnuska, & Stoner, 2006). The GLOBE project (Dickson, BeShears, & Gupta, 2004) pointed out that cultural dimensions can be applied to both the society as well as the organizational level. Triandis (1995) agreed that each individual regardless of his/her nationality will display a combination of individualism and collectivism.

However, the level of individualism and collectivism may vary because of personal differences (Gundlach et al., 2006). In other words, people can be more individualistic or collectivistic even though they are from a same cultural group. Wagner and Moch (1986) developed a multidimensional measure with 11 variables representing three factors: beliefs, values, and norms. Wagner (1995) further expanded his individualism-collectivism measurement scale to 20 items and derived unnamed five factors. Using the same 20 variables, Ramamoorthy and Carroll (1998) eventually came up with a five-factor model with 19 items: supremacy of group interests, solitary work preferences, reliefs in self-reliance, supremacy of group goals, and competitiveness.

The beliefs, values, and norms help people shape who they are. Taking into consideration of cultural differences, it is expected that individualism-collectivism will have a significant impact on people's behaviors, attitudes, and reactions (Cetin, Gürbüz, & Sert, 2015).

Affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment

Organizational commitment is defined as relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Porter & Smith, 1970). Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997) pointed out that organizational commitment is a multi-dimensional construct with three components: continuance, normative, and affective commitment. Employees with CC *need* to stay with their organizations if the costs of leaving the organization are high. Some employees feel that they are obliged and *ought* to remain once NC dominates. And employees with AC *want* to contribute to their organizations.

Among the three dimensions, affective commitment is the most studied (e.g., Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003). However, all three forms of commitment are tied to employees' on-the-job behavior (e.g., Somers, 2009). Affective commitment is the strongest indicator on organizational citizen behavior, followed by normative and continuance commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, & Sheppard, 2012).

Individualism-collectivism and Organizational Commitment

As noted earlier, Wagner and Moch (1986) measured beliefs, values, and norms to understand individualism-collectivism. These broad shared beliefs, values, and norms help shape the societies and influence individuals' attitudes towards their organizations/groups (Street, 2009). They are the essence why and whether people feel committed to their organizations/groups (Fischer & Mansell, 2009). When joining a group, individuals will gain a social identity ((Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), satisfy their needs, and accomplish their goals (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly, & Konopaske, 2006).

But the relationship between individuals and their groups differ. Individualists see themselves independent from their in-group and seek personal achievement, whereas collectivists consider themselves interdependent with in-group and strive for in-group achievement (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990; Triandis, 1995). Therefore, people in collectivistic contexts are more likely to develop affective bonds and display loyalty and attachment to their organizations/groups (e.g., Murphy, Ramamoorthy, N., Flood, P., & MacCurtain, S., 2006; Messner, 2013; Randall, 1993). Meyer et al. (2012) also found a positive relationship between AC and collectivism. On the contrary, Fischer and Mansell (2009) argued that individualists will develop AC, because they rationally calculate costs and benefits and align their personal goals to organizational goals. In strong individualistic settings, organizational practices are implemented to motivate employees to pursue their personal interests. In a social exchange framework (Blau, 1964), they will develop positive attitudes towards their organization when their needs are satisfied (Gelade, Dobson, & Gilbert, 2006), and reciprocate affective attachments to return the favor (Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005). Çakmak-Otluoğlu (2012) also found out that employees on a self-directed career management are more likely to display affective commitment. By studying 402 employees in 11 high tech and financial service companies, Ramamoorthy and Flood (2002) concluded that individualists are more committed to their organization.

H1: Collectivism is positively associated with affective commitment.

H2: Individualism is positively associated with affective commitment.

While affective commitment is most desirable, normative and continuance commitment may not contribute much to positive citizenship behavior (Meyer, Standley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). But would a certain level of continuance commitment be beneficial to employees and their firms?

Based on the three-component commitment model and configural organizational theory, Sinclair et al. (2005) shed some insights on continuance commitment by proposing a framework of affective commitment and continuance commitment profiles. By rating affective commitment (AC) and continuance commitment (CC) as "strong," "moderate," and "weak," they labeled the clusters of 9 profiles, such as devoted (i.e., high AC and CC), allied (moderate AC and NC), free agents (moderate CC and low AC), trapped (low AC and high CC), uncommitted (low AC and CC), etc. While devoted employees are the best ones to keep, Sinclair and colleagues (2005) expected that many employees fall into the allied category with some emotional attachments and some sense of need to stay.

Organizations should consider continuance commitment as a positive organizational phenomenon and encourage their employees to develop this type of commitment (Suliman & Ilnes, 2000).

Meyer and colleagues (2012) noted that research on continuance commitment also turned into mixed results, either high CC in an individualistic context (e.g., Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Randall, 1993) or high continuance commitment in the collectivistic environment (e.g., Felfe, Yan, & Six, 2008; Wasti & Önder, 2009). Çakmak-Otluoğlu (2012) also confirmed that employees on a self-directed career management have a significant level of continuance commitment. In the study by Ramamoorthy and Flood (2002), they suspected that collectivists exhibit more CC than individualists and called for future studies.

H3: Collectivism is positively associated with continuance commitment.

H4: Individualism is positively associated with continuance commitment.

Of the three types of commitment, normative commitment is least studied due to the weakest relationship with job performance (e.g., Suliman & Ilnes, 2000). People experience normative commitment as a sense of obligation to remain in the organization. In collectivistic settings, internalized normative pressures are strong when people act in a way to meet organizational goals and interests (Abrams, Ando, & Hinkle, 1998; Wiener, 1982). This process is achieved through early childhood socialization experiences and the influence of organizational norms (Meyer, Allen, & Topolnytsky, 1998). Since the group-oriented interests are placed at a much higher level, collectivists are more likely to develop normative commitment and stay in the organization (Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000; Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Gamble & Tian, 2015; Kwantes, 2009; Messner, 2013; Wasti, 2003).

In the conceptual model proposed by Street (2009), an organization's cultural values of collectivism-individualism formulate employees' perception on normative commitment as well as affective commitment and continuance commitment mediated by the psychological contract.

H5: Collectivism is positively associated with normative commitment.

H6: Individualism is positively associated with normative commitment.

Proposed conceptual model
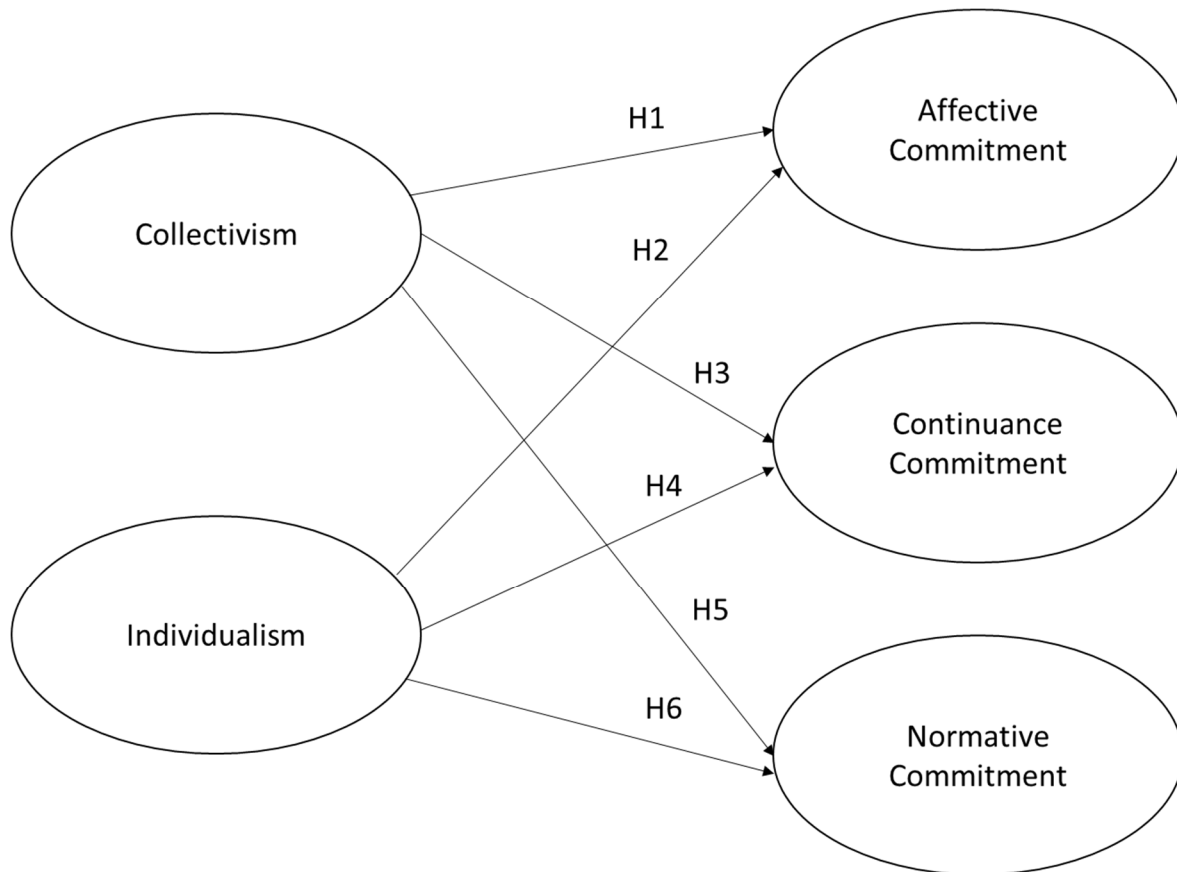
Data Collection

Data will be collected from traditional students enrolled in a four-year American college. These students will participate in group work and take the survey. The data collection is in progress and will be completed in 2019.

Measurement

Collectivism and individualism are measured with Wagner's (1995) 20 items. Affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment are measured with items from Meyer and Allen's (1990) three-component model. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree."

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