

INDIVIDUALISM AS A PREDICTOR OF WORKPLACE COOPERATION

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Abstract: *This study examined individualism as a predictor of workplace cooperation. Participants comprised 214 male and 103 female employees of Nigerian Aviation Handling Company, Ikeja, Lagos between the ages of 26 – 57 years, with mean age of 40.37 and standard deviation of 5.80. They were drawn from 9 Departments in the organization using Multi-stage sampling technique. 7-item individualism scale drawn from Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand (1995) 16-item individualism–collectivism scale and Okonkwo (2003) 9-item workplace cooperation scale were administered. Correlational design was used. Results from regression analysis revealed that individualism did not predict workplace cooperation at $p > .05$. It was concluded that individualism was not a predictor of workplace cooperation.*

Keywords: Individualism, Workplace, Cooperation

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Biographical Note: Ejike Okonkwo, has had wholesome training in the area at some of the best universities in Nigeria and has crowned the training with years of research, teaching and practice. He studied General Psychology and Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Enugu State University of Science and Technology and the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, where he obtained B.Sc, M.Sc and Ph.D respectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Cooperation is a common form of coordination in the workplace, partly because, by cooperating, the employees involved can often accomplish more than they can by working alone. In cooperation, assistance is mutual and two or more individuals, groups or

organizations work together toward shared goals and for their mutual benefits (Katzenbach, 1997). In view of these benefits such as accomplishing more tasks when cooperation exists, it has become a common phenomenon for organizations to create conditions that will make the achievement of organizational goals interdependent. Therefore, employees are encouraged to work closely together and depend on cooperating with one another to accomplish individual and organizational goals. Thus, the greater the interdependence among employees, the higher cooperation among them tends to be (Giancarlo, 1999).

However, in spite of all the obvious benefits that result from cooperation and all the efforts by organizations to foster it yet it fails to exist in some organizations. Why do people who seek the same or at least similar goals fail to work closely together for mutual benefits? Although there are many factors that might lead to this, however, this study thought that the most important reason is the personal orientation of the employees. In work settings like other places, some people with individualist personal orientation seek and pursue individual goals at the expense of collective goals. Individualism values and is concerned more with individual interests, needs and goals (Kabanoff, 1997). This personal orientation as noted by Kabanoff (1997) prefers the equity rule because of the emphasis on competition and self-gains. In organizations, employees who are high on individualism attach greater importance to their personal interests than those of the group (organization) to which they belong resulting in low desire for cooperation (Okonkwo, 2003). Moreover, employees high on individualism even when they cooperate are more selective in terms of such cooperation. They cooperate only when their individual contribution to the organization or any other group is apparent, facilitates their personal goals and when in small groups (Okonkwo, 2003). Interestingly, combinations of individualism and collectivism are associated with higher levels of team member performance such as cooperation (Hollenbeck, Humphrey & Meyer, 2011).

In the workplace, cooperation means working with others for common good and includes behaviors such as sharing information, voluntarily helping others, and seeking mutually satisfactory solutions to problems (McAlister, 1995, Mesquita 2007, Neale & Bazerman, 1991, Williams, 2003). To this end, cognitive theory of individualism has recognized that an individual's cognitive view as an individualist could have implications for the person's cooperation as an employee. Individualism according to this theory has individualist cognitive structure (Trafimow, 1991). In the organization, such orientation sees the workplace as fixed. And in making attribution, individualism orientation sees attitude, personality and other traits as fixed (Norenzayan, 1999). Owing to this fixed traits, the important goal of the individualist is to fulfill their duties, obligations and goals to themselves because of individualist cognitive structure (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). And it is this tendency to fulfill these personal obligations, duties and goals that make them attach

greater importance to personal interests and increased obligation to self than group (Oyserman, 1998).

Individualism is that personal orientation which attaches more importance to personal interests than group interests and puts those of the person above group if these conflict (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk & Gelfand, 1995). In view of this, individualist orientation does not encourage conformity and cooperation (Gorodnicheko & Roland, 2010). Thus, employees high on this personal orientation are not likely to enjoy social network borne out of conformity and cooperation with coworkers.

Considering this social network engendered by conformity and cooperation in the light of individualism, coworkers would not likely give one another social support by working cooperatively towards common goals. According to Hofstede (1997) as cited in Gorodnicheko and Roland (2010), United Kingdom, United States of America, Netherlands are consistently among the individualist countries, while Nigeria, Pakistan and Yemen are among the more collectivist countries. This collectivist culture cuts across various settings including work settings. Thus, employees of Nigeria Aviation Handling Company (NAHCO) as thought by the researcher whose job responsibilities require cooperation for efficient and effective services in the Airport and coming from a collectivist culture would likely be high on collectivism and apt to cooperate with one another. However, the researcher did not rule out the possibility of some employees been low on collectivism and high on individualism, therefore, not willing to cooperate with other members of the organization, hence this present research. This study, therefore, focused on individualism and workplace cooperation among employees of Nigeria Aviation Handling Company. To this end, it was hypothesized that individualism will not predict workplace cooperation among these employees.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 214 male and 103 female (total 317) employees of Nigeria Aviation Handling Company between the ages of 26–56 years ($M= 40.37$, $SD= 5.80$). They were drawn from employees of Nigerian Aviation Handling Company, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria using cluster and systematic sampling techniques. A total of 132 participants were drawn from Cargo department, 105 from Ramp department, 28 from Maintenance department, and 18 from Training department, 10 from Personnel department, 8 from Cooperate Affairs, 7 from Accounts department, 6 from Medical department and 3 from Computer department. The data indicated that 40 of these participants had their Senior Secondary School Certificate, 75 had Ordinary National Diploma Certificate, 95 had higher National Diploma Certificate and 107 had Bachelor of Science Degree. Moreover, 194 of the participants had worked in the organization between 1–10 years, 97 of them had worked between 11–20years and 26 had worked for more than 20 years.

Instrument

Three instruments were used which included demographic information, 7-item individualism scale drawn from Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand (1995) 16-item individualism-collectivism scale and Okonkwo (2003) 9-item workplace cooperation scale. Demographic information included gender, age, years of experience, educational qualification and department.

The 7 items of the Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand (1995) 16-item individualism-collectivism scale measured individualism while the remaining items measured collectivism. The item loadings of the items of the 7-item collectivism scale were 0.40 and above. These item loadings were considered acceptable for validation of the instrument since Mitchel and Jolley (2004) noted that item loading of 0.3 is good and 0.70 very high. These 7 items yielded split-half reliability of 0.85 and was accepted as good index of internal consistency since Mitchel and Jolley (2004) noted that an index of 0.70 (and preferably above 0.80) is needed to say that a measure is internally consistent. All the items but item 3 were positively worded leaving a response of does not describe me at all with 1 point, does not describe me very well = 2 points, describes me somehow = 3 points, describes me well = 4 point and describes me very well = 5 points. For the negatively worded item 3, the scoring was reversed. However, higher scores on this scale indicated high individualism while lower scores indicated low individualism.

The item loading of the 9-item workplace cooperation scale was 0.40 and above. These 9 items yielded split-half reliability of 0.75. In this scale, for the positively worded items, a response of completely true= 4 points, mostly true= 3 points, mostly false = 2 points and completely false = 1 point. And for the negatively worded items, a response of completely true = 1 point, mostly true = 2 points, mostly false = 3 points and completely false = 4 points. Only items 1 and 4 were positively worded. The other 7 items were negatively worded. In addition, higher scores on this scale indicated high workplace cooperation while lower scores indicated low workplace cooperation.

PROCEDURE

A total of 339 copies of the questionnaire measuring demographic variables, collectivism and workplace cooperation were administered using cluster and systematic sampling techniques among staff of Nigeria Aviation Handling Company within one week. The 9 departments in the organization including Cargo, Ramp, Maintenance, Personnel, Cooperate Affairs, Medical, Accounts, Training and Computer comprised 9 clusters. In the clusters (departments) with large population, the researcher applied systematic sampling making use of every 3rd case. For instance, in the first day, the researcher was in the Cargo department before any other staff of the organization arrived. Using the attendance register, every 3rd person that wrote attendance was given a copy of the questionnaire. This was to ensure that

every participant was given equal chance of participating in the study. Out of the 423 workers on duty that morning in the department of Cargo, 141 were administered copies of this questionnaire. And out of 141 copies, 132 (93.61%) were properly filled and returned. Also in the department of Ramp, in the second day, the researcher did the same thing done in Cargo department. Here, out of the 354 staff that reported to duty, 118 were administered copies of the questionnaire using every 3rd person on the attendance register. Out of this 118, 105 (88.98%) copies were properly filled and returned. In the subsequent days in the rest of the clusters (departments) because their population was small, everybody that reported to duty was administered a copy of the questionnaire. For instance, in the department of maintenance 28 copies were administered, Training = 18 copies, Personnel = 10, Cooperate Affairs = 8, Accounts = 7, Medical = 6 and Computer = 3. In these 7 departments, all the administered copies (100%) were properly filled and returned.

However, of the 339 copies of questionnaire distributed, 317 (93.51%) copies were properly filled and returned with the assistance of the supervisors in these departments who served as research assistants. Of all the copies that were not properly filled and returned, 9 came from cargo department and 13 came from Ramp department. The 317 (93.51%) copies that were properly filled and returned were used for analysis.

Design / Statistics

This study was correlational. This enabled the researcher to administer simultaneously the measures of individualism and workplace cooperation. Regression analysis was used as statistical test for data analysis and testing the hypothesis.

RESULTS

Table 1

Regression table showing individualism as a predictor of workplace cooperation

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	R-Square	b	t	P
Workplace cooperation	Individualism	.19	0.06	1.03	>.05

As shown in table 1, the regression coefficient for individualism (b) was .06. Result showed no relationship between individualism and workplace cooperation ($t = 1.03$, $p >.05$). Moreover, R-Square (0.19) indicated that individualism accounted for only 19% of the variation in workplace cooperation. However, this account in variation was found not to be significant. Considering the standardized regression coefficient, individualism did not predict workplace cooperation. Therefore, the hypothesis was confirmed and accepted.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that individualism did not predict workplace cooperation. The findings showed no relationship between individualism and workplace cooperation. Drawing on this no association, either higher or lower scores on individualism led to neither higher nor lower scores on workplace cooperation and vice versa. Among these employees of Nigeria Aviation Handling Company, either increase or decrease in their attachment of more importance to personal interest than group interests (individualism) was related to neither increase nor decrease in their working together toward shared goals for mutual benefits (workplace cooperation).

This inability of workplace to be predicted by individualism is in line with earlier findings. For instance, Chatman and Barsade (1995) observed that social behavior like cooperation depends on the interaction between personal orientations (individualism–collectivism) and situation. Their findings revealed that when individualist were assigned to collective situations, the least cooperation occurred among individualist. This could be based on the fact that individualist orientation tends towards competition, aggression and dominance (Maskowitz, 1994). Perhaps, because of coexistence of contrasting elements of the self, on average, individualists view themselves as more fixed across situation than collectivists do (Suh, 2001). Similarly Markus and Kitayama (1991) observed that the important goal of the individualists is to fulfill their duties, obligations and goals to themselves because of the individualist cognitive structure. Following the cognitive theory of individualism–collectivism, all humans have access to both individualist and collectivist cognitive structure, but the accessibility to these structures differs. In individualist orientation, people have more access to the individualist cognitive structures (Trafimow, 1991).

People in individualist culture see the environment as changeable (norms, obligations and duties) and they as fixed, not ready to fit in. In support of this, Norenzayam (1999) noted that individualists making dispositional attribution see traits as quite fixed. It is this fixed view of the self that individualist values and is concerned more with individual interests, needs and goals at the expense of the group (Kabonoff, 1997). These views have somewhat given credence to the no relationship observed between individualism and workplace in employees of Nigerian Aviation Handling Company. Thus, individualism was not able to predict workplace cooperation because Nigeria is not characterized by individualist but collectivist culture which emphasizes collective goals, compliance and cooperation. Hence, this finding clearly demonstrated that Nigerian culture through the socialization processes does not emphasize individualism orientation which would have resulted in individualist cognitive structure. Therefore, this little or no existence of individualist cognitive structure made it difficult for employees of Nigerian Aviation Handling Company to apply individualism personal orientation to their responsibilities in the workplace which would have made them not to be cooperative.

CONCLUSION

Considering the findings of this study, it has been concluded that individualism had no significant relationship with workplace cooperation. However, industrial psychologists, human resources managers, employers and others interested in organizational behaviour should understand that to enhance workforce performance through workplace cooperation, potential employees should be examined on individualism. This will enable them to identify at the point of recruitment and selection those potential employees who are high on placing more importance on personal goals than group goals (individualism). This will help to nip at the bud any possibility of employing people whose pursuit of personal goals will mar the collective goals of organizations.

Practically, this study has suggested the need for organizations to design organizational strategies that will deemphasize any form of "winner takes all". This will go a long way in reducing the pursuit of personal goals at the expense of collective goals of the organization. Invariably, this will enhance cooperative behavior among job incumbents in the organization. In addition, industrial psychologists, human resource managers and the likes in Nigeria should learn from this study the need to motivate the entire Nigerian workforce in both public and private sectors by tying employees' personal goals to the collective goals of organizations. This if properly implemented will reduce individualism, increase collectivism and cooperation resulting in enhanced productivity of the Nigerian workforce.

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