

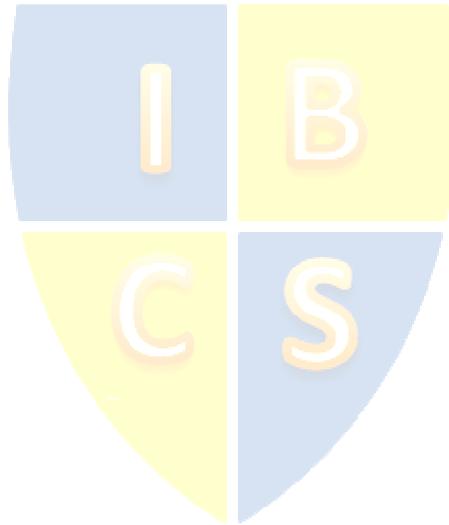
The work ethic: is it universal?

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ABSTRACT

Specific concerns for this discussion are: (a) What is meant by “work ethic”?; (b) what are its origins?; (c) is work ethic a measurable construct?; (d) if measurable, what is to be measured?; (e) how are the results interpreted?; and (f) is work ethic a universal concept? Both theoretical and empirical analyses are analyzed through Weber’s Protestant work ethic theory.

Key Words: work ethic, Weber, cross-cultural work ethic, work ethic instruments



INTRODUCTION: AN INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY

An inquiry into the work ethic concept reveals two directions of thought, one of a theoretical entity and one of an empirical nature. The theoretical approach to the work ethic is more definitive and has been widely studied across the social sciences from psychology to economics. However, the empirical approach to analyzing the work ethic is complex and remains open to debate among those in academe, in research, and in practice alike. Becker and Woessmann (2009) in their article, *Was Weber Wrong*, admits that the work ethic is an elusive concept. Connor (2009) takes this thought as well, suggesting that the work ethic is due to an earlier start in education for the Protestants.

Specific concerns for this discussion are: (a) What is meant by “work ethic”? (b) what are its origins?; (c) is work ethic a measurable construct?; (d) if measurable, what is to be measured?; (e) how are the results interpreted?; and (f) is work ethic a universal concept? It is not likely an unusual concept but likely defined by culture and the measurement may not be universal. The definition may be such that there are multiple definitions and multiple criteria. As Houle, Jennings, Meyer, Rafail, and Simon (2009) note Weber’s work ethic studies display unexplored internal complexity. Ryman and Turner (2007) discuss Weber’s work as both powerful and controversial.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The work ethic theoretical discussion has its origin in Weber’s (1905, 1930) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. A socio-economic discourse on the subject of work, religion, and the future of capitalism, Weber’s thesis is that these beliefs lead to a capitalistic form of enterprise and thus to economic development for society. His work, most commonly referred to as the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE), (as cited in Furnham, 1990) proclaims “only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize today as valid” (p. 272). In an attempt to describe the work ethic, Weber (as cited in Furnham, 1990) states “time is money...credit is money...and the good paymaster is lord of another man’s purse” (p. 274). More specifically he explains “the sound of your hammer at five in the morning...heard by a creditor makes him easy six months longer; but if he sees you at a billiard table or hears your voice at a tavern, when you should be at work, he sends for his money the next day” (p. 274).

Weber’s theory was further developed by the achievement motivation research of McClelland (1961) who linked the individual and micro-level analysis (nAch) of achievement to the Protestant work ethic’s relationship to the macro-level of societal economic development. McClelland stated the need to achieve is a personality factor resulting from child-rearing practices that emphasize independence training thus leading to a high achievement motivation in Western societies. His major interests were primarily the need for achievement and economic growth. The other associated interest was that of Protestantism and economic growth. McClelland examined written material such as children’s books, folk tales, and speeches of a various nature from political leaders to songs and poems to demonstrate his hypothesis (Furnham, 1990).

Consistent with McClelland’s model, Oates (1971) noted the Protestant key component of work ethic emerging for religion was industriousness with a taboo on idleness. Perhaps, it was Cherrington (1980) that most aptly provided a description of the beliefs that comprise the work ethic as applied to the workplace. He lists workers’ pride

and commitment, loyalty, as well as dependable attendance and punctuality among these attributes. The expectance of long hours of work at the expense of leisure and the acquisition of wealth through labor with frugality are other considerations. A review of literature by Furnham (1990) on PWE studies revealed that people who believe in the PWE tend to have high internal locus of control, conservative attitudes and beliefs, and a high need for achievement.

EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION

Mathematics is an exact science; engineering, one of precision. However, the social sciences and human behavior do not fit into formulas and finites, but rather such intangibles as needs, attitudes, beliefs, and values that are not easily observed or set into experiments. Therefore, measuring such concepts that are directly related to the work ethic becomes an inexact science. Many criticisms exist in the measurement of the work ethic. One main concern is that most instruments consider the work ethic an one-dimensional concept, when in reality, it exists in a multidimensional state (Furnham, 1990). The work over the past decade by Hill-Petty and Dawson (1995, 1998) that focuses on factor analysis methodology gives statistical credence to the multidimensionality of work ethic.

A comparison of work ethic research results is difficult because work ethic instruments measure different dimensions of the concept. The seven Protestant work ethic scales illustrates that while some scales focus on the work environment, others focus on a variety of subjects from leisure, frugality, and even morality (Furnham, 1990). Another criticism of the measurement is the self-reported nature of the typically used surveys. Is one's perception of the work ethic the same as the reality of the behavior that is to be measured? Or does one feel compelled to report a high score, particularly if the instrument and research takes place in the work environment? Are samples with traditional age college students or even high school students representative of a general population?

A different approach to the empirical work ethic instrument research approach explained below is the research examining population growth in 272 cities in the German-speaking world in the years spanning 1300-1900 by Cantoni (2010). His findings were that there was not a difference between the Protestant cities and the Catholic cities in the time preceding Weber's book. Arrunada (2010) also found confirmation in survey data that no difference existed in work ethics between Protestants and Catholics.

WORK ETHIC METHODOLOGY

An analysis of the most widely used instruments reveals a divergent path across many of the work ethic dimensions. One noted work ethic researcher, Furnham, (1990b) conducted a review of the literature of Protestant Work Ethic measurements. He used seven questionnaires, but the only non-Western survey is Ho's Australian survey. Furnham's goal was to compare and contrast the measures according to content, correlation and factor analysis.

Furnham used a factor analysis to find if the scales of the seven questionnaires were distinctive and if they were useful in making predictions in their domains of

applicability. Participants were required to complete all seven questionnaires, a total of 78 questions. The surveys were randomized and the seven-point Likert scale was used consistently for each survey. The sample size was 1021 respondents; 472 male and 549 female. The range in age was 18 through 70 with the mean being 23.89, and a standard deviation of 9.71 years. All were native English speakers. Students represented 78% of the sample. Based on religion factors, 49% were Christians (64% Protestant, 18% Catholic), with just over 30 % reporting atheist or agnostic beliefs.

Five factors emerged accounting for over a third of the total variance. Furnham (1990) concluded that all the scales tap what is considered the fundamental dimension underlying the PWE: respect for, admiration of, and willingness to take part in hard work. The third factor from the Ray (1982) instrument was concerned with religion and morality. The fourth factor contained all seven items from the Bucholz (1978) scale concerning independence. The final factor contained items that stress asceticism, the damages of having too much time and money.

Furnham (1990b) suggested that the emerging five factors revealed factors not unlike Weber's original work, that is belief in hard work, the role of leisure, religious and moral beliefs, a stress on independence, and asceticism. An interesting finding was that nearly all of the dimensions of the PWE were found in the combined instrument, but not in any one alone. Thus these measures must be considered to be measuring different components of work ethic, if indeed they measure work ethic at all. Although independence may be a component of work ethic, it is not synonymous with it. Moreover, we must be careful to label work ethic and the Protestant work ethic as one and the same. Although some recognition of the multidimensionality of work ethic role exists (Hill & Petty 1995), studies that demonstrate adequate validity of work ethic surveys (concurrence with actual behavior) are lacking. The application of such constructs across contexts is also limited.

According to Furnham, "depending on the PWE scale used, rather different results will occur. The fact that different studies have used different measures make a review of the literature complicated...one cannot be sure whether the findings are robust, whether the scales are indeed measuring the same things or whether the measures are marked by construct irrelevancies and psychometric deficiencies" (1990b, p.396). His final recommendation is to use a multidimensional scale with concurrent, predictive, and constructive validity. As he reports "it is possible to accurately measure the various beliefs that make up the PWE in any individual and relate these to other beliefs and behaviors. And in this manner study the PWE beliefs within and between groups" (Furnham, 1990b, p. 397).

CROSS-CULTURAL PWE STUDIES

Furnham can be considered the pioneer in analyzing the PWE across cultures. In a study of the PWE in Britain and in Malaysia, Furnham and Muhiudeen (1984) used the Mirels-Garrett scale with two matched groups (73 each) of British and Malaysians. In this study, the authors noted the lack of cross-cultural studies on the PWE beliefs quoting "most PWE studies have been done in the English-speaking world: America (7), Australia (13), and Great Britain (4)" (p. 158). It should be noted that as such these studies also reflect a common cultural and religious heritage. One rationale for the study was the decline of the British economy since World War II and the rise of the economic

success in Malaysia, “in part this relative difference may be reflected in the difference in the PWE beliefs of the two countries” (p. 158). Malaysians of various ethnic and religious backgrounds possessed a stronger PWE belief than the British. Perhaps this should not be surprising since the Malay society is not rooted in Protestantism. Females had higher scores than males. In socioeconomic demographics, the working class had higher scores than the middle-class.

In a second study Furnham (1990a) again cited other studies of a cross-cultural nature. He reported the most popular measure of cross-cultural work to be the Mirels-Garrett, which had been used in Africa, the U. S., Australia, Belgium, Britain, Israel, Malaysia, and Taiwan. He had three goals for his study that focused on young people: (a) to analyze the relationship of different measures of the PWE in the same sample; (b) to examine various demographic factors; and (c) to compare the results with similar samples.

The research was conducted with 439 participants with approximately equal numbers of males and females (range 14-18 years). Seventeen different religions were represented with the majority being Protestant. Other demographic factors included number of siblings, location, (i.e. urban v. rural), and academic class position in school. Each participant completed a 77-item questionnaire derived from the eight different measures (Note: Furnham used the Bucholz scale which was previously used as one instrument as two distinctive ones, leisure and ethic in this study) of the PWE.

The findings suggest that the measures are not interchangeable, but rather tap different dimensions of the PWE as previously discussed. The demographic findings were that family size was positively correlated to PWE beliefs and urban-dwellers had higher scores than their rural counterparts. Academic position in the class only had one significant correlation with that being to the Hammond and William (1976) scale. One explanation by Furnham was that the PWE may be related to academic achievement. However, the relationship may be less in secondary schools than at tertiary levels, because of the latter’s lesser emphasis on structure and a greater reliance on individual differences.

Furnham concluded that the Barbados sample endorsed PWE beliefs more than many other groups that he examined, but offered explanations. First, Barbados is a conservative country and PWE scores are associated with conservatism. He explained the second factor as the social desirability of the testing situation that led to high PWE scores. Finally, he offered that the younger age and lesser educational level in the sample may reflect a naiveté about the world of work.

Furnham suggested PWE measures to be made specific to each culture as been done by Ali (1988) to cope with the cross-cultural problems. In Ali’s work (as cited in Furnham, 1990a) an Islamic scale was used to measure the work ethic. Furnham concluded, “to devise culture-specific measures for each population means that ultimately, they are not comparable” (Furnham, 1990a, p. 40).

PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC STUDY IN 13 NATIONS

Furnham, et al. (1992) conducted a study of the Protestant work ethic beliefs in 13 countries using the seven scales. For each measure there was a significant difference between the score of subjects from different countries. The differences tended to be consistent over the different measures. Furnham et al. reported that subjects from more developed countries tend to have lower scores than those from lesser-developed

countries. Also, the correlation between the most well known work ethic scale score and Hofstede's power-distance score for the 13 countries was also found to be significant, indicating that work ethic beliefs are associated with different weights placed on prestige, power, and wealth in a society. This latter finding is significant because these variables all emphasize individualism. Furthermore, access to these variables is uneven across cultures due to the social caste systems that may be formally or informally expressed within societies.

If the countries are grouped into industrialized v. developing, those with a high GNP, (Germany, the U. S., Britain, Australia, and New Zealand), tend to have low PWE scores. Those countries with a low GNP, (India, Zimbabwe, and the West Indies), tend to have high PWE scores. It is possible that PWE beliefs are better predictors of economic success when associated with individualism. In association with collectivism, the beliefs represent an underlying authoritarianism. One is left to ponder if scores on PWE beliefs are reflective of religious preferences on values rather than economic success?

INTERPRETATION OF THE PWE MEASUREMENT

A study of 12,000 young people in 41 countries (Furnham, Kirkcaldy, & Richard, 1994) discussed the possibilities of justifying the response to the question of, do students constitute a representative sample for the measurement of the work ethic? The study explained that the use of students is defensible. Continuing the rationale, it further cited the fact that national differences in work differences should be present throughout the population and detectable in any sample. The study provided one credible example as McClelland, who obtained his measures of national levels of achievement motivation from a content analysis of children's texts. Furnham et al. (1984) also gave the example of Hofstede who used results from multinational managers to provide measures of national differences in attitudes and values.

However, it was also noted that in developing countries students are not employed until after graduation. Therefore, as the authors cited, their attitudes toward work may be "ideal" rather than practical and empirical, especially in Asia. This point of view addresses the heart of the validity issue; especially validity in context that is still not adequately resolved.

Another factor is that McClelland's work has received much debate, with many researchers suggesting that the "need for achievement" is also a societal and group issue (Niles, 1999). Additionally, although Hofstede's work (33 item value survey on sample of 117,000 from 66 countries) is certainly one of the most noted cross-cultural value research, it too has received criticism. It is over 20 years old and evidence exists that transformational changes have made their way into various cultural values (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina, & Nicholson, 1997). For example, China has converted to market socialism and Hong Kong is now under Chinese rule. The U.S.S.R no longer exists. Germany has become unified and South Africa has ended apartheid. Mexico has undergone economic development, and diversity has dramatically changed the U. S. workforce (Robbins, 2001). The shift in worldwide globalization and the movement from agrarian to industrial to information economies in some nations places renewed interest in the cultural context of the work ethic.

Reflecting on the theoretical discussion of the work ethic, one recalls Weber's description of "sounding the hammer at five in the morning". Can individuals that have

yet to “sound that hammer” respond accordingly to a work ethic survey? Accordingly, can Cherrington’s “acquisition of wealth through frugality and the expectance of long hours at the expense of leisure” interpretation be truly the experience of an inexperienced workforce? (p.20). Finally, as the students age, do their values change? A generation shaped by globalization, technology, the rise of the market economy and MTV seek leisure and balance in their work. “While cultural values change slowly, they do change.” (Robinson, 2001, pp. 65-67).

UNIVERSALITY OF THE WORK ETHIC/SUMMARY

Indeed, many cross-cultural studies (Furnham 1990; Furnham & Muihdeen, 1984; Furnham et al; Niles, 1999) suggest evidence of a work ethic outside the traditional Protestant culture. “He who neither worketh for himself, nor for others, will not receive the reward of God (Allah)” stated The Prophet Mohammed of the Islamic faith (The Koran as cited in Niles, 1999). Hafsi’s 1987 study (as cited in Niles, 1999, p. 18) of three different Muslim groups found a close connection between religious involvement and the centrality of work (Niles, 1999). An interpretation from Buddha is that a work ethic that encourages teamwork is set forth as a religious outlook. According to Niles (1999), Buddha singled out laziness as a cause of the downfall of men and nations. Furthermore, Buddha found poverty to be the prime cause of unethical behavior.

Work ethic as a concept exists in all cultures but appears not to be consistent across cultures in terms of specific values and attributes. We should abandon use of the term of the Protestant work ethic as synonymous with work ethic. The evidence strongly suggests that the “Protestant work ethic” is not a universal concept; however, the concept of “hard work” is a major theme in the great religions of the world. As a primary source for our value systems, the religions reinforce the virtues of work into our daily lives.

The shift in terminology may be called for the term Protestant Work Ethic—as it reflects a cultural bias and may not be relevant in the U. S. today, as it is not to other nations. What is “Non-Protestant” Work Ethic? What are the implications of those values of non-Protestant heritage that contribute to similar employment success in the individual or corporate level—is success defined similarly across cultures?

The task at hand is to identify the variables that create the optimum work environment for success within the various cultural, social, political, and economic contexts. McClelland’s theoretical framework reflects the strong emphasis of Western psychological development theory as individualism. Human resource development managers are not alone in asking these fundamental questions. Developmental theorist and education experts today are also seriously questioning the applicability of Western theory to diverse populations in seeking a better understanding of learning and motivation. (Bowman,2001).

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