

National Culture and Leadership Styles on Employee Job Satisfaction: A Cross-National Comparison Between Chinese and UK Universities

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Abstract: The accelerating globalization greatly promotes the exchange of university academics among different nations. However, few studies have addressed the impact of cultural differences on their perceptions of workplace leadership styles and job satisfaction. Therefore, the study tries to fill the gap by comparing the job satisfaction of 16 academics working in the UK and Chinese universities. A qualitative approach with semi-structured interview and thematic analysis was adopted. It turned out that all the participants had lower level of job satisfaction when exposed to the new environment and experienced some kind of cultural shock. Interestingly, it would eventually go up if supportive leadership intervened in cross-cultural communication. Overall, Chinese participants tended to show higher level of job satisfaction. Therefore, it is recommended that to increase employee's commitment, leaders could employ supportive leadership style and familiarize with employees' national cultures to foster an inclusive organizational culture.

Keywords: National Culture; Organizational Culture; Leadership Style; Job Satisfaction; Higher Education Institution

1. Introduction

Job satisfaction is a critical factor that would affect the overall performance of an organization and its turnover.^[1] Recent studies have begun to examine the influence of cultural factors on job satisfaction. However, little interest has been paid to higher education institutions and it is hard to say whether employees from minority ethnic groups can enjoy the same level of job satisfaction as those from dominant ethnic group.

As the primary disseminators of knowledge, university academics will greatly affect the teaching quality and operation of higher education institutions. Increased job satisfaction among university teachers is also related with fair HR resource allocation, increased productivity and stability.^[2] However, the turnover rate in the UK and Chinese universities are rising. For instance, in the UK, Advance HE reported that in terms of the turnover rate between 2016 and 2017, more BME academics (23.2%) left than White academics (17.2%).^[3] Therefore, in order to better manage an increasingly diversified workforce, universities should take proactive steps to discovering the cultural elements that can enhance employee job satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 National Culture and Leadership Styles

Each country varies greatly in terms of its economic and political conditions. This leads to the creation of different cultures and could also results in preferences for certain leadership styles. As stated by some scholars, even if similarities of certain leadership style (e.g. transformational leadership) exists across cultures, the specific behaviors associated with that style differ significantly.^[4-5] Thus when two people from different backgrounds work together, being culturally-aware and behaving in a culturally-intelligent manner are prone to deliver good outcomes in organizational operations and cross-border communication.^[6]

In the UK, to promote work-life balance and family-friendly, the majority of the UK organizations are operated under two frameworks: the equal opportunity (EO) model and diversity management model (DM).^[7] Under such influence, the UK universities

have taken actions to improve the working conditions for their diversified workforce. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) is one of the many examples. For instance, in leader selection, it suggests that universities should ensure that their fieldwork trainings to include at least the introduction of an institution's operating process and risk assessment.^[8]

On the contrary, in a different continent like Asia, Zhou claimed that the key characteristics of leadership style is authoritarianism, benevolence and morality.^[9] In most Asian culture, where there is a high level of power distance, leaders usually set up their authority to grant direction. For instance, although China's modern higher education model imitate that of the Europe, its leadership style is still based on the feudalism's belief of authority worship and collectivism.^[10] The principal has positional authority over other staff and decisions are often made top-down and allows little room for negotiation. Meanwhile the paternalistic leadership is also very popular among Asian countries like Malaysia, Japan and Singapore, as leaders will act like a father to support and encourage their employees to go above and beyond.

2.2 National Culture on Job Satisfaction

Researchers have examined the impact of national culture on job satisfaction from different perspectives. Some authors examined whether job satisfaction level varies between cultures or countries grounded by different standards. Based on work-role inputs (e.g. education, working time) and work role outputs (e.g. income, advancement opportunities), Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza examined job satisfaction level among 21 countries.^[11] They discovered that the higher the work-role inputs are, the higher job-satisfaction level a country will enjoy. In a similar manner, based on job satisfaction related attributes ranging from attitudes towards a job to job characteristics, Boorah reported that West European countries have higher level of job satisfaction than Eastern Europe.^[12]

In other scholars' works, they investigated the role of specific cultural dimensions (e.g. Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity) on job satisfaction differences across nations. The majority of these research is focused on individualism and collectivism. However, since culture is a complex concept, scholars still fail to reach conclusive results towards its relationships with job satisfaction. As a result, empirical research yield mixed results as well. For instance, Mulki, Caemmerer and Heggde found that in higher power distance organizations, the relationship between satisfaction with supervisor and job performance is stronger.^[13] In contrast, Hauff and Richter argued that power distance is insignificant in affecting relationship with management and job satisfaction.^[14] In addition, when it comes to uncertainty avoidance, scholars like Mustafa and Lines proposed that masculinity is positively related to job satisfaction while femininity has a negative impact on job satisfaction.^[15] However, in Eskildsen, Kristensen and Antvor's study, a negative relationship between masculinity and job satisfaction was presented.^[16]

Putting all this together, it is reasonable to assume that national culture does exert certain influence on job satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data Collection

To carry out qualitative research, interview is a common and useful technique. Rather than providing limited answers of "yes" or "no", interview tends to be more inclusive and well-rounded.^[17] The criteria of participant selection are as follows: (1) interviewees should have at least two years of work experience in a university; (2) the university they are working for has a different culture than their country of origin; (3) non-Chinese interviewees are supposed to from western countries holding different cultural systems than China; and (4) non-academic staff was excluded. Convenience sampling was used and data was collected from May 2, 2019 to July 29, 2019.

All together 16 participants were interviewed. 50% are foreign university academics that have been working in Chinese universities and the rest are Chinese employees who have been working in the UK universities. Their work experience spanned from 2 to 20 years. There were more female participants than male participants. 69% of them had a bachelor degree and above. Among the interviewees currently working in China, 12.5% are from the northern England area, 50% are from the USA and the rest are from other European countries. As for respondents working in the UK, they are either from China or HongKong (China). 5 participants have a position of mid-level managers and the rest are full-time teaching faculties holding a title of Associate Professor or Professor.

3.2 Data Analysis

Interviews were carried out at the respondents' convenience: face-to-face or via the Internet using WeChat and WhatsApp. To define the themes or sub-themes within data, the author adopted thematic analysis (TA). It is suggested that six steps should be used for TA: being familiarized with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing report.^[18] After each interview, the author would transcribe the verbal data and read them several times to get a rough understanding of what the interviewees said in each part. Then the author summarized and extracted key words that frequently appeared during the interview. Followed by that, by looking at these key words, the author tried to find common themes and sub-themes related to the codes and filtered unnecessary key words irrelevant to the research questions out of the data sampling pool. Observation and conclusions were reached after analyzing the major findings of the interview.

4. Results

4.1 Factors Leading to Higher Level of Job Satisfaction

4.1.1 Personal Traits

Generally speaking, participants were satisfied with their job. 62.8% of the participants claimed that they chose to work in the universities because they had a passion for it. It would give them a sense of accomplishment to see student's development under their guidance. It did not matter whether they were working in their home country or not. 25% of the participants enjoyed communicating with the younger generation because that made them feel energetic and kept up with the trends at all times.

4.1.2 Benefits and Rewards

Notably, 80% of the participants said working in another country improved their living standards as their salaries increased. Interviewees mentioned that teaching was not an easy job as many people had anticipated. They would feel happier if their salaries could justify the efforts they had put. As one Chinese professor teaching in the UK said:

“Teaching is not an easy job at all. Disciplines develop over time and it is my responsibility to introduce to my students of the latest development...even during the holidays there are international conferences to attend, helping students with their dissertations...I had work experience in both countries...somehow I felt frustrated working back home because the paycheck is poor...now working in the UK is so much better because I can get more money...”

4.1.3 Good Relationship with Supervisors

As ethnicity minority group in another country, 62.5% of the participants said they preferred to have open communication with their leader or colleagues, as it could help them to reduce the chances of misunderstanding right away. Of the 8 Chinese participants, 5 of them said they had received adequate support from their supervisors to help them mitigate cultural conflicts in the workplace and enhance their relations with colleagues. This gave them a sense of belonging and they really appreciated that.

4.2 Factors Leading to Lower Level of Job Satisfaction

4.2.1 Lack of Open Communication

Although over half of the participants preferred to have open communication, 62.5% were hesitant to talk openly as they were afraid that this might offend their supervisors. 3 Chinese interviewees responded that this was because they were taught to be obedient at a very young age and it really made them felt awkward to questioning leaders' decisions. As for others, 5 foreign experts living in China claimed that they could not figure out why sometimes speaking out loud would be deemed as intolerable and they received little help. Astonishingly, 81.25% of the respondents said they all experienced some kind of awkwardness when communicating with co-workers from different cultures.

4.2.2 Limited Support from Supervisors

One thing that non-Chinese interviewees commonly complained about was the limited support they had received from their supervisors. It seemed that their leaders always had the final say. Sometimes decisions were made without letting them get involved in

the process and did not reflect their needs. “Leaders in China should really be more considerate about the pursuits of foreign academics”, one UK respondent said.

4.3 Culture as a Mediating Factor

The people who responded to the survey were all experiencing some type of cultural conflicts. Therefore, it is rather essential to explore the role of culture in affecting their job satisfaction. Usually, academics working in China experienced more frustration in communication while Chinese employees working in the UK felt neutral. However, some participants also revealed that this kind of disruption in communication decreased after they knew more about the country’s culture. The majority of participants (over 69%) agreed that they had been working in a very international environment with students and co-workers from different cultures. Those who were mid-level managers said they had experience in training and coaching their own team to provide better services for their colleagues and students; but due to the cultural differences, sometimes they would feel frustrated and exhausted.

Throughout the interviews, all the interviewees were active in answering their impression of working in a different culture and the cultural conflicts that they faced. One of the interviewees working in China said that:

“If our university pays more attention to the cultural differences among employees, it can improve the harmonious labor relations in the universities. I first came to China because I’m a huge fan of its mysterious culture. But working here is another story. I grow up in a place that taught me to speak out loud and not be afraid of making mistakes. But most of the times when we are having group meetings my Chinese counterparts seldom say no to leader’s decisions...My friend left because he felt it was too overwhelming...but now I can accept these changes and I will consider to stay in China for the next two years...yes, it is definitely important to study the cultural factors that can affect job satisfaction”.

Another German participant said that:

“Sometimes I really find it hard to convince my Chinese colleagues. This is not just a matter of language difficulties...the Chinese people’s heads are round, and the Germans’ heads are square! We simply can’t think along the same line!”

When it comes to whether national culture will moderate the relationship of leadership style with job satisfaction, one Chinese interviewee said that:

“My suggestion is Chinese academics should make change in the way they communicate. Rather than say something directly, we always like to wait until our supervisor give us permission. But sometimes this would be too late. I once overheard two Chinese technical experts exchanging their opinions of a technological issue in our school’s IT system. Actually I thought what they said was quite amazing and reasonable. Still, they kept silent afterwards and their idea was ‘robbed’ by a Western colleague. Another reason is that comparing with us, our foreign colleagues can speak faster and more fluently, so we usually think they are more confident and smarter than us, but that is not always the case. In order to give Chinese a way to shine, my supervisor would always smile and call out our names to encourage us to express our opinions and I really like that. I think I’ve chosen the right place to work”.

Obviously, in this case, the understanding of a different culture can moderate the perception of leadership style, and once it is moderated, the level of job satisfaction increased for Chinese who works in the UK university.

4.4 Summary of Results

Table 1 Summarization of the Interview Results

Theme	Sub-theme	Example
Factors leading to higher level of job satisfaction	Personal Traits	“It’s thrilling to work in Chinese universities, I get more opportunities to understand its culture ”.
	Benefits and Rewards	“I like the fact that we have a two-month summer holiday. I can go back home to spend some quality time with my family abroad”.

Factors leading to lower level of job satisfaction	Lack of Open Communication	“Sometimes I feel awkward to talk to my foreign colleagues because I don’t know what would interest them”.
	Limited Support from Supervisors	“Sometimes it’s hard to reach my leader since he always seems rather busy”.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the interview outcome that, understanding of national culture differences would improve university academic’s performance in so many ways: their job satisfaction, along with their mental health and their physical health. When a university employee was exposed to a new working environment that is totally different from his/her country of origin, it was common for he/she to feel anxious and at lost. During this period, they tended to experience decreased level of job satisfaction and complained frequently. However, this could change overtime when they were more familiar with the country’s culture and developed a brand new cross-cultural communication techniques under the help of their leaders. This, in turn, would lead to increased level of job satisfaction among university academics.

Additionally, universities will also need different measurements to manage staff with various cultural backgrounds: they can gather more data about staff age, years of experience, personality and how they would like to work and to collaborate in the group setting. At the same time, universities could learn from its past positive or negative experience to judge what are the best solutions for improving employee job satisfaction. However, it should be noted supervisors alone could not bring drastic changes. If a university academic refused to adapt to these changes and cooperate, they would still feel dissatisfied. A more mature and happier mental state would eventually lead to a higher satisfaction by actively intervening and changing the communication behavior of university teachers.

Limitations still exist in this study. One is that the sample selected for the interview cannot represent all the minority ethnic groups working in the two countries’ universities and can be tested across distinct sample bases. Another is that based on the discovery and the field research from all the published previous empirical research, the current studies on building an effective model in assessing university academic’s job satisfaction are still insufficient. Future studies can try to address these problems.

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