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Research note

Reflections on the conceptualization and operationalization of a set-theoretic approach to employee motivation and performance research

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ABSTRACT

The current commentary offers a reflection on the conceptualizations of Lee and Raschke's (2016) proposal for a set-theoretic approach to employee motivation and organizational performance. The commentary is informed by the current author's operationalization of set-theoretic research on employee motivation which occurred contemporaneously to the work of Lee and Raschke. Observations on the state of current research on employee motivation, development of motivation theory and future directions of set-theoretic approaches to employee motivation and performance are offered.

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Reflexiones sobre la conceptualización y operacionalización de un método, siguiendo la teoría de conjuntos, para la motivación y la investigación del desempeño de los empleados

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo ofrece una reflexión acerca de las conceptualizaciones de la propuesta de Lee y Raschke (2016) sobre un método, siguiendo la teoría de conjuntos, para la motivación de los empleados y el desempeño organizacional. El articulo está elaborado siguiendo las actuales investigaciones del autor acerca la operacionalización de la teoría de conjuntos en la investigación sobre la motivación de los empleados, que se produjo contemporáneamente a la obra de Lee y Raschke. El articulo ofrece observaciones sobre el estado actual de la investigación sobre la motivación de los empleados, el desarrollo de la teoría de la

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motivación y las direcciones futuras de los métodos, aplicando la teoría de conjuntos, para la motivación y el desempeño de los empleados.

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Introduction

It was with great interest that the current author discovered the advance online publication of Lee and Raschke (2016), which calls for a set-theoretic approach to the study of employee motivation. The timing of the paper represents clear evidence of the fact that while Lee and Raschke were conceptualizing a set-theoretic approach to employee motivation research, the current author, in collaboration (Ryan & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016), was attempting to operationalize the very same set-theoretic approach to employee motivation. This serendipitous development of independent, parallel thought on the issue of employee motivation research offers a unique opportunity to reflect on how an original experience of operationalizing set-theoretic research in the area might further inform the conceptualization of such research. This commentary and reflection on the work of Lee and Raschke (2016) follows the structure of their original paper.

Reflections

Lee and Raschke (2016) introduce their conceptualization with a general overview of motivation research while highlighting the need for, and benefits of, alternative methodological approaches to the study of work motivation. They assert that the preponderance of recent development in motivation theory is dominated by conventional quantitative analytical tools. Having reviewed the same literature as Lee and Raschke (2016), for the operationalization of a set-theoretic investigation of employee motivation (Ryan & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016), the current author would go even further, and proposes that the dominance of net effect, linear, quantitative analysis has led to an almost complete suspension in meaningful theory development on employee motivation. Rather, the great majority of research on employee motivation presents highly derivative models of motivation which offer little more than a tinkering on the edges of classical motivation theory. This tinkering seems to serve the dissemination of fragmented 'new' concepts which in many cases offer little more than old wine in new bottles. It seems, in an environment of publish or perish, that such 'new' concepts allow academic authors some publication traction in the promotion and further research of these concepts, which acts to feed and perpetuate the cycle of further fragmentation.

Evidence in support of this perspective is available in the work of Lee and Raschke (2016). The majority of influential research which they review is a product of the golden age of social-psychological research in the 1950s–1970s, including the notable efforts of Herzberg, Mauser, and Synderman (1959), Adams (1963), Vroom (1964), Skinner (1965), Deci (1975), and Hackman and Oldham (1976). Such ground breaking theories were developed through considered and thoughtful theorizing, observing and experimenting. It is perhaps not surprising then, since the proliferation of survey based research with a statistical-analytical, net effect focus, that such poor progress is observed in our further development of employee motivation theory. The poor state of much research in management studies is of central concern to Woodside (2016) in his call for better research practices. The set-theoretic approach popularized by Ragin (2008) and advocated by Lee and Raschke (2016) is certainly a positive initiative in this regard.

There are also calls within our current thinking on motivation to move away from the tinkering effects of fragmented new concepts and seek integration and unification in motivation theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Steel & Konig, 2006). Lee and Raschke (2016) offer one such attempt at theoretical integration as a useful basis to begin our set-theoretic approach to the study of employee motivation. They propose the human drives theory of Lawrence and Nohria (2002). Certainly Lawrence and Nohria offer a very useful and practical theory for set-theoretic investigations, but the current author would also suggest an alternative to those interested readers who may consider undertaking such investigations. The meta-theory of Leonard, Beauvais, and Scholl (1999) offers a very interesting integration of classical motivation theory with self-concept based theory. The meta-theory (Leonard et al., 1999) is well conceptualized and intuitive, and has found some following in contemporary research on workplace motivation, including the recent set-theoretic investigation of Ryan and Berbegal-Mirabent (2016). While the theoretical foundations of the meta-theory are robust its most significant weakness may be its failure at self-promotion *à la* Nohria, Groysberg, and Lee (2008) 'powerful new model'.

Regardless of the choice of contemporary motivation theories (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002; Leonard et al., 1999), or classical theories, the would-be set-theoretic researcher should attend to some important considerations. Irrespective of the analytical approach being taken, the unit of analysis should be a central concern. Lee and Raschke (2016) call for the understanding of employee motivation and organizational performance. Undoubtedly employee motivation aggregates to impact at the higher order of the organizations performance. However, it is important for genuine advancement in employee motivation theory that we accurately explore employee motivation at the level of employee performance. Lee and Raschke (2016) discuss elements of cultural levers on motivation, representing a higher order unit of analysis which might reasonably explain a higher order level of performance, i.e. organizational performance, but may be less useful in understanding individual employee performance.

Employee performance is broadly defined as a function of many factors, including motivation, but also including

ability and resources. These resources might include many things such as tools, time, opportunity, environmental characteristics, and the cultural levers referred to by Lee and Raschke (2016). While cultural levers might occur within the higher order unit of the organization, they are experienced at the level of the individual, and may be experienced differently from one individual to the next in the same organizational unit. It is this fact that makes employee motivation such an interesting and complex phenomenon. It is also the reason why we must ensure that individual employee motivation is examined at the level of individual employee performance. Lee and Raschke (2016) ask '*what cultural levers best motivate employees to create organizational value?*' Such a question might overlook the view that different employees in the same organization can experience the same cultural levers differently. Rather we should ask '*what are the complex combinations of individual employee motives, abilities and characteristics of the work environment (including cultural levers) that enhance employee performance?*' Such an approach encourages the inclusion of a more complete variable set and optimizes the usefulness of the set-theoretic research approach.

Ryan and Berbegal-Mirabent's (2016) early effort in the set-theoretic investigation of employee motivation and performance does not include additional variables such as individual ability or resources. However, a key learning experience from that research is the confirmation of the suitability of the set-theoretic approach for including complex ingredients, such as motives, abilities and resources. In fact, results from the operationalization of a set-theoretic investigation of employee motivation and performance not only highlights the suitability of the set-theoretic approach but also the necessity of including complex ingredients into set-theoretic investigations (Ryan & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016). To improve our understanding of employee motivation, such ingredients can include Lee and Raschke's (2016) cultural levers, but as experienced by the individual employee, and assessed in conjunction with the motivational drives/needs of the individual employee.

The current author fully supports the call for set-theoretic investigations of employee motivation. Undoubtedly prior knowledge of the conceptualizations of Lee and Raschke (2016) would have positively influenced the operationalization of Ryan and Berbegal-Mirabent (2016). Regardless, this early evidence in the domain of employee motivation highlights the ability of set-theoretic investigations to supplement and enhance on the more traditional linear investigations of the same concept (Ryan, 2014; Ryan & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016). In promoting set-theoretic research on employee motivation, future research might consider the following. Advancing motivation theory enhances our ability to understand human behavior. As work motivation researchers, it is human behavior, explained through motivations, that we are ultimately interested in. In this case, the behavior of interest is the employee's workplace performance. Employee performance is a function of many elements including (a) motivation, but also (b) individual ability, and (c) resources, environmental characteristics, etc. Any set-theoretic investigation should include some measure of all three elements if we are to truly advance our understanding of the relative influence and importance of employee motivation in complex organizational environments.

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