Managers' Implicit Theories of Motivation: 
How Managers Think Motivation "Works"

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McGregor (1960) asserted that the study of motivation in organizational settings must include managers’ beliefs about motivation, but this has rarely been examined. Semi-structured interviews of practicing managers explicited six common general implicit theories of motivation. Using a forced choice questionnaire and Thurstone scaling, managers’ endorsement of the theories was assessed. Relational demographic variables such as manager’s age and the interaction of manager’s age with the average age of subordinates – but not managerial race, gender, or tenure – helped explain managerial endorsement of implicit theories. Between-organization differences were also found, suggesting that organizational climate and culture could be related to endorsement of implicit theories of motivation.

Motivation is one of the more frequently studied topics in psychology. The purpose of many studies of motivation has been either to: 1) determine what motivational technique is most effective, or 2) discover what combination of factors interact to produce the psychological process called motivation and thus produce performance. However, managers in practice act and make decisions based on their own subjective beliefs about how to motivate employees, rather than on objective theory. Thus, discovering how motivation “works” or what motivational technique is “best” will not tell the whole story of motivation in an organizational context.

Managerial Implicit Theories of Motivation

As McGregor (1960) noted, a key question for top management is: “What are your assumptions (implicit as well as explicit) about the most effective way to manage people?” (p. vii). This implies that, in addition to studying the workings of motivation, an understanding of the pre-existing ideas and “naive theories” (Lord & Maher, 1990; Wegener & Petty, 1998) that managers bring to a situation is also necessary. These implicit theories can be defined as “naive, personal collections of assumptions about how things are related and the way the organizational world works” (Gioia & Sims, 1989, p. 10) and "derive from a goal of processing an abstract understanding of the workings of the social world" (Wegener & Petty, 1998, p. 2).

The concept of implicit theories has been successfully applied to a wide variety of social cognition topics (Higgins, 1998). Recent work by Heath (1999) has highlighted the importance of understanding the operation of implicit theories of motivation in organizations. We refer to this type of an implicit theory as Managerial Implicit Theories of Motivation (MITMs). A MITM is, to be specific, the implicit theory a manager holds about how a manager can most effectively act to motivate employees to perform at acceptable levels over the long term.

As the manager’s implicit theory is created from vast interconnections of past experiences, information, and interpretations, it may not necessarily be the “best” theory of motivation that a manager could develop. But an understanding of these implicit theories is important because such personal beliefs direct later behaviors (see Gioia & Sims, 1989). Whether they are accurate or not has little relevance, because the holder of the implicit theories believes them to be accurate, and acts based on that belief. Thus, MITMs make a given manager’s choice of certain motivational techniques seem natural and obvious, and thus in large part guide the manager’s attempts to motivate his or her employees.

McGregor’s (1960) discussions of Theory X and Theory Y are essentially descriptions of two general implicit theories that managers might hold about the nature of employees and how best to motivate them. Indeed, the basic ideas in any of the major theories of motivation in organizations -- Goal-Setting Theory (GST; Locke & Latham, 1990), Job Characteristics Theory (JCT; Hackman & Oldham, 1980), positive reinforcement theory (e.g., Welsh, Luthans & Sommer, 1993), and Equity theory (Adams, 1965) to mention a few -- can be considered an implicit theory of motivation if a manager holds beliefs congruent...
with the tenants of the formal theory. There are certainly a host of other potential implicit theories that managers could and probably do hold; there are as many possibilities as there are managers. Because it seems likely that many managers might share a small set of MITMs, however, one goal of this research was to identify common MITMs.

**MITMs as Related to Demographic Characteristics**

A second purpose of this study was to determine whether managers with similar demographic characteristics share similar MITMs. There is a great deal of previous research suggesting that people who are similar on a variety of demographic characteristics may share similar views ideas and opinions about a wide range of topics (see, to name just a few, Bartz & Levine, 1978; Leventhal, Matturro & Schanerman, 1978; Peek, Alston & Lowe, 1978; Pilowsky & Spence, 1977; Pittenger & Hunt, 1984) -- including, presumably, motivation. Demographic variables are used as imperfect surrogates because they are likely to correlate with experiences and values, which in turn have an impact on ideas (Wiersema & Bird, 1993).

The demographic characteristics targeted in this study are discussed below.

Further, Tsui and O’Reilly (1989) have argued that researchers must consider not only the target person’s demographic characteristics, but also that person’s characteristics in relation to those with whom he or she interacts. For example, the demographic similarity or dissimilarity of a given manager with his or her subordinates may play a role above and beyond that of his or her personal demographic characteristics (Michaels & Spector, 1982; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979). This seems especially likely, given the research showing that people possess a persistent preference for similar others (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Mayeless & Kruglanski, 1987; Stephan & Beane, 1978).

Obviously, much of a person’s experience occurs outside of a work context. Members of a given generation are likely to experience similar events, and thus are likely to hold similar values (Ryder, 1965), and to develop shared language patterns to communicate with others in their age cohort (Rhodes, 1983). Age is thus an important demographic to consider, because of the likelihood that managers of similar age will hold similar MITMs based on similarity of experience apart from the organizational setting (Wagner, Pfeffer & O’Reilly, 1984).

Additionally, the literature on differences in managerial styles of women and men is extensive (e.g., Estes, 1991; Lamade & Daniels, 1984; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1990), and the popular press tends to emphasize general differences between men and women (Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1994). It thus seems reasonable to expect differences in the MITMs of male and female managers.

Evidence that people of similar racial or ethnic background are more likely to hold similar attitudes and beliefs is also well-established (Bartz & Levine, 1978; Pilowsky & Spence, 1977; Pittenger & Hunt, 1984; Stevens & Brenner, 1990; Werbel & Kidwell, 1994). Though there is less literature on differences in managerial styles related to race, it still seems reasonable to expect differences in the MITMs of managers of different racial backgrounds, due to differences in racial culture (for an overview of racial identity, see Thompson & Carter, 1997).

It is often noted that experts in a field often have better-defined schemas (of which implicit theories are a type) than do novices, simply due to experience. Given that experts make decisions more efficiently than novices, and generally perform better than novices (Lord & Maher, 1990), differences in MITMs as a function of managerial tenure also seem likely.

Schneider’s (1987) A-S-A model would predict that members of a given organization are likely to be more similar on a number of variables than are members of different organizations, and recent evidence supports this contention (e.g., Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). This emerges because people who “fit” are attracted to and stay with an organization, and those who do not fit leave the organization. One would therefore expect managers within an organization to share MITMs because of shared organizational events, shared perceptions of the significance of those events, and shared language to discuss those events (Allen & Cohen, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Wiersema & Bird, 1993).

**Method**

**Phase I: Explication of MITMs**

Phase I of the project attempted to discern general themes that tend to dominate managers’ descriptions of their views of motivation. This was done through one-hour interviews of 21 middle-level managers (i.e., employees who supervise others but who are themselves supervised) at three participating organizations (two hospitals--one public and one private--and one publishing company). The interviews were semi-structured (Schmitt & Klimoski, 1991), following a generally standardized sequence of questions.

The Phase I interviews were reviewed to discern themes that tended to dominate each manager’s description of her or his views of motivation. For example, most managers focused on a few key tactics when they talked about motivating employees. Some managers talked mostly about empowering employees, others talked mostly about praising employees, etc.,
but few talked in detail about a wide variety of approaches to motivating employees. Thus, most managers made comments that fit into more than one theme, but most managers also had one theme that covered the majority of their comments.

Analysis of the interviews yielded six general themes; briefly, these stated that managers should: 1) set goals for employees to work towards, 2) give employees authority and responsibility, 3) reward and praise employees for good work, 4) treat employees equitably and with fairness, 5) serve as a “mentor” and/or resource person for employee, and 6) threaten employees or monitor their work very closely. These common themes can be seen as general representations of MITMs that are commonly held by managers. Though the details of the MITM may vary from manager to manager, the general descriptions given here seem to capture the dominant aspects of the managers’ understandings of motivation. Thus, these six themes are hereafter referred to as common MITMs.

The interviews were again reviewed, and quotations that reflected each of the general themes were taken. These quotations were modified slightly so that they all fit a similar format: “I believe that, in order to motivate his or her employees, a good manager should...”. Expert raters sorted each of the items into categories based on a brief description of the theme and items were revised if there was not 100% agreement; this process continued until all raters agreed. As shown in Table 1, the six common MITMs are conceptually similar to six major theoretical conceptualizations of motivation.

**Phase II: MITM Questionnaire Administration**

Participants for Phase II were 32 middle managers from the three organizations noted above. All participants filled out a forced-choice questionnaire that incorporated 135 paired comparisons among the final items. This number is based on 18 statements (three for each of the six MITMs), with each being paired with every other item except for the two items from the same MITM.

The questionnaire also included several demographic questions. These focused not only on the respondents, but on the respondents in relation to their subordinates in the organization. For example, one question was “Most people I supervise are: Male, Female.” The inclusion of relational demographic variables follows directly from suggestions by Tsui and O’Reilly (1989).

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MITM</th>
<th>Text of MITM items for the Thurstone scaling</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>“In attempting to motivate his or her employees, it is more effective for a manager to:”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>assign work goals for his or her employees that will be difficult for them to attain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>develop goals and objectives that the employees can work towards.</td>
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<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>establish clear performance objectives for the employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCT</td>
<td>give the employees a variety of projects to work on, rather than always the same tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCT</td>
<td>give the employees whole projects to work on, rather than little pieces of projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCT</td>
<td>help the employees understand how their work fits in with the larger organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SELF</td>
<td>give employees guidance on what has to be done, but allow them to determine how to do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SELF</td>
<td>help employees feel that they have the ability and authority to do what they need to.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SELF</td>
<td>serve as a resource person, by being available to help employees when they need it but not being overly directive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>REIN</td>
<td>award privileges for superior performance on specific projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REIN</td>
<td>privately praise employees for good work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REIN</td>
<td>publicly praise employees when they perform well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Th X</td>
<td>actively direct and monitor individual employee performance as closely as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Th X</td>
<td>regularly and visibly monitor employees to ensure they are not loafing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Th X</td>
<td>tell the employees that keeping their job depends on good performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. GST = Goal-setting, JCT = Job Characteristics, SELF = Self-Direction, REIN = Reinforcement, Th. X = Theory X.
Results

Scale Development

The Thurstone scaling procedure (Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) was utilized to calculate respondent’s preferences for each of the six common MITMs. This procedure has the benefit of simultaneously scaling the MITMs and the respondents preferences for these MITMs. For each respondent, a proportion was calculated of his of her endorsement of the Equity MITM over the goal-setting MITM, the Equity MITM over the Theory X MITM, and so on. All proportions were then converted to normal deviates. Since a MITM was never compared with itself, those proportions could not be calculated directly and were therefore set to .5 as recommended by Ghiselli, Campbell, and Zedeck (1981) and Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

The six normal deviates related to each MITM were then averaged, yielding a total of six overall normal deviates for each respondent, representing each respondent’s endorsement of the six common MITMs relative to the other common MITMs on a single interval scale. It was these interval scale scores for each respondent (along with the demographic data) that were used in the central analyses of this study.

Tests of Differences in MITM Endorsement

Direct tests of the hypotheses regarding MITM endorsement were based on a split-plot factorial design (Kirk, 1982). This design was appropriate because of the mixture of a within-blocks effect (MITMs) and various between-block effects (demographic variables). The tests of hypotheses regarding demographic characteristics are questions of the interaction of each demographic characteristic with MITM endorsement; that is, whether a given characteristic moderates preference for MITMs. Given the a priori nature of these hypotheses, tests of the moderating influence of each characteristic were conducted separately.

In each of these analyses, the model included dummy-coded vectors for the within-subjects common MITM variable, and between-subjects interaction terms for the respondent demographic characteristic in question with common MITM, the subordinate demographic characteristic (if appropriate) with common MITM, and the respondent demographic by subordinate demographic by common MITM interaction. The within-subjects error term was common MITM by respondent identification number, blocking on the demographic characteristic(s) of interest.

In each model, significant differences were found among the MITMs, $F(5, 155) = 59.52$, $p < .001$. Further, the Newman-Keuls tests showed that the common MITMs grouped into four groups. The Self-direction MITM was rated significantly higher than the Job Characteristics MITM, the Reinforcement MITM, and the Goal-Setting MITM (which were not significantly different from each other). Each of these was rated significantly higher than the Equity MITM, which was rated significantly higher than the Theory X MITM.

Several moderation effects involving demographic variables were found. The interaction of respondent age (based on a dichotomous split of the sample into categories: under 46 vs. 46 and over) and MITM endorsement was significant, $F(5, 135) = 2.56$, $p < .05$. More importantly, the interaction of respondent’s age with subordinate age also moderated MITM endorsement, $F(5, 135) = 3.58$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 1). Additionally, there were significant differences between the three organizations in terms of the patterns of MITM endorsement, $F(10, 145) = 2.40$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2). However, no differences involving gender, race, or managerial tenure were found ($p > .10$).

Discussion

Both theoretically and empirically, this study returns to the roots of the study of managerial schemas of motivation. With limited exceptions (e.g., Neulip, 1987; Ouchi, 1981), motivation researchers have abandoned McGregor’s (1960) premise that it is a fundamental concern to understand a manager’s beliefs about motivation processes. This study returns to that question, and extends the range of common MITMs beyond the two explicated by McGregor.

As has been alluded to in the presentation of findings above, there was congruence between common MITMs and some of the currently dominant theories of motivation. Specifically, the six common MITMs seem to be examples of managers putting into use actions that would arise from reliance on: 1) Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), 2) Job Characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), 3) Positive reinforcement theory (e.g., Welsh, Luthans & Sommer, 1993), 4) Equity theory (Adams, 1965), 5) Self-direction theory (McGregor, 1961), and 6) Theory X (McGregor, 1960).

There are several practical implications of the findings of this study. First, the findings support the literature on the significance of age cohorts in shaping world views (e.g., Augustinos, 1991; Rubin & Greene, 1991). Indeed, persons of different generations do in fact appear to think differently about motivation. Of course, it is possible that age may serve as a surrogate for the true cause of the differences, such as educational experiences, differing role expectations, etc. Importantly, though, this does not appear to be caused by managerial tenure.
Another implication is that organizational climate and culture appear to be related theories of motivation. The fact that there were organization-level differences between the three organizations, and therefore a relative consensus within organizations, lends credence to the idea that MITMs are one aspect of organizational climate and culture. Of course, the direction of causality is open to debate. Several authors have argued that managerial values and beliefs become enacted into policies and procedures (e.g., Hermans, 1990; Pitre & Sims, 1987; Schneider, 1990; Smircich, 1983), and thus beliefs shape culture. Others have argued that incoming members are socialized into the existing patterns of belief, and so existing structures are reinforced over time (e.g., Fisher, 1986). In all likelihood, both processes function to ensure that such things as managers’ theories of motivation shape and are shaped by organizational culture and climate.

On a related note, the argument could be made that this project taps into managers’ espoused theories rather than their theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1988). Certainly future research should explore this issue more carefully, perhaps by gathering data from subordinates on how their manager actually manages. Here, a parallel MITM questionnaire could be used -- with subordinates responding to the exact same paired comparisons -- in terms of which option they believe their manager would endorse based on his or her managerial behavior.

Nonetheless, an analysis of MITMs could prove to be a useful diagnostic tool for organizations, managers, and subordinates. For example, though there is no direct test of this in the present study, on an intuitive level it seems that MITM analysis could be a useful component in determining managerial fit (Kristof, 1996). For example, if there is congruence between the MITM of top managers and of a given middle manager, or between the middle manager and the desires and values of employees, there is
likely to be a greater feeling of fit on the part of the middle manager. Where there is greater fit, there is less likelihood of turnover (Hatton & Emerson, 1993; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Thus, MITM analysis could be a useful component in predicting turnover of both employees and managers. Additionally, general managerial ineffectiveness could be a result of trying to motivate employees in generally ineffective ways, or in ways that do not fit with the desires and values of employees in the specific organization in question. Thus, part of a diagnostic of the causes of managerial ineffectiveness could be MITM analysis for managers and their subordinates, with subsequent training and development in new ways of managing and motivating for the manager in the event that inappropriate approaches or large discrepancies are discovered.

When motivation programs are introduced in organizations, they often fail. Perhaps this is because the underlying assumptions about employee motivation of the program are not in alignment with the MITMs of the managers tasked with implementation of the program. Thus, the managers may not be committed to the success of the program, and do not invest time and energy in its implementation. An understanding and awareness of MITMs could help determine situation-appropriate programs for different organizations.

Finally, it is possible that managers having different MITMs would have difficulty communicating about these different ideas to each other because of the difficulties people have in articulating implicit theories (Lord & Maher, 1990). MITM analysis could help uncover some of the differences in managerial
approaches that lead to conflict within an organization.

This study showed that it is possible to uncover differences between managers' understandings of motivation, and that these differences can be related to individual-level differences (e.g., managerial age), individual-level relational differences (e.g., average age of subordinates), and organization-level differences. We have noted several practical implications of understanding these differences. Thus, it seems reasonable that researchers and practitioners should pay greater heed that they have in the past to McGregor's (1960) admonition to consider managers' implicit and explicit assumptions about how to most effectively motivate and manage employees.

References


