

Chapter 3

Achievement

An important issue in social regulation in almost every society is the conflict between encouraging individual initiatives and promoting pro-social behavior ... how to maintain a balance between encouraging personal striving and constraining the manner through which personal striving is expressed has been a long-standing problem in almost every social philosophical system.

Source: Chi-yue Chiu & Yong-Hi Hong (1997: 172)

Me, We.

Source: Mohammed Ali

In the preceding chapter, it was argued that cultural identities regularly interact with each other, creating work behavior that is potentially either rigid or fluid, depending on the degree to which it is mutually stereotyped. A prime example of these intercultural dynamics, according to Chapters 1 and 2, is glocalization. Bringing that process to life, this chapter examines how stereotypically global cultures of achievement that are predominantly individualistic, interact with more localized cultures of achievement that are more collectivistic – through their socio-cultural values, workplace traditions, and micro-cultures of mateship in self-managed teams. As a result of donning this glocal lens on achievement-in-context, we identify new “climates for achievement.” These can be negative (discouraging) or positive (encouraging, motivating). Accentuating the latter, the chapter ends with an opening out onto new vistas for managing achievement, which is then explored in the rest of the book.

1. A Brief History of the Study of Achievement at Work

The study of achievement as some of us know it began with the taxonomic efforts, by Henry A. Murray in the USA, to classify a “core” set of human needs based. These were extracted from his predecessors’ writings on individual differences in personality, and tested in a series of group assessments (Murray, 1938). One of the products of this project was the Thematic Apperception Test (or TAT) (Murray, 1943). The basic rationale behind the TAT was to provide test-takers with ambiguous pictures – such as a schoolboy wistfully, or perhaps ambitiously, daydreaming – and to give the test-taker license to “project” their inner motives into the picture via their own creative narratives about it. According to Murray, the more a particular need was alluded to in the resulting storytellers’ texts, the more salient that need must be to the storytellers themselves. Amongst 28 such needs identified by Murray and his team, was a *need for Achievement*, abbreviated to *n Ach*. This particular need subsequently became the most researched of all Murray’s core needs. (Peck, 1975).

1.1. Phase 1: A concept defined

Chief among the researchers making *n* Ach so prominent was D. C. McClelland (1987b). In multiple publications, McClelland and colleagues provided the work research literature with its best-known and most enduring definition of *n* Ach. According to this definition, people high in *n* Ach are focused on “seeking success in competition with a standard of excellence.” This oft-repeated definition captures succinctly at least three core features of achievement motivation: competing to win; striving to continually improve performance; and motivating the self toward those continual improvements (Franken & Brown, 1995). Features like these, of course, render *n* Ach directly relevant to the world of work. This is especially so in a global culture that stresses personal achievement as one of its core tenets.

1.2. Phase II: Ecological research

In the initial research on *n* Ach at work, McClelland adopted an approach that was ecological (Chapter 2, this volume). Achievement levels for societies past and present (at the time) were gauged through various adaptations of Murray’s tests of projection, including, for example, cultural myths and stories. These indices were then for example correlated with measures of economic development several decades later (McClelland, 1961). The resultant correlation coefficients were often positive and statistically significant, thereby supporting a linkage between (a) levels of *n* Ach in a particular cultural group, and (b) that cultural group’s prospects for future economic development.

1.3. Phase III: In-country research

1.3.1. *Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs).*

One of the proxies for economic development, used by McClelland, was ecological level of entrepreneurial behavior (1961). Buoyed by findings that this, too, was linked to *n* Ach, McClelland and his colleagues undertook an ambitious program of behavioral and economic engineering. They designed programs in *n* Ach and entrepreneurial skills for potential business people in “developing” countries (McClelland & Winter, 1969). In an evaluation of one of these interventions in India, conducted two years after the initial training in *n* Ach, found that its trainees had made more profit, employed more people, and invested more money, than an equivalent group of controls. Other interventions, in different “developing” areas, were reportedly also successful in SME development (see for example, McClelland, 1987a). Thus, *n* Ach has been linked to economically successful work behavior both *between* countries (at the ecological level, above) and *within* them (at the level of individual differences) (Chapter 2, this volume).

1.3.2. *Middle management.*

The role of individual differences in *n* Ach has also been explored, extensively, in a less interventionist manner. In one discernible wave of these studies, individuals high in *n* Ach were found to prefer moderate (i.e., attainable) goals over goals that were both more easy and more difficult – and thus less attainable (Littig, 1963; McClelland, 1965; Atkinson & Rayner, 1974). According to the classic definition of *n* Ach above, this preference is partly attributable to individuals high in *n* Ach being more highly motivated to win, and to continually seek to better themselves. Logically, each of these drives is more likely to be realized