Social Axioms and Organizational Behavior

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Abstract This chapter examines the use of social axioms in predicting work attitudes and behaviors. As organizational research can be conducted as several levels of analysis, this chapter reviews the research conducted in the areas of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), normative commitment, and conflict management and resolution, paying careful attention to the possible levels of analysis within each area. The effect of social axioms on organizational citizenship is examined at the individual level of theory and analysis using social axioms as an individual difference variable, at the group level of theory and analysis, where it is called collective citizenship, or across these levels. Likewise, research related to normative commitment and organizational conflict at the individual level of analysis is presented, along with research at both higher levels of analysis and cross-level analysis. Suggestions for future research at the group level of theory and analysis as well as suggestions for cross-level research are presented and discussed.

Levels of Influence

Organizational behavior occurs within two critical cultural contexts—an organizational culture and a social culture. Each level of culture reflects a different level of focus, and therefore a different level of theory and analysis, that can be understood as being nested one within the other. At the broadest level, social culture-related variables may be viewed as representing societal norms that relate to values, beliefs, and behavior. Similarly, nested within social cultures, organizational cultures may be viewed as representing organizational norms that relate to values, beliefs, and behaviors. These organizational culture norms may or may not be congruent with the social culture norms within which the organization operates, and while these variables may describe the society or organization in general, they do not necessarily reflect any particular individual employee’s values, beliefs, or behaviors. Yet, both the social and the organizational culture have an impact on individual behavior, as it occurs nested within both.

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Multilevel issues are often inherent in research that examines the constructs of culture, organizational behavior, or both together. Researchers and theorists have conceptualized culture and/or culture-related variables at the individual, family, school, organizational, and societal levels. This differentiation is apparent in explorations of organizational behavior, for example: employee behavior (e.g., OCBs—Organ, 1988; organizational commitment—Allen & Meyer, 1990), group behavior (e.g., collective citizenship behavior—Karam & Kwantes, 2006; collective efficacy—Watson, Chemers, & Preiser, 2001), and organizational-level behavioral phenomena (e.g., productivity and/or effectiveness of the organization as a whole—Ostroff & Bowen, 2000).

The identification of multiple levels within which organizational behavior occurs has created the possibility of not only empirical research centered at single levels of theory, measurement, and analysis, but also the possibility of cross-level and multilevel work. Individual-level research has often focused on the antecedents and consequences of employee behavior; unit-level research on the unit-level antecedents and consequences of collective organizational behavior constructs; and cross-level research on the top-down influence of unit-level variables on individual-level variables, as well as relationships between individual-level variables. Each of these forms of research requires researchers to adequately identify appropriate levels of theory, measurement, and analysis when examining these constructs and the relationships between them.

Social Axioms

The concept of social axioms has been defined as general beliefs about the social world and is in the form of an assertion that two entities are related (Leung et al., 2002). As such, this construct has been used to represent a set of generalized beliefs that can serve as a basis for differentiating individuals both within cultures and across cultures, as well as differentiating groups of individuals between groups, such as cultures. Each of these approaches reflects a different focus, and therefore presupposes a different level of theory, measurement, and analysis.

Social Axioms: Individual Level of Focus

The examination of individual differences was the main impetus for Leung et al.’s (2002) two-study research in which they identified a five-factor model of social axioms including the generalized beliefs of cynicism, social complexity, reward for application, spirituality (subsequently renamed religiosity), and fate control initially with 580 participants from Hong Kong and Venezuela, and later with 424 participants from Germany, United States, and Japan. In these two studies the focal unit was the individual, such that an individual’s personally held generalized beliefs