Social-cultural Approach to the Theory of Work Motivation

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Abstract
The paper deals with critical comments to the current theories of work motivation and tries to show that these theories are constrained by cultural and social conditions. The paper draws upon Hofstedes' comments on cultural limitations of the work motivation theories. Besides this, the paper introduces survey results which show that these theories might be limited by social conditions of the subjects, as well, specifically by the ways in which the survey subjects understand what work is and what is their role in connection to it. If the assumption put forward in the paper is true, it would mean that the validity and plausibility of the current theories of work motivation is not universal, but could be relied upon only under some specific conditions.

Introduction
After centuries when human work was appreciated only under certain conditions and the most important people in society, i.e. the aristocracy, did not work at all, the general attitude to work started to change in the 20th century. From menial drudgery work was transmuted into something important, exquisite, and even glorious. The triggering mechanism of this change was probably the end of the Second World War as well as the economic growth which had started earlier but was hampered and interrupted by both World Wars and the economic recession which preceded the Second World War. An important role in the thinking of psychologists also played the results of Hawthorns' studies. This development, it could be assumed, resulted in a strong humanistic influence in work and organizational psychology of the second part of the 20th century.

There is nothing inherently wrong with psychological theories being humanistic oriented. However, it seems, this orientation narrowed considerably the outlook of the theoreticians and restricted the development of the field in the period. In this paper we will try to discuss some consequences of the one-sided humanistic orientation of the work motivation theory and support the discussion by quotes of critical comments on the present state of the art in the field. The comments mentioned were derived mostly from other authors, but some results of the present author supporting the claim are introduced there as well.

Work motivation theories and their critics
What surprises the student of the contemporary theories of work motivation is the sheer number of them. If there are so many theories about one thing it probably means that we do not understand it at all. Even as it might appear so, our understanding of motivation does not to be in so bad a shape, though. It could be shown that a great number of the theories which emerged after the end of the Second World War pave, in fact, a solid way of thinking based on one specific, humanistic tradition. This might help to explain the situation, but only in part. The other part, it seems, lies with a

wish to make these theories universally valid, i.e. to make them into something which holds for all the people at all the times and at all circumstances. The assumptions, which stem for this wish, restrict the thought of the theoreticians and might even block them to accept empirical evidence by which the same theories might be refuted. A short review of references might help to support this assertion.

Work Psychology by Arnold *et al.* (2005) is a standard and widely recognized textbook of work psychology. The authors do not in principle contradict existing theories of work motivation but the book contains a lot of critical comments. The following criticism is based especially on these comments (*op. cit.,* p. 306-353).

- *Maslow theory* was refuted; Maslow's presumption that needs create hierarchy in the way he supposed was not confirmed;

- McGregor's *theory X and Y* are not theories in *sensu stricto*; they are generalizations and generalizations are both true and false at the same time and thus they cannot be confirmed or refuted (and so in the sense of Popper methodology they are not scientific theories);

- Vroom's *Expectancy theory* did not lead to research verification; at present it stands aside the main interest of experts in this field;

- *Justice theories (equity, justice, citizenship theories)* are in fact directly linked to ideas connected with self-governance and democracy as they were developed in the cultures of the West. In research they have shown good results. However, most probably because they are directly connected to a specific cultural tradition, they were shown not to work in the same way in cultures from other parts of the world.

Further criticism of present theories of work motivation can be found in the works of Hofstede. Hofstede criticizes especially Malsow, Herzberg's two-factor theory and McClelland's concept of achievement motivation (*need of achievement;* Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 264 – 268, 275). Hofstede's criticism focuses especially on cultural contingency of these theories and theoretical concepts they work with. In the case of Maslow, for Hofstede it is the top of his pyramid of needs which made him to comment that only in the individualistic USA can self-actualization be regarded as an over important value. Most national cultures of the world are collectivist. In the cultures of Asia and Africa self-actualization as the highest objective is unimaginable and in fact it can be equaled to selfishness and inability to live with one's own neighbors there. In the case of Herzberg's theory, Hofstede shows that his classification of motivation factors into intrinsic and extrinsic (motivators and hygiene factors) depends on culture and that Herzberg's concepts reflect value preferences of the American middle class.

Hofstede found an interesting result in connection with McClelland's *Need of Achievement* – he shown that it is not a motivational characteristic but a trait typical for all the cultures with strong *masculinity* and weak *uncertainty avoidance*. The USA is a strongly masculine country and uncertainty avoidance is weak there. McClelland claimed that need of achievement in a country is directly associated with its material wealth. However, Japan is also a developed and rich country, but its cultural characteristics differ. Moreover, in Hofstede's surveys wealth and economic development have correlated with other indicators than those two that correlated with McClelland's achievement motivation.

Besides the theories of work motivation which we have mentioned in the paragraphs above there are two which were left out. These two theories have turned out to be successful and working according to Arnold and others. They are *goal-setting theory* and *theory of psychological empowerment*. Arnold *et al.* (*op. cit.,* s. 326) consider the goal-setting theory to be very successful. According to them, in the 1990's there were more than half of the published papers on motivation of work behavior which dealt with the goal-setting theory. The initial ideas, from which the theory gradually developed, were introduced by E. A. Locke in 1960's. Another significant representative of this approach was G. P. Latham. This theory seems to be an anti-pole to McClelland's theory. For McClelland an efficient man was a man with a high need of achievement. For supporters of *goal setting theory* it is otherwise. A man with a clear and desired goal experiences the fulfilling of this need.

Peter Drucker developed in the sixties the method of *Management by Objectives (MBO)* which linked evaluation of work performance and work motivation with the help of goal setting. The method was very popular, especially in 1970's and 1980's. As in the cases mentioned previously, there again was a great deal of research and its results seemed to prove the validity of the conception. However, over the years, the method ceased to be used gradually. In France, for example, as well as in other European countries, MBO was redesigned and reformulated repeatedly and later on it was abandoned altogether. Hofstede (*op. cit.,* p. 273 - 274) stated that its usability was culturally contingent, in a similar way as in the aforementioned cases. It seems that even if the goal-setting might be a useful approach to motivating people, the way in which it is used might be culturally constrained.

At the present the most frequently used conception of work motivation is the theory of psychological empowerment. Arnold and others (*op. cit.,* p. 337ff) call it *motivation by job re-design.* This at present quite popular concept seems to join both psychological, managerial and organizational approaches and ways of understanding of the role of motivation in organizations into one theoretical and at the same time practical approach. It could be understood as a synthesis of older approaches, including those theories of motivation we have dealt with above.

The psychological empowerment theory was extensively researched in the recent years and the results seem to give it a rather strong position (Wall *et al.,* 2004, Wald *et al.,* 2003; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Thomas and Velthaus, 1990). In spite of the psychological empowerment popularity and the growing evidence of its plausibility the present paper's author feels there are some reasons for reservations as goes about wide and general validity of this approach. At least three reasons might be given to support this claim. The first one concern the cultural constrains similar to those mentioned above in connection to the older work motivation theories. In essence, psychological empowerment derives its basic principles from Herzberg's *job enrichment* method. As Herzberg's theory was shown to be culturally constrained, it is quite probable that the same might hold for its newer development. The second one stems from the research findings which will be shortly described in the following text. The present author believes that these findings show motivational variables to be contingent to the social conditions in which subjects live and specifically to the ways in which they perceive and understand what work is. The third one concerns the difference of a successful implementation of a principle in practice and the requirements of a scientific theory. Actually, if the procedures used to motivate employees are culturally and/or socially constrained, the procedures in question will be effective in only some employees, those with a mind-set responsive to these procedures. Other employees might respond to the same procedures in a different way. It might be argued, however, that even if it would be so it would not be of too great a concern to the organizations in which the subjects concerned work. Organizations look for and prefer employees who think, feel

and act in ways which are compatible with their respective organization cultures. So, we could assume, the motivation procedures might serve unwittingly as selection procedures of sorts, helping the organizations to weed out employees they do not want.

The second reason mentioned in the preceding paragraph is based on the results of a survey conducted by the present author and his colleagues recently. The survey used the EDMK research instrument together with few questions added by the research team. EDMK was designed by Ten Horn *et al.* (1996) and it was used in an international study which compared work motivation in several European countries. In this study (see Roe *et al.*, 2000) the results supported the conclusion that in the countries studied the same motivation mechanisms were identified which were, however, significantly modified by local conditions. The results of the present author and his colleagues study support, as we believe, a somewhat stronger statement (Chamoutová *et al.*, 2006; Michálek *et al.*, 2006). An important part of the results was obtained by the use of one of the new questions, which was coded in the survey as DP6.

The question DP6 was derived by Kolman (2001) in another survey in Czech organizations. This question might be found a bit odd, but it repeatedly brought about interesting data. It sounds: "How probable is the following result of extraordinary work performance in your organization: the employee remains in the same position because s/he knows the job well." In the study from 2001 it was found that respondents stated a higher possibility of such a consequence the older and the less educated they were. These findings were statistically significant at 0.05 levels.

Table 1: Scales of EDMK questionnaire used in the survey

RS – responsibility
MF – meaningful of the work
OC – organization commitment
JI – job interestedness
SR – stress related to work
TL – tendency to leave
SA – job satisfaction
RP – role repletion and requests
PH – physical condition for work

Questionnaire EDMK and Kolman's questions DP were used in a research study which focused on motivation characteristics of Czech population. Altogether, data were obtained from 882 respondents. In the respondents sample the subjects were evenly distributed according to gendre, age, educational levels and some other demographic characteristics (as one of the survey objectives was to compare responses of city and country dwellers). The reliability of the measurement was checked by Cronbach alphas and all the scales shown sufficient reliability.

The main results of the survey, all of them significant at 0.05 levels, which are relevant to this discussion, concern differences between three sub-samples of the respondents and the correlations of the DP6 question and EDMK scales. The three sub-samples were defined by the region of the re-

spondents domicile. The first sub-sample was formed by respondents living in the capital Prague. The second sub-sample was formed from the respondents living in the Prague Metropolitan Area (Prague excluded) and the third sub-sample was formed from the respondents living in small settlements in the marginal counties of the country. These results could be summarized, as follows:

- There were found no differences between the Prague and the Prague Metropolitan Area inhabitants in the average values on the EDMK scales;

- In two cases there were found significant differences between subjects living in the centre of the country and those from the small settlements on the country margin. The both results were obtained by ANOVA and in one case it concerned a difference in sub-samples averages on the scale TL (tendency to leave). In the second case there was found a difference in averages on the DP6 question (as only part of the data was used the number of respondents in this case was 545);

- There were identified small, but significant associations of DP6 with several EDMK scales. The correlations are shown in the table 2.

Table 2: Statistically significant correlations of DP6 with the EDMK scales

scale	MF	OC	TL	SA	PH
correlation	-0,118	-0,156	-0,118	-0,163	-0,172

The correlations in table 2 were calculated using the data from the whole group of 882 respondents. Although they are in absolute value rather low, they prove that the answers to question DP6 are statistically significantly associated with motivation scales of the questionnaire EDMK. As goes about the two previous results, the first difference shows that in the marginal parts of the country the tendency to leave a current job is lower. This, most probably, might be explained by higher unemployment there. The other difference supports the claim we have made earlier in this paper. It shows that the tendency to hold the situation, as described by this question as highly probable is significantly higher in the marginal part of the country, as in its central part.

Discussion and conclusions
Questionnaire EDMK was based on a concept very close to the theory of psychological empowerment. Items and scales EDMK are formulated in such a way that they enable to measure characteristics which are dealt with by this theory. Although the results which were stated in the previous part are not revolutionary, they show that motivation characteristics can be influenced by conditions in which subjects live and probably also by their life experience, life situation and by the way they understand the world around them. Question DP6 is a bit odd, as the people who answer it positively in fact confirm that the organization they work in are not, at least in their opinion, run according to rational principles of management.

According to Arnold *et al.* (*op. cit.,* s. 333) recent developments of the work motivation theory were influenced by social-psychological concepts (see as well Leonard *et al.*, 1999), according to which the motivation processes are contingent to the *self-concept* of the subject in question. We think that the results described in this paper might be consistent with this idea.

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