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Self-Concept of a Karma-Yogi

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- The purpose of this study is to validate the construct of Karma-Yoga, i.e., fulfilling one's obligations with equanimity and without hankering after extrinsic rewards. **Design/methodology/approach-** We validate the construct of Karma-Yoga using self-concepts; i.e., the answer to the questions "Who am I?" We collected data from 274 students in a survey which included a scale on Karma-Yoga and an open-ended test of self-concepts. **Research limitations/implications-** We found that individuals who score high on Karma-Yoga also have more number of social identities in their self-concept. In this manner we provide a preliminary explanation as to how by expressing their social identities, individuals who are high in Karma-Yoga are able to perform actions without expectation of material rewards. Being a survey in which both independent and dependent variables were collected at the same time, this study suffers from common method variance. **Practical implications-** This study shows one possible mechanism by which leaders can motivate followers without providing extrinsic rewards. **Originality/value and Significance)-** Karma-Yoga can provide a novel explanation for moral behaviour beyond the theories of self-interest. Understanding how self-concepts make Karma-Yoga possible, is an important step in understanding Karma-Yoga, the Indian model of moral development.

Keywords: Self-concept, Karma-yoga, Twenty-statements test

INTRODUCTION

The attitude of greed and selfishness encouraged by some segments of the society has always been a cause for concern. Several evils in business and society have been attributed to such an attitude. The Indian doctrine of Karma-Yoga presents itself as an excellent solution to address this problem. Karma-Yoga shifts individuals' focus away from their rights to their duties and encourages them to work with full devotion without expectation of material rewards.

Karma-Yoga is fulfilling one's obligations with equanimity and without hankering after extrinsic rewards. Due to the prevalence of the norm of self-interest (Miller, 1999), it is difficult for people to appreciate the existence of Karma-Yoga. In other words, people find it difficult to imagine how individuals could work without expectation of material rewards. Most of the theories of motivation have a western-individualistic bias and do not explain individual actions which are not motivated by self-interest. Identifying a need to explain behaviour which is expressive and not instrumental, Shamir *et al.* (1993) proposed the self-concept-based theory of motivation. According to this theory, Shamir *et al.* (1993) suggested that individuals are motivated to express their self-concepts, in other words, to act out who they believe themselves to be. In this study, we show how individuals who score high on Karma-Yoga have a self-concept that is composed of more social identities. In this manner, we provide a preliminary explanation as to how by expressing their social identities, individuals who are high in Karma-Yoga are able to perform actions without expectation of material rewards.

Karma-Yoga

Karma-Yoga is a technique of moral action proposed by the Bhagavad Gita (Vivekananda, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 53; Vol. 5, p. 246, 249). This doctrine builds on essential features of the Indian worldview such as belief in the theory of karma to suggest a comprehensive approach to moral action. Karma-Yoga is defined as a technique for performing actions such that the soul is not bound by the effects of the action (Tilak 1915/2000). Mulla and Krishnan (2006) described Karma-Yoga as made up of three factors – duty orientation, equanimity and absence of desire for rewards. Subsequently, the construct of Karma-Yoga was validated using empathy (Mulla and Krishnan, 2008), emotional intelligence and value systems (Mulla and Krishnan, 2007).

Karma-Yoga has important implications for organisations. First, it provides a comprehensive model for moral development in the organisational context comprising of elements of moral sensitivity, moral reasoning, moral motivation and moral character (Mulla and Krishnan, 2014). Moreover, Karma-Yoga is an important antecedent as well as an outcome of leadership. Individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are perceived to be high on transformational leadership by their subordinates (Mulla and Krishnan, 2011b), and followers of transformational leaders score higher on Karma-Yoga (Mulla and Krishnan, 2012).

Despite some early research in conceptualising and validating the Karma-Yoga construct, there have been no explanations as to how expressive action (i.e. action which is not motivated by material expectations) can be explained. In a study of 112 students, it was found that individuals high on Karma-Yoga had a distinct value system in which they valued being 'hardworking' more than being 'ambitious' (Mulla and Krishnan, 2011a). In this study, we suggest that individuals high on Karma-Yoga have a distinct self-concept which is characterised by an emphasis on social identities.

Self-Concept-based Theory of Motivation

Despite there being a large number of existing theories of work motivation, most reviews have highlighted that these do not provide clear guidelines for use by managers and are hence underutilised (Shamir, 1991). According to Shamir (1991), the main issue is that while these theories claim to be universally applicable, they are based on a set of restricting assumptions which may not be universally true. One such assumption is the assumption that self-interest is the only motive for human action (Miller, 1999).

Another serious limitation of the conventional theories of motivation which are based on hedonistic models of self-interest is that they cannot explain motivation proposed by more contemporary theories of leadership such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership suggests that the most effective leaders inspire followers to go beyond their self-interest in the pursuit of larger goals which are in the interest of the collective (Burns, 1978). Numerous studies have shown the positive impact of transformational leadership on a range of desirable organisational outcomes such as follower's willingness to sacrifice for the work unit (Shamir *et al.*, 1998), self-concordance (Bono and Judge, 2003), internalisation of the organisation's moral values and collectivistic orientation (Dvir *et al.*, 2002; Shamir *et al.*, 1998).

Transformational leadership has been found to be expressed in the form of four factors – idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985). The factor of inspirational motivation is an important and essential part of transformational leadership (Fu *et al.*, 2011). Unfortunately, the mechanism by which transformational leaders motivate cannot be explained by any of the conventional theories of motivation, and the only plausible explanation is provided by Shamir *et al.*'s (1993), self-concept-based theory of motivation. Transformational leaders are able to inspire followers because they make the work meaningful for the followers. By portraying a large vision, they are able to infuse mundane tasks with deep meaning and by engaging followers in the task of achieving the vision, they provide personal meaning.

A central aspect of one's meaning-making system is an individual's self-concept. Self-concept is nothing but a cluster of identities arranged in a hierarchy. In others words, self-concept is a possible set of answers to the question – *Who am I?*

Shamir *et al.* (1993) proposed the 'self-concept-based theory of motivation'. Shamir suggested that leaders must engage the self-concepts of their followers in powerful ways such that they can harness the forces of self-esteem and self-worth. This theory provided a useful alternative to the western-individualistic theories which assumed self-interest as a universal motive. In this manner, Shamir *et al.* (1993) provided a unique explanation as to how transformational leaders could motivate followers without providing explicit material rewards.

Karma-Yoga and Self-Concept

The Indian worldview is characterised by a set of beliefs of which one of the most central beliefs is the belief in the law of karma (Dasgupta, 1922/1991, p. 71). According to the belief in the law of karma, all actions by conscious agents have effects in the form of joys and sorrow at a later time. Moreover, if one is not able to enjoy the joys or suffers the sorrows of one's actions in one life, one is required to take birth in a body conducive to the enjoyment of joys and suffering due to oneself based on one's past actions (Radhakrishnan, 1926). This belief provides the basis of explanation as to why one is born in a particular environment or why one finds oneself in a particular set of circumstances and in the midst of certain individuals. In other words, the belief in the law of karma suggests that each one of us is in our current circumstances due to a set of part obligations.

Indian philosophy suggests a number of methods by which an individual can break out of this perpetual cycle of birth and death and attain liberation, of which one of the methods is Karma-Yoga. Karma-Yoga is a technique by which an individual may discharge his or her obligations to those around oneself without expecting any returns, and thereby destroy the very fuel which is the cause for future births (Tilak, 1915/2000). Individuals who are Karma-Yogis experience a deep connection with their environment and strive to fulfil their obligations to those around them without expecting any returns from them.

Earlier studies have shown that individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga have other oriented values, higher emotional intelligence (Mulla and Krishnan, 2007) and greater empathic concern (Mulla and Krishnan, 2008). The essence of Karma-Yoga is a sense of duty or obligation towards others (Mulla and Krishnan, 2014). One can feel a sense of obligation towards others only if one perceives a prior relationship with those in one's surroundings. Moreover, if one is to work selflessly without expecting rewards, the only possible motivational explanation is that one is expressing one's identity (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). Hence we hypothesise that individuals who score high on Karma-Yoga are likely to have more statements emphasising their social identities (Hypothesis 1).

METHOD

We investigated the relationship between self-concepts and Karma-Yoga by collecting data from 274 students who were completing a postgraduate program in business management. The sample consisted of 196 males and 64 females (14 undisclosed). The minimum, median and maximum age of the respondents was 22 years, 25 years and 29 years, respectively.

Karma-Yoga Scale

Karma-Yoga was measured by an 18-item scale developed by Mulla and Krishnan (2006) and subsequently revised by Mulla and Krishnan (2007, 2008, 2014).

Self-Concept and the Twenty Statements Test (TST)

One of the first measures of the self-concept was the 'Who are you?' question or the 'W-A-Y' question; in which, the respondents were asked to give three answers to the question 'Who are you?' (Bugental and Zelen, 1950). The Twenty Statements Test (TST) in its current form was first developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954) to measure self-attitudes. Specifically, they divided the items in an individual's self-concept into two categories, namely consensual references that are those characteristics of an individual based on his or her membership in groups, and sub-consensual references that are those characteristics of an individual which are not based on his or her membership in groups. Later McPartland *et al.* (1961) refined this classification system by developing a fourfold classification of responses called A–B–C–D, representing conceptions of the self as a physical being, as a part of a social structure, as a social actor independent of social structures and as a self abstracted from all

physical, social structures and from social interaction, respectively.

The partially ethnographic nature of the TST (due to the self-reporting feature of this instrument) hopes to elicit descriptions, from participants, that have a high probability value. That is participants may cite roles, feelings or descriptors of their traits and skills frequently demonstrated as well those the participants aspire to realise. These open-ended self-descriptions can then be classified into categories/dimensions of self-concept (e.g. traits, social roles, physical descriptions, emotional states etc.) in response to the 'Who am I?' format.

Since 'self-concept' is essentially phenomenological, referring to the person's own perception of her/himself, Wylie (1974) posited that comparisons to external events are not very relevant in the assessment of self-concept. Thus self-concept has usually been assessed through self-report. Commonly used self-report methods, in self-concept research, include rating scales, checklists, Q-sorts and free-response methods such as the TST (Burns, 1979).

Other than the TST, instruments such as the 'Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale' (Rosenberg, 1965), the 'Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale' (Piers, 1984) and the 'Tennessee Self-Concept Scale' (Fitts, 1991) are also commonly used, and these capture the essence of the global self-concept idea, although each also provides domain-specific scales (physical, moral, personal, family, social and academic/work self-concepts). However, the TST is perhaps the most simple and straightforward measure of an individual's self-concept.

The TST has been used to study the changes in self-concept as an individual matures from childhood to adolescence using a 30-category classification system (Monte mayor and Eisen, 1977). The TST has been used to assess how culture affects self-concepts (Cousins, 1989). For example, while Americans had higher number of psychological attributes and traits, Japanese had a higher number of social roles and highly abstract, global self-references (Cousins, 1989).Trafimow *et al.* (1991) found that Chinese participants retrieved more self-cognitions from the collective self, that is gave more collective self-descriptions (e.g. brother and student) than did native English speakers, based in the United States, who tended to give more private self-descriptions (e.g. friendly, extroverted and resolute) than did Chinese participants. These differences in descriptions have been ascribed to differences in cultural upbringing and community norms wherein societies are segmented as individualistically or collectivistically oriented (Hofstede, 1980).

Data Collection

Respondents were provided with a survey in which they were asked to express their extent of agreement to a set of 18 statements comprising the Karma-Yoga scale. In addition, they answered the TST. Following the original form of the TST developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954: 69), we provided instructions on top of the questionnaire as follows:

> There are twenty numbered blanks in the page below. Please write twenty answers to the simple question "Who am I?" in the blanks. Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you. Do not worry about logic or "importance". Go along fairly fast, for time is limited.

RESULTS

Some items in the Karma-Yoga scale were negatively scored, and hence, they were reversed prior to analysis. The Karma-Yoga scale had adequate reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.73). As expected, the respondents' scores on Karma-Yoga were not related to their age or gender.

The responses of the participants to the TST were coded by one of the authors using the framework provided by Rhee *et al.* (1995). This coding system preserved traditional coding categories and included the two dimensions (referred to here as abstract specific and autonomous–social). Their coding system was based on Cousins' (1989) elaboration of work conducted by McPartland *et al.* (1961). Cousins (1989) used four basic categories, each representing a different level of abstraction, while Rhee *et al.* (1995) extended these categories to eight.

Using the classification framework provided by Rhee *et al.* (1995), we classified the responses into the following: traits (T), social identities (SI), specific attributes (SA), evaluative descriptions (ED), physical descriptions (PD), emotional states (ES), peripheral information (PI) and global descriptions (GD). Moreover, all responses were also sub classified as autonomous or social.

The autonomous–social sub classifications were designated drawing insights from Markus and Kitayama's (1991) description of independent and interdependent selves. Self-descriptions that are not changing over time and context, constituting an internal portfolio of thoughts, feelings, actions, desires, preferences and abilities, were classified as autonomous. Self-descriptions that referred to social context, other people, time and specific locations and are thus situation bound were classified as social (Rhee *et al.*, 1995). For example, the statement 'I am a loyal friend' is classified as social, whereas 'I am friendly' is coded as autonomous.

The correlation matrix is shown in Table 1. As seen in this table, Karma-Yoga is positively related to ED (r = 0.16, p<0.05) and GD (r = 0.22, p<0.05) and negatively related to T (r = –0.19, p<0.05). Moreover, Karma-Yoga is positively related to social (r = 0.14, p<0.05) and negatively related to autonomous (r = –0.12, p<0.05).

The positive correlation between the Karma-Yoga and social scores support our hypothesis that self-concepts categorised in the social domain point to an identity generally woven as part of collectivist, role-oriented cultures, with greater expression of altruism over self-interest that is a Karma-Yoga mindset.

Also the negative correlation between the Karma-Yoga and trait scores reinforces our hypothesis that identities expressing more intensity of autonomous behaviour on the autonomous–social dimension tend to diverge away from Karma-Yoga.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we found that individuals who scored high on Karma-Yoga had more social identities in their self-concept. Not much is known about the mechanism through which individuals work selflessly for others, and

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and inter correlations

		M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	KY	2.56	0.59												
2	ED	3.18	2.02	0.16*											
3	ES	1.10	0.30	0.01	0.13										
4	GD	1.64	1.11	0.22*	–0.05	–0.13									
5	PD	1.20	0.50	0.08	0.12	–	–0.19								
6	PI	1.70	1.94	0.13	–0.16	–0.29	0.33	–							
7	SA	3.87	3.15	0.05	–0.02	–0.12	–0.21	0.42	–0.21						
8	SI	5.91	4.14	–0.03	–0.33**	–0.04	–0.16	–0.13	0.01	–0.337**					
9	T	6.61	4.33	–0.19**	–0.17*	0.08	–0.21*	–0.23	–0.29	–0.222**	–0.35**				
10	Auto.	9.01	3.92	–0.12*	0.10	–0.09	0.09	0.14	0.36*	0.054	–0.46**	0.71**			
11	Social	9.09	3.90	0.14*	–0.00	0.04	–0.11	–0.07	–0.39*	0.071	0.71**	–0.44**	–0.65**		
12	Age	25.10	1.23	0.06	–0.00	–0.11	–0.06	0.10	–0.10	–0.001	0.07	–0.05	–0.09	0.08	
13	Gender	1.24	0.43	0.10	0.01	–0.11	0.23*	–0.13	–0.13	0.065	–0.01	–0.04	–0.07	0.08	–0.17**

Note. N = 272. *p <0.05, **p <0.01. KY = Karma-Yoga, ED = evaluative descriptions, ES = emotional states, GD = global descriptions, PD = physical descriptions, PI = peripheral information, SA = specific attributes, SI = social identities, T = traits, Auto. = autonomous. Gender: male =1 and female = 2.

this study is a small beginning to show the mobilising power of self-concepts in making people work without expectation of extrinsic rewards.

This paper fulfils two important gaps in the existing literature. First, while it is known that followers of transformational leaders score high on Karma-Yoga (Mulla and Krishnan, 2012) and it was suggested the followers of transformational leaders express their self-concepts (Shamir *et al.*, 1993), the relationship between Karma-Yoga and self-concept-based motivation was not established. In this study, we show how individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are likely to possess more social identities (which can be effectively engaged by transformational leaders). In this manner, we propose a mechanism starting with transformational leadership leading to Karma-Yoga and motivation of followers through the self-concept-based theory of motivation.

Second, while it was shown that members of collectivistic cultures are likely to possess higher number of social identities in their self-concept, the philosophical foundations, worldview and belief system which led to the prevalence of these identities were not described. Belief in karma theory forms the foundation of Karma-Yoga. By showing how individuals who score high on Karma-Yoga possess more social identities, we suggest one possible explanation for the prevalence of higher number of social identities in the Indian cultural context.

Ghoshal (2005) argued that by teaching ideologically inspired amoral theories based on faulty assumptions, business schools have freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility. Social science theories contain powerful behavioural norms for students who are exposed to these theories and hence become self-fulfilling. One such theory that is said to be self-fulfilling is the theory of the self-interested behaviour of human beings in organisations (Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Ghoshal, 2005; Miller, 1999; Ferraro *et al.*, 2005). In order to reverse the damage caused by these theories and to reinstitute ethical or moral concerns in the practice of management, Ghoshal (2005) called for teaching theories, which would help build moral/ethical organisations.

The theory of Karma-Yoga and the self-concept-based theory of motivation are two such theories which suggest an alternative to the well-established paradigm of self-interested behaviour. In this paper, we show how Karma-Yoga is related to social identities. Karma-Yoga is a means for achieving self-expansion or oneness with others (Vivekananda, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 53; Vol. 5, p. 246, 249), and self-expansion can be seen as increasing the proportion of social part of self-concept.

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