CO-WORKER EXCHANGE AMONG MEDICAL FACULTY FOR NOVEL UNIVERSITY LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

A university is a place that generates new ideas and also covers the entire universe of knowledge. For higher education numerous learning and teaching strategies are available and provide effective learning and teaching outcomes. Interaction between teachers and education managers is crucial in understanding how universities develop new and innovative pedagogy. In order to change their work environments, teachers must be innovative and open to applying new ideas and opportunities.

In this paper, we suggest that university teachers can be innovative by sharing their insights and knowledge on teaching with their colleagues and peers. Pedagogical development is theorized here based on the concepts of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), co-worker exchange (CWX) and leader-member exchange (CMX). IWB can be defined as the intentional generation, promotion and realization of new ideas within a work role, workgroup or organization. IWB consists of opportunity exploration, idea generation, championing and application. Co-worker exchange refers to the quality of relationships between teachers in university. The leader member exchange (LMX) theory suggests that superiors distribute their resources unequally to their subordinates, hence leading to some group members being more powerful in the work group. As a trickle-down effect, some members have more control over the task accomplishment than others. Hence, co-worker exchange is affected also by the quality of interaction between leaders and members of the group.

In this study we explore how Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) and co-worker exchange (CWX) are practiced in two university medical faculties in Albania and Finland. We suggest that high levels of Innovative Work Behaviour and Co-worker exchange lead to improved teaching practices. We aim to discover and describe best practices among four teams at faculty or department level in two universities.

The teams will be selected by purposive sampling, aiming for maximum variation where possible. They are known for their interest in and openness to pedagogical development. The selected samples represent two presumably different cultural traditions. Albania and Finland differ greatly in the Hofstede's six dimensions of national culture (Hofstede Insights 2018). They can be seen as the two extremes of the aforementioned six-dimensional model of European national cultures. The diverse cultural contexts provide us with the possibility to study whether cooperative communication between group members and between leaders and members of the

group differ in the two countries. This study will inform the academic community as to how pedagogical development in medical faculty teaching and learning is affected by co-worker exchange and innovative work behaviour. The national differences make the results applicable for a wider range of cultures and contexts.

Keywords: medical faculty teaching, co-worker exchange, leader-member exchange, innovative work behaviour, pedagogical development

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is sometimes referred to as solitary work, that is, without much collaboration between the peers. In university, teachers are supposed to share the knowledge of their own research with their students. However, the contemporary discourses call for a number of qualities to be taken into account in learning and teaching in higher education: employability, working life relevance, mobility, to name but a few. Hence, the teacher's profession in university takes place in a context where interaction with peers is valued not only for teaching, but also for developing the curricula to meet the needs of the surrounding society.

Research on communication suggest that an employee's job attitudes and task behaviours are socially constructed. Significant others in the workplace provide individual's normative and informational cues, and these are then used as tools to form communication strategies, as well as alliances, partnerships, and joint ventures such as research consortia (Lee 1997: 268). Some of these behaviours are beneficial to developing teaching methods and renewing the curricula. In practice, this includes behaviours such as helping a co-worker, offering constructive suggestions or other forms of collegial support.

In this paper we suggest that university teachers develop their pedagogy and renew the curricula through the process of innovative work behaviour (IWB). As novel ideas need acceptance and support, teachers engage in communication with their peers and leaders to take their ideas into practice. As elaborated in the theoretical framework, this social interaction is mediated and moderated through the factors identified in the theories of co-worker exchange (CWX) and leader-member exchange (LMX).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In management studies, co-worker exchange (CWX) and leader-member exchange (LMX) theories explore the relationships that exist between the leader and those led, and in this case, those between university teachers and their supervisors. In education, recent studies have also tackled the correlation between teacher innovative behaviour, open and closed leadership behaviours and supervisor empowering leadership (e.g. Geijsel *et. al.,* 2001; Chen *et. al.* 2011; Gkorezis, 2015). This happens always in a cultural context.

Analytical interest has been cast not only on the objective aspects - innovations - but also to the the processes and the social interaction of those involved in the innovation processes. Much of

this research is statistical, which is the reason why a qualitative approach was selected here to explore social interaction in idea championing. Teacher innovative work behaviour is of academic interest due to the fact that education institutions contribute to the innovation system by educating new professionals to the labour market. Universities have a provision of a role model for the society at large, as they produce new knowledge and technologies (Thurlings et. al., 2014). However, universities are not known for their ability to keep up with the fast changing society.

Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB)

Rooting their analysis to research by Farr and Ford (1990) and Kanter (1988), de Jong and den Hartog (2010) divide innovative work behaviour (IWB) into four dimensions: idea exploration, idea generation, idea championing and idea implementation.

Firstly, *idea exploration* means looking for new ways to improve current products, services or processes. This may also include trying to think of them in new ways. Secondly, *idea generation* refers to thinking of new products, services or processes, such as entry to new markets (de Jong & den Hartog, 2010).

Idea championing comes into the picture when an idea has been generated. As it is uncertain whether new ideas will prove to be profitable, employees need to seek support and legitimation from others. Ideas need to be promoted even if they have legitimacy or it is evident that they fill a performance gap. Idea championing includes behaviours such as finding support and building coalitions, expressing enthusiasm and confidence, being persistent, and involving the right people in the organization. Idea champions are persons in informal roles, "who push creative ideas beyond roadblocks in their organizations", and help in realization of the novel idea (Shane, 1994; de Jong & den Hartog, 2010).

As the fourth and last dimension comes the part of *idea implementation*. It includes making innovations part of regular work processes, developing new products or work processes, and testing and modifying them (de Jong & den Hartog, 2010).

Idea championing as negotiation of power between peers and leaders

As co-worker exchange refers to the quality of relationships between teachers in university, the concept of leader-member exchange (LMX) is used to explore how different kinds of leadership behaviours affect the cooperative communication between teachers. As noted by Lee (1997), research on LMX suggests that the subordinate's perception of exchange quality with their leaders influence their communication with peers. This may include e.g. adopting different persuasive strategies or by using different types of conversational resources. Group members may extend the use of communication patterns adopted with their leaders also to their interaction with peers.

From the leaders' perspective, the process of innovative work behavior is divided into two parts, *exploration* and *exploitation* behaviours. According to Spreizer *et. al.* (2005), exploration "refers

to individuals' attempts to reach out for novel ways of working through experimentation, flexibility, discovery and risk taking". Exploitation, on the other hand, refers to goal achievement, effectiveness, and avoiding risks and errors (Zacher *et. al.*, 2014). One role of supervisors in this process, amongst many others, is to support both the creation of ideas (exploration) and taking them into practice (exploitation). Idea championing is part of idea exploitation, and is mediated and monitored by peers and leaders, by either giving or declining support to the suggested novel ideas.

To understand the process of support to championing, the ambidextrous leadership theory (e.g. Benner & Tushman, 2003; He & Wong, 2004; Zacher *et. al*. 2014) explains the contradictory or paradoxical role supervisors have to take in the innovation process. By ambidexterity the research refers to the ability to "use both hands equally well"; that is, supporting risk taking in the phase of seeking novel ideas and reducing risk taking in the application phase by putting emphasis on taking the existing ideas into practice. By doing so, supervisors' *open leadership behaviours* supposedly create new capabilities for the organization, and at the same time, *closed leadership behaviours* aim at exploiting their existing competencies (Zacher *et. al.,* 2014). As described by the concept of ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese and Bausch, 2011), open and closed leadership behaviours are assumed to foster high levels of employee exploration and exploitation behaviours (He & Wong, 2004, Raisch & Birkingsaw, 2008).

Open and closed leadership behaviours can also be seen as part of empowering leadership, (see e.g. Vecchio *et. al.,* 2010; Chen *et. al.,* 2011; Gkorezis, 2016), a form of leadership which delineates behaviours that share power with subordinates. Leaders with high empowering leadership behaviours delegate authority, involve employees in decision making and embolden self-management. Leaders with low empowering leadership behaviours limit employee autonomy, discourage their self-management and express low levels of faith in their capabilities (Chen *et. al.,* 2011; Gkorezis, 2016).

Six dimensional model of national culture

In our study, one interesting context for the pedagogical development is the national culture, since we study work teams in two completely dissimilar cultures. Geert Hofstede used six dimensions to describe how the national cultures differ (Hofstede, 2003: xix; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010: 45, 280). Over the years, his work has extended into an online country comparison tool in which over 76 national cultures can be examined (Hofstede Insights, 2018).

The first dimension is power distance, which refers to the extent to which the unequal power distribution is tolerated (Hofstede, 2003: xix). The two cultures in our study are distinct from each other as Albanians tolerate unequal distribution of power and Finns do not (Hofstede Insights, 2018). Individualism vs. collectivism, the second dimension, is a continuum between individuals taking care of themselves and individuals remaining integrated in groups (Hofstede, 2003: xix). Here the two cultures are complete opposites. Finns are individualistic and Albanians communal (Hofstede Insights, 2018). The third dimension, masculinity vs. femininity, refers to the roles which the genders take between clearly distinct emotional gender roles and

overlapping emotional gender roles (Hofstede & Hofstede 2010. 140). The Albanian culture is clearly masculine and the Finnish culture, on the other hand, clearly feminine (Hofstede Insights, 2018). The fourth dimension is uncertainty avoidance, which refers to the extent to which members of a culture are wired to feel comfortable or uncomfortable in uncertain situations (Hofstede, 2003: xix). Only here are our two cultures similar. Both cultures prefer avoiding uncertainty (Hofstede Insights, 2018). The fifth dimension, long term vs. short term normative orientation, refers to how national culture maintains some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. This dimension also shows clear relative difference between our two countries. The Albanian culture adapts traditions to changed conditions and shows perseverance in achieving results. The Finnish culture, on the contrary, values traditions and seeks quick rewards (Hofstede Insights, 2018). The sixth dimension, indulgence vs. restraint, refers to a continuum between a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires and a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010: 281). Albanian culture is one of restraint and Finland is an indulgent country (Hofstede Insights, 2018). Again the two cultures clearly differ from each other.
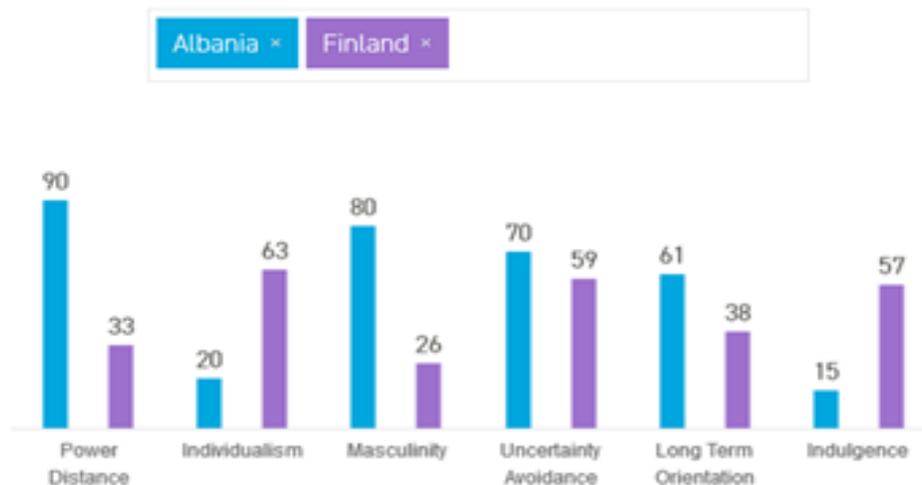
Figure 1. Scores of Albania and Finland on the six dimensions of national culture (Hofstede Insights, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Research question

This study aims to identify what factors university teachers bring up in championing and co-worker exchange on pedagogical development of curricula reform in medical faculty teaching and learning. The samples may bring knowledge on the topic in the field of academic medicine, but further study will be needed in order to find out if similar factors are to be identified in other disciplines as well.

Study design

This is a qualitative case-study using purposive sampling. The data will be collected via semi-structured interviews from two teams in university faculties in Albania and Finland. According to Jamshed (2014), semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews where respondents have to answer pre-set open-ended questions. The interviewer uses a schematic presentation of questions or topics to guide the informants through the interview in order to accomplish a desired line of action. Group interviews are used here to explore the views of many respondents simultaneously and to facilitate a flow of meaning-making among the informants.

Study setting

The study will be conducted on academic staff in the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Turku in Finland, and in the Faculty of Public Health in the University of Vlora in Albania. The teams will be selected by purposive sampling, aiming for maximum variation where possible.

Study population

The study population will consist of professors working in the aforementioned Universities in Albania and in Finland. Purposive sampling will be used, aiming for maximum variation where possible.

Measurement instrument

Based on the literature, an interview structure with open-ended questions was developed by the researchers. Idea championing is explored by combining supervisor-rated and self-reported questions on the innovative work behaviour survey presented by de Jong and den Hartog (2010) as follows:

In your job, how often do you . . .
- . . . make suggestions to improve current teaching and pedagogy (original: products or services)?
- . . . produce ideas to improve work practices, such as teaching methods and the curricula (original: work practices)?
- . . . acquire new knowledge?
- . . . actively contribute to the development of new teaching methods and curricula (original: products or services)?
- . . . acquire new groups of customers? (item dropped from questionnaire)
- . . . optimize the organization of work?

In your job, how do you . . .
- . . . try to make important organizational members enthusiastic for innovative ideas?
- . . . attempt to convince people to support an innovative idea?

Does your executive . . .
- . . . ask for your opinion.
- . . . ask you to suggest how to carry out assignments.
- . . . consult you regarding important changes.
- . . . let you influence decisions about long-term plans and directions.

. . . allow you to set your own goals.

. . . give you considerable opportunities for independence and freedom.

What do you think should change in order to improve co-workers exchange?

Data collection

In each country two focus groups will be held. Group interviews will consist of 3 members in each team, resulting in a total number of 12 informants. The discussion will be recorded while notes will be taken.

Data analysis

The phases of analysis will include coding, followed by the identification and clustering of themes and sub-themes and the production of a descriptive thematic summary. Pairs of (local) researchers code the responses and after that the two different teams will compare their analyses for inconsistencies and agreement. Finally, the themes and sub-themes will be grouped to construct a more interpretative narrative across the dataset.

Limitations of study

This study uses self-reported innovative performance, which has its limitations. According to Reiter-Palmon *et. al.* (2012), self-perceptions of creativity reflect a motivational construct instead of more objective measures of innovative performance.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Prior research on ambidextrous leadership and innovative work behaviour in learning organisations suggests that there may be practical implications on leader selection, training and development (e.g. Zacher *el. al.,* 2014; Gkorezis, 2016). For example, Zacher *et. al* (2014) argue that organisations could select leaders who are able to use specific open and closing leadership behaviours to foster employee idea exploration and exploitation for innovations.

Research on innovative work behaviour and co-worker exchange may benefit pedagogical development in universities by identifying what factors support and hinder teacher collaboration, and what kind of leadership behaviours support the pedagogical development and renewal of curricula. Despite the limitations of the study, it may have implications also for pedagogical training in universities, by bringing new information on how organisational culture affects the cooperative communication at the faculty level.

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