



Perceptions of ethical work climate and person–organization fit among retail employees in Japan and the US: A cross-cultural scale validation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

International retailers can only be successful if they understand similarities and differences between cultures. This study compares retail employees' perceptions of ethical work climate and person–organization fit in the U.S. with those of the same employee type in Japan. The results can help retailers understand employee perceptions of their relationship with the firm. An important aspect of this research involves testing the cross-cultural validity of the ethical work climate (EWC) and person–organization fit (POF) scales. Findings suggest that these scales are valid in both different national contexts and can also be used to compare differences between the cultures. Significant differences were noted in the EWC and POF between retail employees in Japan and the U.S. The relationship between EWC and POF varies significantly for employees in Japan and the U.S.

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1. Introduction

Japanese business environments clearly contrast the Asian from the Western. This contrast means that retail managers must be cautious when applying theory and measures of employee behaviors and attitudes across cultures. Interestingly, although the cultural distance is relatively great, the perceived business prowess observed within Japan leads many western firms to consider adopting Japanese management practices (Lincoln, 1989). Moreover, many U.S. retailers seeking globalization believe Japan offers rich opportunities for retail store expansion (Edelson, 2007). Retail employees are a key link in building customer loyalty since they are the voice and face of the retail firm. As retailers continue to globalize, they need to understand critical differences in employees of different cultures.

Workplace ethics has become a prominent academic research topic. However, the question of measuring how ethical an individual employee is, or how ethical the workplace is perceived, is fraught with intricacies inevitably linked to the epistemology of good versus evil. Is measuring

how moral a retail employee perceives his/her workplace possible? As more and more firms operate across national boundaries, is measuring workplace ethics across borders possible? Or, is the binding of ethics and culture so absolute that comparing the work climate of retail employees across cultures is impossible? The research aims to provide insight into these questions.

This study offers a cross-cultural comparison of the perceptions of EWC and POF between U.S. and Japanese retail employees. Retail employees develop perceptions of how ethical the work climate within which they work truly is. They then assess how well these workplace ethics match their own personal ethics. Is there a fit between the retail firm and its employees? Additionally, in the process of examining these constructs, this study validates cross-culturally the scales for the EWC and the POF constructs originally developed in the United States. Because of differences in the two countries, caution is necessary when applying the same scale to both countries without first validating the scales. The results provide evidence of the usefulness of the EWC and POF scales across cultures and offer insight to retail management in structuring policies for retail control across these cultures.

2. Theoretical background

Japan is receiving significant attention from U.S.-based retailers looking to globalize their operations. This trend is likely to continue as experts are predicting strong growth in the Japanese economy, including growth among retailers (Edelson, 2007). Though the Japanese consumer

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has been described as luxury-brand oriented, Japanese consumer tastes are now shifting toward non-luxury brands. This change represents an opportunity for more mainstream retailers to enter the Japanese market (Hirano and Socha, 2006). Multiple U.S.-based retail chains operate stores in Japan including Nine West, Banana Republic, L.L. Bean, DKNY, and AVEA.

Retailers' success depends heavily on productive front-line employees. However, distinct differences between American and Japanese cultures lead to distinct differences between American and Japanese employees (Hofstede, 1980). For these retailers to be successful, they must properly manage the cultural differences between employees in the U.S. and Japan.

2.1. Business and national culture in Japan and the U.S.

Employee perceptions of business ethics and social responsibility vary across cultures because "business practices are an offshoot of national culture" (Axinn et al., 2004; Ford and Honeycutt, 1992: 27). In the U.S., individual initiative and open communication are advocated, expected and rewarded. Employees generally feel free to voice their opinions to supervisors, even if that opinion may not positively reflect on the workplace. Employee mobility remains an attractive option and is not generally frowned upon in American society.

The Japanese business and management system has strong roots in Japanese culture and tradition. Japanese culture interprets an organization as a unique organic entity (Doktor, 1990) by emphasizing human relationships over functional relationships. Japanese managers place a relatively high priority on facilitating harmony (*wa*) among employees versus projecting innovative ideas (DeFrank et al., 1985). More emphasis is placed on networking (*nemawashi*) and socializing over food and drink (*tsukiai*) which provide opportunities to discuss ideas. Networking and socializing also provide opportunities for less formal delegation of authority.

2.2. Core societal values in Japan and the U.S.

Hofstede (1980) offers the most widely applied theory and evidence on cultural differences based on four basic cultural characteristics: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity (Table 1).

- *Individualism*. In individualistic societies, such as the U.S. (ranked 1st), people tend to be more independent in their attitudes and behavior. Employees expect that hiring and promotion decisions will be based predominantly on individual job performance. Getting the job done takes precedence over individual relationships. On the other hand, in collectivist societies such as Japan, the relationship between employers and employees, and among employees, is more akin to a family relationship where familial obligations/relationships are more important than individual competition (Hofstede, 1991).
- *Uncertainty avoidance*. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Japan (7th overall) are relatively uncomfortable with ideas and behaviors that are new or viewed as contrary to the norm. Japanese employees are more comfortable in stable situations and as a result they tend to be less innovative than Americans (Deshpandé et al., 2004; Hofstede, 1980). Japanese employees are less likely to

leave their job (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1993; Marsh and Mannari, 1977) even though they report lower job satisfaction than American employees (Lincoln, 1989). On the contrary, in low uncertainty avoidance cultures such as the U.S., people are relatively open to innovative or unusual ideas or behaviors. People interpreted as dangerous in high uncertainty avoidance societies, such as Japan, are viewed as curious in low uncertainty avoidance societies (Hofstede and Soeters, 2002). Americans are generally more trusting of others than are the Japanese (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994).

- *Masculinity*. Japan scores significantly higher than the United States on masculinity. In masculine societies, people expect managers to be decisive and employees to be competitive (Hofstede, 1991).
- *Power distance*. Japan is higher than the U.S. on power distance. The boundaries between people of different classes are clearer in Japan than in the United States. This factor would play into a reluctance of Japanese employees to make judgments and, certainly, to voice them about their superiors.

All four dimensions Hofstede (1991) offers influence individuals' perceptions of "ethical situations, norms for behavior, and ethical judgments" (Vitell et al., 1993: 754). Because of cultural differences, retail employees' perceptions of the EWC and POF, and employees subsequent responses to those perceptions, may vary greatly between the U.S. and Japan. Retail management practices that were highly successful in the U.S. may not be successful with Japanese employees.

3. Ethical work climate and person–organization fit

3.1. Ethical work climate

Retail organizations have norms that indicate the sorts of behavior expected of their employees. When these norms relate to ethical concerns, they fall into the realm of the retailer's Ethical Work Climate (EWC). The EWC reflects employee perceptions of morally appropriate actions and policies observed in the workplace (Schwepker et al., 1997). A strong EWC, accepted by all employees, can be a type of informal control (Schwepker and Hartline, 2005).

The EWC construct comprises multiple dimensions including employee perceptions of how people are treated in the organization (responsibility), the rightness or wrongness of co-worker behaviors (peer behavior) and the extent to which employees are urged to engage in high-pressure sales tactics (sales orientation) (Babin et al., 2000). Work climate can be distinguished from culture in that work climate is an individual's perception of his/her environment whereas culture would represent an objective characteristic of the organization itself. In other words, the EWC captures individual employee *perceptions* of how ethical is his or her work climate.

EWC perceptions vary according to age, job position, tenure, and workgroup membership (Forte, 2004; Victor and Cullen, 1988). For example, employees working within the organization for the longest amount of time tend to view the EWC more positively due to a more extensive period of socialization. EWC also influences a number of important employee-related outcomes. Positive perceptions of EWC by salespeople can relate negatively to role stress (Schwepker et al., 1997) and relate positively to job satisfaction as well as organizational commitment (Babin et al., 2000; Schwepker and Hartline, 2005). Schwepker (2003) also suggests that the EWC can also impact the extent to which employees feel that they fit in an organization.

3.2. Person–organization fit

Perceptions of EWC are likely associated with POF the extent to which retail employees feel they fit in the organization. If an employee is highly ethical, but the retail company is not, he/she may feel pressure to compromise his/her values in order to be successful. Conversely, if their philosophy of ethics is more liberal, they may feel that a highly ethical

Table 1

United States and Japan: scores on Hofstede's (1980) dimensions*.

	Individualism	Power distance	Uncertainty avoidance	Masculinity
USA	91/1	40/38	46/43	62/15
Japan	46/22	54/33	92/7	95/1

* score/rank.

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