

KIN ALTRUISM, PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND COMMITMENT IN IMMIGRANT BUSINESSES: SOME THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores underlying psychological mechanisms of employment relations in East Asian immigrant businesses in the United States. Positive functions of kinship and the impacts of kin altruism on psychological contract and commitment are conceptualized from a theoretical perspective of kin selection. In addition, the transmission of Confucian cultural values from home countries to the host country and their influences on employment relations in East Asian immigrant businesses are explicated from a sociocultural evolutionary perspective. Honoring filial piety in a patriarchal family structure is a traditional Confucian value, and such a cultural idea is understood as a unit of cultural transmission. This paper hence proposes the thesis that paternalistic Confucianism as a system of cultural values tends to reinforce biologically evolved kin altruism among East Asian immigrant entrepreneurs while helping them maximize their genetic as well as economic payoff. Several propositions are also presented for future empirical studies.

Keywords: Immigrant business, kin altruism, psychological contract

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, psychological contract has been refined as a measurable construct for unspoken mutual expectations between employer and employee (Rousseau, 2004; Sels, Janssens, & Van den Brande, 2004; Shore & Coyle-Shapiro, 2003). Unfortunately, far less research exists on the formation of psychological contract in unusual organizational settings than on the consequences associated with it (Rousseau, 2001). For instance, there is a gap in the literature on the characteristics of psychological contract in small and medium-sized family enterprises where blood and matrimonial ties play such a critical role (Levinson, 1983).

In a society where democratic ethos is predominant, family ties in the workplace are often associated with nepotism and perceived unfavorably (Bellow, 2003). It is therefore not surprising that kinship with its effects on the formation and maintenance of psychological contract in small and medium-sized family businesses has rarely received much attention. Hence, little is actually known about the underlying psychological characteristics of employee - employer relationships, where family relatives control a large proportion of ownership and workforce.

In this respect, psychological contract and commitment in East Asian immigrant family businesses in advanced Western economies such as the U.S. and the U.K. are intriguing topics.

East Asian ethnic groups in advanced economies are rarely homogeneous, yet they share some commonalities; for instance, the majority of East Asian enterprises are embedded in ethnic communities and highly dependent on kith and kin social networks for procuring capital and labor resources (Sanders & Nee, 1996). About 64% of Chinese-owned, 73% of Japanese-owned, and 63% of Korean-owned firms in the United States are without paid employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 2007, 313,995 Chinese-owned firms in the United States had no paid employees, an increase of 59.4% up from 2002, while 85,537 Japanese-owned firms and 121,041 Korean-owned firms had no paid employees, an increase of 32.1% and 20.3% up from 2002, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). From a market rationality perspective, labor utilization practices of East Asian immigrant business owners are irrational and even exploitative (Light & Bonacich, 1988).

The purpose of this paper is to therefore explore unique employment practices of East Asian immigrant business owners and the underlying psychological mechanisms that characterize their psychological contract with employees. From a coevolutionary perspective (i.e., biological and sociocultural), it is proposed that (a) kinship-based altruism is the biological basis of employment relationship between East Asian immigrant business owners/employers and their employees and (b) transmitted Confucian cultural values tend to reinforce the biologically built-in kin altruism and its extension to coethnics in immigrant business communities. Several propositions derived from the coevolutionary framework are also presented for future empirical studies.

PSYCHOLGOICAL CONTRACT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Early researchers defined psychological contract as implicit mutual expectations and agreements between employee and employer (Argyris, 1962; Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, & Solley, 1962). Rousseau (2004) further refined the construct as “beliefs, based upon promises expressed or implied, regarding an exchange agreement between an individual and, in organizations, the employing firm and its agents” (p. 120). Psychological contract is thus mutual, subjective, and reciprocal because it is based on the engaging parties’ perception or interpretations of the explicit and implied agreements in a social exchange relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Although general patterns of a given psychological contract are likely to vary depending on multiple factors (e.g., personal values, nature of the work, terms of employment contract, etc.), the major function of psychological contract is to represent mutual obligations and entitlements between two or more parties as a schema of employment relations (Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000).

A given psychological contract can be further positioned on a transactional-relational continuum of social exchange relationships (Rousseau, 1995). While a transactional psychological contract is a bare exchange of work for compensation and is prone to be a short-term exchange based on strict reciprocity (i.e., tit-for-tat), relational contract is based on a long-term relationship and is often strengthened by mutual trust and loyalty (Rousseau, 2004; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Depending on the type of given psychological contract, an actor’s commitment to the other party will be affected (Kwon, 2001; Sangkaman, 1995): for instance, when an employee maintains a relatively stable relational psychological contract with the agent of an organization, there is a

higher probability that the former becomes more emotionally identified with and morally committed to the organization.

Cross-cultural scholars and researchers have persistently argued that cross-cultural differences in values and practices indeed have significant impacts on the employment practices (Hofstede, 1983, 1993, 1997; Kao, Sinha, & Wilpert, 1999; Perkins, 2000; Redding, Norman, & Schlander, 1994; Triandis, 1994). For example, it is well known that Asian cultural values, including paternal collectivism and Confucianism emphasizing the “appropriate” codes of conduct according to one’s position in a social hierarchy, have strong impacts on social dynamics of East Asians in organizational settings (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003; Triandis, 1995).

Unfortunately, little is known about the mechanism by which kinship influences the formation and maintenance of psychological contract in Asian immigrant enterprises. There exist few studies on the plausible impacts of Asian cultural values on employment relations in small and medium-sized Asian immigrant enterprises in advanced multiethnic societies such as the U.S. and the U.K. The current situation might be attributable to the lack of a useful theoretical framework that deepens our understanding of kinship psychology and its impacts on psychological contract and commitment in immigrant enterprises.

INCLUSIVE FITNESS THEORY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The human mind, according to a majority of evolutionary psychologists, consists of massive evolved algorithms (i.e., psychological adaptations) sculpted by natural selection (Buss, 2008; Cosmides, Tooby, & Barkow, 1992; Gaulin & McBurney, 2001).

A psychological adaptation is defined as “an inherited and reliably developing characteristic that came into existence through natural selection” (Buss, 2008, p. 39) due to its contribution to our distant ancestors’ survival and reproductive fitness under ancient environmental conditions. As in biological evolution, which provided us a gene pool that predisposes us to behave in certain ways (Van den Berghe, 1990), natural selection endowed our human mind with massive psychological mechanisms that are functional in terms of survival and reproduction (Buss, 2008; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Gaulin & McBurney, 2001). Evolution of hominid sociality, for instance, corresponds with underlying psychological mechanisms that were adaptive for our ancestors to solve various social dilemmas such as finding suitable mates and forging social alliances to outcompete rivals in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts (Campbell, 1985; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Van den Berghe, 1990).

It was William Hamilton who proposed the elegant mathematical model of inclusive fitness theory in order to explain the existence of altruism among predominantly selfish individuals (Hamilton, 1964). According to the gene’s eye view of natural selection, altruism can evolve as long as the benefit (“b”) multiplied by a coefficient of genetic relatedness (“r”) is larger than the cost (“c”) (i.e., $r \times b > c$), when benefit and cost are measured in reproductive currencies (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1984; Hamilton, 1964). In other words, people will forsake their own reproductive interests and behave altruistically for someone who is biologically related to them, as

long as the condition is satisfied. For a sexually reproducing diploid species like *Homo sapiens*, a coefficient of genetic relatedness (“*r*”) is .50 for parent and offspring, .50 for full siblings, .25 for half siblings, .25 for aunt/uncle and nephew/niece, .125 for first cousins (Daly, Salmon, & Wilson, 1997). The key theoretical implication is that people in general do not help others randomly, and particularly not in a life-threatening situation. The evolved kin selection mechanism favors altruism that is selectively aimed at close relatives (Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Daly et al., 1997). Several empirical studies have confirmed the prediction that we indeed do have a tendency to help others selectively according to their genetic similarities to us, preferring our close kin over distant kin or non-kin (Burnstein et al., 1994; Essorck-Vitale & McGuire, 1985; Smith, Kish, & Crawford, 1987).

Evolutionary Bases of Social Contract: Kin and Reciprocal Altruism

Evolutionary speaking, familial solidarity based on kinship is selected against group solidarity larger than family lines mainly because our hominid ancestors lived much of their time in small hunter-gatherer bands until some 10,000 years ago (Campbell, 1985; Dawkins, 1990). Kin altruism, the evolved psychological tendency to prefer kin to non-kin strangers, is not only an emergent outgrowth of our biological evolution, it is also a genetically rational and evolutionary stable strategy to promote inclusive fitness in a predominantly non-cooperative world (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1984; Dawkins, 1990). Firmly rooted in our biological make-up, kin altruism played a significant role in the evolution of early hominid sociality (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1984). In social exchange relationships, for example, engaging with someone who is genetically or matrimonially related is perceived to be safer compared to engaging with those who are unrelated, as the latter invites a higher chance of being manipulated or cheated (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997).

As the social world of our hominid ancestors extended beyond the small circle of family ties into clans and tribes, there must have been obvious selection pressures to deal with social exchanges among those who did not have common ancestors (Campbell, 1975; Van den Berghe, 1990). Group solidarity extending beyond family lines has often been selected against, but through sexual reproduction, a sense of obligation to reciprocate with affinal kin (i.e., in-laws) must have gained enforcing power (Campbell, 1975; Van den Berghe, 1990). Affinal kinship based on a matrimonial relationship with a member of the neighboring clan or tribe is therefore a blind evolutionary mechanism for the evolution of reciprocal altruism with non-kin strangers (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1984; Trivers, 1971; Van den Berghe, 1990).

As reciprocal altruism is an exchange of mutually beneficial favors (i.e., “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine”), it is essentially the pursuit of calculated self-interest in the expectation that the good turn will be paid back at some time in the future (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, 1997). Reciprocal altruism must have evolved much later than kin altruism in hominid evolution for it demands further development of the hominid brain and the cognitive capacity to remember previous social exchanges. In addition, for “tit-for-tat” reciprocity to have emerged in a non-kin small group, there must have existed an underlying psychological adaptation that facilitated an actor to detect a cheater in riskier transactions (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997; Trivers, 1971). Yet, once the cognitive threshold for reciprocity was reached, reciprocal altruism became a significant psychological adaptation for the evolution of social contract among non-kin strangers (Bailey,

2000; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Skyrms, 1996). Reciprocity demands ongoing commitment to a mutual agreement and is easily defected, a psychological algorithm to detect a cheater will become more easily activated when people engage in a social exchange with non-kin strangers (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).

Confucianism from a Sociocultural Evolutionary Perspective

There have been various attempts to apply a universal Darwinian process of blind variation and selective retention to human culture (e.g., Aunger, 2000; Dawkins, 1990; Laland & Brown, 2002; Plotkin, 2000). For instance, Dawkins (1990) proposed that cultural information is stored in human brains as a transmittable “replicator” (a.k.a. meme) while biological information is written in the human DNA (Dawkins, 1990). Thus, it has been claimed that the logic of human cultural evolution is also Darwinian in its basic structure (Aunger, 2000; Blackmore, 2000). From the memetic perspective, it is plausible to consider Confucianism as a system of memes. In other words, Confucian cultural values such as filial piety and loyalty to senior family members in the cardinal “five relationships” (i.e., those between ruler and minister; father and son; husband and wife; brothers; and friends) (Waley, 1964) are units of cultural information that have been selectively retained for the past two and half millennia. Confucianism as a system of interrelated cultural values can be considered a super-meme that resides in the brains of people who are born and raised in Confucian cultural milieus.

In addition, traditional Confucian values provide not only implicit cultural norms with a strong moral sanctioning power in East Asian societies, but also a socio-political ideology justifying the power structure of a given society (Lingle, 1996). As Confucian moralistic maxims tend to be applied beyond the small circle of a household, for many East Asians, good leadership is often identified with a benevolent father figure (Zakaria, 1994). Considering the nature of Confucian cultural baggage, it is not surprising that a majority of first generation East Asian immigrants in the United States - even second generation East Asian Americans, considered “quintessential Americans” - often adhere to transmitted traditional Confucian values such as supporting their elderly parents (Zhou, 2004).

KIN ALTRUISM, PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTACT, AND COMMITMENT: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND EMPIRICAL PROPOSITIONS

The inclusive fitness theory has several theoretical implications for employment relations in East Asian immigrant businesses. First of all, it is very likely that, depending on the degree of genetic relationship (i.e., the degree of kinship, “ r ”), both employers and employees in employment relationships will apply two qualitatively different psychological algorithms (i.e., kin and reciprocal altruism) when they initiate forming mutual psychological contract. East Asian immigrant business owners and their relatives, for instance, will be less affected by the short-term transactional mindset when they engage in employment relationship. Therefore, kin altruism will be the predominant psychological mechanism activated under the aforementioned employment conditions.

Proposition 1a: Depending on the status of kinship, both East Asian employers and employees tend to apply qualitatively different social exchange algorithms to construct and interpret a psychological contract.

Proposition 1b: As the degree of kinship (“r”) increases between genetically related East Asian employers and employees, both parties will be more likely to maintain a long-term relational psychological contract.

It is also expected that qualitatively different psychological algorithms are prone to be linked with distinct motivational processes that affect commitment differently. Previous studies on organizational commitment have claimed that affective (i.e., emotional attachment and identification with an organization) and normative (i.e., a sense of moral duty to remain in an organization) dimensions of organizational commitment are conceptually and empirically distinct from a continuance dimension (i.e., staying in an organization due to the sunk cost from past interactions) (e.g., Allen & Meyer, 1990). It is also reported that normative commitment and instrumental attachment to an organization are two qualitatively different commitment orientations (e.g., Heshizer, Martin, & Wiener, 1991; Wiener, 1982). Therefore, psychological algorithms activated in different employment relationships will have different impacts on the nature of the ensuing commitment.

Proposition 2: Biologically related employees tend to be more emotionally and morally committed to their employers and businesses in East Asian immigrant businesses.

It will be also the case that non-kin employees are more likely to experience negative consequences resulting from the breach of mutual expectations and agreements with East Asian business owners/managers. Broken promises and breached mutual expectations will lead to lowered levels of morale and commitment and increasing numbers of employees’ exit, voice/complaints, and neglect behaviors (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). However, given the shared genetic interests between biologically related employers and employees, kin altruism will probably buffer some negative consequences of unfulfilled promises. In other words, kin altruism is expected to override the activation of a short-term tit-for-tat reciprocity which is a predominant strategy used in social exchanges between non-kin employers and employees (Skyrms, 1996).

Proposition 3: East Asian employers and employees bound by kinship will be less likely to apply the rule of strict reciprocity and tend to be more lenient toward the incidence of breached psychological contract.

Furthermore, given the Confucian cultural emphasis on “harmony” in the paternalistic family structure (Triandis, 1995), implicit cultural norms governing the “appropriate” parent-children relationship must have gained moral impetus in East Asian immigrant communities. It is undeniable that Confucian cultural ideals of the right parent-children relationship have contributed to the fast economic adaptation of first generation immigrant parents, which is seemingly impossible without unpaid or under-paid family labor (Light & Bonacich, 1988). Hence, Confucian cultural traditions of honoring the family membership or

household (i.e., *jia* for Chinese, *ie* for Japanese, and *ga* for Korean) will intensify the in-group (family) versus out-group (non-family) social categorization.

Proposition 4: The Confucian cultural emphasis on the genealogical identity of a household will reinforce the social categorization adopted by East Asian employers in terms of in-group family members and out-group non-family strangers.

DISCUSSION

It has been about a decade since a small group of scholars and researchers have applied Darwinian evolutionary perspectives to the fields of management and organization studies (e.g., Aldrich, 2001; Colarelli, 1998, 2003; Lawrence & Nohria, 2002; Nicholson, 1997, 2000). In immigrant entrepreneurship literature, it is a well-known fact that kith and kin social networks are the primary source of immigrant entrepreneurs' social capital (Lansberg, 1992; Light & Bonacich, 1988). Unfortunately, few have attempted to develop a systematic theoretical framework that deepens our understanding of how kinship and unique cultural values influence the dynamics of employment relationships in Asian immigrant family businesses. This paper has attempted to fill the gap in the literature of immigrant entrepreneurship.

This paper has proposed the thesis that inclusive fitness theory, a biological theory of kinship, provides a useful theoretical lens to analyze the effects of kin altruism and its impacts on psychological contract and commitment in East Asian immigrant businesses. It is further proposed that Confucian cultural ideas (e.g., filial piety and honoring a genealogical family line) acts to reinforce this evolved kin nepotistic tendency mainly because those who endorse the traditional Confucian ideals of a patriarchal household will have a stronger desire to help family members and relatives. For a majority of East Asian immigrant entrepreneurs, running a family business is an effective avenue for maximizing genetic and economic payoff. From a biological perspective, through helping their relatives settle down in the host country, East Asian immigrant entrepreneurs are more likely to increase the opportunities for spreading copies of their genes among future generations. It is also proposed that transmitted Confucian cultural values would intensify universal kin altruism by maintaining well-demarcated genealogical family lines and reinforcing the social categorization strategy of in-group (i.e., kin) versus out-group (i.e., non-kin) distinctions often adopted by East Asian immigrant entrepreneurs.

In addition to the aforementioned five propositions, there are several theoretical questions that need to be empirically tested. For instance, it would be interesting to see whether the proposed relationships among kin altruism, psychological contract and commitment could be also found in different immigrant populations in the U.S. Given that kin altruism is an evolved – universal – behavioral tendency of our species, it is very likely that the predicted relationships would be confirmed in different immigrant/ethnic groups in the U.S. However, non-Asian immigrant business owners/managers may endorse different sets of cultural values, which will have different impacts on the social dynamics in non-Asian immigrant businesses. Furthermore, it is also open to empirical investigation to see whether proposed relationships are stronger between male immigrant business owners and their male relatives than between female counterparts and their

female relatives. Rigorous future empirical studies will enrich our understanding of these unanswered questions.

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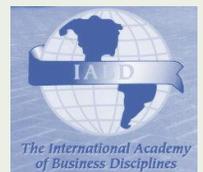
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