

Impact of Personality and Belief Systems on Helping

Zubin R. Mulla

Assistant Professor,

School of Management and Labour Studies

Tata Institute of Social Sciences,

Mumbai, India

Email: zubinmulla@yahoo.co.in

Telephone: 91(22)25525807

Venkat R. Krishnan

Professor

Great Lakes Institute of Management

Chennai, India

Email: rkvenkat@temple.edu

Telephone: 91(44)30809220

Abstract

We investigate the effects of sattva guna (a dimension of Indian personality theory) and beliefs in the law of karma (an essential aspect of Indian philosophy) on helping behaviors in teams. We studied a group of 292 students over a period of 45 days and using structural equations modeling, we found that students who were high on sattva and who believed in the law of karma were more likely to experience a sense of oneness (relatedness) with others. In addition, these students were perceived by their team members to be more helpful.

Keywords: gunas, karma, oneness, spirituality, helping

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Social science theories while attempting to describe human behavior in precise “scientific” terms invariably contain powerful behavioral norms for students who are exposed to these theories. In this way instead of merely being a description of human behavior, they become self-fulfilling (Ghoshal, 2005). One such theory that is said to be self-fulfilling is the theory of the self-interested behavior of human beings in organizations (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Ghoshal, 2005; Miller, 1999; Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2003). The fact that business education leads to behavior that is more self-interested was validated in a longitudinal study of business school students over a period of five years. It was found that students gave more importance to self-oriented values like “a comfortable life” and “pleasure” and less importance to others-oriented values like “being helpful” and “being polite” over a two-year program (Krishnan, 2008). 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 organizations. In this paper, we investigate the practical usefulness an ethical framework derived from the Indian worldview, i.e., the theory of gunas and the theory of karma.

The Indian Weltanschauung

The Indian worldview is characterized by three fundamental beliefs, which are common to all the six systems of Indian philosophy (Dasgupta, 1922/1991, p. 71; Prabhavananda, 1960, p. 201). First, the belief in the karma theory i.e., all actions that are done have the power to ordain for their doers joy or sorrow in the future depending on whether the action is good or bad. Often, individuals may be required to take birth in another body to experience fully the joy or suffering that is due to them because of their past actions.

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The second belief is in the existence of a permanent entity, the soul (*atma*), which is our true unknown nature, pure and untouched by the impurities of our ordinary life. The third belief is about the doctrine of salvation (*mukti*). Since actions lead us through this endless cycle of birth and death, if we could be free of all such emotions or desires that lead us to action, there would be no fuel (in the form of joys or sorrows to be experienced) to propel us into another birth and we would be free of this eternal cycle.

The doctrine of karma

The doctrine of karma is perhaps the most widely known and misunderstood aspect of the Indian weltanschauung (Mahadevan, 1958) and is equivalent to the belief in a just world (Connors & Heaven, 1990; Hafer & Begue, 2005) which states that individuals get what they deserve (Connors & Heaven, 1990). Karma extends the concept of justice to other worlds and other births, thereby implying that all good and bad deeds of all previous lives are accounted for cumulatively. Accordingly, in every life one reaps what one has sown in one's previous lives (Radhakrishnan, 1926). Similar to the belief in a just world, belief in karma reaffirms one's faith in natural justice and makes every person responsible for his or her own well-being and suffering. Thus, positive deeds are believed to lead to good outcomes, while tragic happenings are explained as an outcome of negative deeds done in the past (Agrawal & Dalal, 1993; Dalal & Pande, 1988).

Studies have shown that the belief in karma is highly correlated with belief in God and belief in a just world (Agrawal & Dalal, 1993) and it is an enabler for psychological recovery of accident victims (Dalal & Pande, 1988). Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004) also found that the belief in karma enhanced transformational leadership.

The metaphysical explanation of the law of karma is derived from the concept of spiritual law (*satya*) and law in its working process in the cosmos (*rita*). Conformity to this

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law leads to material and spiritual progress, while its violation is punished with a series of transmigrations. Actions which are motivated by a sense of personal individuality or which are incongruous with the universal order create disequilibrium in the cosmos, which is then set right by inflicting the effect of action upon the doer of it. This metaphysical, ethical, and psychological regulative force is called karma (Krishnananda, 1994).

Freedom from the cycle of birth and death (moksha) or self-realization as the supreme goal

The law of karma is not a blind mechanical framework in which man is trapped for eternity. Freedom from the cycle of karma is possible and is the ultimate goal and destiny of every being (Mahadevan, 1958). This freedom from the cycle of birth and death is termed as *moksha* or liberation. It results when the bonds of ignorance have been broken and is a state, which is free from all imperfections and limitations (Prabhavananda, 1960).

The potential divinity of every being (atma)

In the Rg-Veda, the soul or self is denoted by the word *atma* (Ghanananda, 1958). The soul is the eternal subject, which is free from all impurities like sin, old age, death, grief, hunger, and thirst. The soul is complete and hence, it is free from all forms of desires (Radhakrishnan, 1940).

For an individual who believes in these basic tenets of Indian philosophy, there arises a sense of connectedness with all beings. This sense of connectedness is due to two reasons. First, the awareness of the inherent divinity of every being makes one rise above petty differences of appearance and social status and creates a sense of oneness or relatedness with others. Second, a strong belief in the law of karma leads to the realization that each of us is present in ones current circumstances due to some past obligation. Hence, our temporal

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relationships are not random but systematically arranged by a natural force to enable us of repay our obligations or to enable others to do so based on a long history of past relationships. Because of this sense of connectedness, the individual who strongly believes in Indian philosophy is likely to manifest attitudes and behaviors, which display this sense of oneness with his or her surroundings.

Hypothesis 1. A belief in the law of karma leads to a feeling of connectedness or oneness with others.

Individuals who believe in the law of karma believe that they are part of a particular team, department, or organization for a larger purpose i.e., to fulfill their past obligations. The only way one can achieve liberation is through the conscientious discharge of those past obligations. Hence, they strive to fulfill all their obligations towards their organization and their coworkers. Individuals who have a strong belief in Indian philosophy showed high amounts of sportsmanship and courtesy in their organizations (Mulla & Krishnan, 2012). In a team context, it is more likely that an individual having a strong belief in the law of karma will consider it his or her duty to fully contribute to the team's output and hence will put in large amounts of efforts.

Hypothesis 2. A belief in the law of karma leads to devoted effort towards team goals.

Oneness

Individuals who strongly believe in the doctrine of karma, liberation, and the potential divinity of all beings experience a strong sense of relatedness with their work and their colleagues in the work environment. The feeling of oneness or connectedness is one in which an individual completely identifies with another and treats the other as he would treat himself or herself. Because of this, individuals are more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors and

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contribute towards team goals. Studies have shown that a feeling of oneness with group members leads to helping behavior (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Swann, Jr., Gomez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010).

Hypothesis 3. Oneness leads to devoted effort towards team goals.

Gunās: The Indian Personality Theory

The Sankhya school of Indian philosophy, nature is made up of three distinct qualities or Gunas¹ and humans being a part of nature are likewise made of these three qualities (Dasgupta, 1991). In the Bhagavad Gita (BG), human personality is described as a combination of three gunas in varying quantities (BG chapter 14, verse 5). The three gunas- sattva, rajas, and tamas each symbolize different qualities and an individual may have each of these in different amounts such that one or the other is a predominant personality disposition. Sattva represents purity, calmness, and wisdom (BG chapter 14, verse 11), while rajas represents activity and restlessness (BG chapter 14, verse 12), and tamas represents ignorance and dullness (BG chapter 14, verse 13). The three gunas sattva, rajas, and tamas have can also be understood as illumination, passion, and dullness respectively (Bhal & Debnath, 2006). The predominant guna of an individual is expressed in various activities of the person such as choice of food, friends, manner of giving gifts, spending one's leisure activity, dealing with pleasure and pain, etc. in a way that almost every action can be performed in either a sattvic, rajasic, or a tamasic manner.

Of the three gunas, sattva has been considered as the most desirable guna, which leads to worldly peace and spiritual progress (BG chapter 14, verse 18). The three gunas can also be conceptualized as a progressive development from tamas to rajas to sattva and these have

¹ According to Narain (1961), even though the Sanskrit word *guna* is often translated as “qualities” a more correct translation of the word would be “attributes.”

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been compared with the id, ego, and super-ego respectively (Mohan & Sandhu, 1988). The ideal of sattva represents an enlightened state of “knowledge and peace, where the mind is purified from all its agitations and the intellect is cleansed of passions and criminal lust” (Bhal & Debnath, 2006, p. 171). Individuals who are sattvic (i.e., possess high amounts of sattva) are said to strive after happiness and knowledge (BG chapter 14, verse 6) and are indifferent to pleasure and pain (BG chapter 18, verse 10). As individuals strive for knowledge trying to make sense of the seemingly unfair world with its multiple contradictions, they are likely to start believing in some higher principle or order in the universe which drives the apparent chaos. This higher principle is the law of karma which then in turn develops a sense of acceptance of the world the way it is and is visible in the form of equanimity of the sattvic person to pleasure and pain.

Hypothesis 4. Sattva leads to belief in the law of karma.

Individuals who are high on sattva are likely to be beyond petty likes and dislikes as well as beyond emotions such as anger, envy, and hate. This gives them a deeper understanding of others and makes them more spiritual. Gunas are related to ethical behavior and ethical decision-making (Sharma & Bhal, 2003). A study of 114 managers showed that presence of sattva was positively related to spirituality, idealism, and religiousness (Bhal & Debnath, 2006).

Hypothesis 5. Sattva leads to feeling of oneness with others.

Method

We investigated the relationship between beliefs in law of karma, spirituality (oneness) and three team behaviors viz. devoted effort, helping, and sincerity. Data were collected from 292 students who were completing a 7-week leadership experiential project as

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part of a 1-year full-time residential postgraduate program in business management in south India. The sample consisted of 207 males and 85 females. The minimum, median, and maximum age of the respondents was 22 years, 25 years, and 38 years respectively. The minimum, median, and maximum work experience of the respondents was 18 months, 42 months, and 156 months respectively.

Measures

Belief in the law of karma was measured using a total of 10 items -- 3 items of Mulla and Krishnan (2007) and 7 items of Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004). Oneness or spirituality was measured using a modified version of the scale used by Krishnan (2007). The scale had 7 items. Gunas were measured using a 15-item scale, which was a modified and expanded version of a scale initially developed by Das (1987) and later standardized by Das (1991). The respondents' belief in the law of karma, gunas, and spirituality were measured by a self-report scale administered to the respondents online, 4 weeks after the start of the 7-week project.

The team helping behaviors (i.e., devoted effort) were measured by peer reports at the end of the 7-week project. All the respondents in this study were members of 20 project teams, each consisting of around 15 members working on rural service initiatives. All the members of the teams reported on the team behaviors of all other members and their responses were averaged to get the team behavior scores of each member.

Results

The factor structure of all the variables was tested using IBM SPSS Amos 20.0.0 software. For sattva, after dropping seven items, we found a three factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 1.532$, $p = 0.074$, $GFI = 0.979$, $NFI = 0.914$, $TLI = 0.946$, $RMSEA =$

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0.043, SRMR = 0.0381, AVE = 0.97, and CR = 0.99). All the three factors of sattva were used together for further analysis. For belief in law of karma, after dropping six items, we found a single factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 1.757, p = 0.137, GFI = 0.994, NFI = 0.991, TLI = 0.988, RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR = 0.016, AVE = 0.97, and CR = 0.99$). For spirituality, after dropping three items, we found a single factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 0.863, p = 0.422, GFI = 0.997, NFI = 0.996, TLI = 1.002, RMSEA = 0, SRMR = 0.015$). The Intra-class Correlation Coefficient (ICC) for the average scores on devoted helping in the team was 0.675.

The means, standard deviations, and correlations amongst all the variables are shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 here

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We used structural equation modeling to test the goodness of fit of the following model: sattva affects belief in the law of karma and oneness; belief in the law of karma affects oneness; and oneness affects helping behavior. The model with path coefficients is given in Figure 1. Covariance structure analysis using maximum likelihood estimation yielded Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of 0.926, GFI Adjusted for Degrees of Freedom (AGFI) of 0.901, and Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) of 0.217 (SRMR = .058, Chi-square = 233.769, DF = 156, $\chi^2/DF = 1.499$).

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Insert Figure 1 here

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As can be seen in Figure 1, Hypothesis 1, is supported. Individuals having a strong belief in the law of karma are likely to score higher on feeling of oneness with others. Similarly, Hypothesis 3 suggesting that oneness leads to devoted effort towards team goals is also supported. Hypotheses 4 and 5, which suggest that sattva leads to belief in law of karma and a feeling of oneness with others are also supported by the final model. We did not find adequate support for Hypothesis 2, i.e., that belief in the law of karma leads to devoted effort.

Discussion

The core elements of Indian philosophy include a belief in the law of karma, freedom from the cycle of birth and death as the supreme goal of existence, and divinity of all beings. These beliefs deeply pervade the consciousness of Indians and affect their attitudes towards others and their behavior in the workplace.

Organizations have started realizing the importance of developing a community feeling or a feeling of oneness among its employees, if they wish to enhance helping behaviors. This study provides evidence for strengthening such an inclination. Enhancing feelings of oneness with others will help in enhancing desirable behaviors like devoted effort, helping and sincerity. These behaviors will not only increase organizational performance, but will also make the work environment more enjoyable for everyone.

This study also provides important pointers on how to go about creating a community feeling or a feeling of oneness among employees. This study demonstrates that strengthening one's belief in the law of karma or the cause-effect sequence will help enhance oneness. Modifying a belief is best done by providing convincing evidence supporting the cause-effect sequence. Bringing greater transparency in the reward system could help demonstrate that the due effects always follow the appropriate causes. Changing the various organizational

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processes so that the linkage between cause and effect becomes clearer would be a good step in this regard.

Sattvic foods are wholesome and conducive to strength and vitality (BG chapter 17 verse 8). It is not at all difficult for any organization to serve such Sattvic food in its canteens. Besides food, organizations can also focus on other aspects like encouraging appropriate hobbies and interests among their employees, to develop a sattvic personality. Developing a sattvic personality may have several other benefits to organizations, since sattva facilitates a balanced perspective towards all issues.

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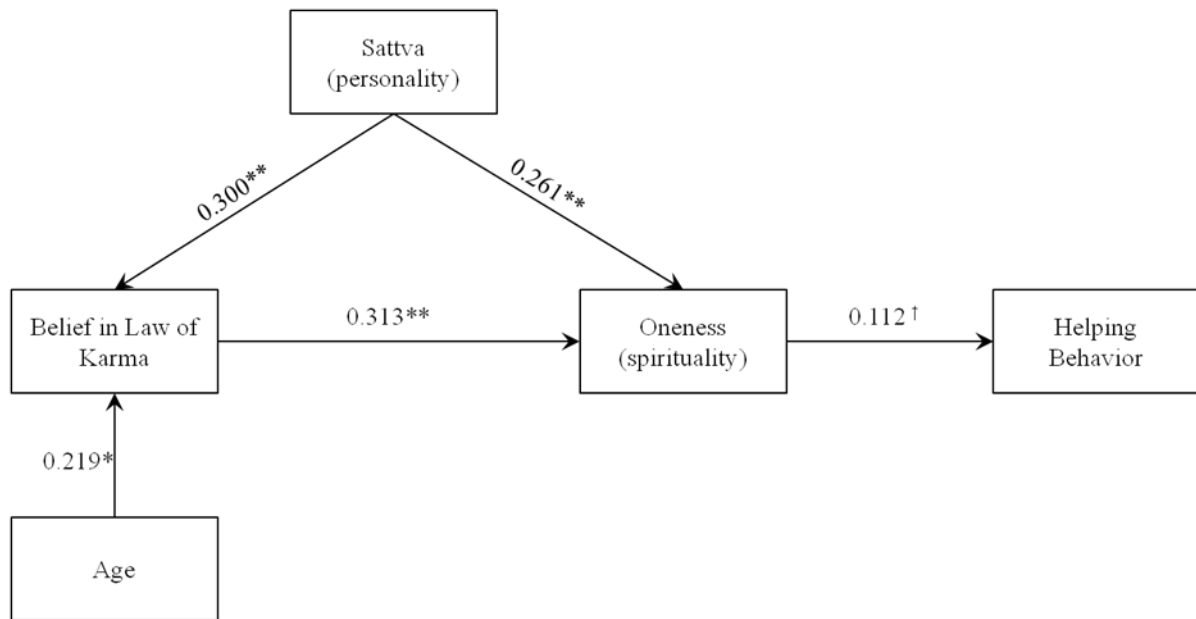
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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations amongst all variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Belief in karma	3.94	.80	(.80)					
2. Oneness	4.16	.67	.41**	(.76)				
3. Sattva	6.06	1.44	.23**	.27**	(.68)			
4. Devoted effort	76.26	8.20	.18	.07	.14*	-		
5. Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)	.29	.45	.11*	.02	-.03	.05	-	
6. Age (in years)	25.92	1.78	.16**	.05	.01	-.17**	-.09	-
7. Work Experience (in months)	42.43	13.89	.09 [†]	.05	-.02	-.15**	-.10	.75**

N varies from 289 to 292. [†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Figures in brackets along the diagonal are Cronbach alphas.

Figure 1: Structural Equations Model

Note: The numbers mentioned are standardized estimates in the manifest variable equations under maximum likelihood estimation.

$^\dagger p < .10$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.