Status Quo and Prospect of Felt Obligation Research

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\textbf{Abstract.} Felt obligation is a new concept in the research of organizational behavior. This research has stated the definition of felt obligation perception and combed the measurement method of felt obligation, which provides some new perspectives for the research of organizational behavior theory. The research summarizes five aspects in the latest progress of studies on perception of felt obligation at home and abroad: background of felt obligation; definition and measurement of felt obligation; difference and relation among perception of felt obligation, role identity, self-efficacy and organizational-based self-esteem; mechanism of felt obligation; factors and effects of felt obligation. In the end, the research has proposed to pay more attention to enrich research method, develop the measures of prevention and conduct the research of cross-cultural factors in the further study on the basis of analyzing the existing problems in researches of felt obligation.

1. Introduction

All the time, the five personality traits are described as the basic dimensions of the personality traits in both China and Western countries, which include agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience\cite{1}. The conscientiousness means that assessing individual’s organization, insistence and motivation are in the goal-oriented behaviors. It contains 6 dimensions, that are competency, logic, responsibility, achievement striving, self-discipline and deliberation. The persons with high conscientiousness always display good characters like capable, reliable, polite, and mature, responsible and etc. Whereas, people with low conscientiousness often show that careless, lazy and slack, irresponsible, unplanned and etc. A large number of researches indicate that the conscientiousness can promote people do right things not only for self but also for others. And the individuals with high conscientiousness have high sense of moral responsibility \cite{2}; at the same time, the leaders who have high conscientiousness tend to share effective information and communicate with subordinates in order to make right decision and they consider it as own responsibility. For these reasons, the perception of felt obligation is quite important to the development of organizations and individuals.

2. Concept of felt obligation

2.1 Definition of felt obligation.

Culbert, Eisenberger, Fuller et al. have conducted representative statements about the felt obligation. Culbert proposes that the felt obligation is an important self-concept which reveals individuals’ thinking and perception of the self-object, as well as individuals perceive they have responsibility and obligation to the results of their work\cite{3}. In the researches of Eisenberger, he has defined the perception of responsibility as the individual convictions of hard working to maintain the successful operation of organization in some extent. Along with the motivation of high felt obligation to the organization, the staffs will conduct behaviors that the organization advocates or benefits. On the one hand, the staffs will well complete their works in order to ensure in-role performance. On the other hand, the staffs will also make some behaviors beyond the usual good one like organizational behaviors, creation and etc\cite{4}; through the empirical research and analysis, Fuller states the felt obligation means that how large extent the staffs think they should work harder and participate actively in the various kinds of constructional behaviors to improve the operation of organization, which implies some kind of subjective\cite{5}, as well as, incentive belief in work. All
above think the felt obligation as a subjective and positive individual conviction that benefits the organization. Meanwhile, an army of data has confirmed these viewpoints, and they become the main stream in academic circles.

2.2 **Discrimination from similar concepts.**

As an important factor to study individual behavior in organizations, the perception of responsibility always confounds with some other positive self-concepts. Therefore, the research discriminates these similar concepts as follow: (1) Role identity. The staff makes various judgment of values in terms of the staff’s own special understanding and cognizes to the role. This concept believes that individual will adjust their behavior conforming to the demands of own role, thus deepen the role identity. (2) Self-efficacy. It is individual’s assessment of their ability to complete specific tasks in certain environment, which reveals individual’s confidence of ability about own behaviors. Relying on the social cognitive theory, the concept considers that individual will adjust own expectant results, ways of coping, level of effort and etc. in accordance with the cognitive assessment about own capacity to finish tasks. Yang Jingzhao points out the role identity embodies the element of “I am” in the self-concept[6]. The self-efficacy contains the element of “I can” and the felt obligation in this research reveals the element of “I should”. (3) Organizational self-esteem is a broader self-concept. It is the perception of individual to own value, meaning, degree of importance in the organization, as well as, self-efficacy in some extent. These self-concepts lead to positive effects to the results of individual work. However, there are some apparent differences among them.

2.3 **Model of Felt Obligation.**

In the research of felt obligation model, Cummings proposed a responsible process model that included some critical factors affecting individual perception of responsibility in 1990, such as rewards, punishments, self-expectation and etc. The most influential model is the triangle model of responsibility suggested by Schlenker[7].

![Figure 1. Triangle model of responsibility.](image)

In the triangle model of responsibility, individuals’ judge own (or others) felt obligation after assessment and estimation. There are three elements that norm, event and identity, as well as, the interactive information among these elements, which assessors need in the assessment and estimation. The model applies the vivid analogy that “the felt obligation is a psychological expressway that connects three elements of evaluation.” What’s more, if there are strong relations among three elements, the information can quickly pass from one element to another. Then individuals perceive great responsibility. It means that the felt obligation of members is up to the intensity of three relations in following: (1) relation of norm-event or the clearness of objective and process. The stronger the relation between norm and event is, the clearer the objective and process are. Meanwhile, the clearness can improve the confidence of individual; (2) the relation of norm and identity or individual obligation or duty. It means the degree that individual feels the connection with norm according to the demands of own identity. The stronger the relation is, the “clearer” individuals know. Hence, this relation provides objective and direction for route; (3) the relation of identity and event or the controllability of individual. The intensity of this relation shows that individual strives to achieve a certain result. Meanwhile, individual has capability and freedom to complete the event.
3. Measurement of Felt Obligation

After the concept of felt obligation came up, scholars deeply study the influence of individual felt obligation on the group or organization in order to explore the relations between the felt obligation and other factors. Basing on the theories of felt obligation, scholars have developed some different questionnaires to measure the felt obligation. At present, there are three common used scales of felt obligation.

In 1999, Morrison and Phelps’ developed the five-point scale of felt obligation, which applies self-assessment of staff. The scale is from 1 to 5 that represents from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”. And the scale includes 5 items in total and 2 of them are reverse, for example, “I don’t think I have responsible to challenge or change the current situation”. In addition, the scale has really good internal consistency reliability, 0.80. This scale became precious reference for later scholars. In 2001, Eisenberger developed another scale of felt obligation, including 7 items. The internal consistency reliability of the new scale is 0.88 in the single-dimension structure. And it has a reverse item, which is that “I fell the only duty of myself in company is to finish the lowest requirement of my work”. Afterwards, Liang and his partner revised and developed the 7-item scale relying on previous researches, such as “it’s my duty to try my best to figure out ideas (or methods) to finish the objectives of enterprise”. Besides, the internal consistency reliability is 0.92[8].

4. The Influential Effect About Felt Obligation

4.1 Personality Characters

In the five personality traits, the felt obligation is one dimension of the personality. The perception of responsibility also has a close relationship with the personality. The practice experience also proves that the personality is an important fact which influences personal sense of responsibility. The firm, tenacious, achievement promotion, intelligence and emotion all link to the sensibility of responsibility. Some researches which related to the personality characters show that the responsibility has negative relationship with the psychoticism and neuroticism. But the responsibility has obvious positive relationship with the extroversion and masking. People who have high extroversion and high social masking have high personal responsibility. Thus, the extroversion, flexibility and low neuroticism can predict individual sense of felt obligation.

4.2 Work Character

Based on the job demand resource theory, the job resources try to satisfy the demands of the inner and outer demands of employees to promote employees pay more resources and energy. Based on the social exchange theory, the felt obligation is the working demand that the employees ego internalize the reward and obligation to the organization. When the individual feels the demand of responsibility, enough working resources can make them feel confidence about the work. Then, they will pursue the higher demand. The accessory from work, sense of controlling, social supporting and the organization support, creative, performance feedback and organization equality that the individual conscious about can stimulate the sense of responsibility of individuals in the company.

5. The Influential Result About Felt Obligation

From the current research documents, the influential result variables about felt obligation are focus on the behaviors and attitudes that the individual has in the working places and living area. Also contains the psychology and physiological conditions. Other studies are concerned with the relationship between individuals and how they are transported between people. The consequences about felt obligation are as follows.

5.1 Working Attitude and Working Behavior

Lots of researches show that the felt obligation for constructive change enables the employees to translate this positive internalization into part of their work. When they accomplish part of this constructive responsibility conscious behavior, they will feel satisfaction and sense of achievement.
We can also say that people with a higher sense of responsibility will feel better at work. People who have a higher sense of responsibility will have a positive attitude, higher job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment and lower turnover intention. The felt obligation could also promote personal performance at work. The employees will do the things which benefit the organization under the promotion of felt obligation[4]. On the one hand, the employees will do their job in order to have a high performance[4,9,10]. On the other hand, the employees will also do the creative and beneficial job which out of their job position[4]. Therefore, the perception of highly responsible employees will show more extrinsic personality behavior and lower absenteeism rates for companies and employees.

5.2 Subjective Well-being and Creative Thinking

The research shows that the felt obligation can help the individuals in the group have a better life. Strong sense of responsibility can bring the high positive emotion and steady style when dealing with affairs. The creative results of employees are based on their inner motivation. This motivation difference is not only comes from the cognitive style and psychological capital of the individual, but also due to the felt obligation to promote them improve their work. The felt obligation make the employees internalize the job requirements into their working process. This can improve their inner working motivation then increase their positive constructive behavior. At last, they will increase the creative performance of employees. The research also show that the felt obligation for constructive change of employees has positive influence to the creative performance of the employees.[11] Thus, the strong sense of responsibility will bring more creative thinking for the individual which can help the company improve.

5.3 The Positive Permeate and Interlace of Felt Obligation

Through the permeate and interlace, we can pass the positive personal belief-felt obligation, to the life and other people. The permeate is the emotion transfer from work to the life. The interlace means the transport between different people. When people bring this high sense of responsibility from work to life, then he will be more responsibility to their family and pay more loyalty to their family. This will make people have a more harmony family life. At the meantime, the sense of responsibility will also convey to other people which can bring positive energy to others.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

Until today, the research about the felt obligation has gained progress abroad. The related concepts, measurement, influential elements and effects have been tested through continuing research. In our country, this area also draws lots of attention. But, at the meantime, there still are many problems needing to research and discuss.

To begin with, the research method various and the cross check in result. The current researches use the self-report to measure the felt obligation which cannot avoid the social procedural problems. Thus, we need use more methods to let people evaluate themselves. They can let employees evaluate themselves. They can also let other research help us know the development process of felt obligation. We can also know the interrelationships between different variables.

Moreover, cultural influences and cross cultural studies. The felt obligation is closely related to personality, and has a close relationship with culture. Thus, different culture has different perception of responsibility. For the researchers in eastern countries, researches in west only provide reference work which cannot be used directly. But we are still weak in the field research; we need a further and deeper discussion about this topic.

In the last, we are in the blank stage about mechanism of action about felt obligation and the intervening measures. Intervention studies will play a guiding role in how to improve their sense of responsibility. The research already showed that the high felt obligation have an obvious relation with creative performance. So, how can we increase the felt obligation? Doing some researches in this field will have practical meaning to guide the company to design effective stimulating mechanism.
7. References


