Understanding the Self-Reinforcement Process

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Abstract

The present state of the international corporate environment has sparked renewed interests in understanding the process by which people make behavioral decisions and rationalize their actions. As we reflect on these fiascos, it is often difficult to understand the thought processes and rationalization of the people involved**.** This study takes an in-depth look at self-reinforcement in order to probe deeper into the process of human behavior motivation and the path that leads to escalation of commitment. A theoretical model is developed and presented in which self-image, image management and self-affirmation are conceptualized as contributors to self-reinforcement, while self-justification is viewed as a moderator of the relationship between the antecedents and self-reinforcement. This model further positions self-reinforcement as a major contributor to the escalation of commitment phenomenon. The potential interactive effects of self -reinforcement and culture (organizational and national) on escalation of commitment are also explored. Implications and future direction are discussed.

Introduction

The present condition of the international business environment has sparked renewed interests in understanding the process by which individuals make behavioral decisions and rationalize their actions. It is common place for the media to explode with news about the shrewd and sometimes unethical and unscrupulous behaviors of corporate executives. Some of the schemes and schemers that have been highlighted lately are the Bernard Madoff Scam (United States Ponzi Scheme), Amway and Quixtar Scam (consumer fraud and phony business opportunities), Weizhen Tang Canadian Ponzi Scheme and securities fraud) and the infamous AIG Scandal (alleged misuse of government bailout funds).

As we reflect on these debacles, it is often difficult to understand the thought processes and rationalization of the people involved. Actions that seem to have no logical basis, might very well be determined by personal validation and reasoning. Indeed, most of the strategic decisions that people make are not impulsive, but vigilant. The questions at hand are, how and why people continue to engage in behaviors that are yielding detrimental results and have the potential to invoke far reaching harm to many. Is there some hidden reward system? Or is it that individuals lack the ability to see the future consequences of their actions?

In order to probe deeper into the process of human behavior motivation and the path that leads to escalation of commitment, we believe that an in-depth look at the self-reinforcement process is merited. Specifically, the notion that individuals' are primarily concerned about what is beneficial for self and their internal state of agreement. Thus, they focus on self image, image management, self affirmation and self justification. However, since individuals do not live in a vacuum, environmental factors can also be expected to influence behavior. Based on this notion, we examine the impact of organizational and national culture. Moreover, this study is designed

to integrate and extend theory related to self and culture so as to provide practical knowledge that is beneficial to organizations.

Literature Review

Self Reinforcement

In "The Myth of Self-Reinforcement" (1975) Catania argued that the factors contributing to behavioral management by self-reinforcement are difficult, if not logically unfeasible, to distinguish. Review of the empirical literature appears to support this conclusion. Difficulties include use of experimenter-identified (rather than subject-identified) target responses (Glynn, 1970); presence of an observer who may wield antecedent control over the subject's behavior (Ninnes et al. 1989); and failure to confirm self-delivered reinforcers as functional reinforcers, along with the intertwining of self-reinforcement with external (social) reinforcement (Nelson, Hayes, Spong, Jarrett, & McKnight, 1983).

However, as scholars attempt to gain insight into the process of rational decision making and individual behavioral choices, reinforcement has been recognized as an important construct. Frequency of reinforcement is embraced as a premise in numerous theories that approach the development of psychopathology from a behavioral perspective, such as those put forward by Bandura (1971), Ferster (1973), Lewinsohn (1974), and others. Rehm (1977) applied the three components of the self-control model, originally proposed by Kanfer (1970), to self-reinforcement for his theoretical model for depression. The components as reconstructed by Rehm for self-reinforcement are establishing response criteria for reinforcement, discriminating the response when it occurs and administering the self-reinforcement either covertly or overtly.

Nevertheless, an essential component of self reinforcement is rewarding oneself and building natural rewards into one's own work (Belle, Colletem & Ellemers, 2009). Moreover,

self-reinforcement involves recognition and appreciation for actions that lead to effective

performance. Given sufficient information, individuals evaluate their own accomplishments. By

studying the processes by which individuals reinforce their path of actions, we can gain more

insight into why they engage in behavior that we otherwise do not understand. A fundamental

starting point is identifying factors and situations that contribute to the self reinforcement process

and related outcomes.

In order for self reinforcement to lead to positive outcomes, people must be critical of their

own performance. By learning to recognize faults in their work practice, they can gain increased

knowledge of their work and recognize appropriate behaviors for success (Belle et al., 2009).

However, it is posited that in some cases, self reinforcement can lead to negative out comes. The

lack of honest self-evaluation and the presence of personal and situational rationalization

processes might lead to continued engagement in negative behavior that ultimately lead to

disaster.

Considering the overall potential of the self reinforcement path process, focus and attention

is merited. It is suggested in this study that there is a presence of and need for internal and

external factors to promote norms of behavior based on individual and group or cultural aspects.

In order to better understand the self reinforcement process, the following model was developed.

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Antecedents to Self Reinforcement

Self-image, image management and self-affirmation are conceptualized as antecedents of self-reinforcement. The theoretical basis for this conceptualization is explicated in the following sections.

Self Image

In almost all applications of the self-image congruence hypothesis, positive, desirable, or agreeable self-concept facets are stressed. In other words, implicit comparisons between the self as currently experienced and an imagined desired end state are emphasized (Bosnjak & Brand, 2008).

There is a growing awareness that conventional models of motivation do not explain the diversity if behavior found in organizations (Leonar, Beauvias, & Scholl, 1999). Thus some have begun to explore how self-concept influences peoples' choice of actions and have focused on self-theory as an additional explanation of motivated behavior. These theories are based on the notion that people have a basic need to maintain or enhance the "phenomenal self" (Snyder & Williams; 1982). In order to fulfill this need, people are motivated to behave in ways that are consistent with their self perception. Thus, people's motivation to maintain the self-prescribed appropriate self-image has the ability to influence their behavior.

Although individuals differ in their chronic motivation to maintain an agreeable self-image, specific events that threaten one's positive self-image can activate this motivation. Understanding this might help to explain why people engage in activities that are not in sync with what appears to be rational based on external motivational factors and reinforcers. Instead, is suggested that some people are more motivated to do things that enhance their internalized view of self.

We propose that self-concept based motivation is a basis for deliberate and calculated explanations of behavior (Leonard et at., 1999) within organizations. Once a person's professional identity is established, they make choices among behavioral options, set and accept goals and undertake projects that are aimed at achieving feedback that is consistent with their self image. The expectancy theory can be used to explain the role of self-concept in determining actions. The valence of feedback is based on the value or values associated with the persons established identity. In other words, a person's behavior is considered to be a choice process employed in order to obtain feedback on traits, competencies or values which are deemed important in relation to the ideal self (Gecasm 1982; Korman, 1970).

When activities lead to desired outcomes and feedback, self reinforcement is strengthened. Moreover, if the individual perceives his/her current behavior is consistent with the desired image of self, the activities will serve as a reinforcer. On the contrary, if the activities reflect an undesired self, an avoidance tendencies will be triggered (Bosnjak & Brand, 2008).

Proposition 1: Self-concept will be positively linked to self-reinforcement when behavior is perceived to be consistent with the desired self-image and negatively linked to self-reinforcement when behavior perceived to be inconsistent with the desired self image.

Image management

In this study image management, conceptualized as synonymous to impression management, is considered to be an effort to create a positive social image. It is further described as a process by which individuals try to exert control over the image others have of them. Impression management is viewed as conscious effort to exhibit certain behaviors that will make others view the actor as desired (Bozman & Kacmar, 1997). Research evidence suggests that individuals are more inclined to engage in impression management when the benefits they

receive are greater (Roberts, 2005). We argue that these benefits serve as personal rewards and self reinforcement.

In the context of the work setting, employees choose their image management strategies to yield positive outcomes and maximize their personal gains (Dory & Zaidman, 2007). Impression management is accentuated in contexts in which the person is being evaluated in some manner and is a function of extreme pressures (Gilmore, 1999). Employees in all levels of an organization (i.e., new employees, junior managers, and top executives) may feel compelled to engage in impression management. Their image management strategies may be assertive or defensive (Wayne and Liden, 1995).

Through the use of assertive strategies, an individual attempts to establish a particular reputation with a specific target audience. The actions involved in this process are not merely a reaction to a situation (Wayne and Liden, 1995). For example, sales managers may do certain things to establish credibility with clients and financial planners may present select information to invoke investors trust. Additionally, some may use impression management to indicate stronger commitment when their actual commitment may be weak (Singh and Vinnicombe 1991). This allows them to forward personal agendas while appearing to have the organizations interest at heart.

Alternatively, defensive strategies are generally utilized in response to subpar performance (Wayne and Liden, 1995). These actions include, but are not limited to excuses, apologies, explanations, and self-handicapping. By engaging in these kinds of behaviors, individuals might be able to avoid taking responsibilities for mistakes, failures and even incompetence. Ultimately, defensive strategies enable individuals to defend and protect their face and reputation.

Rewards and/or the lack of negative consequences garnished form successful impression management attempts might serve as indicators of effective performance. Skillful use of impression management can yield both immediate gratification and beneficial future outcomes. Thus, it can be expected that individuals will find it acceptable to engage in behaviors that create and substantiate a desired image of themselves.

Proposition 2: Image management will be positively linked to self-reinforcement when impression management behavior leads to desired presentation of self and negatively linked to self-reinforcement when impression management behavior leads to undesired presentation of self.

Self Affirmation

Self-affirmation refers to behavioral or cognitive events that bolster a person's perception of their own integrity, moral and adaptive adequacy and confidence (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). Self affirmation is generally studied in the context of people's reactions to an ego threat that have unfavorable implications for self (Tice 1993). Such threats can be expected to elicit self enhancing tendencies. Consistent with the idea that self-affirmation affects confidence, it is believe that people will more readily engage in behavior that validates their abilities and self worth. In keeping with this line of thought, past study results showed that self-affirmation induces high performance motivation and a focus on the personal self (Briñol, Petty, Gallardo, & DeMarree, 2007).

Other studies (Hobfoll, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) expand the relevance of self-affirmation into mental and physical health, specifically dealing with recovery from adverse health conditions. The studies tend to make evident that utilizing a self affirmation activity, is a vital element in buffering physiological discomforts and as a health protective

resource (Creswell et al, 2005). A later study (Creswell et al, 2007) supports previous literature that self-affirmation can buffer stress and improve well being.

Sherman (2006) examined how self affirmation would impact one's cognitive response to adverse information and events. He outlined four tenets of self-affirmation. These tenets suggest that: people are motivated to protect the perceived integrity and worth of self, motivations to protect self-integrity can result in defensive responses, the self-system is flexible and people can be affirmed by engaging in activities that remind them of who they are. Furthermore, self-affirmation has the potential to buffer against threats - decreasing information processing - such that negative messages are perceived more positively and create a strong inclination to work for self even if it is at the expense of the group (Creswell, Lam, Stanton &Taylor, 2007). It is therefore proposed that:

Proposition 3: Self-affirmation will be positively linked to self-reinforcement.

Self-justification as a Moderator

Self-Justification

Self-justification theory suggests that a person tends to justify prior behavior, rebuffing any negative feedback associated with the course of action (Brockner 1992; Keil 1995). A person influenced by self-justification will be inclined to have a very favorable opinion of previously chosen actions. We reason that whenever there is perceived discrepancies related to self-concept, negative feedback from image management attempts, or lack of self-affirmation, individuals will react to the situation by utilizing the potentially adaptive sense making strategy of self justification.

Although there are a host of behaviors that can be used to deal with this dissonance, a few fundamental ones are identified and described here. Individuals might seek out validating

evidence to diminish the disconfirming feedback, or discredit the source of the disconfirming feedback. Changing feedback by presenting evidence and/or arguing the that the original evaluation was incorrect is another alternative used to justify past behavior (Leonard et al, 1999). Both of these strategies are related to attempts to change the presentation and/or interpretation of behavioral feedback.

Other reactive strategies might be used to manipulate the perceived link between the person and unfavorable outcomes and feedback. For instance, people try to disassociate themselves from the outcome or behavioral effects by publically demonstrating that they were not aware or were not trying. Similarly, those who are experiencing the discomfort of inner friction might attempt to show that a particular outcome or behavioral effect was "not their fault" and was the result of forces outside of their control.   Both of these reactive strategies are done primarily to cause a disconnect between the outcomes and the persons' personal traits, competencies and values.

Consistent with self-justification theory, the risk-reduction benefit of continuing the course of action associated with prior behavior and resource allocation frequently leads to additional commitment of resources, even if the additional commitment is irrational (Bobocel and Meyer 1994; Brockner 1992). Based on the general characteristics of self-justification, it is believed that this factor will exacerbate the relationship between the previously identified antecedents and self reinforcement.

<div align="center">Outcome</div>

Escalation of Commitment

The escalation-of-commitment phenomenon refers to an individual's propensity to make an increased commitment to previously chosen courses of action when the individual is chiefly

responsible for making that decision (Staw and Fox 1977) and/or the actions serve to uphold, enhance or protect the image or reputation of the person. The basic precept of escalating commitment refers to the tendency to persist with a failing course of action, leading to delayed termination of failing projects, despite availability of new information (Schmidt & Calantone, 2002; Barton, Sidney, Duchon, Dennis, & Dunegan, 1989). Based on the embedded processes of self reinforcement, it is asserted that it will be a positively and directly linked to escalation of commitment. Thus, the following proposition is made.

Proposition 5: Self-reinforcement will be a positively and directly linked to escalation of commitment.

Although we argue that self-reinforcement is directly linked to escalation of commitment, we additionally suggest that other factors, not directly related to individuals' concept of self (real or constructed), also affect their propensity to move relentlessly down a path of action. In other words, we suggest an interaction between personal systems and features of the environment. Zayer (2007) provides a conceptual model that integrates various psychological factors that lead to escalation commitment. The three moderating effects – *timing, unquestioned decision scope, and overconfidence* – identified by Zayer, have been recognized in other research (Drummond, 1995; Teger 1980; Russo & Shoemaker, 1992) as the critical elements in escalating commitment. To better understand the escalation commitment, we believe that other real world environmental factors should be considered as potential moderators. Specifically, it is posited that organizational and national culture have an influence on the relationship between self-reinforcement and escalation of commitment.

Culture as a Moderator

Cultures revolve around shared value systems, direct younger members on the appropriateness of specific behaviors, and encourage the perpetuation of the status quo. Both national and organizational cultural environments serve this purpose.

Organizational culture. The influence of organizational structure and leaders are immense, shaping work values, acceptable behaviors and employee attitudes by nurture and by nature. Organizational cultures differ in the way they view their human resources. These differences are associated with various value systems, assumptions and expectations of their employees. Desirable behavior, competence and excellence are defined by the organizaiton's cultural system (Drory & Zaidman, 2007). There is some evidence that culture influences employee behaviors and attitudes such as job satisfaction, performance and commitment to quality (Victor and Cullen; 1987). Moreover, the organizations culture provides powerful cues for acceptable behavior.

The increasing interest in the ethical and unethical conduct of organizational members has led to the exploration of cultural concepts. Most scholars agree that the culture is influenced by contextual factors such as values, codes, rules, organizational form (mechanistic or organic) and organization specific factors (profit margin, market share and compensation system) (Erben & Guneser; 2008). Another and perhaps the most important, organization-specific factor is leadership.

Leaders are credited as responsible for inspiring ethical standards in their employees and the organization as a whole. Leaders serve as role models for others in the organization for the kind of behaviors that are appropriate (Dickenson, Smith, Grojean & Ehrhart; 2001) and set the standard for how ethical problems and questions are handled Neilsen, 1989). In other words,

leader set the tone and creates the climate within the organization. Whether ethical or corrupt, the values that permeate throughout organizations and influence behavior is often a byproduct of leader behaviors and values.

It has been argued that values come to the forefront in exigent or difficult situations that confront organizations (Badaracco, 1998). Badaracco termed these situations "defining moments". Leaders' responsive actions in these defining moments set the precedence and serves as an indicator of what is acceptable and/or permissible. During these challenging times, effective leaders will reflect on questions related to personal identity, the organization's identity and the direction that the organization should take. Thus, according to Graber and Kilpatrick (2008), crises are necessary to test and evoke the leader's values. If the organizational culture and leadership enables employees to obtain favorable performance evaluations, promotion opportunities and career advancement by doing what they are currently doing, the culture will contribute to continuance down the existing path of actions and lead to escalation on commitment.

National culture. Although national culture is an exceedingly difficult concept to define, most scholars agree that it is the shared ways in which groups of people understand and interpret their surroundings. Hofstede (1984) proposed that culture is something that is learned and therefore is rooted in a society or nation. It is similar to a cognitive program that is acquired early in life and reinforced through a broad program of socialization. The influence of culture on human activity is deemed pervasive (Williams *et al.,* 1998). Hall (1976) asserts that individuals' thought processes are greatly modified by national culture. Because of the deep impacts culture has on the life of all people, it provides a structured and highly consistent way of living that is not intentionally constructed (Hall, 1976).

Heine (1997) notes that the vast majority of researches have been conducted in North America and – therefore – making it very difficult to generalize the psychological theories as it may prove very difficult to obtain similar results across the cultural divine. For example, a prominent construct of self for individuals living in North American cultures is the independent view of self (Hofstede, 1991). However, the construct model of self for individuals living in Asian cultures is the interdependent view of self (Hamaguchi, 1985). Building upon previous studies (e.g. Steele et al, 1993; Bond & Cheung, 1983; Campbell et al, 1996; Mahler, 1976), Hein acknowledges that any association between self-esteem and dissonance reduction (or self-affirmation) may be related to a particular culture. Thus, the standards for "appropriate behavior vary across cultures, groups, and situations (Heine, 2005). Similarly, threats to self-integrity may present itself in various forms, but they will always embroil genuine and perceived failures to meet culturally or socially significant standards (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

The presence of numerous studies concerning the cross-cultural distinctions in the concept of experience and selfhood (e.g., Markus & Kityama, 1991; Kim & Markus, 1999; Hein et al, 1999) poses a critical question regarding the effect of culture on self-reinforcement process. The study by Hein et al (1999) clearly describes the differences between individualistic (U.S./North America) and collectivist cultures. Also, the relationship between national cultures and escalation of commitment has been mildly explored. Stephens (2001), in a comparative study of Mexican and U.S. decision makers, examined the differences in tendencies toward escalation of commitment. The study shows that the Mexican decision-makers were significantly more leaning toward escalation than their American counterparts. Also, the Mexican decision-makers reported significantly greater confidence in their escalatory decisions.

However, the majority of studies on self-reinforcement and escalation of commitment do not address the concepts at a comparable level across the cultures. Some authors (Hiniker 1969) have claimed that it is possible that people from particular cultures might not experience dissonance. The "fit" between cultural values and individual behavior may be viewed as arising from the implicit models associated with national cultures (Hofstede, 1991). We extend this theory to assert that individuals prefer to engage in behaviors that are consistent with basic cultural perspectives. Thus, it is proposed that:

Proposition 6: Organizational and national cultures will interact with the self-reinforcement process to influence escalation of commitment.

Discussion and Implications

The self-reinforcement process has been identified as an important process that determines behavior and contributes to escalation of commitment. Each construct in the model plays a significant role and is key to the process. Self related theory supports the notion that many personal cognitive and behavioral decisions are motivated by efforts to maintain internal consistency between concept of self and external feedback (Gecasm 1982; Korman, 1970) and validate self worth (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). Additionally, social influence theory establishes impression management as a powerful motivator to engage in certain behaviors (Bozman & Kacmar, 1997). This study integrates these theories and presents a logical approach to understanding the factors that contribute to self-reinforcement. The ability of people to rationalize their behavior and create an acceptable explanation for their choices also affects their views and preferences. This is incorporated into the study as the relevance of self-justification is considered.

In many case, organizations have little to no control over the effects that the identified antecedents might have. However, the interaction between self reinforcement and organizational culture allows organizational leaders the opportunity to influence continuance patterns of behavior. Supervisors, who give feedback, and who are perceived as trusting, and encouraging innovative behaviors contribute to the development of self-leadership behaviors such as self-reinforcement (Elloy, 2008). On the other hand, the veracity of the current reward and recognition systems used by most organizations evaluating contributions and the ever-increasing demands on senior management may encourage them to influence junior managers and employees to engage in work activities in the mentors' preferred domains. Sometimes, employees may feel constrained by the organizational culture in pursuing a specific personal agenda.

Increasing multicultural awareness is also essential for organizational leaders. In a global business environment, learning and understanding of other cultures would be an essential factor in dealing with cross-national differences. A common obstacle confronting a company - with global business ambitions – is being ill-informed about cultural dimensions (e.g. power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus felinity) of a country that might guard against the pitfalls of ethno-centric behavior. Careful consideration and management of both cultural factors and the desire to change the general attitude of cynicism towards organizations (e.g. corporations and big businesses) can be used to promote desirable behavior and deter actions deemed detrimental. Strong ethical leadership is vital to this approach.

Future Direction

The model in this study is viewed as a starting point intended to inspire further exploration of self-reinforcement in the specific context of the corporate environment. The

information garnished here can be used to fuel future empirical studies that test the suggested links in the model. Few studies have investigated the interrelationship between proposed antecedents and little is known about the level of their combined impact on self-reinforcement and escalation of commitment. Additionally, it is suggested that consideration be given to the possibility that culture might have duel moderating influence. Although we posited organizational and national culture as a moderator of the self-reinforcement-escalation of commitment relationship, it is also feasible the culture might interact with the antecedents to establish self-reinforcement. Additionally, and in-depth exploration of the conditions in which self-reinforcement leads to positive/negative outcomes is merited.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

This study has been mainly concerned with the self reinforcement process and its impact on escalation of commitment. The model presented sought to establish a systematic approach to understanding behavioral motivation in organizations. Understanding the factors that influence individuals' path of action can be helpful in deterring disastrous behavior before it escalates and encouraging desired behavior that might change the milieu of the corporate environment. The benefits derived from creating a more positive corporate world can be far reaching and long lasting.

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FIGURE 1

Culture

- Culture Acceptance
  - o Organizational
  - o National

Rationalizations

- Self Justification

Self Image

Image Management

Self Affirmation

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Self Reinforcement

Escalation of Commitment