

Cynicism in the workplace. Impact on manager's extended EVLN responses.

A reciprocity and social exchange perspective

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Introduction

Our research has led us to take a look at cynicism in organizations. According to the literature, employees are demonstrating attitudes in the workplace that are increasingly cynical. Cynicism is an attitude that involves distancing oneself from the organization owing to a belief that the organization lacks integrity and will always try to fool its employees (Andersson and Bateman, 1997, Dean, Brands and Dharwadkar, 1998). Following the results of a qualitative study in the field and a review of the literature in management and philosophy, we performed a quantitative study in order to measure the cynicism of top management as perceived by managers, cynical attitudes of managers towards their directors, the impact on behavior at work and more specifically on the desire to quit, constructive protest, aggressive protest, loyalty and negligence (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogert, Mainous, 1988, Hagedoorn, van Yperen, van de Vliert, Buunk, 1999).

Our research had a mixed design with a qualitative exploratory phase and a quantitative phase. It is based on the perceptions of managers. These perceptions are the apprehensions that managers have from what they interpret through their senses and cognition in the workplace. The theoretical framework for the development of perceptions is the social exchange theory. The perception that managers have of how top management treats them influences their behavior and attitudes. It is independent of the accuracy of their perceptions. If managers perceive their top managers as being cynical, they are going to react with a more cynical attitude and with behavior that could potentially be damaging for the organization.

The philosophical implications of this research are discussed. First, we focus on the research based on the perceptions of managers and the epistemological implications. We then describe the theoretical framework that guided our research.

Key words: research design, perception, social exchange theory, reciprocity.

1. Manager perceptions: where their reality is

Our research is founded on the perceptions of the actors. They are the perceptions that managers have of their directors when they interact with researchers through individual interviews, focus groups, or by filling out questionnaires. These perceptions contain our essential data. This is an indispensable point to consider. Individual perceptions can concern oneself (self-perception), others (interpersonal perceptions), or objects that are external or related to others such as the organization itself or the sector of activity.

1.1. Definition of perception

Perception can be described with several terms such as consciousness, belief, cognition, estimation, sense. We have chosen to retain the term "perception" in the sense that Meziar and Starbuck (2003) described: the perceptions of managers are the apprehensions that they experience from what they interpret or what they attempt to understand through their senses (sensorial and emotional mechanisms) and their cognition (cognitive mechanisms) in the workplace. Indeed, the manager's sense positions the information that he or she receives and interprets it with immediate perception whereas cognition attributes a sense to it, a signification and places it in cognitive contexts that have been experienced in the past.

This process expresses the existence of a distance between the reality of the facts and individual perceptual reality. This notion of distance is reflected in the celebrated aphorism by Korzybski: "the map is not the territory". In this aphorism, "territory" refers to the outside world, to objective reality and facts. The word "map" is a reference to the brain or the result of what the brain processes vis-à-vis the objective events that have an impact on it (Bulla de Villaret, 1973). This is an individual and filtered "reading" that an individual makes through his or her experience and experiences by means of sensorial, emotional and cognitive filters which are influenced by personality, needs, values (Zalkind and Costello, 1962).

1.2. Perception and production of knowledge

According to Starbuck (2006), the principal goal of scientific research is the constitution of knowledge that can be considered as objective and "true". How can the gathering and analysis of one's perceptions contribute to the creation of knowledge when several studies have suggested that managers have perceptions that are highly contrasted and often inaccurate (Meziar and Starbuck, 2003)? Based on the eight definitions of the word

"knowledge" in Webster's Dictionary, Starbuck (2006) proposed two orientations for the definition of "knowledge": a) knowledge as a thorough or broad familiarity, or b) knowledge as the perception of facts or truths. It is the second definition that guides research in social sciences because a researcher considers him or herself as a producer of knowledge which is received by people as the truth made up of facts and truths (Starbuck, 2006).

1.3. Perception and epistemological positioning

Given that all humans interact with the outside world through their perceptual systems, the results of scientific research are also subject to the perceptual systems of researchers in social sciences. The status of knowledge from the results will be conferred by tacit agreement of the social system through which the perceptions will be elevated to the rank of facts and truths if they are collectively shared and accepted (Starbuck, 2006). It is for this reason that whether one is positivist and believes in an absolute truth in an objective factual world or one is interpretativist or even constructivist, a perceptual filter on an individual scale will always be present. Our epistemological position therefore remains indistinct and depends on the belief that access to reality goes through one's perceptions which are processed and analyzed by the researcher's proper perceptual system.

1.4. Perception and its value: its accuracy

Much research and numerous managerial practices depend on the individual perceptions of managers which are usually collected through interviews and questionnaires (Starbuck and Mezas, 1996, Sutcliffe, 1994, Walton and Dawson, 2001) because they have a direct effect on behavior (Zalkind and Costello, 1962). However, very few have verified the accuracy of these perceptions. Mezas and Starbuck (2003) questioned the accuracy of individual manager perceptions and consequently their value in strategic decisions as well as the risk of errors inherent in such decisions. Studies evaluating manager perceptual accuracy vis-à-vis associated variables in strategic decisions (Mezas and Starbuck, 2003) have shown that these managers, be they mid-level or senior executives, do not have very precise perceptions of the characteristics of their organization (the organization they are in charge of) nor of the external environment or the market in which their organization interacts. Strategic decisions are based on beliefs that are often shared collectively. This, in the eyes of the deciders, gives them an objective value with a certain logic that justifies their choice (Brunsson, 1982). Mezas and Starbuck (2003) have named this process "managerial folklore". Yet, one of the principal conclusions of their studies shows that, in the end, the

accuracy of manager perceptions is not a condition for making adequate decisions for an organization. If managers have long-term general objectives within the framework of their functions, a process of trial and error with adjustment of actions will avoid errors that could be linked to managerial perception inaccuracy.

1.5. Perception and current research

In the same direction as these results, our research attempts to show the prevalence of individual perceptions in the workplace and takes particular interest in the perceptions that managers have of their directors – especially in the perception of cynicism. In agreement with the conclusions of Zalkind and Costello (1962), we attempted to evaluate the possible direct relationship between this perception, be it precise or not, and manager behavior in the workplace, in particular, in terms of the intention to quit, constructive protest, aggressive protest, patience or negligence, then on the development of more cynical attitudes towards top management.

We collected our data in three stages. The first phase of the qualitative study was performed through in-depth centered interviews. These interviews made it possible to clarify the perception that managers have of their directors. We then organized two focus groups with the aim to verify the pertinence of the results of the analysis of the thematic content of the interviews. Finally, we proceeded with the quantitative phase with the creation of a questionnaire that included several measurement scales. It was sent out over the internet and we received 700 answers to the questionnaire. These data were processed statistically and we used structured equation models to test our hypotheses.

In light of the framework proposed by Schein (1997) on the levels of research involvement (Table I), we can consider that our research design is mixed: qualitative in terms of the individual interviews and focus groups and quantitative for the construction and use of measurement scales and the questionnaire followed by a statistically significant quality control. Our level of involvement as researchers and in the eyes of Schein (1997) was high during the qualitative phase and medium during the quantitative phase. Involvement for the subject was partial during the data collection phase and maximum during the statistical control phase.

		Level of researcher involvement →	
		Low to medium	High
		<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>
Level of subject involvement ↓	Minimal	Demographics; measurement of 'distal' variables	Ethnography; participant observation; content analysis of stories, myths, rituals, symbols, other artifacts
	Partial	Experimentation; questionnaires, ratings, objective tests, scales	Projective tests; assessment centers; interviews
	Maximal	Total quality tools such as statistical quality control; action research	Clinical research; action research; organization development

Table I: Categories of Research in Organizations (Schein, 1997, p. 29)

2. The theoretical and epistemological framework of managerial perceptions

Understanding the epistemological framework in which employee perceptions are constructed in the workplace is fundamental for interpreting research results. What governs the formation of perceptions that a manager has of his or her directors and other actors in the organization? The formation of perceptions depends on actor exchanges. These exchanges are twofold. First, there is market or economic exchange, in particular, in the form of a contract of employment. The employment contract will legally link the employee with the organization for a determined period of time with explicit and reciprocal obligations and rights. However, there are obligations between the organization and the employee that are not specified in the contract that develop and that are tacit. This phenomenon concerns the social exchange that will guide the quality of interpersonal relations and exchanged resources (Wayne, Shore and Liden, 1997).

2.1. The social exchange theory: employee-organization exchange framework

The social exchange theory is based on the work of March and Simon (1958), Homans (1958) and Blau (1964). According to them, individuals maintain relations in a conditional manner. These authors defined social exchange as an exchange of goods – material and especially non-material goods. In this perspective, the exchanged resources can be tangible (equipment, money loaned...) or socio-emotional (communication, signs of approbation...).

The pertinence of the social exchange theory in human resources has been evoked for decades to explain work relations. The first research by Argyris (1960) showed that relations between shop workers and their foremen are essentially based on the reciprocity of their exchanges: the workers maintain a high level of production in exchange for the respect of informal engagements made by the foremen such as mutual respect, regular salary or lifetime employment. Argyris (1960) described the psychological and tacit nature of actor exchanges that are beyond the employment contract and that generate reciprocal beliefs and expectations between the employee and the organization. The theories of organizational justice, psychological contract, organizational support and engagement, among others, are founded on the social exchange theory. Employment relations in terms of social exchange can therefore be understood as a process of adjustments in time which can be explained by the manner in which each party perceives and reacts to his or her environment (Guerrero, 2005).

2.2. The norm of reciprocity

Social exchange is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) which refers to owing people who have given us something. Gouldner positioned reciprocity as the starting mechanism of interpersonal relations and emphasized that only the norm of reciprocity can be the basis of a durable exchange and a source of satisfaction. Exchanges in an organization are based on the principle of reciprocity according to which each "gift" generates the expectation of a "return". Moreover, a balance in the exchange is necessary so that the two parties feel obliged to durably contribute to it (Blau, 1964). Thus, when an individual (e.g. the person immediately above in the hierarchy) does something that has positive consequences for another (e.g. an employee), it generates an engagement that remains difficult to exact, an "obligation tension" (Homans, 1958). In order to honor this obligation, the person will return an undefined benefit to the initiator of the action. Behavior towards the organization is therefore connected to experiences at work according to the norm of reciprocity (Settoon, Bennett and Liden, 1996, Wayne, Shore and Liden, 1997).

2.3. Social exchange versus economic exchange

The social exchange theory was inspired by the anthropologic work of Mauss (1950) and Lévi-Strauss (1958) on exchanges between individuals in archaic societies (Galois, 2005). Their research goes beyond the purely economic vision of exchange based on the rational calculation of opportunistic behavior. The rules of the game in social exchange are

different from those of economic exchange. There is a form of equilibrium in both cases. No social exchange relationship (e.g. invitations to dinner or doing favors) can survive very long if the situation is too asymmetrical: one day or another the person who has received must give back – even if the moment and the nature of this returned invitation, favor, or debt are very uncertain. However, what radically differentiates social exchange from economic exchange is what Bourdieu (1980) calls the "calculation taboo": the terms of the exchange must remain tacit. If one day they become explicit or if the parties discuss who owes how much to the other, it means that the relationship is in question or even in doubt. On the other hand, the rule is transparency in economic exchange: the terms of the exchange are clear on the ex ante contract. What makes economic exchange possible is exactly what makes social exchange fragile.

2.4. The social exchange theory and current research

The norm of reciprocity applies to all cooperation relationships: when a person treats others "equitably", he or she can expect favorable treatment in return. Thus, when an employee feels respected and perceives the enterprise as benevolent, he or she will probably feel obliged to act for the good of the enterprise and take care not to go against its interests. As for the enterprise, it can feel obliged to take care of the well-being of its employees if it wants to obtain their implication in the goals of the organization and create employee loyalty (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch and Rhoades, 2001). In fact, employees generally tend to seek a fair and balanced exchange with their organization. Consequently, if the employee feels that the organization has not fulfilled its obligations, he or she will tend to limit contributions to the organization in order to reestablish a balance in the exchange relationship (Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood and Bolino, 2002). From this point of view, the perception that managers can have of top management will have an impact on the attention the managers bring to the organization through their work. If the managers perceive their directors as cynical, they will generally judge that there is a lack of benevolence on the part of the organization and in order to "balance the exchange", they could potentially measure their implication at work by modified behavior in reaction to a disagreement and by cynical attitudes that mimic those perceived from their directors.

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