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# Collectivist orientation as a predictor of organizational commitment: A study conducted in China

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# COLLECTIVIST ORIENTATION AS A PREDICTOR OF AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN CHINA

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*This study tested the hypothesis of collectivist orientation as a predictor of affective organizational commitment. Data from 510 employees working in two organizations in China supported the hypothesis, that is, collectivist orientation is a significant predictor of affective organizational commitment when employees' specific organization, age, sex, organizational tenure, educational level, and pay satisfaction are controlled.*

Organizational commitment is considered to be one of the most important work attitudes of employees. Studies have consistently found that organizational commitment has a negative correlation with an individual's intention to quit (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Thus for organizations which want to control their employees' turnover rate, it is important to recognize factors leading to high organizational commitment. This study tested individuals' collectivist orientation as a predictor of affective organizational commitment. The only other known study to have tested this relationship (Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000) failed to find significant results; however, that study was conducted in the USA, a country regarded as having a strong individualist culture. This study was conducted in

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China, a country that reportedly has a strong collectivist culture. The results of this study could provide evidence regarding the existence of a relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment as well as information as to whether or not this relationship is cultural dependent.

### **Affective Organizational Commitment and Collectivist Orientation**

Earlier studies on organizational commitment focused more on organization-based factors, including job characteristics, group-leader relations, organizational characteristics, and role states (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Personal demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, tenure, and salary (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) were subjects of research as well. More recently, organizational researchers began to study the roles played by personal beliefs, attitudes, and past experiences in the formation of organizational commitment (e.g., Angle & Lawson, 1993; Clugston et al., 2000; Lee, Ashford, Walsh, & Mowday, 1992).

Angle and Lawson (1993) proposed that individuals with a positive view of being committed to an organization tend to internalize the organization's values as their own and eventually develop affective commitment to the organization. Angle and Lawson emphasized that a positive view of being committed to an organization is a component of a person's general value system. It stays stable across different times and situations, and is part of the person's personality. The results of their two-year longitudinal study supported their proposition.

Placing a high value on commitment to an employer brings to mind a broader concept—collectivist orientation. An individual's collectivist orientation reflects how highly he/she values being loyal to a social group (that he/she deems to be an in-group), working hard for group goals, and sacrificing personal benefits for group interests (Triandis, 1995). A social group may be a family, a community, a nation, or an employment organization. It can be estimated that a person with a high collectivist orientation is more likely to hold a positive view of being committed to his/her employment organization as long as the organization is perceived as an in-group. Angle and Lawson's finding, therefore, suggests the possibility of a relationship between an individual's collectivist orientation and his/her affective organizational commitment.

Few studies published tested the relationship between individuals' collectivist orientation and their affective organizational commitment. However, recently Clugston et al. (2000) examined the effects of different cultural factors (including collectivist orientation) in predicting multiple bases and foci of commitment (including organizational commitment). The study did not find a significant relationship between collectivist orientation and affective commitment to the organization.

The study by Clugston et al. (2000) was conducted in the U.S., a country regarded to have an individualist culture. More studies, especially those from countries with different cultures, are needed before we can make a conclusion about the relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment. This study was aimed to test the presence of such a relationship in China, a country reported to have a collectivist culture (Earley, 1993). We believe

this study will provide valuable information about the relationship between employees' personal values and their work attitudes. This type of study is also needed because more and more American companies are expanding overseas to countries where people's behaviors are reported to be more influenced by collectivistic norms, beliefs, and values, such as Japan, China, and Mexico.

### **Affective Organizational Commitment**

Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) defined organizational commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (p. 226). It consists of a strong belief in and acceptance of organizational values and goals, a willingness to exert extra effort for the sake of the organization, and a desire to retain membership in the organization (Mowday et al., 1979). Organizational commitment defined by this approach was later referred to as "affective organizational commitment" (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

According to Mowday et al. (1979), such organizational commitment exists when an individual identifies with the organization (Sheldon, 1971), or when an individual has goals that are congruent with organizational goals (Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970), or when the individual believes his/her attachment to the organization can bring reward or payment from the organization (March & Simon, 1958).

### **Collectivist Orientation**

Collectivism and individualism are the two opposite ends of a continuum of norms, beliefs, and values toward collectives, collective goals, and collective effort (Wagner & Moch, 1986). An individualist culture assumes that individuals are concerned only about their own needs and interests or those of their immediate family members, whereas a collectivist culture assumes individuals belong to "in-groups" (family, clan, organization), who protect individuals' interest while expecting more loyalty from them (Hofstede, 1984). Within a culture, different individuals may have different degrees of collectivist versus individualist orientations (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). This paper focuses on collectivist orientation at the individual level. However, we recognize that the culture difference in collectivist versus individualist orientation affects development of collectivist orientation of individuals within a culture by means of pressure from social norms as well as control of social information processing during the socialization process. It can be expected that more people have collectivist orientation in a collectivist culture, while more people have individualist orientation in an individualist culture. This is part of the reason why we proceeded with our study in a country with collectivist culture, because the only other known study on this topic was conducted in a country with individualist culture.

Triandis (1995) summarized four key attributes of collectivists. First, collectivists define themselves by their membership in various social groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Second, they tend to subordinate their personal goals to group goals (Triandis, 1988; Yamaguchi, 1994), and sacrifice personal interests for the sake of collective interests when there are conflicts between personal interests and collective interests (Parsons, 1951). Third, their behaviors are more driven by social norms, duties, and obligations (Bontempo & Rivero, 1992). Fourth, they pay

more attention to harmonious social relationships within the in-group, sometimes at the cost of task achievement (e.g., Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). Given these attributes, collectivists are more likely to develop affective organizational commitment than individualists are.

### **Collectivist Orientation as a Possible Predictor of Affective Organizational Commitment**

As previously stated, affective organizational commitment happens (1) when the individual's identity is linked to the organization; (2) when the individual's values or goals are congruent with those of the organization, and (3) when the individual believes commitment to the organization may bring rewards or payment from the organization. We believe these three conditions are more likely to occur among collectivists than among individualists. Thus, compared to individualists, collectivists are more likely to develop affective organizational commitment.

First of all, collectivists are more likely to identify themselves with organizational membership due to the approach they take to construct self-identity. According to social identity theorists (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987), self-identity is a composite of personal identity and social identity. Personal identity is built upon individuals' traits, preferences, and attitudes. Social identity is derived from individuals' membership in a certain social group as well as the values and emotional significance attached to that group. Individualists are believed to be more conscious of personal identity, which is the predominant regulator of their behaviors, whereas collectivists have their self-concept mainly built on their social identities in terms of social relationships to specific others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). An employment organization is an important social group to an individual. Membership in an organization, thus, is an important source of social identity and ultimately an important source of self-identity of a collectivist.

The second precondition of affective organizational commitment is a congruence of personal beliefs, values, and goals and organizational beliefs, values, and goals. Organizational beliefs and values and goals are not only those that are held by individuals before they join the organization, but also those that are adopted by individuals after they join the organization. People can internalize norms and values of the organization and link personal goals to organizational goals (Shamir, 1996). Unlike individualists who think of self as the unit of analysis, collectivists tend to treat the group as the unit of analysis (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). They tend to accept group beliefs as truth and values as certainty (Triandis et al., 1990). Group values, norms, and goals are more salient to collectivists and structure more of their personal beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. It can be expected that within an organizational context, collectivists are more likely to adopt organizational values and goals, which eventually will contribute to development of their affective commitment to the organization.

Collectivists see a much closer link between personal interests and collective interests than individualists. As previously discussed, collectivists are willing to subordinate their personal goals to organizational goals (Triandis, 1988; Yamaguchi, 1994). When there are conflicts between self-interests and group interests, collectivists give priority to group interests (Parsons, 1951). The high input by



collectivists to a group was found to be strongly related to their high expectations for output (rewards) from the group (e.g., Fijneman et al., 1996). In other words, collectivists are more likely to recognize an exchange relationship between themselves and the group, whereby they input commitment and effort and expect rewards in return. The logic of collectivists obviously complies with the third precondition of affective organizational commitment—a belief that organizational commitment can bring rewards from the organization.

All the behavior and cognitive patterns of collectivists described so far only apply to the context labeled as “in-group” by collectivists. Collectivists act like individualists to out-group people (Triandis et al., 1988). Thus, the key problem here is whether an organization is classified as an “in-group” or an “out-group.” Earley (1993) defined an in-group as “an aggregate of people sharing similar traits and background characteristics. In-group members may identify one another via common interest, values, beliefs, or heritage” (p. 321). Earley believed in-group members do not necessarily have direct contact with each other. Triandis et al. (1988) argued that in the collectivist culture, definition of an in-group depends on the situation to some degree. They mentioned that in Japan, employees of Nissan Motor talked about “we” Nissan and “they” Toyota, but when discussing the market share of automakers, they talked about “we” Japan and “they” America. We believe an organization can be labeled as an in-group by an employee under certain circumstances because it gives identity to its members, has collective norms or values that its members can embrace, and goals for which its members can exert effort and interests from which its members can benefit.

In summary, compared to individualists, collectivists are more likely to identify themselves in terms of organizational membership, internalize organizational values and norms, and link organizational commitment to personal gains. Therefore, it can be expected that collectivists are more likely to develop affective commitment to the organization. Based on the above arguments, we propose the hypothesis that collectivist orientation has a positive relationship with affective organizational commitment.

## Method

### Sample

The survey data used in the present study were collected in two companies in Guangdong Province of the People's Republic of China. Company A was a manufacturer of a popular consumer product. Company B was a provider of paging services. Survey questionnaires were given to 284 respondents from company A, which included almost all the employees on the site that day and covered about 85% of the total workforce of the company. In company B, the survey was completed by 226 employees from paging stations and offices, accounting for 20% of all employees in the company's headquarters in Guangdong Province and branches in Beijing and Shanghai. Neither of the companies reported an unusual pattern of absence on the survey day. Respondents completed the survey on company time. Researchers monitored the survey process and collected data on the site.

Of the entire combined sample ( $n = 510$ ), 51.6% were males, 55% were under age 25, about 89.2% finished high school, and nearly 30.4% finished college. Mean tenure was 1.96.

### Test Design

A regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment. Past studies showed that age, gender, tenure, educational level, and satisfaction with pay are predictors of organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Therefore, these variables were treated as control variables in the present study. Since the data were collected from two organizations, the particular organization was also treated as a control variable so as to control any possible effect of organizational culture.

### Scale Development and Measure

Age, gender, specific organization (out of two), educational history, and tenure were factual data provided by respondents. The particular organization and gender were coded with "1" or "0." Educational level was measured with an item scored from "1" to "8." "1" was "below primary," "2" was "primary," "3" was "junior high," "4" was "senior high," "5" was "vocational school," "6" was "three-year college," "7" was "undergraduate," and "8" was "graduate" (M.A. and Ph.D.). Tenure was the number of years one had been with the organization (the number of months was converted into the number of years, for example, 6 months means .5 year).

Satisfaction with pay, collectivist orientation, and organizational commitment were measured by multiple survey questions. Five-point Likert scales were used, with responses ranging from "1" representing "strongly disagree" or "extremely dissatisfied" to "5" representing "strongly agree" or "extremely satisfied." Point "5" represented high organizational commitment, strong collectivist-orientation, and more pay satisfaction. In contrast, point "1" indicated low organizational commitment, strong individualist-orientation, and less pay satisfaction.

Scales used in the present study were developed by following the steps below. First, existing scales measuring the constructs included in the study were examined. Second, interviews were conducted with plant employees to deepen the understanding of the nature of the organizations and the work performed. Third, based on the review of previous measures and the information obtained from the interviews, relevant instruments were developed. Fourth, the initial version of scales was translated from English to Chinese. In order to ensure that the translated items had psychometric equivalence across different languages, a pilot study was conducted with 30 MBA students from China who newly arrived in the U.S. Besides completing the survey questionnaires, participants were also asked to comment on readability and clarity of the survey items and instructions, item wording, translation issues, and layout and attractiveness of the instrument. Fifth, based on the results of the pilot study several items were modified or dropped. Final versions of scales were formed and internal reliabilities of the scales were estimated. Organizational commitment was measured by 8 items based on the scale used by Farh, Earley, and Lin (1997) ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Collectivist orientation was meas-

ured by 4 items based on the scale reported by Wagner (1995) ( $\alpha = .64$ ). Pay satisfaction was measured by 4 items developed for this study ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

## Results

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis of the 16 attitudinal items measuring organizational commitment, collectivist orientation, and pay satisfaction was performed by using LISREL 8.52. The measurement model fitted the data fairly well [ $\chi^2(101, N = 510) = 285.76, p < .01$ , RMSEA = .06, NNFI = .95, and CFI = .96]. All the items had significant loadings on their intended constructs (see Table 1).

In order to verify that the items measure three distinctive constructs, we compared two alternative measurement models to the hypothesized three-factor model: two-factor model and one-factor model. The two-factor model postulated that items measured two factors: "satisfaction with pay" and a factor tapping the common dimensions of "collectivist orientation" and "affective organizational commitment." Affective organizational commitment reflects an individual's psychological bond with an organization. Collectivist orientation describes an individual's cognitive framework and behavioral patterns regarding interaction with a group. Because both constructs involve how individuals relate to a group, items intended to measure the two constructs may end up measuring one single construct tapping the common underlying dimensions of collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment. Therefore, in the two-factor model items intended to measure collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment were combined as if measuring one construct. The one-factor model assumed the items completely lack discriminant validity, thereby measuring one single construct.

Different measurement models change the number of parameters estimated,  $\chi^2$  and degrees of freedom. If an alternative model produces a  $\chi^2$  significantly lower than that of the hypothesized model at a particular degree of freedom (difference of the degrees of freedom of the two models), then the alternative model is regarded as fitting the data better, resulting in rejection of the hypothesized model. In contrast, a significant increase of  $\chi^2$  indicates that the alternative model fits the data poorer, thereby supporting the hypothesized model (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996).

The result of model comparison of this study is included in Table 2. We compared the two-factor model with the hypothesized three-factor model and found that the two-factor model increased [ $\chi^2(2, N = 510)$  by 233.5,  $p < .01$ ]. Other fit indexes of this model were also poorer than those of the hypothesized model. Similarly, the one-factor model displayed a poorer fit than did the hypothesized three-factor model. The one-factor model increased [ $\chi^2(3, N = 510)$  by 785.40,  $p < .01$ ] and other fit indexes were poorer as well. Overall, the two alternative measurement models were poorer fits with the data than the hypothesized three-factor model, indicating discriminating validity of the items used in the study.

### Creation of Summated Scales

The confirmatory factor analyses showed that the items measured the intended single concepts, meeting the requirement of unidimensionality for creat-



ing a summated scale (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). The summated scales were created by averaging scores of the indicator variables measuring the three constructs included in the study. Table 3 reports means, standard deviations, and correlations among all the variables.

**Table 1**  
**Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the 16 Attitude**  
**Items in the Survey Instrument**

Item	OC	CO	PS
<i>Organizational commitment (OC)</i>			
1. I plan to stay with this company for a long time to advance my career.	.51		
2. I often think of quitting my current job. (R)	.59		
3. It is very possible for me to leave for another company next year. (R)	.49		
4. I feel very honored being a member of the company.	.42		
5. I am willing to make an extra effort to help this company succeed.	.62		
6. I often tell my friends that the company I am working for is a very ideal workplace.	.58		
7. In order to continue working in this company, I am willing to accept any task assigned to me by the company.	.60		
8. I think that my values are compatible with those of the company.	.76		
<i>Collectivist orientation (CO)</i>			
9. An employee should accept the group's decision even when personally he or she has a different opinion.		.45	
10. Problem solving by groups gives better results than problem solving by individuals.		.46	
11. The performance of one's work group or unit is more important than one's own individual performance.		.61	
12. Working with a group is better than working alone.		.62	
<i>Pay satisfaction (PS)</i>			
13. Your income in general.			.69
14. Your current benefits such as pensions and year-end bonus.			.70
15. The categories of your benefits such as subsidies for commuting, meals, and housing.			.71
16. The pay differences between you and your colleagues in your unit.			.50

Note: (R) represents reversed score.

**Table 2**  
**CFA With Items for Organizational Commitment,**  
**Collectivism, and Pay Satisfaction**

Model	$\chi^2$	df	RMSEA	NNFI	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
3-factor (hypothesized)	285.76	101	.06	.95	.96	na	na
2-factor (organizational commitment and collectivism items combined)	519.26	103	.08	.90	.91	233.50**	2
1-factor	1071.16	104	.14	.79	.82	785.40**	3

*Note:* *N* for all chi-squares was 510. RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, NNFI = Non-Normed Fit Index, CFI = Comparative Fit Index.

\*\**p* < .01.

**Table 3**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Measures of Reliability**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Organization	.56	.50	—							
2. Age	26.46	5.65	.17**	—						
3. Sex (M = 1, F = 0)	1.47	.50	-.45**	-.12*	—					
4. Educational level	4.79	1.32	-.34**	.15**	.05	—				
5. Tenure	1.96	1.54	.52**	.34**	-.23**	-.08	—			
6. Pay satisfaction	2.90	.72	.20**	.20**	-.21**	.13**	.13**	(.82)		
7. Collectivist orientation	3.85	.67	-.04	.21**	-.09	.18**	.07	.22**	(.64)	
8. Organizational commitment	3.61	.64	.23**	.23**	-.15**	-.04	.16**	.43**	.30**	(.79)

*Note:* Coefficient alphas appear in parentheses on the diagonal.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

### Missing Values

Three variables had over 5% missing data: age (12%), tenure (5.9%), and educational level (5.3%). "Constant Plug-In" method (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) was used to test whether missing data significantly predict the dependent variable "organizational commitment." Test results showed that missing data of age, tenure, and educational level did not explain a significant part of variance of organizational commitment. Therefore, data were randomly missing in this case. Missing data were handled with pairwise deletion in the following analyses.

## Hypothesis Testing

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with organizational commitment as the dependent variable and collectivist orientation as the predictor variable. Control variables age, tenure, sex, educational level, particular organization, and satisfaction with pay were entered into the regression function first, followed by collectivist orientation. The result (see table 4) showed that all the control variables explained 23 % of the variance in organizational commitment ( $p < .01$ ), and collective orientation explained 4 % of the extra variance in organizational commitment ( $p < .01$ ). The regression coefficient for collectivist orientation was .21,  $p < .01$ , supporting the hypothesis that collectivist orientation has a positive relationship with organizational commitment. Among the control variables, age and pay satisfaction explained a significant amount of unique variance of organizational commitment ( $p < .05$ ). Older employees and employees who were more satisfied with their pay were more likely to be committed to the organization (see Table 4). This result was consistent with the results of previous studies (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

**Table 4**  
**Regression Function of Organizational Commitment**

Variables	Step 1		Step 2	
	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	$\beta$
Intercept	2.28		1.67	
Organization	.12	.10	.16*	.12*
Age	.02**	.15**	.01*	.11*
Sex (M = 0, F = 1)	.00	.00	.02	.02
Educational level	-.04	-.08	-.05*	-.10*
Tenure	.00	.01	.00	-.01
Pay satisfaction	.35**	.39**	.31**	.35**
Collectivist orientation			.21**	.22**
$R^2$		.23**		.27**
$\Delta R^2$				.04**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

The study supported our hypothesis that collectivist orientation is a significant predictor of affective organizational commitment after all other relevant factors are controlled. The finding of this study is important to our understanding of the origins of affective organizational commitment. People with high collectivist orientation have a more salient social identity defined by membership in various social groups, such as an employment organization. As a result, they are more likely to identify with the organization, internalize organizational values, link per-

sonal interests to organizational interests, and eventually develop affective organizational commitment.

### **Managerial Implications**

The finding of this study can provide certain guidance regarding the choice of practices aimed to nurture high affective organizational commitment. Past research has focused much on organization-based factors. As a result, many practical approaches have been taken in human resources, job redesign, and training for the purpose of creating organizational structures and operations that are best for development of high affective organizational commitment. The finding of this study suggests that organizational commitment originates from employees' belief and value system, such as collectivist orientation. Thus, an alternative approach for an organization to possess a highly committed workforce is to incorporate the notion of collectivist orientation in development and implementation of their employee related policies. As an example, they could take applicants' collectivist orientation into consideration in developing employee selection procedures and making selection decisions. Additionally, they could create a collectivist oriented organizational culture, emphasizing loyalty to the organization or other groups such as working teams. Finally, they could provide employees with training aimed to develop collectivist-oriented beliefs and values among employees. By incorporating collectivist orientation into employee selection, training, and organization culture building, an organization will be more likely to build a workforce with a higher collectivist orientation, that will then be more likely to develop affective organizational commitment, work hard to achieve organizational goals and have less turnover intention.

### **Future Research**

Using data collected in China, a country reported to have a collectivist culture, this study found the relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment, which Clugston et al. (2000) failed to find in the U.S., a reportedly individualist country. The question then may arise as to whether or not the relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment is culture-dependent. The same types of questions could be asked about other theories related to organizational commitment that have been primarily developed and tested in countries with predominantly individualist cultures. For example, how does affective organizational commitment influence employee behaviors and subsequent performance outcomes in a collectivist culture versus in an individualist culture? How is affective organizational commitment affected when an employee with a high collectivist orientation fails to receive an expected reward? To answer these questions, more studies are needed in countries with cultures of varying degrees of collectivist orientation. Cross-cultural studies are especially desirable because those types of studies would be able to examine the relationship between collectivist orientation and affective organizational commitment more accurately by controlling for culture factors.

Future research could also test presence of relationships between collectivist orientation and components of organizational commitment other than affective



commitment such as normative commitment and continuance commitment. Normative commitment occurs when an employee believes being loyal to an organization is a right thing to do. Continuance commitment occurs when an employee believes he/she cannot afford loss of various benefits by leaving the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Special attention could be paid to different impacts that collectivist orientation has on the development of normative commitment and continuance commitment.

### Research Limitations

The present study has several methodological limitations, the first being bias from common method variance. Since all the scales measuring the constructs in the present study are the same self-reported 5-point Likert scales, test results may have an inflated bias due to common method variance. Further studies thus should apply different types of measurements to control biases caused by common methods. The second limitation relates to back translation issues. Back translation is generally regarded as an effective approach to ensure psychometric equivalence across different languages. We did not perform back translation specifically; instead we did a pilot study to determine the cultural and psychometric equivalence of the measurement. During the pilot study, we asked the 30 Chinese students to comment on the translation of the measurement. If any portion of the measurement had a different meaning in the two languages, it was modified. Therefore, we believe we were justified in our confidence in the psychometric equivalence of our measurement through the use of a pilot study. Nevertheless, a back translation could have provided more objective information as to whether the measurement is equivalent across two different languages and cultures. Future studies could combine back translation with a pilot study to achieve the goal of measurement equivalence.

This study also has a sampling limitation. On average, the samples are quite young (mean age = 26.46) and have relatively low tenure (mean tenure = 1.96). This sample may not represent the population, thereby influencing the generalizability of the study's result. Future studies of this type should use samples with demographic characteristics more resembling those of the working population so as to improve the generalizability of test results.

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