Track: International marketing (#3)

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CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS OF SELLING BEHAVIOR: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract:

This study analyzes the impact of individual-level culture variables (i.e. power distance, uncertainty avoidance) on emotional intelligence which in turn impacts various types of relational selling behaviors (i.e. adaptive selling and customer oriented behavior). By analyzing salespersons' survey data from industrial firms in two developing countries, we find that the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and salesperson behavior is dependent on power distance and uncertainty avoidance in the case of Croatia, and on uncertainty avoidance in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We outline some implications for future research in international marketing and sales, but especially focus on the implications for managing increasingly internationalized relational exchanges in the contemporary sales environment.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, culture, customer oriented behavior, adaptive selling behavior, developing countries

CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS OF SELLING BEHAVIOR: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI), rooted in the social intelligence literature (Goleman, 1995), was introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), defining it as the ability to deal with one's own and others' emotions and to use this information to assist individuals in problem solving and decision making. This conceptualization was later expanded into a four-pronged EI model consisting of perception, usage, understanding and management of emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Despite EI being identified as a "critical component of effective selling […] research linking EI to relationship marketing and selling is limited" (Heffernan, O'Neil, Travaglione & Droulers, 2008, p. 188). While recent research suggests a direct and positive impact of EI on sales performance (Boyatzis, Good, & Massa, 2012; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011; Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Prentice & King, 2013), the increasing internationalization of sales (Baldauf & Lee, 2011; Panagopoulos et al., 2011) has shifted the research and managerial foci to the interplay between culture and EI (Gunkel, Schlägel & Engle, 2014). This is based on the so called cultural-relativist perspective of emotions in psychology (Emmerling, Shanwal & Mandal, 2008). Recent empirical findings from developing markets show that the relationship between EI and sales performance is mediated by other forms of behavior (Kadić-Maglajlić, Vida & Obadia, 2014). This reaffirms the call by sales scholars for more international studies across diverse country contexts which would help to better understand the cultural antecedents in the EI-selling behavior relationship and the degree of cultural embeddedness of selling behavior (Moncrief, Marshall, Lee & Cron, 2014; Asare, Yang & Alejandro, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to analyze individual-level cultural antecedents (power distance and uncertainty avoidance) of selling behavior via EI as a mediator in two developing country contexts (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia).We contribute to the sales literature by filling an empirical gap for non-Western, emerging and developing cross-country sales studies (Panagopoulos et al., 2011), as well as to the broader international management literature by analyzing the impact of individual-level culture on an individual's EI which in turn affects specific types of behaviors (Gunkel, Schlägel & Enkel, 2014). Drawing on the organizational psychology literature, Stubbs Koman, Wolff and Howard (2008, p. 39) in particular point to the limited research on both "effects of emotion and emotional intelligence in work groups and teams" as well as on the impact of "culture on emotional processing in work groups and teams". Our results hold important theoretical and managerial implications for international marketing and sales, since salespersons not only need to increasingly manage cross-cultural relationships with their international buyers, as their firms expand internationally, but also because global firms tend to utilize sales teams composed of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds (Storbacka, Ryals, Davies, & Nenonen, 2009). Therefore, the knowledge about culture related variables which drive salespeople EI and indirectly their behaviors is needed to understand and effectively manage individual salespeople, sales team dynamics and ultimately sales performance.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Culture and Emotional Intelligence

According to Erez and Gati (2004) culture has a multi-level influence on human beliefs and emotions, as well as structural and dynamic dimensions. At the so called macro level culture "transmits […] beliefs, values, symbols and emotional patterns [which] are shared meaning

systems transferred through top-down process of socialization" (Stubbs Koman, Wolff & Howard, 2008, p. 40). At the individual level, Hofstede's (2001) analogy of culture as software of the mind perhaps best explains the cultural impact on values, beliefs, on cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes and responses of individuals in a society (Aycan, 2000).

Based on cognitive appraisal theory (Levy, 1984; Lazarus, 1991) cognition moderates both the awareness/interpretation, as well as the behavioral response stages in the emotional process. At both stages, culture impacts both interpretation (Leavitt & Lipman-Blumen, 1995) and behavioral respose of individuals (Fineman, 1993). Since cultural responses differ across cultures (Stubbs Koman, Wolff & Howard, 2008), EI varies and takes on different meanings across cultures also in terms of managerial effectiveness (Shipper, Kincaid, Rotondo & Hoffman, 2003).

According to Harzing and Hofstede (1996) higher power distance (PD) and uncertainty avoidance (UA) are linked to stronger resistance to change and influence adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is also an integral part of culture as an "internalized system" based on specific norms (Levy, 1984, p. 232). Thus, given the focus of this study on the role of culture related variables and EI on two types of relational selling behaviors (i.e. adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling) which both require from a salesperson to adjust their behaviors to the specific sales situation at hand, we delimited our investigation to the impact of these two cultural dimensions on EI.

PD is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001). In countries where power distance is high, it is socially acceptable and very common that members of the society overtly express emotions to each other, where in general superiors are expressing emotions such as anger, while subordinates would express sadness of being afraid (Ekermans, 2009). This implies that members

of society where power distance is high are constantly faced with the need to be able to perceive and understand emotions of people in different hierarchical position, but at the same time to be able to understand and manage their own emotions. Thus, we hypothesize that **H1:** ***Power distance is positively related to Emotional Intelligence***.

UA refers to the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous or an unknown situations (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals coming from high uncertainty avoidance countries understand expression of emotions as socially acceptable and normal (Sharma, Deller, Biswal, & Mandal, 2009). They believe it is socially acceptable to express their own emotions often as anxiety is released through the showing of emotions; they also feel the need to interpret emotional expressions of others (Ekermans, 2009; Hofstede, 2001). In those cultures, individuals seek to acknowledge, perceive, and understand the expressed emotions in order to understand the behavior of others and adapt their own behavior to the demands of a specific situation. In this way, by practicing such culturally relevant behaviors, individuals in high uncertainty avoidance societies keep improving their own emotional intelligence from an early age on. Thus, we hypothesize that ***H2: Uncertainty avoidance is positively related to Emotional Intelligence***.

Emotional Intelligence and Selling Behaviors

Weitz, Sujan and Sujan (1986, p. 175) defined adaptive selling as the "altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation." Sujan, Weitz and Kumar (1994) suggested that for salespeople to succeed, they should be adaptive with their cognitive side (i.e. through the exercise of adaptive selling) as well as through their emotional expressions. Rozell, Pettijohn and Parker (2004) argue that salespersons with greater EI are more efficient in selecting the optimal course of sales action because they are able to fully understand and perceive changes in customer

behavior, and to use emotions to achieve goals and maintain good relationships with customers. We posit that an emotionally intelligent individual will be able to exercise adaptive selling behavior in a superior way. ***H3: Emotional Intelligence is positively related to Adaptive Selling***.

Salesperson orientation has been conceptualized and operationalized through two sub-constructs, namely, *selling orientated behavior* (SOB) and *customer orientated behavior* (COB). In this study, both forms of salesperson orientation are employed, although in different terms. Salespeople who are practicing customer-oriented selling behavior have a high concern for others and themselves (Schwepker, 2003) and focus on the needs of the customer. This in turn suggests their willingness to work with clients over extended periods of time (Schultz & Good, 2000). COB requires that a seller understands the buyer's entire value chain (Day & Wensley, 1988), not only as it is today but also as it evolves over time subject to internal and market dynamics. In order to exercise COB, a salesperson should be able to perceive and understand emotions of the customer, allowing the salesperson to fully understand the present and future needs of the customer and offer appropriate support. ***H4: Emotional Intelligence is positively related to Customer-oriented behavior.***

The literature often depicts SOB with negative connotation reflecting the deleterious mainstream opinion about SOB as compared to COB. SOB is conceptualized as behavior that seeks to stimulate the demand for the services or products being sold rather than selling services or products in response to customer needs (COB) (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). The definition shows SOB contradicts the currently prevailing paradigm in contemporary sales management with the focus on relationship marketing principles. Thus, we posit that EI is not significantly related to SOB. In order to test this assumption we introduce SOB as a control variable to our model, without formally hypothesizing this relationship, as depicted in our conceptual model in Figure 1.

---- Insert Figure 1 about here ----

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANAYLSIS

Sampling and Measures

Our data set includes samples of salespeople in Bosnia and Herzegovina (n=286; 28.6% response rate) and Croatia (n=245; 24.5% response rate) working for at least one year in firms with more than five employees. Both countries can be considered as developing countries. Given the challenging nature of collecting data in emerging and developing markets (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006) related to validity and reliability issues (Lages, Pfajfar, & Shoham, 2015), legal and cultural issues (Moncrief et al., 2014) and the absence of existing secondary databases (Panagopoulos et al., 2011), we constructed an ad-hoc database of 1,000 potential respondents in each country based on Internet resources and industry reports. Only respondents where the firm had full control over its sales force in the past year and who personally performed regular sales activities on a daily basis were asked to participate in the survey.

Bosnian respondents worked for firms in various sectors: wholesale and automotive (26.5%), financial and insurance (17%), manufacturing (16%), IT (7.5%), pharmaceutical (5%), accommodation and food services (4.5%), construction (4%), and other industries. 68% percent were employed in small and medium-sized enterprises (between 11-250 employees); 21% in large firms and 11% in micro firms (under 10 employees). The sample was well balanced in terms of gender (41% female), with an average sales working experience of 8.4 years.

Croatian respondents also worked in diverse industries: wholesale and automotive (20.8%), financial and insurance (19.2%), tourism (10.2%), manufacturing (9.8%), IT (9.8%), pharmaceutical (9.2%), transportation and storage (3.7%), construction (3.3%), energy (3.3%) and other industries. The sample contained a slightly larger portion of female respondents (51%), with an average sales working experience of 8.8 years.

Constructs were operationalized based on the previously validated measures in the literature and adapted to the new cultural context according to guidelines for conducting cross-national research by Craig & Douglas (2005). Likert-type scales were employed for all measures. PD and UA were operationalized as single-item constructs, as Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2009) provide support for the employment of single-item constructs in cases where constructs can be considered concrete (overall assessments), within limited sample sizes and in cases of diverse sampled populations (industry variation). Further, Hayduk & Littvay (2012) suggest that the usage of single-item measures encourages the development of theoretically sophisticated models and permits stronger statistical control of potential confounders while encouraging detailed investigation of causal mechanisms. Therefore, the following indicators were taken from Sharma (2010): "People in higher positions have more power those in lower positions" for PD, and "I am very cautious about how I spend my money" for UA.

EI was operationalized through the Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 1998) and specified as a second order construct. The widely utilized five-item ADAPTS-SV scale developed by Robinson et al. (2002) was used to measure adaptive selling behavior. COB and SOB were assessed with the short form of SOCO scale (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) proposed by Thomas, Soutar and Ryan (2001).

Measurement Model Analysis

The psychometric properties of the scales were tested with LISREL 8.71 in both countries. As indicated in Table 1, the CFA results show that each scale displays appropriate reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) statistics. The fit statistics of the measurement models in both countries indicate a good fit. The convergent validity of the measures is supported by inspecting the t-values of the loadings of the measurement variables on

respective latent variables (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). Using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) procedure, discriminant validity was assessed for all latent variables. All AVE values were larger than the shared variances (i.e. squared correlations) of each pair of constructs in both countries.

---- Insert Table 1 about here ----

In order to test our data for common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012) we conducted Harman's single-factor test and did not find evidence that our two data sets are having common method variance problems. We also conducted invariance analysis for all measures, as suggested by Steenkamp & Baumgartner (1998). Configural, metric, and partial scalar invariance were confirmed across the Bosnian and the Croatian samples which allowed comparison between the two countries.

Structural Model Analysis

The hypothesized relationships were tested using structural equation modeling (LISREL 8.71) using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure. The standardized path coefficients, standardized errors and associated t-values for are presented in Table 2.

---- Insert Table 2 about here ----

Our findings show that PD is positively related to EI in both countries (H1), but statistically significant only in the case of Croatia (CRO: $\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), while non-significant for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH: $\beta = 0.06$; not significant). UA is positively related to EI (H2) in both samples (CRO: $\beta = 0.17$; $p < 0.01$ and BH: $\beta = 0.25$; $p < 0.01$). We were further

able to confirm H3 and H4 across both data sets. More specifically, we found that EI is positively related to customer-oriented behavior (CRO: $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$ and BH: $\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.01$). We also found that EI is a significant antecedent of adaptive selling behavior (CRO: $\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$ and BH: $\beta = 0.31$; $p < 0.01$). As we assumed, our control variable, SOB, was not significantly related to EI in either of the two country samples.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study we tap into the somewhat uncharted area of the role of cultural variables on emotional intelligence and subsequently work-related behaviors in the industrial sales context. Overall, the findings of our study lend support for the premise stated in the literature that emotions are socially and culturally shaped and maintained (Ekermans, 2009). Our analyses of empirical data from salespersons in two developing countries confirm that UA has a significant and positive impact on EI in both country samples. On the other hand, we found a positive and significant effect of PD on EI in the case of Croatia, but not in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These findings are somewhat consistent with the results of the recent nine-country study by Gunkel et al. (2014) which found significant effect of UA on all four dimensions of EI, but could not confirm the relationship between PD and EI. The authors contend that individuals from societies scoring high on UA tend to pay more attention to understand one's own emotions and regulate them, as well observe others and interpret their behavior in order to circumvent the possible misinterpretations and unpleasant situations.

In addition, the current study enhances the sales literature by highlighting the role of EI in driving two focal forms of relational selling behaviors. While there is ample evidence in the sales literature that salesperson relational behaviors lead to enhanced sales performance outcomes (e.g. Schwepker, 2003; Kadić-Maglajlić, 2014), EI effects on specific types of selling behavior have

been thus far sparsely examined in the literature. Our results regarding the direct link between EI and selling behaviors suggests that emotional abilities are essential to effectively employ strategies and techniques for interacting with the customers when practicing adaptive and customer-oriented selling.

With respect to managerial implications, the findings of this research offer initial insights into how cultural background determines individuals' EI and their sales related behaviors. Such knowledge should inform human resource and sales management in setting up more coherent and productive (cross-cultural) sales teams when those are needed, and effectively select personnel for sales tasks that involve cross-cultural interactions and/or necessitate effective relational selling behaviors. Moreover, our findings related to the role of UA (and partly PD) as factors underlying a salesperson's EI and ultimately the performance driving adaptive selling and customer-oriented behaviors have important implications for the frequently tenacious challenges in (multinational) sales firms, i.e., recruitment, selection, motivation and training of sales personnel (Storbacka et al., 2009; Panagopoulos et al, 2011). For example, in this study we found that salespersons low on individual-level cultural dimensions of UA and PD may need substantially greater needs for training and development programs in terms of how to apply their EI to effectively utilize customer-oriented and adaptive selling behaviors than salespersons high on UA and PD. Considering that individual-level cultural orientations (UA, PD), as well as EI levels are likely to vary widely across individuals on the sales team, these characteristics should be carefully assessed for each salesperson prior to entering the training process so as to optimize the effectiveness of sales trainings. This is particularly important given that "one size fits all" EI training approach rarely works and that development of sales professionals can be excessively costly for industrial sales firms, particularly in multinational settings. Overall, the results of this study reaffirm the potential value in examining cultural dimensions and cultural background of

the employees in order to effectively manage, develop and motivate individuals from different cultural settings (Taras et al., 2011).

In terms of research limitations, much effort was invested in this study to overcome the various challenges of data collection in the two developing country settings, particularly as related to the respondent sampling frames (e.g., Panagopoulos et al., 2011; Assare et al., 2012). While we collected data from two under-researched developing countries still in the transition process, future research should provide a more comprehensive cross-country samples which would not only include countries at various levels of development (which may impact selling behavior based on industrial organization, market structure and strategic orientation of firms), but also countries with divergent cultural orientations. In this way, external validity of research findings would be greatly enhanced, which is particularly relevant when addressing the degree of cross-cultural contingency in selling behavior in multinational settings. We also acknowledge the use of single-item measures of PD and UA. Future research should cross-validate our findings by building on multi-item operationalization of culture based on individual-level Hofstede's typology which despite some drawbacks (Taras et al, 2011) offers comparability of results with existing research efforts.

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FIGURE 1: Conceptual Model

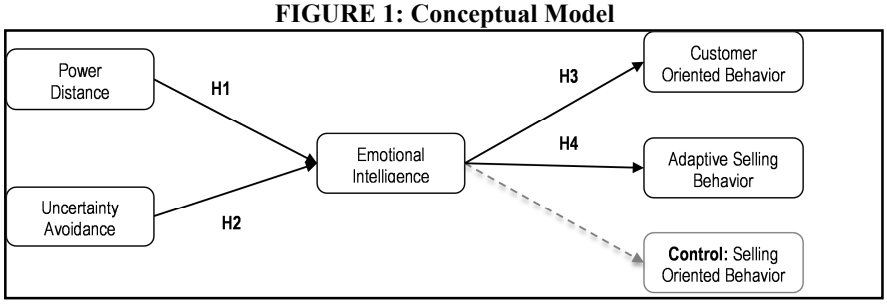

TABLE 1: Results of Confirmatory Factory Analysis

		Std. Loadings	
		CRO	**BH**
Adaptive Selling Behavior (CRO: CR=0.870, AVE=0.630); (BH CR=0.806, AVE=0.512)			
ASB1	When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach.	0.625	0.625
ASB2	I like to experiment with different sales approaches.	0.800	0.722
ASB3	I am very flexible in the selling approach I use.	0.868	0.763
ASB4	I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.	0.858	0.743
ASB5	I try to understand how one customer differs from another.*	-	-

Customer Orientated Behavior (CRO: CR=0.819, AVE=0.536); (BH CR=0.809, AVE=0.517)			
COB1	I try to figure out what a customer's needs are.*	-	-
COB2	I always have the customer's best interest in mind.	0.613	0.704
COB3	I try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product/service that helps solve that problem.	0.653	0.627
COB4	I offer the product/service that is best suited to the customer's problem.	0.752	0.718
COB5	I try to find out what kind of products/services will be most helpful to a customer.	0.880	0.815
Selling Orientated Behavior (CRO: CR=0.819, AVE=0.532); (BH CR=0.798, AVE=0.500)			
SOB1	I try to sell as much as I can rather than to satisfy a customer.	0.734	0.638
SOB2	It is necessary to stretch the truth in describing a product to a customer. *	-	-
SOB3	I try to sell a customer all I can convince them to buy, even if I think it is more than a wise customer would buy.	0.735	0.789
SOB4	I paint too rosy a picture of my product/service to make them sound as good as possible.	0.627	0.601
SOB5	I decide what product/service to offer on the basis of what I can convince customers to accept, not on the basis of what will satisfy them in the long run.	0.811	0.780
Power Distance			
PD1	I easily conform to the wishes of someone in a higher position than mine.	0.932	0.946
Uncertanty Avoidance			
UA1	I am very cautious about how I spend my money.	0.938	0.940
Emotional Intelligence_Managing Others (CRO: CR=0.797, AVE=0.568); (BH CR=0.780, AVE=0.542)			
EI13	I arrange events others enjoy.	0.805	0.798
EI24	I compliment others when they have done something well.	0.690	0.721
EI30	I help other people feel better when they are down.	0.762	0.686
Emotional Intelligence_Managing Own (CRO: CR=0.692, AVE=0.532); (BH CR=0.657, AVE=0.492)			
EI28	When I am faced with a challenge, I never give up because I know I will be successful	0.639	0.617
EI31	I use good moods to help myself keep trying in the face of obstacles.	0.810	0.777
Emotional Intelligence_Emotions Perception (CRO: CR=0.727, AVE=0.571); (BH CR=0.756, AVE=0.607)			
EI29	I know what other people are feeling just by looking at them.	0.717	0.804
EI32	I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voice.	0.793	0.754
Emotional Intelligence_Emotions Utilization (CRO: CR=0.682, AVE=0.518); (BH CR=0.786, AVE=0.656)			
EI17	When I am in a positive mood, solving problems is easy for me.	0.738	0.648
EI20	When I am in a positive mood, I am able to come up with new ideas.	0.701	0.944
Emotional Intelligence (second-order construct) (CRO: CR=0.911, AVE=0.722); (BH CR=0.871, AVE=0.633)			
	Managing Others	0.943	0.931
	Managing Own	0.910	0.799
	Emotions Perception	0.759	0.783
	Emotions Utilization	0.770	0.642

Measurement Model Fit Indexes

CRO: $\chi2$=312.03, d.f.=214, $\chi2$/d.f.=1.45, p=0.00; RMSEA=0.043, GFI=0.900; NNFI=0.966; CFI=0.971
BH: $\chi2$=340.02, d.f.=214, $\chi2$/d.f.=1.58, p=0.00; RMSEA=0.045, GFI=0.905; NNFI=0.946; CFI=0.954

CR.= composite reliability, AVE= average variance extracted,
*Items eliminated during the purification procedure

TABLE 2: Results of the Structural Models

Relationships	Hypotheses	St. path coefficients		St. error		t-value	
		CRO	BH	CRO	BH	CRO	BH
PD → EI	**H1**	0.23	0.06	0.06	0.04	2.92*	0.83
UA → EI	**H2**	0.17	0.25	0.04	0.03	2.28*	3.40*
EI → COB	**H3**	0.38	0.21	0.12	0.12	4.43*	2.72*
EI → ASB	**H4**	0.27	0.31	0.11	0.11	3.49*	3.94*
EI → SOB	**Control**	-0.11	0.01	0.20	0.18	-1.44	0.06

Fit Indexes

CRO: $\chi2$=244.16, d.f.=131, $\chi2$/d.f.=1.86, p=0.00; RMSEA=0.059, NNFI=0.937, GFI=0.900; CFI=0.946
BH: $\chi2$=248.77 d.f.=131, $\chi2$/d.f.=1.90, p=0.00; RMSEA=0.056; NNFI=0.935; GFI=0.912; CFI=0.944

*p<0.01 critical t-value is 2.325