

A review of involution and its psychological interpretation

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Abstract: In recent years, the concept of involution has been widely spread, and more and more articles begin to use the concept with its extended meanings to discuss social problems in China. However, there is little discussion on the evolving meanings of involution, which makes the use of the concept quite arbitrary. In the early stage of the development of involution, it was a concept based on economic theory and the tendency of the generalization of the concept calls for more systemic discussion across academic disciplines. In order to take a new perspective to understand employee performance, especially some deviant or withdrawal behaviors, this paper analyzes the specific meaning of the concept and the possible psychological factors behind it. After the theoretical discussion of the concept, this paper also tries to seek solutions to effective motivation at workplace.

Keywords: involution, needs, functional fixedness, motivation, diversity, managerial ethics

Introduction

In recent years, Involution has been regarded as a concept that is closely related to some phenomenon of Chinese society, frequently used and widely influencing researches in the field of Chinese sociology. This concept was first put forward by American sociologist Clifford Geertz, and gradually

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entered Chinese academia with the research of Huang Zongzhi¹ and Prasenjit Duara². It is mainly used to describe the phenomenon of self-circulation and stagnation of development where the same behavior is repeated for a long time and maintained at a certain level without any changes or promotions³. With the popularity of the works of the scholars mentioned above, this concept has been adopted by more and more scholars in different fields and used to describe some social phenomenon. In the field of management, some authors have adopted involution or its related concepts to describe and demonstrate some viewpoints. It can be seen that involution will have a positive impact on enterprise management.

However, at present, there is still a lack of theoretical research on the concept of involution in China. Due to the lack of theoretical monographs, the definition of the concept of involution is not clear and its use is arbitrary⁴, which leads to the vague connotation and low operability of the concept and restricts its further development.

This paper firstly focuses on the concept of involution, discussing its origin and development history in order to illustrate the changing connotations of involution. After that, a new tint of meaning is added to the concept based on China's post-pandemic context and a more concise and explicit definition is proposed in order to utilize the concept for a broader application. After clarifying the generalized definition of involution, the paper explores further to examine the new concept of involution underpinned by several psychological theories and extends the discussion into understanding individual behaviors. Finally, based on the analysis of psychological impact of involution on individuals, the paper proposes suggestions to avoid involution and improve motivation in work organizations.

¹ Philip C.C. Huang (also known as Huang Zongzhi), *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 1988, p. 128.

² Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 1991, p. 78.

³ Shiding Liu, Zeqi Qiu, "The Discussion of the Concept of Involution", *Sociological Studies* 2004, no. 5, pp. 96–110.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

1. The evolution of the concept of involution

The concept of involution was first put forward by Clifford Geertz⁵ and used to describe a kind of agricultural development model with stagnant development and only quantitative change but no qualitative change. Gradually, it was extended to be the general term of systematic operational phenomenon with no substantial growth but only quantitative change.

After the publication of Huang Zongzhi's book⁶ about smallholder families and rural development in the Yangtze river delta, the word involution gradually became popular in China and started to be used in many different topics. It further developed and gradually evolved across the border, and began to be applied to the study of life philosophy, grassroots political power construction, agricultural reform, enterprise management and other aspects.

1.1. The origin of involution: Geertz's agriculture involution

The concept of involution was first put forward by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *Agricultural Involution: the process of ecological changes in Indonesia in 1963*. In the book, he describes: "...the input of more labor force does not lead to a significant decline in per capita income, at least indirectly absorbs almost all the surplus population generated by the entry of westerners. For such a process of self-conquest, I call it 'agricultural involution'"⁷.

Thus, it can be seen that the original meaning of Involution (i.e., Agricultural Involution, as Geertz called) refers to the cycle mode in which, under certain conditions, a certain agricultural mode will enter into a cycle mode of stagnant development with only quantitative increase or decrease but no qualitative change when it reaches a certain stage of development. Java agriculture, as mentioned above, due to various obstacles, lost the opportunity to further upgrade

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1969, p. 77.

⁶ Ph.C.C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change...*

⁷ C. Geertz, *Agricultural Involution...*, p. 77.

to senior agricultural form of curing for labor filled agricultural model, in the ‘labor input – production – consumption – labor put in’ cycle: no new patterns of agricultural is produced, and there is only the cycle under the old system.

1.2. The development of involution: Huang Zongzhi’s involution growth

Since the concept of agriculture involution appeared, the concept of Involution has been widely used, accepted and developed by some other scholars, among which Huang Zongzhi and Prasenjit Duara are the representatives.

In his book *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Huang Zongzhi combined the concept of Involution with the principle of diminishing marginal effect of economics, to study old China’s economic development and social changes, and clearly proposed the concept of Involution Growth. He says that “the rural economy in the Yangtze river delta did see considerable growth during the Ming and Qing dynasties” and “the rural economy also shows some degree of growth”, but after Analyzing the annual income of the whole family, he points out: “but a closer look shows that this increase has come at the cost of diminishing returns per day. The increase in annual household income has come not from the increase in pay per unit of work day, but from the greater use of household Labour... This is ‘growth without development’, or ‘excessive growth’ (i.e., internal volume growth)”⁸.

Huang’s involution refers to an economic development mode of increasing quantity without promoting quality, which further expands the application scope of agriculture involution proposed by Greertz. From then on, the concept of involution is widely adopted in China and used to study the operating principles of small-scale peasant economy.

1.3. The extension of involution: Duara’s state involution

Further cross-disciplinary development of the theory represented by Duara, in his book *Culture, Power, and the State*. Duara developed Greertz’s theory into a new subject,

⁸ Ph.C.C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change...*, p. 128.

politics, and put forward the new concept, the state involution. In his book, Duara analyzes that national institutions expand the exercise of their functions “by copying or expand the old country and social relationships, such as China’s old profitable brokerage institution”⁹. Duara uses the term Involution to describe that the state system no longer continues to change and create new systems, but constantly expands the old system to solve existing problems, and is also trapped in a cycle of only quantitative change (the increase and decrease in quantity within the old institutions) without qualitative change (the birth of the new systems).

In his book, Duara admits that his understanding of Involution is different from that of Greertz, and the fields concerned are not limited to agriculture and economy. However, he also admits that there are some key points in common with Greertz’ involution. First, Involution is the growth without improving efficiency and actual development. Second, involution growth depends on the regeneration and survival of old ways¹⁰.

1.4. Arguments about involution

Up to now, the application of involution has gone beyond the original scope of agricultural involution, and has been applied in many fields. But the process is controversial. Liu and Qiu¹¹ pointed out that all the scholars mentioned above have different understandings of involution, and their methods to analyze the phenomenon of involution are also different, which may lead to contradictory findings. For instance, Huang completed his research of involution by studying the marginal productivity of labor problems but Greertz did not do such analysis, so the original meaning of the concept sees an obvious discrepancy and a shift into another research direction.

Therefore, there is a phenomenon that different researchers’ definitions of involution are somewhat uncorrelated, and the new researchers do not completely follow the path of the

⁹ P. Duara, *Culture, Power and the State...*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Sh. Liu, Z. Qiu, “The Discussion of the Concept of Involution”.

previous ones. It can be seen that the methodology adopted by various scholars to study this concept is different from each other, and the connotations of involution proposed by them are not consistent. This split makes the concept still in the pre-science stage at present, and the inconsistency of the concept makes its application difficult and chaotic¹². However, such kind of inconsistency and abuse of this concept suddenly became aggravated in China in 2020.

2. The new facets of involution in China

The development of involution has gone through a long period and crossed many different fields. At the same time, it has been interpreted by different scholars, which makes it complicated to trace back and study this concept. The academics have not paid enough attention to this concept, so the research on its inherent meaning is also very limited. There is a lack of widely recognized and rigorous literature to explain this concept, and there is also a lack of standards in the academic category. What's more, this concept can be easily cited to explain any new behavioral tendency at social or individual levels.

2.1. A New call for involution to alleviated social pressure

The concept was first applied to discuss a specific mode of agricultural operation, and then it was further developed into a discussion of small-scale peasant economy. Although there are new ways of applying political theory, in general, the use of the concept has been limited to two broad frameworks: the agricultural economy and the system of government. This can be clearly seen in the existing literature on involution concepts. In the relatively authoritative literature database in China, CNKI, relevant literatures on the concept before the year 2020 are basically about the construction of rural economic system and the construction of government system, which indicate that involution can be actually used to analyze Chinese political and economics phenomenon.

¹² Ibidem.

However, after the second half of the year 2020, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic impact on China coupled with approaching end-of-year review, suddenly a large number of articles using this concept sprang on the Internet, and most of these articles have gone beyond the research scope of the key scholars and applied the concept to a much broader field. These fields cover various aspects ranging from China's industry development to public administration¹³, from teachers' career development¹⁴ to students' performance improvement¹⁵, and from China's urbanization process¹⁶ to rural tourism¹⁷, with even more extensive social interests than academic research on this concept. The jungles of theoretical discussions are indeed beyond the scope of the original use of the concept. Its new connotation, as vigorous as a kind of self-generated concept by the mass media, has been used as an attribution to any social pressures causing either personal or social stagnancy.

2.2. A new trend of the generalization of involution

After reviewing its original and conventional meanings and introducing a plethora of new applications in China, we can try to consolidate the core viewpoints and re-define the concept, which can be roughly summarized into the following three points:

No development: nothing new happens in the old modes.

Run in cycle: the old modes keep running, but do not produce new things.

¹³ Zongzhi Huang (also known as Philip C.C. Huang), "Involution Revisited and Thoughts on De-Involution", *Opening-up Times* 2021, no. 01, pp. 157–168+8.

¹⁴ Mingting Fu, "On Involution: Teachers Career Development in Rural China", *Journal of Education Forum* 2020, no. 47, pp. 4–6.

¹⁵ Shuihong Gao, "Involution: Cultural Reproduction of School Education Process", *Journal of Education Research and Experiment* 2020, no. 04, pp. 13–18.

¹⁶ Chongming Sun, Jihong. Ye, "The Involution of Development District Administration During Transformation Process – The Discussion Based on Administrative Ecology", *Administration Forum* 2020, no. 27(01), pp. 42–48.

¹⁷ Guanjun Wang, "The Analysis of Involution of Entrepreneurial Management in Communities", *Agriculture and Economy* 2020, no. 06, pp. 44–46.

Negative evaluation: the old modes produce things which are subjectively negative.

These three points form the conditions necessary to describe involution in current social life in China, and any social or personal development that meets the requirements of these three points can be reasonably called involution. The concept has been generalized to represent any nominal or pseudo growth without real development, or a state of circular stagnation. Therefore, involution remains as a concept rather than a theory, at least for now, alluding to a complex system behind any visible phenomenon.

Some articles pointed out that the term is meaningless¹⁸. However, we believe that the concept can serve as an important indicator for behavioral studies at individual and group levels. First, the existence of a phenomenon and its underlying mechanism may help open up new directions for subsequent analysis. Second, it describes a kind of commonality of human behavior to some extent. To understand such tendency of human behavior, key concepts can be generalized in order to capture common features and judge whether an entity risk falling into involution, and therefore send out managerial warnings. The wide spread of this concept in the mass media mainly manifests the second function, which encourages public participation in discussion and provides a plethora of different views for people. This explains why a large number of articles directly use this concept without defining it, because what such articles need is not a rigorous academic concept, but an enlightening and thought-provoking symbol. Therefore, we focus on psychological perspectives to further examine the managerial implications of the concept of involution with aim to best utilizing this concept and understanding organizational behavior related to involution, especially deviant ones such as withdrawal behavior. How to break the spell and find effective ways to motivate individuals, and how to drag them out of the stagnant circles is of great significance for today's work organizations.

¹⁸ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Jiangsu People Press, Nanjing 2003.

3. Involution and needs hierarchy

Examining from individual behavioral level, we could clearly identify that the abstract conceptualization of involution summarized above bears some similarities with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For example, as described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the satisfaction of lower needs makes the generation of higher needs possible, and the purpose of human behavior is to continuously meet various needs¹⁹. In other words, if the lower demand cannot be satisfied, the higher demand will not be generated, and individuals will be in the process of satisfying the lower demand for a long time, which is similar to the circular process of growth without development mentioned in the internalization.

Development refers to the generation of higher needs. To meet higher needs, individuals will have more active behaviors and pursue self-transcendence. In this way, it can be reasonably believed that no generation of higher needs is the signal of involution, which may result in conservative behaviors and the advancement of behaviors to fulfill higher needs will not appear.

3.1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Abraham Maslow is a famous American social psychologist and the founder of the third-generation psychology. His major achievements include the development of humanistic psychology and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow proposed in 1943 that human needs are a complex system structure, which can be divided into five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs (love and belonging needs), respect needs, and self-actualization needs.

Needs lurk in everyone's heart and generate demands, and individuals show different needs in different periods. Individuals may have multiple demands in the same period, but there is always a dominant demand in each period, which is the dominant demand. Survival and instinct mainly

¹⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science*, Gateway, South-lake 1966.

reflect the low-level needs, while high-level needs are the main reason to stimulate individuals' enthusiasm. High-level needs are more attractive. Self-realization needs are the highest level of needs, that is, through the most effective and the most perfect way, to give play to their potential, so as to achieve the ideal of life. Only by emancipating the basic physiological needs of human beings, it is possible to develop towards higher needs.

This theory has already been widely applied in education, management and other fields. For example, Antal, Debucquet and Fremeaux²⁰ proved through empirical research that events in individuals and organizations can change the needs of employees. Habitual communication systems in organizations can significantly affect the generation and satisfaction of high-level requirements. The satisfaction of needs and communication in business have some kinds of relationship.

3.2. The connection between involution and Maslow's hierarchy of needs

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, it can be inferred that human needs tend to develop from low level to high level, and the satisfaction of low-level needs is the basic condition for the emergence of high-level needs. Demands itself represents both the primary drive of human behavior and the source of human initiative and mental health. Gratification of requirement gives rise to health through what Maslow refers to as gratification health.

What happens if the requirements are not met, especially at a lower level? Take a beggar's life as an example, the lack of food means that his physical needs cannot be met. The hunger will force him to constantly get more food. If we assume that he has been unable to get enough food, then his behavior will always revolve around the key task of getting food. This case manifests a cycle and all his behavior is around the acquisition of food. Among them, it is difficult and even impossible to identify more advanced behavior pattern. A hungry man will not endeavor to seek the truth nor focus

²⁰ Ariane B. Antal, Gervaise Debucquet, Sandrine Fremeaux, "Meaningful Work and Artistic Interventions in Organizations: Conceptual Development and Empirical Exploration", *Journal of Business Research* 2018, no. 85, pp. 375–385.

on love for music and the demand for dignity. Since the critical issue at hand is about life and death, therefore the rest of the needs are suppressed by the urgent one.

The behavior focusing on satisfying low-level needs, the process of continuous circulation before the satisfaction is achieved, and the “vulgar” purpose (e.g., to simply fill one’s belly) despised in both theory and practice, seem to meet the relevant requirements of defining Involution. The above analysis shows, to some extent, that involution is prevalent in human behavior, as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs starts from lower-end needs.

Therefore, we can see a clear correlation between Maslow’s need hierarchy and the concept of involution. If there is no sufficient drive pushing one’s needs up to the satisfaction-progression process, one may get entangled with the lower-order needs. It means a person will not generate new motivation of improving his behavior or changing his behavior patterns but repeating his existing behavior pattern to fulfill his lower-order needs. Changes in the level of demand and needs will lead to changes in behavior, so the exact contents of needs must be analyzed before possibilities of behavior changes are discussed.

4. Involution and ERG

Clayton Alderfer, on the basis of the hierarchy of needs theory proposed by Maslow, conducted a study closer to practical experience and proposed a new humanistic theory of needs. Alderfer think that there are three kinds of core needs: the needs of survival (Existence), the relationship needs (Relatedness) and the needs of the growing development (Growth), thus the theory known as the ERG theory²¹.

4.1. Differences between hierarchy of needs and ERG

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs takes a kind of rigidly ascending structure, that is to say, the needs of the lower level must be fully satisfied before the needs of the higher level are satisfied,

²¹ Clayton P. Alderfer, “An Empirical Test of a New Theory of Human Needs”, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 1969, May, pp. 142–175.

and the two are irreversible. On the contrary, ERG theory does not hold that the hierarchy of needs is rigid. For example, even if a person's survival and interrelationship needs have not been completely satisfied, he can still work for the needs of growth and development, and the three needs can work at the same time.

In addition, the theory of ERG also proposes an idea called frustration-regression. Maslow believes that when a person's needs are not satisfied at a certain level, he may stay at this level until he is satisfied²². In contrast, ERG theory suggests that when a person is frustrated at a higher level of need, his needs at a lower level may increase instead. For example, if a person's social needs are not met, it may reinforce his desire for more money or better working conditions. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, ERG theory holds that the satisfaction of lower needs will trigger the desire for higher needs. Different from the theory of hierarchy of needs, ERG theory believes that multiple needs can act as incentive factors at the same time, and when the attempt to meet the needs of higher levels is frustrated, individuals will return to the needs of lower levels.

4.2. The connection between involution and ERG

The most important point of ERG theory is that it indicates that the absence of higher needs of individuals will lead to the enhancement of lower needs, and the emergence of higher needs does not mean the disappearance of lower needs, and in some cases, it may even be enhanced. Therefore, there is a possibility for behavior level to degenerate. Since lower needs may be reinforced, the motivation for behavior to return to meeting lower needs still exists, which can further explain the strong fixation on the previous motive, and tendency to stay inertial.

The existence of such situation can be interpreted from a negative sense. It can be considered that there is a reactionary force in human behavior change and human development cannot be achieved overnight. The existence of such

²² Ibidem.

factors also indicates the possibility of insinuation, at least in the context that behavior has internal circulation and internal driving force to maintain stability. The counter effect resulted from the unsatisfied higher needs may push one further back to the lower needs, leading to the degradation of high-level behavior to low-level behavior and showing the failure of behavior improvement. Individual behavior still cycles in the lower levels and efforts to change one's behavior to be better are undeveloped.

5. Involution and functional fixedness

There is a problem with the potential relationship between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and involution discussed above. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the satisfaction of lower needs will lead to the emergence of higher needs. Despite the above extreme assertions, everything seems to be naturally better, that is, there will not be the continuous cycle of so-called lower needs (negative orientation). However, another question emerges: Does the satisfaction of low-level needs necessarily and naturally lead to high-level needs, or is there an automatic upgrading of needs at higher levels and any underpinning behaviors to pursue demand satisfaction?

5.1. Functional fixedness: how is this habitual tendency formed?

Chronically repeated behavior has an inherent tendency to solidify, which may be used to analyze that human behavior will not naturally develop towards a higher level, that is, the so-called fixation on a lower level, the low-level cycle. Repetitive behavior over time may lead to a conditioned belief that individuals should behave in the same way, a condition known as Functional fixedness²³. Functional fixedness is a kind of psychological block, it can inhibit previously associated with some other uses for the perception of new features of the object, have adverse effect on

^B Yufang Bian, Qi Dong, "Can Matchboxes be Used as the Candlestick-Duncker's Functional Fixedness Experiment", *Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary School* 2012, no. 5, pp. 33–35.

problem solving. It's hard to see a new use for a familiar function or connection: the more important a function one sees for the first time, the harder it is to see another use for it, so it's hard to think creatively.

To investigate the effect of functional fixation on problem solving, psychologist Duncker conducted a candlestick experiment²⁴. In this experiment, two groups of subjects were asked to solve the same problem, but in different ways. The subjects were given a selection of materials, including three candles, three matchboxes, a few matches, a few thumbtacks, and a vertically placed cork board. It is required to use any objects on the table, and fix three candles on the cork board, parallel to the plane of the board and perpendicular to the table. There are two ways to set up the problem. The first way is to put candles, matches and thumbtacks in three matchboxes. In the second setting, the candles, matches and pins are set separately, with nothing in the matchbox. That is, the only difference between the two Settings is whether there is anything in the matchbox. In the experiment, the first group solved the problem independently in the first setting, and the second group solved the problem independently in the second setting. The researchers noted the number of individuals in each group who successfully solved the problem within the allotted 29 minutes. The answer is simple: simply light a match, melt the bottom of the candle, and then glue it to the matchbox. The next step is to pin the box to the board and match box into a candlestick, and the problem is solved.

The results of this experiment are very interesting. The researchers found that the first group did much worse than the second. During the allotted time, only 40 percent of the first group solved the problem, compared with 86 percent of the second group. There was only one difference between the two groups when it came to problem solving, namely whether the matchbox was separated from the match or not. Obviously, after the match box is filled with something, the subject is easily affected by functional fixation, and it is difficult to think that the matchbox can be used

²⁴ Ibidem.

as a candlestick. In contrast, while the match box is empty, the subject is more likely to think of using it and give full play to its other uses.

The implications of Duncker's experiment are profound. Creative problem solving requires constant vigilance against the effects of functional fixedness. Functional fixedness is a phenomenon in which it is difficult for a person to see other functions of an object after he knows its basic functions and make it as the only right function.

5.2. The connection between involution and functional fixedness

Existing ideas form a powerful force that helps us solve problems while solidifying our minds. This kind of involution occurs when a person encounters a new problem. It is always easy to treat and solve the new problem in the same way or experience that he used to deal with such problems. If all conditions have not changed, the use of existing experience and methods will be quickly solved, improving the efficiency of work and learning.

If we still follow the old ways and deal with the problems in a fixed mode when the conditions have changed, we will take many detours and cannot solve the problems well. It can be imagined that such phenomenon has a negative impact on self-development and the solution of problems. Ideas have set pattern so knowledge will be limited to a certain range, it is difficult to continue to explore. It is not difficult to see that functional fixation is essentially a kind of mental set, and it is quite common in real life. This shows that functional fixedness is the reason why individuals are difficult to change their behavior, which is the symbol of involution phenomenon.

6. Involution and Two-Factor Theory

As mentioned above, a driving force for change comes from changes in demand, and change requires motivation. A wrong understanding of what is needed can lead to a lack of motivation and make it difficult to change behavior. The Two-Factor Theory argues that not all needs can give individuals enough motivation to change.

6.1. Two-Factor Theory: what merely satisfy but not motivate us?

American psychologist Herzberg put forward two-factor theory in 1959. He divided the relevant factors in the enterprise into two types, namely the satisfaction factor and the dissatisfaction factor²⁵. Satisfaction factor, later called motivational factors, refers to the factors that can satisfy and motivate individuals, while dissatisfaction factor refers to the factors that are prone to opinions and negative behaviors, namely, hygiene factor. He believes that these two categories of factors are the main factors affecting employee performance.

Hygiene factors include the company's policies and management, supervision, salary, colleague relations and working conditions. These factors are non-work factors. If these factors are satisfied, the dissatisfaction can be eliminated and the original work efficiency can be maintained, but it cannot motivate individuals to take more positive actions. Motivation factors are related to the work itself or the work content, including achievements, appreciation, meaning and challenge of the work itself, sense of responsibility, promotion, development, etc.²⁶ Only these factors can generate a lot of motivation.

6.2. The connection between involution and Two-Factor Theory

Involution refers to the growth without development, in which no development is the key point. Even if there is a desire to change, when the two factors are not clear, it is likely to lead to the failure of change. Hygiene factors cannot promote the development of behavior to a higher level, but can only make individuals feel better at the same level. In this process, from the perspective of behavior improvement, the increased efficiency does not lead to substantial changes in behavior, so it also contains the risk of involution.

In order to mobilize enthusiasm and break through fetters of behavioral development, it is necessary to clearly recognize what the incentive factors are, and take this as the

²⁵ Frederick Herzberg, Bernard Mausner, Barbara Bloch Snyderman, *The Motivation to Work*, Wiley, New York 1959.

²⁶ Stephen P. Robbins, Timothy A. Judge, *Organizational Behavior*, 15th ed., Tsinghua University Press, Beijing 2017.

driving force to promote the development of human behavior. Otherwise, even if there are ideas of change and innovation subjectively, the actual behavior is still internal and there is no substantial change. For example, if manager in the work organization just use hygiene factor to motivate employees, they cannot change employee's behavior as they expected because only the satisfaction factor has the power to mobilize one's behavior to change. Employees' behavior will stay in the circle of involution if manager cannot understand the difference between satisfaction factor and hygiene factor.

7. Suggestions for involution avoidance

Employees are the key resources of an organization, making them one of the most important components. In a sense, the potential of every employee's personal growth represents the development vigor of any organization. In order to maintain the vitality of organization, it is necessary for the management to encourage employees to actively innovate, keep open mind and accept new ideas. Therefore, it should be a beneficial topic for organization to understand the potential psychological factors of involution and prevent employees from being stuck in it.

7.1. Energize diversity management

The maintenance and promotion of employees' constructive behavior are closely related to the satisfaction of their needs. To understand every employee's individual needs is no longer regarded as an excessive requirement for management. Instead, diversity management makes everyone more aware of and sensitive to the needs and differences of others. Much concern about diversity has to do with fairness. Organizational justice cannot be easily achieved unless distributive, procedural and most importantly, interactional justice, are all taken in to consideration by managers at all levels.

First of all, a proactive attitude towards employees will be more appropriate for contemporary Chinese enterprises. Effective Diversity Programs encourage fair treatment of all employees regardless of their demographic characteristics and foster Personal Development Practices that bring

out the skills and abilities of all workers, acknowledging how differences can be leveraged to become a valuable way to improve performance of everyone. On this premise, a more flexible reward system can be adopted to timely reflect the changes of employees' behaviors and prevent the occurrence of involution. This is not a simple breaking-down of the salaries or bonus that employees deserve, which in contrary would reduce the basic fulfillment of their needs. Instead, the essence of such flexible reward system is to give individual caring for their behaviors. The individualized and small-but-frequent incentives will serve as a spring of timely feedback to any desired behavioral changes of employees, no matter how small the changes would be. Timely feedback is not for perpetual supervision but for sincere care for people development and prevention of involution.

On the premise of fair treatment, managers should examine their workforce to determine whether certain employees have been underutilized and look for any hidden barriers to their advancement. It is important for management to examine and improve their managerial practices and systems more often than once for all. Constant feedback given on the work results of employees, either self-generated or from others, is not for strict control or supervision purpose, but out of the assumption that individuals can take the initiative to improve themselves if they are treated with dignity and respect.

7.2. Enable continuous improvement

Chronically repetitive and fixed behavior is an important factor that leads to the inflexibility of human behavior. To ensure the openness and flexibility of employees' thinking, different work objectives and task forms should be given to them. Conventionally, managers assign jobs based on structured job positions, ensuring the efficiency to the clear allocation of responsibilities. However plausibly efficient, it also limits employee's ability by the focused duty of work, making the problem-solving method fixed as the position required. The seemingly efficient work result is achieved at the expense of the employee's commitment and creativity, which will eventually damage the vitality and innovation ability of organizations in the long run.

Hence, managers can give employees access to new information, encourage them to incrementally yet continuously adopt and create new working methods, and praise their innovative behaviors in public. In a well-managed organization, unnecessary rigid rules on working methods should be reduced, and employees should be given the autonomy to solve problems according to their own working methods. While ensuring the work progress, employees at all levels should be given more open channels to speak freely about organizational affairs, so that they can propose their own solutions and opinions, boost their enthusiasm and creativity and improve their problem-solving ability in face of different affairs, especially workplace dilemmas. The generation of new ideas and passion to do the same tasks differently can help reduce the risk of fixing in the obsolete thinking and acting patterns, and foremost, reduce the risk of involution.

7.3. Envision diversified career paths

As in her book, *Creative Experience*, Follett²⁷ pointed out almost a hundred years ago that people knew very little of the functions of business, nowadays we still know very little of both the comprehensive roles of business and the significance of ethics in management. Businesses provide not only economic functions but also social services, especially in social justice. The development of work organization means a lot for democracy improvement. For managers who work with the young cohorts grown up in the so-called New Normal Era, properly recognizing the distinctions among staff and then help them formulate different career advancement paths is a critical important competence to manage human resources effectively. Since the perceived endless and meaningless work may easily drive employees into a dangerous mental state of burnout or even physical involution, managers have to be very sensitive to employees' perception of their work, and meanwhile, establish organizational supports for employees in need. One of the organizational supports aiming to terminate involution is by means

²⁷ Mary P. Follett, *Creative Experience*, Longmans Green & Co., New York 1924.

of designing diversified career development channels, which is also known as Work Redesign in management²⁸. This work redesign practice involves the reconsiderations of one's work at three aspects: tasks, relations and self. Employees who choose to reconsider and even divert from their current jobs used to be regarded as the losers in the knock-out system. However, being more realistic and humanistic, the permission of such diverted career development is a more inclusive and responsible attitude towards increasingly diverse employees in China, and undoubtedly, is a progress in managerial ethics.

Conclusion

The earliest concept of involution originated from the analysis of agricultural economic problems and gradually extended to the analysis of political and social problems, representing a growth model without actual development in quality but quantity. Although the theoretical research on this concept is still limited, the wide application of this concept has shown its practicality. There is no rigorous academic theory for the study of involution in fields other than political economy. However, through comparative study, we deem that involution is well underpinned by concepts or theories in psychology and management, especially in motivation, which may bring up some insights for personal and organizational development.

Being universal in various facets of life, involution has more significant impact on our personal growth. Although there is little crossover research on it, it is useful to use some of its criteria to indicate whether our lives are in such an inefficient cycle. As long as we pay attention to the internal psychological factors, it is feasible to avoid the negative effects of involution.

For individuals, the existence of the concept of involution itself is enlightening. Individuals should stay vigilant of the phenomenon of involution, learn how to cope with

²⁸ Ya-jing Qi, Xin-chun Wu, "Job Demands-Resources Model: The Development of Theoretical and Empirical Research", *Journal of Beijing Normal University* 2018, no. 6(270), pp. 28–36.

such lassitude or withdrawal tendency in life, and consciously modify behaviors in time to drag one's self out of such condition. This is also meaningful to work organizations, using involution as an indicator, to remind the management of the diversity of its employees and the feasibility of individualized considerations of motivations, or even the redesign of career development. Any resolutions to tackling involution ought to be properly discussed and appraised, including the acceptance of work redesign, which is not a run-away expediency and shouldn't be judged as inferior.

Further study on the concept of involution is needed to lay a solid foundation for its development in different fields. Due to the needs to improve efficiency, avoid latent stagnation in organizations and seek more sensible work-life balance, more prudent and in-depth studies of this concept can be expected.

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