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In a world of changes: using a new visual research method for exploring employees' attitudes towards the organizations they work in

KEYWORDS

visible and hidden attitudes, employees' organizational positions, visual research method

ABSTRACT

In the age of globalization, employees are required to adapt themselves to changes inthe working world. Employees change their working placesquite often; therefore, they have less stability in the organizations they work in. This situation might influence their general attitudes toward the organizations and particularly their personal perceptions about their organizational positions. In turn,this affects their motivation, loyalty, health etc.

The aim:To present three studies which were carried out in three distinct periods of time regarding Israeli employees' perceptions of their organizational positions, incorporating a new visual method developed by the author.The population included technology managers, registered hospital nurses and educators. The common research methods (questionnaires and interviews) facilitate the examination of visible attitudes but are less effective for those which are hidden. The visual method was based on the drawing of a fruit tree, and suggested an indirect way of exploring the participants' attitudes.

Results and conclusion: The participants' interpretations raised a diversity of themes about their organizational positions, depending on the type of organization and their stability in the workplace. This enabledthe gaining of a deep level of knowledgeaboutthe employees' attitudes in an indirect way.

Introduction

In the age of globalization (Friedman, 2006; Coutinho, Dam and Blustein, 2008; Bond and O'Byrne, 2014), employees are required to adapt themselves to changes inthe working world. Employees who change their working places quite often-might have less stability in their organizations(Neumark, 2000; Mukkelli, 2015) andtherefore,they need adaptive, effective organizational recognition of the-changes resulting from globalization (Grantham, 2000; Blustein, 2006; Gibson and Mitchell, 2006).This situation can influence employees' general attitudes to-wards the organizations they work in and particularly their personal perceptions about their organizational positions. In turn, this affects different factors like their motivation, loyalty, satisfaction, and sense of belonging(Coutinho, Dam and Blustein, 2008).

A sense of belonging is significant for most employees at work. Am I part of the organization? Is my work meaningful? Do I have a clear future in the organi-zation, or, is it easy to replace me? The answers might affect the employees' fee-lings and perceptions regarding their jobs, stability in the workplace, willingness to contribute to the success of their organizations etc. Different studies show that such feelings can negativelyinfluence employees' health and causehigh levels of stress(Hall and Mirvis, 1996; Grantham, 2000; Blustein, 2006; Coutinho, Dam and Blustein, 2008; Kishore, 2012).

Employees' intentions also influence the answers to these questions. On the one hand, there might be employees who wish to work in a specific place only for a short time, to gain experience or for a particular project. Other employees prefer challenges and stimulations in the workplace, and are therefore ready to chan-getheir work easily. However, there are employees who are looking for stability and work permanence, they do not want to change workplaces every few years, and when they do not have this permanence at work, they feel unstable, fear losing their job, or feel threatened about being replaced (Hall and Mirvis, 1996; Savickas, 2000; Hall, 2004).

Understanding the current changes in the working world, the fact that during their life careers people might change their working placesa couple of times, eit-her by personal preferenceor because of thesituation, should provoke a new way of studying employees' attitudes towards their workplaces.These changes indicate the need to develop an additional research method,moresuitable for the age of globalization, especially since employees tend to respond,while measuring their organizationalperceptions, according to dominant norms, more than their perso-nal attitudes (Snir and Harpaz, 2002).

Usually, attitudes are measured by two main methods: questionnaires and interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Neuman, 2011; Creswell, 2013). In both methods, the attitudes aremeasured with direct questions. Therefore, such methods facilitate examinationofthe visible and common attitudes of the participants,but are less effective for the hidden and deeper ones.

When participants are responding to questions which deal with personal attitudes, social desirability influences their way of responding, as Nueman (2011: 322) claims, "social desirability bias is widespread, when respondents distort answers to conform to popular social norms". Participants try to reply according to common perceptions on the specific topic in their society in general, or in the organization where they are employed in particular, but not, or less so,according to their own perceptions.

Already in 1934, LaPiere, in his article *Attitudes versus actions,*had introduced the gap between attitudes and behaviors(LaPiere, 1934). He traveledin the US with a couple of Chinese ethnicity. They visited 251 hotels and restaurants and were turned away only once. At the end of their travels, LaPiere mailed a survey to all of the businesses they had visited with the question, "Will you accept members of the Chinese race in your establishment?" Of the 128 that responded, 92% answered "No".

LaPiere's study established the gap between attitudes and behaviors. It was explained that since the American mood at that time was not in favor of Asians, the restaurant owners responded according to social desirabilitybut notaccording their personal attitudes. Several researchers after LaPiere examined the issue of social desirability bias and found that in some situations, respondents may be tempted to give a socially desirableresponse rather than describe what they actually think, believe or do (Phillips and Clancy,1972; Paulhus and Reid, 1991; Holtgraves, Eck and Laskey, 1997; Nancarrow and Brace, 2000).Furthermore, a person may respond in a socially desirable fashion to a question in orderto appear in a positive light to the researcher or interviewer, or to preserve the respondent's own self-esteem (Paulhus and Reid, 1991). Social desirability bias can be reduced by using indirect questions (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977; Fisher, 1993), promising anonymity (Paulhus and Reid, 1991) and confidentiality (Singer, Hippler and Schwarz, 1992).

To conclude, employees' responses might reflect what they assume is expected from them, following the common perceptions in their society, orwhat they assume their organization's management wishes the employees to "feel" or to "think". Therefore, the results might include bias, not reflecting their real attitudes. Consequently, alternative ways of measuring employees' attitudesconcerning their workplaces have to be foundrather than relying on research based on direct questions exclusively.

Methodology

The aim of the article isto present theresults of three studies andintroducea visualresearch methoddeveloped by the author (Haller-Hayon, 2008) for measuring attitudes in a different, not direct way.The studiesexamined Israeli employees' perceptions towards their organizational positions;they were performed in three distinct periods of time with different populations, technology managers (2006), nurses (2009) and educators (2017).

This is research carried out according to the post-positivistic paradigm (Creswell, 2013), with an inductivedesign approach (Bryman and Bell, 2007),which has the aim of ascertaining the perceptions of technology managers, nurses and educators, regarding their organizational positions, and from their points of view.

Research method

Thedrawing of a *fruit tree*was the visual research method which was performed in these studies, suggesting an indirect way of exploring the participants' attitudes, by asking:

> *"Assuming that the tree represents the organization*
> *in which you work, where would you position*
> *yourself: roots, trunk, leaf, fruit, branches, other."*
> *"Please explain your choice."*

Content analysis was employed to explore the themes which explain the participants' choices and create the categories for their responses.

Participants

The research used a convenient and snow ball sampling methods(Neuman, 2011). The participants received the questionnaires by email or in hard copy, and returned themvia the same medium. This was an anonymous questionnaire; the participants were informed about the confidentiality of their answers and the use of their responses for research purposes only.

The threepopulations included: 2006-Technology managers who worked in high-tech companies (Haller-Hayon, 2008), 2009-Registered hospital nurses in management positions (Haller-Hayon, Balik, Kalishak, Shamish, 2010), 2017-Educators, employed in academia and in the educational system in Israel.

Table 1 represents the characteristics of the three participant groups. While 90% of the technology managers were males, most of the nurses and educators were females. In the other characteristics; age, seniority as an employee, and level of higher education, the three groups are quite similar. Therefore, it can be expected that these variables do not have any influence on the results.

One difference between the groups is in the number of organizations in which they had been employed. While most of the nurses had been working at the same hospital for their entire career (some of them even trained in nursing at the same hospital where they are employed), the technology managers had changed workplaces often, typical behavior in high-tech companies. However, it is interesting to learn that the educators, who are supposed to be more stable in organizations, had changed their working placesquite often. If we take into account that something like 25 percent of the educators stated in the study that they do not have permanence at work, it can explain the common replacement of their workplaces (only the educators were asked about permanence at work).

Table 1. The characteristics of the three groups

Characteristic						
Professions:	No of participants	Gender	Age	Years of seniority as an employee	Level of higher education	No of organizations which they had worked in
1. Technology managers	75	90% male	50% over 40	40% more than 20 years	BA 45% engineering, MA + 55%	65% – 3 and more (up to 8)
2. Nurses	44	90% female	65% over 40	75% more than 15 years	BA 72% MA 28%	80% up to 2
3. Educators	46	85% female	95% over 40	83% more than 20 years	100% MA degrees	80% 3 and more (up to 10)

Research results

In the three studies, the participants' interpretations created a diversity of categories regarding their organizational positions,and this facilitated learning about their attitudes in an indirect way. Furthermore, in the participants' explanations of their choices, varieties of interpretations of the same choices were found.

The chosen tree components

The studies' results concern two aspects; the chosen tree components of the three different groups and their interpretations regarding their choices.

Table 2. The chosen tree components

Profession	The tree components						
	Roots	Trunk	Branches	Leaves	Fruits	All/some-parts	Other
Technology-managers	**33%**	**35%**	6%	4%	4%	3%	15%
Nurses	12%	**37%**	5%	0	**20%**	17%	9%
Educators	15%	13%	**25%**	9%	**22%**	13%	4%

Table 2 shows the results of the chosen tree components for the three participant groups. Most of the technology managers chose roots and trunk as representing their organizational positions. The trunk was also the most popular component among nurses; however, branches were the first choice for educators.

The key themes of the components

The significant results are not only what components were chosen by the participants, but also their interpretations of these choices.A content analysis was performed of the participants' answers, separately for each group.

Table 3. The key themes of the components

Profession	Themes
Technology managers	Mediation position(1)*, Owners/seniors(2), Very much knowledge(3), Influence(4), Power(5), Foundation stones(6), Very much experience(7), The organization's "products", Temporary
Nurses	Mediation position (1), Seniors(2), Knowledge(3), Influence(4), Power(5), Foundations stones(6), Very much experience(7)
Educators	Legacy/foundation stones(6), Permanence/belonging, Policy, Centrality, Importance, Continuity, Giving to others, Connecting between parts, Policy implementation

* The same themes received the same number in all the professions.

Table 3 represents the key themes which emerged from the content analysis. Parts of the themes were found in different components. For example, twopartici-

pants could describe their organizational positions, one as roots and one as trunk, but still give the same interpretation of their choices as, for example, *influence*.

The same themes were raised for technology managers and nurses, although their professions are verydifferent in essence. While the technology managers are mainly males, characterized by having several workplaces during their careers, the nurses are mainly females who arevery stable in their workplaces.

The technology managers and the nurses emphasized the issues of influence, experience, knowledge, foundations stones and power. The technology managers also referred to issues of the organization's "products" and the idea of being temporary.Foundations stones were the only similar theme for all the groups. The educators' themes were different andthey emphasizedissues oflegacy/foundation stones, policy,centrality, permanence/belonging, importance, continuity, giving to others, connecting between parts and policy implementation.

The participants' interpretations of their choices

The participants' interpretations added essential understandingof the research subject; why the participantschoose to describe their organizational positionsin a specific way. Some examples.

Technology managers:
Trunk (35%) was the most dominant component. One of them explained:*"Just as the trunk connects the different parts of the tree and directs its growth, so in my position in the organization I am in contact with various departments and try to direct the company's efforts in the right directions from the technological point of view."*

While referring to *roots* (33%), they said: *"I outline the Management policy, the performance and the professional realization"* or *"I am at the critical decision--making stage of the organization, in a forum that directs its overall activity"*.

Someof them also referred to *branches* (6%): *"The organization is divided into a number of industries, and these are again divided into smaller branches. In my organization, the R + D branch is divided into several groups, and groups into several teams. I manage one of these teams"*, to *fruits* (4%): *"Rainmaker"* or*"generates revenue"* and to*leaves* (4%): *"The organization's legacy continues to live, everyone has a substitute, there are no few people on whom the organization is built, so there are no people in the trunk or in the roots"*.

The technology managers also claimedthat they are *all the tree's parts* (3%). One said: *"As a high-tech entrepreneur who builds start-up companies from the con-*

cept to the sale of the company, I go through all the stages. First I am the root of the tree, and in the course of the development of society I am the trunk, branches, leaves, and fruits. After selling the company I have been out of the tree (with a pinch in the heart) but enjoying myself on behalf of its fruits...”

Nurses:

The most dominant component for them was *trunk* (37%): “*The trunk is the base through which the branches and leaves receive food and water and it stabilizes the entire tree. Without him it is impossible. That's how nurses are, responsible – the heart of the hospital! Their activities are crucial, since it is the responsibility under their authority that strengthens the hospital*”.

Fruits (20%) were their second choice: “*I grew in this organization, at the beginning of my way I was rooting and growing high. And the green leaves – are similar to everything I have accumulated and learned over the years and now I imagine myself as a fruit, professionally cooked and motivated to give the fruits which I sprouted over the years and disperse*”.

R*oots* (12%) were less dominant: “*Everything starts in the roots. Roots are the most important thing for the development of the tree and if there were strong and stable roots then it will be a strong and stable organization. Of course, I have the desire to be part of these stable and strong roots in the organization in order to grow it*”.

Only 6% of the registered nurses saw themselves as branches: “*trunk-management, branches– departments' management, leaves–the treatment teams, fruits--patients rotting or growing*”. None of them choose*leaves*; however, 17% declared that they are *all the tree's parts*. As such they explained: “*I started here, the trunk, the main foundation on which I was raised during my life in the organization and at home, leaves, slowly I began to grow, I learned things, etc. Fruit, to bear fruit is the end result. Self-feeling of ability to produce fruits and serve the whole organization*”.

Educators:

Contrary to the other two groups, the educators chose the *branches* (25%) as the most dominant component which describes their organizational position: “*It means that with the help of the foundations…the organizational culture and the atmosphere thorough they are developing as fruits. Their job after that is to feed others which will spread their seeds. I am one of the small branches that branch from the same big branch, and bridging between this branch and the fruits, and contribute to the fruits' ripening*”.

While referring to *fruits* (22%), educators claimed: “*Most of my knowledge, experience and qualifications, are in the fruits that their symbol is: the essence of life:*

taste, smell and color. The fruits are the contact (the source of knowledge) between the past (the tree) and the future (the seeds which are produced from it). In addition, the fruits are dispersed on the front of the tree and give it grace and honor".

Roots (15%):*"I have been a teacher at the same school for 21 years. I am considered as one of the leading teachers at the school (and I say this with much modesty)…. I placed myself in the roots, since it is the most central and important part of the tree, without it, there is no instrument which can forward the food to the rest of the tree's parts, which are the fruits and the leaves".*

Whenrelating to*trunk* (13%), the educators said: "*I have a very important and central job. Alongside the formal definition of the job, I am a professional anchor in the key mechanism in my district. I am part of the leading team of the district where I work".*Some 9% of the educators positioned themselves as *leaves*: "*I do not feel a significant part, but part of something without being deep and meaningful",* or, "*I am an outside lecturer, very low in the hierarchy, without work permanence; therefore it is easy to replace me…. Objectively, I am supposed to be in the branch, but my subjective feeling is lack of job security, and therefore, I am in the leaves".*

13% of the educators thought that they are *All the tree's parts.* They clarified: "*It was not easy for me to respond. On the one hand, as I have been working in the ministry of education for 20 years, I feel definitely as if I am the roots and the trunk. I am strong, experienced and understand a lot. Although, with the innovation processes, I see myself also developing, changing, and branching off, likes the branches and the fruits".*

There are educators who workboth in school and academia. Analyzingtheircomments about the two working places, separately, one can discoversignificant results. It is not the participants'personalitieswhich influence the way of responding, but more the type of organization where they are employed andthe sense of belonging, if they have it. For example, while referring to her school's work,one of the participants positioned herself as *branches*:*"I belong to the central part of the organization. I am not part of the pioneers and the management, therefore I am not in the trunk, but I definitely belong to the factors which base and grow my school. I have a part in the fruits that my organization grows".* But when she positioned herself in her academia's work, it changed to *leaves*: "*I am so marginal, that I am like leaves".*

Another participant described herself in academia as*Branches*:*"I feel that what I am doing is one small branch from a very big organization. Even if one of the branches breaks, the place of its break will be seen for a while, but then the tree will grow a new branch. So, if I go, very soon, someone else will take my place and I will be forgotten".* However,whiledescribing herself at school she chose*roots* and explained: "*Since I was the one to build the organization which I was managing (school), I see*

the organization as established on the roots which I have planned, in the aspect of the organization's perception, the working processes, norms, organizational culture. I assume that all those will stay for a long time after me, even if the leaves fall off and the fruits are pickedand grow again, again and again".

A couple of participants described themselves differently. For example, Technology managerssaw themselves as a "*Screw*" or as "*A bird on the tree*". One nurse said that she is: "*A person who is sitting on one of the tree's branches and picking up the fruit*", and educators described themselves as "*Seeds*", or a "*Gardener – From my point of view, the student is the whole tree, with all its parts. As a teacher, my job is to enrich the soil in which the student chooses to grow. I will give the student all the conditions for growing, in order to grow to be the tree that he chooses, what fruits to have, what will be the thickness of the trunk, and the depth of the roots*".

Discussion and Conclusions

The results emphasized the importance of using indirect methods while examiningemployees' attitudes, as was suggested by previous researchers,for reducing the social desirability bias (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977;Paulhus and Reid, 1991; Fisher, 1993). Additionally, the needs of belonging and permanence at work, as influencing employees' perceptions regarding their organizational positions, were demonstrated in these studies, strengthening previous research (Hall and Miris, 1996; Grantham, 2000; Blustein, 2006; Coutinho, Dam and Blustein, 2008; Kishore, 2012).

The results introducesignificant differences between the participants' subjective perceptions regarding their organizational positions. Thisreflects how the type of organization, a willingness for stability or for change, can influence the ways employees relate to their workplaces, to their position in organizations, feelings of belonging, etc.

The different types of professions andorganizationsshow a dissimilar way of relating to organizational position. Technology managers and nurses referred in their responsesto themselves, while the educators referred to schools and academia as part of "the whole system", and emphasized the customers – the students, especially as fruits. Furthermore, the educators' answers were changed according to the workplace they were referring to, school or academia.

To conclude, using anindirect research method can facilitate learning about participants' attitudes in different ways and contribute, as was found in these studies, to gaining more knowledge regarding employees, their perceptions, satisfa-

ction, feelings and needs. Therefore, it is recommended to develop more indirect research methods for measuring attitudes, especially the hidden ones, and through this, to contribute to the understanding and knowledge of this research area.

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