



Are people in the West really more proactive than those in the East? The role of different processes and forms of proactivity

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Abstract

Proactivity is becoming increasingly crucial for employee career success and organizational productivity in the contemporary workplace across various cultures. However, there has been a prevalent perspective that people in the West seem more proactive than those in the East. This paper challenges the prevalent view by selectively reviewing the research findings and proposing a more comprehensive framework that considers the process of proactivity and its various forms that may better explain cultural differences in proactivity. We identify five cultural dimensions relevant to examining the cultural influences on proactivity: power distance, individualism-collectivism, future orientation, assertiveness, and tightness-looseness. Drawing on research on culture, proactivity, and creativity, we theorize that different cultural dimensions may play a role in shaping three different processes of proactivity: proactive goal generation, planning and execution, and feedback processing. We also elucidate the cultural influences on varying forms of proactivity by classifying them into three broad categories: promotive versus prohibitive, pro-self versus prosocial, and radical versus incremental. Our theorizing challenges and complements the current understanding of cultural influences on proactivity, revealing a more nuanced role that culture may play in shaping proactivity processes.

Keywords Proactivity · Cultural influences · Proactivity process · Forms of proactivity

Introduction

As the emperor, if you see something desirable, think of contentment so as to discipline yourself. If you intend to undertake an endeavor, think of stopping before going too far so as to give your people peace.....

— Excerpt from *A Petition of Ten Thoughts to Emperor Taizong* by WEI Zheng,

a celebrated politician in Chinese history renowned for his boldness in speaking up.

Proactivity—as self-initiated and future-oriented actions or action tendency to make positive changes at work (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006)—has garnered a great deal of research attention in the past three decades across various cultures (e.g., Crant, 2000; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). Proactivity has been shown to have positive influences on employee performance and well-being, and team performance (e.g., Tornau & Frese, 2013). An emerging issue in proactivity research centers on the role of culture in shaping proactivity. Such a discussion of the role of culture in shaping proactivity is inherent in the very definition of proactivity pertaining to initiating changes in the environment, because culture represents an essential environmental context whereby proactivity may occur and act on (Parker et al., 2019). In addition to the theoretical significance, examining how culture affects proactivity may also have practical implications for managing multinational organizations and global virtual teams wherein people are from different cultures work together and proactivity is typically needed to deal with various challenges brought by the ever-changing business environment (Grant & Ashford, 2008). The recent development in the proactivity literature on wise proactivity also highlights the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping proactivity processes (Parker et al., 2019). Because a broader conceptualization of proactivity includes creativity and innovation (Parker & Bindl, 2016), such an emphasis on cultural differences in proactivity is also reflected in research on creativity and innovation across countries. A *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article titled Why China Can't Innovate listed a number of reasons why people in China may be less creative due to a number of economic, social, institutional and cultural factors (Abrami et al., 2014). In a similar vein, given that the majority of proactivity research has originated and been conducted in Western contexts that place a high value on individual agency, Urbach et al. (2021) recently explicitly asserted that individuals in West are more “used to taking initiative and they are even expected to do so as part of their work role” (p. 4) as compared to those in the East. It appears that this is a prevalent view on cultural differences in proactivity. But the question we raise is: Is this really true?

This paper serves as a rebuttal of this prevalent view on cultural differences in proactivity that people in the West are more proactive in general. As the opening quote suggests, people in the East, like the celebrated politician in Chinese history renowned for his boldness in speaking up WEI Zheng, may also be able and given the

opportunity to voice and speak up, a form of proactive behavior (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Drawing up the theoretical and empirical research on cultural differences in proactivity (e.g., Bailey et al., 1997; Morrison et al., 2004; Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2018), we argue that although seeming reasonable, this prevalent perspective may be over-simplistic and is not always supported by research evidence. In fact, people in Eastern cultures may also exhibit different forms of proactivity (Kitayama, & Uchida, 2005). Drawing upon more comprehensive research on proactivity, creativity, and culture (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Morris & Leung, 2010; Parker & Bindl, 2016; Westwood & Low, 2003), we propose that a more nuanced understanding of the role of culture in shaping proactivity should take into consideration of two major factors: processes of proactivity and forms of proactivity.

First, proactivity represents a goal-driven process consisting of proactive goal generation and goal striving (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker & Bindl, 2016). The process of proactivity is under the significant influence of contextual factors including culture. In fact, this notion has been supported by creativity research—a line of inquiry bearing ample similarities with proactivity—that societal culture can have different influences on idea generation and idea implementation (e.g., Hubner et al., 2022; Liou & Lan, 2018; Nakata & Sivakumar, 1996). Second, proactivity may take many forms that require closer examination. Proactivity varies from promotion-focused to prevention-focused (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008). This distinction is consistently documented in research on multiple specific proactive behaviors, including voice, job crafting, and feedback-seeking (e.g., Liang et al., 2012; Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019; Lin & Johnson, 2015). Additionally, the proactivity literature suggests that proactivity may vary across different targets of impact (self versus other) and the intended magnitude of impact (radical versus incremental) (e.g., Ashford et al., 2003; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Madjar et al., 2011). As we elucidate in greater detail below, culture may exert distinctive influences on these different forms of proactivity. The literature on cultural differences in proactivity, however, has yet to fully incorporate the role that different forms of proactivity and proactivity processes may play in shaping proactivity processes. We suspect that this omission may have somewhat contributed to the inconsistent findings on cultural differences in proactivity.

As a rebuttal of the prevalent view on cultural differences in proactivity that people in the West are more proactive, this paper offers a preliminary theoretical model that serves as one of the first endeavors to elucidate how societal cultures affect proactivity. Extrapolating from the literatures on proactivity and culture (e.g., Luque & Sommer, 2000; Smale et al., 2019), we selectively identify five cultural dimensions that we deem most relevant (Gelfand et al., 2006; Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2002): power distance, individualism-collectivism, future orientation, assertiveness, and tightness-looseness. Based on research on the proactivity process (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker & Bindl, 2016), we then theorize that different cultural dimensions may play a role in shaping processes of proactivity including goal generation, plan and action, and feedback processing. We further investigate the cultural influences on varying forms of proactivity by classifying them into three broad categories: promotive versus prohibitive, pro-self versus prosocial, and radical versus incremental.

It is important to point out that culture is not the only contextual variable that may affect proactivity. As pointed out in previous research on proactivity (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006), employee proactivity can be enabled or hindered by a number of factors including individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits), interpersonal variables (e.g., coworker relationships and relationships with supervisors), and organizational contextual variables (e.g., organizational support), to name a few. Yet, the decision to focus on societal/country culture as a major variable that is able to explain cross-cultural differences in proactivity is in fact in keeping with the literature on cross country differences in proactivity (e.g., Urbach et al., 2021) and the large body of cross-cultural research on country differences in human behavior and attitudes (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994). One important reason, as we argue below, is that culture, by its definition, may play a role of software of the mind that exerts normative pressure on people in a society that shapes individual behavior and attitudes in consistent with what a culture deems important (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002). In this vein, behaviors and attitudes of people in a society consistent with a cultural value will be rewarded and these human behaviors and attitudes against a cultural value will be punished. Yet, by focusing on culture, we do not necessarily mean that other factors are less important. In addition, it is also important to clarify that our proposition that culture may explain cross-country differences in proactivity does not necessarily mean that all people in one culture will behave in the same manner just because they may be affected by the same culture. Put differently, people in the same society characterized by the same culture may behave differently owing to influences of other factors, such as individual characteristics and organizational contexts, although such a discussion of individual and organizational factors is beyond the scope of this paper.

Our paper contributes to the literature on the intersection between proactivity and culture in three important ways. First, as a rebuttal of the assertion by Urbach et al. (2021), we aim to challenge and complement the prevalent view that people in the West are always more proactive than those in the East. Taking the proactivity process and various forms of proactive behaviour into consideration, our preliminary theorizing may offer a more nuanced understanding of the influences of culture on proactivity, which may in turn help explaining some of the seemingly contradictory findings in prior empirical research (e.g., Bailey et al., 1997; Morrison et al., 2004; Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2018). Yet, reconciling the inconsistent findings is beyond the scope of the current paper. Our theoretical model, though not mean to be comprehensive and exhaustive in listing all the possible cultural factors, may further have the potential to generate new consensus on cultural differences in proactivity in the future.

Second, our proposed theoretical model adopts a broader cultural perspective in theorizing the influence of culture on proactivity processes. Prior research has focused almost exclusively on cultural values, and in particular on individualism-collectivism, to explain all differences across cultures (Gelfand et al., 2007). The literature on cross-cultural differences in proactivity is not an exception, with a major focus on cultural values in accounting for cross cultural differences in proactivity (Urbach et al., 2021). We extend this line of inquiry on cross cultural difference in

proactivity by including such influences from more recent development in cultural research as cultural tightness-looseness in the theorization and find it is powerful in predicting cultural differences in proactivity (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011).

Third, our paper extends the proactivity process model (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker & Bindl, 2016) by integrating societal-level cultural factors and introducing three broad categories to encapsulate the variation of proactivity so as to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the antecedents of proactivity processes. Prior research on process models of proactivity has primarily focused on individual level and organizational antecedents of proactivity, which has overlooked the role of societal level variables (e.g., culture), and the possibility that such variables may have distinct influences on different forms of proactivity (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay). Yet, recent research on proactivity has pointed out the necessity to investigate the role of culture in proactivity and the importance of distinguishing different forms of proactivity in proactivity processes, especially the promotion-focused versus prevention-focused proactivity (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Although substantial variation has been reported in studying specific types of proactive behaviors (e.g., approach versus avoidance job crafting, promotive versus prohibitive voice), researchers have devoted relatively little attention to the influence of culture on such different types of proactivity. We extend this line of research by identifying three general categories to untangle the cultural influences on proactivity and incorporating culture as a societal variable that may affect the processes of proactivity.

In sum, our theoretical framework, although not necessarily comprehensive, may help explain how culture—an important contextual variable that proactivity may take place in and act upon—affects proactivity across societies in a manner that may be different from what many people have assumed previously (Urbach et al., 2021). Thus challenging this prevalent assumption is of theoretical importance because it addresses a core question to the very definition of proactivity whereby one makes positive changes to the environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006), including important cultural contexts. In doing so, our paper may have practical implications for individual employees, organizations, and the government to act on different cultural aspects that may hinder or encourage proactivity to better performance and well-being for employees, teams and organizations. Our paper may also have practical implications for managing multinational organization and global virtual teams so that people from different cultures may work together more smoothly to promote proactivity over time (Urbach et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

A selective and critical review of research on culture and proactivity

Despite the burgeoning literature on proactivity and the recognition that contextual factors shape proactivity processes (Parker et al., 2019), only a limited amount of research endeavors has been devoted to investigating how culture—a crucial contextual variable—shapes proactivity related relationships. Our objective is not to provide a comprehensive review of culture and proactivity (for such a review, see Urbach et al., 2021), because doing is beyond the scope of the current paper. Rather, our review

is selective and we aim to critically examine the widespread assumption that individuals from Western cultures are more proactive. We review cross cultural research on proactivity in order to answer three questions: Are there cultural differences in the average level of proactivity? Are Easterners less motivated than Westerners to engage in proactivity? Is proactivity perceived less desirable in the East than in the West?

With respect to cross cultural differences on mean-levels of proactivity, researchers have proposed that Western cultures characterized by high levels of individualism and low levels of power distance tend to promote proactivity (e.g., Bailey et al., 1997; Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; Morrison et al., 2004), leading to higher prevalence of proactivity in the West. However, the current empirical findings offer mixed support. While Morrison and colleagues (2004) found the expected differences in newcomer feedback-seeking between U.S. and Hong Kong participants, Bailey et al. (1997) reported no significant difference between the U.S. and Chinese respondents in their feedback-seeking initiative. More interestingly, Park and Nawakitphaitoon (2018) found participants in South Korea reported higher levels of voice than those in the U.S. Importantly, the mixed findings have also been shown in cultural comparisons within Western countries (e.g., Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Fischer & Smith, 2006; Frese et al., 1996; Gordon et al., 2015).

Another related question is whether there are cultural differences in proactive motivation between the West and East. We are only aware of two studies that have examined this issue. Knoll et al. (2021) found both similarities and differences in the prevalence of employee silence motives (i.e., silence based on fear, resignation, prosocial, and selfish motives) across 33 countries. Power distance, institutional collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance were related to different types of silence motives in divergent directions. Power distance was positively related to acquiescent and prosocial silence, whereas institutional collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance were negatively related to acquiescent and opportunistic silence, respectively. Similarly, Macdonald et al. (2008) compared the feedback-seeking motives between Canadian and Chinese students. The two cultural groups differed in their motivations to seek feedback. In sum, these studies suggest that the motivational sources for proactivity vary across cultures, but not necessarily the case that individuals in certain cultures are inherently less motivated to be proactive.

The third question deals with the effects of proactivity across cultures. If the assumption that proactivity is more desirable in the West than in the East holds, it stands to reason that proactivity will be better received and thus lead to more positive consequences for individuals Western, not Eastern. Among the limited research testing this assumption, Brockner et al. (2001) found that the effect of voice on organizational commitment and performance was less pronounced in high—as compared with low—power distance nations, which is consistent with the aforementioned assumption. However, Zhao et al. (2023) found in their meta-analysis that newcomer proactive behaviours and socialization outcomes were more strongly related in collectivistic cultures, suggesting that newcomers in Eastern cultures may gain more from proactive behaviours. Smale et al.'s (2019) also found the complex role of national cultures in shaping the outcome of career proactivity: career proactivity was relatively more important for subjective financial success in cultures with high in-group collectivism, high power distance, and low uncertainty avoidance. For work-life balance, career

proactivity was relatively more important in cultures with high in-group collectivism and humane orientation. These findings again indicate that individuals from cultures characterized by high power distance and/or collectivism may actually benefit from involvement in proactivity.

In conclusion, the prevalent assumption that people in the West are more proactive than those in the East, though intuitively appealing and consistent with the conventional view in the literature (Urbach et al., 2021), has not received widespread and consistent support in the literature. Individuals from Eastern cultures are not necessarily always less likely to engage in proactive behaviour, feel less motivated to be proactive, or experience less favorable outcomes when they do. We reckon that many country level factors such as economic, historical, institutional and cultural factors may play a role in explaining such cross country differences in proactivity, as suggested previously in cross cultural research (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994). In this paper, in order to make it more manageable, we argue that a more complete understanding of culture and proactivity should take into account different forms of proactivity, different proactivity process, and broader cultural dimensions.

Cultural framework

In this paper, we adopt the definition that culture refers to “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations” (House et al., 2002). Following previous research (Urbach et al., 2021), we focus mainly on the societal level to understand how culture affects proactivity.

The dominant approach in cultural research has relied on using values to explain cross-cultural differences. Among the several major cross-cultural projects (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994), the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE; see House et al., 2002) project has received a lot of attention and been adopted to study proactivity (e.g., Knoll et al., 2021; Smale et al., 2019; Urbach et al., 2021). Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that new perspectives are needed to understand culture beyond cultural values (Chiu et al., 2000; Gelfand et al., 2006; Leung et al., 2002; McAuley et al., 2002; Peterson & Smith, 2000). Among those new endeavours, the influential work by Gelfand and colleagues on tightness-looseness seems very relevant and has been adopted widely in cultural research (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). We therefore include this construct in our framework.

To make this paper more manageable, we selected five cultural dimensions pertinent to proactivity in our framework: power distance, individualism-collectivism, future orientation, assertiveness, and tightness-looseness. The first four are from the GLOBE project, and tightness-looseness is from Gelfand and colleagues. Importantly, the GLOBE team has distinguished cultural practices from cultural values. Cultural practices concern *What Is* or *What Are*, common behaviors, institutional practices, proscriptions, and prescriptions in society, whereas values reflect how a society *Should Be* from the perspective of its members (House et al., 2004). Cultural

practices are more specific and proximal in predicting specific individual behaviour, and have been shown to be more strongly related to objective societal facts than cultural values (House et al., 2004). We hence limit our discussion to cultural practices.

In essence, cultural practices create normative pressure that shapes individual behaviour in accordance with those practices. Although we choose to focus on the five cultural dimensions in our current paper, this list does not mean to be exhaustive. They are chosen because they are among the most commonly studied cultural dimensions in organizational and cultural research (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994) and have satisfactory construct validity. Second, they are closely related to the core characteristics of proactivity: self-starting and future-oriented behaviors or tendency to make positive changes.

Power distance is defined as the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared (House et al., 2002). This construct is a replication of Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede, 1980).

Individualism-collectivism represents perhaps the most studied construct that has been used to explain cultural differences. GLOBE differentiated two forms of collectivism. Societal collectivism reflects the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action, whereas in-group collectivism reflects the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations or families (House et al., 2004). Low scores in collectivism reflect individualistic emphasis of the society.

Future orientation refers to the degree to which individuals in societies engage in future-oriented behaviours such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification (House et al., 2002). It is derived from Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Past, Present, Future Orientation dimension, which focuses on the temporal mode of a society.

Assertiveness is defined as the degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships (House et al., 2002). It is derived from Hofstede's Masculinity dimension and has been shown to be a valid new dimension (Minkov & Blagoev, 2012).

Tightness-looseness refers to the strength of social norms, or how clear and pervasive norms are within societies, and the strength of sanctioning, or how much tolerance there is for deviance from norms within societies (Gelfand et al., 2006).

Cultural influences on the enactment of proactivity

It is important to point out that we draw on recent cultural frameworks in the cultural literature from Hofstede (Hofstede, 2011), the GLOBE project (House et al., 2002), and recent work by Gelfand and colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011) in developing our theoretical framework to account for cross cultural differences in proactivity. In fact, such cultural dimensions have also been adopted to explain both individual level and country level differences in proactivity across societies (Urbach et al., 2021). We reiterate that our theoretical framework pertains to influences of cultural character-

istics on the general tendency related to proactivity for typical people in one culture, which may take place at individual, team, and also organizational levels theoretically as pointed out in previous research on proactivity (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006). In fact, our treatment of culture influences on proactivity at individual, team, and also organizational levels theoretically in consistent with prior research on cultural values (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994), which has been shown to affect individual behaviors and attitudes also at individual, team, and also organizational levels. Such a match at different levels of analyses points to the appropriateness of using culture to explain cross country differences in proactivity.

Next, we will discuss the role of culture in shaping different processes of proactivity and different types of proactivity. Researchers proposed that high levels of power distance and collectivism, which are frequently referred to in describing East Asian societies inhibit proactive behaviors (e.g., Urbach et al., 2021). We believe that this may not always be the case when taking the process and different types of proactivity into consideration.

The role of culture in different processes of proactivity

Proactivity has been conceptualized as motivated, conscious, and goal-directed processes involving a sequence of interrelated actions (Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Bindl, 2016). For example, Frese and Fay (2001) outlined an action loop that begins with goal development, followed by information collection and prognosis, planning and execution, and feedback processing. Similarly, Grant and Ashford (2008) and Parker and Bindl (2016) have emphasized the significance of goals, planning, and action to achieve the desired future. Building upon their work, we identify three key phases of proactivity that may be most susceptible to cultural influences: goal generation, planning and execution, and feedback processing. Goal generation involves anticipating future problems and/or opportunities and creating a goal to bring about changes (Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Once the goal is set, an individual formulates action plans and exhibits a series of actions to accomplish the goal. Given that planning always implies some kind of action (Frese & Zapf, 1994), we consider planning and execution as closely intertwined and therefore discuss them together. Feedback processing is the final phase of the action sequence (Frese & Fay, 2001), which informs how far one has progressed toward the goal (Frese & Zapf, 1994). It helps individuals to sustain or modify their proactive goals or action plans to achieve those goals (Parker & Bindl, 2016). We expect that different cultural dimensions likely exert distinct influences on the three phases.

It is important to note that it is possible that all the five cultural dimensions may affect all the three proactivity processes. Yet, doing so will lead to fifteen possible relationships between cultural dimensions and proactivity processes. It is also possible that all the five cultural dimensions will influence all the different types of proactivity. Considering the scope of the current paper and to make it more manageable, we are not able to discuss all the possibilities; instead, we decide to focus on the relationships of the five cultural dimensions with proactivity processes and different types of proactivity that we deem most important or with the most theoretical and

empirical ground. In addition, because we are not aware of any formal theoretical framework that has been put forth as a comprehensive model to explain cross cultural differences in proactivity (Urbach et al., 2021), we are not able to compare our theoretical framework with previous ones so as to highlight further the contributions of our theoretical model. As one of the first attempt to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework linking culture and creativity, our theoretical model may serve as a first step toward a more comprehensive theoretical framework outlining all the possible relationships between cultural dimensions and proactivity with its different processes and types. We urge future research to further extend our theoretical model and include more relationships between societal level factors (e.g., economic, historical and cultural factors) and proactivity.

Future orientation and proactive goal generation We expect that future orientation tends to enhance the frequency of individuals engaging in proactive goal-generation activities. First of all, proactivity is defined as a self-initiated, future-oriented behaviors to initiate positive environmental changes (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Bindl, 2016). In order to initiate and implement positive environmental changes, people need to scan the environment (Frese et al., 1996), figure out opportunities to make changes, and make initial plans to implement such positive changes (Frese et al., 1996). Moreover, making things happen and carrying out positive changes are not always easy enterprises and thus often times, people will be required to reflect on and revise their strategies to better achieve their positive goals in the future (Li et al., 2014). Such proactive processes inherently embedded in making things happen will lead to more frequent proactive goal generating activities.

Indeed, Ashkanasy et al. (2004) pointed out that “cultures with high future orientation have a strong capability and willingness to imagine future contingencies, formulate future goal states, and seek to achieve goals and develop strategies for meeting their future aspirations”. Such arguments support our expectation of a positive correlation between future oriented culture and proactive goal generation. In sum, we expect that individuals in such cultures are expected to engage in envisioning activities more frequently, which are the key components of proactive goal generation (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Bindl, 2016). They are capable of anticipating opportunities and/or problems that occur in their work and motivated to create a new and better future by change the self and/or the situations (Parker & Bindl, 2016).

Proposition 1: High future orientation cultures tend to encourage more proactive goal generation activities.

It is important to point out that our propositions deal with the influences of cultural characteristics on a general tendency related to proactivity for typical people in one culture. This is in keeping with the common practices in cultural research (e.g., Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2002; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz, 1994) and cross cultural research on proactivity (Urbach et al., 2021). Yet, this does not preclude the situation in which people from one culture may behave differently and thus there

may exist within-culture variation in proactivity, which may be affected by individual level and organizational level variables.

Power distance, individualism-collectivism, tightness-looseness, and proactive goal generation Culture may also shape the preference of its members toward different types of proactive goals. We propose that regulatory focus theory (e.g., Higgins, 1997) is crucial in understanding the cultural influences on the proactive goal-generation process. First, proactive goal generation delineates the motivational process in which individuals act on their own volition in setting proactive goals (Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker & Bindl, 2016). This process matches well with the regulatory focus theory, which elucidates how individuals' motivational orientations shape the goals they create and the strategies they use to achieve them. Thus, individuals with different regulatory foci will create and generate different types of goals. Furthermore, compelling evidence shows that regulatory focus is a product of culture (Higgins et al., 2008; Kurman & Hui, 2011), suggesting regulatory focus as pathway to understanding cultural influences on psychological and behavioral processes (e.g., Lam & Chiu, 2002; Uskul et al., 2009). Integrating the two literatures, we illustrate how culture shapes the way individuals engage in proactive goal generation (Fig. 1).

First, regulatory focus theory posits two broad motivational orientations, promotion and prevention, both of which are chronically and situationally accessible to individuals (e.g., Higgins, 1997, 1998). A promotion focus emphasizes growth, advancement, and accomplishment, and is concerned with the desire to align with the ideal self. A prevention focus emphasizes safety, security, and responsibility, and is concerned with the desire to align with the ought self (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997, 2000). Each orientation has its own preferred strategies or means of goal pursuit. While promotion focus is associated with an eager strategy to ensure gains, prevention focus is associated with a vigilance strategy to avoid losses. When it comes to proactive goal generation, individuals in the promotion focus mode are more sensitive to the opportunities that can benefit themselves and focus on achieving positive outcomes. Their proactive goal is thus more promotion-focused and an eager strategy is preferred. In contrast, individuals who are in the prevention focus mode are more sensitive to the problems that can harm themselves and focus on avoiding negative outcomes. Their proactive goal is thus more prevention-focused and a vigilance strategy is preferred. Individuals with different regulatory foci will generate distinct types of proactive goals.

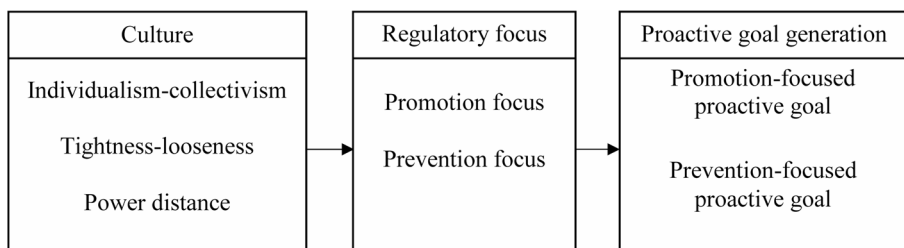


Fig. 1 Culture and distinct processes of proactive goal generation

Culture plays an important role in influencing their members' chronic regulatory foci. Current research reveals that the promotion focus is more prevalent in individualistic cultures, whereas the prevention focus in collectivistic cultures (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Higgins et al., 2008; Lalwani et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2000). In individualistic cultures, individuals usually view themselves as independent of one another. They are encouraged to distinguish themselves from others and tend to focus on their personal achievements and aspirations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The independent self-view tends to be more consistent with the promotion focus motivational system, which focuses on the positive features of the self and potential gains (Lee et al., 2000). In contrast, individuals from collectivistic cultures view themselves as more interdependent with others. They strive to fit in their group and focus on their obligations and duties to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This interdependent self-view is associated with the prevention focus motivational system (Lee et al., 2000).

Gelfand and colleagues (2006, 2011) provide evidence showing that cultural tightness-looseness can make regulatory focus more chronically accessible to individuals. Individuals in tight societies are exposed to stronger situational constraints in their daily life, where behaviors are closely scrutinized and norm violations are expected to be punished. As a result, individuals in such societies tend to prioritize prevention focus to avoid mistakes and behave appropriately. By contrast, individuals in loose societies experience greater behavioral freedom and expect more tolerance for deviant behaviors. They shall be more focused on the ideal self, leading to a tendency toward promotion focus.

Proposition 2: High collectivism and tightness cultures tend to encourage more prevention-focused proactive goals (P2a); High individualism and looseness cultures tend to encourage more promotion-focused proactive goals (P2b).

While most of the studies so far have tied regulatory focus to only individualism-collectivism and tightness-looseness, we expect that the power distance in a society can also cultivate members' regulatory focus. Power distance reflects the degree to which a society encourages behaviors that establish and maintain power differences among its members (House et al., 2004). Cultures with high power distance have a great deal of respect for formal and social hierarchies and thus leaves little room for making mistakes. As such, individuals shaped by such cultures are generally submissive and obedient to rules and structures and thus unlikely to take risks and engage in rule-breaking behaviors. Indeed, high power distance has been suggested and found to hinder voice behaviors from followers to speak up and raise different opinion (Urbach et al., 2021). Based on the above reasoning, we expect that a chronic prevention focus motivational system can help people better navigate their social life members (House et al., 2004). All these above reasoning and analyses lead to the following proposition.

Proposition 3: High power distance cultures tend to encourage more prevention-focused proactive goals (P3a); low power distance cultures tend to encourage more promotion-focused proactive goals (P3b).

Future orientation, tightness-looseness, and planning and execution Planning and execution of proactive goals foster concrete behaviors that can have effects on one-self and the environment. Researchers have emphasized the importance of effective self-regulation in the behavioral process (Parker & Bindl, 2016). Because proactive goals are to bring changes to the future and challenge the status quo, such actions may encounter barriers and setbacks. To successfully achieve proactive goals, individuals need to persevere in overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of their goals (Frese & Fay, 2001).

We propose that high future orientation likely enhances the planning and execution activities because of the emphasis on envisioning the future and delayed gratification (House et al., 2002). Individuals in future-oriented cultures focus on long-term gains and are likely to motivate them to persist in goal-directed behavior to overcome obstacles. Besides, individuals in such societies tend to have a stronger sense of self-control through their emphasis on delayed gratification (e.g., Casey et al., 2011), which can help them to regulate their behavior and emotions in the goal-pursuit process.

Moreover, cultural tightness is conducive to planning and execution activities. Generally, individuals in tight societies have high impulse control due to the strong situational constraints in their daily life (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). Harrington and Gelfand (2014) further reveal that tightness is associated with higher trait conscientiousness and greater self-control (e.g., lowered drug use). We thus expect individuals in tight societies to show more persistent efforts in the pursuit of their goals.

Proposition 4: High future orientation and tightness cultures tend to encourage more persistence in planning and execution.

Power distance, Assertiveness, Tightness-looseness, and feedback processing Feedback information is likely to facilitate the behavioral process by helping adjust the proactive goals and action plans. Being proactive involves actively seeking feedback and developing pre-signals for potential problems and opportunities (Frese & Fay, 2001). Individuals can seek feedback through either explicit verbal requests (i.e., inquiry) or indirect observation (i.e., monitoring) (Ashford et al., 2003). Alternatively, individuals can engage in indirect inquiry, which involves using indirect questions and third parties to seek information and testing limits to prompt spontaneous feedback from others (Miller & Jablin, 1991). We expect that cultural factors including power distance, assertiveness, and tightness-looseness can have a significant impact on the adoption of different feedback seeking strategies.

High power distance seems to be associated with more monitoring and indirect inquiry behavior than direct inquiry. High power distance of a society dictates that members to be deferential to authority and avoid challenging those in positions of power. In high power distance cultures, asking questions may be interpreted as criticizing, and therefore may be prohibited (Carl et al., 2004). As a result, cultural members may engage in more monitoring behaviors, such as observing how other people respond to their proactive behavior or reflecting on their past efforts. When they want

to solicit opinions and thoughts from others, they are more likely to rely on a limited set of trusted sources and raise their questions in a more indirect and methodical way. In contrast, members of low power distance society are more likely to engage in direct inquiry behaviors, such as asking questions from a variety of sources, as they perceive it as legitimate to question others.

We also anticipate assertiveness to promote more direct inquiry behavior. Assertiveness refers to the degree to which individuals in societies are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships (House et al., 2002). The more assertive the culture is, the more individuals can freely express themselves. We expect this tendency to be reflected in how cultural members seek feedback. Indeed, Morrison et al. (2004) found that individuals in a culture with high level of assertiveness reported more direct feedback seeking (i.e., feedback inquiry).

Tightness-looseness may also influence the strategies used to obtain feedback. Loose cultures have less pervasive social norms and are more lenient about deviant behavior as compared to tight cultures (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). Individuals shaped by loose cultures may feel more comfortable engaging in proactive behavior without concern for situational constraints. Consequently, they are more likely to adopt direct and overt inquiry behavior to seek feedback. Individuals from tight cultures tend to be more cautious in engaging in proactive behavior, as it may be viewed as deviating from cultural norms. To avoid potential punishment, they may prefer to use subtle and indirect strategies to obtain feedback.

Proposition 5: Low power distance, high assertiveness, and high looseness cultures tend to encourage more direct inquiry (P5a); High power distance, low assertiveness, and high tightness cultures tend to encourage more monitoring and indirect inquiry (P5b).

Culture and different forms of proactivity

The proactivity literature has revealed many types of proactive behaviors. For example, the literature distinguishes promotive voice from prohibitive voice (Liang et al., 2012), and identifies that individuals can seek feedback through inquiry or monitoring (Ashford et al., 2003). Job crafting can also be further differentiated into approach versus avoidance, cognitive versus behavioral, and resources versus demands (Zhang & Parker, 2019). Instead of subsuming varying types of proactivity into an overall category, we propose that culture may have differential influences on different forms of proactivity. Here we focus on three general forms of proactivity: promotive versus prohibitive, self-oriented versus other-oriented, incremental versus radical.

Promotive versus prohibitive proactivity The distinction between promotive and prohibitive forms of proactivity is gaining momentum in proactivity research on voice and job crafting (N. Li et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012; Lin & Johnson, 2015). For example, promotive and prohibitive voice are predicted by distinct factors (e.g., Lin & Johnson, 2015) and result in different outcomes (e.g., Li et al., 2017). We argue that these two general forms can be applied to overall proactivity, which are moti-

vated by different regulatory foci. Promotive proactivity represents actions taken to actively promote or create new opportunities, solutions, or outcomes with the goal of seeking growth and advancement, which aligns with the promotion focus (e.g., Lin & Johnson, 2015). Prohibitive proactivity refers to actions taken to prevent or avoid negative outcomes, threats, or risks with the goal of avoiding losses, which aligns with the prevention focus (e.g., Lin & Johnson, 2015).

As argued earlier, cultures with low levels of power distance, as well as high levels of individualism and looseness, tend to exhibit a dominant promotion focus, while cultures characterized by high levels of power distance, collectivism, and tightness tend to have a prevalent prevention focus. Based on this, we expect that promotion focused cultures will encourage more promotive proactivity, whereas prevention focused cultures will encourage more prohibitive proactivity.

Proposition 6: Low power distance, high individualism, and high looseness cultures tend to encourage more promotive proactivity (P6a); High power distance, high collectivism, and high tightness cultures tend to encourage more prohibitive proactivity (P6b).

Pro-self versus prosocial proactivity The literature also suggests that proactive behaviors have different intended target of impact, that is, whom or what the behavior is intended to affect (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Research has revealed that employees may engage in proactive behavior to enhance personal career goals (e.g., Chi et al., 2016; Seibert et al., 1999), to benefit coworkers (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991), and to improve organizational functioning (e.g., Ashford et al., 2003). We focus on two primary targets that proactive behavior aims to benefit: the self or the significant others including coworkers, work units, and organizations (see Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010, Grant & Ashford, 2008d Li et al., 2018, for similar categorization). Proactive actions directed to benefit oneself are termed pro-self proactivity and those initiated for the purpose of others' benefits prosocial proactivity.

Individualism may be prone to pro-self focused proactivity because of the emphasis on personal independence and personal uniqueness. In individualistic cultures, one's identity is based on one's personal accomplishments (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In order to create and maintain a positive sense of self, individuals in individualistic cultures may value personal success. Hence, they are expected to engage in proactive behaviors that promote their own work and personal career (e.g., Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998). Note that we do not anticipate individualistic cultures to inhibit other-oriented behaviors because prosocial proactivity is not necessarily in conflict with personal success (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Frese & Fay, 2001).

We also expect collectivistic cultures to not only promote prosocial proactivity but also inhibit pro-self proactivity. Collectivism assumes that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals. In collectivistic cultures, group membership is a central aspect of one's identity (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002). To create and maintain a positive self-view, individuals focus on their duties

and obligations to their in-group. We thus expect prosocial proactivity to be more welcomed in collectivistic contexts than in individualistic contexts because it may be perceived as a contribution to the collective. Collectivists are also concerned about group harmony (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2002). Proactive behavior might be viewed as a threat to interpersonal relationships because of its challenging nature, which is especially the case if it aims to benefit oneself. Indeed, researchers have shown that pro-self focused proactivity may incur envy among coworkers and be perceived as egocentric and selfish (Hirschfeld et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2021). We hence expect that pro-self proactivity be discouraged in collectivistic societies.

Proposition 7: High individualism cultures tend to encourage more pro-self proactivity (P7a); High collectivism cultures tend to encourage more prosocial proactivity (P7b).

Radical versus incremental proactivity Another important but often overlooked dimension of proactivity is the degree of impact that one aims to achieve (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006). The innovation/creativity literature has distinguished two types of innovation/creativity: radical versus incremental. Radical innovation/creativity brings about new and set-breaking frameworks or processes, whereas incremental innovation/creativity focuses on minor changes and modifications to existing practices and products (Madjar et al., 2011). Thus, we propose two types of proactivity based on the magnitude of change. Radical proactivity aims to create substantial changes and even build a new status quo, whereas incremental proactivity refers to minor changes and modifications to existing situations.

We hypothesize that cultures with higher power distance, collectivism, and tightness are associated with more incremental proactivity and less radical proactivity. A prevention-focused instead of a promotion-focused motivational system dominates in these cultures. The common goal of proactivity is to resolve problems and avoid potential losses. Although the induced proactive actions may challenge the status quo, the ultimate goal is not to disrupt but modify it. This argument is echoed by Kark and Van Dijk's (2007), who proposed that promotion focus is associated with transformational and charismatic leadership styles, whereas prevention focus is associated with monitoring and transactional leadership styles. The former is supposed to bring more radical influence and change to the environment than the latter. Findings of one study on the relationship between regulatory focus and two types of creativity (incremental versus radical) at the team level (C.-R. Li et al., 2019) are also consistent with our prediction. Furthermore, these cultures tend to have a low level of tolerance for change to the status quo. To achieve their proactive goal, individuals in these cultures are more likely to initiate change in an incremental way. Indeed, Chua et al. (2019) found that Chinese provinces with tighter cultures had lower rates of substantive/radical innovations yet higher rates of incremental innovation. We expect the same pattern can be observed in individual proactive behavior.

Proposition 8: High power distance, high collectivism, and high tightness cultures tend to encourage more incremental proactivity (P8a); Low power distance,

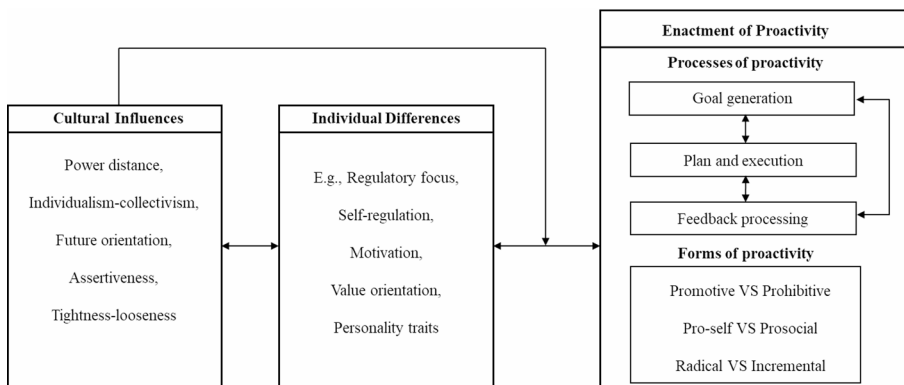


Fig. 2 A More nuanced model of cultural influences on proactivity

high individualism, and high looseness cultures tend to encourage more radical proactivity (P8b).

Agenda for future research

This paper serves as a rebuttal to the prevalent notion that people in the West are more proactive than those in the East (Urbach et al., 2021). In doing so, we have reviewed the existent research on cultural differences in proactivity. We have then moved beyond this simple dichotomy to discuss cultural influences on the enactment of proactivity (i.e., the dynamic process and varying forms). Although rigorous empirical research is warranted to examine our propositions, the enactment of proactivity tends to be influenced by various cultural factors. We reckon that our theoretical model does not intend to be exhaustive of all possible cultural influences and all the possible relationships among the five cultural variables and various indicators of proactivity. Aside from the direct influences that have been discussed, we believe that culture can also moderate the relationship between proactivity and its correlates. We therefore propose a more comprehensive model (Fig. 2) that can help elucidate how cultural factors affect proactivity. Below we point out several important directions for future research.

Culture and proactive motivation

Researchers have devoted great attention to detecting motivators for proactivity (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker et al., 2006; Parker & Bindl, 2016). Yet, it is unknown whether the same motivational source observed in the West can be found to the same extent in “non-Western” contexts. The scarcity of research on culture and proactive motivation notwithstanding, our critical review and theorizing imply that the underlying proactive motivation could be shaped by distal cultural factors, perhaps in a manner different from what has typically been assumed previously.

It is believed that Westerners are more used to being proactive as their culture values individual agency (e.g., Urbach et al., 2021). Our theoretical model suggests that this might be an over-simplistic interpretation of the construct of agency. Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2003) pointed out that individual agency is universal and can be understood and experienced in diverse ways across different cultures. In Western cultures, agency often resides in personal functions of identifying internal attributes of the self and using them as referents in regulating action. Actions are thus primarily the results of individual's own desires, goals, intentions, or choices. This style of agency is called independent agency (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). In East Asian cultures, however, agency is often constructed in a more interdependent manner termed as interdependent agency. That is, the goals, desires, and needs of socially important others are just as important as one's own. Individual agency thus depends critically on interpersonal functions of inferring thoughts of others and using them in regulating one's own actions. Actions are therefore responsive to obligations and expectations of others, roles, situations (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 2003).

This logic suggests that East Asians should not be less motivated to be proactive. Nonetheless, the motives underlying proactive behaviors are likely to be different between Westerners and Easters. Kitayama and Uchida (2005) claimed that individuals who endorse independent agency are strongly motivated to pursue and actualize the internal attributes of the self in action (i.e., motivation to stand out), whereas those with interdependent agency strongly motivated to accommodate and fit-in to others' expectations and needs (i.e., motivation to stand in). Accordingly, we expect that the motivation to stand-out is more strongly associated with proactivity among Westerners while the motivation to stand-in is more strongly associated with proactivity among East Asians, which awaits future empirical research. Based on such cross-cultural research on motivations of proactivity, future research could also examine potentially different profiles of proactivity motivation and different forms of proactivity in different cultural contexts and identify which profiles of proactivity motivation and forms are most prevalent and functional in different cultures.

The role of proximal social contexts: leaders and coworkers

In addition to culture, the proactivity literature has also taken into consideration of more proximal social influences from leaders and coworkers (Cai et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2019). To extend our proposition, one promising direction involves investigating how leadership interplays with culture in affecting proactivity. Although some studies have explored this relationship at the individual level, their findings have been inconsistent. In voice literature, some researchers found that the effects of leader behaviors on employee voice were weaker when individuals' power distance orientation was high than low (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Farh et al., 2007; Liu & Liao, 2013), while Wei et al. (2015) reported that supervisory delegation was more effective on promotive voice (not prohibitive voice) for people with a high power distance orientation. We urge researchers to pay more attention to the process of proactivity and its varying forms in studying the interaction between culture and leadership. Moreover, the mechanisms through which culture and leadership interact

to shape proactive behavior have not received adequate attention. Our theorizing has highlighted the role of individual psychological adaptations, particularly regulatory focus, in shaping the enactment of proactivity. While culture can cultivate the chronic regulatory focus of its members, leaders can also induce a situational regulatory focus among employees (e.g., Kark et al., 2015; Neubert et al., 2008). Future research can test the role of regulatory focus empirically and examine other potential variables that may contribute to the underlying mechanism.

Another promising direction involves interpersonal interactions with coworkers (Parker et al., 2006; Tucker et al., 2008). Culture may play a powerful role in shaping the coworker dynamics at work (e.g., Farh et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2008). Because the success of proactivity often relies on the support and approval from significant others (Parker et al., 2019), it is intriguing to examine how the different coworker relationships may influence individuals to engage in proactive goal generation and goal striving activities. Furthermore, it is also important to study how leaders and coworkers in different cultures may differ in their evaluation and reaction to different forms of proactivity. Newcomers in collectivist cultures are found to have more favorable socialization outcomes if they engage in more proactive behaviors to promote themselves (Zhao et al., 2023). This may be because organizational insiders in collectivist cultures are likely to consider it part of their role to respond positively to those behaviors. Besides, the discouragement of self-oriented proactivity in collectivist culture may make such behaviors more salient and beneficial. Considering the increasing importance of cultural contexts and cross cultural collaborations in today's business world, future research may also examine how leaders and coworker work in tandem to affect different forms of employee proactivity during different proactivity process in multinational organizations and global virtual teams where the influences of culture may be more salient. In such multinational organizations and global virtual teams, people may have different motivations of proactivity and proactivity may be manifested differently from people with different cultural backgrounds. Findings of such research on how different forms and motivations of proactivity from people with different cultural background may complement, supplement or conflict with each other will generate useful practical implications on better managing cross-cultural teams and organization to promote sustainable proactivity over time (Urbach et al., 2021).

Causality issues

As with other theoretical and empirical work on the societal culture (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011; Markus & Hamedani, 2019), in this paper, an important assumption is that the direction of causality travels from culture to individual differences through socialization, and then to proactive goal generation and striving, and proactive behaviors. Yet, this is not necessarily the only possibility. The emerging line of research on gene-cultural coevolution suggests that it is also possible that individual differences and behaviors may over time shape societal cultures (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2009). Moreover, although previous research has shown that proactivity has a genetic basis (W.-D. Li, 2013), it seems possible that proactive goal generation and striving may also feedback to individual difference variables such as proactive personality (W.-D.

Li et al., 2014, 2021; Wu & Li, 2016) such that proactive personality may develop because of people's proactive behaviors and work experiences. Future research may examine possible reciprocal relationships between individual differences and the core phases of proactivity process (i.e., goal generation, plan and execution, and feedback processing), and between the different phases of proactivity. If possible, it is also interesting to examine the coevolution of societal culture and different forms of proactivity and proactivity processes over time at the societal level.

Methodological concerns

We provide several suggestions for testing our propositions and designing cross-cultural studies. First and foremost, researchers should be cautious in determining the level of analysis, which has long been criticized in cross-cultural studies (Ayman & Gelfand, 2012; Gelfand et al., 2007). This paper, like most studies, defines culture as shared attributes among societal members, which is rooted at the group level and cannot be easily reduced to individual level (Na et al., 2010). A common pitfall is that researchers often use individual value orientation to operationalize culture even though they conceptualize it as a group-level variable. To properly examine our propositions, multilevel study designs and multilevel modeling techniques are recommended (e.g., Nezlek, 2010). By using these methods, researchers can better model the interaction between culture and different levels of contextual factors as well as individual differences and gain a more accurate understanding of the role that culture plays in shaping individual proactive behavior. Second, it is imperative to launch a global project aimed at systematically investigating the relationship between culture and proactivity. A notable limitation of the extant empirical studies is that they usually compare a limited number of cultural groups with North Americans always used as the reference group (e.g., Bailey et al., 1997; Brockner et al., 2001; Morrison et al., 2004). A large-scale global study is therefore needed to overcome the significant sampling limitation. With more cultural groups included, the global study can not only address the inquiry about mean level differences of proactivity across cultures but also provide valuable insights into the within-culture variances.

Conclusion

With the recognition that proactivity matters for individual, team and organizational performance, and the increasing use of cross-cultural teams and multinational organizations in today's business world, proactivity scholars have started to devote more research attention to cross-cultural differences in proactivity. We suspect that it is premature to automatically assume people in the West are always more proactive than those in the East. As a rebuttal of this widespread assumption, this paper untangles the process of proactivity and differentiates various forms of proactivity to gain a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes proactivity, beyond merely focusing on overall differences in proactivity across cultures. Although our theoretical framework is by no means comprehensive, we hope that this paper can serve as a

starting point to encourage more theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between culture and proactivity.

Declarations

Competing interest The authors declare no competing interests or conflict of interests.

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