Thriving in multicultural work settings

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Thriving in multicultural work settings

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Abstract

Owing to globalization and the global mobility of workforce, working in multicultural environments has become a daily reality for an increasing number of manpower. Such an environment does introduce unique challenges to individuals, enabling some of them to thrive. The aim of the paper, therefore, is to explore the antecedents of thriving and its components in multicultural work settings of multinational corporations (MNCs). The in-depth interviews with 38 informants were conducted to analyze intercultural interactions in 2 MNCs' subsidiaries. The study demonstrates that those individuals who thrive in MNCs assess their specific job demands as challenges. Moreover, thriving people activate their personal resources to face their challenges, which in return enhances their learning and personal growth. The learning component of thriving appeared to be more salient than vitality.

The research may suggest that managers of MNCs should recruit employees whose need for growth is well-developed, since those individuals can benefit more from multicultural work

settings and thrive. International experience and psychological capital are the additional factors here that may foster employees' thriving.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first research that explores thriving in multicultural work context. It looks at the antecedents of thriving with the Positive Organizational Scholarship lens. Nevertheless, the study is based on the qualitative methodology, which does not allow for a generalization of the findings.

Keywords: intercultural interactions, learning, thriving, positive psychological capital, Positive Organizational Scholarship

Introduction

Thriving is the experience of an individual's growth resulted from vitality and learning in a work context (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012; Paterson *et al.*, 2014). The studies on thriving are becoming an important domain of inquiry and are systematically growing in number as the phenomenon produces many positive outcomes for organizations. First, thriving is a positive subjective experience that helps employees to develop in a positive direction (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005). Second, it is positively associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment and negatively associated with professional burnout. Third, it plays a mediating role between organizational commitment and a career development initiative as well as organizational commitment and job performance (Porath *et al.*, 2012; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, it can support human resource managers in using practices that seek to fit work environment and employees positive potential (Kira and Balkin, 2014).

Over the years researchers have concentrated on the benefits of thriving with regard to work-related outcomes. However, to date, the antecedents of thriving are considerably less recognized. There are certain calls of other researchers (e.g. Niessen *et al.*, 2012; Paterson *et al.*, 2014) that more studies are needed on how job characteristics (job demands and job resources) and personal resources foster thriving and consequently increase individual and organizational outcomes. An understanding of the role of such contextual antecedents is particularly important for managers in organizations, who are interested in promoting their employees' thriving at work. They want to know how and why their employees react to specific contextual features and utilize their personal resources.

The work landscape has considerably changed over the years. Amidst these changes, both globalization, which has led to multinational corporations (MNCs) being present in host economies worldwide, and the global mobility of workforce have made working in multicultural environments a daily reality for an increasing number of manpower (Nolan, 2012; Westover, 2012). The work context in MNCs varies from any other corporations' work context. The main difference is cultural and language diversity, which is evident in the interactions of MNCs' staff (Lauring, 2009; Tanova and Nadiri, 2010). Although such an environment poses unique challenges to individuals, since they are exposed to cultural barriers (Chen *et al.*, 2005), there may also appear opportunities (Youssef and Luthans, 2012) that enable individuals to thrive. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to explore the antecedents of thriving and its components in multicultural work settings of MNCs.

To the best of our knowledge, no research so far has explored thriving in the multicultural work context. This study, by focusing on multicultural work settings of MNCs, is likely to be the first one that responds to the aforementioned researchers' calls. It also looks at antecedents of thriving with the Positive Organizational Scholarship lens contributing to this emerging domain of inquiry.

In the following sections of the paper, we briefly review the literature on thriving and present the methodology that substantiates our research. Afterwards, the empirical findings are discussed with regard to thriving in multicultural environments of MNCs. The conclusions and discussion section draws contributions, limitations and practical implications. Directions for future research close the discourse.

Literature Review

Thriving in the prior studies and the research gap

Thriving is "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work" (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005, p. 538). Vitality captures the positive experience of energy and aliveness, while learning is defined as the sense that a person acquires knowledge and skills and is able to use both of them (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005). Spreitzer *et al.* claim that both components are necessary to thrive (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012) – namely, experiencing vitality or learning separately is not enough for an individual's prosperity, growth and development.

The prior research on thriving at work has revealed that employees describe both vitality and learning as important elements of forward progress in self-development. Therefore, thriving

reflects both the affective and cognitive component of psychological experience and combines the hedonic and eudemonic perspective of psychological functioning (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005).

Spreitzer *et al.* (2005) point out some antecedents of thriving that have led to the formation of the concept. These are agentic behaviors such as task focus, a heedful relation and exploration, and some psychological traits and experiences, i.e. positive affectivity and resilience. Nevertheless, they were drawn from a theoretical reflection. Some studies that have explored the antecedents of thriving applied a qualitative design. For example, Travis *et al.* (2014) have examined the effective mechanisms that facilitate positive experiences at work among childcare providers. The results of this study indicate that a climate of trust and respect as well as autonomy in decision-making are instrumental in fostering thriving. Moreover, the importance of the positive attributes of the meaning making process aimed at developing intrinsic motivation and fostering team-orientation was found conducive to thriving at work.

Only a few studies so far have scrutinized thriving in a work setting (see e.g. Niessen *et al.*, 2012; Paterson *et al.*, 2014; Porath *et al.*, 2012). Recently, a few empirical quantitative studies have been published in an organizational context, in which correlational, longitudinal and diary designs of research are applied.

The correlational study conducted by Porath *et al.* (2012) shows some antecedents of thriving, namely that thriving is positively related to positive affect, a learning goal orientation, a proactive personality and core self-evaluation in young employees. Moreover, they reveal that proactiveness is a stronger correlate of thriving than other factors and thriving is associated more with a positive affect than a negative one.

Paterson *et al.* (2014) in their longitudinal research tested thriving at work by linking it to a theoretically important personal outcome variable such as self-development, and examined its relationship with two agentic work behaviors, i.e. task-focused and heedful relating, and two antecedent variables, namely positive psychological capital (PsyCap) and organizational supportive climate. The novelty of this study was indicated by advancing the model with PsyCap - a complex, personal resource including self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience - components that have a synergistic effect on positive organizational behaviors (Luthans *et al.*, 2007; Luthans *et al.*, 2010). The research of Paterson *et al.* (2014) supports the findings that employees' thriving is positively related to the supervisor ratings of their self-development and is also related to job performance. Task focus and heedful relating are positively associated with

thriving as well as with PsyCap and organizational supportive climate. Moreover, task focus, yet not heedful relating, mediates the relationship between two antecedents and thriving.

One of the most interesting studies that have expanded the knowledge about thriving as a dynamic state was conducted by Niessen *et al.* (2012). Their results suggest that employees who can acquire relevant knowledge and experience positive meaning at the beginning of a work day, witness better thriving when the work day ends. Thus, the daily experience of positive meaning is an important antecedent of both vitality and learning. The relationships between positive meaning, knowledge and thriving are also mediated by agentic work behaviors such as task focus and exploration. Additionally, the authors' findings show that dynamic relationships and day-to-day variability are typical of thriving. These results support theoretical assumption of the socially embedded model of thriving and that agentic behaviors can drive thriving (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005).

Basing on the literature review, we have discovered a significant gap in the previous studies. First and foremost, more empirical studies are still needed to verify the potential antecedents of thriving in various work contexts. Moreover, the existing research has not indicated how job demands and job resources affect thriving and which of them are of vital importance. To the best of our knowledge, no research so far has explored thriving in the multicultural work context that creates peculiar job demands. It has also occurred evident that more effort is needed to explore personal resources in the context of MNCs as the antecedents of thriving. Our research responds to these needs.

Methodology

The research method

The research took a form of a qualitative, explorative study based on information gathered primarily via semi-structured, in-depth interviewees with managers and specialists, who were involved in intercultural interactions while performing their occupational duties in subsidiaries of MNCs. We launched the data collection process in March 2014 and completed it in September of the same year.

The open-ended and flexible character of the in-depth interviews has appeared to be an appropriate method to obtain the most accurate, exact and detailed observation with regard to the participants' experience, attitudes, perceptions and opinions (Dearnley, 2005; Brenner, 2009). The method also gives an opportunity to discover new aspects of the phenomenon which may have been missed so far by other researchers (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010).

The series of questions that we asked during the interviews referred to the outcomes of intercultural interactions and factors enabling effective cooperation with foreigners. Nevertheless, we modified the order and the number of the questions depending on the course of each dialogue and the relevance of information obtained from the interviewees (Dearnley, 2005). The study design presumed that the duration of each interview should take 45 - 90 minutes to leave enough room for logical conclusions and a dialogue between us and the informants. On average, each interview's time duration was 63 minutes, whilst we carried out 39 hours of the interviews in total. Then we manually coded and analyzed the entire collected materials.

We followed the procedure of qualitative content analysis, i.e. "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). The coding schemes used in the content analysis were developed inductively from the data by a constant comparison of each interview and emerging themes (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), thus it took a form of a conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). We followed the three steps procedure of qualitative content analysis (Hassi *et al.*, 2011). As the first step, open coding was applied. We tried to reveal some common themes emerging from the interviews known as open coding (Randall and Mello, 2012). These were for instance 'interesting experiences and curiosity'. Afterwards, those categories were labeled with the higher-level concepts such as e.g. 'needs fulfilment'. The main logic behind the axial coding at this step was to classify each category according to 1) the types of difficulties witnessed in the relationships with foreigners (e.g. the 'communication barriers' category was developed); 2) the types of outcomes derived from intercultural interactions (e.g. the 'learning and vitality' category was created); 3) conditions essential for fostering successful interactions (e.g. the 'personality' category was found). Finally, during the process of selecting coding some categories were combined into broader clusters and refined (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). As a result, a theoretical scheme emerged that enabled us to discuss the findings with respect to thriving antecedents, both organizational and individual ones, and its components, i.e. learning and vitality.

The companies and participants

The subsidiaries of two MNCs (see Table 1), which could "inform the research questions being investigated" (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 309), were selected via a purposive sampling technique that is usually used in studies that rely on qualitative content analysis (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). We searched for subsidiaries of MNCs in which intercultural interactions at work are a daily reality for their staff. The subsidiaries A and B met this initial criterion.

Subsidiary A	- belongs to a German MNC that employ above 2,300 employees worldwide, - established via a greenfield investment in 1986, - offers surface protection, scaffolding, steel construction and oil and gas offshore services, - operates on various European markets and the vast majority of its revenues are produced outside Poland, - involves its employees in intercultural interactions such as both face to face and virtual relationships with the subsidiary's mandators or their authorized representatives, the MNC's employees and contractors, - delivers services for foreign clients by the subsidiary's project managers and workers on overseas assignments, yet it occasionally hires workers from other countries, - it has subsidiaries in France, Denmark and Germany.
Subsidiary B	- is a part of a North American multinational semiconductor manufacturer that employs above 100,000 people worldwide, - founded in 1994 as a greenfield investment and merged with a previously Scandinavian affiliate located in Poland in 1999, - works mainly as an IT-shared service center and additionally as a HR-shared service center as well as a global tax and trade shared service center, - services other subsidiaries in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, - involves its employees in intercultural interactions that are rather intense, daily, and virtual with the other employees of the MNC, including the members of geographically dispersed multicultural teams, who frequently represent culturally distant countries.

Table 1.   *A brief profile of the subsidiaries in the sample*

Overall, 38 individuals involved in intercultural interactions constituted the sample in both MNCs, namely 20 subjects in subsidiary A and the remaining 18 interviewees in subsidiary B. The majority of them were specialists and the middle level managers who accounted for 42.1% and 26.3% of the sample respectively. 60.5% of the interviewees were men. There were 3 foreigners in the sample, i.e. a Dane in subsidiary A and an American and a Ukrainian in subsidiary B. People in their twenties and thirties contributed to the sample in 39.5% and 26.3% respectively. 55.3% of the study's informants have worked in the present MNCs for less than five years. The participants represented various organizational units, nevertheless most of them were directly employed in operations departments (18.4%), HR/administration (15.8%) or board of directors (15.8%), and R+D unit (13.2%). 71.1% of the individuals in the sample have worked and lived abroad, while 47.4% of them had professional experience gained in other MNCs, which may suggest that the respondents have had international experience (Takeuchi and Chen, 2013). It is worth emphasizing that this fact could affect their notion of intercultural interactions at work.

Research Results

The organizational antecedents of thriving

The content analysis of the data revealed that the participants witnessed learning and vitality at work as a result of *specific job demands* in MNCs. The vast majority of them categorized those job characteristics as challenges rather than barriers:

> The difficulties are the challenges that motivate you and bring about job satisfaction. I learn more, though frustration may arise when difficulties occur.

Working in the MNCs required from the interviewees a good command of common, *functional language*. As the analysis proved, this job requirement appeared to be the most demanding in view of the respondents' remarks and it was often seen as a barrier to their rapports with foreigners. However, an opportunity to master language skills in a daily communication was also appreciated by the majority of them. Moreover, by some of the participants the requirement was classified as a challenge rather than a barrier that, if successfully faced, contributed to their learning and professional development:

> [Communication is] a challenge not a barrier, but the greatest difficulties are in this area.

In multicultural environments of the MNCs the interviewees were expected *to manage the difference* of attitudes, perspectives, views, habits, etc. under their specific job requirements, which also induced them to learn and invigorate:

> I like diversity and learning. I am fond of working with foreigners. (…) There are difficulties. You have to bear in mind that others may think and behave in a different way, since they were raised in various cultures. (…) You need a wider imagination.

Learning is inclusive, among others, of *cross-cultural adjustment* and adaptation. The requirement to adjust and be flexible was an obvious consequence of cultural diversity at work in the analyzed subsidiaries:

> You have to be flexible, expect unexpected, be prepared for out-of-the-box thinking about problems.

In view of the study's participants' remarks, their MNCs' work context was highly demanding and competitive. Nevertheless, the companies provided in return better *resources* than in other types of organizations, which could enable employees' adjustment and as a result facilitated tasks actualization and interpersonal rapports. These were for instance language and cross-cultural trainings, communication technology for dispersed teams, knowledge databases, core values, special initiatives, relocation and other amenities:

> Our core values – we are different but we pursue the same goal. There are language courses. The company supports diversity – in case of discrimination, the consequences would be severe.

Personal resources as individual antecedents of thriving

Since work settings of MNCs are highly demanding, MNCs' staff should be equipped with unique personal resources. Thus, we asked the interviewees what, in their opinion, makes working with foreigners affluent of positive outcomes. Generally, the respondents indicated the following: personality traits, a positive attitude, skills and experience.

With respect to personality, *being open* was the most crucial feature of a person that, in view of the informants' remarks, influenced success in intercultural interactions. For instance, one of them noticed:

> [A person who wants to succeed in intercultural interactions should be] open to other people, respect others and be confident of his/her competencies.

The features of curiosity and a preference for variety were also identified in the respondents' utterances:

> Differences are precious and more important than initial challenges. It is interesting and gives you joy when you can interact with others.

The participants of the study frequently mentioned *a positive attitude* as another factor that may determine smooth relationships with foreigners. As symptoms of a positive attitude toward representatives of different cultures the respondents indicated not yielding to stereotypes, persevering toward goals and motivation:

> Positive experiences set one's mind positively. (…) For example, you need a positive attitude toward someone's accent because you want to reach goals together.

According to the informants, being successful in addressing language and cultural diversity challenges, as specific demands of a work context in MNCs, required certain *abilities* such as speaking foreign languages or having social and technical skills:

> [To be successful, you need to be able to] make contacts, speak a foreign language, present personal culture, will, commitment to goals

In view of the overall collected data, it must also be stressed that the enabling factors in intercultural interactions were a person's belief that he/she demonstrates a sufficient level of the foregoing abilities and has potential for activating required motivation, resources and course of actions, i.e. he/she feels self-efficacy and hope:

> I prefer to work in a multicultural environment because I appreciate diversity (…). I feel self-confident in such an environment.

Last but not least, the interviewees considered *having international experience* as an essential condition for establishing and maintaining effective relationships with foreigners:

> Since I was a child I have been travelling a lot. I have always loved international experiences. I have always wanted to discover, meet new people. I have been open and tolerant, so I don't see problems.

The thriving components in multicultural environments

As far as our research is concerned, it has occurred evident that working in a unique workplace of MNCs faced the interviewees with challenges or barriers, contributing to their perspective broadening, knowledge sharing and as a result enhanced *learning*:

> Contacts always teach you something and bring something. If they are with a foreigner, then you very often learn the other country's culture and it is somewhat enrichment. The contacts with other states broaden your horizons. (…) The contacts with foreigners let you observe how they work and you learn.

As the content analysis revealed, demanding work environments in the MNCs stimulated the interviewees' growth. For instance, working with foreigners activated both the participants' and organizational creativity and innovation via overcoming rigid solutions as well as inducted their adaptability and resilience:

> I personally appreciate the chance to learn from people from other places. It is a kind of reward to observe others, their talents and how they come up with a solution.

A participant of the study directly indicated that due to working in the multicultural environments of their MNCs, they satisfied their *need for growth*:

> You gain personal development and cultural exchange due to contact with foreigners.

Learning languages as a natural consequence of working with foreigners was another symptom of an individual's growth that also occurred in terms of personality developments, i.e. openness and tolerance:

> Work brings people closer, especially work abroad, when you have a direct contact, talk about habits etc. It increases your curiosity and then respect for the other culture, history.

Finally, the study provided evidence that in multicultural environments of MNCs the participants witnessed *different emotional states*, both positive emotions (e.g. curiosity, excitation, enthusiasm, pleasure, surprise, joy, satisfaction) and negative ones (e.g. frustration, anxiety, stress, impatience, homesickness). However, the positive emotions prevailed in the respondents' opinions and those emotions could foster their vitality:

> This job isn't stress-free, yet it drives my energy, the continuous challenges you meet. I like that.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study extends the literature on thriving and cultural diversity, since it revealed that specific job demands in the MNCs, such as the necessity to use functional language (due to multilingualism), to manage the differences (i.e. cultural diversity) and to adjust to them as well as organizational resources, can be acknowledged as the *organizational antecedents* of learning, whereas personal resources as the *individual antecedents* of vitality. Both learning and vitality facilitate individual development in MNCs. Nevertheless, in our study it is the learning component of thriving that appeared more salient than vitality.

In the subject literature, learning is perceived as a relational process "in the sense of relying on interactions between people to determine what needs improving and how to do it" (Carmeli *et al.*, 2009, p. 81). It "depends on members sharing knowledge and creating new solutions" (Carmeli *et al.*, 2009, p. 82). In our research, learning has not only contributed to one's personal growth, but also supported the organizational development due to enhanced creativity and innovation.

Our study shows that although MNCs' job demands put effort into the work process, they can be evaluated by individuals more as challenges than hindrances. The multicultural work environment appears to be highly motivating and MNCs do provide such job resources that enable coping with potential difficulties and enhance learning. Success in dealing with these challenges triggers positive emotions, albeit within the process of cross-cultural adjustment people may experience varied feelings (Takeuchi and Chen, 2013).

To date, numerous studies have scrutinized what competence is needed to function effectively in multicultural environments (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Panggabean *et al.*, 2013). Amidst other factors, learning was identified as a process that builds competence required for functioning in multicultural settings (Bartel-Radic, 2006). Learning is also a vital process for an individual's thriving (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005) and it helps to acquire necessary experience (Takeuchi and Chen, 2013). In our study the respondents indicated the importance of international experience that enables them to deal with multicultural work environments. While acquiring international experience, people learn new abilities and exercise their linguistic, social and other skills, which further enhances their organizational potential.

The informants also described themselves as open, tolerant and curious individuals. Open people "utilize effective and creative solutions to manage work stressors" (You *et al.*, 2015, p. 140). The prior research also suggests that an open person more willingly interacts with representatives of other cultures and exhibits more cultural flexibility (e.g. Maertz *et al.*, 2009; Caligiuri and

Tarique, 2012). Openness may therefore foster an individual's adjustment to unique work requirements in MNCs and increase his/her resilience. Furthermore, open people "have intellectual curiosity and a preference for variety" (Maertz *et al.*, 2009, p. 74). Openness is an essential antecedent of thriving (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005).

The respondents' remarks about the factors that enable them to function in the multinational work environments demonstrate individual traits of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience, i.e. PsyCap. Moreover, what appears visible is that the respondents presented a positive attitude toward cultural diversity, which in the subject literature is seen as a component of cultural competence (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). There is also evidence that an employee's positive PsyCap leads to a positive attitude (Donaldson and Ko, 2010). In our research, the aforementioned personality traits and dispositions created positive emotions, e.g. enthusiasm, excitation, joy and satisfaction, and shaped vitality.

The empirical findings indicate some *practical implications*. Our research may suggest that managers of MNCs should recruit employees whose need for growth is well-developed, since those individuals can benefit more from multicultural work settings and they will thrive. International experience and PsyCap are additional factors that may foster the employees' thriving. Moreover, more concern should be put on training employees' language, social and other skills since it may build their positive PsyCap and organizational resources.

Our study adds to the literature, since to the best of our knowledge, this is the first research that explores organizational (i.e. job demands and job resources) and individual antecedents of thriving and its components in the multicultural work context. It also looks at thriving with the Positive Organizational Scholarship lens. Nevertheless, the study has some *shortcomings*. First and foremost, the qualitative methodology applied to the research does not allow for a generalization of the findings. The sample size was limited since only the respondents from two MNCs were interviewed. However, the results indicate certain directions for *further research.* For instance, the role of positive PsyCap as a moderator in the relation between job demands and thriving should be better recognized. Moreover, a focus on job resources in future research can help to explain the role of organization in building thriving. Finally, antecedents of thriving in multicultural teams could be separately explored in future studies.

To conclude, *the organizational antecedents* such as job demands and job resources, and *the individual antecedents* such as personal disposition (positive PsyCap), international experience and skills can foster learning and vitality in MNCs. Additionally, thriving strengthens other

positive individual and organizational outcomes as well as makes MNCs an attractive workplace for people seeking to thrive.

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