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Warszawa, 13.06.2022

Review of the doctoral dissertation entitled “Moral licensing as a predictor of counterproductive behaviors in public administration” written under the joint supervision of Prof dr hab. Przemysław Hensel and Prof. dr Fariborz Rahimnia.

This review is based on a letter sent to me by prof. dr hab. Grzegorz Karasiewicz, the Head of the Discipline Council for Management and Quality Sciences at the University of Warsaw. The review is performed in line with the regulations on the PhD granting procedure in the Republic of Poland referenced in the above-mentioned letter.

According to these legal regulations, the PhD thesis should fulfill the following criteria: (1) provide an original solution to the research problem; (2) present the candidate’s overall theoretical proficiency in the discipline in which the procedure takes place; (3) prove the candidate’s abilities to independently conduct research in the given discipline. I conducted the evaluation against these specific requirements and this review is structured to reflect how these are fulfilled by the Candidate.



(1) Original solution to the research problem

The main goal of the dissertation is defined as follows: “(t)he main purpose of this study is developing the theory on moral licensing and the discovery of the causes, factors and consequences of moral license in public administrators” (p. 15). This goal reflects an original research question. The research question itself is adequately substantiated in the Introduction part of the dissertation. The argument beyond the novelty and significance of this research goal is supported with both up-to-date literature sources as well as Author’s own reflection over the challenges posed by the practice of managing today’s organizations.

Having said that, there are still several issues that raise questions regarding some choices the Candidate made to tackle the research problem in the specific way, as reported in this dissertation. I list them below:

- The field selected for empirical investigation should be contextualized and debated in more depth. On the one hand, to me, conducting fieldwork in Iran constitutes a great and underutilized potential contribution of this work. It provides data from a geographical and cultural place that remains understudied in management discipline and yet may provide very informative insights into the academic debate. It also highlights the unique advantage of the Candidate to conduct fieldwork in an underrepresented empirical setting with difficult access. To leverage this particular benefit of the dissertation, a debate on culture as a concept in management science would be a necessary supplement. This addition to the dissertation should consist of at least two parts. First, it should be a discussion of the notion of culture itself including various concepts, definitions and approaches (for example, national culture, organizational culture, work culture etc.). Second, it should be the discussion of Iranian culture itself. This should have been done to give necessary context; and could have been performed with adequate theoretical tools, even if



only using the much criticized but still useful traditional frameworks to compare cultures (e.g., Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner). While the first omission may be seen as open for discussion, the other one is more serious. Presentation of Iranian culture is particularly lacking and it seriously hinders the interpretation of findings and the evaluation of the empirical material quoted in the work. Especially, that both the author and the interviewees themselves sometimes directly refer to the country- and religion-related aspects of Iranian culture. This is evident, for instance, when we read the following: on p. 105 “The Islamic kindness to punishments indicates that the aim of punishment is mending the behavior of a violator...”, on p. 107 “Unfortunately, culturally we are moving in the direction that escaping and following the law is considered a kind of cleverness”, on p. 109 “Although the generation of physicians such as Dr. Gharib and Dr. Skheikh is still seen in our medical community...”. In Implications to practice the Author states: “...unfortunately, the costs of committing violations in our country, and especially administrative violations in government organizations, is very low...” or “...what is of particular importance is the principle of equality of all before the law so that the famous proverb ‘If they are ordered to get drunk in the city, whatever they are’ can fully illustrate this fact” (both statements on p. 142). Overall, it is surprising not to see the chapter that would describe the population under study in relation to topic that is so culturally-bounded. Yet, there are signs of Author’s awareness of the importance of cultural grounding of the empirical study as it is mentioned in the description of limitations of the research (short mentioning on p. 138).

- The fieldwork conducted by the Author is impressive. Conducting it must have required dedication, skills, intricate knowledge of the field, and sensitivity. The analytical procedures evident in rigorous following of the grounded theory steps were effortful and needed discipline.



Seeing this, it is sometimes inexplicable and sometimes frustrating to follow the narrative in chapter 4. Why does it contain statements which seem superficial, cliché or just resemble stereotyping? Are these just shortcuts? Why are they not substantiated with field evidence or literature sources? Example of such statements are to be found, among others, on p. 106 “Many events occur in life eventually. The same can be said about organization. All relationships, events, changes, violations and deviant behaviors occur in organizations eventually”.

- Another unexpected omission in the dissertation is a discussion of the specificity of government administration organizations or public organizations as such. Much of the sources the author discusses in literature review are studies on business organizations. This raises the question on the conditions and caveats to use this literature to define a research problem that is to be investigated on a population of public servants.

(2) Candidate's overall theoretical proficiency

The discussion of literature in various parts of the dissertation shows that the Candidate is familiar with the debate on moral licensing in the discipline of management. It also proves that the author is able to draw inspiration, critically review, and integrate contributions from other social science disciplines (mainly psychology of organizations and psychology of work). The discussion of literature sources in the Introduction (chapter 1) and in the Literature review (chapter 2) shows proficiency in discussing theories and research findings in the field of management. The narrative of literature review is problem-centered proving reflective and critical skills of the Author.



Against this background, the discussion of findings of the Candidate's own research (chapter 5) is a bit disappointing. Considering the extensive literature discussed in chapter 1 and 2, thorough knowledge of methods (chapter 3) as well as superb and original fieldwork conducted within this PhD work (chapter 4), I would expect a more direct and clear discussion on how this work contributes to the on-going theoretical debate on moral licensing. It would be good if – in the discussion - the Candidate had attempted to more precisely connect research gaps identified in chapter 1 and 2 with the research findings from chapter 4. In sum, chapter 5 seems quite chaotic and is definitely not leveraging the strengths of this work that were made evident in chapter 2, 3 and 4.

(3) Ability to conduct research in the field of management and quality sciences.

The methodological chapter and the fieldwork constitute one of the major advantages of this dissertation. The methodology selected to perform the study is in line with research objectives and this choice is well-argued by the Author with appropriate support in the academic literature. This shows knowledge of the methods applied in management sciences as well as ability to critically reappraise methodologies and match methodologies to specific research goals. The discussion of the limitations of selected methodology shows reflective skills of the Candidate.

The methodology part has, however, some shortcoming that would require further explanations from the Candidate:

- Moral licensing is a sensitive topic, as the Author admits in the dissertation. Talking about moral licensing in real contexts is challenging due to its taboo and tacit nature. Discussing moral



licensing may carry significant social implications and pose a political threat to those studied or to those they represent. Hence, a surreptitious approach to data gathering and analysis may be required to elicit honest accounts from field study participants. How was this addressed in practice? Has the researcher applied specific techniques to cross-check findings from the interviews, to enable the interviewees to speak freely, to build trust?

- Why is the identity of researcher not directly discussed in this work? Is it possible that it may have had impact on the quality of the field material and on the results? How did the interaction between the interviewees and the researcher look like in the field?
- Translation procedures are not adequately reported by the author. This is a serious issue of two reasons. First, it is difficult to review the quality of analytical work if the dissertation is written in English and the original fieldwork was conducted in another language. Second, several quotations in the empirical part of the dissertation were illegible to me, and I am wondering how much this is an issue of the quality of research work and how much of some translation slips. Careful reading of the empirical part provides numerous examples; just to mention one, on p. 96 the interviewee [10] is reported to say: "It is also a teaching that if someone waists your right, do not quit your job".
- The technical side of preparing this dissertation may raise some doubts and show paths for improvements that are necessary if the Candidate plans not only to conduct research, but also to participate in academic debates. First, there are problems with editing that make this work sometimes difficult to read, which should not happen at the PhD level. Second, the work needs careful proofreading. While nowadays in academia very few of us are native speakers and minor mistakes are not a problem, it is expected that our works will be communicative and linguistically



correct. Some parts of this dissertation have basic English slips (e.g. 'quality research' instead of 'qualitative research') and there are typographical mistakes, which can frustrate the reader (for example, the candidate cites Sanders et al on p. 51, while the original source is by Saunders et al, correctly spelled in the bibliography which shows it was typographical, not a factual mistake). The overall work is legible and understandable, but in particular the discussion (chapter 5) would benefit from more careful wording. I suspect that the difficulty to follow some sentences in this chapter can impact its overall assessment as the weakest part of the dissertation (see, for example, the narrative on pages 134-136).

Conclusion

Having considered the advantages of the presented work as well as its shortcomings listed and discussed above I conclude that this dissertation fulfills the requirements set by the Polish regulations on PhD granting procedures. I recommend the Discipline Council for Management and Quality Sciences at the University of Warsaw to proceed with it and open it for public presentation and defense.