

SOCIAL-COGNITIVE MODELLING OF GROWER AND EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

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Summary

Research suggests that farmers' economic behaviour and productivity is predicted by their personality traits (Austin, Deary, & Willock, 2001; Willock et al., 1999). Given cotton is a "high-risk" crop, the implications of this research are significant; yet, there is no body of research that discerns the key motivational factors of a cotton growers and farm employees. Knowledge of the motivational factors is needed to inform the development of a workforce strategy for cotton and to develop interventions that support growers. Toward that end, this paper provides an outline of a social cognitive model of cotton grower and employee motivations (McIlveen et al., 2014; Wunsch, McDonald, & McIlveen, 2014).

Introduction

The *Edinburgh Study of Farmers* (Austin et al., 2001; Willock et al., 1999) is a striking example of psychological research that describes the economic, productivity-related behaviour of farmers—both crop and cattle. The key findings of the Edinburgh Study highlight the role of personality traits in farmers' motivation and productivity. These traits are: Extroversion, Openness to Experience, and Conscientiousness. In this paper, we report on progress toward a new conceptual model of grower and employee motivation that extends beyond the Edinburgh Study's focus on personality traits. The model identifies other *adaptive attitudes and behaviours* that have additional potential to predict work behaviours that is associated with cotton growers' and farm employees' productivity, satisfaction, and engagement in work. The findings of the research project will inform farm-management theory and practices, including the recruitment and selection of cotton farm employees, and the ongoing professional career development of growers.

Many industries have taken up the empirical research and technologies produced by applied psychology, most notably in human resources management, occupational health and safety, and marketing. For example, psychometric screening of future employees is now commonplace as a method to (a) reduce the time, cost, and risk of staff recruitment, (b) enhance the likelihood of selecting staff that "fit" in a workplace. Yet, apart from the Edinburgh Study, there has been little research into the vocational psychology of agriculture since the 1970s (e.g., Richards

Jr, 1973) and, as a consequence, agriculture has not benefited from the advancements in research in the specialised fields of psychometrics and vocational psychology that predict career satisfaction and workplace productivity. There is a pressing need to determine the factors that attract and retain personnel in the cotton industry, and psychological approaches to understanding the factors that contribute to attraction and retention will go a long way to closing the knowledge gap.

We conceptualise cotton grower and employee behaviour within a social cognitive framework (Bandura, 2001). This framework accounts for the influences of the real world, including on-farm factors (e.g., personnel, finances) and off-farm factors (e.g., industry trends, suppliers). Following the Edinburgh Study, a cotton growers' personality (e.g., Conscientiousness) leads the grower to a work ethic to the best of available resources.

To a cotton grower, it seems obvious that his or her Conscientiousness is key to success as a grower, and equally important is the Conscientiousness of those employees who are solid and reliable. It makes sense: being diligent, dependable, organised, and aiming for success, drive one to engage in behaviours that ultimately produce a good year. What is not known, however, are those adaptive attitudes and behaviours that boost the effects of Conscientiousness. We also suspect that other personality traits, such as Grit, will influence how growers and employees engage with their work. A gritty grower knows how to hang in there for the long-term. Again, what is not known is how best

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to enhance the effect of Grit by training other adaptive attitudes and behaviours. Within the frame of our social cognitive model, the aim of our research is to discern those attitudes and behaviours. Central to the model's predictive relationships are self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

Methodology

The research project will use develop authentic measurements of the key motivational factors, using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Structural equation modelling will test the social cognitive model to determine if the predicted relationships between adaptive attitudes and behaviours have potential impact on engagement and satisfaction.

Results

Preliminary research using interviews with growers affirmed the content validity of the psychometric measurement instruments. Parallel modelling using data on other occupations has affirmed the model's validity. The interview research will continue in 2014 and will be widened to include farm employees. A large-scale survey, using a battery of psychometric measurement instruments, will be rolled out in 2015.

Conclusion

The final and fully tested models of grower and employee engagement and satisfaction will be used to design supportive initiatives for growers and employees, so that they can get the most out of their career and commitment to farming. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research project will inform on-farm management practices and workforce strategies that aim to attract and retain talent in the industry.

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