

How Does Millennials' Perception on Their Employers Affect Their Work Ethic? A Study in Hong Kong

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Work ethic of millennial employees has raised considerable attention in Hong Kong. Current article examined how the millennials' perception on their employers would have an effect on their own work ethic. A survey study of 212 millennial respondents showed that the millennials in general perceived their employers positively and embraced good work ethic. Two variables – perception and work ethic – are significantly related. The study also revealed that millennials in Hong Kong hold peculiar interpretations of work and leisure, and of work and success. It was suggested that parenting, educational system, and modern working environments might have caused these interpretations.

Key words: millennial, work ethic, perception, psychological contract, Hong Kong

Introduction

In 2013, there were twelve local market studies conducted by non-academic consultancy firms in Hong Kong to study the employees. Five of them were related to work ethic and behaviors of the millennial employees. Similar researches among the local academia in Hong Kong have been rather deprived in the recent decade. Though it is generally recognized that the millennials, making up about 30 percent of the labor force in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department 2013), are better educated, more creative and possess greater potentials, they are also often negatively labelled and openly criticized by market studies in the social media in the recent years for being tardy, utilitarian and self-centered (CPD Alliance 2013). These studies, having gathered responses primarily from managers and employers, had largely neglected the views and perspectives of the millennials, and had reported conclusions that are mostly one-sided. Studies that gather the perspectives of the millennial generation can thus provide a more balanced evaluation of the millennial workforce and enhance our understanding of the possible antecedents towards the values and beliefs they hold at work.

This study therefore aims to gather the perspectives of the millennial generation to examine (1) the general work ethic of the millennials in Hong Kong and extend to adopt an exploratory approach to study (2) the relationship between their perception on their employers and their work ethic.

Work Ethic

Work ethic is a terminology used generally to describe the set of beliefs, values, and attitudes that an individual assumes during work (Meriac, Woehr, and Banister 2010). It is a reflection of an individual's dedication and commitment to work, and one's willingness to exercise effort over and above the threshold standards required and expected by a job (McMurray and Scott 2013). This terminology was originally created by post-reformation scholars who promoted individualism among society and discredited the welfare state (Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth 2001). The scholars believed that individuals should be fully accountable for their well-beings in life and it is through hard work that any one individual could better his or her standard of living.

As the 'work ethic' terminology develops and evolves, its interpretation gradually collides with Max Weber's work about 'Protestant Ethic' (McMurray and Scott 2013). Making reference to the rationalization laid down by Weber, the ability to work and gain returns was considered to be an act of satisfying God's will and fulfilling the labor desired by God. The ethic in work resembles a kind of calling from the above and that individuals should work systematically and continuously to maximize the benefits of their labor and thus the glory to God (Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth 2001). Weber's construct of Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) was theorized formally basing on religious faith and duty, holding onto beliefs and personal principles in the dimensions on centrality of work, self-reliance, hard work, leisure avoidance, morality, delay of gratification, and time utilization.

Nowadays, the modern understanding of work ethic does not confine to any single culture or religion (Geren 2011). Occupational work ethic covers a wide range of aspects and is culturally developed from a combination of the employees' family, religious, and ethnic beliefs and values (Petty and Hill 2005). According to Anca (2012), the concept of work ethic today 'stresses the importance of skills, discipline, challenge, autonomy, quality of work produced,' and positive work ethic aims to increase employees' productivity through the achievement of an optimal efficiency, mentality and position.

Perception on Employers

Among the organizational behaviorists, the debate as to whether work values and beliefs are affected by structure – which signifies recurring patterns that limit the available variations – or by agency – which considers individuals' ability to think and act independently to complicate structures – is still ongoing (Heugens and Lander 2009). Agency theorists tend to believe that the way individuals make sense of the environment can influence the individuals' beliefs and values (Ivancevich, Konopaske, and Matteson 2007). Therefore, an individual's perception – or one's cognition in meaningful interpretations of the environment – may influence their beliefs and values.

According to McShane and Von Glinow (2010), employees' perceptions of their employer and the working environment can greatly manipulate their work attitudes and beliefs. Over three decades ago, James Hayes (1977), the then president of the American Management Association, had already noted that organizational conditions and leadership play an important role in shaping the attitudes of the employees. The perception of the working environment they are introduced to when the employees report for duty on the first day would influence their willingness to extend themselves to ethical behaviors at work. This includes the consistency of the work ethic displayed by the leaders and the consistency of the working condition with what they have been told or promised for.

While literatures have frequently rested upon the social exchange concept whereby individuals' voluntary actions are motivated by the returns expected, motivational concepts like the equity theory developed by John Stacy Adams (1963) also appeared to be applicable to explain the employees' expectation for reasonable and ethical treatments by the employers and the organization before they display the similar level of desired work ethic at work. In more recent studies, psychological contract breach has often been named as the mediating factor for poor workplace ethical outcomes (Suazo 2009). As illustrated, the perceived organizational injustice at workplace would destroy the psychological contract between employees and the employer, and undermine the mutual trust and reciprocal exchange relationship between the two parties. This would lead to employees' retaliation in the form of holding on to less desirable work ethic at work.

Zribi and Souaï (2013) studied 340 Tunisian employees and argued that psychological contract break occurs from employees' negative evaluation of the fairness of the reciprocal expectations and obliga-

tions between employees and employers. The contract breaks when increasingly injustice organizational practices permitted by the employers have increased the frequency of deviant behaviors among the employees. Similarly, the study of Liu and Berry (2013) argued that organizational injustice can promote unethical workplace behaviors such as time theft. The relationship between perceived injustice and time theft is mediated by the morality and the equity sensitivity of the employees. Employees when perceived to be treated unfairly would be more likely to distort their moral judgments and engage in unethical behaviors. The perceived exchange relationship between the employers and the employees can consequently be used to predict the ethical positions of employees after subjecting to different treatments by the employers. Weaker feeling of attachment, lower sense of responsibility, and more deviant behaviors were observed in organizations where workers perceived their treatment by the employers and the organizations as substandard, unjust and unreasonable.

The Millennial Generation

In many Western countries, academic research has been actively conducted on the millennial generation and has reported that the millennials possess distinctive characteristics in their values, expectations, and behaviors at work (Costanza et al. 2012).

In terms of the perceptual aspects of millennials on their expectations of the organizations and their careers, studies agreed that the millennials place a significant interest in work-life balance (De Hauw and De Vos 2010), but findings revealed that these younger employees are willing to lower their expectations in less optimistic economic environment. The millennials, however, continue to expect highly on job content, training and development, and fair rewards in times of recession, especially in the availability of opportunities for personal career development in the organizations. Violation of these high expectations can lead to the perception of a psychological contract breach that may result in devastating outcomes in the employees' commitment, performance, and retention.

In terms of work ethic and work attitude across employees of different generations, small statistical differences are observed between generations when they are at the same age (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg 2010). Some of these small differences include the slightly lower work centrality and slightly higher job satisfaction among millennial generation, but there is certainly no difference significant enough to be reported as a profound discovery (Kowske, Rasch, and

Wiley 2010). In general, the millennial employees possess weaker work ethic, believing that work is not so much the central element of life, placing greater value in leisure, demanding more freedom and work-life balance than previous generations (Twenge 2010). The millennial employees are more satisfied with their organizations and their jobs than older generations when valued and provided with opportunities.

As reported by Hershatter and Epstein (2010), the millennial employees appear to possess the following distinctive characteristics. Firstly, millennials prefer supportive environment that assures them with acknowledgement, reward, and career progression when they have made accomplishments. Secondly, millennials prefer clear structures. Thirdly, millennials place strong values on work-life balance and are likely to make career decisions which strike balances between job stability and healthy personal and professional life. Finally, millennials have strong affiliation needs to the employers and desire personal relationships with supervisors. Overall, the millennials are more happy than other generations to confine themselves to existing organizational infrastructures, to work with technologies, and to collaborate and engage with people around them. However, the millennials also have strong needs to be valued, taken care of, and appreciated. The millennials can be remarkably loyal when organizations can provide individualized attention, supportive culture, and equitable framework to acknowledge and reward their efforts.

Based on review on literatures related to work ethic, perception on employers, and characteristics of millennials in the Western countries, this study positioned itself to examine the general work ethic of the millennials in Hong Kong and extend to investigate the relationship between their perception on their employers and their work ethic from an exploratory perspective.

Method

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

A survey strategy has been adopted for this study to collect the necessary data from convenience samples. In this study, the millennial generation has been defined as those individuals who were born in the 1980s (also known as the 'post-80s' in Hong Kong) and the 1990s (the 'post-90s'), equating to individuals who are between 15 and 34 years of age inclusive in the year of 2014.

150 invitation emails were sent to students, alumni, and staff of secondary and tertiary education institutions who age between 15

and 34 inclusive and were conveniently accessible by the researcher through networking platforms and alumni systems of institutions. These individuals were given clear instructions to read the introduction and the ethical statements attached in the email before clicking on the hyperlink to the questionnaire. Therefore, respondents to the questionnaire were fully aware of the voluntary basis of their participation, and that information collected in the survey exercise would be kept confidential from third parties. Upon completion of their questionnaire, respondents were urged to invite more friends of theirs who age between 15 and 34 inclusive to participate in the study.

To prevent possibility of repeated entries by the same individual, the respondents' IP address were recorded as they completed the questionnaires. Responses from the same IP address were barred. Although there was still possibility that a respondent repeatedly accessed and completed the questionnaire on multiple electronic devices, the chances of such action were low since no financial incentives were given to the respondents on completing the questionnaire – not to mention an additional one.

By the closure of the survey exercise, a total of 226 web-based electronic questionnaires were completed. Out of the 226 completed questionnaires, 8 respondents do not possess any current or prior work experience and 6 respondents fell outside the age range of 15–34, and therefore these 14 responses have been excluded from the sample data set. In the end, 212 responses were usable for research data analysis.

INSTRUMENTS

Questionnaires were distributed to the respondents to collect their self-evaluated work ethic and their perceptions on their employers together with other demographic information. The questionnaire is designed with standardized questions to solicit easily quantifiable answers. Most respondents should be able to complete the questionnaires within 15 minutes.

For measurement of the respondents' work ethic, the 19-item Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) scale (Mirels and Garrett 1971) was adopted in this study because the PWE scale has been used by many other related studies in the last decade (Dunn 2013). In addition to the 19 items from the PWE scale, three more items were re-worded from the list of employees' duties described by Crane and Matten (2007), namely duty to comply with labor contract, duty to comply with the law, and duty to respect the employer's property, to measure

the sense of moral duties and work obligations held by the respondents. In total, there were 22 items measured on work ethic in my questionnaire based on the Likert scale between 1 and 7. Low scores would mean lower work ethic possessed by respondents whereby high scores would mean higher work ethic possessed by respondents. The internal reliability of the scale was 0.828.

For measurement of the respondents' perception on their employers, the measuring items are obtained from the list of employees' rights from Crane and Matten (2007) and re-worded to ask for respondents' view on how far do they think their employers have fulfilled their employees' rights through organizational practices in the current study. The list of employees' rights include right to freedom from discrimination, right to privacy, right to process, right to participation and association, right to healthy and safe working conditions, right to air pay, right to freedom of conscience and speech, and right to work. The items are measured with the Likert scale between 1 and 7. The internal reliability of the scale was 0.890.

Results

Table 1 summarizes that distribution of the demographics of the respondents. There was a disproportionate distribution of respondents who were born in the 1980s and the 1990s. There were more respondents who were born in the 1990s in this study. This outcome was an expected outcome and limitation of convenience sampling, and it was acceptable in this exploratory mini-scale study. The other demographics relating to gender, educational attainment, and work experience have shown fair and reasonable distribution among the respondents.

Table 2 summarizes the mean and the standard deviations of the respondents' perceptions on employers' ethic. On a Likert scale between 1 and 7, the average scores for employees' perception on employers' ethic range from 1.00 to 6.63, and the mean of the average score is 4.15. This shows that the post-80 and post-90 employees are likely to perceive their employers in the positive manner and believe that their employers have fulfilled employees' rights in their workplace. The close gap between the mean total score (4.15) and the central value of the score (4.00) implies that the employees' positive belief on employers' ethic – though inclined to be optimistic – remains weak among the millennial respondents.

Looking at the scores corresponding to the different employees' rights, respondents believe that their employers are ethically fulfilling their right to healthy and safe working conditions (4.52), right

TABLE 1 Summary of Respondents' Demographic Data from the Questionnaire

Category		Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-24	161	75.9
	25-34	51	24.1
Education	Secondary	14	6.6
	Sub-degree	94	44.3
	Bachelor	91	42.9
	Postgraduate	13	6.1
Gender	Male	117	55.2
	Female	95	44.8
Work Experience	1 year or less	81	38.2
	1 to 5 years	92	43.4
	5 years or more	39	18.4

TABLE 2 Summary of Respondents' Perception Data from the Questionnaire

Item	(1)	(2)
Right to freedom from discrimination	4.33	1.351
Right to privacy	4.17	1.365
Right to process	3.99	1.457
Right to participation and association	3.72	1.413
Right to healthy and safe working conditions	4.52	1.368
Right to a fair pay	4.00	1.429
Right to freedom of conscience and speech	4.38	1.546
Right to work	4.12	1.444
Respondents' perception on employers' fulfillment of employees' rights	4.15	1.069

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) mean, (2) standard deviation.

to freedom of conscience and speech (4.38), right to freedom from discrimination (4.33), right to privacy (4.17), and right to work (4.12). Respondents' perception of the employers' ability to fulfill their right to fair pay (4.00) is a tie struggle neither believing nor disbelieving. Respondents, however, disbelieve that employers fulfill the employees' right to participation and association (3.72) and right to process (3.99). Again, the differences between the mean values and the central values are small and thus this disbelief remains weak in general.

Table 3 summarizes the mean and the standard deviations of the respondents' self-reported work ethic scores. The mean scores of work ethic among the respondents range from 2.65 to 5.81. The mean total score of all work ethic items is 4.34 and this indicates that millennial respondents generally hold positive work ethical beliefs and values. The small standard deviation of 0.66 implies that the scores

TABLE 3 Summary of Respondents' Work Ethic Data from the Questionnaire

Item	(1)	(2)
<i>Employees' duties</i>		
Duty to comply with the law	5.17	1.357
Duty to respect the employer's property	4.59	1.400
Duty to comply with labor contact	4.62	1.235
<i>Protestant work ethic</i>		
Most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements.	4.15	1.529
Our society would have fewer problems if people had less leisure time. (Reversed)	3.10	1.538
Money acquired easily (e.g., through gambling or speculation) is usually spent unwisely.	4.80	1.630
There are few satisfactions equal to the realization that one has done his best at his job.	4.81	1.426
The most difficult college courses usually turn out to be the most rewarding.	4.43	1.486
Most people who don't succeed in life are just plain lazy.	4.56	1.627
The self-made man is likely to be more ethical than the man born to wealth.	4.72	1.481
I often feel I would be more successful if I sacrificed certain pleasures.	4.76	1.448

Continued on the next page

cluster around the mean and that majority of the millennial respondents reported ethic scores near the mean total score and possesses positive work ethic.

Segregating the 22 work ethic measurement items into two, 19 of them are items from the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) scale and the remaining three are rephrased from the list of employees' duties. The means of the PWE scores range from 2.48 at minimum to 5.78 at maximum and the mean total score for the PWE items is 4.28. This lower mean score among the 19 items as compared to the mean of the aggregated 22-item measurement shows that millennial respondents carry a slightly weaker PWE-associated moral belief on working hard over taking leisure.

The respondents score highly in 'any man who is able and willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding' (5.00), 'the credit card is a ticket to careless spending' (4.93), 'there are few satisfactions equal to the realization that one has done his best at his job' (4.81) and 'money acquired easily is usually spent unwisely' (4.80). This implies that the respondents in general appreciate and believe in the ethic to work hard and do one's best at work, and that the respondents do not agree with unwise spending of money

TABLE 3 *Continued from the previous page*

Item	(1)	(2)
People should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation. (Reversed)	3.61	1.630
Any man who is able and willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding.	5.00	1.473
People who fail at a job have usually not tried hard enough.	4.00	1.431
Life would have very little meaning if we never had to suffer.	4.61	1.493
Hard work offers little guarantee of success.	3.75	1.367
The credit card is a ticket to careless spending.	4.93	1.541
Life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time. (Reversed)	3.73	1.398
The man who can approach an unpleasant task with enthusiasm is the man who gets ahead.	4.15	1.336
If one works hard enough he is likely to make a good life for himself.	4.43	1.431
I feel uneasy when there is little work for me to do.	4.08	1.480
A distaste for hard work usually reflects a weakness of character.	4.34	1.359
Respondents' agreement to their own duties at work	4.79	1.008
Respondents' Protestant work ethic score	4.28	0.659
Respondents' aggregated work ethic score	4.34	0.662

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) mean, (2) standard deviation.

that has been obtained via occasional luck or utilization of credits.

A closer look at the 19 PWE items, there are four items scoring below 4 out of 7-point Likert scale, which are 'our society would have fewer problems if people had less leisure time,' 'people should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation (reversed),' 'life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time (reversed),' and 'hard work offers little guarantee of success.' The former three items are concern with the attitude towards leisure and the results indicate that post-80 and post-90 respondents do not consider leisure time or more relaxation as a hindrance to hard work (3.10, 3.61, and 3.73). As for the last item which evaluates the respondents' belief in the linkage between hard work and success (3.75), this finding reveals that millennial respondents in Hong Kong believe that their hard work can lead to success in their work or careers, and again confirms that the millennials generally agree to the idea of hard work as a work ethic or work virtue.

As for the respondents' ethical belief in fulfillment of their own employee work duty, the mean of the three duty items range from 2.33 to 7.00. The mean total score of the three duty items is 4.79

TABLE 4 Cross-Tab Analysis by Perception Groups

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Positive (above 4)	5.17	4.56	4.63
Negative (below 4)	4.30	3.91	3.95
Relative difference (%)	18.60	15.38	15.78

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) respondents' perception on employers' fulfillment of employees' rights, (2) respondents' agreement to their own duties at work, (3) respondents' Protestant work ethic score, (4) respondents' aggregated work ethic score. The neutral group with perception mean equals to 4 has been omitted in this table. Relative difference is calculated by dividing the difference of the two means by the average of the two means. Relative difference = $(m_1 - m_2) / ((m_1 + m_2) / 2)$.

which is higher than the mean total score of all 22 work ethic items. This shows that millennial respondents generally accept that it is their duties to comply with the law (5.17), comply with the labor contract (4.62), and respect the employers' property (4.59) at workplace. But when comparing the mean total duty score (4.79) and the mean total PWE score (4.28), these millennial respondents more recognize their rightful duties at work and less recognize with the PWE that working hard should be placed over taking leisure.

Table 4 is a cross-tab analysis conducted by segregating the perception data into smaller groups and the corresponding work ethic scores between the perception groups are compared against one another. The cross-tab analysis results showed that respondents with positive perception on their employers in general possess higher work ethic (4.628), while those with negative perception on their employers hold lower work ethic (3.951). The relative differences of means for the duty items, PWE items, and the aggregated work ethic measurement between the positive and negative groups are significantly above 10% at 18.6%, 15.4%, and 15.8% respectively. This clearly demonstrates that the employees' perception on their employers' ethic can influence the work ethic that they hold, both in terms of their beliefs in the needs to fulfill employees' duties and in the way they identify with the need for hard work. Since perception can influence ethical beliefs, millennial employees who perceive their employers in a better way may appear to possess more acceptable work ethical beliefs, fulfill employees' duties more duly and value the importance of hard work to a greater extent.

Analysis of the correlation and the significance shows strong positive relationship between employees' perception on employers' ethic and employees' work ethic, $r(212) = 0.540$, $p < 0.001$, two-tailed. The extremely small p value means that the likelihood that the result is

TABLE 5 Correlation Analysis between Perception and Work Ethic

Pearson Correlation	EmDuties	PWE	WorkEthic
		0.535**	0.506**
Regression	B	Beta	Sig
		0.334	0.540

NOTES ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

due to chance is very low. In other words, the relationship between these two variables is very likely to exist. Simple regression analysis was further conducted to investigate how well employees' perception on employers predicts the employees' work ethic. The results were statistically significant $F(1, 210) = 86.23, p < 0.001$. The adjusted R squared value was 0.288 and this indicates that 28.8% of the variance in employees' work ethic was explained by employees' perception on their employers. Accordingly, the regression analysis further confirms the direction of the relationship in which employees' perception on their employers is statistically a significant predictor for employees' work ethic.

From the descriptive analysis and the results of the correlation and regression analysis, millennial respondents in the current study generally carry positive perception on their employers, believing that their employers have fulfilled ethical obligations at work to protect employees' rights at workplace. Majority of the millennial respondents also possess positive work ethic. Furthermore, the millennial employees' perception on employers appears to be related to their work ethic.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the general perception of the millennial employees on their employers and the millennial employees' work ethic in the Hong Kong context, and further extend to investigate the relationship between their perception on their employers and their work ethic from an exploratory perspective. Indeed, the millennial respondents in the current study do not see themselves as negatively as described by the market studies or the social media. Results from the descriptive analysis in the current study agreed with the literature that the millennials do have distinctive characteristics in their values, expectations, and behaviors at work.

MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON THEIR EMPLOYERS

Millennial employees were found to have a generally positive perception on their employers. They consider their employers to be

ethical in fulfilling the employers' obligations to safeguard the different employees' rights at work. These millennial employees are not antagonistic towards their employers, most of whom are from older generations. They do not have many grunts and complaints against their employers. Many post-80 and post-90 employees see their employers as ethical individuals and are able to appreciate the employers' effort in ensuring the provision of healthy and safe working conditions, freedom of conscience and speech, freedom from discrimination, privacy, and fair recruitment and selection procedures at work.

Certainly, the genuine acknowledgement by the millennial employees on their employers' effort in fulfilling employees' rights could be a reason for the positive perception results obtained in the current study. Another possible reason could be due to a cultural disposition in an Asian society. Individuals in Asian society usually possess higher agreeableness trait (Allik and McCrae 2004), associating with personality characteristics of being kind, sympathetic, considerate, warm, helpful, pleasant, trustful, cooperative, and agreeable (Saucier 1994). Socializing activities in Asian nations therefore favor subservience, humility, and preservation of harmonious relationships between people (Hamid 1994). The millennial generation having brought up by the previous generations in the Asian society, resided in the Asian cultural environment, and cultivated by educators of the previous generations under Asian values may have been shaped to possess the agreeableness characteristic. Throughout the growth of the millennials, they may have been encouraged to develop and maintain close relationships with peers, seniors and superiors at home and in school (Hershatter and Epstein 2010). They are thus more willingness to show kindness, cooperativeness, and acceptance to their peers, seniors and supervisors at work.

The positive perception of the millennial respondents on their employers may therefore be a result of the millennials being more agreeable and willing to accept organizational practices that are not too bad after all. Even though some employers may not have fully satisfied the millennial employees' demand for a symbiotic relationship, these millennial employees may still hold a positive and congenial feeling towards the employers because they are more agreeable. They prefer to perceive the organization under more optimistic and friendly lens so that they can enjoy a more harmonious working environment and supportive interpersonal relationships with their employers.

MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES' WORK ETHIC: WORK AND LEISURE

Millennial respondents in the current study in general possess good work ethic, believing that it is important to work hard and fulfill their duties as employees. This opposes to the connotation among the society as described in the background of the dissertation that millennial employees possess weak work ethic (CPD Alliance 2013).

However, when time is concerned, millennial employees tend to hold a significantly different ethical belief in which they value leisure at a similar level to work. Millennial respondents appear to hold looser interpretation to the concept of work and leisure. Accordingly, the leisure work values do not only limit to non-office hour rest time or vacation time, but also extend to work perspective in seeking for allowance to work at a slower pace under less restricted duration and environment (Twenge 2010). The current research found that millennial employees do not consider taking leisure time as obstructing or opposing to working hard. In contrast to the Protestant Work Ethics in which hard work and less leisure is preferred, the post-80 and post-90 employees appear to view work and leisure more on par. They do not think that leisure and work are mutually exclusive and they do not believe that leisure is a hindrance to work. In fact, they are more inclined to consider both leisure and work can co-exist and that taking reasonable leisure does not necessarily equate to second-placing the importance of hard work. In other words, these millennial employees simply take a more balanced view on work and rest.

The millennial respondents' mentality for more leisure and balanced work-life is in conjunction with the findings from other overseas studies that the millennial generation places greater emphasis on work-life balance and would value leisure more compared to people from earlier generations (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, and Wiley 2010). As Hershatter and Epstein (2010) argued, this mentality may be developed from social learning as the millennials observed throughout their growth when their parents prioritized corporate success over work-life balance and sacrificed their time spent with the family, leaving many of the young millennial kids in childcare or at home most of the time with their household assistants. Having those unfavorable past experiences, the millennials believe stronger in the need for more balanced and flexible working arrangement so that they can spend more valuable moments with their family members and friends which constitute important aspects of their lives.

Of course, managers and employers might argue that the millennials are less hard-working. However, literatures suggested that the different work ethical beliefs on work and leisure may have been resulted from contextual reasons. With the immersion of digital and information technology in the current era, the border between professional and personal life becomes less concrete (Hershatter and Epstein 2010). The segregation between work and leisure becomes more ill-defined because employees may be required to attend to emails or instant messages during non-office hours. Even though the official working hours have not increased significantly over generations, mobile and digital technologies enable employers to reach their employees almost anytime and anywhere (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg 2010). The situation is even worse in Hong Kong because the average annual working hours for employees in Hong Kong have topped the world at 2,606 hours per year as described in the Prices and Earnings 2015 report (Union Bank of Switzerland 2015). This is equivalent to employees working nearly 50 hours per week, 10 hours per day assuming a 5-day work week. Employees feel 'as if they are never off the clock.' In order to achieve the balance in work and leisure, it is therefore not surprising to find millennial employees adopting similar mentality and morality in their actual work behaviors within organizations.

Referring back to the questionnaire findings, the millennial respondents believe that 'people should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation' and 'life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time.' They do not agree that 'our society would have fewer problems if people had less leisure time.' Ultimately, these millennials displayed the work ethic in observable behaviors possibly in the form of taking more breaks and rests than acceptable and day-dreaming at work. Thus, it is not surprising to see managers and employers, looking at the millennial generation under their own lens, complained about the millennial employees for being tardy, utilitarian and self-centered, and lacking discipline and sense of responsibility (CPD Alliance 2013).

MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES' WORK ETHIC: WORK AND SUCCESS

From the current study, the millennial respondents believe that hard work can lead to success, but are contradictorily disbelieving in their employers in the provision of right to process (3.99) for job promotion and progression. The millennial employees doubt that employers have given sufficient career advancement opportunities to those who work hard and put in much effort at work.

Overseas studies have noted that the millennial generation has higher expectations for career advancement than previous generations (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, and Wiley 2010). Having brought up under an education system packed with frequent assessments and quantifiable feedback (i.e. marks or grades), the millennial employees lack self-confidence and security when they do not receive similar assessment and feedback mechanism in the working environment. Among the Asian organizations, the feedback could be more qualitative in nature where modest and conservative comments are provided instead of the numbers, grades, or ranks desired by the millennial generation. The inability to clearly evaluate their own performance against the organizational standards and against other colleagues creates confusion and frustration among millennial employees who desire to know how and where they stand in the department or in the whole organization.

These millennials thus demand for clear instructions and feedback to their working tasks, and more transparent structures and systems within the organization to measure and reward performance (Hershatler and Epstein 2010). They wish to know if they are good enough for consideration on promotions. It is likely that because of the conflicting between the perception on employers and their work ethic among the millennials on the idea of hard work and progression, the millennials are constantly looking for very well-defined expectations and criteria for performance and promotions. Therefore, highly structured systems and clearly defined outlines can serve to ease the millennials' sense of insecurity in grasping success through hard work, and enhance retention of talented millennials within the organizations.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION AND WORK ETHIC

Results confirmed strong relationship between the millennial employees' perception of their employers and the millennial employees' own work ethic. These two variables are of similar construct – the former one is the respondents' perception on the employers' fulfillment of responsibilities which is a form of evaluation of the employers' ethic, while the latter is the respondents' self-reported work ethic. Their relationship may be explained by the equity theory (Adams 1963), which looks at the perceived fairness in a social exchange. The work ethic of employees may be viewed as a reciprocal return of the employers' ethic.

As Zribi and Souaï (2013) illustrated, the sense of equity or the

psychological contract between employers and employees is developed in a way that reciprocal relationship is pursued by the two parties to balance the expectations and obligations of one another. When employers are expected to remunerate the employees, the employees are obligated to perform. Vice versa, when employees are expected to protect the organizational interest, the employers are obligated to protect the employees' interest. De Hauw and De Vos (2010) also noted that millennials are in general more understanding to the employers and less focused on the contract breach when the organizations are open and honest, for example to explain their positions of limited resources and to discuss other less costly arrangements to satisfy the employees' professional developmental needs.

When the employees believe that the employers are work ethical, the employees are then more willing to adopt similar level of work ethic to uphold the fair relationship in the social exchange. This may be a convincing explanation as to why the millennial employees' perception of their employers' ethic can be used to predict the millennial employees' own work ethic.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the scale and the nature of this research study, there are several limitations to be recognized. Firstly, this study utilizes the chain-referral sampling technique which is a non-probability sampling approach. The information collected is therefore subjected to questionable generalizability and challenges to external validity (Saunders, Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill 2009). Readers should be cautioned when trying to generalize the findings of this research to the larger population of the millennial group in Hong Kong. Despite so, the researcher has put in substantial effort in ensuring that the sample consists of respondents who have worked in a broad range of industry with different educational backgrounds to increase the variations in the sample. Secondly, the small sample size of 212 compared to the large sample population of over 1.4 million individuals belonging to the millennial group in Hong Kong, the number of participants of the study is suboptimal, or even too small a percentage of the total sample population. This again raises concerns on the external validity of the reported findings in terms of the generalizability of the conclusion made. Thirdly, the use of questionnaire as a method of data collection may constitute to biasness. For any self-report study, the participants may exaggerate or under-report certain responses in the questionnaires due to various biasness such as positive skew, central tendency, social desirability, primacy and recency, and others.

This may create another construct validity concern. Finally, the use of questionnaire surveyed at a particular point of time has limited the information collected to a specific static instance of time. Information collected may differ at a different instance but there is no way to account for those differences when only static field study is conducted.

With these limitations, future research can attempt to use a larger sample with probability sampling. This can provide more accurate and solid verifications to the findings in the current study, and strengthen the generalizability of the results. Additionally, qualitative components may be explored and integrated in future studies to provide greater insights to the rationales of the phenomena and relationships observed in the current study. Future studies can also encompass a larger duration of time to conduct longitudinal studies on the millennial generation to examine if work ethic will change as they age. Generational studies can also be conducted in which comparisons are drawn from employees of different generations to inspect if any generational differences exist among the workers in Hong Kong or in Asian societies.

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