

Meta-Motivations to Commit in the Hong Kong Financial Service Sector: From a Reversal Theory Perspective

K.M. (Mike) Lau, Kanimozhi Narayanan
Aston University

Rob Robson
The People Experience Hub

The financial service sector in Hong Kong is known for its long working hours and poor work-life balance. Despite these stressors, statistics show gradual increases in the employment rate in the sector. Aiming to understand the motivations of employees to join, thrive, and commit at work, this paper explores these motivations according to reversal theory, which emphasizes the inconsistency and changeability of motivation and experience. We introduce principal concepts of the theory, including meta-motivational states, reversals between modes, focality, and dominance. We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews and recorded the nature of meta-motivational reversals and other factors that influenced changes of motivations among respondents. We found that multiple states can account for one's job choice and that dynamic experience could drive different motivational changes, eventually affecting employees' work behavior. The relevance and applicability of reversal theory in formulating employee strategies in the Hong Kong financial service sector are then discussed. We evaluate the theory and highlight future directions for studying the reversal process and cultural impacts on work motivations.

Keywords: Commitment, Financial Service Sector, Motivations, Reversal Theory, Structural Phenomenology

Hong Kong is one of the largest financial hubs after New York and London (Birnbaum & Wong, 1985). Contributing over US\$14 billion (Information Services Department, 2016), its financial sector consists of banking, insurance, professional services, and related areas (HK Financial Development Council, 2018). Providing over 250,000 jobs (HKTDC Research, 2018), it is successfully growing, with the sector's employment and value-add increasing by 7% and 17%, respectively, in 2018 (Census and Statistics Department, 2018).

Ranked 12th globally and 1st in Asia for attracting and retaining talent (HK Financial Service Development Council, 2018), Hong Kong's financial sector provides attractive jobs. However, it is not without its disadvantages. Reliant on a knowledge-intensive workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010), employees must be dedicated at work. With the central focus of providing professional service (Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006), the sector has a poor work-life balance and stressful environments (Talukder et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Srikathverma et al. (2013) found that almost half of the respondents had worked for more than

45 hours weekly. Wubbe (2009) found that consultants and bankers need to work between 61 to 74 hours per week and that employees had difficulty managing their personal lives. Networking functions added more working time for employees in addition to their long hours (Wubbe, 2009). Furthermore, workload was heavier at the end of the fiscal year, when employees are likely to work more than 10 hours a day (Khan et al., 2011).

While one might imagine that people would have higher intentions to leave these stressful work conditions, this might not be the case in Hong Kong. By unveiling key "turning-points" over their careers, reversal theory can be ideal for exploring employees' subjective experiences (Carter, 2005). Reversal theory captures patterns and changes of an individual's attitude, emotion, and motivation (Apter, 2001). Our study focuses on the motivations of employees for choosing to work in a high commitment-oriented environment and investigates subsequent workplace behavior and turnover intentions.

In modern practice, management might pinpoint improving key factors that effect work motivations as identified by global benchmarks or leadership strategies (Clugston et al., 2000). As suggested by reversal theory, they might neglect the fact that motivation itself is a meta spectrum with high fluidity (Apter, 2015). As a result, this study aims to give guidance not only on attracting joiners through emotionally engaging platforms but also to help managers facilitate im-

K.M. (Mike) Lau, & Kanimozhi Narayanan, Department of Work & Organizational Psychology, Aston Business School, Aston University, U.K. Rob Robson, The People Experience Hub, U.K.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mike Lau. E-mail: mikelau@gmail.com

Table 1
Summary of reversal theory (Carter, 2005)

Predictor	Domain	Motivational Status
Somatic	Telic	Objectives, Achievements, Planning
	Paratelic	Experimentation, Open Thinking, Passion
	Conformist	Implementation, Agreement, Duty
	Negativistic	Challenges, Conflict, Critical Analysis
Relationships	Mastery	Success Orientation, Resources, Status
	Sympathy	Harmony, Cooperation, Support
	Autic	Personal Needs, Self-Actualizations, Experience
	Alloic	Transcendence, Guidance, Team Spirit

provements in employee retention and well-being. Having a better understanding of an individual's motivations may help managers lessen or minimize the stressors within the Hong Kong financial sector.

Meta-motivations and Reversal theory

Motivation consists of internal and external inducements (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007) and accounts for individuals' arousal, magnitude, and maintenance (Darolia et al., 2010). Linked to how employees view organizations, it can be reflected by job commitment and satisfaction (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007).

Reversal theory studies cognitive, motivational, and affective changes in relation to behavior (Males et al., 1998), emphasizing the possibility of occasional and inconsistent changes between motivation states (Apter, 2015) throughout experiences (Carter, 2005), with no state being intrinsically better or worse (Males et al., 1998). Focusing on one's activities and transactional outcomes, the theory illustrates two different state of minds (Lafreniere, 1993). Shedding light on the interpretation of subjective experience, reversal theory reveals one can have varied motivations in identical situations at different times (Table 1 summarizes the motivational states described in reversal theory).

Apter (2001) described a spectrum of emotional experiences as outcomes of motivational sensations and psychological variables: felt significance, negativism, transactional gain, and identification. It has been shown that individuals tend to spend extended periods in a particular state, defined as dominance (Apter, 1981). For example, it was found that a paratelic dominant individual was likely to spend more time operating playfully and looking for challenges than they were to spend time in the serious-minded telic state (Apter et al., 1998). Thus, reversal theory provides evidence to suggest that it is not the case that most workers are consistently upset by some degree of work pressure. Given that having challenges could bring arousal and better mood for paratelic dominant individuals (Apter, 1989), they would be less prone to mood disturbance than telic dominants in stressful situations. In this way, reversal theory might help explain

some employees' commitment and intention to stay despite the stressors they experience, thus providing new insights on prior research on job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Liu et al., 2012). Therefore, although experiences and behaviors may be experienced as contradictory, whether the action was pleasant or not depends on individuals' prevailing motivations (Apter, 1981).

Taking motivation changes into account, contingency factors can alter one's motivation in ways such as having previous targets being superseded by new objectives or being pushed by peer pressures towards negativism (Apter, 1981). Apter and Lafreniere also argued that frustration and satiation would build up over time to facilitate spontaneous reversals (1981, 1993). The former indicates failure to attain satisfaction while the latter highlights natural change of arousals from prolonged habituation (Apter 1981; Lafreniere, 1993). As a result, motivational reversals would occur involuntarily when the net push for changes is relatively stronger than the combined strength of previous factors (Lafreniere, 1993), which may predict changes in meta-motivations among employees from some triggering career events.

Desselles and Apter (2014) have studied practices that help induce and manipulate specific motivations. They found that through situational manipulations, or employing certain stimuli, most people are likely to behave in a designated motivational state. Some examples are being serious in an academic conference (telic), acting collaboratively at a teambuilding workshop (alloic), or reaching a consensus in a group discussion (conformist). States can be seen to be controlled indirectly such that the stimulus acts as a conditioned stimulus while the motivational state acts as the conditioned response, as depicted by classical conditioning (Desselles et al., 2014). As a result, it is worthwhile to study the potential effects on motivational states exerted by organizational environments, climates, or existing societal norms.

Describing no direct relationship of means to ends, reversal theory exemplifies the fluidity and variations among meta-motivations (Apter, 2015). Since performing the same job or task reflects different personal values to employees across time, one might expect that these subjective experi-

ences at work would induce changes in one's motivations (Apter, 2001). As such, these experiences might help to capture the ups and downs across one's career development, making this theory useful for providing insight into the study of employees' motivations to commit and thrive as in the case of workers in Hong Kong's financial sector.

The Hong Kong financial service sector

Regarding the potential negative impacts from a poor work-life balance, scholars have argued that it is not only the number of working hours but also the experience that matters (Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006). For instance, one broker mentioned her job tasks could only be manageable if she also works on weekends (Blair-Loy & Jacobs, 2003). As a result, such massive workload would create exhaustion and lack of personal and social time (Kwok, 2012). With these demands not being dealt with effectively, more inferior service delivery has been recorded among employees (Srikanthverma et al., 2013).

Therefore, work commitment may be vital to the Hong Kong financial sector, where service quality is highly valued (George & Zakkariya, 2015). Indeed, in performing different routine tasks, the potential for role ambiguity poses increased work challenges (Ismail & Teck-Hong, 2011). For instance, one study showed a significant relationship between excessive time pressures, work demands, and contentious relations to job stress and violence among financial service workers (Silva & Barreto, 2012). Because of the difficulty and volatility of intangible services (Montgomery et al., 1996), work intensifications were seemingly inevitable, making workers vulnerable to task-related stresses (Ismail & Teck-Hong, 2011).

As discussed in the job-demand framework, employees' stressors in a competitive landscape can be explained by lack of control and support (Michailidis & Georgiou, 2005). Regarding poor work-life balance and heavy workloads, job targets are often perceived as unrealistic (Chen et al., 2011b), and it was found that behaviors could be deeply impacted by discrepancies between imposed job demands and personal resources (Malik & Khalid, 2016). Specifically, the high-performance work standards represent stressors that not only affect performance negatively but also increase the risk of emotional exhaustion, which is a contributing factor to employee burnout (Ashill et al., 2015). Found to be strongly linked to adverse behaviors (Ismail & Teck-Hong, 2011), some detriments that have been identified include increased blood pressure and lower self-confidence (George & Zakkariya, 2015).

Moreover, based on Resource Conservation Theory, declining satisfaction creates stress as it marks a continuous loss in personal resources (Chen et al., 2011a). According to the theory, when they find it challenging to meet excessive targets, workers will reduce the imbalance through

behavioral changes to counteract psychological discomfort, thereby stimulating absenteeism and turnover intentions (Liu et al., 2012). With strong associations between long working hours and poor health and work quality (George and Zakkariya, 2015), one might conclude that there is a considerable price to pay for remaining committed to working in the financial sector.

More generous compensation packages compared to non-financial sectors, however, has increased research attention on whether higher pay motivates employees to commit (Ismail & Teck-Hong, 2011). Research has studied monetary effects (Tang & Chiu, 2003), where compensation has a direct relation with job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2011), and compensation's mediating effect on the relationship between job performance and burnout (Karabay et al., 2014). However, for work motivation, George and Zakkariya (2015) emphasized that both extrinsic (e.g., pay, working condition, job security, etc.) and intrinsic factors (e.g., personality, values, recognition, etc.) need to be taken into consideration for a bigger picture. Also, given that most studies were done in the west, the transferability of results to Hong Kong can be questioned. Referring to studies conducted locally, work motivation was studied across groups and industries such as Gen Y (Kwok, 2012), retired workers (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2014), or in industries such as construction (Liu et al., 2007), law (Foley et al., 2006), hotels (Lam et al., 2002), and teachers (McInerney et al., 2015).

Moreover, in the literature to date, the telic-paratelic pair and the notion of dominance has garnered extensive application in sports and health studies (Apter, 2013), with scarce attention in business (Apter, 2001). With most reversal theory studies conducted in the US (Svebak & Murgatroyd, 1985), it has also been noted that the moment-to-moment changes of meta-motivational states is worth assessing beyond academic settings (Desselles et al., 2014). In addition, research has identified synergies between leadership development and manipulating meta-motivations in the workplace (Apter & Carter, 2002). With the potential benefits of applying reversal theory in mentoring or team building, this study offers an original contribution to understanding work motivation using reversal theory.

Methods

To conduct this study, we adopted a semi-structured interview to explore individuals' preference for different emotional experiences (Males et al., 1998). Reflections on motivational changes can be captured through discussing "critical incidents" (Anderson, 2013).

Content

Because of the inconsistencies in subjective experiences, the interview was designed to elicit specific information to allow categorization of responses (Males et al., 1998, Males

et al., 2006). To shed light on “the why behind the why” of behaviors related to competing motivations; the interviews were composed of a few stages that oriented respondents to their experiences that induced particular states.

We asked questions regarding respondents’ working environment and their opinions about the financial sector, followed by items on reasons to join and thrive at work. Their answers gave us insights about specific motivations for working in the Hong Kong financial sector. Next, we asked interviewees to recall specific experiences, examining the effects of motivational changes on behaviors such as commitment and intention to stay, which helped compose a picture of motivational dynamics across several stages. The interview included specific questions about respondents’ preference and orientations, which also helped compare internal values between joiners and stayers, particularly through discussing their different experiences.

Participants

Interviews were targeted at workers in Hong Kong and conducted in English. With reversal theory emphasizing that “motivators” like compensation hold different values among individuals, it was worthwhile to explore if workers from all fields and job grades were driven to join and thrive in the sector by similar motivational states. Therefore, a diverse group of respondents was recruited through LinkedIn. In this study, 14 interviews lasting around twenty to thirty minutes each were conducted (10 males, 4 females). Respondents worked in the banking, investment, accounting, and insurance fields. Job grades ranged from associates to directors, with a mean age of 27.6 years (range 23 - 54 years). The average working experience in the sector was 3.75 years (range 0.5 - 22 years) at the commencement of the study.

This study was undertaken professionally, with the well-being of respondents being of the utmost importance. All participants consented to our research objectives and related information. Questions were provided in advance upon request. Moreover, participants were made aware that they could refuse to answer any questions or end the interview at any time. They were also told that data collected would be solely used for academic purposes and would be destroyed after analysis.

Analysis

The data collected were coded thematically in NVivo for transcriptions. Its functions involve sorting and filtering raw data, discovering and building relationships, as well as assigning and defining themes for categorizations (Phillips & Lu, 2018). A structural phenomenology framework was employed, where motivational states and reversal agents acted as guides to drive categorization.

Coding is the analytical process of assigning meaning to descriptive, compiled information (Miles & Huberman,

1994) and can help reflect the data categories observed (Wiltshier, 2011). In this study, words or phrases about themes such as meta-motivational states or factors affecting reversals were catalogued into containers called “nodes” (Phillips & Lu, 2018). Initial coding identified some general motivations and key events related to working in the Hong Kong financial service sector. These coded data were stored as both free and tree nodes then re-arranged as the project progressed. Tree nodes allow nodes to be grouped into hierarchies whereas free nodes are grouped separately as individual “folders.” Since its nodes could be grouped together or separated, if necessary, NVivo promotes a high degree of flexibility in analyzing qualitative data (Wiltshier, 2011).

Throughout the process, quotes regarding respondents’ subjective experience were grouped under eight trees/meta-motivational states nodes. Other instances, such as general comments on the financial sector or intentions to stay, were stored as free nodes until they were further analyzed after thematic saturation. Towards the final stages, most interview data were classified and moved into relevant groups in the tree nodes based on periods with specific motivations. For instance, free nodes such as comments on money were represented by reassigning corresponding references under different hierarchies (i.e., some quotes attached to the “telic tree,” others were allocated to the “paratelic” node). By grouping chunks of statements, we found a spectrum of distinctive motivational states among respondents (e.g., struggles to conform upon joining the sector). After grouping themes and quotes of similar characteristics, we then examined patterns of behavioral components further using content analysis within and between different tree nodes.

Results

Based on the results of thematic analysis, we reviewed each respondent’s place in the Hong Kong financial service sector, followed their meta-motivational profile to commit and thrive in this industry. Emphasizing the dynamic nature of motivations and the impact of ongoing events on one’s behavior, we examined respondent’s statements thoroughly in four distinct themes to provide further insights on their experience. To safeguard confidentiality, letters were used instead of real names and actual companies were not identified.

A high-commitment oriented industry

At the beginning of the interviews, respondents depicted their responsibilities, with work clustering on investments (i.e., formulating business and currency development pipelines, market dynamics tracking, trade profile review), business regulations (i.e., abiding monetary authorities, institutional work, liaising with statutory), and asset management (i.e., wealth planning, asset value evaluation).

Results stressed that multitasking is a key performance indicator in the industry and that overtime work is very preva-

Table 2
Opinions on the Hong Kong financial sector

Categories	Comments
Multitasking and undue stress	<p>"... lots of meeting that I can only start working after 6 pm, where carrying duties back home is common, work-life balance and workload is far from satisfactory." (M - Investment bank director)</p> <p>"... with spontaneous deadlines and projects, as well as insufficient supervision and training, time is always minimal for me to review my work." (G - Private bank assistant manager)</p>
A pressing and objective-oriented job environment	<p>"Sector does not have clear guidelines and regulations to protect employees, with profit-making strategies always prioritize any well-being practises..." (K - Big Four accounting associate)</p> <p>"Thanks to China's economic reform, Hong Kong is an important market with government infrastructures. To live up with the status as a global hub, long hours and overtime is expected..." (E - Former private bank manager)</p>

Table 3
Working in the sector: Orientations towards remunerations

States and Values	Related Quotes
Telic (planning)	"The sector is relatively high paid with commission and bonus, helping me make ends meet, also support my plan on funding marriage and mortgage... " (W - Big Four accounting senior associate)
Paratelic (enjoyment)	"Working in this bank is arguably the best... as I was raised in a low-income family, money is then so important for pure enjoyment on bags and luxuries... " (S - Investment bank senior associate)
Negativistic (challenges)	"... eager to generate more values from 'low-tier' rated assets in the market , compensation acts as one of my major drives..." (K - Big Four accounting associate)
Mastery (status)	"Expertise is what people are looking for, as this field composes of high-end experts, compensation is proportional to socio-economic status... " (J - Private Bank senior associate)
Sympathy (relationships)	"I was looking to meet more people at work , with all the bonuses, joining the industry means more connections to explore for me..." (T - Insurance sales)
Alloic (For others)	"Under heavy bankrupt pressure... driving me at work was my family , I immediately fund their needs whenever I received pay checks." (M - Investment bank director)

lent, with an average of eleven hours a day among workers. Some participants even reported working till midnight during peak seasons. When faced with concurrent deadlines, interviewees expressed a need to take work home or to finish during weekends, especially for the client-facing fields.

Given that the sector operates in global markets, the work was described as around the clock, with demand from Asia, Europe, and the US. To meet business and trading objectives, workers may need to stay vigilant 24/7. Several accounting respondents were concerned about the undue stress exerted by client demands and an unsupportive firm culture. Interviewee W, a Big Four senior associate, argued that burnout and fatigue are common, sometimes with news of workers found dead or having committed suicide. He stressed the climate 'pushes people off-limits' and demands extreme pressure tolerance (see Table 2).

Considering the remuneration package, respondents depicted the sector as offering a competitive package with mortgages, subsidies, and allowances compared to other job fields. Interviewee E, a former manager of a private bank, replied these are merely "compensations to cover up

their contributions" and further expressed thoughts on Hong Kong's status as a commercial port. With its relative importance to the city, the financial sector was suggested to be a contributing pillar to the job market. Respondents reported mixed feelings while working in this sector and that it could be very tough and tiring.

Employees' motivations for choosing to work in the sector

Given that monetary rewards are usually mentioned as a pivotal motive to join the financial sector, respondents expressed different underlying values for their choice and their perceptions of "money" were different from each other. Although it appears that salary provided is seemingly attractive, a wide array of states was observed reflecting their motivation (see Table 3).

In fact, several statements are also captured where depictions are not primarily based on "money" but based on the job itself. Table 4 shows illustrative examples.

Table 4
Working in the sector: Orientations towards the job itself

States and Values	Related Quotes
Telic (Planning)	I would like to grow with my job starting from the beginning, where a thorough perspective can be built in this trainee programme. . .” (X - Big Four accounting senior associate)
Paratelic (Open thinking)	“I was offered handsomely to work in this firm after internship, the role requires skills just as what I did previously. . . it just feels very convenient, and I didn’t mind live with the flow. . . ” (H - Insurance Analyst)
Conformist (Fit)	“I decided to give it a try. . . the firmwide culture seemly matches me well.” (H - Insurance Analyst)
Autic (Self-focus)	“I was passionate back then, where I was proactive in taking up job duties for self-actualizations. . . ” (A - Big Four accounting senior associate),

Table 5
“Critical incidents” behind motivation changes

Respondent	Related Quotes	States and Values	
		Then	Now
Y - Central bank manager	“. . . there was too much work. . . staying till 10 pm with my team most of the time didn’t feel right. . . there were too much rigidity and hidden agendas to comply with. . . these make me fed up with the private sector, and fuelled my intention to leave. . .”	Conformist (Duty and compliances)	Negativistic (Conflict and critical analysis)
M - Investment bank director	“I worked well previously until the new boss arrived. . . when I was told to handle layoffs, I was uncomfortable in ‘axing’ teammates. . . ultimately push me to the tough call. . .”	Conformist (Duty and compliances)	Negativistic (Conflict and critical analysis)
S - Investment bank senior associate	“It is hard to get away as work needed to finish on time. . . running after schedule hinders my study on certification tests soon. . . With limited study leave given, it has been hard time to take care of my personal needs. . . ”	Conformist (Duty and compliances)	Autic (Self-focus)

Interestingly, we found that some statements can be categorized with more than one state. For instance, suggesting a conformist motivation to join the sector, Insurance Analyst H described a “fit” between himself and the business environment. Meanwhile, his open-minded attitude can also be viewed as a paratelic motivation, suggesting potential activations of multiple states.

Changes of motivation to commit in the sector based on subjective experience

We next evaluated respondents’ change of motivations in terms of motivational shifts. As a natural response to the working environment, misalignments are reported in interviews, where respondents indicated that “work not fit with their values.” Being less passionate compared to when joining the sector, they illustrated frustrations and pessimism, including “lack of exposures” or “negligence,” which drove them to experience feelings of losing hope and meaningfulness at work (see Table 5).

With expectations being supervened from experienced overtime, the change in motivation of interviewee Y here might support previous findings.

Conversely, some respondents found conflict in complying with new rules and mentioned reversals from conformist

towards the negativistic state in response to dealing with challenges. Capturing the triggering events at work, most statements illustrated changes in work motivations. With respondents realizing salient pressures in conformist-dominant settings, their motivation to commit in the sector is “sensitized” by external factors beyond their control, which trigger a push to state reversals and shifts of motivation. For instance, the incident experienced by interviewee M might suggest a manipulation of motivational state in the workplace depicted above, where she was forced to make lay-off decisions.

Impacts on workplace behavior and turnover intentions

Among the 14 respondents in this study, we note that most of them (12 out of 14) preferred staying in the sector, with more than half (eight) of the sample size still engaged in the financial service industry after changing jobs. Surprisingly, despite recorded changes in meta-motivations, there are three interviewees still working within the same company or job positions they had been working in previously.

Reviewing their meta-motivational profiles, we found interviewees who stayed within their current position describe recent behaviors as a “product of experience.” These experiences involve modifications in decision making, such as to

Table 6
An experience-behavior matrix of employee behavior

Subjective Experience	Adapt (Stay)	Action (Leave)
Intrinsic factors (Personal)	“I believe to be working on similar duties even after job switches... as part of my qualification exams ‘ties’ me up to precisely within this sector... given my field is generally small, career path somehow sticks mainly on insurance and risk management, I do not have many talks on that... ” (H - Insurance analyst)	“I do not want to do things I did before, and data analysis field is too narrow and limited, I am willing to cross that bridge when one comes to it, wait and see for the future... ” (P - Private bank assistant manager)
	“Previously, I strived to support my family... when everything settled, there come needs of personal satisfaction, as feel I had done more than enough already... now trying to pursue recognition at work; where prove myself as a role model to others is a great self-actualization to me...” (M - Investment bank director)	“Fed up with the pressure, taking care myself and focus my own needs are some prime concerns recently, where moving to a less stressed company with work-life balance and a supportive team within this field would be the best for me.” (A - Big Four accounting associate)
Extrinsic factors (Situational)	“When I was talking with my client on moving to other industry, she showed great support and said OK to follow another agent for the sales... where the words of the client touched me and make me choose to stay, realizing my work on building relationships is more important than being the top sales.” (T - Insurance sales)	“My plan previously was to build up a foundation to fund my marriage; unfortunately, it became worthless as I broke up. Trying to treat myself better , I decided to pursue something I like... Taking a month-long no-pay leave to attend an architect course drives me to resign, and fully immersed in studying. It just feels good in this experience...” (E - Former private bank manager)
	“I used to compare my job performance with my batchmates, then it all changed once I participated in a networking workshop... now I am more self-motivated and focus on status progression instead ... Without that opportunity I would not know that status building could draw more connections... My effort and expertise could be broadly recognized compared to peer competitions...” (J - Private Bank senior associate)	“The changing point of my career was the time when my new assigned duties were instead helping the ‘rich’ becoming ‘richer’, but not helping people in need... I felt my job does not fit with my values to serve the greater community and the public... Therefore, I left after that project for a post focusing on bringing more public impact that suits my heart to serve...” (Y - Central bank manager)

“predict feelings of others” (sympathy), “setting up learning goals” (telic), and “formulate contingencies to avoid failures” (mastery), with evidence from interviews suggesting that interviewees reversed to new states by satisfying different demands. Adapting their motivation through ongoing experience, an adjustment process can be seen in most of the statements from these interviewees.

As the outcome of motivational sensation and psychological variables, Table 6 may help explain findings on emotional experience (Apter, 2001). Though they look contradictory between one’s experience and behaviors, whether the action was pleasant or not depends on their prevailing motivations (Apter, 1981). In such a sense, additional job demands may not only exert stress as a situational factor, but also induce an emotionally poor experience for employees who are dominant on specific motivational states.

Revisiting quotes of interviewee H across different sessions, numerous motivational states were found activated

throughout his work experience. Still, stressing the “fit” of himself in the sector occasionally in his interview, it does not seem to show his frustration from external pressures but an adaptation to the climate of the Hong Kong financial sector. Ultimately, it is suggested that H might tend to spend extended periods in the conformist state and thus may help explain his intention to stay.

Regardless of the experience the stayers faced, it appeared that almost every participant was striving for more control “to get the most” out of their career. Specifically, “rotation,” “overseas experience,” and “secondment” were some popular terms used in interviews. In addition, “felt optimistic,” “no pain, no gain,” and “best will come” are some of their recent reasons to remain in their position or current company. Rather than looking for adaptation, those who chose to leave a position or company redirected their focus on a new position that was a better fit to their needs. Recalling their triggering experience, leavers acted on new changes in

response to stress factors and workload in their previous post. Oriented to a new motivational state, some even continued to “thrive” within the given work environment and were more than tough as mentioned. With reference to the behavioral dynamics and events mentioned by interviewees, we propose that there might be some potential interactions between commitment and workplace experience among employees in the Hong Kong financial service sector.

Discussion

Underlying mechanisms behind meta-motivations

Choosing to work in a high commitment-oriented sector, one might argue that joiners are motivated by the money one could make most of the time. This seems to align well with classical views of motivation as a means/end relationship, but such a definition could appear restrictive from the interview results. Questioning what underlies these motivations in-depth, reversal theory emphasizes motivations behind the “motivator” (Apter, 2001). What is motivating behind having excellent compensations or working in stress-prone environments can be poles apart among individuals. One employee could thrive because of pure enjoyment, status of money, or another by looking for challenges to prove themselves. Similarly, evidence in this study suggests there could be apparent connections between a “desire” and an object of “desire” (i.e., monetary reward), which might not necessarily be driven by fun; but to support family or others, as reported by respondents themselves.

Some interviewees showed a strong tendency to spend time in one specific state within motivational pairs; phrases such as “challenge the system” or “serve the community” have been mentioned several times. We also observed respondents mentioning various orientations using words such as “rotations” and “learning” on granting qualifications (mastery) and looking for changes (negativistic). Based on these results, one could argue that respondents pay more attention to some states than others, providing an example of state salience (Apter, 2007). Potentially, this conflicts with the expectation that people who thrive have high telic dominance and are absorbed in completing tasks (Males et al., 1998). However, reversal theory proposes that excessive dominance is not mentally healthy (Desselles & Apter, 2013) since one would be vulnerable to exhaustion and even burnout if only one state was consistently experienced. Being dominant in a specific state does not indicate individuals were not experiencing both states within a motivational pair (Apter & Carter, 2002); one might experience the telic state until a stressful situation triggers a reversal, or simply have such a tendency at work but immerse in the playful state elsewhere. In this study, participants showed signs of changes in states when facing different conflicts in specific situations. These

reported variations in meta-motivations could offer explanations for how or why employees are committed at work.

Realizing misalignments between themselves and their job, some interviewees discussed an interest in alternatives and eventually took a leap of faith. Highlighting changes from conformist towards the negativist state, emotional “U-turns” occurred. Having depicted strong desires to fit in previously, respondents were generally frustrated as their work failed to meet their expectations. This new orientation focused instead on “being different” rather than “to become one of them”; as suggested by reversal theory, contextual “triggers” could be a pivotal “force” driving their feelings to “reverse” within motivational pairs as they adapt to the new “conflicts.”

Conversely, it was found that new motivations described by respondents were not actually in conflict with those they desired when joining the sector. For example, interviewee H depicted a preference for flexibility over compliance and J prefers recognition over learning. The incurred motivational changes from the somatic towards relational domains, might suggest that these cases could involve “shifts” of motivation states. Although these changes do not involve “direct” reversals, such findings in fact, could be explained by focality, another concept in reversal theory.

Describing the relative importance of motivations (Apter, 2015), focality sheds light on the complementary value of states that go together at a particular period and how these change over time (Apter, 2013). In this study, “assimilation” arises when two states were active during “critical” events encountered by respondents. Though both play a part in this, the controlling state would govern ongoing action more than the secondary one (Apter, 2015). Participants reported being oriented more by the new state, with multiple states activated concurrently even after motivation changes. Suggesting motivation “shifts” among some of the respondents, it could be explained that their new “prime” motivation is focusing on the state at the forefront and other states are still operative but with lesser focality.

Cultural effects on meta-motivations

Working environments and climates in the financial sector are “controlled” by business agendas, which “stereotype” certain behaviors as key competencies. But by creating disparities between an employee’s desired and experienced states, these manipulations by the working culture also create discomfort among participants (Desselles & Apter, 2013).

Being well-known for its competitive market, Hong Kong has long been driven by goals (Burton et al., 2000). With achievement-oriented values embedded in a robust economy, recognizing winners and best performers is common (Clugston et al., 2000). Primed by well-developed financial infrastructures, money is shown to be an immediate medium to standardize and quantify performance (Tang &

Chiu, 2003). For instance, the investment and insurance fields “rank” employees by sales. Living in a society with social-economic status valued in terms of “monetary value” suggests that occupations with high financial value can be “indicators” for success. Therefore, it can be said that employees might be affected by a masculine climate (Clugston et al., 2000) to fulfil motivations in the “goal-oriented” telic state or “power-driven” mastery state.

In addition, organizational structures in Hong Kong are segregated by multiple management grades, making its work hierarchies one of the most prominent across the globe (Rowlinson, 2001). Decisions are more likely to penetrate multiple levels in a centralized pipeline. Subordinates’ abilities therefore tend to be overlooked due to limited communication with leaders (Clugston et al., 2000). Receiving inadequate support, respondents also reported being given limited recognition of their involvement and efforts, making their work-life difficult.

Furthermore, Hong Kong’s work culture is described as strictly controlling. With priorities often centered on revenues and profit-making, respondents said that it felt “strange” not to comply with leaders and most of the participants reported staying very late in the office. Such high pressure to “fit in” a restrained culture might explain some incidents that triggered motivational changes of interviewees.

In short, we found that participants were generally receptive to change in uncertain times for personal advancement or fulfilling their own needs. Noticing that their job duties are strictly related to the global market, workers might show high resistance to stress in ambiguous situations (Kennedy, 2002). Given a lack of resources to challenge hierarchies, these instances might explain respondents’ pessimism and turnover intentions. Cherishing realism and flexibility, “open thinking,” and “playfulness” were some of the paratelic motivations mentioned by participants regarding the importance of being “fluid” workers in the financial service sector. Participants who decided to leave, or to look for change eventually, were predicted to be highly adaptable and showed some extent of “rebelliousness” in the negativistic state.

Implications for organizational commitment

With such a limited sample size, this paper is speculative in providing a brief overview of meta-motivation concepts and reversal processes in the Hong Kong financial sector. With an increased understanding towards studying seemingly “paradoxical” behaviors, insight into employees’ organizational commitment could also be drawn. Supported by a robust research base, enhancing one’s commitment has been shown to be a beneficial predictor of job performance, reduced absenteeism, and lower turnover rates as well as an indicator of employees’ adaptability to organizational change (Su et al., 2009). Its three components, affective commitment firstly refers to one’s emotional attachment and desires

to remain, whereas normative commitment is experienced as a sense of obligation to the employees’ values to remain and to reciprocate in return (Anitha & Begum, 2016). Lastly, continuance commitment is defined as one’s awareness of the costs associated with leaving, such as lost benefits and compensations from the job (Meyer et al., 2012). Interviewees have revealed possible factors influencing commitment, which could be used by firms to introduce specific strategies or interventions to improve the overall work experience of employees.

Excluding the fact that remuneration is relatively generous, a few interviewees commented that their “cost” to leave is high. “Bound” by “certificates” and “qualifications”, they are regarded as professionals who specialize in specific duties. Consequently, interviewees’ difficulties in mobilizing expertise and transferring talent beyond the financial sector might contribute to a great extent of continuance commitment.

Likewise, demonstrating keen obligation towards their assigned tasks, such as being willing to work beyond regular hours, interviewees described these “responsibilities” in response to the compensation and opportunities given, where a high extent of normative commitment was also noted.

Still, indicated from their comments, what matters most to commit in the work context are emotions and experience. Recalling respondents’ sharing of some firm-wide practices to bring more innovation and creativity in the workplace, such as encouraging flexible wear, or setting up open co-working spaces, these efforts were reported as ineffective to address the difficulties of client-facing employees in the frontline. In a masculine society that cherishes monetary rewards, “extrinsic” aspirations such as certificates and awards are still stated as the most important incentives by interviewees working in managerial positions. With these interventions failing to reach most workers in the sector, there is a need to refine firm-wide initiatives.

To improve employees’ affective commitment, reversal theory can be applied through situational “manipulation” in different contexts. Respectively, this study has acknowledged differentiated motives among employees in their work positions. Understanding that the above initiatives might not align effectively with different expectations among Hong Kong financial service sector employees, to drive organizational commitment, there is a need for firms in the sector to identify motivations to work, thrive, and commit among employees. In the light of change management, restructuring work environments with respect to the desired motivation states might not only introduce new “stimuli” to employees (such as deploying flexible work arrangements) from their current job conditions but can also help enrich their subjective experience at work. With a “push” towards the satiation mechanism of reversal theory, reversals of motivation can

be induced effectively by satisfying employees' motivational needs.

Specifically, organizations could develop self-initiated/manageable programs with details designed by employees. Given the fact that respondents' needs are not catered for effectively during their career progression, human resources might need to take a more dynamic approach to reviewing strategies. For example, responding to voices through conducting town hall events or through surveys or focus groups is highly recommended to the board leaders. Moreover, in response to a rigid reporting structure in the Hong Kong financial sector, by managing expectation through real time feedback, workers' motivation might be more effectively managed. To improve transparency in the leadership's management practices, involving employees in open participation in the process might help. Putting individual needs in central focus regularly, could result in their needs being met while improving their affective commitment.

For instance, providing overseas opportunities to work in foreign subsidiaries might encourage stayers to "try things out" after being settled in the telic state. What is more, introducing flexible work packages such as picking either mortgage subsidies or being in an "elite" program could encourage employees to manage what suits them best, in a way that caters to both workers who are looking for housing support as well as those who seek status building opportunities. Bringing in collaboratively tailor-made solutions for employees based on their subsequent motivations, organizations could hereby enjoy the fruits of a highly motivated and committed workforce.

Recalling the structural phenomenology philosophy, having a better understanding of employees' demands can help promote "psycho-diversity", which is a state in which pursuing organizational, business objectives could co-exist with employees' well-being strategies (Apter, 2001). By taking an eclectic approach, it might be best for leaders to build a "performance climate" accommodating the eight meta-motivations (Apter, 2001), where controllable tasks assigned and work to be accomplished can match with specific motivations of employees as a result of timely conversations. Consequently, it is hoped that more motivation-oriented and custom-made interventions can be brought into practice to create positive emotions to more "valuable" and "meaningful" experience as a means of retaining talented employees at work.

Contributions, limitations, and future directions

This study complements previous studies on dominance (Apter & Carter, 2002) and uses structural phenomenology (Apter, 1989) to understand interactions of emotions and contextual effects on motivational changes, particularly on employees' intention to stay. In comparison to literature on

motivation and organizational commitment, based on the results driven from a diverse group of respondents, this study challenges deeply held assumptions on working in the financial service sector. Revisiting critical events of the 14 interviewees, reversal theory considers motivations as a multifaceted paradigm. It facilitates meta-cognition and eventually introduces a new way to perceive actions and behavior in this context. Taking this novel approach, this study shed light on the various aspects of employees' commitment in the stress prone Hong Kong financial service sector. In addition, it can act as a steppingstone to increased theoretical understanding, providing supporting evidence as to the significance of studying meta-motivations in the workplace.

As a fluid concept, structural phenomenology acknowledges the subjectivity of experience and the differing values of individuals. Considering the work context and experience, discrepancies between what companies offer and employees' expectations are constantly evaluated and compared. Even with a relatively small sample size in this qualitative research, the interview results were able to raise awareness and understanding of mechanisms behind motivation changes and highlighted the benefits of implementing employee strategies to facilitate the experience of desired motivations. As an exploratory study, this paper also investigated possible ways for developing a new research field for shaping optimal employee experience from a bottom-up approach. Furthermore, with their relevance for organizational behavior, a wider spectrum of meta-motivational patterns can be further explored in areas such as cohort effects, cultural differences, or the future of work, such as "Imagineering" people strategies. In addition, adopting a structural phenomenological analytical approach encourages respondents to engage into a "soul-searching adventure" with real-life struggles and thus gain awareness of their own subjective experience. The semi-structured interview design helps foster greater understanding of participants' internal dialogues, while analyzing their thought processes and emotions.

In contrast, one might argue that reversal theory offers a narrow approach that limits one's understanding of motivation. Based on pre-determined constructs, there might be limitations regarding interviews where respondents could be directed to appropriate responses. To prevent subjectivity, follow-up conversations with respondents and triangulation with reversal theory professionals were employed. Even though a high degree of data variation was obtained from the semi-structured interviews, there is a need for further study.

As one's motivations to join, thrive or stay in the financial sector could be affected by unique local values, this study failed to cover these regarding the contextual impact on employees' orientations. However, there might be potential connections or even complementary effects between constructs that require further exploration. As a "collective programming of one's mind that distinguishes the members of one

group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3), culture is divided into six measurable dimensions, namely Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Collectivism, Masculinity, Long-Term Versus Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence-Restraint (Hofstede, 2011). Through the way workers perceive what goes on in job settings, culture in organizations could be a tool to control, coordinate, and integrate company subsidiaries (Hofstede et al., 2005). With differentiated orientations of cultural dimensions among individuals (Hofstede et al., 2005), this could affect the values and expectations on how companies are run, thus explaining changes in employees’ meta-motivations to commit in the financial service sector.

Adopting a pioneering approach to examining meta-motivations in the financial service sector, this study nevertheless makes only an initial contribution. Future work focusing on interactions with cultural dimensions or organizational commitment can be studied to examine motivations among Hong Kong employees further. Via a range of methodologies incorporating multiple data sources, orientation, and degree of satisfaction could be mapped against employer demands, while the Apter Motivational Scale can be used to profile motivational dominances in relation to these factors (Apter, 2001).

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