

IS KARMA-YOGA POSSIBLE? CAN WE BE HARDWORKING WITHOUT BEING AMBITIOUS?

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Abstract. *Karma-Yoga implies being duty-oriented which in turn leads to being indifferent to the rewards, and being equally open to pleasure and pain. A commonly expressed doubt about Karma-Yoga is: How can we put in efforts without expecting any reward in return for our efforts? Using a modified list of Rokeach's instrumental values, we investigate if 112 Indian students see any difference between the values "ambitious" and "hardworking." Additionally on a sub-sample of 77 students, we see if the extent of Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) determines the extent of to which individuals can distinguish amongst these two values. We find support for our suggestion that for individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga, being "hardworking" will be more important than being "ambitious."*

What motivates people to work hard and give off their best? Since earliest times this has been a subject of inquiry for scholars from diverse disciplines in the social sciences. Most theories of motivation are based on the principle of hedonism and they focus on an individual who strives to maximize personal utility. A limitation of most of these theories is that they "focus on the individual who is assumed to be a rational maximizer of utility" (Shamir, 1991, p. 406). In other words, most motivation theories implicitly assume that individuals are driven only by hedonistic goals and utilitarian considerations in determining the direction and extent of their effort. This approach to motivation is at odds with the Karma-Yoga philosophy explained in the Bhagawad Gita, a part of the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. Karma-Yoga philosophy suggests that individuals ought to work with no concern for the rewards that they are likely to get from their efforts.

In our classroom sessions with executives and full-time students, whenever we have discussed the concept of Karma-Yoga, we are faced with a common query from most students—"How is it possible to work hard without having any desire for rewards?" In this paper, we investigate whether hard work and aspiration for rewards are two different things and can exist separately from each other. The first step towards showing the existence of Karma-Yoga is to prove that these two (viz. hard work and aspiration) can exist independently of each other.

WHAT IS KARMA-YOGA?

The word Karma-Yoga is made up of two Sanskrit words—(i) karma, which includes all physical and mental actions of a being and (ii) yoga, an intelligent way of performing actions (Gita Chapter 2, Verse 50). Thus, Karma-Yoga is defined as a technique for intelligently performing actions (Tilak, 1950/2000). Karma-Yoga constitutes a theory of work motivation built upon the Indian worldview and suited for the Indian culture.

The Indian worldview comprises three fundamental beliefs, which are common to all the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy (Dasgupta, 1922/1991, p. 71; Prabhavananda, 1960, p. 201). First is the belief in the law of karma, which suggests that all actions bring joy or sorrow to the agent depending on whether the action is good or bad. The law of karma is similar to a belief in a just world (Connors & Heaven, 1990; Hafer & Begue, 2005) except for the fact

that karmic justice can be meted out across various lifetimes. Second is the belief in an eternal entity, or soul that remains pure and untouched through its existence in various physical forms across many lifetimes. The third belief concerns salvation or freedom from the eternal cycle of birth and death. In other words, as beings interact with external objects they experience pleasures and pain through their sense organs. These pleasures and pains create within the mind of the agent, the desire to seek pleasure or to avoid pain. The desire to seek pleasure or avoid pain compels the being towards further interaction of sense organs with external objects. In this manner, all beings are continuously interacting with external objects, experiencing pleasure and pain, and hankering after pleasure or avoiding pain in a never-ending cycle of birth and death.

Because, the main purpose of a soul manifesting itself in a physical form is to enable it to experience the results of its past actions, if somehow beings could extinguish the power of actions to yield future results, there would be no reason for the soul to be reborn and thus salvation would be achieved. According to Indian philosophy, the goal of all beings is to achieve freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Thus, an intelligent action is one, which is conducive to achieve freedom from rebirth. In other words, Karma-Yoga, the technique of intelligent action, can also be defined as a technique for performing actions such that the soul is not bound by the effects of the action (Tilak, 1915/2000). The doctrine of Karma-Yoga suggests that freedom is within reach for all beings irrespective of the shape of their form or nature of their activities, provided they act in a manner that does not compel them to receive the fruits of their actions.

Karma-Yoga in Organizations

The concept of Karma-Yoga has received attention from scholars in organizational behavior (Menon & Krishnan, 2004; Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003) who were seeking to operationalize this construct. Mulla and Krishnan (2006) performed a content analysis on a contemporary version of the Gita (Gandhi, 1946/2001) and identified the three dimensions of Karma-Yoga as- duty-orientation, indifference to rewards, and equanimity. Since the development of the Karma-Yoga scale by Mulla and Krishnan (2006; 2007), the construct has been validated with the personality factor of conscientiousness (Mulla & Krishnan, 2006), dimensions of empathy (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008b), and terminal and instrumental values (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007). In addition, studies on leader-follower pairs in organizations have shown that in the Indian context, individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are perceived to be higher on transformational leadership (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008a) and followers of transformational leaders are seen to have higher levels of Karma-Yoga (Krishnan, 2007; 2008; Mulla & Krishnan, 2009).

Measuring Karma-Yoga

All the studies described in the earlier section used a self-report Likert scale to measure Karma-Yoga. Despite their extensive use in organizational behavior research, self-report scales have severe limitations (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). While self-reported objective and demographic data are easily verifiable, other information like personality traits, behavior, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions are not. This is largely due to lower self-awareness (Wohlers & London, 1989). Hence, using a self-report Likert scale for validating a construct like Karma-Yoga is not likely to give conclusive results. For example, when 459 executives responded to the Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) scale (a five-point Likert scale from 0 to 4), the minimum score was 1.33 the maximum was 4, the median was 3.33, and the skew was -.57 (Mulla, 2008). This clearly indicates that the Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) scale is prone to social desirability effects. One way of eliminating some of the problems with self-report Likert scales is the use of an ipsative measure such as that used for measuring value systems of individuals.

VALUES

According to Rokeach (1968), human personality consists of three distinct domains. The behavioral domain consists of observable behaviors, the affective domain consists of feelings, emotions, and attitudes, and the cognitive domain consists of the intellect which reasons and evaluates. Values form part of the cognitive domain, which is the innermost core of the personality and which affects the other two aspects i.e. the affective, and the behavioral domains. Values are prescriptive or exhortatory beliefs, which advocate a certain course of action or a certain state of existence as desirable, or undesirable, like for example one believing it is desirable that children should obey their elders (Rokeach, 1968).

Value System

Rokeach (1973) defined a value as “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence.” A belief concerning a desirable mode of conduct was called an instrumental value and a belief concerning a desirable end-state of existence was called a terminal value. If a person values freedom as an end-state of existence, it means that he or she believes that freedom is preferable to slavery. Values can be looked upon as being hierarchical in nature, leading to the idea of a value system. Rokeach (1973) defined a value system as “an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.” A set of rank-ordered values is called a value system. A person’s value system is enduring and value systems affect how people feel about themselves and their work. Empirical studies have shown how value systems affect personal and organizational effectiveness (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998).

Ambition and Hardwork

The first instrumental value in the list of Rokeach’s (1973) values is “ambition” which is explained by Rokeach as “hard-working” and “aspiring.” The use of the words “hard-working” and “aspiring” together as an explanation of the value of “ambition” by Rokeach, implies that according to him they either mean one and the same thing or they refer to two facets which always go together.

According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, the word “ambitious” refers to “having a desire to achieve a particular goal” (ambitious, 2009) and the word “ambition” means “an ardent desire for rank, fame, or power” (ambition, 2009). Similarly, the word “aspiring” means “to seek to attain or accomplish a particular goal” (aspiring, 2009). Clearly, the focus is on the motives of a person’s actions. On the other hand, the word “hardworking” implies being “industrious or diligent” (hardworking, 2009). The word “diligent” means being “characterized by steady, earnest, and energetic effort” (diligent, 2009). Both these words (i.e., being industrious and diligent) focus on the visible behaviors and not the motives.

Rokeach’s (1973) use of the words “hardworking” and “aspiring” together as synonyms implies that he presupposes a motivation for the observable behavior of hard work. That is, according to Rokeach, if we say that a person is hard working, we automatically imply that the person is also “aspiring” or “ambitious.” In other words, being hard working precludes all other motives except a desire for a particular goal such as rank, fame, or power.

The doctrine of Karma-Yoga suggests that individuals must perform actions in a manner that they are not bound by the results of their actions. This means that while performing actions individuals must be motivated by a sense of duty, must be indifferent to rewards, and must possess equanimity. Performing action in the spirit Karma-Yoga requires at the very least a recognition that it is possible for one to act sincerely while at the same time being indifferent to the results of one’s actions. Rokeach’s conceptualization of “ambitious” as made up of

“aspiring” and “hardworking” completely precludes a Karma-Yogic action. Because Rokeach’s conceptualization of “ambitious” is most probably conditioned by traditional western philosophical thought that presumes that all action is motivated by a desire for rewards, it is likely that in other cultures (such as India), the two values of “ambitious” and “hard working” will be seen as different.

Hypothesis 1. The instrumental values “ambitious” and “hard working” will be seen as distinct and different by respondents from India.

Karma-Yoga and Instrumental Values

Karma-Yoga is defined as a technique for performing action such that the soul of the actor is not bound by the results of the actions. Instrumental values are beliefs regarding the preference of a particular mode of conduct. Hence, it is expected that individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are likely to have a distinct instrumental value profile.

Mulla and Krishnan (2007) found that individuals who scored high on Karma-Yoga rated being “responsible” as the most important instrumental value. Responsibility means being dependable and reliable. Individuals who are highly duty oriented are likely to be highly responsible and dependable. Another interesting observation in the aggregate value systems of the two groups was that for low Karma-Yoga individuals, being “forgiving” (rank = 15) was more important than being “obedient” (rank = 18). On the other hand for high Karma-Yoga individuals, being “obedient” (rank = 10) was more important than being “forgiving” (rank = 17). Similarly, Mulla (2008) found that individuals who were rated high on Karma-Yoga gave more importance to instrumental values like being honest, being responsible, being helpful, and being self-controlled. The core of Karma-Yoga is being duty oriented and being able to follow one’s duty even though it may be personally uncomfortable. Hence, individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are likely to place a high emphasis on performing their allotted duties without worrying about the personal gains that they achieve from their actions. In other words, individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga will place high value on being “hardworking” and being “responsible” and they will place less value on being “ambitious.”

Hypothesis 2. Individuals who are high on Karma-Yoga are likely to value being “hardworking” and “responsible” more than being “ambitious.”

METHOD

The instrumental values list of the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS; Rokeach, 1973) contains a list of 18 values of which the first value is “ambitious” which is explained in parenthesis as “hard-working” and “aspiring.” We separated this value into two values viz. “ambitious” explained as “aspiring” and “hardworking” explained as “industrious” and diligent.” The meaning of the word “hardworking” was obtained from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. In this way, our modified list of instrumental values arranged in alphabetical order contained 19 values with “ambitious” as the first value and “hardworking” as the eighth value. The modified list of instrumental values was administered to 130 students completing the post-graduation studies in business management in Mumbai colleges.

For the sake of completeness, the list of Rokeach’s list of 18 terminal values was also administered without any changes. Of the 130 responses, few responses, which were incomplete, were removed and we finally had 112 usable responses on the modified list of Rokeach’s instrumental values. The sample comprised 44 males and 59 females (9 undisclosed) of age 20 to 42 years (Median = 23).

Among the sample of 130 students 90 of the students were also administered the Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) scale (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007); after removing the non-usable responses, 77 usable responses including data on Karma-Yoga were retained.

Results

Table 1 shows the aggregate value system of the entire 112 respondents. The aggregate value system was calculated by taking the median of the value rankings provided for a particular value by all the respondents. The values were then arranged in ascending order of the median rank for each value (in case of a tie in the median, the mean of the value ranking was used to break the tie). The median rank given to the value “ambitious” was seven and the median rank given to the value “hardworking” was eight. Considering that a number of median ranks were similar for value pairs (e.g., “honest” and “loving” are both ranked at 6.5; “independent” and “capable” are ranked at 10; and “self-controlled”, “logical”, and “polite” are ranked at 11), the fact that “ambitious” and “hardworking” have distinct ranks (albeit consecutive) is encouraging.

Table 1. Aggregate value system of all respondents

1. Honest (6.5)
2. Loving (6.5)
3. Responsible (7)
4. Ambitious (7)
5. Hardworking (8)
6. Intellectual (8.5)
7. Broadminded (9)
8. Courageous (9)
9. Helpful (9)
10. Independent (10)
11. Capable (10)
12. Cheerful (10.5)
13. Self-controlled (11)
14. Logical (11)
15. Polite (11)
16. Forgiving (12)
17. Imaginative (13.5)
18. Clean (14)
19. Obedient (16)

Note. Figures in brackets indicate the median rank for the group.

Hypothesis 1 was tested by finding the differences in the ranks of the value “ambitious” with all the other values. Since there were 19 instrumental values and they were taken in pairs (with one of the items in the pair being the rank on the value “ambitious”) to calculate the absolute value of the difference, this yielded 18 differences. One of the difference scores was the absolute value of the difference between the ranks “ambitious” and “hardworking.” If the values “ambitious” and “hardworking” were seen as distinct by respondents, then the difference between the values “ambitious” and “hardworking” should not be significantly lesser than the difference between “ambitious” and any of the other 17 values. Hence, ANOVA was done on the difference between “ambitious” and “hardworking” and “ambitious” and each of the other 17 values taken one at a time. Thus 17 ANOVA were performed of which five showed that the difference between the ranks given to “ambitious” and “hardworking” were not significantly less than the difference between the ranks given to “ambitious” and any other instrumental value. The results of the ANOVA are shown in Table 2. In other words, the difference in the ranks given to the values of “ambitious” and “hardworking” is no less than the difference in the ranks given to five other pairs of values viz. “ambitious” and “broadminded”; “ambitious” and “capable”; “ambitious” and “cheerful”; “ambitious” and “courageous”; and “ambitious” and “honest.” Thus, Hypothesis 1 is partly supported.

Table 2

ANOVA to study the significance of the difference between the mean difference between the ranks given to the values “ambitious” and “hardworking” and the mean difference between the ranks given to “ambitious” and the each of the other 17 values.

Comparison value pair	Mean Difference	Is the mean difference between the value pair significantly different from the mean difference between the values “ambitious” and “hardworking” (mean difference = 5.34)
1. Ambitious & Broadminded	5.53	$F = 0.11$ (n. s.)
2. Ambitious & Capable	4.91	$F = 0.66$ (n. s.)
3. Ambitious & Cheerful	6.36	$F = 2.98$ (n. s.)
4. Ambitious & Clean	7.33	$F = 10.89^{**}$
5. Ambitious & Courageous	6.20	$F = 2.78$ (n. s.)
6. Ambitious & Forgiving	7.50	$F = 14.09^{**}$
7. Ambitious & Helpful	6.71	$F = 6.18^*$
8. Ambitious & Honest	6.09	$F = 1.87$ (n. s.)
9. Ambitious & Imaginative	7.35	$F = 12.25^{**}$
10. Ambitious & Independent	6.88	$F = 7.00^{**}$
11. Ambitious & Intellectual	6.73	$F = 6.69^*$
12. Ambitious & Logical	7.05	$F = 9.18^{**}$
13. Ambitious & Loving	7.90	$F = 19.49^{**}$
14. Ambitious & Obedient	8.25	$F = 25.30^{**}$
15. Ambitious & Polite	7.57	$F = 15.64^{**}$
16. Ambitious & Responsible	6.63	$F = 5.42^*$
17. Ambitious & Self-controlled	7.19	$F = 10.15^{**}$

n. s. = not significant, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) scale was found to be reliable (Cronbach alpha = .68) after dropping three items. Earlier studies using the Karma-Yoga scale (Mulla & Krishnan, 2006; 2007; 2008b) have shown that the scale for indifference to rewards and equanimity show low reliabilities and that Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) forms the central theme of Karma-Yoga. Hence, in this study as well Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) was used as a measure of Karma-Yoga.

Scores on Karma-Yoga (duty-orientation) were calculated for the 77 respondents and the respondents were arranged in ascending order of their Karma-Yoga scores. The Karma-Yoga scores ranged from a minimum of 0.67 to a maximum of 3.67 (on a scale of 0 to 4). The entire respondent set was divided into three groups based on the Karma-Yoga scores. The first group (low Karma-Yoga) comprised 25 respondents having Karma-Yoga scores ranging from 0.67 to 2.00. The second group (medium Karma-Yoga) comprised 22 respondents having Karma-Yoga scores ranging from 2.33 to 2.67. The third group (high Karma-Yoga) comprised 30 respondents having Karma-Yoga scores ranging from 3.00 to 3.67. The median of the ranks given to each of the 19 instrumental values of each of the three groups was calculated to give an aggregate value system for the entire group. The aggregate value systems for each of the three groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Aggregate Value Systems of Low, Medium, and High Karma-Yoga Respondents

Low Karma-Yoga (Karma-Yoga scores from 0.67 to 2.00) N = 25	Medium Karma-Yoga (Karma-Yoga scores from 2.33 to 2.67) N = 22	High Karma-Yoga (Karma-Yoga scores from 3.00 to 3.67) N = 30
Honest (3)	Loving (6)	Responsible (5.5)
Loving (6)	Ambitious (6.5)	Hardworking (5.5)
Courageous (8)	Honest (7.5)	Ambitious (7)
Responsible (8)	Broadminded (7.5)	Honest (7)
Self-controlled (8)	Capable (7.5)	Loving (8)
Ambitious (9)	Responsible (8)	Intellectual (8)
Broadminded (9)	Intellectual (8)	Helpful (8.5)
Cheerful (9)	Courageous (8.5)	Broadminded (9.5)
Intellectual (9)	Helpful (9)	Capable (10)
Capable (10)	Hardworking (9)	Logical (10.5)
Helpful (10)	Cheerful (9.5)	Cheerful (11)
Independent (10)	Independent (10.5)	Self-controlled (11)
Logical (11)	Imaginative (10.5)	Forgiving (11)
Polite (11)	Logical (11)	Polite (11)
Hardworking (12)	Self-controlled (11.5)	Courageous (11.5)
Forgiving (13)	Forgiving (11.5)	Independent (13)
Imaginative (15)	Polite (13)	Clean (14)
Clean (16)	Clean (13.5)	Obedient (14)
Obedient (16)	Obedient (15)	Imaginative (16.5)

Note. Figures in brackets indicate the median rank for the group.

As shown in Table 3, the aggregate value system for individuals low on Karma-Yoga shows “ambitious” ranked as more important than “hardworking”, however the aggregate value system for individuals high on Karma-Yoga shows exactly the opposite pattern with “hardworking” ranked more important than “ambitious.” In addition, for low Karma-Yoga respondents, “responsible” has a median rank of eight (ranked after “honest”, “loving”, and “courageous”) while for high Karma-Yoga respondents, “responsible” has a median rank of 5.5 (ranked highest). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Discussion

Our results show some support for our hypothesis that individuals in India view being “ambitious” and being “hardworking” as two distinct values. The difference between the ranks given to the values “ambitious” and “hardworking” was no less than that given to five other pairs of values viz. “ambitious” and “broadminded”; “ambitious” and “capable”; “ambitious” and “cheerful”; “ambitious” and “courageous”; and “ambitious” and “honest.” Even though these results are not very strong support for our contention that “ambitious” and “hardworking” are viewed differently in the Indian context, they provide us some evidence of the need to investigate this area in more detail.

We also found that as individuals increased on their Karma-Yoga orientation, their relative ranking of the two values viz. “ambitious” and “hardworking” was reversed. Individuals who were low on Karma-Yoga gave higher importance to being “ambitious” as compared to being “hardworking” whereas individuals who were high on Karma-Yoga gave higher importance to being “hardworking” as compared to being “ambitious.” Also individuals who were low on Karma-Yoga ranked “responsible” as being less important than three other values (viz. “honest”, “loving”, and “courageous”), while individuals high on Karma-Yoga ranked “responsible” as the most important value. Once more, even though the findings are weak, the general trend of the results is in support of our hypotheses.

This paper makes two important contributions to the literature. First, it shows that the values of “ambitious” and “hardworking” are seen as different by a group of Indian respondents (students). Further studies of instrumental values must use a modified version of Rokeach’s list of instrumental values where the value of “ambitious” must be removed and in place of that, two values viz. “aspiring” and “hardworking” must be included.

Second, this paper provides an alternative to the Likert scale for measuring Karma-Yoga. By using the modified list of instrumental values, and seeing the relative importance given to the values of “ambitious,” “hardworking,” and “responsible” we can assess the extent of Karma-Yoga orientation in a respondent.

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