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Bringing Carl Rogers Back In: Exploring the Power of Positive Regard at Work

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Abstract

We draw on Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy theory and the theoretical lens of positive work relationships to explain why and how positive regard can be a powerful source for the development of employees' sense of vitality, job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). We theorize that when employees experience relationships characterized by a high level of regard with their co-workers they are likely to develop a sense of vitality, which in turn results in enhanced job performance and OCBs. These relationships are examined in both experimental and field studies. We conducted three studies to examine our conceptual model. In Study 1, we used a field design to examine the hypothesized relationships between positive regard, vitality, and both job performance and OCB-O. In Study 2, we used an experimental design to provide further validation for our findings in a controlled environment. In Studies 3 and 4 we used an experimental design to further examine the proposed causal relationships. The results of these multiple studies provide general support for the power of positive regard in augmenting a sense of vitality and enhancing both job performance and citizenship behaviors.

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Relationships form the fabric of organizational life (Eby & Allen, 2012) and can be of high quality or corrosive. Most studies have drawn on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) to explain how reciprocal relationships, which involve interactions that generate obligations (Emerson, 1976; in Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 874), influence employees' behaviors. However, not all relationships are reciprocal in nature; they can also be generative (Baker & Dutton, 2007; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Ragins & Dutton, 2007; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011).

Generative work relationships serve “as a force that propels and motivates actions” (Dutton & Workman 2012, p. 402); as they are “endogenously resourcing individuals” (Carmeli, Dutton, & Hardin, 2015, p. 1022). Following this line of thinking, we focus on *regardful relationships* (Rogers, 1951) which we see as generative.

This article expands on a theoretical perspective that views relationships as humanizing, non-judgmental, and generative in nature (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Dutton and Heaphy (2003) suggested that when people are in high quality connections in the workplace they experience a high level of positive regard (Rogers, 1951). The concept of positive regard, was developed by Rogers (1951) to characterize genuine relationships in which therapists develop a non-judgmental approach towards patients that cultivates a sense of acceptance, thus enabling positive psychological change.

Our focus is on *level of regard* which is conceptualized in terms of being liked or loved (not intimately) by other members in a social group and thus elicits a sense of inclusion (Rogers, 1951, 1957). We propose and test a model, shown in Figure 1, which posits that when co-workers experience a high level of regard, they develop a sense of vitality, which in turn drives both job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

Definition of Vitality

In this study, we focus on *vitality at work* and expand on Ryan and Frederick's (1997) definition of vitality as "a subjective feeling of aliveness and energy" (p. 529). We define a person's feelings of vitality as "the feeling that one is eager to act and capable of acting" (Quinn & Dutton, 2005, p. 36), and a sense of aliveness. When individuals are vital, they develop a high level of motivation to engage and perform their tasks more successfully (Thayer, 1989).

Positive Regard and Vitality

Researchers have argued that individuals have a need to feel included in their social groups (Ainsworth, 1989; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the workplace, social inclusion captures the extent to which employees have informal social ties with others at work and feel socially included (Pearce & Randel, 2004). The social valuing perspective (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2015) emphasizes the influence of quality interpersonal treatment on individuals' perceptions and behaviors (see Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2008, 2010). One key manifestation of social inclusion is *perceived liking* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) that arises from respectful interactions (Ellemers, Doosje, & Spears, 2004), which signal positive regard in a way that affirms the other person in the connection (Dutton, 2003; see also Carmeli, Dutton, & Hardin, 2015).

The socially embedded model of thriving at work suggests that vitality is deeply rooted in social systems (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Research indicates that positive work relationships can be an energizing force that 'propels one's actions' (Dutton, 2003; Quinn & Dutton, 2005; see also Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Relational energy is defined as "a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one's capacity to do work" demonstrating how individuals accumulate greater energy (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003) through social interactions.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between positive regard and employees' sense of vitality.

Vitality and Employee Performance

When individuals feel a sense of vitality at work, they are more likely to perform their job successfully and engage in citizenship behaviors. Our theorizing draws on the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) which suggests that positive emotions broaden individuals' thought-action repertoire, and drive them to pursue a wider range of paths of thought (Fredrickson, & Branigan, 2005).

Employees who develop a sense of vitality accumulate a variety of resources and "personally engage at the moment" (Kahn, 1990, p. 714), which enhances both job performance and OCBs. Researchers have linked positive emotions and prosocial behaviors (Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988). We suggest that the positive feeling of vitality lead employees to perceive their co-workers and the organization in a more favorable way; which drives them to seek opportunities to contribute.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between employees' sense of vitality and both (a) job performance and (b) organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs).

The Mediating Role of Vitality

. When employees feel that they are liked in connections with their colleagues they feel valued and accepted, and affirm their self-concept – which engenders positive arousal. A heightened level of positive energy is likely to be a powerful psychological force for people's engagement in citizenship behaviors and capacity to perform tasks effectively (Dutton, 2003).

Hypothesis 3a: There is an indirect relationship between positive regard and job performance, through employees' sense of vitality.

Hypothesis 3b: There is an indirect relationship between positive regard and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), through employees' sense of vitality.

Overview of Studies

Study 1, Method

This study was conducted amongst 132 salespeople and their managers (response rate of 88% and 100% respectively). The measures are described in Appendix D1.

Study 1, Results

With vitality as the dependent variable, the regression coefficient for positive regard was significant (.68, $p < .01$; CI (95%) = [.5, .75]), indicating a reliably significant effect, thus lending support to Hypothesis 1. When considering the effect of both positive regard and vitality on job performance, only vitality had a significant coefficient (.42, $p < .05$; CI (95%) = [.02, .74]), whereas the direct effect of positive regard on job performance was not significant (-.35, .33). The specific indirect effect of positive regard on job performance through vitality (.3) was statistically significant (.01, .48). This supported Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 3a. . When We performed the same analysis with OCB-O, We found a significant influence of vitality on OCB-O (.5, $p < 0.05$). The specific indirect effect of positive regard on OCB through vitality (.34) was significant as well ($p < 0.01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 3b.

Supplementary Analysis

A competing account of our findings argues that organizational identification serves as a mediator of the positive regard - performance relationship. We tested this, and the analysis revealed a significant effect only for vitality. (Appendix D1)

Study 1, Discussion

The findings of Study 1 provide preliminary evidence for the indirect influence of positive regard on both job performance and OCB-O, through a sense of vitality. We used structured surveys to collect the data. In cases like these, common method bias can often distort the interpretation of the results (e.g., Doty & Glick, 1998). However, this bias is apparently less severe when using time-lagged data and different sources to measure the explanatory and outcome variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Van den Bos (2001) has suggested that researchers should test their hypotheses in the field to ensure external validity, as well as in experimental settings to ensure internal validity. Berkowitz

and Donnerstein (1982) further suggested that lab experiments should deal mainly with causal hypotheses. Following this line of thinking, we conducted a lab study (Study 2) to address some of the limitations of Study 1.

Study 2, Method

Participants

Ninety-three participants residing in the USA were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk survey platform.

Procedure and Task

After providing their consent, participants were asked to read their randomly assigned scenario in which co-workers in the organization conveyed a high ($N = 49$) or low ($N = 44$) level of regard. They were asked to reflect on the scenario, after which they completed the manipulation check questions. Finally, they reported their levels of vitality and both job performance and OCB-O. (Appendix D2).

Study 2, Results

With vitality as the dependent variable, the regression coefficient for positive regard was significant ($2.16, p < .01$; $CI(95\%) = [1.83, 2.5]$), thus lending support to Hypothesis 1. When job performance was regressed on positive regard and vitality, only vitality had a significant coefficient ($.2, p < .05$; $CI(95\%) = [.03, .38]$), whereas the direct effect of positive regard on job performance was not significant ($CI(95\%) = [-.27, .42]$). The specific indirect effect of positive regard on job performance, through vitality was significant ($.45, p < .05$; $CI(95\%) = [.01, .89]$). This supported both Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 3a. When OCB-O was regressed on positive regard and vitality, only vitality had a significant coefficient ($.3, p < .05$; $CI(95\%) = [.11, .49]$), whereas the direct effect of positive regard on job performance was not significant ($CI(95\%) = [-.62, .39]$). The indirect effect of positive regard on job performance through vitality was significant ($.65, p < .05$; $CI(95\%) = [.21, 1.17]$). This supported Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 3b.

Study 2, Discussion

This study was designed to provide a further examination of our model in a controlled paradigm. An important limitation was that job performance and OCB were self-reported rather than being externally evaluated.

Studies 3 and 4, Overview

Studies 3 and 4 used an “experimental causal chain design” (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong, 2005, p. 846) to provide a powerful way to examine the psychological process by manipulating both the independent variable (Study 3) and the mediating variable (Study 4). Spencer et al. (2005) argued that this approach allows strong inferences about the causal chain of events. In these studies, we used different panel data to increase the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, in Study 4, both job performance and OCB-O were assessed with objective measures to reduce the possibility of demand characteristics. Finally, in Study 4 we extended our examination of OCBs by investigating both OCB-O and OCB-I as outcome variables.

Study 3, Method

Participants

Eighty-seven participants were recruited via the Prolific Academic survey platform.

Procedure and Task

We used the same scenario for manipulating positive regard employed in study 2, followed by a measurement of vitality. (Appendix D3).

Study 3, Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect ($F(1, 85) = 971.9, p < 0.001$). The results indicated that those who experienced a high level of regard reported higher levels of vitality than those who experienced a low level of regard. This supported hypothesis 1.

Study 4

A MANOVA with vitality as a between-subjects factor revealed significant main effects for vitality, (Wilks' $\lambda = .78$, $F(8, 180) = 3.03$, $p < .01$). Univariate Fs indicated that conditions differed significantly on task performance, $F(2, 93) = 6.12$, $p < .003$, $\eta^2 = .11$, performance self-ratings, $F(2, 93) = 4.3$, $p < .016$, $\eta^2 = .09$, OCBO, $F(2, 93) = 4.1$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$, , and OCB-I, $F(2, 93) = 3.91$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$. These results supported Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Discussion

Our work extends research on workplace relationships by focusing on regardful relationships amongst co-workers. This is important because the concept of positive regard has mainly been studied in psychology (Barrett-Lennard, 1962; Rogers, 1951, 1957).

We advance the notion of how workplace relationships can be generative (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011; Ragins & Dutton, 2007) and produce emotional resources that enable people to engage and perform better (see also Owens et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2015).

We expanded on emerging research that underscores the humanizing facet of the connections between individuals (Carmeli et al., 2015; Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012) as a “complementary lens” to that of social exchange theory which does not capture the substance of regardful relationships, but rather deals with norms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958; see Carmeli et al., 2015).

Our research has useful implications for practice. The findings shed light on the importance of positive regard at work, which may help managers design and shape a relational space that instills a sense of vitality, and enhance performance.