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ARE GOOD MORALS OFTEN RECIPROCATED? PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL VIRTUOUSNESS AND OPTIMISM AS PREDICTORS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The study employed the cross-sectional survey design to examine whether perceptions of organizational virtuousness and optimism could predict work engagement among bank workers in Nsukka and Enugu capital city, southeastern Nigeria. A total number of 222 employees (127 males and 95 females) randomly sampled from 12 commercial banks completed measures of organizational virtuousness, optimism and work engagement. Employees' immediate supervisors provided additional report on their subordinates' level of work engagement. As expected, the results of the hierarchical regression analyses showed that both perceptions of organizational virtuousness and optimism significantly predicted work engagement. Findings have been discussed in the light of typical Nigeria work organizations, wherein it is recommended that practitioners should consider organizational virtuousness and optimism as two critical factors that could spell success to organizations.

Keywords: Work engagement, among bank workers, perceptions of organizational virtuousness

INTRODUCTION

Following Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) awakening on behalf of "positive psychology", research attention has since shifted from the negative aspects of human behavior such as malfunctioning, weakness and pathology (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007) to the Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Positive Psychology is defined as the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning (Seligman & Csiksentmihaly, 2000). One positive psychology construct that has continued to receive large scale research attention in recent years is work engagement.

The upsurge in interest on work engagement among researchers started within the last decade and this interest has not waned. It has been defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that features vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). *Vigor* refers to high level of energy activation and mental resilience while working, the willingness to put in effort in one's work, and perseverance in the face of difficulty; *dedication* refers to a sense of significance, being strongly involved, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge; while *absorption* refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one's

work, whereby time tickles away quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.

Work engagement has been linked with various performance indicator variables such as job satisfaction (Burke & El-kot, 2010), higher job resources (Bakker & Bal, 2010). The objectives of the present study were to establish whether perceptions of organizational virtuousness and employee optimism could predict work engagement among Nigerian employees.

Organizational Virtuousness and Work Engagement

Although studies on organizational virtuousness seem to have been in limbo (Caza, Barker & Cameron, 2004), the recent devastating global financial breakdown and high level of mistrust among various organizational members have strengthened the need for organizations to begin to renew and redirect their energy towards the value of organization's virtue (Rego, Ribeiro, & Cunha, 2010).

Virtuousness refers to the state of excellence in human or organizational character (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006). It helps organizations avoid wrongdoing; and also builds confidence in employees and enhances the likelihood that they will pursue higher levels of individual and societal benefit as well (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002). Extensive review of literature revealed that while other components of positive psychology such as hope and happiness are daily gaining increasing popularity in the scientific literature (Hrinda, 2008) virtuousness seems to be profoundly omitted (Caza et al., 2004). This dearth of studies in organizational virtuousness provoked reactions from several researchers (e.g., Lilius et al., 2008) who emphasized the need to consider virtuousness in the business and management research agenda.

Despite lack of empirical studies on the construct, researchers have tried to relate virtuousness with some positive job behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Rego, Ribiro, & Caza, 2010), commitment (Koys, 2001) with their cumulative significant consequences on performance. As few as there are empirical studies on organizational virtuousness they majorly focused on job performance and more recently on organizational citizenship behavior an indicator of motivation, which has conceptual resemblance with work engagement (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010). One is therefore astonished why none of such studies attempted to examine the relationship between perceptions of virtuousness in organizations and work engagement. It is therefore hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of organizational virtuousness will significantly predict work engagement.

Optimism and Work Engagement

Another positive organizational behavior variable that has recently witnessed resurgence of interest within the academic community is the concept of optimism. As organizations struggle in

the face of a volatile economic environment to remain competitive, employee optimism may be what they need to remain in business. Since optimism seems to have the quality of sustaining one

even in the worst of times, its essence in organizations is mostly needed now than ever (Higgins, Dobrow, & Roloff, 2010).

Optimism is defined as the tendency to always expect positive outcome (Scheier & Carver, 1993). Seckinger, Langerak, Mishra and Mishra (2010) defined it as the tendency to believe, expect or hope that things will turn out well despite current excruciating experience. Optimism is the belief that despite the present difficult situation employees may find themselves in, the future is still bright. Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman (2007) summarized that "employees who are more hopeful, optimistic, efficacious, and resilient may be more likely to 'weather the storm' of the type of dynamic global environment contexts confronting most organizations today than their counterpart with lower psychological capital." (p. 568)

Researchers have attempted to relate optimism to well-being and health. For instance, previous studies (e.g., Terril, Ruiz, & Garofalo, 2010) found that optimism significantly predicted several aspects of well-being. It has also been associated with a vast range of positive outcomes, including physical and psychological health, coping and recovery (Seligman, 2002). It may serve as a shield against future mental and somatic health problems (Giltay et al., 2006), and improving coping strategies (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Research evidence has also shown that optimism is positively associated with important job behaviors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and performance (Kluemper, Little, & DeGroot, 2009).

Despite the real and potential organizational benefits associated with employee optimism, researchers have profoundly undermined its importance in the workplace. Accordingly, Rego et al. (2010) reported that optimism as a perceived organizational feature has been understudied. It is not known why researchers have unanimously ignored the relationship between employee optimism and positive job behaviors such as work engagement. Based on the foregoing it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: Employee optimism will significantly predict work engagement.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

An availability sample of 222 employees from 12 commercial banks operating in Nsukka urban and Enugu Capital city, south-eastern Nigeria participated in the study. In each organization, the employees were sampled after adequate rapport has been established between the management (manager operations) and the researcher. Out of this number that participated in the study, 123 were males, while 99 were females, their ages ranged from 26 to 51 years, with average age of 38.8 years. Their average organizational tenure was 6.7 years, while average job tenure was 9.3 years. Only individual employees with an organizational tenure of 6 months and above were considered for analyses. This six months period is considered adequate for an employee to have had a good grasp of the functions of their organization. It is also considered enough for their

immediate supervisors to be able to rate them on specific job attitudes and behaviors. This is in line with Rego et al. (2010) who asserted that 6 months period is conservative because many

other researchers (e.g., Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanazy, 2008, cited in Rego, et al., 2010) employed shorter time period in their study.

A total number of 259 copies of the scales were administered to the respondents in their various places of work. Out of this number only 247 copies of the questionnaire were returned, representing a response rate of 95.37%. Out of this number, 25 copies (10.12%) were lost to improper completion and only 222 copies (89.88%) were considered for analyses. To reduce common method bias, individual employee's self-report scores on work engagement were cushioned with that of their immediate supervisors' report on their level of work engagement. The two sets of scores were averaged to provide employees' composite score on engagement.

Instruments

Organizational virtuousness

Perceptions organizational virtuousness was assessed with the 15-item Likert-type response scale developed by Cameron, Bright and Caza (2004). The scale represented five dimensions of organizational virtuousness, which includes; social optimism, trust, compassion, integrity and forgiveness. Sample items includes: "Acts of compassion are common here," "This organization would be described as virtuous and honorable," "A sense of profound purpose is associated with what we do here." Cronbach alpha of .81 was obtained for the instrument in the present study. Each dimension of the scale has a total score and the grand total score of all the five subscales represents employees' composite score on organizational virtuousness. Higher scores represent positive perceptions of organizational virtuousness.

Optimism

Optimism was measured with the 8-item Personal Optimism Scale from the Questionnaire for the Assessment of Personal Optimism and Social Optimism – Extended (POSO-E) developed by Schweizer and Koch (2001). It is a self-report inventory that followed a four-point Likert-type response format ranging from (1) – not agree to (4) – agree a lot. Sample items include "1 face my future in an optimistic way," "I often feel that nothing nice will happen." Cronbach alpha of .77 was obtained for the instrument in the present study.

Work engagement

The short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) was used to measure work engagement. It is a self-report scale with a 5-point Liker-type response format ranging from 0) = never to 4) = always. It captures the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption. Sample items include: "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" (vigor), "I am enthusiastic about my job" (dedication), "I feel happy when I am working intensely" (absorption). Cronbach alpha of .83 was obtained for the instrument in the present study. However, employees' immediate supervisors completed the same UWES-9

which items were reworded to suit a report on their subordinates. Sample items include: "At his/her work, he/she feels bursting with energy" (vigor), "He/she is enthusiastic about his/her

job" (dedication), and "He/she feels happy when he/she is working intensely" (absorption). Cronbach alpha was .87 for the present study.

Design/Statistic

The cross sectional survey research design was adopted in the collection of data, while the hierarchical regression statistic was employed to analyze the data.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics and intercorrelations are reported in Table 1, and the results for the hierarchical regression analyses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics and correlations of study variables*

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Engagement	25.73	3.86	1								
2. Education	1.40	.49	-.42**	1							
3. Gender	1.40	.49	-.55**	.18*	1						
4. Marital status	1.64	.48	.59**	-.30**	-.43**	1					
5. Org'l tenure	1.40	.49	-.46**	.31**	.26**	-.23**	1				
6. Job tenure	1.45	.50	-.35**	.15*	.25**	-.19*	.33**	1			
7. Rank	1.41	.49	-.35**	.27**	.09*	-.30**	.09*	.19*	1		
8. Virtuousness	64.31	9.67	.30**	-08#	-.16*	.10*	-.04#	-.06#	-,24**	1	
9. Optimism	24.82	3.37	.48**	-.32**	-.23**	.26**	-.20*	-.14*	-.11*	.39**	1

$* = p <. 05; ** = p <. 001; \# = \text{Not Significant.}$

Note: A total of 222 employees completed the measures. Education (1 = high, 2 = low); gender (1- male, 2 = female); marital status (1 = married, 2 = single); organizational tenure (1 = long, 2 = short); job tenure (1 = long 2 = short); rank (1 – senior, 2 = junior). Organizational virtuousness and optimism are closed so that higher scores on them indicate higher virtuousness and optimism.

Table 2: Hierarchical regression analysis results

Variables (Predictors)	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Education	-.16**	-.16**	-.10*
Gender	-.30**	-.27**	-.24**
Marital status	.30**	.31**	.28**
Organizational tenure	-.21**	-.22**	-.20**
Job tenure	-.10*	-.10*	-.09*
Rank	-.15*	-.11*	-.11*
Virtuousness		.18**	.19**
Optimism			.25**
R Square	.59	.62	.68
R Square Change	.59	.03	.06
F Change	52.18	16.44	36.31

| F Value | 52.18** | 50.28** | 55.80** |

$* = p < .05; ** = p < .001$

The result of the analyses showed that the control variables explained a significant 58.1% of the variance in work engagement (adjusted R). This implies that when all the control variables combine, they are positively related with work engagement, $F(6,215) = 52.18$, $p < .001$. The following control variables predicted work engagement. Education (= -.42, $p < .001$); gender (= -.55, $p < .001$); marital status (= .59, $p < .05$); organizational tenure (= -.46, $p < .001$); job tenure (= -.35, $p < .05$); rank (= -.35, $p < .05$). Thus, all the control variables were significant. Perceived organizational virtuousness explained 61% of the variance in work engagement, above and beyond that of the control variables. This relationship was significant, $F(7, 214) = 50.28$, $p < .001$. In the regression equation however, perceived virtuousness was equally significant. (= .18, $p < .001$). This revealed that it significantly predicted work engagement. This is consistent with the first hypothesis and was therefore accepted. The results equally indicated that optimism accounted for 66.5% of the variance in work engagement, above the beyond and control variables and perceived organizational virtuousness. This relationship was equally significant, $F(8, 213) = 55.80$, $P < .001$. In the regression equation analysis however, optimism had a significant positive relationship with work engagement, (= .25, $p < .001$). This indicated that optimism significantly predicted work engagement. This is equally consistent with the second hypothesis and was accepted.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the first hypothesis, positive perceptions about organization's virtuousness predicted work engagement. This result is in line with Rego, Ribeiro and Cunha's (2010) findings that when employees perceive virtuous behaviors among their organizational members, it translates into notable positive organizational consequences such as organizational citizenship behaviors. Cameron and Lavine (2004) purported that such employees encounter fewer problems and enjoy better performance. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) argued that the presence of virtuousness strengthens interpersonal relationships among co-workers. Dutton and Heaphy (2003) stated that such "high-quality connections" among colleagues may foster positive emotions and increase the possibility of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), which has conceptual resemblance with work engagement (Bakker, 2005).

The result also seems to corroborate Koy's (2001) finding that virtuousness is related to commitment, participation, trust, and collaboration, which are possible indicators of work engagement. The finding seems to be consistent with Bagozzi (2003), which suggested that positive organizational features such as virtuousness may influence organizational citizenship behaviors. It is also in line with Cameron, Bright and Caza's (2004) study which found significant relationships between virtuousness and both perceived and objective measures of organizational performance. Chemers, Watson and May (2000) stated that virtuousness may be

an important contributor for conduct and might motivate a person to continue to toil until challenging goals are attained.

The results of the present study also confirmed the second hypothesis that employee optimism will significantly predict work engagement. This finding seems to corroborate with Seligman and

Schulman's (1986) study, which established that optimism is related to work performance. This result also seems to be consistent with that of Kluemper et al. (2009), which found that optimism is related to job satisfaction, happiness and organizational commitment.

Implications for practitioners and researchers

When organizational members have the feelings of working in a virtuous organization, they are happy and more likely to go the extra mile and may be able to rescue a drowning organization. The concept of virtuousness is contagious (Fredrickson, 2003) and so individual virtuousness spills over and gradually permeates every employee and the whole organization is influenced positively. This suggest that management as well as organizational practitioners should devote enormous resources into developing an atmosphere that encourages virtuousness and also make employees feel the material impact of their leadership (Rego & Cunha, 2008). Otherwise they will restrict themselves to in-role activities, which have been observed as no longer adequate for organizations in the 21st Century.

Management of organizations must know that employees' subjective perception and evaluation of situations are far more crucial for psychological well-being than objective reality (Haller & Hadler, 2006) and this determines to a great extent how they respond to various issues in their workplace. Also, the issue of optimism has a far reaching implication to management. Managers should include optimistic measures during recruitment process so as to be able to hire those that have innate positive attitude since it sets them to the path of success. If such employees are not hired, they should be trained or encouraged to change their thought pattern and hold a positive view about life in general since the organization will benefit as well.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further researches

First among the limitations of this study is its lack of ability to establish causation. Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann and Birjulin (1999) asserted that longitudinal studies are needed to address such problems. Also because the data for the study were collected in one instance, the issue of daily fluctuations in employees' levels of personal resources (optimism) and work engagement as asserted by several authors (e.g., Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009) could not be observed. Longitudinal studies could also be carried out to this effect.

Social desirability bias could have led participants to fake their responses in favor of socially desirable attitude, states and behaviors (Bowling, 2005). For instance, participants may wish to appear optimistic or engaged with their work. Thus, the social desirability bias might have artificially inflated perceived virtuousness, optimism and work engagement scores. Although measures such as anonymity of respondents were taken to check this, it may have reduced, but not eliminated this threat. Despite research evidence that many variables moderate the relationship between some antecedent variables and work engagement such as personality

(Halbesleben, 2011) the present study did not test moderation effect of any variable on the study variables. Future researchers might profit from addressing all of these limitations.

CONCLUSION

The world has never experienced such magnitude of economic depression as the one it currently faces. This has threatened many businesses in all parts of the world. While old ones are closing down, new ones are not springing up leading to astronomical unemployment rate. Thus, at a time like this there is usually the urge on the part of organizations and their members to indulge in unethical practices as a surviving strategy. Fortunate enough, positive organizational behavior such as virtuousness and individual employee optimism have proved to be what organizations really needed to survive with a in a dilapidated business environment.

The main thrust of positive psychology has been to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from pre-occupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities (Seligman & Csiksentmihalyi, 2000). Ignoring the positive aspect of work is inappropriate if we must appreciate the meaning and effects of working (Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2002). It is against this background that studies on positive psychology such as the present is not only timely, but necessary.

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