Negative affectivity as a moderator of perceived organizational support – work outcome relationships

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 December 2015
Received in revised form 2 March 2016
Accepted 5 April 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Negative affectivity
Perceived organizational support
Commitment
Job performance

ABSTRACT

Drawing on organizational support theory and principles of affect infusion, we tested the proposition that negative affectivity (NA) will moderate the positive effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on employee commitment and performance. Based on the premise that employees low in NA will be more likely to view high POS in a favorable light and act on this support, we hypothesized that the relationships between POS and these work outcomes will be stronger when NA is low (vs. high). Results yielded support for both hypothesized moderating effects, such that low NA accentuated the relationship between POS and both commitment and performance.

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1. Introduction

Perceived organizational support (POS) is a central construct within organizational support theory (OST) that reflects the extent to which employees believe their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Grounded in principles of social exchange, OST posits that employees who experience high POS will seek to reciprocate by displaying more favorable work attitudes, and elevated work effort and performance (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Consistent with this premise, POS has been shown to be associated with a wide spectrum of employee work outcomes, ranging from improved job satisfaction and organizational commitment to the display of increased organizational citizenship and creative work behaviors (e.g., Baran, Rhoades-Shanock, & Miller, 2012). While these findings are generally supportive of OST, meta-analytic evidence suggests that the association between POS and overall job performance is tenuous, reflecting a weak relationship that varies substantially across studies (e.g., ρ = .17, k = 98; Kurtessis et al., 2015).

Despite the vast literature has accumulated on POS, there have been very few efforts to integrate dispositional variables into OST or to explore personality traits as moderators of the effects of POS. Drawing on a trait interactionist perspective (e.g., Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argue that employees may perceive and act on POS quite differently depending on their personality. Specifically, consistent with affect infusion theory (e.g., Forgas & George, 2001) and the premise that affective states influence cognitive evaluations and subsequent behavior, we propose that trait negative affectivity (NA) will moderate the influence of POS on employee commitment and performance.

1.1. The moderating role of negative affectivity

NA is a broad dimension of personality that reflects a stable tendency to experience aversive mood states (Watson & Clark, 1984). Individuals high in NA adopt more pessimistic views of the world and are more inclined to report negative emotions such as anger, guilt, fear, nervousness, and anxiety across different situations (e.g., Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Due to these attributes and the tendency for the cognitive evaluations of high NA individuals to be infused by negative emotions (Forgas & George, 2001), we argue that NA may play a central role in coloring workers’ perceptions of the overall value of POS. For example, because high NA individuals are more cynical and less trusting of others, they may view POS as resulting from self-serving efforts on the part of the organization to achieve organizational goals rather than reflecting an authentic concern for the well-being of employees (Byrne & Hochwarter, 2008). Given that POS is construed more favorably when organizational intentions are viewed as being benevolent and sincere (e.g., Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011), high NA may diminish perceptions of the overall value of POS.

Complementing this perspective, NA is a key component of one’s behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which reflects a heightened sensitivity to negative stimuli and a tendency to engage in avoidance behaviors (Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1998). Due to their more pessimistic outlook on POS, coupled with this heightened behavioral inhibition,
individuals high in NA may be less likely to actively engage and utilize sources of support available in the organization (e.g., socializing and networking with others, seeking guidance and feedback, securing optimal tools/equipment to perform one’s work). In contrast, individuals low in NA demonstrate more comfort and trust in interacting with others (Watson et al., 1988), and are more willing to initiate relational and task-related actions (e.g., goal-setting) that cultivate commitment and performance (e.g., Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, & Haynes, 2009, Parker, Johnson, Collins, & Nguyen, 2013). Equipped with these attributes, individuals low in NA may be more likely to avail themselves of instrumental and social support in the organization, in turn, strengthening the exchange process relating to POS. In this regard, while high NA may suppress a worker’s motivation to act on POS, low NA should have the opposite effect, magnifying the influence of POS on commitment and performance.

**Hypothesis 1.** NA moderates the positive relationship between POS and organizational commitment such that this relationship is weaker when NA is higher and stronger when NA is lower.

**Hypothesis 2.** NA moderates the positive relationship between POS and job performance such that this relationship is weaker when NA is higher and stronger when NA is lower.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Participants and design

Data were collected from employees in a state-owned manufacturing organization in China. Workers completed a questionnaire measuring their POS, NA, and organizational commitment. Supervisors provided ratings of each of their worker’s job performance. Each of the measures used was translated into Chinese from English. Surveys packages were sent to 367 workers in total; 286 surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 78%. After removing cases with unmatched responses, complete data for 219 workers remained. The average age of the workers was 35.22, 66% were male, and their average organizational tenure was 13.05 years.

#### 2.2. Measures

##### 2.2.1. Negative affectivity

Negative affectivity was assessed with the NA scale from the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988). Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they have experienced 10 discrete emotions (e.g., nervous, hostile, distressed) over the past year. Cronbach’s alpha was .89.

##### 2.2.2. Perceived organizational support

POS was assessed using a 7-item measure from Rhoades, Eisenberger, and Armeli (2001). Respondents reported their level of agreement with each item using a 6-point scale. Alpha was .87.

##### 2.2.3. Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment was measured with Meyer, Allen, and Smith’s (1993) Affective Commitment (AC) Scale. We chose to focus on AC and not on other dimensions of organizational commitment (e.g., normative, continueance) as AC has strong motivational underpinnings, and in line with OST, is the mostly widely studied and strongest correlate of POS (see Kurtessis et al., 2015). A 6-point scale was used to record responses. Alpha was .94.

##### 2.2.4. Job performance

Job performance was assessed using five items from Williams and Anderson’s (1991) In-role Behavior Scale. Supervisors indicated their response to each item using a 6-point scale. Alpha was .93.

#### 2.2.5. Control variables

Gender, organizational tenure, and job tenure were included as controls as these variables have been shown to be associated with affective commitment, and also in some cases, job performance (e.g., Meyer et al., 1993, Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012).

### 3. Results

The means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for all study variables are reported in Table 1. Because supervisors provided performance ratings for multiple subordinates, we tested our hypotheses using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). HLM enabled us to control for between-group variation on the dependent variables (i.e., potential supervisor-level effects) by treating the intercepts as random rather than fixed effects. ICC (1) values were .34 for performance and .19 for commitment, providing support for our use of HLM. HLM analyses were comprised of three steps using grand-mean centered variables: the control variables were entered in step 1 (Model 1), following by the independent variables in step 2 (Model 2), and the hypothesized interaction in step 3 (Model 3).

Table 2 presents results of our HLM analysis. As indicated in Model 3, NA moderated the relationship between POS and both outcome variables (commitment: γ = −.18, p < .01; performance: −.14, p < .05). To ascertain the precise form of these moderating effects, we calculated significance tests and plotted simple slopes at 1 SD above and below the mean for NA (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the magnitude of the positive relationship between POS and commitment was discernibly stronger for workers low in NA (simple slope = .72, p < .001) relative to workers high in NA (simple slope = .50, p < .001). Likewise, as shown in Fig. 2, POS was significantly positively associated with job performance when workers were low in NA (simple slope = .28, p < .001); however, this relationship was not observed at higher levels of NA (simple slope = .10, ns). Taken together, these results support both of our hypothesized moderating effects, signaling that lower levels of worker NA significantly strengthens the influence of POS on commitment and performance.

### 4. Discussion

Despite an impressive body of research documenting the influence of POS on various work outcomes, very few studies have examined the role of employee personality traits in moderating these effects. In response to calls for research in this area (e.g., Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011), this study tested and found that NA moderates the influence of POS on both affective commitment and performance.

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1 To assess the distinctiveness of each of the employee-reported variables (e.g., POS, NA, commitment) we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in which a one-factor model was compared against the hypothesized three-factor model. In the three-factor model, all items loaded significantly on their respective factors. Fit indices improved significantly from the one-factor model to the three-factor model ($\Delta G^2 = 1794.38, \Delta df = 3$), providing support for the uniqueness of these variables.
Indeed, our findings suggest that POS may only predict job performance for workers low in NA. Taken together, our results are consistent with the view that NA may function as a perceptual filter that shapes one’s interpretation of, and motivation to act on, POS. Specifically, as a result of their more pessimistic outlook and the lower value they place on POS, workers high in POS may be less inclined to actively engage sources of instrumental and social support in the organization. Conversely, due to their stronger recognition of the value of POS, workers low in NA may be more likely to seek out and utilize these sources of support; in turn, yielding a greater propensity to reciprocate with heightened commitment and performance. Studies have suggested that the influence of POS on work outcomes may vary as a function of individual differences relating to social exchange processes (e.g., reciprocation wariness; Lynch, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 1999). This study extends this work by indicating that dispositional affect may also play a pivotal role in moderating the effects of POS.

In practical terms, our findings reinforce the notion that HR practices that convey support and concern for employees will enhance employee commitment and performance. However, these effects may be limited for workers high in NA, particularly with respect to their work performance. In this regard, organizations should consider supplementing the use of conventional “supportive” HR practices (e.g., providing career development opportunities, implementing fair reward systems; Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003), which may potentially not be as effective with high NA workers, with other workplace interventions that have been shown to both amplify POS and reduce NA (e.g., job crafting; Heuvel, Demerouti, & Peeters, 2015).

5. Limitations and conclusions

There are limitations to this research that should be noted. Despite a strong theoretical basis for the proposed direction of causality, the cross-sectional design limits the degree to which causality can be inferred. Further research with longitudinal or experimental designs are required to establish the causal direction of these relationships. Likewise, it is possible that the observed moderating effect on job performance may be partly attributable to a supervisor rater bias reflecting factors such as higher perceived likeability of employees low in NA and high in POS. To further test the generalizability of our results, future research should incorporate objective measures of performance and performance ratings from other sources (e.g., coworkers). Studies are also needed exploring other dimensions of OC (e.g., normative commitment).

Although this study contributes to the growing literature on POS from international (“non-western”) data sources (Baran et al., 2012), research is also needed testing the cross-cultural generalizability of our findings. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that POS effects may be moderated by workers’ cultural values. For example, Farh, Hackett, and Liang (2007) found in a cross-organizational sample of Chinese workers that higher levels of power distance and traditionality (i.e., an acceptance of hierarchical role relationships in Chinese society) may attenuate the effects of POS on commitment and performance. They deduced that POS effects may be weaker for workers who possess these values due to their stronger desire to maintain social distances and a lower reliance on the reciprocity norm in governing their behavior. Our results extend this work by demonstrating that personality traits such as NA may also wield significant value in explaining the varying effects of POS on work outcomes. Given the nature of our sample (manufacturing workers in China), additional research is needed testing the generalizability of our findings in different cultural settings and industries.
Further empirical work is also needed exploring whether other personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness, positive affectivity) may act as contingency variables, and the process mechanisms mediating these effects. Testing integrative models incorporating principles from OST and other affect- and resource-based theories (e.g., conservation of resources, Hobfoll, 1989) will assist in gaining a more nuanced understanding of how dispositional variables temper the effects of POS.

References