

Perceived Organizational Support and Affect: The Moderating Effect of Locus of Control

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Abstract. The aim of this paper was to understand the relationships between perceived organizational support (POS) and positive and negative affect, and to test the moderating effect of locus of control. This study was carried out in a large multi-division Indian organization in the manufacturing space. Sample included 262 employees from different functions and hierarchical levels. Data were collected through questionnaires. The results show that POS is related positively to positive affect and negatively to negative affect. In addition, the results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses support the moderating effect of locus of control on the relationship between POS and negative affect.

Keywords: POS, happiness, locus of control.

Generational shift at the workplace has redefined the psychological contract between employees and employers. Not any more is the contract defined by and restricted to an offer of lifelong guarantee of employment and good compensation and nor does it, from employees' side, fetch unquestioning and unwavering organizational commitment. Multiple opportunities to move across organizations to pursue what is known as a "Boundary-less Career" are available to the employees. High levels of monetary rewards fail to retain employees as larger pay packages await them in their 'next' organization. However, an enabling organization culture, opportunities for development and perceptions of long-term organizational support are some of the factors that have acted as glue and have been successful in affectively binding them to their organizations.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Organizations per se are non-human entities. Employees, however talk of organization culture, organization support and organizational engagement -- referring to an organization as if it were a living human being. This anthropomorphizing or personification is achieved by interpreting actions taken by agents or representatives of the organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) as indication of the organization's intent rather than attributing them to individuals' personal motives (Levinson, 1965). In terms of organization's commitment to the employees, the support coming from an organization especially from managers and leaders in significant positions is judged as a reflection of an organization's desire to retain and develop an employee. Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to employees' perception about the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being as viewed and judged by the actions of the organization's agents, policies, norms, and culture. Based on the principle of reciprocity, as an organization expects employees to show commitment to work and their employer, employees too want the organization to take onus of their well-being and growth. Organizations; thus, become a source of not only tangible resources like wages and medical benefits but also that of socio-emotional resources, such as respect and caring (Eisenberger, Jones, Aselage, & Sucharski, 2004).

Being recognized and rewarded by the organization becomes a precursor to meeting needs related to self-esteem, affiliation and actualization. Employees perpetually look out for cues that tell them about how they are perceived by consequential people like supervisors and leaders in their organization. Amount and nature of support rendered by the organization; thus, becomes an index of 'value' an organization attaches with the employee in question.

Cohen and Wills (1985) trace four functions of support that shield people from negative effects of stressors (George et al., 1993: 159). According to them, first, support contributes to feelings of self-esteem and acceptance by symbolizing to people that they are valued and worthy and accepted regardless of their problems or deficiencies. For example, support counteracts feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem that often accompany distress, thereby enhancing individuals' perceptions of their ability to cope with the stressor. Second, support serves an informational function and helps individuals to interpret, comprehend, and cope with a potential stressor in functional ways. Third, support fulfills needs for companionship, affection, and affiliation that may contribute to feelings of "belongingness" and help to distract a person from concern over the stressor itself. Finally, support can serve a tangential function by providing individuals with resources and services needed to help combat the source of stress. By virtue of spending between forty to seventy hours per week at workplace, work and organizational relationships become not only sources of stress but ironically, it is within the organizations' boundaries where employees seek support, friendship and redressal of stress. Moreover, stress, anxiety and burnout do not recognize organizational boundaries and therefore spill from work-life to our personal lives, influencing our total life-experience. POS, which is manifested in an organizational setting as both emotional and tangible support, is known to decrease employees' strain at both low and high exposure to stressors. It is negatively related to burnout (Cropanzano et al., 1997), anxiety (Robblee, 1998; Venkatachalam, 1995), and headaches (Robblee, 1998). Absence of stress is a desirable situation that not only has the potential to influence positively employees and their personal-level outcomes at workplace, but also may enhance their overall happiness by augmenting positive affect and reducing negative affect.

Happiness is the preponderance of positive affect over negative affect with a focus on affective evaluation of one's life situation (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). The negative affect dimension signifies the extent to which a person is experiencing a negative or aversive mood such as feelings of irritation, guilt, distress, scare, hostility, shame or nervousness. Positive affect, on the other hand, points to extent of positive mood like feelings of pride, strength, enthusiasm, interest or excitement (Watson & Clark, 1997). Happiness can be measured in terms of both frequency and intensity of instances of affect. However, it is easier for individuals to store frequency of affect information in memory. On the other hand, it is very difficult to encode intensity of affect information, as there is no natural system by which to define or label emotional intensity. Consequently, many happiness researchers measure happiness in terms of frequency of affect (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). Argyle and Martin (1991) also discussed happiness in terms of three, partly independent, components: the frequency and degree of positive affect or joy, average level of satisfaction over a period, the absence of negative feelings such as depression. Out of these three, the first and third are related to our affect and emotions while the second is linked to our cognitive evaluation of life situations. Considering the relative independence of positive and negative affect, both are used as separate constructs by many happiness researchers (Diener & Emmons, 1984).

There are certain established sources of joy and happiness. Argyle and Martin (1991) enlisted them as social contacts with friends or others in close relationships, sexual activity, success, achievement, physical activity, exercise, sport, nature, reading, music, food and drink and alcohol. Lyubomirsk, King, and Diener (2005) reported that people experiencing positive emotions or affect will generally be living through advantageous circumstances, experiencing favorable conditions in life. Within the sphere of one's work-life, co-workers, supervisors and leaders assume the mantle of friends and support providers. Concomitantly, positivity at work place in the shape of perceived organization support is known to generate and enhance positive mood. Research carried by Eisenberger et al. (2001) found that POS conveys competence, worth, and achievement, thereby enhancing positive mood. George et al. (1993), in a study of nurses treating acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) patients, found that POS moderated the relationship between nurse's exposure to AIDS patients as part of the work role and negative mood. They discovered that negative mood was strongest when organizational support was low and weakest when organizational support was high. In conformation with existing studies, it is safe to assume that a person with positive perception of organizational support will be happier than another who is stressed because of absence of organizational support. Identifying and defining happiness in terms of positive and negative affect, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1. POS is positively related to positive affect.

Hypothesis 2. POS is negatively related to negative affect.

Along with organizational factors, personality plays a large and important role in determining happiness. Many studies have shown that subjective well-being or happiness is related to the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality. (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Personality traits most commonly related to happiness are extraversion, neuroticism and locus of control. Locus of control is considered to be an important determinant of the way individuals interpret situations they encounter (Rotter, 1966). Locus of control is a personality construct that reflects one's belief or perception about who controls life and the environment (Lefcourt, 1976). According to Spector (1982), locus of control is defined as the degree to which individuals tend to attribute what happens to them to internal factors (e.g. skills, efforts, perseverance) or to external factors (e.g. chance, other people, divine intervention). Locus of control is, therefore, a factor with two contradictory aspects. These aspects are reflected in the extent to which individuals believe that what happens to them is within their control, or beyond. People with an internal locus of control believe that the results of their actions are consequent to their own efforts, abilities or personality. People with high internal attribution acknowledge their share of responsibility in their successes and failures (Aube, Rousseau, & Morin, 2007). On the other hand, people with an external locus of control feel powerless and believe that outcomes are dependent on factors outside their control like actions of influential others, luck, chance, fate, and a belief that the world is very unpredictable for them to plan and do something that will make a difference. Those with higher external locus of control are also likely to exhibit higher negative emotions. Allen and Greenberger (1980) found that lower levels of perceived control, under certain conditions, lead to modification of aspects of the physical environment through the act of destruction. Storms and Spector (1987) also discovered that locus of control moderated the relationship between perceived frustration and counterproductive behavioral reactions like sabotage, with frustrated external subjects engaging in sabotage while frustrated internals did not.

Grob (2000) found a positive correlation between well-being and perceived control, supporting the idea that people who believe that they control flow of events show higher level of self-esteem and perceive their world in a more positive light. Locus of control is likely to have a moderating effect on the relationships between POS and happiness. According to Chiu et al. (2005), individuals who have an external locus of control are more sensitive to support provided by the organization, since they consider that their organizational environment has a great influence on what happens to them (Aube, Rousseau, & Morin, 2007). We therefore further hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3. Locus of control moderates the relationship between POS and positive affect.

Hypothesis 4. Locus of control moderates the relationship between POS and negative affect.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Data for this study were collected using an online questionnaire from a large multi-division Indian organization in the manufacturing space. The organization has been in existence for more than a century now. It is well known for high quality products that are sold across the globe. Survey link with a note from us was sent through an email to approximately 800 employees spanning junior, middle, and senior management by the HR department of the group. Considering that it takes some time for organizational support perceptions to develop, data were collected only from employees who had spent at least six months working with their current supervisors. Two hundred and eighty six questionnaires were filled, among which 24 were incomplete. Thus, data from 262 questionnaires were analyzed for this study. Median age of the participants was 30 years (with a mean of 32.04), minimum being 20 years and maximum being 56 years. Out of 262 respondents, 94.2 percent were men, and 97.3 percent had a male supervisor. Median organizational tenure of respondents was 4.55 years, with minimum being 6 months and maximum being 33 years. The respondents' median tenure duration in current role with current supervisor was 2 years, with minimum being 6 months, and maximum being 23 years. Based on their hierarchical levels (as specified by the organization), the respondents were categorized into junior, middle, senior-middle and senior level. Approximately 20.6 percent of the respondents belonged to junior management level, 68.3 percent to middle management level, and 11.1 percent to the senior-middle management level.

Measures

Positive and negative affect. Measurement of positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) was done using 20 items, developed by Watson, Clark and Tellegen. (1988). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale that ranged from very slightly (1) to extremely (5). Sample items measuring PA are “interested” and ‘proud’, and those measuring NA are “ashamed” and “irritable”.

Perceived organizational support.

Measurement of POS was done using the eight-item scale recommended by Eisenberger et al. (1986). Sample items are “The organization values my contribution to its well-being” and “The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me” (reverse-scored).

Locus of Control. Spector's (1988) scale was used to measure work locus of control. This 16-item measure is specifically adapted to work settings (e.g. “Promotions are usually a matter of good fortune”). Items were rated on a five-point Likert response scale where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “strongly agree”. The scores for eight of the items signifying high internal locus of control should be reversed. A higher global score represents a more external locus of control.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and Cronbach's alphas are shown in Table 1. Cronbach's alphas vary from 0.76 to 0.92, indicating that the measures used in this study are fairly reliable.

Relationships between perceived organizational support and positive and negative affect

The hypotheses regarding relationships between POS and the positive and negative affect were tested by using correlation analyses (see Table 1). Results show that POS was related positively and significantly ($p < 0.01$) to positive affect ($r = 0.45$) and negatively and significantly to negative affect ($r = -0.38$), which supports Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations between Variables

	Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4
1	Perceived Organizational Support	3.31	.67	(.86)			
2	Locus of Control	2.49	.44	-.40	(.76)		
3	Positive Affect	3.36	.82	.45	-.28	(.92)	
4	Negative Affect	2.20	.77	-.38	.34	-.32	(.87)

Cronbach Alphas appear along the diagonal in parenthesis . $p < 0.01$ for all correlations. $N = 262$.

Moderating effect of locus of control

In order to test the hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of locus of control on the relationships between POS and positive and negative affects, we used a two-step hierarchical multiple regression as proposed by Cohen et al. (2003). In the first step, the dependent variable is regressed on both independent and moderating variables. In the second step, an interaction term, created by multiplication of scores obtained from the two variables entered in the first step, is added to the regression model. Table 2 captures both these steps. In order to reduce the problem of multi-collinearity due to correlation between the first two variables entered in the model and the interaction term, the scores for the variables are centered before being multiplied. The moderating effect is supported when the regression coefficient associated with the interaction term is significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2: Locus of Control Moderating Effect Analysis

Model	B	T	Model R²	Model F
Dependent variable: positive affect				
<i>Step 1</i>			.22	***36.26
POS	.40	***6.77		
Locus of control	-.12	*-2.02		
<i>Step 2</i>			.22	***24.24
POS	.40	***6.72		
Locus of control	-.126	*-.209		
POS x Locus of control	-.03	-.60		
Dependent variable: negative affect				
<i>Step 1</i>			.19	***29.71
POS	-.29	***4.81		
Locus of control	.22	***3.59		
<i>Step 2</i>			.20	***21.35
POS	-.30	***4.92		
Locus of control	.20	**3.26		
POS x Locus of control	-.11	*-1.99		

* p < .05

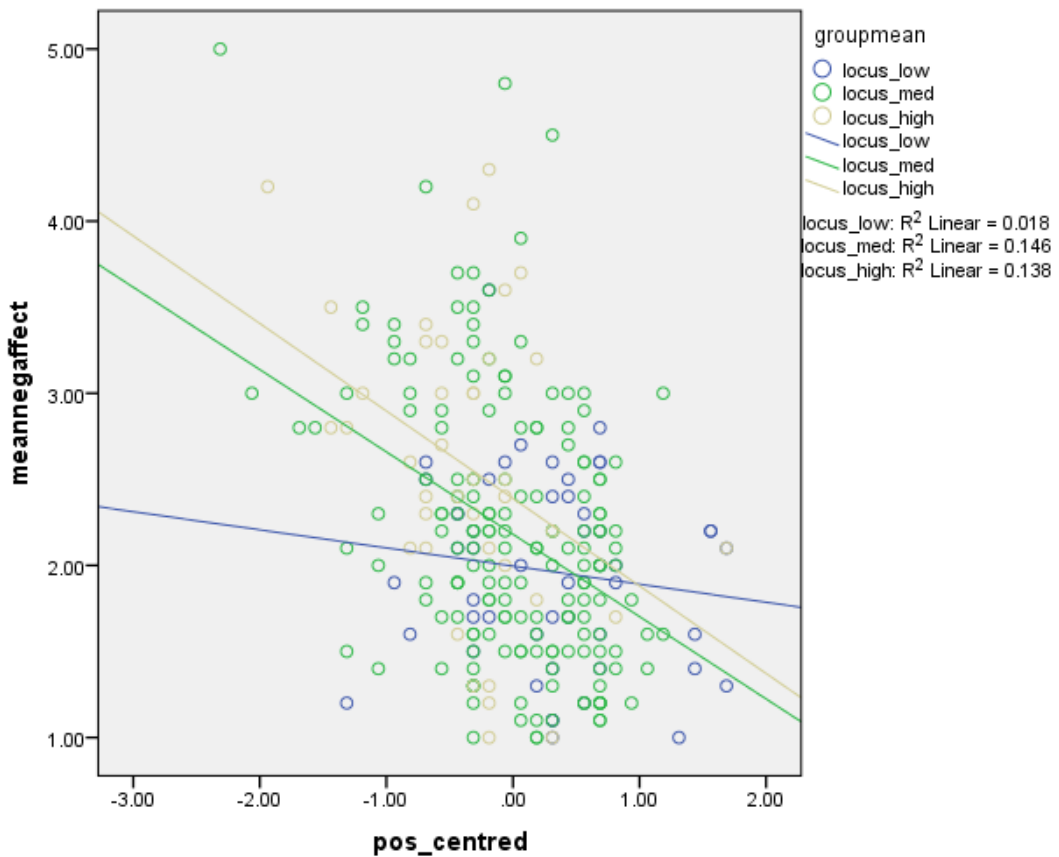
** p < .01

*** p < 0.001

Results of the hierarchical multiple regression shown in Table 2 reveal that locus of control moderated the relationship between POS and negative affect ($\beta = -.11$, $p < 0.05$), which supports Hypothesis 4. However, locus of control did not significantly ($p < 0.05$) moderate the effect that POS may have on positive affect. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

To illustrate the moderating effect, we plotted the regression of dependent variable on the independent variable at three values of locus of control. These values are the score at mean, at one standard deviation below the mean and at one standard deviation above the mean. Figure 1 shows how the relationship between POS and negative affect varies as a function of the locus of control. A visual inspection of this figure reveals that more external the locus of control, stronger (and negative) the relationship between POS and negative affect. The form of the moderating effect is consistent with Hypothesis 4. Thus, these results support the hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of locus of control on the relationship between POS and negative affect.

Figure 1: Relationship between perceived organizational support and negative affect for high, moderate, and low level locus of control



DISCUSSION

This study sought to achieve two goals -- first, establish the relationship between POS and happiness, and second, decipher the moderating effect of locus of control on these relationships. POS was found to be positively associated with positive affect and negatively with negative affect. In other words, high level of perceived organizational support was associated with higher positive affect while low levels or absence of POS was marked with higher level of negative affect. This finding is in consonance with findings of Lyubomirsk, King, and Diener (2005), which state that advantageous situations in one's life will lead to enhanced well-being or happiness. The favorable conditions may be economic in nature and related to income or to one's health or family (Diener, 1993; Easterlin, 1995, 2001). With higher incomes, people are able to afford comfortable living conditions and get access to better amenities which lead to increase in happiness. In an organizational setting, perceived organizational support while assuring one of commitment from superiors and leaders, fulfills social needs and indicates future prospects and prosperity thereby leading to increased feelings of wellness and positive affect. Higher POS indicates favorable relative standing vis-à-vis others in the organization generating perception of fairness and positive affect. POS also mitigates stress -- a necessary pre-condition for augmenting positive affect and preventing or mitigating negative affect.

In line with the importance of personality factors in happiness research, our results also indicate that greater the extent to which individuals have an external locus of control, stronger and more negative the effect of POS on negative affect. However, locus of control does not moderate the relationship between POS and positive affect. In other words, individuals with external locus of control require more of organizational support to reduce their negative affect, but not to enhance their positive affect. This finding is consistent with research of Grob (2000) that found that people with external locus are more prone to stress and its negative effects including lower levels of well-being. However, interaction of POS and external locus of control contributes only to mitigation of negative affect and not to increase in positive affect, which is in line with finding of Parkes (1991) and Cummins (1989) that only people with higher level of internal locus are able to make use of support to reduce stress.

Relationship between POS and negative affect, assumes high importance in these times when the sentiment amongst employees across various industries because of shrinking economy and accompanying retrenchments is gloomy and pessimistic. POS deserves more attention than ever in these circumstances to check generation and manifestation of negative affect. Negative affect experienced by employees can result in high stress and burnout, and counterproductive behaviors which can be damaging to both the employee and the employer. Providing support to employees by valuing their contribution, appreciating their efforts and rewarding them through monetary and non-monetary rewards is not optional but is critical for the survival of the organization. The leaders can further build commitment through ensuring employee satisfaction by enriching jobs, recognizing aspirations and caring about the general well-being of employees. Along with providing direct support, leaders can also decentralize, delegate, train and develop employees to enhance their sense of self-sufficiency and control. These initiatives may not have much impact on affect levels of employees' with internal locus of control but will surely boost the morale of those with external locus, enhancing their happiness. Another interesting aspect that deserves attention is the non-moderating role played by locus of control in the relationship between POS and positive affect. As it seems difficult to increase positive affect for high external locus employees even after providing substantial support, this personality variable should be tested and given substantial weightage during the selection process.

In our paper we have considered both organizational support and personality variables that can act as pre-requirements for a happy life. However, social support in the nature of family ties and relationships with friends outside organizational territories were not included. These ties can mitigate negative affect while supplementing positive emotions. Future research in the domain of happiness can include social support as an additional independent variable along with POS. Within organization also, immediate supervisors have a much larger influence on our well being as compared to other stakeholders or leaders. Supervisory support can therefore be studied as a separate independent variable capturing commitment of the immediate superior exclusively unlike POS which is more geared to encapsulate backing of all consequential managers and leaders in general.

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