The Impact of Members' and Leaders' Positivity on Organizational Identification in Business Student Organizations

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Abstract

        Although both positive psychology and organizational identification have been heavily studied, the literature does not reflect the impact of members' and leaders' positivity on organizational identification in business student organizations. This research was conducted by engaging student participants in professional business organizations at a Midwestern college of business. The first hypothesis (H1+) is that student organization member positivity is positively related to organizational identification. The second hypothesis (H2+) is that student organization leader positivity is positively related to organizational identification. The findings in this study indicate that students with a higher degree of positivity identify with their student organizations. Additionally, this study shows that student organization leaders with a higher degree of positivity also had higher organizational identification for their student organization. Since research indicates that positivity increases productivity, student leaders, then, who are more positive when leading their members, may lead the organization to achieve more during their tenure. This also has implications for training student leaders and organizational members in subjective positivity to enrich personal growth and enhance organizational outcomes.

Keywords: Positivity, Organizational Identification, Student Organizations, Student Organization Leaders

INTRODUCTION

Humans have the power to control up to 40% of their happiness, so why do people seem to struggle at attaining happiness? As a rule, people strive to be happy but always expect it to come tomorrow. Research indicates that 40% of what determines happiness is within reach and is an intentional activity. Another 50% is the "Set Point" that is genetically determined. The remaining 10% is the result of life circumstances or situations (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As students grow in college, they are on a journey to learn about themselves, find their place in the world, and most importantly discover what brings them fulfillment and success.

Past research has indicated that subjective happiness and organizational identification can provide a way to be happier and more productive in personal and professional venues. It is important, then, to research student organization members and leaders to determine whether subjective positivity of members and leaders enhance undergraduates' organization identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive psychology and organizational identification have been heavily studied; however, the literature does not reflect the impact of members' and leaders' positivity on organizational identification in business student organizations. Hence, this literature review provides brief discussions about positive psychology and organizational identification research.

Positive Psychology

Although Abraham Maslow first coined the term, "positive psychology" (1954), Martin E. P. Seligman (1998) created a research interest in the topic. Extensive research centers around the concept of positivity and its effect on individual, student, and business level outcomes. Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener (2005) published a comprehensive literature review of positivity effect and success. Psychologists support the idea that a positive mind-set, with effort, can be developed (Peterson, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Christopher Peterson adds that, "there are things that people can do to lead better lives, although…all require that we live (behave) differently…permanently. The good life is hard work, and there are no shortcuts to sustained happiness" (Peterson, 2008, p. 1).[DH1]

Positive psychologists and researchers continue to experiment with activities that promote happiness. Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues indicate that happiness increases through expressing gratitude, developing optimism, avoiding ruminations, practicing acts of kindness, investing in social relationships, cultivating resilience, practicing forgiveness, increasing flow activities, practicing mindfulness, pursuing meaningful goals, and taking care of the mind and body (2008). Tal Ben-Shahar suggests job crafting current roles, finding purpose by identifying meaning, pleasure, and strengths (MPS), simplifying one's life, positive psychology based educational programs, meditating on happiness, and appreciative inquiry activities developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues in the 1980s (2007).

Positive work practices are found to support higher organizational performance, and thus competitiveness (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Lyubomirsky and colleague's literature review pointed to positive organizational behavior as a determining factor in happy individuals being "more likely to secure job interviews, to be evaluated more positively by supervisors once they obtain a job, to show superior performance and productivity, and to handle managerial jobs

better" (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005, p. 822). Other studies indicate that happier people earn higher incomes (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; Graham, Eggers, & Sukhtankar, 2005).

Individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy and optimism fosters higher performance downstream (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998 as cited in Diener, et al., 2020). In a study in the United States and New Zealand, happier workers predicted better relationships with colleagues, cooperation, and increased engagement (Diener & Seligman, 2002 as cited in Diener, et al., 2020). Consequently, many businesses implemented positivity as a guiding principle when hiring. For instance, Men's Wearhouse strives to hire associates who exude optimism and enjoy life (Luthans, 2002). Just as positive psychology research in organizations demonstrates that those who exhibit positive effect experience greater success, students in the college setting also benefit from a positive disposition.

Positivity and College Student Success

As research shows that positive individuals are more engaged and productive in the workplace (Lyubomirksy, 2007), Medlin and Faulk (2011) found that student engagement, through increased optimism, positively affects student perception of academic performance. Moreover, positive students are more academically successful (Nonis, 2005), and are more satisfied with their lives (Straw & Barsade, 1993 as cited in Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Happier college students persevere during hardships. In fact, students with developed coping strategies increase their academic performance and GPA (Saklofski et al., 2012).

Happier college students set higher individual goals than their less happy peers (Baron, 1990; Home & Arbuckle, 1988; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Moreover, happier students feel more encouraged and energized after developing goals than less happy students (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012; in Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Further, Trope and Pomerantz (1998) suggest that students who reported engaging in a positive experience were more willing to accept criticism about their flaws related to achieving significant goals. In fact, students who reported higher positivity remained positive during the pandemic switch from in-person to online classes (Rist, Meek, & Tucker, 2019). Some colleges are now introducing positivity into the classroom (Meek, Tucker, Pueschel, & Jordan, 2019). However, there is an opportunity to explore student positivity within student organizational and whether such positivity leads to organizational identification.

Organizational Identification

Organizational Identification (OID) research flowed from the social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1978; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mail & Ashforth, 1992; Haslam, 2004; He & Brown, 2013). According to Tajfel, social identity describes an individual's "knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (1978, p. 3). According to Mael and Ashforth, "...OID is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member" (1989, p 104). Organizational identification is also known as a phenomenon of the tendency of individuals to see themselves and their groups or organizations as intertwined, having common qualities and

faults, successes and failures, and common destinies (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kelman 1961; Tolman, 1943).

There is a plethora of research on OID, including the impact of OID on performance outcomes (Riketta, 2005; van Knippenbert, 2000) including creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Hirst, van Dick, & van Knippenberg, 2009; Madjar, Greenberg, & Chen, 2011) and financial performance (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009). OID has also been studied in nontraditional contexts, including mergers and acquisitions (Ulrich, Wieseke, & Dick, 2005; van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006; Martin & Tyler, 2006) and corporate social responsibility (Brammer, Millington, & Rayton, 2007; Hansen, Dunford, Boss, Boss, & Angermier, 2011). OID research in virtual work environments have increased in importance with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and COVID pandemic (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001; Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012). Bartel et al., assert that virtual workers may perceive less respect from their organizations (2012). Recent research has found that interactional and interpersonal factors, including leadership factors, enhance OID (He & Brown, 2013).

Leaders can influence followers' identities (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Lord & Brown, 2001; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), including OID. Leaders' behaviors can affect how employees see their relationships and social identifications with their work organizations. Employee OID has been shown to be positively related to multiple leadership styles, including transformational leadership (Carmeli et al., 2011; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005) and ethical leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Transformational leadership is a leadership style characterized by four main features. First, individualized consideration which can be described as attending to the individual needs of the followers. Second, intellectual stimulation can include risk-taking, challenging the status quo, supporting followers' ideas, and providing job meanings for followers. Third, inspirational motivation which is formulating a vision to inspire followers. And lastly, idealized influence which can be understood as having a role model for ethical standards as well as ingraining confidence and trust (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leadership is effective in influencing followers' behavior and performance, by first heightening followers' OID (Kark et al., 2003).

Organizational identification is recognized as having significant implications for the feeling of satisfaction and belonging of employees, and for the effectiveness of the work or organization (Brown, 1969; Patchen, 1970). Positivity research suggests that happy college students are more productive and successful. Since leadership influences followers' behavior and performance by increasing followers' OID, this research seeks to explore that (1) student organization members' positivity results in OID, and (2) student organization leaders' positivity results in OID.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by engaging student participants in professional business organizations at a Midwestern college of business. The first hypothesis to apply to this study (H1+) is that student organization member positivity is positively related to organizational identification. The second hypothesis (H2+) is that student organization leader positivity is positively related to organizational identification. A Qualtrics survey was used to query students about their subjective happiness (positivity) and their OID with their professional business organizations. The Qualtrics survey was distributed in Spring Semester of 2021 after obtaining IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval. Responses came from 399 College of

Business undergraduate students (focusing specifically on the members of all College of Business student organizations). This survey utilized a positivity scale developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) and an organizational identification scale by Mael and Tetrick (1992). Data from Qualtrics was downloaded into Excel and SPSS for cleaning and analysis. One hundred responses were discarded because students did not belong to an organization; another 62 students did not complete the entire survey, leaving 237 usable responses. Leaders were designated by identifying 122 students who self-reported holding an office in their organization. The study utilized the Subjective Happiness Scale and the Organizational Identification Scale.

Subjective Happiness Scale

Lyubomirsky & Lepper's 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (1999) was utilized for this research because of its high internal consistency across global samples with good to excellent reliability and validity to measure subjective happiness. To support the subjectivist approach, the authors theorize that it seems reasonable because individuals are the best judge of their happiness (Myers & Diener, 1995; Diener, 1996; Lyubomirsky, 1994). The Subjective Happiness Scale questions were based on a seven-point Likert scale from one (indicating the lowest agreement/positivity level) to seven (highest level of agreement/positivity level) with four representing a neutral response (See Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999, 151):

1. In general, how happy a person do you consider yourself?
2. Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

Organizational Identification Scale

The Organizational Identification measure by Mael & Ashforth (1992) was modified for this study, as the authors suggested, so that items were specific to the school and professional organization appropriate for respondents. The six items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale with one being strongly Agree and five being Strongly disagree with three being neutral. The following items were included in the questionnaire for this study:

1. When someone criticizes my CoB student organization, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about my CoB student organization.
3. When I talk about my CoB student organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they".
4. My CoB student organization's successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises my CoB student organization, it feels like a personal compliment.

RESULTS

After reverse coding and standardizing the scale items, linear regression analysis was performed. The means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables used in this study are found in Table 1 (see Appendices). Student Organization Member Positivity (r = 0.170, p < 0.05) and Student Organization Leader Positivity (r = 0.260, p < 0.05) are positively correlated with Organization Identification.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposes that student organization member positivity is positively related to organizational identification. Table 2 (see Appendices) summarizes the results from the linear regression analysis. The results in Model 1 of Table 2 indicate that student organization member positivity is significantly and positively related to organizational identification (B= 0.154, p < 0.01). This result shows that one unit increase in student organization member positivity will result in a 15% increase in student organization member's organizational identification.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposes that student organization leader positivity is positively related to organizational identification. The results of Model 2 of Table 2 indicate that student organization leader positivity is significantly and positively related to organizational identification (B = 0.230, p < 0.01). Similarly, this result shows that one unit increase in student organization leader positivity will result in a 23% increase in student organization member's organizational identification Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings in this study indicate that students with a higher degree of positivity identify with their student organizations. Additionally, this study shows that student organization leaders with a higher degree of positivity also had higher organizational identification for their student organization. Since research indicates that positivity increases productivity, student leaders, then, who are more positive when leading their members, may lead the organization to achieve more during their tenure. This also has implications for training student leaders and organizational members in subjective positivity to enrich personal growth and enhance organizational outcomes.

Not included in this study is whether students in an organization are happier than students who do not belong to a student organization. Indeed, research does recommend social connections as an important factor when growing personal happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Students continue to pursue personal and professional growth throughout college, and post-graduation, including networking, work-life balance, meaningful connections, and more. Colleges and organizations alike can use this evidence to market their programs and groups to both potential and current students or employees. Previous research suggests that people who are positive tend to be also more productive, and companies with a more positive culture create more productive environments. However, student organizations have not been studied to determine if the more positive student organizations are more productive. Future research might investigate this intriguing relationship.

Few would disagree that change is happening at a faster and faster pace, creating stress that may affect our productivity. At the same time research indicates that subjective happiness and organizational identification may provide a way to be happier and more productive in our personal and professional lives. Additionally, faculty curriculum committees may benefit from our findings and bring positivity into their curriculum. Doing so not only equips students with

knowledge of positivity and organizational identification but may also help them become more successful in their personal and professional lives.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1	Organizational Identification	2.310	1.068	1		
2	Student Organization Member Positivity	3.004	1.173	0.170**	1	
3	Student Organization Leader Positivity	3.086	0.111	0.260**	-	1

*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$ ***$p < 0.01$*

Table 2: Regression Analysis Results

Variables	Model 1 Student Organization Member's Organizational Identification	Model 2 Student Organization Leader's Organizational Identification
Constant	1.846 *** (0.189)	1.594 *** (0.259)
Student Organization Member Positivity	0.154 *** (0.059)	-
Student Organization Leader Positivity	-	0.230 *** (0.078)
T-Value	2.636	2.955
N	237	122

Notes: Not standardized coefficients - *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$ ***$p < 0.01$*