Linking supervisor and coworker support to employee innovative behavior at work: role of psychological Conditions

Vipra Arora

Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, India

T. J. Kamalanabhan

Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, India

ABSTRACT

Innovation is being considered by companies as competitive edge and aid to organizational success. It is important to understand what it takes to foster employee innovative behaviors at work. Herein, the influence of supervisor support and the coworker support on individual innovative behavior have been discussed. Supervisor support and coworker support are critical influencers of innovative behavior develop psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability. These positive psychological conditions create motivation and thereby lead to employee engagement in innovative behaviors at work. It is implied that employees who gain support from supervisor and the coworkers are able to engage themselves in innovative behavior. This, also, answers a very pertinent question as to why only some individual's engage in innovative behavior. In addition, testable propositions are provided and innovative behavior is discussed.

Keywords: innovative behavior, supervisor support, coworker support, psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is an important factor in helping organizations to establish their competitive advantage. At the heart of all organizational innovation lie creative ideas and it is individual employees, who alone or in groups, generate, promote, discuss, modify, and realize these ideas (Scott and Bruce, 1994). Thus, organizations are dependent on the knowledge, the creativity and the innovative engagement of their employees.

Empirical evidence indicates that perceptions of an employee's work environment and creativity climate directly affects the creativity of employees (Amabile, etal., 1996). Employees who come up with innovative ideas challenge and violate established systems (Ford, 1996). At its core, innovation is a sociopolitical process that can be expected to be resisted by organizational members who are committed to the existing frameworks of thoughts and actions (Janssen, 2003; Kanter, 1988). Hence, to be successful innovators need to make friends, have backers, and sponsors who can provide the support that is necessary to protect and realize their ideas (Kanter, 1988). Considering the sociopolitical nature of innovation processes, employees' willingness to invest in innovative activities may depend upon the extent to which they perceive they have support at the workplace.

The concepts of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) have long been used by researchers to describe the motivational basis behind employee behaviors and encouraging factors for positive employee attitudes. Research suggests that positive actions directed at employees by the supervisor and the coworkers lead to establishment of high quality exchange relationships that create feelings of obligation for employees to reciprocate in positive ways (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Shore & Wayne, 1993). This study aims to highlight the importance of support extended by the supervisor and the coworkers on the employees' feelings of obligation to reciprocate and on the innovative behavior of the employees. It is suggested that support from the supervisor and coworkers may be important antecedents to innovative work behaviors through their impact on psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability. Prior research has shown that these psychological conditions foster employee engagement in particular work behaviors (Kahn, 1990) through intrinsic motivation (Carmelli & Spreitzer 2009). The study highlights the role of supervisor support and coworker support that generates motivation and engagement in innovative behaviors through positive psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety and availability).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The exchanges occurring between employees and others at work go well beyond simple economic exchange; social exchange elicits positive affect, trust, and kinship. Blau's (1964) exchange theory suggested social exchange occurs when an individual is attracted to another if they expect associating with them to be in some way rewarding, and their interest in the expected social rewards draws them to the other individual at work. These relationships create an environment of reciprocity between the supervisor-employee and coworker-employee. It is assumed that when employees' various needs are met, a perception or belief about how the organization, supervisor and coworkers feel about them is formed. If the belief is positive, employees perceive support, safety and are confident to present their innovative ideas.

Employees evaluate the support expected from the, supervisor and the coworkers before engaging in an innovative course of action. When the employee feels confident of getting the support needed for an innovative action, they may consider engaging themselves in innovative behavior.

The reciprocal exchange between employees and supervisors and coworkers seems to be an important factor for improving the understanding of innovative behaviors among employees. This study, therefore, investigates the consequences of resources provided by the organization, supervisor and coworker on the employees' feelings of obligation to reciprocate and on the innovative behavior of the employees. Organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) provides an appropriate model for describing the exchange of innovation- relevant resources between the employees and the supervisor and the coworkers. The model explains how innovative behavior among employees arises out of a feeling of being obligated towards the supervisor and the coworker, to provide innovation-relevant contributions. It is assumed that this feeling of obligation is the result of perceived support from the supervisor and coworker, so far as they provide resources relevant to innovation.

This study examines how the social contextual factors of supervisor support and coworker support, nurture psychological conditions of psychological safety, psychological meaningfulness, and psychological availability, which in turn, result in increased motivation and by implication a high level of engagement in innovative work tasks. This study answers calls to focus further research on engagement and involvement in creative and innovative work tasks rather on the outcomes of the creative and innovative process (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007).

Supervisor Support and Innovative Behavior

Supervisor support is defined as employees' belief concerning the extent to which supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being. Employees need motivation to expend greater efforts and more personal resources in innovative tasks when supervisor exhibit their individual consideration toward followers, followers are likely to perceive the warmth and consideration from their supervisors. Similarly, employees who perceive support from their supervisors often feel obligated to pay back supervisors' favors or kindness by helping supervisors to reach their stated goals (Eisenberger et al. 2002). Jung et al. (2003) indicated that leadership is positively associated with employee-perceived empowerment and support for innovation. Creativity and innovation is an area where supervisors can have a strong impact on employee creativity through their influence on the context within which employees work (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). In order for innovative behavior to occur, supervisor needs to foster, encourage, and support creativity (Shalley and Gilson, 2004).

Janssen (2003) found evidence that employees responded more innovatively to higher levels of job demands when they perceived that their efforts were fairly rewarded by their supervisor. Oldham and Cummings (1996) found that supportive, non-controlling supervisors created a work environment that fostered creativity. Open interactions with supervisors and the receipt of encouragement and support lead to enhanced employee creativity (Tierney, Farmer, and Graen 1999). This means that employees who perceive a fair balance between supervisor's inducements relative to their work efforts will respond with more innovative behavior. According to social exchange theory additional arguments can be derived for a relationship

between supervisor support and innovative behavior. Direct supervisors can act as organizational agents. Employees tend to view actions by agents of the organization as actions of the organization itself. Therefore, they reward favorable supervisor treatment with desired behaviors. In this light, the following proposition is made:

Proposition 1: Supervisor support is positively related to individual innovative behavior at work.

Coworker support and Innovative Behavior

Co-worker support refers to co-workers assisting one another in their tasks when needed by sharing knowledge and expertise as well as providing encouragement and support (Zhou and George, 2001). Colleagues may share their knowledge and expertise when an employee is faced with a difficult and novel task for which a solution is not readily available (Scott and Bruce, 1994). Employees may also acquire task-relevant knowledge and expertise from supportive co-workers, which may make new ways of doing things possible (Perry Smith, 2006). In this context, working with helpful, supportive colleagues promotes an environment where new ideas can be discussed more openly and freely.

Coworker support is defined as ''the extent to which employees believe their coworkers are willing to provide them with work-related assistance to aid in the execution of their service-based duties''. These can motivate followers to take extra responsibilities and to engage in more pro-social behaviors that are needed to achieving collective goals, including helping coworkers with heavy workloads, sharing resources, and providing advice to coworkers who encounter work problems. Existing empirical studies also demonstrate employees who receive more support from their coworkers might obtain more job resources to deal with stressful and innovative tasks. This notion is translated as proposition 2:

Proposition 2: Coworker support is positively related to individual innovative behavior at work.

Perceived Support and Psychological Conditions

Perceived Support refers to the extent to which a person feels that supervisor and coworkers extend support through quality relationships that an individual has built at work. In high-quality work relationships, people feel that other organizational members care for them, support them and value their contribution. Social exchange theory suggests that engaging in mutual reciprocal relationships is a vital form of human interaction. When people feel that others in the organization support them, they are likely to reciprocate toward those persons (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960).

Kahn (2001) pointed to the importance of relationships that are formed within a "holding environment" at work where "people demonstrate care and concern for others in particularly skillful ways." Organizational members seek out a holding environment especially when they are confronted with work-related situations that they find disturbing, discomforting, or anxiety-provoking and which distract them from their tasks (Kahn, 2001). Additionally, organizational researchers have mentioned the influence of support and care in organizations on positive feelings, job attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Support from supervisor and co-workers are likely to cultivate three forms of positive psychological conditions: psychological meaning, psychological safety, and psychological availability.

Psychological conditions of Meaningfulness

The psychological condition of meaningfulness has been recognized as an important psychological state or condition at work (May, 2003). Individuals have a primary motive to seek meaning in their work which occurs when individuals feel useful and valuable and that they are making a difference (Kahn, 1990). Meaningfulness is defined as the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards (May, 2003). Lack of meaning in one's work can lead to alienation or 'disengagement' from one's work. Experience of meaningfulness at work by employees facilitates both their personal growth and their work motivation (Spreitzer et al., 1997).Psychological meaningfulness provides a sense of purpose or personal connection to work, and individuals with high quality interpersonal interactions with their supervisor and coworkers will experience more psychological meaningfulness, which will contribute to higher levels of work engagement (May et al., 2004). When individuals are treated with respect, dignity and are valued for their contributions, they are likely to sense meaningfulness from their interactions. High quality coworker interactions create a sense of belonging, a strong sense of social identity and meaning and loss of social identity can lead to meaninglessness. When an employee feels support from the supervisor and the coworkers at work he is likely to experience psychological meaningfulness at work as support engenders feelings of being worthy, useful, and valued, that the person is making a unique contribution and is not taken for granted (Kahn, 1990). Based on the above arguments, it is proposed that the support felt from the supervisor and the coworkers lead to sense of psychological meaningfulness at work.

Proposition 3: Coworker support is positively related to psychological meaningfulness.

Psychological condition of Safety

Kahn (1990) has defined psychological safety as the degree to which people perceive their work environment as conducive to take interpersonal risks. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake others will not penalize or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or penalize them for asking for help, information or feedback. Immediate supervisor can have an impact on an individual's perception of psychological safety of a work environment. A supportive and not controlling relation should foster perceptions of safety (Edmonson, 1999) and enhance employee creativity (Oldham & Cummings 1996). The supervisor support felt through positive feedback, empowering actions, concern for subordinates enhances the sense of safety at work. Employees who feel safe are likely to engage themselves in trying out novel ways of doing things, discuss failure and learn from them in a supportive environment (Edmonson, 1999). Supporting and trusting supervisory and co-worker relations lead to feelings of psychological safety (May et al., 2004). Research has shown that people felt safer where their relations with others are characterized by openness, supportiveness (Kahn, 1990). Individuals with rewarding interpersonal interactions, as well as

the presence of co-worker interactions that foster a sense of belonging and stronger sense of social identity should experience increased psychological safety (Kahn 1990). Relationships with supervisor and coworkers that extend support at work help individuals to express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn, 1990) because they are less likely to focus on self-protection. On the other hand, in situations which are ambiguous, unpredictable, and threatening, the psychological conditions of safety, meaningfulness, and availability are not likely to emerge. This type of relationship may further prevent the provision of individuals' basic needs such as self-expression and self involvement in their work (Maslow, 1954). Interpersonal relationships at work that create psychological safety produce a higher degree of performance and reduced risk in presenting new ideas (Edmondson, 1999) leading to exhibition of innovative behavior. Based on the literature, it is proposed that

Proposition 4: Supervisor support is positively related to psychological safety.
Proposition 5: Coworker support is positively related to psychological safety.

Psychological condition of Availability

Psychological availability refers to a individual's belief of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment" (Kahn, 1990). Individuals' need adequate resources at work with which they can fully engage in particular roles (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004). Different job roles have different physical, emotional and cognitive demands and when availability of resources leads to greater engagement in challenging tasks (Olivier and Rothmann, 2007). Expending energy on managing impressions, rather than on the work itself can preoccupy people, and leave them with little space, energy or the will to engage in a particular work task (Kahn, 1990). Self-consciousness about how others perceive and judge a person at work will make an individual focused on external cues and is perceived to play a role with regards to psychological availability (Olivier and Rothmann, 2007). A lack of psychological availability exhausts energies in maintaining status which would have been used to handle work. It is suggested that supervisor support and coworker support may cultivate a secure work environment with fewer anxieties and is likely to mitigate social–psychological distractions. This perception of psychological availability enables individuals to channel their resources and energy to innovative actions. Thus, when people are in supportive relationship are likely to develop a sense of psychological availability. This is because the support is extended with adequate resources that allow them to feel secure to pursue innovative tasks. Hence, the following propositions are made:

Proposition 6: Supervisor support is positively related to psychological availability.
Proposition 7: Coworker support is positively related to psychological availability.

Psychological conditions and Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions. Intrinsic motivation exists within individuals. In another sense, intrinsic motivation exists in the relation between individuals and activities. People are intrinsically motivated for some activities, and not everyone is intrinsically motivated for any particular task. Intrinsic motivation refers to the extent to which an individual is inner-directed, is interested in or fascinated with a task, and engages in it for the sake of the task itself. According to Amabile's (1983) componential

conceptualization of creativity, intrinsic motivation is one of the most important and powerful influences on employee creativity (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Amabile et al., 1996; Shalley, 1991, 1995). Individuals who sense psychological meaningfulness are likely to be motivated to invest in their work (May et al., 2004). In order to be motivated to engage in such a complex and demanding task as innovation, employees need to have a sense of calling that motivates them to engage in innovative behaviors. Psychological safety is necessary to motivate employees to engage in innovative tasks because the individuals may refrain from taking risks unless they act in a psychologically safe environment. Also, when individuals are provided with physical, emotional, and cognitive resources, they are more likely to be motivated to engage in innovative work (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011). Therefore, on the basis of these arguments the positive links between psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability to intrinsic motivation is assumed. Thus,

Proposition 8: Psychological conditions are positively associated with individual motivation to engage in innovative behavior.

Psychological Conditions, Employee Motivation, and Engagement in Innovative Behaviors

Creativity is defined as the production of new or novel ideas that are useful (Amabile, 1988), whereas innovative behaviors at work are defined as a multistage process in which an individual recognizes a problem for which she or he generates new (novel or adapted) ideas and solutions, works to promote and build support for them, and produces an applicable prototype or model for the use and benefit of the organization or parts within it (Scott & Bruce, 1994).

It is suggested that the positive psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability foster employee motivation, which is likely to enhance engagement in innovative behavior at work. Individual feel confident of the resources and the energy within them to undertake the innovative tasks. When individuals feel support from supervisor and coworkers at work, their sense of psychological availability is enhanced, such that they can channel right resources into their work and engage in innovative behaviors. The supportive relationships build a secure environment for individuals and enable them to express themselves without social and psychological distractions at work. Support at work build people's physiological resourcefulness, (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011), and also expand cognitive capacity that broadens one's range of options, and promotes creative solutions helping individuals engage in innovative behaviors. Based on this knowledge the following propositions are made:

Proposition10: There is a positive relationship between psychological conditions and engagement in innovative behaviors.

Proposition 11: Motivation will partially mediate the link between psychological conditions and engagement in innovative behaviors

CONCLUSION

In order to facilitate an individual's creativity, an environment that is supportive and rewarding of creative ideas is required. Individuals possess required resources and abilities to think creatively, but without supportive environment, they might never display creativity.

Various work conditions that may foster employee creative and innovative behaviors have been researched (Amabile, 1988; Scott & Bruce, 1994), but studies and evidence about the relational context that cultivates positive psychological states and leads to creative and innovative behaviors has only begun (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009;). This study contributes to this line of research by showing that supervisor support and coworker support are important for psychological conditions that engender motivation and personal engagement in innovative work tasks. It is proposed that all three psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety and availability) are essential for individual engagement (Kahn, 1990) in innovative work tasks. This model (figure1 in appendix) provides insights into the theoretical notion that when employees enjoy support of their organizational members they develop a sense of positive psychological conditions, all important contributors to engagement in innovative tasks. We expand on previous research that has highlighted the importance of quality exchanges (support and care) between parties in facilitating creative and innovative behaviors (Shalley & Gilson, 2004)

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Depicting the links between supervisor support, coworker support, psychological conditions, motivation and innovative behavior at work
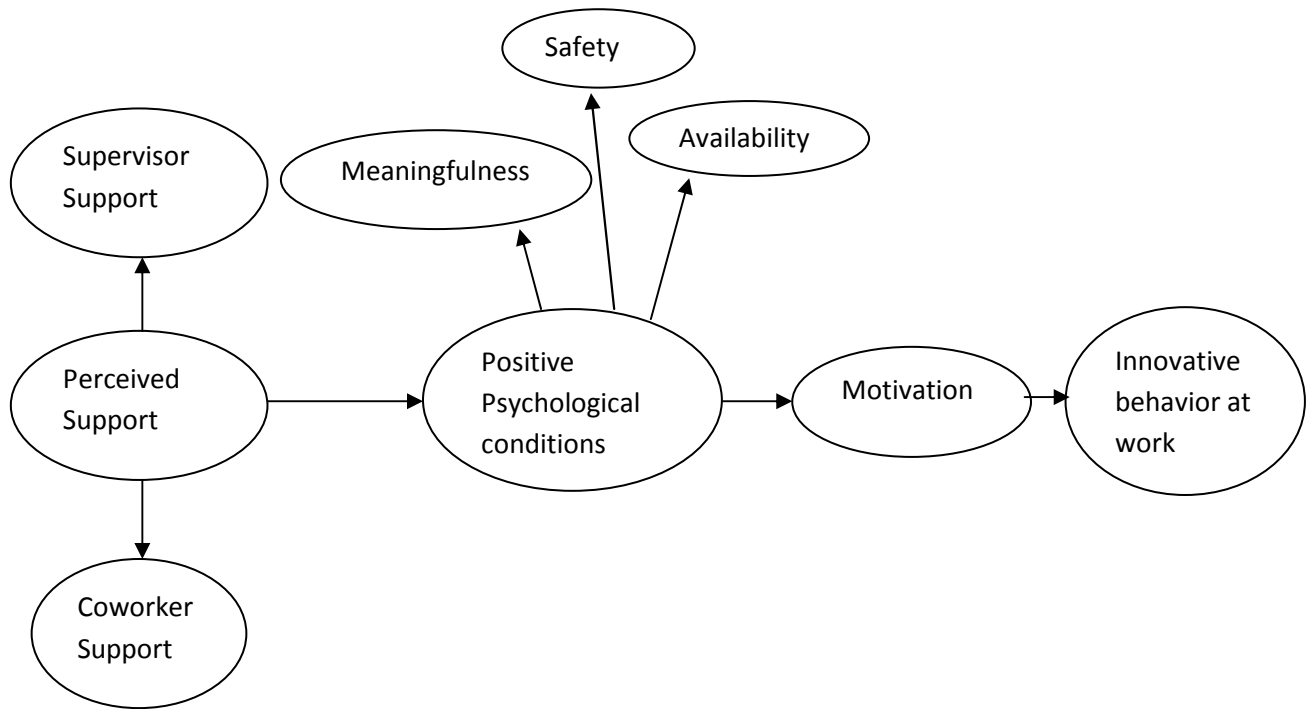
References

- Amabile, T. M. (1988). A model of creativity and innovation in organizations. *In B. M. Staw, & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), Research in organizational behavi*or 123−167. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Amabile, T. M., Barsade, S. G., Mueller, J. S., & Staw, B. M. (2005). Affect and creativity at work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50, 367−403.
- Amabile, T. M., Conti, R., Coon, H., Lazenby, J., & Herron, M. (1996). Assessing the work environment for creativity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39, 1154–118
- Blau, P. (1964). Exchange and power in social life. *New York, NY: Wiley*
- Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. E. (2009). Learning behaviours in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science,* 26, 81−98.
- Carmeli, A., & Gittell, J. H. (2009). High Quality Relationships, Psychological Safety and Learning from Failures in Work Organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30, 709–729.
- Carmeli, A., & Schaubroeck, J. (2007). The influence of leaders' and other referents' normative expectations on individual involvement in creative work. *Leadership Quarterly*, 18, 35–48.
- Carmeli, A., & Spreitzer, G. M. (2009). Trust, connectivity, and thriving: Implications for innovative behaviors at work. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 43, 169–191.
- Choi, J. N. (2004). Individual and contextual predictors of creative performance: The mediating role of psychological processes. *Creativity Research Journal*, 16, 187−199
- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31, 874–900.
- Edmondson, AC. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 350–383.
- Eisenberger R., Huntington R., Hutchison S., & Sowa D., (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, 500
- Ford, C. (1996). A theory of individual creative action in multiple social domains. *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 1112–1142.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review*, 25, 161–178.
- Janssen, O., (2005). The joint impact of perceived influence and supervisor supportiveness on employee innovative behavior, *Journal of Organizational Behavior,* 78, 573 − 579.
- Kahn, W. A. (2001). Holding environment at work. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 37, 260–279.
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, 692−724.
- Macey, W. H., & Schneider, B. (2008). The meaning of employee engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 1, 3−30.
- Maslow, A. (1954). Motivation and personality. *New York, NY: Harper & Row*

- May, D. R., Gilson, R. L., & Harter, L. M. (2004). The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77, 1−37.
- Olivier AL and Rothmann S (2007). Antecedents of work engagement in a multinational oil company , *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology,* Vol33, No.3, 49-56
- Oldham, G. R., & Cummings, A. (1996). Employee creativity: Personal and contextual factors at work. *Academy of Management Journal,* 39, 607–634.
- Perry-Smith, J. E. (2006). Social yet creative: The role of social relationships in facilitating individual creativity. *Academy of Management Journal,* 49, 85–101.
- Ragins, B. R., & Dutton, J. E. (2007). Positive relationships at work: An introduction and invitation. In J. E. Dutton, & B. R. Ragins (Eds.), Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation (pp. 1−25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Shalley, C.E., Zhou, J, & Oldham, G.R. (2004). The effects of personal and contextual characteristics on creativity: Where should we go from here? *Journal of Management*, 30, 933-958.
- Scott, S. and Bruce, R. (1994). Determinants of innovative behaviour: a path model of individual innovation in the workplace, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 37, pp. 580-607.
- Spreitzer, G. M., Kizilos, M. A., & Nason, S. W. (1997). A dimensional analysis of the relationship between psychological empowerment and effectiveness, satisfaction, and strain. *Journal of Management*, 23, 679– 704.
- Stajkovic, A. D., & Luthans, F. (1998). Social cognitive theory and self-efficacy: Going beyond traditional motivational and behavioral approaches. *Organizational Dynamics*, 26, 62-74
- Tierney, P., Farmer, S. M., & Graen, G. B. (1999). An examination of leadership and employee creativity: The relevance of traits and relations. *Personnel Psychology*, 52, 591–620.
- Vinarski-Peretz, H., & Carmeli, A. (2011). Linking care felt to engagement in innovative behaviors in the workplace: The mediating role of psychological conditions. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts,* Vol. 5, No. 1, 43–53
- Zhou, J. and George, J.M. (2001).When job dissatisfaction leads to creativity: encouraging the expression of voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 44 No. 4, pp. 683-96.
- Zhou, J., & Shalley, C. E. (2003). Research on employee creativity: A critical review and directions for future research. *In J. Martocchio (Ed.), Research in personnel and human resource management,England, Elsevier: Oxford.* 165−217