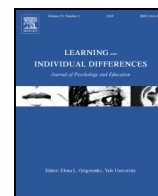




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lindif

Creativity at work as a joint function between openness to experience, need for cognition and organizational fairness

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2014

Received in revised form 15 July 2015

Accepted 24 July 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Creativity at work

Openness to experience

Need for cognition

Organizational fairness

ABSTRACT

This study examines how cognitive personality traits and organizational context interact to predict creativity at work. Drawing on a trait interaction model, we propose novel idea generation as resulting from the interaction between openness to experience and need for cognition, because the first facilitates expressive intellect, while the second leads to controlled intellect. Furthermore, we propose novel idea implementation as a joint function between openness to experience, need for cognition and organizational fairness. This three-way interaction relies on social-exchange and trait activation theories, highlighting that the translation of novel thoughts into implementation depends on contextual activation of individual dispositions. This was supported in a survey study based on a sample of 220 full time employees from diverse organizations. These findings expand theory on personality and creativity, informing work psychologists about how to identify employees with creative potential and how to manage the workplace to foster this potential.

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1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and competitive environment, organizations face the challenge of fostering creativity in order to enhance effectiveness (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; George, 2007; Janssen, van de Vliert, & West, 2004; Reiter-Palmon, 2011). In the workplace, creativity is understood as the generation and implementation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1988; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), which aim to both solve problems and take advantage of opportunities emerging in the environment. As such, creativity at work deals with developing better work methods, procedures and products/services (Kanter, 1988; West & Farr, 1990). An important body of research has shown that creativity in the workplace is driven by individual and contextual factors, such as personality traits and work climate (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Egan, 2005; George, 2007; Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Madrid, Patterson, Birdi, Leiva, & Kausel, 2014; Rank, Pace, & Frese, 2004; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1990). For instance, adopting the Five Factor Model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), openness to experience has been supported as a relevant cognitive disposition positively associated with the generation of novel ideas. Similarly, organizational fairness, namely, the extent to which employees perceived that their efforts are properly rewarded by the organization, has been observed as a critical contextual factor that is positively related to the

implementation of novel ideas (Janssen, 2000, 2001). A challenge for this stream of research is to determine which other traits might contribute to the association between personality and creativity at work, and whether personality traits and context interact in predicting creativity.

In this paper we expand theory and research on personality and creativity at work, proposing that the positive influence of openness to experience in developing novel ideas would be strengthened by the need for cognition of employees. The latter refers to a cognitive disposition denoting the extent to which individuals are prone to engage in effortful cognitive tasks (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984; Petty, Briñol, Loersch, & McCaslin, 2009). Specifically, drawing on a trait interaction model to personality (Shoss & Witt, 2013), we proposed that benefits of openness to experience to novel idea generation would be stronger for employees characterized by higher levels of need for cognition. Openness drives curiosity, ideation and heuristic information processing (expressive intellect) associated with the production of novel ideas (McCrae & Costa, 1997), while need for cognition leads to dedication and hardiness in thinking (controlled intellect) to reach novel and useful ideas (Peabody & Goldberg, 1989). Moreover, because implementation of novel ideas requires an additional behavioral effort to put ideas generated into practice (George, 2007), we propose that together with openness to experience and need for cognition, organizational fairness is needed to make novel ideas happen (Janssen, 2000). Thus, a strong positive relationship between openness to experience and novel idea implementation is expected when the workplace is characterized by high levels of fairness. Integration of social exchange theory and trait activation theory support this proposal (Blau, 1964; Tett & Burnett, 2003), highlighting that effort and greater motivation for implementing novel

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ideas is a function of reciprocity perceived among individuals in their social environment that activates individual cognitive dispositions relevant for this kind of performance. These proposals were supported using an Internet survey study based on a sample of full time employees working in diverse organizations.

This paper contributes to the literature on creativity at work by integrating and developing new theoretical argumentation together with empirical evidence, showing that personality traits denoting intellect functions can interact together with organizational context to provide a synergistic effect in predicting high levels of creativity at work.

1.1. Openness to experience, need for cognition and novel idea generation

Openness to experience is an important personality trait for generating novel ideas, because it entails tendencies to look for new experiences in life, facilitating the development of varied thoughts and ideas. Open to experience individuals are imaginative, curious, and responsive to unconventional perspectives (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Madrid et al., 2014; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae, 1987). Accordingly, the benefits of openness to experience to creativity in organizations have been supported in a series of empirical studies (for a meta-analysis see Hammond et al., 2011).

An important challenge for theory and research though is to determine whether other individual dispositions might interact with openness to experience in predicting novel idea generation at work. This most likely responds to the typical approach to personality adopted by work psychologists, which concentrates on the competition for power explanations between direct effect of traits on affect, cognition and behavior (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Christiansen & Tett, 2013; Harari, Rudolph, & Laginess, 2014). Expanding this, we adopt a trait interaction approach to personality proposing that openness to experience would work together with other personality dispositions in fostering creativity. This trait interaction understanding of personality points out that individual dispositions in combination may configure synergistic relationships enhancing, decreasing or making possible the relationships between these dispositions and other relevant outcomes (Shoss & Witt, 2013). These processes of interaction are possible because every personality trait describes unique tendencies potentially relevant for an affective, cognitive or behavioral outcome, even when some degree of overlap exists due to proximity of traits contents.

In concrete terms, we propose that need for cognition would interact with openness in predicting generation of novel ideas at work. Similar to openness to experience, need for cognition is a personality trait describing intellect and cognitive tendencies. However, need for cognition departs from openness because it enhances dedication and hardiness in thinking rather than imagination, curiosity and responsiveness to novelty (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Individuals characterized by higher levels of need for cognition are prone to intrinsic motivation for extensive cognitive processing, higher daydreaming and awareness of their own processes of thinking (metacognition) (Blagrove & Hartnell, 2000; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), together with use of intuition, mental images and affect in thoughtful ways (Petty et al., 2009) leading to greater performance in diverse tasks requiring creativity (Dollinger, 2003). Furthermore, high levels of need for cognition leads to careful consideration of available information and more confidence in one's own thoughts in a process of decision-making (Levin, Huneke, & Jasper, 2000), and is associated with enhanced problem-solving (Unnikrishnan Nair & Ramnarayanb, 2000). As such, while openness to experience involves tendencies to "expressive intellect", need for cognition can be described in terms of tendencies for "controlled intellect" (Peabody & Goldberg, 1989). Emerging theorizing and evidence support the idea that controlled intellect could be a relevant driver for creativity at work (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Choi, 2010; George & Zhou, 2007; Nijstad, De Dreu, Rietzschel, & Baas, 2010; Wu, Parker, & de Jong, 2011). Organizations need novel but useful ideas to tackle practical problems linked to procedures, services and

products (Amabile, 1988; George, 2007). So, an expressive intellect offered by high openness to experience should be relevant for the generation of unconventional thoughts, while a controlled intellect denoted by high need for cognition should offer persistence, dedication and concentration to transform these unconventional thoughts into ideas with practical and useful value. On the other hand, individuals with high levels of openness to experience might develop random novel ideas with limited practical usefulness when need for cognition is low, because effortful cognitive processing is reduced. The combination of these psychological processes leads us to propose that high levels of need for cognition will strengthen the benefits of openness to experience for creativity at work.

Hypothesis 1. Need for cognition will moderate the relationship between openness to experience and novel idea generation, such that a positive relationship between openness and novel idea generation will be stronger when need for cognition is high.

1.2. Openness to experience, need for cognition, organizational fairness and novel idea implementation

Organizations require not only the generation of novel and useful ideas but also the implementation of them (Amabile, 1988; Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Kanter, 1988). Previous research has suggested that while generation of novel ideas is substantively explained by individual differences, implementation of the same ideas is explained more by the organizational context (Axtell et al., 2000; Madrid, 2012). In other words, the generation of ideas by individuals with creative personalities is not a guarantee of making ideas happen, because the implementation process depends on whether the context is appraised as rewarding and supporting innovation (Amabile, 1988; Anderson & West, 1998; Janssen et al., 2004; Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978; West, 2002). As such, for example, there is support for an association between realization of novel ideas and organization fairness, namely, the extent to which employees perceive and believe that effort and high performance is rewarded properly by the organization (Janssen, 2001; Young, 2012). This relationship is underpinned by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) which highlights that in social systems, such as organizations, individuals develop reciprocity expectancies about what they give and receive, thereby influencing their cognition and behavior. So, perceptions of high organizational fairness are important for implementing novel ideas at work, because such endeavors represents a kind of high performance that demands high effort and a willingness to face challenges, and eventually transform relevant procedures, products and services (Janssen, 2000).

We propose an integrative person–situation view arguing that implementing novel ideas requires both appropriate characteristics of both employees and the work context. From a trait activation approach (Tett & Guterman, 2000), expression of personality dispositions in social behavior depends on whether the work context activates the latent cognition and behavior associated with these dispositions. Relevant contextual cues in the workplace for this activation processes are embedded at the task, social and organizational levels (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Applying these principles to the creative situation, openness to experience and need for cognition would be necessary but insufficient resources to lead individuals to invest effort in implementing their novel ideas. Sustaining expressive and controlled intellect while translating novel ideas in practice would be needed for maintaining motivation on the creative process; however, perceiving the organizational context as fair would be decisive for a stronger expression of implementation behavior. Individuals characterized by openness to experience and need for cognition would be more prone to perform novel idea implementation if they believe that effort is fairly rewarded in the organization, otherwise the same implementation behavior may be stifled because the organization would be appraised as not deserving such dedication.

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