



# Work resources and civic engagement: Benefits to employee physical and mental health



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 August 2016

Received in revised form 22 February 2017

Accepted 27 February 2017

Available online 2 March 2017

### Keywords:

Civic engagement

Work-non-work enrichment

Work resources

Happiness

Physical health

Mental health

China

## ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that people can function better when they participate in both work and non-work roles. Drawing on this premise, this paper examines the combined effects of positive work and non-work experiences—measured by perceptions of acquiring valuable resources at work and engagement in civic activities—on happiness and health. Using a representative sample of 10,331 people in China, we demonstrate that civic engagement and work resources enhance people's perception of happiness and that this, in turn, is conducive to greater mental and physical health. We also found that the association between civic engagement and happiness is moderated by income such that the association is positive for people with either low or high income, whereas there is no association for middle or upper-middle income. There is negative association between work resources and happiness for middle level income, but no association was found for other levels of income. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Economic turbulence makes employment in contemporary society very demanding (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Employees increasingly work longer hours to prove hardcore commitment to their organizations, reduce the risks of layoffs and maintain the same level of income as before the economic crisis (Fondas, 2014). Consequently, work-home tensions, marital conflict, mental exhaustion, and substance abuse are on the increase (Adkins & Premeaux, 2012; Drummond et al., 2016). This trend may have significant negative repercussions on people's capacity to engage in other domains outside work (hereinafter non-work) and consequently on their wellbeing as the benefits of engaging in both work and non-work domains are well-documented in numerous literatures (Booth, Park, & Glomb, 2009; Meuris & Leana, 2015; Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2013; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). Work-family researchers have widely demonstrated that engaging in both work and non-work activities can reduce work-family conflict (Griggs, Casper, & Eby, 2013) and increase work-family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Hakanen, Peeters, & Perhoniemi, 2011; Russo, 2015; Wayne, Casper, Matthews, & Allen, 2013). Stress researchers have also documented that engaging in meaningful activities outside work can help employees recover, recharge their batteries, and 'switch off' from work-related preoccupations (Bakker, Demerouti, Oerlemans, & Sonnentag, 2013; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Similarly, career researchers claim that devoting time to community and to personal interests outside work is crucial to build a sustainable career over time (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Newman, 2011; Ng & Feldman, 2014).

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In this paper, we focus on the effects of work-non-work enrichment on people's happiness and their physical and mental health. Drawing on prior research, we define happiness as a highly valued positive emotional state that is related to subjective well-being and general satisfaction (Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005), whereas health as an individual's condition that can be examined from a focus on individual biomedical state to a wide-ranging aspects of human welfare (Salomon et al., 2003).

Using a sample of 10,331 employees in rural and urban areas of China, we examine whether people's experience of work-non-work enrichment, captured by their engagement in civic activities and perception of acquiring valuable resources at work (hereinafter work resources), is likely to enhance their physical and mental health indirectly, by making them experience greater levels of happiness. Moreover, we test whether the individuals' level of income is likely to moderate the relationship between work-non-work enrichment and happiness.

Importantly, of the various resources individuals can acquire at work, we focused on the extent to which an organization provides employees with health, retirement and housing benefits. We made this decision because such monetary resources are particularly important to ensure a high quality of life and can lead employees to direct their attention away from the accomplishment of basic self needs (i.e. financial security) to more altruistic activities, such as contributing to the local community (Rothbard, 2001). To capture employees' positive non-work experiences, we focused on civic engagement, which refers to involvement in community and societal activities (Wilson & Musick, 1997), for two reasons. First, prior research on the relationship between work and civic engagement is mostly limited to Western countries (see Yiengprugsawan, Somboonsook, Seubsman, & Sleight, 2012 for a noticeable exception). Second, when focusing on individuals' non-work activities, scholars have mostly focused on the time employees spend within their families (Voydanoff, 2001). Although family is a crucial component of personal life, a considerable number of people strongly identify with and engage in other roles outside the family, including leisure, sport and/or community roles (Haar, Russo, Sune, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014; Keeney, Bond, Sinha, Westring, & Ryan, 2013), making this an important but so far overlooked area of inquiry.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

We base our rationale on work-family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) and the Conservation of Resource (Hobfoll, 1989) theories. Work-family enrichment theory posits that when performing in either a work or a non-work role, people can acquire valuable resources, such as skills, self-esteem, social support, salary and others, which can be carried over into other roles, generating significant performance improvements and better system functioning (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). This favorable scenario is likely to occur for two main reasons. First, certain resources are cross-functional, and can be used to accomplish meaningful goals in multiple roles (e.g., the salary can help an employee to pay for his/her piano lessons and thereby to cultivate a personal interest). Second, when employees are able to develop positive synergies between work and non-work domains, they are likely to experience positive emotions that spill over into many facets of life, resulting in greater positive affect (Carmeli & Russo, 2016; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Milliken, Schipani, Bishara, and Prado (2015) have provided several examples of how positive experiences at work can help employees to become more effective in the local community. For instance, they argue that working in a finance department can give employees skills relevant to serving as financial advisor on school or community boards.

Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) posits that people seek to acquire and defend the resources they need to accomplish the things they value in life (Halbesleben, Neveu, & Paustian-Underdahl, 2014). Accordingly, people are more inclined to engage in activities that help them acquire further resources and/or protect the resources they already have.

Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) offer a synthesis of these two frameworks, by introducing the *work-home resource* model, which identifies in the work-home enrichment the key process through which people can accumulate, replenish and broaden the repertoire of resources at their disposal. More specifically, they argue that by actualizing the positive synergies between work and non-work domains, people can trigger a resource generative process, i.e. a *resource gain spiral*, through which they can develop and accumulate further resources that may help them to successfully cope with work and non-work demands (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). For example, an employee might resolve an important work problem with the advice of a member of his/her local community. The help received can trigger a resource gain spiral, as it may help the focal employee accumulate further resources in the workplace, such as a positive evaluation for having successfully solved a work problem, greater self-esteem, promotion and/or monetary reward.

Drawing on these paradigms, we hypothesize that people's engagement in civic activities can enhance their level of happiness. We contend that by participating in the activities of their local community, employees can accumulate important resources, such as a positive disposition, skills and abilities, new friends, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills, which can be used in multiple domains and enable them to perform and feel better both at and outside work (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Another reason we believe that civic engagement can make people happier is that by contributing to the development of their local community, employees can experience a sense of meaningfulness and feel useful. Research has shown that helping others can make people happier and more satisfied with their lives (Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2012). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**H1.** *Civic engagement is positively associated with perception of life happiness.*

### 2.1. Work resources and happiness

Resources are defined as objects, things and conditions that people value (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) as they are conducive to desirable outcomes (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Work resources include social support, autonomy, job security, income, allowances,

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