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Motivation in organizational behavior: History, advances and prospects

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ABSTRACT

In this article we selectively review major advances in research on motivation in work and organizational behavior since the founding of *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* (now *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*) 50 years ago. Using a goal-based organizing rubric, we highlight the most impactful articles and summarize research progress over time related to understanding the why, where, how, what, and when of motivation during goal choice and goal enactment. We also note macro-level trends in motivation research published in this journal, including the shift away from publishing new, core theories of work motivation in favor of using new approaches published elsewhere to examine key micro-regulatory processes involved in goal decisions and goal pursuit. We conclude with discussion of promising future research directions.

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1. Introduction

In 1966, Jim Naylor and George Briggs introduced the purpose of *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* (OBHP, now titled *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* [OBHDP]) as a journal aimed at publishing significant research that "contribute(s) to our basic knowledge of human performance" (Naylor & Briggs, 1966, p. 1). Over the past five decades, the journal has published seminal papers on the determinants, mechanisms, and outcomes of motivation related to decision-making and performance in work and achievement settings. New and influential theories of motivation have been introduced in the journal, including Alderfer's ERG theory (1969), Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), Deci's Cognitive Evaluation Theory (1972), Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model (1976), and Locke's Goal Model (1968). Other articles provide incisive reviews and critiques of these approaches that had considerable influence on the field (e.g., Mento, Steel, & Karren, 1987; Pritchard, 1969; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). In 1982, Campion and Lord introduced and tested a control systems model of motivation to explain how goals and performance feedback operate in tandem to affect motivation and behavior over time, and in 1986 Bandura and Cervone published empirical support for the role of self-efficacy in maintaining motivation during goal pursuit. A special issue on theories of cognitive self-regulation in 1991 produced additional influential articles on goal setting (Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke, 1991) and the role of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Bandura, 1991).

As the 20th century drew to a close, the motivational research landscape coalesced around the goal construct, prompting a broad reorganization of findings in terms of understanding the effects of person, context, and temporal variables in two goal-related subsystems – goal choice and goal pursuit (see Kanfer, 2012). In this expansive paradigm, motivation serves as an umbrella term that encompasses both the purpose and reasons underlying decision processes and goal selection (that set the course of action), and the regulatory dynamics through which goals and other variables affect the allocation of an individual's cognitive resources across activities and over time for the purpose of goal attainment (i.e., goal pursuit; Vancouver, 2008). This meta-framework has also spawned new theories and research directed at more precise measurement and understanding of person, social, and contextual influences on goal choice, goal construal, and behavioral intentions (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Chen & Mathieu, 2008; da Motta Veiga & Turban, 2014; Grant et al., 2007), the relationship between goal choice and goal pursuit (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Ratajczak, 1990; Sun, Vancouver, & Weinhardt, 2014), motivational dynamics during goal pursuit (Fishbach & Choi, 2012; Seo & Ilies, 2009), and the motivational processes in and of teams (Chen, Kanfer, DeShon, Mathieu, & Kozlowski, 2009; Nahrgang et al., 2013).

In this article we provide a selective review of major advances in motivation related to work and organizational behavior since the founding of the journal 50 years ago. In keeping with the celebration of the journal's jubilee, we have organized our review in a

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way that highlights those articles in OBHP/OBHDP that have been most widely-cited and have had a major influence on the study of motivation in work and organizational psychology. The article is organized into three sections. The first section sets the stage for the review by summarizing foundational principles in motivational science. Next, we highlight influential articles published in OBHP/OBHDP and review progress by organizing theory and research around four principal questions that have long-driven scientific efforts in motivational psychology: (1) *Why* do individuals allocate resources to specific behaviors and courses of action, (2) What is the influence of an individual's environment on motivation – the "*where*" and "*when*" questions, (3) *How* do goals and goal-linked processes affect motivation and action, and (4) *What* resources do individuals employ for the purpose of goal accomplishment? In the third and final section, we discuss the representation of motivation theory and research in the journal, progress in each of the four topic areas, and promising future research directions.

2. A brief overview

Motivation in work and organizational psychology is concerned with the energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual's being that influence the initiation, direction, intensity, and duration of action (cf. Pinder, 1998). Modern views typically portray motivation as a time-linked set of recursive and reciprocal affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes and actions that are organized around an individual's goals. An individual's goal, defined as the mental representation of a desired outcome, does not exist in isolation but rather within hierarchically organized networks that are developed and modified over time as a result of the continuous interplay between person, situation, and epigenetic forces (Powers, 1973). The resultant network structure of goals contributes to both the stability and heterogeneity observed in motivated action.

Over the past half-century there have been numerous accounts of work motivation. Although the development of a comprehensive integrative model lies beyond the scope of this article, our review of the literature suggests that various conceptualizations may be broadly differentiated and loosely organized in terms of the primary issues they address and their position along a continuum of proximity to goal choice. As shown in Fig. 1, the most prominent theories of work motivation address the proximal, intra-individual psychological forces, mechanisms, and processes that determine goal choice and action (i.e., the why, how, and what of motivation). Within-person formulations in this segment of Fig. 1 derive from three distinct but related streams of research. "Why" accounts of motivation may be traced back to early 20th century work on the identification of universal human motives and tendencies. Although motive-based theories also posit a process by which motives influenced goal choice, the introduction of cognitive, information-processing approaches and expectancy-value theories to organizational psychology beginning in the 1950s riveted research attention on the "how" question, including for example the cognitive processes by which expectancies and outcomes are integrated, and how best to conceptualize and assess affect. By the mid-1960s, however, motivational theorists began to question basic tenets of expectancy-value models and their applicability for predicting performance on new, difficult, prolonged, or ill-defined career and task goals, such as becoming a neurosurgeon, or pursuing a management promotion.

During the 1970s, social-cognitive theories (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b; Carver & Scheier, 1981) and theories of action regulation (Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987; Sun & Frese, 2013) emerged that addressed the gap between an individual's goals and performance (the "what" question). These approaches reconceptualized an individual's decision as a goal that instigated (when necessary) volitional (self-regulatory) processes required for goal accomplishment (performance). The introduction of theories of goal pursuit in motivation psychology shifted attention away from determinants of goal selection and toward the operation of self-regulatory mechanisms and dynamic processes by which goals are enacted, modified, or abandoned.

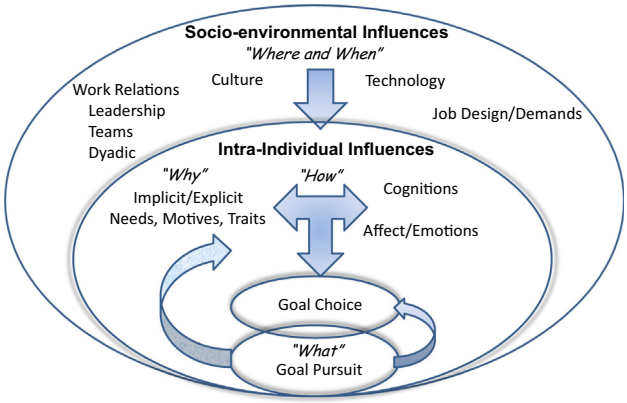

Fig. 1. A heuristic meta-model of work motivation and the focus of major theoretical accounts.

As "what" approaches gained traction during the late 20th century, motivation and decision-making researchers focused on increasingly different topics and questions. Motivational scientists within the broader organizational behavior domain focused on the processes by which goal attributes and the individual's construal of the goal influenced planning and self-regulatory processes during goal pursuit and performance accomplishments. Over the past few decades, advances in measurement of implicit motives and evidence for the influence of automatic processes during goal pursuit have further extended the study of motivation to incorporate the impact of non-conscious influences on goal construal and goal pursuit.

At the same time, there have been significant advances over the past half-century in the "where and when" portion of the motivational network. Theory and research in this segment of the field highlights the contextual variables and processes by which externalities in the work setting influence an individual's goals, engagement, and behavior. Many, though not all of these approaches build upon sense-making processes by which individuals interpret social events and work processes, and studies on the effects of these processes on trait activation, job attitudes, and affect. In addition to research investigating the impact of job design and demands on goals, new, integrative streams of research have emerged for understanding the impact of work relations associated with different patterns of leadership, team structures, and work-related interpersonal processes (e.g., with co-workers, customers) on motivation processes. Research findings in this area have been linked to a variety of work phenomena such as escalation of commitment, ethical decision making, negotiation outcomes, and progress decisions during task goal striving (see Klein, Austin, & Cooper, 2008). Although there has been less work directly linking broader constructs such as culture and technology to goal choice and action, we include these constructs in the figure to signify an important direction for future research.

3. A biography of journal contributions and progress in the field

3.1. Person-oriented formulations: the "why" of motivation

The "why" question of motivation is typically studied from a person-centric perspective, that focuses on the needs, motives,

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