



Positivity within teamwork: Cross-level effects of positivity on performance



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ABSTRACT

This study has been designed to investigate, from a multilevel perspective, the relations among positivity and job performance. Analyses were conducted on a sample of 232 participants from three Italian organizations with the Group Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny & Garcia, 2012). Results corroborate previous findings attesting to the beneficial effects of positivity on organizational behaviours and in particular attest to the crucial role of others' positivity in neutralizing an individual's low positivity. People low in positivity performed better when other group members' positivity was high.

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1. Introduction

A large body of research has focused on human strengths and positive qualities that can be "measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). Organizations, in fact, are increasingly appreciating the value of psychological assets as well as the importance of synergies among individuals and groups for growth and innovation in very competitive markets (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011). This has led researchers to become more and more sensitive to the advantages that may result from various degrees of fit between individuals' and other team members' personalities, in order to gain a better understanding of organizational functioning (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000).

Therefore, it is essential to identify the personality traits that particularly determine the social environment of organizations as well as the mechanisms through which they operate. In this regard, the study of how group composition in personality traits may influence the expression of individuals' personality traits is no less important than the study of how the group's composition in terms of personality influences different outcomes like job performance,

group climate, intragroup cooperation, and group conflicts (e.g., LePine, Buckman, Crawford, & Methot, 2011). Several studies, mostly using the Big Five taxonomy addressed the relation between traits with a large number of outcomes, treating personality from a group-level perspective (Driskell, Hogan, & Salas, 1988). For example, Neuman, Wagner, and Christiansen (1999) found that team performance is correlated with the amount of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to experience in teams (Team Personality Elevation), whereas Extraversion and Emotional diversity in groups (Team Personality Diversity) are the main predictor of team effectiveness.

The present contribution aims to examine the extent to which a recently identified basic personality trait, namely positivity, may contribute to a better understanding of relevant aspects of organizational behavior (Caprara, Steca, Alessandri, Abela, & McWhinnie, 2010). Recent studies (Alessandri et al., 2012) have found that, simultaneously controlling for the big five and positive affectivity, positivity is significantly related to in-role and extra-role performance, with little residual variance accounted for by self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism once their common component (as reflected by the measure of positivity) is taken into account. Although the benefits associated with positivity have become clear, no study has yet attempted to disentangle the different contribution of positivity at the individual and at the group level and cross-level interaction. This study has been designed to fill this gap in the literature.

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1.1. POS and job performance: individual, group-level and individual X group-level perspectives

Although findings consistently attest to a relationship between positivity and group-level outcomes, literature on person-environment fit (P-E fit) offers a different way to look at personality in social contexts, showing compelling evidence that the personality traits of salient others are a defining feature of a person's social environment (e.g., Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998). Usually in these studies, fit with social environment has been studied in terms of supplementary fit, that is, the similarity between the personality of individuals and that of other group members (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). Nevertheless other studies have also suggested that in teams P-E complementary rather than supplementary fit exists between individuals' extraversion and group members' extraversion (Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Stevens, 2005) demonstrating that, at least in case of extraversion, individuals complete the social environment by offsetting a group weakness.

Although research that takes into account groups as building blocks of organizations is still limited, several researchers argued that group-level phenomenon are fundamental in order to predict individual performance in teams especially for affective states when emotional convergence among members lead to what Barsade (2002) called group affect. Thus, understanding how group members behave or feel as a function of the others in the group is a critical issue raising different questions regarding the relationship between members and their own group (Ervin & Bonito, 2014; Kenny & Garcia, 2012). The most basic question is the effect of a person's fit into the group or the person's similarity to the other members, but there is also the effect of the group's average, sometimes called group climate, on individuals (Florin, Giamartino, Kenny, & Wandersman, 1990).

Few studies have examined the influence that other members' average traits may exert on the contribution of individuals' traits to organizational outcomes. For example, Pierro, Presaghi, Higgins, Klein, and Kruglanski (2012) found a complementary fit between individual and other group members in self-regulatory orientation, attesting that multilevel regulatory mode complementarities of locomotion and assessment can positively affect individual-level performance in goal-relevant tasks. In another study, the similarity between employees' levels of the need for cognitive closure (NFCC) and the NFCC of their workgroups predicted employee performance (Pierro, Sheveland, Livi, & Kruglanski, 2015): in this case, NFCC individuals performed better in workgroups in which the remaining members were also high in the NFCC and low NFCC individuals performed better in workgroups in which the remaining members were also low in the NFCC.

2. Positivity

Whereas a number of authors, in various ways and with different labels, have argued about a general disposition conducive to facing experience under a positive outlook, Alessandri, Caprara, and Tisak (2012) focused on what is common to self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism and identified a basic disposition named positive orientation (POS, Caprara et al., 2010). They noted that several authors have reported a high degree of correlation between self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism (see Caprara et al., 2010 for a review). Other findings have converged with longitudinal and cross-sectional findings in attesting to the trait-like nature of POS and to its stability (Alessandri, Caprara, et al., 2012). Cross-cultural studies have documented the generalizability of POS factorial structure across countries that differ widely in terms of models of self, language, cultural and historical roots, and ways of life (Caprara, Alessandri, Trommsdorff, et al., 2012).

Recent findings attest the significant contribution of positivity to chronic positive affect over an extended length of time in the crucial transitions from adolescence to adulthood (Alessandri, Caprara, et al., 2012) pointing to the influence that may exert on individuals' affective tone. In this case, the path of influence was always from positivity to positive affect other than the other way round. In different work settings, POS relate to in-role performance and extra-role desirable organizational behaviors over the effects of its lower-order components (self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction) and any of the Big Five Personality Factors (Caprara, Alessandri, Trommsdorff, et al., 2012).

Thus, it has been reasoned (Caprara et al., 2010) that people could not stand the awareness of their own limitations nor cope with the difficulties, adversities and losses of the human condition unless predisposed to believe that they are worthy of regard, that life is worth living, and that the future is promising. Recent findings that further corroborate these arguments derive from psychometric studies that demonstrate the validity of a new scale designed to measure positivity directly and that document the unique impact of positivity on work performance and organizational behavior over and beyond that of two common predictors of job performance like conscientiousness and core self-evaluations (Alessandri, Vecchione, et al., 2012). Furthermore, other studies have shown that POS can empirically and theoretically be distinguished from similar constructs, such as core self-evaluations generalized self-efficacy and positive affectivity (see Alessandri, Vecchione, et al., 2012). Although previous studies have focused on the positive outcomes of positivity for individuals' success and well-being, no less important is investigation of the effects of positivity in context, namely among individuals and within groups. Below, we review empirical studies linking positivity to job performance at the individual and at the group level.

2.1. Individual level

Previous studies have examined the links of POS with job performance mostly from an individual perspective. For example, Alessandri, Vecchione, et al. (2012) have found that POS is significantly related to in-role and extra-role performance fully subsuming the effects of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism, and that the relation of POS with job performance remained significant when controlled for the Big Five, positive affectivity, and core self-evaluation. Other studies have investigated the relation of constructs akin to POS, like self-esteem, life satisfaction, and dispositional optimism with job performance. With regard to self-esteem, Judge and Bono's (2001) meta-analysis reported a correlation of 0.26 between self-esteem and job performance. Likewise both dispositional optimism (Kluemper, Little, & DeGroot, 2009) and life satisfaction (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000) may contribute to job performance by fostering high tolerance to stress, resilience, and cooperativeness. These studies are relevant since POS represents the common component underlying self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism that leads one to face experience with a positive outlook,

2.2. Group level

Few studies have investigated the effect of group-level positivity on job performance and mostly in terms of parent constructs like, for example, positive group affective tone (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). Group trait positive affectivity (PA), conceptualized as the average level of positive affect in a group, and group positive affectivity diversity, for example, may have different effects on team job performance. Prior research on group trait PA has generally indicated positive relationships between *group trait PA* and teamwork outcomes (Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfeld, 2000). This is because individuals in the positive group are more motivated to

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