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A Conceptual Proposal: Does Improvisation moderate the relationship between Mindfulness and Employee Creativity

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Abstract

Prior research on creativity has grasped the attention of researchers to devote more focus on the interaction that arises between the individual and the surrounding milieu. Thus, this study aimed to propose the moderating role of improvisation on the relationship between mindfulness and employee creativity. The propositions posted in this study was developed based on the relationships established within previous empirical studies among these variables. Such proposition of improvisation as a moderator on the relationship between mindfulness and employee creativity might heavily contribute to the theory by addressing the issue of mixed and inconclusive results in the mindfulness-creativity literature, and will provide a comprehensive understanding of how improvisation might help in unleashing the creative potentials of employees.

Keywords: mindfulness, employee creativity, improvisation

Introduction

Over decades, employee creativity has enticed scholars' attention to investigate its antecedents (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) in their endeavor to develop theoretical models and empirical-based guidance for promoting it (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman & Legood 2018). Thus, research investigating creativity has become considerably salient in internationally recognized academic journals (Koh, Lee & Joshi, 2019), this is stemmed from the emergence of employee creativity as a challenging issue put in face of organizations, as creativity reinforce their constant innovation, which is prerequisite for their growth and survival in a dynamically changing business landscape (Zhou & Hoever, 2014).

Employee creativity plays a pivotal role in firm performance, as employees' creative ideas enhance the firm's internal operations. Because it enables the firm to meet its customers' demands by improving its services, products, and procedures (Gong, Zhou & Chang, 2013). This manifests that the creative efforts of those employees contributed substantially to firms' performance (Alblooshi, 2018). Drawing on this premise, firms were urged to acknowledge the critical importance of creativity to their growth as the latter fuels organizational growth (Cheng, Cao, Zhong, He & Qian, 2019).

Drawing on the above, many service firms have espoused creativity reinforcement mechanisms to manage employee-based service creativity to support their growth (Tsai & Huang, 2019). These mechanisms have the potential to foster idea generation and implementation that can enable the

development of novel products and services (Revilla & Rodríguez-Prado, 2018) which by its turn will boost the firm's overall creativity (Epstein & Phan, 2012; Epstein, Kaminaka, Phan & Uda, 2013).

Given the advantageous outcomes of mindfulness for individuals, interest in mindfulness has prospered in recent years (Eby, Robertson & Fecteau, 2020). One plausible reason for this evolution is a growing body of research has revealed that mindfulness furnishes various benefits in the work setting in terms of enhancing many issues from social relationships, and task performance to task commitment, enjoyment, and memory. Thus, many organizations have initiated enrolling their workforce in mindfulness programs (Hyland, Lee & Mills, 2015).

Drawing on mindfulness's impact on cognitive functioning, growing recent research has proposed that mindfulness practice must also be considered as a source that can easily contribute to business success (Hyland et al., 2015). Fiol and O'Connor (2003) highlight that mindfulness practice may promote the likeness to better decision making such that individuals practicing mindfulness will be more apt to (a) comprehend the value of information for surrounding circumstances and (b) construe unanticipated results as relevant rather than disregarding them, even when they do not match with familiar practices. Therefore, mindful individuals may be more inclined to go beyond the status quo and/or quick rewards in pursuit of long-term goals, a pivotal characteristic to sustain success and growth (Hyland et al., 2015). This is further supported by Shapiro, Carlson, Astin and Freedman (2006), who asserted that practicing mindfulness has led to an enhanced ability to discern events objectively; and Hyland et al., (2015), who found that mindfulness has improved the capacity to resist to cognitive biases. Such assertion has been highlighted by Walsh and Arnold (2020) who reported that previous studies revealed that the amplified, open attentiveness of mindfulness allows individuals to process thoughts comprehensively, which successively predicts variations in outcomes.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1996) has been analyzed by Fisher and Amabile (2009) and it was evidenced that this theory lacks improvisation. Drawing on that, those scholars have suggested that to explain the creativity phenomenon, there is a need to have a boundary condition as "improvisation" which might enhance the explanation of the creativity process.

By proposing the role that improvisation might play in raising employee creativity, the research is answering a recent call in the creativity literature "More research is needed to specify when and for whom improvisation leads to desirable results" (Fisher & Barrett, 2019, p. 27). By doing so, the research will add a more contextual contribution.

The current research contributes to the mindfulness-creativity literature by proposing improvisation as a moderator that is anticipated to reinforce the relationship between employee mindfulness and employee creativity. This will allow catering to the inconclusive results in terms of significance and non-significance as highlighted by (Lebuda, Zabelina & Karwowski, 2015). Furthermore, it is anticipated that this study will enable future empirical studies to fill the gap in the mindfulness literature as reported by scholars "the relationship between employee mindfulness and employee creativity is unclear" (Baas, Nevecka & Ten Velden, 2014, p.1092). Finally, this study is expected to contribute to addressing the issue of scarce studies that prevented investigating the possible theoretically related moderators (Lebuda et al., 2015).

Literature Review

Amabile Componential Theory of Creativity

The theory underpinned by this research is Amabile (1996) componential theory of creativity. Drawing on this theory, the creativity phenomena is explicated through a mechanism that compiles a set of components and process that takes a stage like a sequence, whereas these components likely influence these stages. Thus, mindfulness will influence the process of creativity through the cognitive flexibility that provoke employees to abandon routine-scripted tasks and to seek fresh and novel paths

of both thoughts and actions (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller & Staw, 2005; Fredrickson, 1998). However, as revealed by Fisher and Amabile (2009), “stages do not always happen in strict sequence” and “that the process of creativity happens in a more or less ordered fashion” (p. 15). Thus, to strengthen the intervening mechanism by which mindfulness engenders followers’ creativity, improvisation is proposed within the research framework as a moderator, especially that improvisation enables individuals to generate novel solutions instantly (Crossan, Cunha, Vera & Cunha, 2005).

The componential theory of creativity that was grounded initially by Amabile (1988), postulated that individual creativity comprises one “external component” which is the social environment, and three “intra-individual components”; intrinsic task motivation, domain-relevant skills, and creativity relevant skills.

- The social environment comprises all extrinsic factors that constitute either barriers or stimuli to both intrinsic motivation and creativity (Amabile, 1988).
- Intrinsic task motivation was operationalized by Amabile (1988) as “passion; the motivation to solve a problem because it is interesting, involving and personally challenging”.
- The domain-relevant skills include the acquired knowledge, possessed expertise, technical skills, and talent in the specific domain where the problem-solver works. These skills encompass the raw materials that the individual will combine to generate possible responses and the expertise against which the feasibility of response possibilities will be judged (Amabile, 1988).
- Creativity-relevant processes entail a flexible cognitive style in terms of aggregating information and the ability to analyze it, as well as openness to new experience, initiating novel perspectives on problems (Amabile, 1988).

The componential theory elucidates that creativity arises in sequence or stage-like path as follow (Amabile, 1988):

- The first stage: problem identification- is the time point where the individual starts to recognize that there is a necessity to solve a certain problem. At this point, task motivation will exert a significant impact, as it identifies whether the individual will opt to take part with the problem at hand and the extent of his/her engagement.
- In the second stage: preparation, domain-relevant skills typify this stage as the individual will be in a pursuit to gather information (and possibly acquire new knowledge and competencies) to carry out the task.
- The third stage: response generation, Creativity-relevant skills, and task motivation mostly identify the result of the response possibilities generated by the individual.
- In the fourth stage: response validation, the individual depends heavily on domain-relevant skills to judge the originality and the validity of his/her responses.
- In the fifth stage: the outcome, the final response is conveyed to others in the organization and the result of the whole process is assessed. In case the outcome is a total success (an innovative and valid solution that is acknowledged by others) or total failure (no improvement towards a solution), the process terminates. If there is slight advancement toward the final goal, the individual likely returns to the first stage and restarts the process.

Mindfulness and Employee Creativity

A stream of growing recent literature has reported a positive relationship between mindfulness and employee creativity (e.g., Baas, Neveick & Ten Velden, 2020; Cheung, Huang, Chang & Wei, 2020; Byrne & Thatchenkery 2019; Hassan, 2019; Montani, Setti, Sommovigo, Courcy & Giorgi, 2019; Ngo, Nguyen, Lee & Andonopoulos, 2020; Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020; Wolever, Schwartz & Schoenberg, 2018).

It seems apparent that there is a consent in the extant literature that the link between mindfulness and creativity is construed to mindfulness training and its association with cognitive capacity (Colzato,

Ozturk & Hommel, 2012), as it can produce a robust impact in preparing the individual's mind before attempting to solve the problem in their pursuit for creativity (e.g., Byrne & Thatchenkery, 2019; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt & Lang, 2013; Ding, Tang, Deng, Tang & Posner, 2015).

It is argued that mindfulness training that stands for meditation nurtures an employee's cognitive ability to have more focused thoughts and to observe the nuances of what is occurring in the here and now, vs being trapped in contemplation about the past or what might arise in the future. Within this evolution of thoughts, the individual will be acquiring new knowledge and will be focusing on finding out relations between different patterns, then assessing all possible solutions. Therefore, such information processing will enhance the individual's problem-solving capacity, and promoting his/her creative performance (Byrne & Thatchenkery 2019; Colzato et al. 2012).

Building on the theory of conservation resources (Hobfoll, 2001), mindfulness can be perceived as a personal resource that supports individuals to administer more successfully the encountered stresses in their workplace like role conflict (Kaplan, Christopher & Bowen, 2017). It is argued that as mindfulness heighten individuals' awareness of all inner and external stimuli, they will be using their mindfulness as an inner resource to eliminate any role conflict, to dedicate their energy to think objectively to avoid responding headily, and thus they will be more apt to bring out creative solutions to overcome such stressors. Consequently, those mindful individuals will be in a better position than others in dealing with such stressors (Montani et al., 2019) as they will be more capable to employ this resource to regulate cognition (Good, Lyddy, Glomb, Bono, Brown, Duffy, Baer, Brewer & Lazar, 2016; Liu, Xin, Shen, He & Liu, 2020).

Proposition-1: Mindfulness is positively related to employee creativity

Improvisation and Employee Creativity

Improvisation entails an intentional creation of innovative activity and has been investigated across multiple domains comprising musical and theatrical performance. In the 1990s, improvisation expanded beyond the musical and theatre field into other scopes such as management, medicine, and education. Stemmed from the increasing competition in the universal marketplace, management scholars have devoted more emphasis to comprehend how accumulated knowledge and competencies form improvisation and the inherent tightness between the exploration and performance required to retain momentum within an organization (Moorman & Miner 1998).

Similarly, research has reported that deft improvisers in management can acquire the knowledge to put together current routines to generate action (Gerber & Fu, 2018). Thus, improvisation constitutes one critical process that can facilitate engendering innovation. It stands for the intentional fusion of devising and executing a novel production (Cunha, Cunha & Kamoche, 1999; Miner, Bassoff & Moorman, 2001). Its spirit is experienced every day as per the phrase: "Make it up as you go along." Improvisation, as conceptualized entails novel productions, which are not designed previously. Though it naturally builds on or links to past structures, thus it can be said that improvisation is not a total novel action as it might comprise components of previous knowledge and plans, while yielding a novel action (Cunha, Miner & Antonacopoulou, 2016). Diverse amounts of past novel features can generate diverse types and levels of improvisation (Hadida, Tarvainen & Rose, 2015; Miner et al., 2001). Since improvisation entails rapid innovation, hence constituting severe challenges to cohesion and coordination (Smith & Lewis, 2011). When individuals are conscious of the firm's goal they can link their intent with the circumstances surrounding them in an individually meaningful way (Ulrich & Dulenohn, 2015). They can also direct their reactions to unanticipated situations in real-time, or indirectly act based on their reference point for novel actions (Cunha, Gomes, Mellahi, Miner & Rego, 2020).

Numerous organizational researchers have revealed that improvisation can be valuable in comprehending the course over which services are enhanced (e.g. Kamoche & Cunha, 2001; Miner et al., 2001). In agreement with Brown and Eisenhardt (1998), improvisation is what cultivates gaining and production of knowledge, supporting tourism properties to constantly co-generate benefit in

adjacent cooperation with other stakeholders. Improvisation can be considered as a type of instantaneous learning that occurs when organizations strive to address a problem or unanticipated opportunity (Miner et al., 2001), this is due to that improvisation can affect “long-term trial-and-error learning”, yielding novel actions and perceptions. Additionally, improvisation emanates from cognizing the present stemmed from the previous background, and expecting the imminent in the surrounding milieu and beyond (Haanpää, 2017; Haanpää, García-Rosell & Tuulentie, 2016). Improvisation compels a proper comprehension of the numerous links pertinent to the setting; if not, it can co-ruin value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). In agreement with Vera and Crossan (2004), it is imperative to distinguish between how improvisation arises and what it necessitates to do it properly (García-Rosell, Haanpää & Janhunen, 2019).

Drawing on the above, improvisation has garnered the attention of both researchers and practitioners, as it demonstrates the firm emergent need to cater for the unexpected issues that urge for departing from traditional routines and turn towards cultivating a broader understanding of how instantaneous behaviors (improvisation) reinforce coping with such incidents (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). In such doing, improvisation, will allow triggering novel solutions to rising on the spur of the instant, by enabling employees to constantly adjust (Crossan et al., 2005) and cater to the need for fast responses (Cunha, Clegg, & Kamoche, 2006; Magni, Palmi & Salvemini, 2018).

Moderating role of Improvisation

Within mindfulness research, scholars are more focused on investigating how the practice of mindfulness that refers to devoting attention in a specific manner deliberately in the current instant and non-judgmentally impacts employee creativity (Hassan, 2019). In this line of thought, it is deemed that creativity is hindered when employees lack this attention and when they are encountered with fast-paced working environments that involve them in multitasks (Connell & Thaarup, 2014). Despite that, mindful employees may have a greater inclination to decrease insight capacity, thus mindfulness might impede performance on tasks that depends on instantaneous insights (Zedelius & Schooler, 2015). Additionally, mindfulness might be associated with a decrease in intuitive thinking (Remmers, Topolinski & Michalak, 2014). This entails employees to resort to improvisation in uncertain situations that enable them to generate unplanned solutions to the encountered problems, deliberately abandoning the set norms or performing without the guidance of pertinent procedures (Brown & Duguid 1991; Kamoche & Cunha 2001; Cunha, Clegg, Rego & Neves, 2014).

In the extant literature, it is apparent that there is a consensus that improvisation is parallel to creativity and somehow overlapping with it (Baker, Miner & Eesley, 2003; Barret, 1998; Fisher & Amabile, 2009; Leone, 2010; Leybourne & Saddler-Smith, 2006; Miner et al., 2001; Moorman & Miner, 1998). Through improvisation, creativity can be considered an indispensable part of activity instead of considering it as “something one possesses or has.” Certainly, improvisation is perceived as an instantaneous activity, an approach to diverge from the existing knowledge and established practices. Thus, “improvisation, can better be described as a novel activity and a way to novelty” (Nisula, 2013, p. 52).

The argument is that improvisation is an activity that reflects a momentum response that encompasses an aim to diverge from known approaches, norms, and domain of knowledge. Thus, individuals with a high level of improvisation are closer to creativity (Fisher & Barrett, 2019). This is based on the premise that improvisation endeavors to generate a novel initiative that is related to the faced case (Magni et al., 2018).

When this psychological variable mindfulness impacts creativity, it would be interacted by employees' improvisation such as people having high improvisation will have a stronger effect of mindfulness on their creativity (Hassan, 2019).

Proposition-2: The positive relationship between mindfulness and employee creativity will be stronger when improvisation is high.

Proposed research framework

Figure 1: Proposed research framework

Conclusion

This study proposed that mindfulness is positively related to employee creativity and this proposition is in agreement with the extant literature that investigated this relationship (e.g., Baas et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2020; Byrne & Thatchenkery 2019; Hassan, 2019; Montani et al., 2019; Ngo et al., 2020; Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020; Wolever et al., 2018). Such relationship was attributed by scholars to that observation and openness to experience accompanied by acceptance in a non-judgmental inclination equip individuals with a cognitive superiority, thus nurturing their mind-sets in engendering creative responses in their pursuit to solve complex encountered problems as revealed by Ostafin and Kassman (2012) along with implying an interesting tendency to test ideas and experiences (Carson, 2014). This is based on the premise that mindfulness typifies a non-judgmental awareness of the present that decreases inattentive thoughts and unconscious behavior, as a result, mindful individuals will be more apt to solve problems that entail creativity. Whilst Hassan (2019), attributed the nexus between mindfulness and creativity to the highest state of attentiveness experienced by mindful individuals when switching their minds from convergent to divergent thinking, thus generating novel ideas (Hassan, 2019). This is due to that mindful individuals will possess an active imagination and curiosity that will intellectually drive them towards exploring a variety of alternatives. Their observation with openness will likely raise their cognitive flexibility. As a result, they will be closer to generate creative solutions to the complex problems they encounter as they will inhibit their autopilot responses towards any surrounding stimulant.

In conclusion, the insights of this study offer theoretical support for the propositions that mindfulness and employee improvisation might strengthen the later creativity. Drawing on the above, proposing improvisation as a moderator between mindfulness and employee creativity might theoretically contribute in coping with the issue of mixed and inconclusive results highlighted within the surge of empirical findings. Additionally, proposing improvisation as a moderator might promote the extant understanding of the notion of creativity.

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