



## Introduction

# Expanding the boundaries of psychological resource theories

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This article introduces JOOP's special section on expanding the boundaries of resource theories in occupational and organizational psychology. After an introduction of the most relevant resource theories and their current application in occupational and organizational psychology – key resource theories, conservation of resources theory, resource theory of social exchange, and selective optimization with compensation theory – the opportunities and challenges for future research are outlined, as well as the innovative trends emerging from the contributions in this special section.

Traditionally, new theoretical insights that are developed in general psychology only slowly migrate into the applied fields, and a lack of meta-theories has been discussed as a major shortcoming of occupational and organizational psychology (Campbell, 1990; Schönplflug, 1993). In order to stimulate theoretical development of the field, it therefore remains crucial to actively focus efforts towards integrating general psychological meta-theories into occupational and organizational psychology. This article introduces a special section of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, which aims to do just that by presenting original and innovative research extending the boundaries of resource theories in occupational and organizational psychology. In recent years, theories regarding psychological resources have formed the basis for much of the literature on – for example – job stress, recovery, and ageing. However, in many cases, the originators of these theories did not explicitly suggest they are limited to any specific research domain. The aim of this special issue is to expand the boundaries of resource theories in work and organizational psychology.

This introductory article will initially review the literature on resource theories that seem particularly promising to occupational and organizational psychology, including a

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brief discussion of issues covered and major challenges and opportunities lying before occupational and organizational researchers who seek to apply resource theories to their work. Then, we will briefly outline the articles that will be presented in this special issue.

## **Resource theories**

A review of the literature shows several influential resource theories that may have particular relevance for occupational and organizational psychology. These are grand theories that make predictions concerning peoples' affect, cognition, and behaviour across different life domains and institutional settings.<sup>1</sup>

The first class of resource theories that can be distinguished concerns key resource theories (Hobfoll, 2002). Key resource theories generally focus on single or multiple individual difference variables (resources) that are considered key for effective adaptation and management of the demands of life. Examples are theories on self-referent beliefs, such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), dispositional optimism (Carver & Scheier, 1998), and psychological capital, a composite of optimism, hope, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). In occupational and organizational psychology, key resource theories have been used extensively to explain individual differences in resilience to job stress. However, only relatively recently have self-referent beliefs been included as relevant study variables in job-design research, showing positive gain cycles of job resources, individual key resources, motivation, and job performance (e.g., Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a, 2009b).

A second resource theory that has been one of the leading theories in explaining job stress and burnout is the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Halbesleben, 2006; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Hobfoll, 1988, 2001). According to COR theory, people strive to maintain, protect, and retain their resources. In contrast to key resource theories, this integrated resource theory distinguishes four broad classes of resources: material, condition, personal, and energy resources. An important premise of COR theory is that in order to prevent stressful loss cycles of resources and to enhance motivating resource gain spirals, people need to invest resources. The more resourceful people are, the better they are able to do so. While increasingly common in the stress literature, COR theory also has broad implications for the literature on motivation, work engagement, decision making, and other psychological constructs (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008).

A third resource theory we want to mention here is the resource theory of social exchange (Foa & Foa, 1976, 1980). This theory focuses on the quality of social exchange between individuals by looking at what types of resources are being exchanged between people in social relationships. The underlying premise is that every interpersonal behaviour consists of giving and/or taking away one or more resources. In addition, every action of one person in turn leads to reciprocation or retaliation from the other person in the form of giving, withholding, or taking away specific resources. This resource theory identifies six broad classes of resources that are appreciated differently depending on the type of social encounter, namely love, status, services, information, goods, and money. The resource theory of social exchange (Foa & Foa, 1980) has, for example, been applied to research on co-worker and leader-member exchange (e.g., Flynn, 2003; Sherony & Green, 2002), and work-life facilitation from an ecological perspective (Grzywacs & Butler, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup>Next to these, resource theories exist that focus on task-level processes, such as cognitive and attention resource theory. These are not the focus of this special issue.

Finally, Baltes and Baltes' (1990; Baltes, 1987) theory of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) is a life-span theory of human development, according to which people possess resources (mental, physical, social, and environmental) that are limited at any specific point in time. During the life span, people meet opportunities (e.g., education, promotion) and demands (e.g., illness and physical deterioration) that require choices about the allocation of these limited resources. To do so, people apply management strategies of (1) selecting the goals to pursue, (2) optimizing and using goal-relevant means, and (3) using compensatory means to maintain goal attainment when previously employed resources are no longer available or blocked. SOC theory has been applied to research on career success (e.g., Wiese, Freund, & Baltes, 2002), and recently used to examine work-family conflict and facilitation (e.g., Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003; Wiese, Freund, & Baltes, 2000).

Building on these theories, the following opportunities emerge for occupational and organizational scholars beyond studying job stress, recovery, and ageing. Most importantly, resources not only buffer against the potentially harmful stress effects of the demands of working life. Resources have intrinsic value, and the active search for gaining and increasing resources has a motivating effect. As such, resources form an excellent basis for flourishing in the workplace and optimal performance. Focusing on different types of resources as part of a greater dynamic process provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for an active, positive psychological perspective in occupational and organizational psychology, focusing on motivating gain spirals of resources, well-being, and job performance, as well as for studying both positive and negative social encounters at the workplace (Bakker & Derks, 2010; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

In order to apply resource theories successfully, scholars face several challenges. An important question is what types of resources would be relevant to a specific process in a specific context? Several research models exist in occupational and organizational psychology that form a starting point for identifying relevant resources, such as the job demands-control (JD-C) model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Nachreiner, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2001), and the demand-induced strain compensation (DISC) model (De Jonge & Dormann, 2003). Originally, these models typically focused on job resources, ignoring personal resources, but recently also personal resources have been added to these models (e.g., Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009a, 2009b).

Job characteristics, such as job autonomy and social support, are generally equated with resources. This approach may sometimes lead to inconclusive and equivocal results, for example, the finding that social support sometimes has positive and sometimes has negative effects. In order to understand such results, it may be fruitful to differentiate in more detail between job characteristics and the tangible or psychological resources they may at the same time provide or take away. Support may provide services and information, but at the same time take away status (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

Another theme that emerges is compensation. All resource theories emphasize there are different ways to reach a goal. This paves the road towards an active psychology, studying the reasons why different workers strive for different goals and employ different strategies to meet these goals. One may wonder how effective the use of one type of strategy is over another. Building on resource theories, the answer to this question relates to the characteristics of different resources employed. For example, the appropriateness of resources exchanged in social encounters greatly depends on the context, and exchanging the inappropriate resource (e.g., pay with money instead of appreciation in a private context) may lead to resentment and retaliation. Relevant to this question is

also the extent to which resources are used up and how quickly they are replenished again. According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1988, 2001), energetic resources (e.g., time, money, vitality) are easily used up, but are also relatively quickly replenished. In contrast, other resources such as skills and knowledge may be slower to build up, but may be reinforced or positively reciprocated when applied. Assuming an equal likelihood of successful goal attainment, a strategy investing resources that are not used up or easily replenished should be preferred over one that uses finite resources that are difficult to replenish.

The dynamics of most processes at the workplace in terms of effective management of resources have remained largely hidden to date. This special section makes a start to filling this void.

### **JOOP's special section on Psychological Resources Theories in Organizations**

The aim of this special section is to stimulate theoretical progress in the field of occupational and organizational psychology by expanding the boundaries of resource theories beyond the study of job stress, recovery, and ageing. The call for papers yielded 27 high-quality manuscripts that were subject to JOOP's normal review process with the additional review criterion that all papers should meet the goal of using psychological resource theories in an innovative way. This special section presents five articles that were ultimately selected. The foundation of these articles was mainly a combination of COR theory and key resource theories. Innovative trends emerging from these contributions are (1) an emphasis on positive psychological processes, (2) a movement towards dynamic process models and developments over time, (3) a movement towards active psychology, emphasizing purposeful behaviour instead of passive coping responses, and (4) the use of multi-level perspectives focusing on either different life domains, different levels of organizations, or dyads in a social interaction.

The article by Hakanen, Peeters, and Perhoniemi (2011, pp. 8-30) presents a longitudinal study that sheds light on enrichment processes within and across the private and the work domain. This study shows positive gain spirals of work and home resources, work engagement, and marital satisfaction over time. Consistent with the literature on negative spillover processes, they find that work- and family-originated enrichment processes show different spillover patterns. Job resources predicted work-family enhancement, which in turn had cross-lagged effects on work engagement. In contrast, home resources did not spill over to the work domain, but appeared to be part of a domain-specific gain spiral.

The second article by Zimmerman, Dormann, and Dollard (2011, pp. 31-57) deals with positive gain spirals of sales peoples' service behaviour, customers' behaviour, and positive affective states of both sales persons and customers. The study showed that supportive behaviour, as exhibited by customers, predicted positive affective states of sales people during a sales encounter, which in turn, predicted customers' positive affective states. This is an interesting example showing that service encounters not only represent potentially energy depleting demands for emotion work, but they can also be energizing and motivating experiences in themselves through positive social exchange of other than material resources.

Two articles in this special section deal with employees' proactive behaviour explaining counterintuitive relationships between personal characteristics and organizational

outcomes. Arguing that employee behaviour is instrumentally driven, the authors of both papers show how personal resources may stimulate employees to behave in a way that is beneficial for them, but also has unintended negative or positive consequences for the organization. For example, the article by Penney, Hunter, and Perry (2011, pp. 58–77) shows an unanticipated positive relationship between high conscientiousness and counterproductive work behaviour when combined with low emotional stability. Highly conscientious employees are normally expected to refrain from counterproductive work behaviours, because they are motivated to set and pursue task-related goals. However, conscientious workers who additionally lack emotional stability need to compensate for this disadvantage by employing less preferred strategies to meet task-related goals. Some of these fall under the heading of counterproductive behaviour, such as yelling at co-workers to motivate them to cooperate, and taking longer breaks to regulate negative emotions. Furthermore, Winkel, Wyland, Shaffer, and Clason (2011, pp. 78–94) show an unanticipated positive relationship between emotional intelligence and deviant workplace behaviour, presumably because it might have been combined with an immoral inclination to serve one's own purposes and an unanticipated positive relationship between impulsivity and organizational citizenship behaviour.

The fifth article by Zellars, Hochwarter, Lanivic, Perrewé, and Ferris (2011, pp. 95–115) shows non-linear relationships between accountability for others and employee well-being. The findings indicate that adjustment to job demands (accountability for others) is better for some employees as compared to others depending on the possession of enough resources.

The special section concludes with a commentary by Stevan Hobfoll. Integrating the contributions in this special issue, Hobfoll (2011, pp. 116–122) takes COR theory in occupational and organizational psychology to the next level, combining it with an ecological perspective. All papers present interesting new approaches leading to important new insights. We hope that the special section is both a theoretical and practical stimulus encouraging scholars in occupational and organizational psychology to conduct more theory-driven innovative research.

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