COMMENTARIES

Putting Self-Interest Out of Business? Contributions and Unanswered Questions From Use-Inspired Research on Prosocial Motivation

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More than any other question, I find managers asking, "How can I motivate employees to be more helpful and giving—to care about contributing to other people and the organization?" This query has stimulated my own program of use-inspired research on prosocial motivation at work. In this commentary, I draw attention to several of the key contributions and unanswered questions raised by this research. My perspective aligns with Kanfer's (2009) call for use-inspired work motivation research to place a stronger emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

Evidence is mounting that self-interest is not the only motivation that drives work effort and behavior. Applied psychologists and organizational researchers have argued that we have underestimated the extent to which many employees hold other-oriented motives and values (Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004), seek to engage in behaviors that protect and promote social justice and human well-being (Folger & Salvador, 2008), and are motivated to serve the public through meaningful work that benefits others (Perry &

Hondeghem, 2008; Shamir, 1991). Scholars have observed that employees are attracted to socially responsible organizations that provide opportunities to contribute to causes and make social contributions (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003; Turban & Greening, 1997). These scholars share a common focus on prosocial motivation: the desire to help or benefit others (Grant, 2007, 2008a). Below, I examine recent research and new questions—all use inspired—on how prosocial motivation can be cultivated in work settings (context), how such endeavors affect employees with different personality traits (content), and how prosocial motivation is influenced by self-interest (change).

Close Encounters of the Helpful Kind: Sparking and Supporting Prosocial Motivation

Although many employees do work that has the potential to benefit others, they are often disconnected from seeing their impact on these beneficiaries. Automotive engineers design cars that save drivers' and passengers' lives but never meet these beneficiaries of their work. Similarly, medical research scientists develop cures and vaccines that protect the health of patients but rarely connect with these beneficiaries. My research has explored a theoretical and practical solution to this

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problem: When employees are unaware of the difference that their jobs make, their motivation may be enhanced by connecting them to the people who benefit from their work.

For example, consider fundraising callers who solicit alumni donations to a university. Although the callers raise money that provides scholarships for students to attend the university, the callers rarely have contact with these scholarship recipients. In one field experiment, merely meeting one scholarship recipient more than doubled the amount of weekly time that callers spent on the phone and the amount of weekly donation money that they raised, whereas callers in two control groups did not change on these measures (Grant et al., 2007). Additional field experiments showed that even reading two stories about how the work benefited scholarship recipients was sufficient to motivate higher caller performance (Grant, 2008b). A field experiment with pool lifeguards also showed that reading several stories about the potential for their work to save drowning swimmers motivated lifeguards to work more hours and provide more help to protect the safety of pool guests (Grant, 2008b). Together, the studies reveal that connections with beneficiaries motivate these behaviors through at least three mediating psychological mechanisms, enabling employees to (a) receive feedback about their impact on beneficiaries, (b) feel valued and appreciated by beneficiaries, and (c) develop stronger emotional attachments to beneficiaries (Grant, 2008b; Grant et al., 2007).

These studies advance a relational perspective on work design and motivation, providing theoretical, empirical, and practical insights into how and why connections with beneficiaries can be structured to increase motivation. Although they suggest that even brief, temporary connections with beneficiaries can motivate substantial increases in task effort, persistence, and performance, several important questions have yet to be addressed.

How stable is prosocial motivation? Does connecting employees to beneficiaries increase prosocial motivation or encourage employees to express this motivation at work? Research has yet to reveal whether connections with beneficiaries produce lasting increases in prosocial motivation, leading to a greater desire to help others, or whether connections with beneficiaries encourage employees to express their stable desires to help others in the work domain. This is a critical theoretical question because it will deepen our understanding of how and why connections with beneficiaries increase motivation. It is a critical practical question because it will provide insight into whether managers can encourage sustainable increases in prosocial motivation or whether managerial efforts should focus more heavily on selecting prosocially motivated employees and encouraging them to channel their existing levels of prosocial motivation toward specific tasks.

How does prosocial motivation vary as a function of beneficiaries and causes? Recent research in psychology and sociology suggests that it is not only a general altruistic personality or a set of stable prosocial motives that drives helping behavior. While carrying out their work, employees come to define their identities in terms of helping within specific roles (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). This implies that employees will be more likely to experience prosocial motivation directed toward some beneficiaries and causes than others (e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007). For example, some firefighters may define themselves not as helpful, caring, altruistic, or giving individuals in general, but rather as individuals who protect citizens and property from harm because of fires. More research is needed on how employees become prosocially motivated to help particular beneficiaries and serve particular causes, and how these differences in prosocial motivation influence work behaviors and experiences. This question is significant in theory because it will extend our understanding of the nature, content, and forms of prosocial motivation. It is significant in practice because it will provide us

with tools for motivating employees to contribute effort toward important causes.

How Long Do the Effects Last? These studies have focused on samples of young, part-time employees with high levels of turnover, making it impossible to address the temporal duration of the motivational effects of connecting employees to beneficiaries. In line with Kanfer's call for more studies of temporal changes, we need studies to inform how long the effects of contact with beneficiaries last and how often repeated interventions should occur to sustain increases in motivation.

Ned Flanders Versus Homer Simpson: Who Benefits From Connections to Beneficiaries?

Moving beyond main effects, I turned to another use-inspired research question that dovetails with Kanfer's call for more research on content–context interactions: *What types of employees are most likely to be motivated by connections with beneficiaries?* One of the traits that I considered was conscientiousness, as conscientious employees tend to express stronger concerns for responsibility, duty, and dependability than their less conscientious counterparts. Kanfer's theoretical and empirical perspective, and the literature on trait activation theory (e.g., Tett & Burnett, 2003), suggest that employees high in conscientiousness will find connections with beneficiaries more motivating, as these connections should appeal to their desires to be responsible, dutiful, and dependable. My research, however, showed the opposite: An intervention connecting fundraising callers to scholarship recipients motivated higher levels of performance for employees low in conscientiousness but not for employees high in conscientiousness (Grant, 2008b).

One explanation for these results is that conscientious employees have already approached a motivational ceiling (cf. Côté & Miners, 2006; Ilies, Scott, & Judge, 2006; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004): They value good performance as a reward in and of itself and are thus less dependent on exter-

nal cues about the importance of the work. Employees who are less conscientious, on the other hand, may rely more heavily on external cues to signal the importance of discipline and dedication. By revealing that trait-discordant contextual factors can increase motivation, this evidence raises unanswered questions.

How sustainable is prosocial motivation among less conscientious employees? Given that less conscientious employees display lower cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies toward responsibility, duty, and dependability, it is theoretically and practically important to understand the duration of the motivational effects of connections with beneficiaries on less conscientious employees. How frequently do less conscientious employees need to be connected with beneficiaries in order to sustain their prosocial motivation?

When will trait-congruent versus trait-incongruent contexts increase motivation? Although we often assume that trait-congruent contexts will increase motivation, this study suggests that trait-incongruent interventions can compensate for low dispositional levels of motivation. This research thus highlights the need for integrative theoretical frameworks to identify the boundary conditions for these patterns, which will help us to predict, understand, and explain the circumstances under which we should expect to see congruent versus discrepant contexts produce motivational effects.

"Mahatma Scrooge": Are Prosocial and Self-Interested Motivations Always Antithetical?

When I share these findings, managers often inquire about whether the rise of self-interested motivations may be suppressing prosocial motivation. This question is consistent with research suggesting that the Millennial generation entering the workforce, often described affectionately as "Generation Why?" and less affectionately as "Generation Me," has a stronger sense of

entitlement and self-absorption than any generation in recent history (Twenge, 2006).

My response is twofold. First, my field experiments have taken place with members of this generation, suggesting that prosocial motivation is alive and well even in Generation Me. Second, although many researchers have treated self-interest and other interest as diametrically opposed motivations, there is good reason to believe that these motivations are complementary and perhaps even work together to drive behaviors that neither motivation would encourage on its own. Correspondingly, a number of researchers have argued that there may be synergy between self-interested and prosocial motivations, such that employees will expend the highest levels of effort when they are simultaneously seeking to benefit themselves and others (e.g., De Dreu, 2006; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

Along these lines, in field studies of firefighters and fundraisers, I found that prosocial motivation is more likely to predict persistence, performance, and productivity as intrinsic motivation increases (Grant, 2008a). It appears that when prosocial motivation is accompanied by intrinsic motivation, employees enjoy the work itself and experience the desire to help others as autonomous and self-determined, and are thus willing to invest high levels of effort in their work. When prosocial motivation is accompanied by extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, it appears that employees experience helping others as an obligation, which may undermine effort by precipitating feelings of pressure, overload, and depletion. This pair of studies suggests that prosocial motivation can operate in tandem with one form of self-interested motivation—intrinsic motivation—to predict higher levels of motivated behavior.

Additional research has shown that prosocial motivation can interact constructively with another form of self-interested motivation: impression management motivation (Grant & Mayer, 2009). Two field studies with for-profit and nonprofit employees from diverse organizations indicated that prosocial motivation is more likely to predict affiliative citizenship behaviors of helping and initiative when impression management motivation is also high (Grant & Mayer, 2009). It appears that impression management motivation encourages employees to express their prosocial motivations in forms of organizational citizenship behavior that are both socially and personally beneficial—actions that both "do good" and "look good"—rather than in riskier, potentially self-sacrificing citizenship behaviors such as voice and whistle-blowing. Thus, rather than undermining prosocial motivation, the self-interested motivation to form a favorable impression may encourage employees to channel their prosocial motivation toward higher levels of affiliative citizenship. Together, these studies challenge long-held dichotomies between self-interested and prosocial motivations, suggesting that the two motivations can support rather than undermine each other. At the same time, they accentuate key questions for future research.

Under what conditions do self-interested motivations undermine prosocial motivation? In contrast to these findings, evidence exists that self-interested motivations can undermine prosocial motivations. Some researchers have argued that we are often motivated by feelings of compassion and empathy to help others, but that social norms discourage the expression of this prosocial motivation unless it can be justified as self-interested (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Miller, 1999). Others have found that monetary rewards and financial incentives, especially when linked to time or performance, can distract employees' attention away from concern for others (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; Wright, George, Farnsworth, & McMahan, 1993). Research is needed to inform the conditions that moderate whether self-interested motivations undermine versus support prosocial motivation.

Among millennials, is prosocial motivation increasing, decreasing, or shifting in focus? In light of evidence for the independence of and synergy between self-interested and prosocial motivations, it is not clear that prosocial motivation has

necessarily decreased in the Millennial generation. Indeed, the rise of corporate social responsibility initiatives, social entrepreneurship, and green management and sustainability movements raises the possibility that prosocial motivation is increasing within this generation. We need cross-temporal meta-analyses to examine whether and how prosocial motivation has changed over time.

Conclusion

Use-inspired research on work motivation offers great promise for enriching theory and contributing to practice. It is important to be mindful of the fact that motivation is often directed toward benefiting other people, not only toward tasks and the organization. Given practitioners' interests in cultivating prosocial motivation, I hope that researchers will embrace a sharper focus on the role of context, content, and change in the desire to make a difference.

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