WORK ENGAGEMENT IN NURSING: THE ROLE OF SELF-EFFICACY AND OPTIMISM

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ABSTRACT

Within healthcare organizations, nurses as customer-contact employees play an important role in care delivery and health quality. Nursing is an important profession to study because nurses’ performance has a great impact on the nature and quality of service provided to the patients. This study examined the relationship between self-efficacy and optimism with work engagement. The sample comprised of 205 staff nurses in two public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. Statistical results using regression analysis indicated that optimism was positively related to work engagement. On the other hand, self-efficacy was found to have no significant impact on work engagement. Implications of the results, limitations, and future research directions are also presented.

JEL Classifications:  
Keywords: work engagement, self-efficacy, optimism, nurses, Malaysia  
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INTRODUCTION

Currently, all organizations, especially those in the healthcare industry, encounter challenges, difficulties and competitive pressures. The increasing costs of health care, an aging population, growing sophistication of technology, and emergence of new diseases have created a greater burden on hospitals and their employees. In such situation, the most affected healthcare employees are the nursing professionals who must deal with increased demands for efficiency, cost reduction, and improved healthcare quality, whilst at the same time coping effectively with workplace stress, exhaustion and burnout (Luthans, Lebsack & Lebsack, 2008). According to Moritz, Hinshaw, and Heinrich (1989), nurses portray the organization’s competence since the quality of nursing care has a strong effect on healthcare organizations’ ability to provide services at the desired professional standard. Hence, healthcare organizations require highly qualified nurses who are willing to work efficiently towards organizational goals (Katrinli, Atabay, Gunay & Guneri, 2008).

Moreover, Gronroos (1983) argued that nurse’ attitudes and behaviours as customer-contact employees are deemed vital in determining the quality of healthcare services. This is because nurses spend most of their working time directly with patients. Hence, in order to provide quality healthcare to the public, nurses should perform and engage in favourable attitude in the form of high work engagement. Drawn from the emergence of positive psychology which reflects the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), work engagement has been recognized as one of the positive states, which is considered to be the antipode of burnout. Bargagliotti (2011) argued that work engagement in nursing is becoming strategically significant because of global shortage of nurses, political resolve to control the increasing costs of healthcare in industrialized countries, and the rate of medical error that threatens the health of people. According to Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), engaged employees are energetic and have effective relationship with their work activities, and capable of coping effectively with their job demands. Furthermore, evidence has shown that engaged employees perform better than non-engaged employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Research by Schaufeli and Van Rhenen (2006) has revealed that engaged employees often experience positive emotions, and this may be the reason why they are more productive. Similarly, Crippanzano and Wright (2001) argued that happy people are more sensitive to opportunities at work, more outgoing and helpful to others, and more confident and optimistic. Generally, organizations expect their employees to be proactive and demonstrate initiative, highly involved in their work, and committed to high quality performance standards. Therefore, they require employees who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

To foster high work engagement within the nursing workforce, nurses as boundary-spanners of healthcare institutions need to have greater personal resources. Personal resources such as optimism, self-
efficacy, resilience, and self-esteem are aspects of the individual that usually assist one to persevere through challenges and difficulties (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis & Jackson, 2003). Hence, these personal resources are essential ingredients for nurses in handling their daily work activities since the nature of their job deals with tragedy, suffering, and trauma. Several researchers have discovered the existence of a positive relationship between personal resources and work engagement (Bakker, Gierveld & Rijswijk, 2006; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2007; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008). According to Deese (2009), given the challenging nature of the nursing profession, studying the linkage between work engagement and personal resources would be interesting. Therefore, this study sought to examine the effect of self-efficacy and optimism on work engagement among Malaysian nurses.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Work Engagement**

Work engagement can be defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008, p. 187). Vigor refers to “high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, p. 5). Meanwhile, dedication is characterized by “being strongly involved in work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, p. 5). Absorption refers to “being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in work” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, p. 5). According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), individuals who are absorbed in their work perceive time to pass quickly and find it difficult to detach themselves from work. Saks (2006) further suggested that engaged employees will probably be satisfied with and committed to their organizations, and highly involved in their jobs. In sum, work engagement is essential as engaged employees experience (1) pleasure, joy, and enthusiasm, (2) good physical and psychological health, (3) better job performance, (4) increased ability to create job and personal resources, and (5) capability to transfer their engagement to others (Bakker et al., 2008).

Several studies provided empirical evidence on the relationship between work engagement and work-related outcomes. For instance, work engagement has been found to be positively related to customer loyalty and employee performance (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005), in-role performance (Schaufeli, Taris & Bakker, 2006b), job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviours (Saks, 2006), employee proactive behaviours (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2006), and financial returns (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2009).

**Predictors of Work Engagement**

Bakker and Demerouti (2008) proposed that there are two categories of predictors to work engagement, namely job resources and personal resources. Job resources are physical, social or organizational features of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth and development (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005; Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2003; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001).

Meanwhile, personal resources are aspects of the one’s self that refer to an individual’s capability to persevere through difficulties and challenges (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Employees who possess personal resources, such as optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem, resilience and an active coping style will help them to have control over their work environment and to achieve career success (Luthans, Norman, Avolio & Avey, 2008). According to Conservation of Resources theory, individuals who have an abundant of resources are likely to invest resources for future gain (Hobfoll, 1989). Hence, work engagement is mainly influenced by resources in the work environment and in the person (Costa, Passos, & Bakker, 2014).

Of the two forms of resources, personal resources would be more within the control of the individual. Luthans et al. (2008) argued that these resources seem to assist engaged workers to control and impact upon their work environment successfully. In addition, personal resources are not only related to stress resilience but also have a positive influence on physical and emotional well-being (Scheier & Carver, 1992). The main aim of this study was to examine the effects of two forms of personal resources (self-efficacy and optimism) as predictors of work engagement following Hobfoll (2002) who argued that these resources represent fundamental components of a person’s adaptability.

**Personal Resources**
Personal resources are aspects of the individual that generally help one to persist through challenges and obstacles (Hobfoll et al., 2003). According to Judge, Van Vianen, and De Pater (2004), these positive self-evaluations predict goal-setting, motivation, performance, and other pleasuring outcomes. In addition, the greater the amount of an individual’s personal resources, the more positive the person’s self-regard will be and the greater the likelihood for goal self-concordance (Judge, Bono, Erez & Locke, 2005). Luthans and Youssef (2007) noted that individuals with higher goal self-concordance are more intrinsically motivated to attain their goals and this will lead to higher satisfaction and performance.

Numerous authors have investigated the relationships between personal resources and work engagement. For example, Rothmann and Storm (2003) conducted a cross-sectional study among 1910 police officers in South African, and found that police officers who experience high work engagement used an active coping style which relates to problem-focused and taking active steps to get rid of stressors. Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) examined the role of three personal resources (self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem, and optimism) in predicting work engagement among highly skilled Dutch technicians. Their findings indicate that engaged employees are highly self-efficacious and believe that they are capable to meet their job demands. In addition, engaged employees have the tendency to believe that they will experience good outcomes in life (optimistic), and are of the opinion that they can satisfy their needs by involving in roles within the organization (organizational-based self-esteem). Bakker et al. (2006) in their study among female school principals found that principals with high personal resources which include resilience, self-efficacy and optimism scored highest in work engagement. Meanwhile, Bakker, et al. (2008) concluded that work engagement is a unique concept that is best predicted by job resources (autonomy, supervisory coaching, and performance feedback) and personal resources (optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem). In a recent study by Ouweneel, Blanc, and Schaufeli (2012) among 200 employees of a Dutch university, it was found that personal resources (hope, optimism, and self-efficacy) are positively related to work engagement.

One personal resource that is salient in predicting work outcomes is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals’ beliefs that they have the skills and resources needed to succeed at a specific task (Bandura, 1997). Individuals who are high in self-efficacy are more likely to try a task than those who believe that they cannot succeed, which is similar to expectancy beliefs (Bandura, 1977). In a meta-analysis by Stajkovic and Luthans (1998), self-efficacy was found to be significantly correlated with work performance. Employees who believe that their work goals are achievable will be more likely to engage in their jobs.

Another personal resource is optimism. Optimism is defined as related to human performance processes of goal accomplishment and self-regulation (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Consequently, employees who are more optimistic will be more likely to be engaged in their work by maintaining effort and passion. Individuals who are high in optimism have a realistic, positive attitude about the future and a positive attribution of events (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). Luthans et al. (2008) argued that optimism is important in the healthcare profession besides other occupational setting. Luthans et al. (2008) investigated the relationship between optimism and performance among nurses, and discovered that optimism was significantly correlated with all performance measures, including customer satisfaction, commitment to the hospital’s mission, and overall performance. Findings further revealed that after dividing the performance scores of the nurses into four quadrants, nurses with the best performance ratings (highest quadrant) reported more optimism than nurses in the lowest quadrant. Luthans and his colleagues (2008) also found that years of experience were significantly related to optimism. Their study provides evidence on the key role played by optimism in influencing work outcomes within the healthcare industry. Based on the above review of literature, it is posited that:

Hypothesis 1:  Self-efficacy is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 2:  Optimism is positively related to work engagement.

METHOD

Samples and Procedures

The respondents in this study were staff nurses working in two main public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 220 questionnaires were distributed with the assistance of the Matron Office of the two hospitals. The distribution and collection of the completed questionnaires took about one month. Of the 220 questionnaires distributed, 205 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 93.18%.
Measurements

Work engagement was assessed using the shortened nine-item version of the Utrecht work engagement scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). This scale consists of three underlying dimensions, which are measured with three items each: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Respondents reported on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “never” to 7 = “always”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale is 0.90. For the purpose of analyses, an overall work engagement factor score was computed following the suggestion made by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2003), the use of a composite index for work engagement may sometimes be more practical in empirical research due to the existence of moderate to high correlations between the three dimensions. Meanwhile, self-efficacy was measured using 8 items developed by Jones (1986). Meanwhile, a scale constructed by Scheier and Carver (1985) consisting of 6 items was used to measure optimism. The reliability coefficients for these two variables were 0.77 and 0.76 respectively. All items were measured on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. Demographic information such as gender, marital status, age, race, organizational tenure, job tenure and educational level were also requested.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

Of the 205 respondents, 3 (1.5%) were males and 202 (98.5%) were females. Most of the respondents (179 staff nurses or 87.3%) were married, while the remaining 12.7% of the respondents were unmarried. The mean age of the respondents was 37.72 years (SD=9.55). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Malays (92.2%), followed by Chinese (5.4%), other races (1.5%), and Indians (1.0%). Education-wise, 119 respondents (58.0%) had basic training, and 86 respondents (42.0%) had post basic training. As for organizational tenure and job tenure, the mean values were 9.02 years (SD=8.42) and 13.34 years (SD=9.21), respectively. The profile of respondents in this study is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>87.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>92.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Qualification</td>
<td>Basic Training</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>58.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post Basic Training</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations of the Study Variables

Descriptive statistics such as mean scores, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the study variables are provided in Table 2.
TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, CORRELATIONS, AND RELIABILITIES OF THE STUDY VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Work Engagement</th>
<th>Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work Engagement</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ** p<0.01; Figures in parentheses denote the reliability coefficients for the study variables.

As shown in Table 2, the level of work engagement (M = 5.28, SD = 0.84), self-efficacy (M = 5.58, SD = 0.65), and optimism (M = 5.58, SD = 0.66), was slightly high. The reliability coefficients for the study variables were above 0.70, which meets the minimum acceptable standard of 0.7 for exploratory research as suggested by Hair et al. (2006). Meanwhile, correlations between the study variables were found to be significant (p<0.01).

Regression Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the two hypotheses of this study. Following past scholars (Koyuncu, Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2006; Mauno, Kinnunen & Ruokolainen, 2007) age, marital status, education, organizational tenure, and job tenure were statistically controlled. The results of the analysis are depicted in Table 3.

TABLE 3. RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Work Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. ß</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Control Variables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Tenure</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tenure</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Predictor Variable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-value</td>
<td>3.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²-Change</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-Change</td>
<td>3.94**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ** p<0.01

As shown in Table 3, the five control variables did not make any significant contribution towards the variance in work engagement. In model 2, by adding the two predictor variables, the $R^2$ increased to 0.22. This result shows that the two variables were able to explain an additional 13% of the variance in work engagement ($r^2$ change = 0.13, $F$-change = 16.02, p < 0.01). Of the two predictor variables, optimism was found to have a positive and significant relationship with work engagement ($ß = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), thereby, supporting H2. Meanwhile, the effect of self-efficacy on work engagement was insignificant. The non-existence of a relationship between self-efficacy and work engagement leads to the rejection of H1.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effects of self-efficacy and optimism on work engagement. Our findings found that optimism was a significant predictor of work engagement. This finding is...
consistent with those of previous researchers (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Bakker et al., 2006; Bakker et al., 2008). Nurses who are high in optimism have a realistic, positive outlook about the future and a positive attribution towards their jobs. Hence, they are more likely to engage in a favourable attitude in the form of work engagement. In contrast, self-efficacy was found to be unrelated to work engagement. This finding is inconsistent with those discovered by past researchers (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Bakker et al., 2006; Bakker et al., 2008). One possible justification may relate to the work environment of the sample itself. Presently, Malaysia suffers from a shortage of nurses especially among public hospitals (The Star, 5 July, 2007). Given the large number of people (as many as 40 million) that visited public hospitals each year, nurses in Malaysia have to carry a tremendous burden of serving the public. Besides, they also have to bear witness to tragedy and human distress in their daily working lives. Although the self-efficacy levels of these nurses may be relatively on the high side, the adverse elements associated with the work environment may have constrained them from having any effect on their level of work engagement.

As for implications, since optimism influences work engagement, it would be worthwhile for hospital administrators and the Ministry of Health to encourage and enhance optimism among nurses. Optimism is a trait than can be learned and developed as suggested by past scholars (Luthans et al., 2008; Seligman, 1991). For that reason, Ministry of Health should provide more training to nurses in developing their optimism levels.

The present study has two main limitations. First, only two predictor variables (self-efficacy and optimism) were examined. Other personal resources such as resilience, hope, self-esteem, and others may play an important role in predicting work engagement. Future researchers may want to expand the scope of this study by focusing on these variables. Secondly, this study is limited to staff nurses working in public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. The same research could be expanded and replicated among other healthcare personnel from public and private hospitals. A larger sample from the same industry would improve the generalization of the findings.

REFERENCES


