

Organizational Citizenship Behavior: It's Construct Clean-Up Time

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Accumulated empirical evidence, some telling criticisms, and even the most cursory glance at the business press compel us to rethink the defining character of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). It no longer seems fruitful to regard OCB as "extra-role," "beyond the job," or "unrewarded by the formal system." A more tenable position is one that defines OCB much along the lines of what Borman and Motowidlo (1993) called *contextual performance*. Some preliminary suggestions are offered for the repositioning and articulation of the OCB construct as redefined; due attention is given to the problems that nonetheless remain, and will occupy us for some time to come as we reckon with root changes in the very character of organizations.

In concluding my account of the "good soldier syndrome" (Organ, 1988), I freely admitted to some "discomfiting softness" in a "working definition" of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). I made this admission in a chapter titled "Unfinished Business." Perhaps the business of conceptual refinement is never finished, but it is high time to revisit some questions pertaining to construct definitions, terminology, and basic models.

Already one substantial review of construct definitions and nomological networks related to OCB has appeared (Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995). As will soon become clear, I find much to appreciate in that discussion. However, I differ with them on some important issues and I raise some other issues that they chose not to address.

Van Dyne et al. (1995) addressed the following issues: (a) the muddled state of overlap among several constructs of extra-role behavior (ERB): OCB, prosocial organizational behavior (POB), principled organizational dissent (POD), and whistle-blowing (WB); (b) the case for the utility of the larger construct, ERB; and (c)

the plausible sets of antecedents and consequences of redefined categories of ERB. Along the way, Van Dyne et al. argued for making do without the construct POB because of its excessive breadth, a position already concurred with by the two coauthors of that term. Curiously though, Van Dyne et al. took no account of two other constructs—organizational spontaneity (OS; George & Brief, 1992) and contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Brief and Motowidlo (1986) first presented the idea of POB, but left it behind in search of more precise notions.

My agenda here is more limited. I wish to look at the persistent problems that astute people (including myself) have observed with respect to the working definition of OCB and offer some suggestions toward ameliorating those problems. Of necessity, a considerable amount of empirical research is reviewed, because the data from that research make important statements about the viability of one or another positions with regard to definitions, taxonomies, and nomological nets. But in the main, the discussion here is not about hypotheses to be researched or the documentation of substantive relations or even methodology in the usual sense. What is hoped for is simply a way of thinking about OCB that we can be comfortable with.

THE WORKING DEFINITION

My 1988 monograph defined OCB as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ, 1988, p. 4).

That definition, with very minor stylistic differences, preserved the one offered earlier in Bateman and Organ (1983) and Smith, Organ, and Near (1983); an updated account (Organ, 1990) retained it as well. Anticipating some of the criticisms that came later, I immediately elaborated on and qualified the three “soft spots” in that definition:

By *discretionary*, we mean that the behavior is not an *enforceable* [italics added] requirement of the role or the job description, that is the clearly specifiable terms of the person’s employment contract with the organization; the behavior is rather a matter of personal choice, such that its omission is not generally understood as punishable. (Organ, 1988, p. 4)

(Note that even the qualifiers are qualified, e.g., pointed use of the adverbs “clearly,” and “generally.” Thus, the discipline of academic writing makes cowards of us all, such that we are loath to say anything that is not qualified.)

I went on to add:

Our definition of OCB requires that it not be *directly* or *formally* recompensed by the organization’s reward system. ... [Does this] mean that OCB must be limited to those

gestures that are utterly and eternally lacking in any tangible return to the individual? ... Not necessarily. Over time, a steady stream of OCB of different types ... could well determine the impression that an individual makes on a supervisor or on coworkers. That impression, in turn, could influence the recommendation by the boss for a salary increase or promotion. The important issue here is that such returns not be contractually guaranteed. (Organ, 1988, p. 5)

In other words, I was thinking of OCB as contributions that might—or might not—invite some future recompense. The point is that the rewards that accrue to OCB are at best indirect and uncertain, as compared to more formal contributions such as high productivity or technical excellence or innovative solutions. Those contributions would have a greater likelihood of being expressly linked to the formal reward system.

Finally, it was required that OCB contain only those behaviors that, in the aggregate, across time and across persons, contribute to organizational effectiveness. In other words, not every single discrete instance of OCB would make a difference in organizational outcomes; for example, I might offer help to a coworker that actually turns out to be dysfunctional for that person's performance, but summated across the categories of relevant behaviors, the effect would be positive. Or, if you will, lots of people who frequently offer help to coworkers will contribute to the effectiveness of their organization.

This latter requirement as a definition of OCB was one that I thought would ultimately have to be an exercise in faith. The concept of *organizational effectiveness*, its operational definition, and its temporal relation to any of its many antecedents, all loomed as formidable and perhaps impossible conditions to demonstrate. As it happens, though, several studies have taken on the forbidding task of testing the relation between OCB and effectiveness, and the results—while hardly conclusive, because they are cross-sectional—are consistently supportive (Karambaya, 1991; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, in press; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Walz & Niehoff, 1996).

The discretionary and noncontractual reward requirements of the definition have elicited much more discussion and criticism of the OCB construct, as well as its usual forms of measurement. And the problems noted with respect to this demand a reconsideration of the utility of these defining requirements; as we will see, they might still figure as descriptive attributes that, in a probabilistic sense, differentiate OCB from other constructs.

Problems With "Discretionary"

In brief, the problem noted with OCB defined as discretionary, extra-role, and beyond the job requirements is that OCB, as measured, contains elements that many

observers (even the respondents themselves) would consider part of the job. Thus, Morrison (1994) reported that 18 of 20 OCB items were described by a majority of respondents as "in-role." Moreover, participants in her study differed in their conception of the "breadth" of the job. Morrison concluded that "OCB is ill-defined and varies from one employee to the next and between employees and supervisors" (Morrison, 1994, p. 1561). One could interpret this as more of a measurement issue rather than a construct problem, but often the two turn out to be very much intertwined. Construct clarity is not a sufficient condition for psychometric soundness, but it probably is a necessary condition.

Perhaps the problem with defining OCB as extra-role or beyond the job requirements inheres in the very fuzziness of the concepts "role" and "job" themselves. As the work of Graen and others on leader-member exchange (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) has long documented, roles evolve from leader-subordinate give-and-take. Katz and Kahn (1966), in articulating their open-systems model of organizations, explicitly defined roles in terms of the expectations of "role senders," and obviously "expectations" can vary from expecting something well beneath any formal job requirements to something far beyond them. It seems that we guarantee construct muddiness if we define OCB as requiring that it be extra-role.

Van Dyne et al. (1995) vigorously defended the viability of ERB as a construct. They freely conceded that observers will differ across persons and times as to what is exactly in-role or extra-role, and therefore it is somewhat arbitrary in many instances as to what is actually extra-role. However, arguing forcefully with an analogy to the arbitrariness of what we choose to call "green" or "blue" or "aqua," which certainly does not render the concept of "green" (or the concept of "color") valueless, Van Dyne et al. insisted that ERB and in-role behavior (IRB) are useful theoretical building blocks. Thus, one would infer that their position regards any problem here as pertaining more to measurement than construct definition.

My own position is that it would be preferable to avoid, if we could, reference to ERB in defining OCB. As noted earlier, roles evolve as a function of expectations and role-sending; somehow it seems odd that what would be considered OCB today would be regarded as something else next month, or that what a supervisor thinks is OCB is assessed as IRB by some peers or subordinates. I do not see the Van Dyne et al. (1995) position as untenable, but I would want to exhaust other possibilities first.

What about extra-job? I think most students of these matters would concede a distinction between role and job, particularly if by job we mean some sort of formal job description. Thinking this way leaves us pretty much where we started in 1988, that is, OCB is discretionary in the sense of going beyond the enforceable requirement of the job description.

My response to this proposal is that there are probably rampant ambiguities regarding what enforceable job requirements consist of. Jobs, like roles, are

changing, in the wake of downsizing, flattening, team-based, flexform organizations. Indeed, a cover story of *Fortune* magazine titled “The End of the Job” (1994) suggested that the “job” is a social artifact and no longer the best way to organize work. If what they are saying has any empirical foundation whatsoever, then one suspects that such formal job descriptions as are still being written are couched in increasing levels of abstractions and generalities. The job will be whatever is required in the person’s workplace, contingent on the necessary training having been provided. To the extent this occurs, OCB would have been defined away, because anything that is needed from the person in order to contribute would have been part of the job.

The Problem With Noncontractual Rewards

If neither role nor job provide a convenient point of departure for defining OCB, what about the rewards issue? The working definition, we need to remember, did not rule out some sort of reward consequence for a behavior to qualify as OCB, only that it not be contractually guaranteed by the formal reward system. The problem with this is that very few rewards are contractually guaranteed for any behavior, including technical performance or brilliant innovation. How many professors can say they are “guaranteed” promotion, tenure, or an above-average salary increase, regardless of how much or how well they publish, or how good their student evaluations are? In the downsizing of the 1980s and 1990s, how many people employed in private business can even guarantee their continued employment, regardless of how consistently well they have performed? How many top management people would even gingerly guarantee any employee benefit anymore—having learned that even the IBMs of the world can be blind-sided by competition?

Indeed, to the extent that “rewards” follow from appraisals of performance, research (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1991; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Werner, 1994) now strongly suggests that some forms of OCB might be just as likely as—if not more likely than—in-role performance to lead to monetary recompense. Orr, Sackett, and Mercer (1989) reported that managers have no reluctance to put a dollar value on most of the behaviors that we have been calling OCB.

So, where do we stand? Of the three essential conditions for OCB, we are left with one—that it contribute to organizational effectiveness. If that is all we have, then we might as well call it “performance” or “contribution” and be done with it.

OCB AS CONTEXTUAL PERFORMANCE

As noted previously, Van Dyne et al.’s (1995) discussion made no reference to Borman and Motowidlo’s contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993;

Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Because Borman and Motowidlo (1993) defined this as "behaviors [that] do not support the technical core itself so much as they support the broader organizational, social, and psychological environment in which the technical core must function" (p. 73), there is clearly overlap here with such notions as OCB and ERB.

Borman and Motowidlo (1993) enumerated five categories of contextual performance, including volunteering for activities beyond a person's formal job expectations, persistence of enthusiasm and application when needed to complete important task requirements, assistance to others, following rules and prescribed procedures even when it is inconvenient, and openly espousing and defending organization objectives. Obviously, the enumerated categories sound much like OCB in the form of altruism, compliance, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue (at least as the latter has been operationalized in studies of OCB dimensions). What is different from OCB is that contextual performance as defined does not require that the behavior be extra-role nor that it be nonrewarded. The defining quality is that it be "non-task," or more to the point, that it contribute to the maintenance and/or enhancement of the context of work. Some such contributions might well lie within the explicit expectations of what constitutes appropriate role behavior and some could well earn emoluments from the formal reward system via the effect on performance appraisals.

Some readers might object to defining OCB as Borman and Motowidlo define contextual performance, regarding it as too vague or diffuse. And indeed, it could be that we have just introduced still more concepts that cry out for clarity. What do we mean by "social and psychological environment"? What do we mean by "support" in reference to such environments? A good initial test of any construct, say *X*, is to see if we can designate some things that certainly are not *X*. I am hard pressed to think of many nontrivial actions that would most certainly not, in one way or another, "support the social and psychological environment."

On balance, though, I am inclined to counter this objection to diffuseness by saying that it is premature and should await tests of our ability to develop measures that demonstrate convergent and, especially, discriminant validity. In fact, Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994) already empirically demonstrated, in a study of 421 Air Force mechanics, that measures of task performance and contextual performance have different predictors, and more to the point, that they contribute independently to ratings of overall performance. Contextual performance is, to be sure, couched at a rather high level of abstraction. But if that continues to bother us, it is a condition that can be remedied by some mix of conceptual and empirical work that provides molar or "mid range" constructs, that is, classes of contextual performance. These might or might not bear much resemblance to the categories of altruism, compliance, sportsmanship, courtesy, and the like.

Another consideration in favor of the task/contextual dichotomy is the long tradition in group and organizational studies of similar distinctions. One thinks, for

example, of Bales' pioneering lab studies of small groups, in which he saw roles of task and maintenance specialists emerge (Bales & Slater, 1955); of Fleishman's field studies of leadership, finding that initiating structure and consideration were independent dimensions of formal leader behavior (Fleishman, Harris, & Burt, 1955); of Katz and Kahn's (1966) distinction between production systems and maintenance, political, and adaptive systems. Even the Hawthorne studies (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939/1967), with the recognition of formal and informal leadership, and the sociological theory of Parsons (1960), distinguishing between the technical and institutional social systems, echo this duality.

My objection to contextual performance is not its definition but its name. It simply strikes me as cold, gray, and bloodless. Perhaps our formal constructs should be like that. For the moment, though, I would like to hold on to OCB, at the very least for certain milieus of discourse, because I find that both academic and practitioner types readily and intuitively grasp what it is all about. They might quibble over both the existing and any newly proffered definitions, but in the larger sense they see the point. Perhaps the research community will settle on yet a different moniker for its own internal purposes, but even so I think the tag OCB would come in handy as we disseminate our insights and findings to broader constituencies.

THE NOMOLOGICAL NET

So, if we redefine OCB as contributions to the maintenance and enhancement of the social and psychological context that supports task performance (or the technical/technological/production system?), how do we construe the larger nomological net that identifies and enriches such a construct?

First, I would suggest that, compared to task performance, OCB (now conceived as synonymous with contextual performance) is less likely to be considered an enforceable job requirement, to the extent that such requirements continue to exist in organizations. Second, I would suggest that OCB in its revised definition is less likely than task performance to be regarded by the performer as leading confidently to systemic rewards. Although research has demonstrated that exceptional display of OCB can influence performance evaluations and that managers are willing to put a dollar value on some forms of OCB, it is doubtful that the persons rendering these contributions would see a one-to-one correspondence between discrete instances of such contributions and near-term payoffs. The major exception to this statement would obviously be those jobs that, by their nature, virtually consist of varied forms of contextual performance. Counselors, ombudsmen, and some human resource staff functions might fit this exception.

The exceptions, even if they turn out to be numerous, still constitute inordinate construct problems, because now we do not require as a construct definition that

OCB be “beyond the job” or “not lead to system rewards.” We are, rather, offering an empirical testable hypothesis to the effect that performance contributions in the two forms—OCB and task—differ by degree in the matters of enforceable job requirements and guarantee of systemic rewards.

Thirdly, as indicated earlier, I find much to agree with in Van Dyne et al.’s (1995) discussion, excepting their positive regard for the in-role/extra-role distinction. I would, for example, second their motion that we regard OCB as “affiliative” and “promotive.” I agree with them that construct clarity is aided by preserving the distinction between OCB and “challenging” behaviors (such as POD or WB), which have a different character altogether: Although there is no gainsaying that such challenges can and sometimes do ultimately contribute to an organization’s survival and long-run effectiveness, they do so at the risk of severe short-term costs to the social and psychological context that supports task performance. Put differently, challenging behaviors—however appropriate and needed they might be—often pit brother against brother, sister against sister, ins against outs, haves against have-nots, and so forth. Challenges present shocks to the system. Sometimes these shocks are needed, but they do present risks.

Early on, I noted in Graham’s “civic virtue,” or responsible involvement in the governance and political system of an organization (Graham, 1986), an important form of contribution “beyond what is required by the formal system,” and thus something that ought to be subsumed under OCB. However, anyone familiar with the research on OCB knows how civic virtue was garbled in the process of operationalization—it came out in questionnaire rating items that referred to attending meetings, keeping up with what was going on, reading and responding to announcements and mail. Something got lost in the process, and here’s why.

Origins of OCB

The roots of OCB research and theory lie in an intuitive conviction that, contrary to the then-in-vogue party line of industrial/organizational psychology, job satisfaction did indeed bear a functional relation to performance of a sort (Organ, 1977). Although granting that job attitudes might have little to do with objective measures of individual job output, the argument was that satisfaction would affect people’s willingness to help colleagues and work associates and their disposition to cooperate in varied and mundane forms to maintain organized structures that govern work. Putting the argument in these terms meant that there was scant interest in looking at such things as POD. We do not generally think of people who “challenge,” or criticize, the established order as people who are most satisfied with it.

The need to identify more precisely those helpful and cooperative behaviors borne of job satisfaction led Smith (Smith et al., 1983) to visit several lower-level managers at their places of work. Using a tape recorder, Smith simply asked these people:

What kinds of things do you like to have people in your group do, but you know that you can't actually force them to do it, can't promise any tangible rewards for doing it, and can't punish them for not doing it?

Smith got the richly textured material that she sought and went on from there to develop the instrument that has been the most widely used in research on OCB. But deriving the instrument this way ensured a "managerial" or, if you wish, "status quo," bias to the measure and thus, in effect, to any honest interpretation of the research using that measure. In other words, OCB became, operationally, "things that supervisors like for you to do, even though they can't make you do it and can't guarantee any reward for it beyond their appreciation and perhaps an occasional extra kindness or two." Moreover, one could have bet that the behaviors identified would tend toward the mundane—rather than, say, bold innovative suggestions. One suspects that most managers are trying to minimize present headaches, not trying to multiply them by entertaining scores of initiatives from their charges.

But, in retrospect, perhaps the unintentioned bias toward what kind of performance results from satisfaction and what managers appreciate is not unfortunate, at least from a theoretical perspective. What was unfortunate was not making it explicit. Worse yet, trying to subsume too much under the construct, and then operationalizing ill-fitting molar constructs (such as civic virtue) into the same kind of items found in the early OCB measure, occasioned confusion. Recognizing that to be the case now, we can proceed explicitly with what we started out with, but now with much more well-defined boundaries. To regard OCB as affiliative and promotive, as suggested by Van Dyne et al. (1995), has much to recommend it.

Antecedents

I have a quibble, though, with Van Dyne et al.'s (1995) description of OCB antecedents as *affective states*. The quibble arises because, of late, some readers would equate affective states with mood states. Readers do so because some writers have chosen to define mood as affective state (e.g., George & Brief, 1992, and various social psychological works from which they draw). However, affect and affective have been used in psychological discourse in ways that do not necessarily say anything about mood. The conventional psychological definition of an attitude, for example, refers to an affective component or "the intensity of positive or negative affect for or against a psychological object" (Worchel, Cooper, & Goethals, 1988, p. 200). This does not mean that people with positive attitudes toward their employers are necessarily in a "good mood" at any particular time. It simply means that the cognitions clustered in association with the employer contain positive evaluations or assessments.

Furthermore, in a recent meta-analysis of attitudinal and dispositional correlates of OCB (Organ & Ryan, 1995), little support was found for the ability of mood-state

or mood-trait measures to predict OCB. Rather, it was found that affectively toned descriptions of the organization and its leadership—to wit, job satisfaction, perceived fairness, leader supportiveness, and organizational commitment—predicted both Altruism and Compliance at about the same level. It would appear that it is what such measures have in common, as attitudes, that really relates to OCB. And we might do well simply to refer to that common ground as something akin to the old-fashioned notion of “morale.”

The meta-analytic review also found next to nothing in the way of dispositional predictors of OCB; the sole exception was that various measures that appear to overlap around a core concept of “conscientiousness” are modestly associated with Compliance, or the more impersonal variety of OCB.

Thus, if I had to offer up a statement of antecedents of OCB, I would prefer a more parsimonious version than that proposed by Van Dyne et al. (1995). In place of the six affective states, I think it is more appropriate to put “attitudes indicative of or derived from a general state of morale in the workplace.” Instead of their six individual differences dimensions, we might do well just to refer to “dispositions related to conscientiousness” and “any dispositions that can be confidently and empirically tied to characteristic level of morale in the workplace.”

DIMENSIONS OF OCB

One of the recurring objections to OCB terminology has been the use of the term *altruism* to denote those contributions to effectiveness that take the form of assistance to specific persons, such as colleagues, associates, clients, or the boss. The objection rests on the argument that to describe any such behavior as altruism is to impute a particular motive for the behavior, or at the least to imply that some motive devoid of self-interest is at work.

The point is well taken. We can do rather well by calling this form of OCB simply helping or helpfulness. If we really need something neutral and more likely to guard against preconceived connotations, we could follow the lead of Williams and Anderson (1991) and designate it as *OCB-I*—to indicate that the exemplars of this class of OCB contributions are those targeted toward an individual as they are acted out. Furthermore, we might well use this nomenclature also to refer to what has otherwise been separated out as *Courtesy*, those OCB gestures that are demonstrated in the interest of preventing problems that would otherwise occur for specifiable individuals. Empirical research has sometimes been able to sustain the distinction between what was termed Altruism and Courtesy, but not with consistent loading of the intended items on the factors.

Continuing with the Williams and Anderson labels, we can designate a dimension of OCB as that which offers no immediate aid to any specific person or persons, but demonstrates and sustains high standards for attendance, punctuality, conser-

vation of organizational resources, and use of time while at work—and label it as *OCB-O*, to indicate that the organization or unit as an entity is the target. In time, perhaps someone will offer a useful tag, analogous to helping for *OCB-I*, that will capture the gist of this concept. I still am partial to the label *conscientiousness*, except that it invites confusion with a dimension of the Big Five group of personality factors. Perhaps that confusion is a tolerable, even trivial risk. After all, we use achievement motivation and anxiety as both state-descriptors and trait-descriptors.

THE “UNFINISHED BUSINESS” BEFORE US NOW

If we can assume some reasonable degree of consensus on the positions described here, then how do we now proceed? What are the problem areas?

No doubt the most formidable exercise awaiting us is develop a more precise rendering of what we mean when we define OCB as “performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place.” Although that is a good place from which to start, we can scarcely be comfortable in leaving it at that. What we seem to be groping for is something that is in the essence of the very condition of social organization itself. This might be an issue whose treatment calls for some consultation with our “macro” colleagues in organization theory. Unfortunately, their literature is one that I cannot claim to have followed closely in recent years. But those readers who toil in the interstices of macro- and micro-organizational behavior might know of fruitful linkages that would help explicate a compelling description of the construct.

Such linkages might well aid us in yet another area of concern, which is the level of analysis problem. To date, most OCB and related research has addressed contributions by individuals and the antecedents of those contributions. A few studies have looked at the group or organizational level, but virtually entirely so in a straightforward aggregative and descriptive style. We are left with a “black box” of “process” (as is all too common in a discipline whose bread-and-butter methodology is the correlational field study). Although we have some reassuring data in support of the connection between OCB and systemic performance, little if any analysis has dealt with the means by which OCB has these effects. What is the chemistry by which the state of organization is altered by individual OCB? What sequences of stages are effected? What is the “half-life” of these stages and their effects?

CONCLUSION

The changes that are occurring in the workplace—changes that we already have written and talked about so often that their description has become a quilt of

cliches—will no doubt cause us to reexamine many of our favored constructs in organizational psychology. Or at least that will be the case for the “organizational” part of our field, and that is the part that provides our *raison d’être*. Although it does not seem to me that 1983 is exactly lost in the shrouded mist of history, it does appear now that the way I described OCB in that year was mightily influenced by fading attributes of a different kind of organization from the one we see taking shape now. One hopes that the refinements along the lines suggested here and by others will help to preserve whatever the idea of OCB had to offer.

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