



Practitioner's Corner

ARE CONFIDENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY INTERCHANGEABLE: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracy H. Porter
Cleveland State University, USA

Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) is a field of research that has gained attention in recent years for “looking at those human strengths and psychological capacities that lend themselves to developmental approaches specifically designed to enhance workplace performance” (Luthans, 2003). In much of the literature, the POB construct of confidence is described as based upon self-efficacy; therefore, many theorists have stated that the terms are interchangeable. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of the current literature regarding each construct with the intent of conducting future research. Also included is correspondence with Drs. Bandura and Luthans (2009) regarding this topic.

Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) is a field of research that has gained attention in recent years for “looking at those human strengths and psychological capacities that lend themselves to developmental approaches specifically designed to enhance workplace performance” (Luthans, 2003). POB looks at the psychological and behavioral processes from a positive perspective (Nelson & Cooper, 2007). The historical basis of POB is rooted in positive psychology, which is a movement calling for a more balanced approach in the research, looking at the positive and negative aspects of organizational issues. Luthans and Avolio (2003) proposed the constructs of confidence, hope, and optimism as the foundation of POB.

In previous literature, the construct of confidence is noted to be the most valid of the three constructs because it is theoretically based upon the concept of self-efficacy. In fact, in much of the literature the terms are said to be interchangeable. However the relationship between the two terms is debated. According to Bandura (direct correspondence, 2009) it is not appropriate to interchange the two terms.

Literature Review

The Historical Roots of Positive Organizational Behavior

A number of years ago, many psychologists became increasingly concerned about the field of psychology's emphasis on the negative aspects of people and the lack of research on positive aspects (Nelson & Cooper, 2007). Many were concerned that the field of psychology had ignored the reasons why some organizations were successful and consistently focused on the failures of followers. Seligman & Csikszentmihali (2000) explained that the initial emphasis on the negative was appropriate during its time but is not appropriate now. In earlier research, it was assumed that characteristics such as courage and optimism gave followers a buffer against the negative consequences of difficult experiences (Nelson & Cooper).

In time, the field of positive psychology developed into what is now commonly referred to as positive organizational behavior (Nelson & Cooper, 2007). Luthans (2002b, 2000) pioneered the positive approach in organizational behavior by focusing on building human strengths in organizations rather than only managing the weaknesses (Nelson & Cooper). POB is defined as "the study and application of positively-oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (Luthans, 2002a, p. 59). This definition includes measurable criteria that contribute to performance improvement in the workplace (Luthans).

Psychological Capital/PsyCap

The concept of psychological capital, or PsyCap, was developed by Luthans as a measurable way of assessing performance. PsyCap is the process of "going beyond human (what you know) and social (who you know) capital to who you are (the actual self) and what you intend to become (your possible self)" (Avolio & Luthans, 2006, p. 147). PsyCap is also defined as:

An individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting path to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success. (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 3)

The PsyCap Construct of Confidence: The Definition

According to Luthans (2002b), the PsyCap construct of confidence is primarily based on the work of Bandura (1986, 1997) and social cognitive theory. Under this theory Bandura (1997) referred to the probability that people will estimate that they can take on a particular task as a demonstration of their self-efficacy. "Although Bandura did not use the term confidence often in research, the terms efficacy and confidence have become interchangeable in positive psychology" (Maddux, 2001, p. 257). Luthans (2006) described confident people as having the following five important characteristics:

1. They set high goals for themselves and self-select into difficult tasks.

2. They welcome and thrive on challenge.
3. They are highly self-motivated
4. They invest the necessary effort to accomplish their goals.
5. When faced with obstacles they persevere (p. 38).

Confidence can be defined as “an individual’s conviction (or confidence) about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action necessary to successfully execute a specific task within a given context” (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998, p. 66). From a simplistic standpoint, a confident individual will trust his or her own abilities. It is this confidence which gives a person the ability to choose challenging tasks, invest the necessary time and energy to achieve their goals, and persevere when faced with obstacles and discouraging signals (Stajkovic & Luthans).

Luthans (2006) noted five key discoveries of the PsyCap characteristic confidence which will aid in the level of understanding of one’s own efficacy and therefore guide one’s progress in life. Luthans once again used the terms confidence and efficacy interchangeably. The key discoveries of confidence are:

1. Discovery 1: PsyCap efficacy is domain specific. One may be quite sure of themselves in one domain but, not at all confident in others. Confidence which is built in one domain may not be transferrable to another domain.
2. Discovery 2: PsyCap efficacy is based on practice or mastery: It is likely that one is most confident with the tasks one practices routinely. Efficacy is based on one’s estimate of future probability of success.
3. Discovery 3: There is always room for improvement in PsyCap efficacy. Even in a domain where one feels quite confident there may be aspects of that task one needs to improve upon.
4. Discovery 4: PsyCap efficacy is influenced by others. What others may say or demonstrate about one’s behavior will affect the self-evaluation process.
5. Discovery 5: PsyCap efficacy is variable. Confidence level may be affected by many factors including knowledge, skills and abilities to attain goals (Luthans, 2006).

Luthans (2006) argued these five discoveries mold the efficacy of individuals and increase their ability to perform well over extended periods of time:

People with high confidence do not wait for challenging goals to be set for them; they continuously challenge themselves. People with low confidence are shown to have self-doubt, skepticism, negative feedback, social criticism, obstacles and setbacks, and even repeated failure. (p. 50)

Confidence and Self-Efficacy: Are The Terms Interchangeable?

Luthans (2006) posited that the POB construct of confidence and Bandura’s (1997) construct of self-efficacy are interchangeable terms. However, according to Bandura this assertion is not necessarily correct (personal communication, March 13, 2009). Bandura responded in the following way when asked if the two terms were interchangeable:

Self-efficacy is rooted in a theory of human agency. Self-efficacy concerns beliefs in one’s capability to effect changes by one’s actions. Confidence is simply the strength of that belief. Where is the theory of how you build confidence, the mechanisms through which it works, its diverse effects, and how it can be used for personal and social change? (Bandura, personal communication, March 13, 2009).

The field of positive psychology needs to be addressed from the agentic perspective of the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2006). “To be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s functioning and the course of environment events” (Bandura, in press). Therefore, the people themselves contribute to their lives and are not simply products of them (Bandura). The most important mechanism of agency is personal efficacy (Bandura). Bandura described efficacy as a core belief in motivation, well-being, and accomplishments. People need to believe they are able to produce desired effects by their actions or else they will have very little incentive to act or face difficult situations (Bandura). “Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivator, they are rooted in the core belief, that one has the power to effect changes by one’s action” (Bandura).

Bandura (in press) noted there are numerous benefits to the study of agentic positive psychology that can actually accent human enablement rather than focus primarily on people’s problems and failings. However, “the potentials they cultivate and the life paths that become open to them are partly determined by the societal systems to which their development and well-being are entrusted” (Bandura, in press). The social systems in which people live can build competencies, build people’s belief in their efficacy to influence life, and allow the individual to become self-directed (Bandura).

Discussion

Based on the available literature regarding the constructs of confidence and self-efficacy, it appears that there is a need for further research in this area. Clearly there is dissension among theorists regarding the operational definition of each construct.

Luthans (personal communication, January 13, 2010), when asked about the operational definition of confidence, responded that “it’s basically self-efficacy”; no further information was given regarding the theoretical basis of confidence. On the other hand, Bandura (personal communication, March 13, 1999) clearly disagreed with Luthans’ assertion regarding confidence. Bandura does not believe that the term confidence can or should be based upon the theoretical foundation of self-efficacy. Bandura stated that “confidence is simply the strength” behind human agency and self-efficacy (personal communication, March 13, 1999). Therefore, the question has to be raised as to whether confidence is in fact a moderating variable to self-efficacy.

This paper serves as a platform for future research regarding the construct of confidence. It will be important for future research to determine empirically whether confidence and self-efficacy are in fact interchangeable. Can confidence be operationally defined outside of the theoretical basis of self-efficacy? Additionally, the potential moderating effect of confidence on self-efficacy should be studied.

About the Author

Tracy H. Porter is a term faculty member with the Management and Labor Relations Department of Cleveland State University. She has extensive experience in the higher education field and as a management consultant. She received her bachelor’s degree in business administration from Towson University and a master’s degree in organizational development from Johns Hopkins University. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in organizational leadership at Regent University

specializing in human resource development. Her current research interests are in leadership, individual differences in the leader-follower relationship, and spirituality in the workplace.
Email: t.h.porter@csuohio.edu

References

- Avolio, B., & Luthans, F. (2006). *The high impact leader: Moments matter in accelerating authentic leadership development*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (2000). Cultivate self-efficacy for personal and organizational effectiveness. In E. Locke (Ed.), *The Blackwell handbook of principles of organizational behavior* (pp. 120-136). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bandura, A. (in press). An agentic perspective on positive psychology. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Positive psychology: Expecting the best in people*. New York: Praeger.
- Luthans, F. (2002a). Positive organizational behavior: Developing and managing psychological strengths. *Academy of Management Executive*, 57-72.
- Luthans, F. (2002b). The need for and meaning of positive organizational behavior. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 695.
- Luthans, F. (2006). *Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press.
- Luthans, F., Youssef, C., & Avolia, B. (2007). *Psychological Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luthans, F., Zhu, W., & Avolio, B. (2006). The impact of efficacy on work attitudes across cultures. *Journal of World Business*, 121-132.
- Maddux, J. (2002). Self-efficacy: The power of believing you can. In C. Snyder & S. Lopez, *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 257-276). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, D., & Cooper, C. (2007). *Positive Organizational Behavior*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology. *American Psychologist*, 5-14.
- Stajkovic, A., & Luthans, F. (1998). Self-efficacy and work related performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, 240-261.
- Wright, T. (2003). Postitive organizational behavior: An idea whose time has truly come. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 437.
- Youssef, C., & Luthans, F. (2005). A positive organizational behavior approach to ethical performance. In R. Giacalone, C. Jurkiewicz, & C. Dunn (Ed.), *Positive psychology in business ethics and corporate social responsibility* (pp. 1-22). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.