THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE AND MEANINGFUL WORK IN THE FORMATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP

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Abstract

The study examines the relationship between two important constructs in organizational psychology – *psychological ownership* and *meaningful work* in the context of *organizational justice*. Perception of organizational justice is conceptualized as a contextual variable which is used to evaluate environmental influence (fair, unfair) on the relationship between the target variables. To better analyze the complex relationship between the variables, we introduced burnout as a dependent variable. 536 public servants participated in the study. The study used a self-administered questionnaire and the results were interpreted from the perspective of social exchange theory.

According to the study, meaningful work plays an important role in the development of the sense of psychological ownership towards the organization. The more valuable the work is, the stronger is the sense of psychological ownership towards the organization. Meaningful work enables employees to overcome problems at the workplace and cope with difficulties. Organizational justice moderates the relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership. The importance of work compensates for the negative effect of the perception of organizational injustice on the development of psychological ownership. The relationship between the perception of the meaning of work and burnout is partially mediated by psychological ownership. Employees' perception that they do valuable work contributes to the development of psychological ownership. Sentence to the development of psychological ownership.

Key words: meaningful work, organizational justice, psychological ownership, burnout, social exchange theory

Introduction

Key constructs

Work is a very special and valuable part of our life. It is associated with a number of psychological, social and material benefits. However, the importance of work in human life is determined by its potential for personality growth, self-actualization and professional development. V. Frankl's concept of meaning of life emphasizes the importance of intrinsic

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motivation for personality growth and development (Devivere, 2018). Work helps people make their existence meaningful. The more meaningful and valuable the work is, the stronger the experience of the meaningfulness of life (Allan, Douglass, Duffy, & McCarty, 2015).

Professionals working in the field of industrial and organizational psychology agree that work is special because of its meaningfulness, the employee's perception of its usefulness and value (Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2012). *Meaningful work* is related to the individual, his/her purposes and necessities and their need to contribute to important events (Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). Meaningful work increases intrinsic motivation, has a positive impact on the work-related attitudes (job satisfaction, engagement), and reduces avoidance behavior such as absenteeism and turnover (Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). An employee who perceives his/her own work as meaningful is better motivated to contribute to organizational success. Meaningful work results in positive organizational outcomes, such as increased motivation and organizational responsibility, organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment (Pickford, Joy, Roll, 2016).

Self, others, work context and spirituality have been identified as four sources of meaningful work. Work acquires a deeper meaning for those people for whom spirituality is truly important (Rosso, 2010). For such people work is related to higher purposes and meaning (Steger, 2017).

The present study is based on the following assumption: *Meaningful work becomes part of the employee's identity and contributes to the formation of psychological ownership towards the organization.*

Psychological ownership is the state in which an individual develops possessive feelings for a specific material or immaterial target object (Van Dyne, Linn & Pierce, Jon, 2004). It is a complex construct composed of cognitive and affective components. Its cognitive aspect involves the belief that the individual possesses the 'target object' (potential targets could be the organization and/or the work performed by the employee); affective aspect implies the feeling of pleasure caused by ownership and provoked by self-efficacy and experience of being competent. Because of the above mentioned and other reasons, the individual becomes attached to the target object (Avey et al., 2009), which results in positive attitude towards the organization and productive behavior. It is believed that psychological ownership evokes enthusiasm, which makes this construct especially important (Kumar, & Nayak, 2019). Research shows that psychological ownership is related to high level of performance (Pierce, Jussila, & Cummings, 2009), job satisfaction (Avey et al., 2009), work engagement and high level of participation in decision-making (Mayhew, Ashkanasy, Bramble, & Gardner, 2007). Psychological ownership contributes to organizational citizenship behavior (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004, Rochikashvili, 2021). On the other hand, it is negatively related to deviant behavior against the organization and employee turnover (Dawkins, Tian, Newman & Martin, 2015).

According the psychological ownership theory developed by John Pierce, there are three key motives that underlie psychological ownership. These are: 1. Efficacy; 2. Self-identity; 3. Belongingness (Pierce, & Jussila, 2011). We suggest that the arousal and/ or realization of motives is facilitated by meaningful work. This kind of relationship could

be explained as follows: When an employee has a feeling that she/he is doing meaningful work, this links the employee's identity with the possessed object (organization in this case) even stronger and increases the sense of psychological ownership or contributes to its formation.

It would be logical to assume that the conditions which enable the individual to influence the development of important processes and do meaningful work, can satisfy the needs for efficacy and control. Therefore, the individual strengthens the ties with the target, which increases the sense of ownership. At the same time, she/he symbolically presents oneself in this way and the given work and organization become an expression of the employee's identity.

The results of multilevel organizational research and the complexity of work environment, i.e., existence of different interacting multilevel factors, suggests that the *organizational environment, i.e., the context, has an impact on the relationship between the formation of sense of ownership and the endowment of work with meaning.* We expect that *organizational environment, specifically, organizational justice, will play a particular role in the relationship of these two variables.*

The term 'organizational justice' was coined by Greenberg (1987). It implies that *employees have their personal perception of fairness of organizational processes and the decisions made by the organization.* Individuals, normally, judge fairness by the proportion between what employees invest and what they receive in exchange. Employees judge the organizational justice by results, procedures and interaction with the management. Therefore, organizational justice refers to individuals' perceptions of fairness of formal processes and procedures in the organization and the way they are treated by management.

There is an increasing amount of research which demonstrates a positive impact of organizational justice on employees' attitude to work, performance and effectiveness of the organization (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Mengstie, 2020). The studies show that perceived organizational justice is a precondition of job satisfaction, work motivation, organizational commitment and positive organizational behavior (Bakhshi et al., 2009; Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Cheng et al., 2020; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Gillet et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2020; Mengstie, 2020; Moliner et al., 2008; Rasheed & Al, 2017). Both local and international research of justice show that organizational justice is an effective mechanism preventing deviant, antagonistic behavior and stimulating positive behavior at the workplace (Kutaladze, Tsulaia, 2021). It reduces absenteeism and turnover and contributes to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, high level of performance, organizational citizenship behavior, etc. (Bouazzaoui, Wu, Roehrich, Squire, & Roath, 2020). As already mentioned, even though organizational justice refers to perceived fairness, in our study it is considered as a *contextual* variable.

We chose **burnout** as a dependent variable. It is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion which is caused by being in an emotionally difficult situation for a long time. Unfair organizational environment must be one of the most emotionally difficult situations. Psychological ownership can be also associated with burnout. If increased sense of ownership is a positive experience, its loss results in the feelings of emptiness and

exhaustion. When we lose what we believe is our 'possession', we experience negative feelings. Past research and social experience say that the sense of ownership is accompanied by significant behavioral, emotional and psychological outcomes (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). The introduction of burnout as a construct will enable us to reveal a more complex picture of interrelationship between the study variables.

The purpose of the study is the assessment of the impact of organizational justice on the formation of the perception of meaningful work and sense of ownership and the relationship of these two constructs. Meaningful work is viewed in the context of negative organizational outcomes (including burnout) as a buffer preventing negative results. The *social exchange theory*, presented in the final part of the document, has been used as a conceptual framework of the study.

Study design

The present research is a part of a large-scale study conducted in the public sector. The study aimed to obtain empirical evidence on the actual impact of public sector reform on the development of effective, meritocratic system of HR management. Due to 'psychological tendencies' observed in the public sector, together with direct indicators, we included several important constructs from organizational psychology, which were used for an indirect evaluation of the effectiveness of the reform. Our research mainly focused on the four constructs described above and their interrelationship, which could be examined through a complex analysis. Relationship between the constructs was analyzed using the data obtained from 536 public servants.¹

The study used the following instruments: Work as meaning inventory – WAMI and modified versions of Psychological Ownership Questionnaire developed by James Avey and his colleagues in 2009². Both questionnaires were adapted within the framework of a master's thesis.³ The organizational justice was measured using Niehoff and Moorman's short version of the instrument (Niehoff & Moorman, 1993), and BMS (Malach-Pines, 1988) was used to measure burnout. Internal consistency was measured with Cronbach's alpha which ranged from .8 to .83.

Before data analysis, factorial structure of each instrument, its reliability and psychometric properties were evaluated. The instruments used ensured collection of the information which was valid for the given study.

As already said, we used short versions of the instruments, due to which it was impossible to measure dimensions of the main constructs. In addition, participants of the study were public servants, which created difficulties in terms of the generalization of obtained results. These two points could be considered limitations of the study, even though the

¹ Demographic data: women – 56%; men – 44%; mean age – 44, standard deviation – 12. Most respondents in the sample held bachelor and master degrees (90% in total).

² Since the present study is part of a large-scale study, we used a short version of the questionnaire.

³ (1) M. Rochikashvili (2021), Organizational predictors and outcomes of psychological ownership. Master's thesis. Supervisor: I. Kutaladze. (2) L. Parjiani (2021), Predictors of the perceived value of work. Supervisor: I. Kutaladze.

selection of short versions of the instruments and the limitation of the study participants to public servants was rational and logical.

Results

Relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership in fair and unfair organizational environment

The relationship between the target variables of the study – *meaningful work and psy-chological ownership* – was measured in the context of perceived organizational justice. The table below shows that correlation between the variables was statistically significant.

	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3
1. Organizational justice	39.97	7.783			
2. Meaningful work	4.30	.695	.408**		
3. Psychological ownership	4.38	.685	.435**	.698**	
4. Burnout	7.24	3.057	441**	476**	486**
** p< 0.01					

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables

Linear regression analysis showed that *organizational justice* predicts 19%- of the variance in psychological ownership (R^2 = .19, F(1,534) = 124.4, p < .01). 1 standard unit increase in organizational justice was associated with 0.44 standard unit increase in psychological ownership (β = .44, p < .01).

Multiple liner regression was used to predict the role of meaningful work and organizational justice in the development of psychological ownership. It was demonstrated that meaningful work plays a dominant role in the development of psychological ownership. Both factors (meaningful work and organizational justice) jointly explained 51.5% of the variance in psychological ownership ($R^2 = 0.515$, F(2, 534) = 282.730, p < 0.001). However, the role of meaningful work in the development of psychological ownership was especially important ($\beta = 0.63$, p < 0.001). 1 standard unit increase in meaningful work was associated with 0.63 standard unit increase in psychological ownership. The effect of organizational justice was relatively weak ($\beta = 0.18$, p < 0.01).

Simple moderation model was used to examine the role of organizational justice (contextual variable) in the relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership. As a result of the evaluation of the *moderating effect* of organizational justice in the relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership, it turned out that the employees' perception that their activity at the workplace is valuable and useful and that the work they do is important for society (i.e. meaningful work), has a significant role in the

development and/or stimulation of psychological ownership. It needs to be emphasized that in this and other below stated cases we used the so-called quasi-moderator as all the moderating variables correlated with the dependent variable.

Dependent variable : Psychological ownership						
R ² =.52, F(3, 532)=193.362, p<.001						
Variables	В	SE	Т	Р	95% CI	
Predictor (direct effect): Meaningful work	.946	.124	7.64	.000	[.70, 1.189]	
Moderator: Organizational justice	.054	.014	3.81	.000	[.026, .083]	
Interaction variable: Organizational justice and meaningful work	009	.003	-2.76	.05	[015, .003]	
A. F. Hayes PROCESS, model1; (N=536)						

Table 2. Simple moderation model: Organizational justice as a moderator of the relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership

Meaningful work has a positive effect on psychological ownership at any level of organizational justice. The feeling that you do valuable work 'compensates' for the negative effect of unfair organizational environment on employees' psychological ownership (buffering the effect of moderation). On the other hand, when organizational environment is fair, meaningful work strengthens the positive effect of organizational justice on psychological ownership (amplifying moderation).

The study results show that the fairer organizational environment is, the higher the probability of developing psychological ownership. The hypothesis that the organizational justice (contextual variable) has an effect on the relationship between psychological ownership and meaningful work, was not confirmed. The finding of the study is that in the presence of meaningful work the effect of an extremely important variable – organizational justice is relatively weak. This is also proved by moderating, 'compensatory' effect of meaningful work on the relationship between the organizational justice and psychological ownership. Such a result is not surprising since meaningful work, as a concept, is linked with the meaning of life and purpose of our existence.

Organizational justice, meaningful work, psychological ownership and burnout

Compared to meaningful work and psychological ownership, the organizational justice did not play a significant role in the development of burnout. Our assumption regarding its dominant role was based on the study results demonstrating a critical role of organizational justice in the prediction of work attitudes and behavior (Choi, Sungjoo, 2011). It turned out that meaningless, routine work (in contrast with meaningful work) and estrangement from the organization (in contrast with psychological ownership) equally contributed to the development of burnout.

Meaningful work, organizational justice and psychological ownership explain 32.4% of the variance in burnout (R^2 = 32.4%, F(3,532) = 85.087, p < 0.001). Meaningful work, organizational justice and psychological ownership are associated with a lower risk of burnout and vice versa.

1 standard unit increase in meaningful work was associated with 0.124 standard unit decrease in burnout (β = -0.214, *p* < 0.01). 1 standard unit increase in psychological ownership was associated with 0.225 standard unit decrease in burnout (β = -0.225, *p* < 0.01), which is slightly stronger than the organizational justice effect (β = -0.256 *p* < 0.01), but compared to the target variable as a contextual factor it does not play a dominant role in the explanation of variance in burnout.

Complex analysis of study variables: Mediation and moderated mediation model

Mediation and moderated mediation models were used for a more complex analysis of the relationship between the study variables.

Mediation analysis was applied to meaningful work (predictor), burnout (dependent variable) and psychological ownership (mediator). It was confirmed that the subjective perception of meaningful work and burnout are mediated by psychological ownership (partial mediation).

The above result can be interpreted as follows:

- When an employee feels that his/her work is less valuable, it prevents them to perceive organization as part of their identity and develop a sense of ownership towards it. This, in its turn, creates estrangement from the organization, which, may, ultimately, become a precondition for burnout;
- In contrast with the above, an employee's perception that she/he does valuable work, facilitates the development of psychological ownership, which, in its turn, reduces the risk of burnout.

Dependent variable: Burnout						
$R^2 = .27, F(2, 533) = 99.810, p < .001$						
Variables	В	SE	Т	р	95% CI	
Predictor (direct effect): Meaningful work	-1.17	.227	-5.15	.000	[-1.62,72]	
Mediator: Psychological ownership	-1.34	.23	-5.82	.000	[-1.79,89]	
Indirect effect	Effect1	BootSE			Boot 95%CI	
<i>Indirect effect:</i> Meaningful work→ Psychological ownership → Burnout	21	.04			[29,13]	
A. F. Hayes PROCESS, model 7; (N=536)						

Table 3. Simple mediation model: Psychological ownership as a mediatorof relationship between meaningful work and burnout

The study also demonstrated the role of *moderated mediation*. In the given model, meaningful work is a predictor and burnout is a dependent variable. The relationship between these two variables is mediated by psychological ownership. The relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership is moderated by organizational justice.

Figure 1. Moderated mediation model: Psychological ownership as the mediator or relationship between meaningful work and burnout, moderated by organizational justice



Dependent variable: Burnout							
R ² مسورة شريع مربع المربع							
Variables:	В	SE	Т	р	95% CI		
Predictor (direct effect): Meaningful work	17	.22	-5.15	.000	[61,72]		
Mediator: Psychological ownership	-1.34	.23	-5.81	.000	[-1.79,89]		
ndirect effect: Meaningful work → Psychological ownership → Burnout	Effect ²	BootSE			Boot 95%CI		
Organizational justice: Low level	88	.18			[-1.2,53]		
Organizational justice: Medium level	78	.15			[-1.07,49]		
Organizational justice: High level	69	.14			[97,42]		
Mediated moderation index	Index	BootSE			Boot 95%CI		
	.012	.0078			[.0004, .0304]		
Dependent variable: Psychological ownership							
Predictor: Meaningful work	.95	.12	7.6	.000	[.70, 1.2]		
Moderator: Organizational justice	.05	.01	3.8	.000	[.03, .08]		
Interaction variable: Meaningful work and Organizational justice	009	.033	-2.76	.000	[02,003]		
A. F. Hayes PROCESS, model 7; (N=536)							

Table 4. Moderated mediation model

The above configuration of target variable can be interpreted as follows:

 Perception of psychological ownership depends on the interaction of perceived organizational justice and meaningful work;

- The fair organizational environment increases the probability of the development of

psychological ownership towards organization. In addition, the positive emotions stimulated by sense of ownership reduce the risk of burnout;

Meaningful work also has a positive effect on unfair organizational environment. If an employee believes that she/ he does meaningful work, this reduces the negative effect of unfair organizational environment on psychological ownership, which, in its turn, reduces the risk of burnout. In contrast with the above, routine work, the sense of doing something unimportant hinder the development of psychological ownership towards the organization. Estrangement from the organization (absence of belongingness to the organization or sense of ownership) increases the risk of burnout.

Discussion

The study results were interpreted from the perspective of social exchange theory which is one of the most influential paradigms and conceptual frameworks in industrial and organizational psychology¹. This theory helps understand how two parties (the organization and the employee) develop potentially 'quality relations' through the exchange of resources.

The most important constructs in the field of organizational behavior, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1994), organizational commitment (Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000), organizational support (Ladd & Henry, 2000) and organizational justice (Tepper & Taylor, 2003) have been widely researched using the above conceptual model. One of the recent meta-analytical studies on the perceptions of organizational justice says that the variables of social exchange theory (*trust, organizational commitment, perceived organizational support and leader – member exchange*) are important for the perception of organizational justice, performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Colquitt et al., 2013). The conceptual model of social exchange has been applied to psychological ownership studies, whereas the essence of meaningful work has not been, actually, analyzed from the perspective of social exchange theory. Our study aims to fill just this research gap.

Social exchange is a series of transactions between two or more parties (Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012), when one of the party's action is followed by an action from the other party (Cooper-Thomas, 2018). Psychological ownership is a result of this kind of exchange. The fairness of organizational processes and decision-making practices contribute to the development of psychological ownership. It is a case of positive exchange: employees react to a fair organizational environment with psychological ownership, whereas the development of psychological ownership in an unfair environment is less probable. The findings of the present study imply that the provision of fair organizational environment and 'meaningful' work design is an important investment on the part of the organization to which employees respond with the sense of psychological ownership. At the same time, a high level of the sense of ownership develops close links and fami-

¹ Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005), Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. Journal of Management, 31(6), 874–900. <u>https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279602</u>

ly-like dynamics among the organization's employees, as a result of which, employees find their work more important (Steger, 2017).

The social exchange principle explains *the relationship between the organizational justice and psychological ownership. However, it is important to know which psychological mechanisms explain the dominant role of meaningful work in the formation of psychological ownership in relation to such fundamental organizational variables as organizational justice. Search for meaning is one of the basic motives of human being (Frankl, 1984). Meaningful work as a concept has originated from philosophical principles and is associated with general meaning of life, the purpose of existence. Work plays an important role in search for the meaning of life (Frankl, 1984). In meaningful professional environment, as well as in human life, meaningful work is an essential precondition for the development of sense of harmony and completeness, of the meaning of life. This explains why offering meaningful work to employees has a stronger positive effect than organizational justice, i.e., contextual factor. The positive effect received in exchange gets more powerful when employees have an increased opportunity of realizing their leading motives ¹.*

The social exchange principle also works in relation to burnout. An increased sense of psychological ownership caused by organizational justice and meaningful work (social exchange) are perceived as positive experience, whereas the loss of sense of ownership results in negative feelings, burnout and emptiness, which explains the predictive role of psychological ownership in the variance of burnout.

Finally, let's briefly discuss the psychological mechanism underlying the relationship between meaningful work and psychological ownership. When employees see the importance of work they do for the organization, the self-efficacy motive, which is one of the basic motives of psychological ownership, is realized. At the same time, the sense of doing valuable work creates closer ties between the employee's *identity* and the object of ownership, i.e., *organization*. Therefore, **self-efficacy, self-identity is the dominant mechanism** which contributes to the development of psychological ownership towards the organization.

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¹ The dominant role of work compared to other contextual, environmental factors, has also been demonstrated by Herzberg theory.

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