



## **FUELING RELATIONAL ENERGY? PROPOSING PSYCAP AND HUMOR AS POTENTIAL ANTECEDENTS**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study investigates relational energy within work context from the angle of potential ways to increase it and its associated benefits. Starting from two main streams of positivity at work, POS and POB, and based upon interaction ritual theory, social contagion theory, and conservation of resources theory, this work proposes PsyCap and humor as two prospective means of achieving this goal. In other words, it argues PsyCap and positive humor can positively impact the relational energy between an individual's supervisors, followers, or coworker and herself, which in turn, can have various benefits for organizational members' wellbeing and performance, including during the COVID-19 setbacks.*

### **Keywords:**

Relational Energy, Psychological Capital, Humor, COVID-19.

### **Acknowledgement:**

This paper reflects part of the broader PhD research (Braha, 2021) representing an obligation for fulfilling graduation requirements. The initial research provides an integrated model of two antecedents and two descendants of relational energy, while the current work focuses only on the first part summarized as per the journal's writing guidelines.

## **1. Introduction**

The core idea illustrated in this study is to identify means for increasing relational energy within organizations as well as benefits deriving from it. Two constructs are proposed as potential antecedents, namely psychological capital (PsyCap) and positive humor. The scientific reasoning supporting this relationship is based on interaction ritual theory, social contagion theory, conservation of resources theory, positive organizational scholarship (POS), and positive organizational behavior (POB). To the author's knowledge it is an original postulation since no other work has suggested such a correlation before, which is both theoretically (here and in Braha (2021)) illuminated and empirically (Braha, 2021) evidenced.

Initially, positivity in work context, focusing on POS and POB is discussed. Then, all three constructs – relational energy, PsyCap, and humor – are elaborated. Following that, the model is postulated and supported. Finally, conclusions, contributions (including potential benefits during COVID-19 lockdowns), limitations, and recommendations for future research are provided.

## **2. Positivity at work – Positive Organizational Scholarship and Positive Organizational Behavior**

This analysis reflects positivity within organizational settings which originates from positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Most works in social and natural sciences emphasize adverse occurrences and search solutions for returning to a normal state. Positive to negative state ratio in psychology publications is 14 to 1 (Myers, 2000) and a similar trend is also in research related to organizational studies (Luthans, et al., 2015). As a result, scholars regard it necessary concentrating on investigations on how to move beyond the normal so as to flourish and achieve extraordinary performance, i.e. focus on positive deviance. This implies discovering positive settings within

organizations and ways for advancing them in order to excel. However, scholars do not diminish the importance of studying negative events and neither consider positive and negative deviance as opposite ends of the same continuum; they rather argue those represent separate continuums with distinct outputs, principles, and antecedents needing independent investigation (Luthans, et al., 2015).

Positivity approach within disciplines of management and organizational studies is primarily reflected in Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and Positive Organizational Behavior (POB). The former is argued to represent a “movement in organizational science that focuses on the dynamics leading to exceptional individual and organizational performance such as developing human strength, producing resilience and restoration, and fostering vitality” (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 731). The latter represents “the study and application of positively oriented human resources strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). Here constructs from both streams are combined with the fundamental focus being the advancement of relational energy at work and maximization of its benefits for employee, team, unit, management, and organizational performance.

### 3. Relational energy

Human energy is regarded socially contagious (Baker, et al., 2003; Cross, et al., 2003; Dutton, 2003; Cameron, 2013; Owens, et al., 2016) and a source of individual and organizational excellence (Dutton, 2003) and thriving (Fritz, et al., 2011). Organizational energy is an amplified synergy derived from individual human energies which stimulates innovation, productivity, and readiness to change (Bruch & Kunz, 2013). Positive energy develops high-quality relationships, which in turn, generate more positive energy, spreading out the cycle of generation and transmission of both (Dutton, 2003). Social interactions as an energy resource affect people’s engagement and performance (Baker, et al., 2003; Cross, et al., 2003; Dutton, 2003; Cole, et al., 2012; Owens, et al., 2016). Positive relationships positively correlate with mental sharpness, memory, post-surgery recovery, fast learning, and job performance, while negatively relate to sickness, depression, discomfort and pain (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). Positive followers’ perception about their relationship with the leader appears energizing what influences the former to engage in more creative work (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009). Very importantly, positive outcomes are merely a result of what one invest in such an interaction rather than what one receives from it (Brown, et al., 2003).

As a separate manifestation compared to physical, psychological (mental) and emotional energies, relational energy does not get depleted when utilized; in contrary, it is expected to grow the more it is used (Cameron, 2012; Cameron, 2013). Drawing from interaction ritual theory, social contagion theory, and conservation of resources theory, Owens et al. (2016) define relational energy as “a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one’s capacity to do work” (p. 37). Example of its benefits include: high-quality relationships (Liebhart & Faullant, 2014), job engagement (Amah, 2016; Owens, et al., 2016; Amah & Sese, 2018), job performance (Owens, et al., 2016), and handling consequences of work-family conflict (Amah, 2016). Relational energy also mediates several valuable relationships: work passion transmission from leader to follower (Weng, et al., 2020), workplace friendship on greater interpersonal citizenship (Xiao, et al., 2020), servant leadership on high quality mentoring relationship (Amah, 2017), positive and negative impact of authentic leadership on deep and surface acting respectively (Wang & Xie, 2020), employee service engagement behavior on customer service engagement behavior (Liang, et al., 2020), spiritual leadership on job performance (Yang, et al., 2017), leader humility on follower task performance (Wang, et al., 2018), and underlying similarity on relationship quality (Liebhart & Faullant, 2014). Together with compassion and shared vision, it affects perceived relational climate (Boyatzis & Rochford, 2020). Conversely, it moderates the disadvantageous effect of emotional labor, which in turn improves cognitive flexibility (Baruah & Reddy, 2018).

Within organizations, energizers stimulate knowledge transfer (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008), are more optimistic, thoughtful, reliable, selfless and expose to others elevation, motivation, uplifting, and vitality (Cameron, 2012), are higher performers, enhance others’ performance, and are 3 times more present in above-average performing organization (Baker, et al., 2003), influence team success (Cross, et al., 2003), and team and organizational performance (Cole, et al., 2012). Energizing interactions appear beneficial for health, well-being and nature of those interactions (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008).

Finally, there is some emerging evidence (Chadee, et al., 2021) of relational energy’s importance in dealing with the adverse effects of COVID-19 lockdowns. Corona quarantine periods created situations where digital connectivity

resulted detrimental on work behavior since it led to self-control exhaustion, what in turn, implied work disengagement. Chadee et al. (2021) conclude that relational energy transmitted through online communication moderates this detrimental impact and strongly encourage relational energy online enhancing practices.

#### 4. Psychological capital

In appraising existing and future staff, organizations are primarily concerned with human capital and social capital the value of which could be time-dependent (Luthans, et al., 2015). In contrast, psychological capital (PsyCap) is argued to go beyond those in the sense that it aids people advancing from the actual self to the potential self/collective selves (Avey, et al., 2011; Luthans, et al., 2015; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

PsyCap is correlated with lots of positive outcomes, from physical to organizational benefits. Examples of those include life satisfaction (Brockorny & Youssef-Morgan, 2019) job performance, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship, psychological wellbeing, reduces stress, turnover, cynicism, and anxiety (Avey, et al., 2011), multifold return on investment (Luthans, et al., 2015), emotional labor, job satisfaction and reduced burnout (Cheung, et al., 2011), creativity (Yu, et al., 2019), and reduced turnover intentions (Siu, et al., 2015), innovation (Novitasari, et al., 2020), and work engagement (Zuberbühler, et al., 2021).

There is initial evidence that PsyCap too can be utilized in handling COVID-19 related implications. Pathak & Joshi (2020) find small hotel owners' PsyCap creating hope and optimism among their staff during the corona lockdowns. Daraba et al. (2021) conclude PsyCap mediates the positive impact of leader authenticity on job performance while working from home during COVID-19. Harahsheh et al. (2021) find PsyCap playing an intermediate role in the process of transformational leadership positively affecting effective decision making. Furthermore, Turliuc & Candel (2021) show significant impact of PsyCap during quarantine in terms of greater life satisfaction and lower depression and anxiety of organizational members. Similarly, Alat et al. (2021) provide evidence for PsyCap acting as a psychological resource in significantly protecting people from mental health deterioration during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Finally, Maykrantz et al. (2021) find PsyCap stimulating health-protective behaviors such as keeping social distance, wearing a mask, and washing hands.

#### 5. Humor

Humor is integrated in the analysis as a construct associated with both physical benefits and social and organizational positive outcomes. Important to note, not all kinds of humor are considered having positive implications. Therefore, there are distinctions of humor most notably illustrated by Martin et al.'s (2003) humor styles, i.e. affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, and aggressive. Nevertheless, in current paper humor implies only the positive type that generates positivity during social interactions.

Humor's advantages rely on different aspects. Examples include, group effectiveness (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008), innovative thinking, social cohesion, and rapport building stimulated by managers' humor's creative energy (Holmes & Marra, 2006), increased trust (Lynch, 2002), improved communication, creativity and enthusiasm, brightened and more enduring workplace (Sathyanarayana, 2007), stronger individual connections (Cooper, 2008), job satisfaction, affective commitment, and organizational pride (Mesmer-Magnus, et al., 2018), employee engagement (Gunter, et al., 2013), innovative behavior (Johari, et al., 2021), persistent behavior (Cheng & Wang, 2014), employee effectiveness (Gostik & Christopher, 2008), as well as reduction of tension (Duncan, et al., 1990), stress (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983), blood pressure (Martin, et al., 1993), burnout and work withdrawal (Mesmer-Magnus, et al., 2012).

Similar to relational energy and PsyCap, humor's benefits arise too during corona quarantine. Andrew & Thomas (2021) show that people with dominant self-enhancing and affiliative humor perceive less stress and hopelessness related to corona, and as such, engage in more protective behaviors. They found exactly the opposite for people with dominant self-defeating and aggressive humor. Similarly, Canestrari, et al. (2021) find that healthcare workers with more humor-based coping strategies experienced not as much of pandemic-related stress in their work as compared to their colleagues with less humor-based coping strategies.

## 6. Proposing the Model

The model proposed postulates that people with higher levels of PsyCap tend to energize more and people that use more positive humor tend to have the same impact too. In addition, people higher in both PsyCap and humor tend to have synergized energizing levels.

Energizers have more PsyCap related qualities as compared to de-energizers. The former are optimistic (Cameron, 2012), see new and realistic possibilities (Cross, et al., 2003), create hope to others (Cross, et al., 2003), and follow through (Cameron, 2013), while the latter see primarily roadblocks (Cross, et al., 2003) and are frequently critical (Cameron, 2013). These traits appear compatible with the hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism dimensions of PsyCap. On the other hand, people with higher levels of PsyCap tend to positively impact private and workplace social relationships (Story, et al., 2013) something that relates to a relational energy state.

Furthermore, PsyCap appears having a contagious influence in terms of increased followers' optimism and hope (Pathak & Joshi, 2020), affected by leader's PsyCap. Further evidence illustrates leader's PsyCap raising team's PsyCap and vice versa (Story, et al., 2013). This kind of impact can be elucidated through social contagion theory. Luthans & Youssef-Morgan (2017) call for research in exploring this mostly uncharted contagious aspect of PsyCap, particularly, in determining mechanisms through which positivity and PsyCap spread top-down, bottom-up, or horizontally. As potential explanation this paper argues the increase of relational energy that PsyCap creates illustrates the above referred contagious facet.

Consequently, building upon interaction ritual theory and social contagion theory and referring to PsyCap characteristics detected at energizers, it is postulated here that PsyCap positively affects relational energy.

Higher use of positive humor creates and perceives high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003), plays a role in passing interactions (Cooper & Sosik, 2012), raises positivity among user and receiver of humor (Cann, et al., 2009), facilitates social relationships (Cooper, 2008), improves communication (Sathyanarayana, 2007), creates social cohesion and solidarity as well as builds rapport and emphasizes collegiality (Holmes & Marra, 2006), and reduces tension (Duncan, et al., 1990). These implications of humor can be argued to convey a higher relational energy state.

Important for this analysis is that humor is also regarded from the positive psychology outlook (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Further, it is also investigated under the lens of POS (Cooper & Sosik, 2012) and endorsed in creating and sustaining positive energy (Cameron, 2013), building high-quality relationships (Dutton, 2003), and raise positivity (Cann, et al., 2009). Utilization of humor as an energizing tool is also suggested in Cross et al. (2003).

Another perspective of relating humor with relational energy is the conservation of resources theory. Considering humor aids in recuperation from stressful occurrences, Cheng and Wang (2014) suggest it has potential to reload work-related resources. On the other hand, relational energy as an organizational resource grows in energizing relationships, but gets depleted within de-energizing ones, while humor was illustrated to positively impact positive (i.e. energizing) interactions. On this basis, Cheng & Wang's statement can be interpreted as covering relational energy as well.

To sum up, humor at work is shown to be correlated with creating positive emotions and positive energy, building and maintaining high-quality relationships, and reloading exhausted energy when performing tasks. Accordingly, building upon the construct of positive emotions and on theories of interaction rituals and conservation of resources, humor too is postulated as an antecedent of relational energy.

Finally, it is noteworthy highlighting the relationship between PsyCap and humor as well. To start with, both PsyCap and positive humor appear to create positive emotions (Avey, et al., 2008; Cheng & Wang, 2014) which are very often reflected in relational energy too (McDaniel, 2011). Likewise, scholars argue humor has features in common with PsyCap such as optimism (Kuiper & Martin, 1998) and found significant positive correlation between the two constructs (Hughes, 2008). In line with that, Cooper & Sosik (2012) strongly advise future research on this relationship. On this basis, it is here postulated that the combination of PsyCap and humor has a synergic impact on relational energy.

Considering all the above, the postulated hypotheses and model are presented below.

Hypothesis 1: There is significant positive impact of PsyCap on relational energy.

Hypothesis 2: There is significant positive impact of positive humor on relational energy.

Hypothesis 3: There is significant increased joint positive impact of PsyCap and positive humor on relational energy.

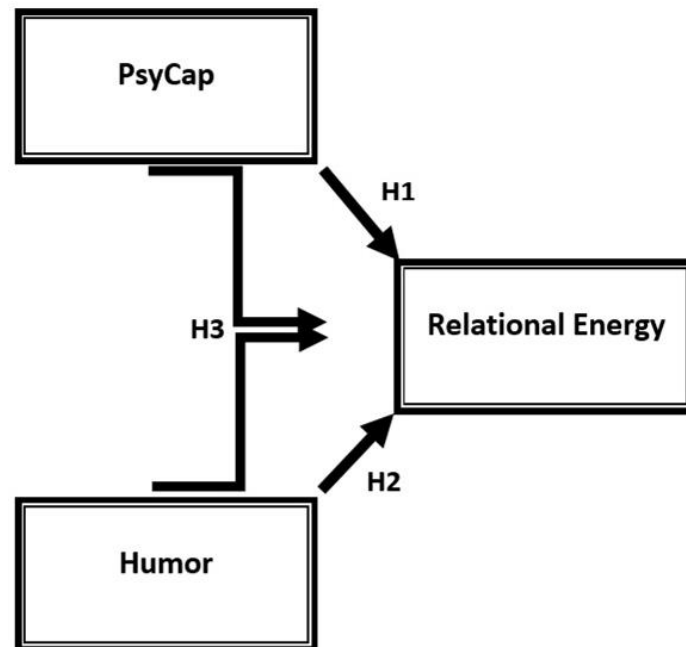


Figure 1. Proposed model on the correlation of PsyCap and positive humor on relational energy

## 7. Conclusions and Contributions

This paper argues there are potential means – advancing PsyCap and positive humor – for increasing relational energy and all above mentioned benefits of energizing relationships within organizations. It also suggests that the joint impact of advancing both these antecedents synergizes. This new insight represents an additional helping tool for managers in terms of better knowledge about generating, maintaining, and growing relational energy of themselves and among their staff.

This insight is also valid at individual level, i.e. manager, employee or business partner could build higher quality collaborations by advancing her own positive energizing influence as well as by choosing, whenever possible, more or less frequent interactions with energizers and de-energizers respectively (aiming interactions that reflect higher levels of relational energy). For instance, people could work on advancing some or all PsyCap elements and positive humor as well as identifying others with similar features as preferred collaborators.

Likewise, the contribution also rests in organizations' attempts for greater effectiveness. When training and/or stimulating employees for advancing their PsyCap or positive humor, besides numerous individual advantages arising from each, organizations also benefit from advanced relational energy and its associated positive implications as highlighted above.

Moreover, this study illustrates some emerging evidence regarding positive implications of all three constructs of the postulated model on handling adverse effects related to COVID-19 lockdowns. Its contribution relies also on providing useful awareness on the possibility for intervening in these constructs, individually or combined, in withstanding corona quarantine consequences as well as of potential future epidemics, pandemics, or other health crises.

This work advances relational energy research in two major ways: regarding each individual employee as potential engine of relational energy rather than concentrating only on management as possible performer of this role; and endorsing greater attention to how to advance relational energy with the attempt of multiplying its outcomes, rather than focusing merely on what positive effects relational energy has. Nevertheless, the understudied and greatly unexplored field of relational energy is recognized and in no way is it here argued the descendants part to be less investigated. However, this analysis only emphasizes the essential need and tremendous potential to contribute to the relational energy's descendent research by proliferating research efforts also on its antecedents' side.

To the author's knowledge, this analysis represents one of the very few exploring relational energy antecedents, and it is considered one of the pioneers in studying those not from only a focused leader-member approach. Instead, it generalizes to all vertical and horizontal interactions within organizations. Moreover, it is the first to announce PsyCap and humor as antecedents of relational energy.

Additionally, the model proposed here includes variables from POS and POB what is considered a contribution to the intensification of researches that link these two streams of positivity within organizational settings.

Finally, this study is also argued to progress literature on theory of organizations and management, particularly in positivity, energy, social networks, motivation, social and psychological capital, and humor.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

This study provides a theoretical reasoning for two new antecedents of relational energy. Future research could test this postulation empirically across different organizations, industries, and cultures.

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