A Theoretical Model of the Impact of Performance Appraisal Politics on Work Engagement

Peng Ding, Qingqing Yang

College of Systems Engineering, National University of Defense Technology, Changsha, Hunan Province, 410000, China

Abstract: This study focuses on the impact of performance appraisal politics on work engagement. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, it introduces self-efficacy as a mediating variable and perceived organizational support as a moderating variable to explore the relationships between individual and organizational factors in the context of performance appraisal politics and work engagement, thereby constructing a theoretical model. Theoretically, this research aims to introduce a new research perspective based on previous scholarly work to explain the influence mechanism of performance appraisal politics on individual behavior. Practically, it seeks to provide methodological recommendations for enhancing individual work engagement.

Keywords: Performance Appraisal Politics; Work Engagement; Self-Efficacy; Perceived Organizational Support

1. Introduction

Performance appraisal is the core component of the performance management system, and the objectivity of its results has a direct impact on the science and effectiveness of human resources management policies. However, the data shows that individuals' acceptance of the assessment results is not high [1]. That is, deviations in the assessment results are widespread. Some scholars' studies have further found that since the introduction of performance appraisal system into management practice, its tendency to politicization has accompanied it [2]. This phenomenon of politicization is reflected in the subjective intervention of appraisal subjects in appraisal results based on non-performance factors (personal relationships, power games, or prioritization of organizational goals), which leads to a systematic deviation of appraisal results from true performance. Especially in China's local context, influenced by the traditional humanistic society, relationship network and the doctrine of the mean culture, this kind of artificial manipulation of the evaluation process presents stronger concealment and complexity [3].

Combing through the existing studies, it is found that the discussion of the politics of performance appraisal in the domestic academic community mainly focuses on its impact on individual work performance such as knowledge sharing behavior, innovative behavior and counterproductive behavior. As a pervasive phenomenon of informal power interventions in organizational management, the path and boundary conditions of performance appraisal politics on work inputs have not been systematically explained. Under the premise of recognizing its objective

existence, how to scientifically guide and exert its efficacy through the joint role of individuals, organizations and other aspects has become a theoretical and practical proposition that needs to be systematically explored.

2. The Definition of Concepts

2.1 The Politics of Performance Appraisal

Longenecker first systematically elucidated the intervening behavior of appraisers in introducing non-performance factors in the performance appraisal process in 1986. Based on this foundation, Longenecker and Gioia et al. formalized the concept of the politics of performance appraisal after continued and deepened research, the appraiser interferes with the appraisal results subjectively based on specific interests or influenced by situational factors other than the appraisee's actual performance, resulting in a deviation of the appraisal results from the real performance [4]. This concept has become the theoretical foundation for subsequent related research and has gained wide theoretical resonance in the fields of organizational behavior and human resource management. Current research based on the politics of performance appraisal in the Chinese context is divided into two main dimensions: a two-dimensional structure that includes incentives and punishments, representative examples include Shusong Zhao's study of the impact of performance appraisal politics on knowledge sharing behavior[5]; The other is a three-dimensional structure that includes The other is a three-dimensional structure that includes incentives, penalties, and balance, representative of, for example, Zhao Jun et al.'s study of the effects of performance appraisal politics on counterproductive behavior [6]. This study combines the latest research results of related scholars and adopts a three-dimensional structure to conduct research on the politics of performance appraisal.

2.2 Work Engagement

The concept was introduced by Kahn in 1990 and has since been deepened and expanded with the rise of positive psychology [7]. Through further research, Schaufeli et al. defined it as an occupational psychological state characterized by high energy levels, strong identification, and sustained concentration [8]. The theoretical framework covers the three dimensions of vitality, dedication and concentration: the vitality dimension reflects individuals' high energy level, mental toughness, and perseverance in the face of difficulties; the dedication dimension reflects individuals' enthusiasm, sense of meaning, and sense of pride in their work; and the concentration dimension is manifested in the blurring of temporal perception in the task-immersion state. Subsequent scholarly research on work engagement has generally used the definition of Schaufeli et al.

2.3 Self-Efficacy

First introduced by Bandura in 1977 in his Social Cognitive Theory framework, it is defined as a system of beliefs that an individual develops based on past experience about his or her ability to perform a particular behavior effectively and achieve a desired goal [9]. It is essentially a psychological judgment of "ability expectations" rather than a direct reflection of objective skill levels. In particular, Bandura emphasizes that such efficacy beliefs are fundamentally different from actual competence, reflecting an individual's subjective expectations about the efficacy of his or her own behavior, rather than a reserve of skills already possessed.

2.4 Perceived Organizational Support

Based on social exchange theory, Eisenberger's research team formally established the theoretical framework of organizational support in 1986, defining it as the subjective perception of individuals that an organization values their contributions and cares about their rights and interests [10]. Although subsequent studies have expanded the theory from a multidimensional perspective, the core connotation continues to be Eisenberger's definition of a sense of organizational support.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Social Exchange Theory

Homans first systematically proposed the theoretical framework in 1958 [11], asserting that interpersonal interactions are essentially resource interaction mechanisms, with individuals adopting utility-maximizing strategies through cost and benefit accounting. Blau, a subsequent scholar, realized a double breakthrough in the theoretical construction [12]: on the one hand, he believed that social exchange has dual functional attributes, which is the basis of relational ties and the generating mechanism of social inequality and power structure; on the other hand, he delineated the types of social exchange resources, distinguishing between two dimensions: exogenous and endogenous. Modern organizational management research mostly relies on Blau's theoretical framework to analyze social exchange behavior.

3.2 Conservation of Resources Theory

Hobfoll formalized resource conservation theory as the theoretical framework for stress research in 1989 [13]. The theory suggests that there is an instinctive motivation for individuals to maintain a stock of resources, and that this motivation drives people to manage critical resources through strategies such as acquiring, maintaining, and adding value. When individuals perceive a potential threat or actual loss of resources, they activate psychological defense mechanisms, and this state of resource imbalance triggers a stress response, which leads to shifts in behavioral decision-making and changes in emotional states. After iterating the theory, Hobfoll's team condensed the core ideas of resource preservation theory into four basic principles: first, loss dominance, compared with resource acquisition, the impact of resource loss on the psychological state is more significant and long-lasting; second, resource investment, individuals must continue to invest in resources in order to prevent the loss of existing resources, and to acquire new reserves of resources; third, the paradox of acquisition, in the case of resource scarcity, limited resource supplementation can produce significant relief; fourth, resource desperation, when the critical point of resource depletion is approaching, individuals will activate defense mechanisms, which may manifest aggressive behavior or irrational decision-making [14].

4. Theoretical Assumption

4.1 The Direct Impact of Performance Appraisal Politics on Work Engagement

The politics of motivational performance appraisal. First, from the perspective of organizational identity, this type of appraisal strategy conveys the organization's recognition of the value of the individual's contribution through positive evaluations, which prompts him or her to take the initiative to engage in behavior based on the principle of reciprocity. Second, when individuals perceive that appraisal results are positively correlated with career development and material rewards, they will adjust their behavioral patterns to maintain the effectiveness of incentives, which

will significantly enhance the continuity of work engagement.

The politics of punitive performance appraisal. When the individual perceives that the appraisal system is alienated into threatening manipulative behavior or non-fair disciplinary mechanism, it will trigger the individual's defensive psychological mechanism. Specifically, under the perspective of resource conservation theory, individuals will actively contract their work input behaviors in order to avoid excessive depletion of psychological energy, which is manifested in the weakening of the sense of responsibility and the attenuation of the spirit of initiative. This psychological defense reaction is essentially a compensation strategy for the lack of organizational support.

The politics of balanced performance appraisal. Its essential feature is that appraisers, based on the purpose of maintaining organizational harmony, avoiding interpersonal risks or building informal power networks, form convergent judgments on performance strengths and weaknesses through the flexible adjustment of evaluation criteria. When an individual encounters or recognizes such a non-performance-oriented appraisal mechanism, the psychological defense mechanism based on the resource conservation theory will be activated, and he or she will doubt the significance of his or her work, thus reducing the degree of work commitment. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The politics of motivational performance appraisal positively affects work engagement, the politics of punitive performance appraisal negatively affects work engagement, and the politics of balanced performance appraisal negatively affects work engagement.

4.2 The Effect of Performance Appraisal Politics on Self-Efficacy

The politics of motivational performance appraisal. Appraisal results, as an explicit representation of organizational support, can activate individual self-efficacy perception, forming a virtuous cycle of "ability confirmation, behavioral reinforcement, goal internalization". The essence of this is that when individuals perceive the ability confirmation signal from the appraisal system, they will cognitively re-adjust their self-efficacy level, thus enhancing the psychological capital reserve for goal achievement.

The politics of punitive performance appraisal. When individuals perceive unfair procedures, evaluation bias, or unjustified interventions in the appraisal system, on the one hand, they attribute their failures to the power structure rather than to their personal efficacy, resulting in a helpless psychological state; on the other hand, even if there is a tendency to self-attribute, individuals will fall into the cognitive closure of "questionable ability, ineffective efforts". This double pressure mechanism will cause the individual to create the "effort paradox" in the continuous depletion of resources, which ultimately leads to the spiral decline of self-efficacy.

The politics of balanced performance appraisal. When employees perceive that non-performance-related factors interfere with the performance appraisal system, the "effort–outcome" causal chain within their psychological contract will fracture, specifically manifested as the intensification of perceived discrepancies in the "input–output" relationship. Once the appraisal results are confirmed to systematically deviate from individual contributions, individuals will progress from initial self-efficacy doubts to the erosion of trust in organizational support systems, ultimately leading to reduced work engagement. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: The politics of motivational performance appraisal positively affects self-efficacy, the politics of punitive performance appraisal negatively affects self-efficacy, and the politics of balanced

performance appraisal negatively affects self-efficacy.

4.3 The Impact of Self-Efficacy on Work Engagement

In the vitality dimension, individuals with high self-efficacy have a higher perception of their own ability, which encourages them to turn work pressure into opportunities to improve their ability, and then increase their continuous energy investment. In the dedication dimension, when there is positive feedback between the expectation of competence and the achievement of goals, individuals' sense of professional mission and responsibility will be significantly strengthened, which will drive them to increase their work commitment and pursue value realization. In the concentration dimension, individuals with high self-efficacy invest more of their limited psychological resources in core task areas, significantly increasing work immersion. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: Self-efficacy positively influences work engagement.

4.4 The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy

The politics of motivational performance appraisal. This signaling of goal attainability through institutional recognition strengthens individual self-efficacy. Further, this efficacy belief, through cognitive resource redistribution mechanisms, activates work engagement behavior. Therefore, the effect of incentive performance appraisal politics on work engagement may be characterized by a dual path, which may include both the direct effect of institutional incentives and the endogenous engagement motivation stimulated by the mediating effect of efficacy beliefs.

The politics of punitive performance appraisal. When individuals perceive irrational bias in evaluation criteria, it undermines the principle of fair exchange within the psychological contract, triggering the reconstruction of individual professional identity. Specifically, when one's capabilities are negated, the individual will implement a cognitive resource reallocation strategy, redirecting psychological energy originally invested in work toward defensive psychological coping. This process forms a behavioral pattern of "self-handicapping" establishing a transmission path: "institutional oppression, deconstruction of efficacy beliefs, depletion of motivational resources, behavioral withdrawal". In essence, this mechanism influences individual self-efficacy, thereby further reducing work engagement.

The politics of balanced performance appraisal. When the appraisal system adopts irrational allocation strategies such as mandatory distribution and turn-taking, individuals will perceive that there is no necessary connection between performance evaluation and self-competence, i.e., personal efforts and competence enhancement will not directly affect the appraisal results, which will greatly affect the beliefs of individuals about their own competence and thus affect work commitment. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H4: Self-efficacy mediates between motivational, punitive, and balanced performance appraisal politics and work engagement.

4.5 The Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support

Organizational support in terms of emotions, tools, and systems can have a direct impact on individuals' work behavior [15]. In the path of the influence of performance appraisal politics on individual work engagement, the sense of organizational support, as a key contextual moderating variable, may have a significant moderating function. Under a high level of organizational support

context, motivational appraisal strategies generate multiplier effects of efficacy gains through social exchange mechanisms, efficacy loss effects triggered by punitive appraisal strategies are effectively suppressed by organizational identity buffer mechanisms, and potential efficacy value-added functions of balanced appraisal strategies are enhanced through resource redistribution mechanisms; conversely, under low support contexts, politicized manipulation of appraisal systems triggers cognitive On the other hand, in a low support situation, the politicization of the appraisal system triggers cognitive defense mechanisms, which may lead to the attenuation of motivational efficacy, the generalization of punitive effects and the failure of balanced strategies. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H5: Organizational support perception positively moderates the indirect pathway whereby incentive-based performance appraisal politics influence work engagement through self-efficacy, while negatively moderating the indirect pathway where punitive and balanced performance appraisal politics affect work engagement via self-efficacy.

In summary, this study proposes a theoretical model of performance appraisal politics affecting work engagement, as shown in Figure 1.
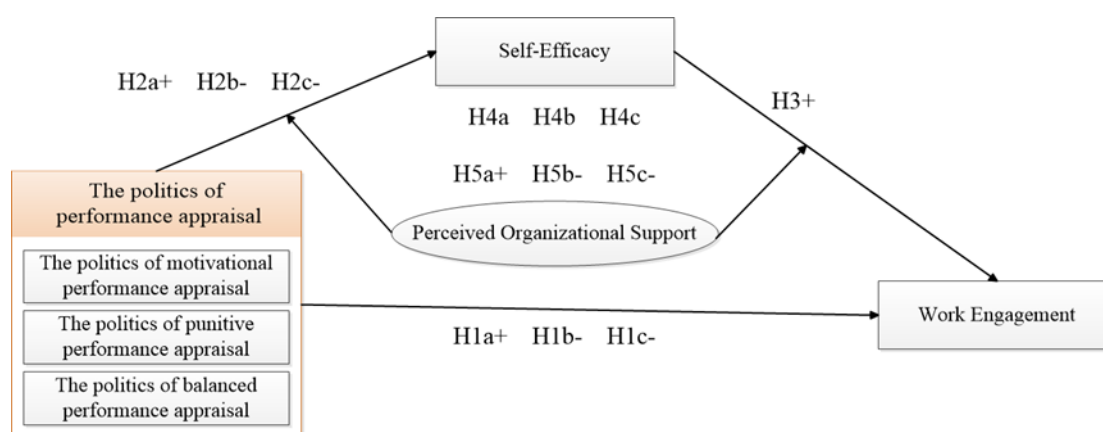

Figure 1: Theoretical Model.

5. Summary

5.1 Theoretical Significance

First, it deepens the application of Conservation of Resources Theory in organizational management contexts. By linking the three-dimensional characteristics of performance appraisal politics—namely, the positive provision of incentive-based resources, the negative consumption of punitive resources, and the dynamic regulation of balanced resources—with individual self-efficacy (psychological resources) and work engagement (behavioral resources), this study provides a more specific chain of action for Conservation of Resources Theory's application in organizational management. It enriches the micro-analytical framework of the theory in "resource loss,repair" scenarios. Second, it promotes the dimensional refinement and mechanistic deepening of research on performance appraisal politics. By integrating the latest advancements in scholarly research, this study differentiates performance appraisal politics into three dimensions (incentive-based, punitive, and balanced). Incorporating the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of perceived organizational support, it systematically reveals the influence mechanisms through which different dimensions of performance appraisal politics affect individual work engagement. This contribution

complements existing theoretical research on performance appraisal politics in the field of organizational management.

5.2 Practical Significance

First, it provides guiding value for optimizing individual performance appraisal systems and enhancing the effectiveness of human resource management. Given the inevitable existence of performance appraisal politics, this study explores how to better leverage it. By revealing the differentiated impacts of incentive-based, punitive, and balanced performance appraisal politics on individual work engagement, it offers practical basis for managers to implement targeted strategies, as well as empirical support for organizations to design more scientific appraisal schemes and balance "constraints" and "incentives". Second, it provides methodological pathways for expanding the enhancement of individual work motivation. Focusing on analyzing the influence mechanism between performance appraisal politics and individual work engagement, this study reveals the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of perceived organizational support. These findings not only strengthen the theoretical foundation for innovating talent cultivation models but also identify actionable directions for building a "supportive" organizational culture.

6. Research Limitations and Future Directions

6.1 Empirical Testing and Optimization of the Theoretical Model

Based on a systematic review of relevant concepts, this study preliminarily constructed a theoretical research model from the dual perspectives of Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory. Although this model demonstrates theoretical innovation value in explaining the mechanism of performance appraisal politics, it still requires validation through empirical research methods. Specifically, a multi-stage mixed-methods research design should be adopted to analyze sample data. Structural equation modeling (SEM) will be used to test the path relationships among variables, and the Bootstrap method will be employed to verify the robustness of mediating effects and moderating boundaries.

6.2 Theoretical Framework Expansion and Contextual Adaptation

This study establishes self-efficacy as a mediating variable and perceived organizational support as a moderating variable. Future research could integrate organizational contextual characteristics (e.g., bureaucratic structures, digital transformation maturity) to develop a context-specific measurement framework for performance appraisal politics, addressing limitations in measurement validity and ecological validity of existing tools. Furthermore, building upon Conservation of Resources Theory, systematic exploration of psychological capital and occupational identity as individual resource mediators is recommended. For instance, applying sequential mediation models could clarify dynamic pathways such as "organizational support, self-efficacy, work engagement", thereby advancing theoretical understanding of resource transmission mechanisms in performance management contexts.

6.3 Extending Theory to Management Practice

In the future, building on the empirical validation of the theoretical model proposed in this study, combining action research or case analysis could yield more actionable policy recommendations for human resource management. Examples include enhancing self-efficacy through targeted training

programs and strengthening organizational support via improved support policies. These efforts aim to foster mutual reinforcement between theoretical insights and practical applications, bridging the gap between academic research and managerial implementation.

References

[1] Chen, Y. Y., & Zhang, Y. C. (2008). Political considerations in performance appraisal: A content analysis-based study of Chinese contextual characteristics. Management Review, 20(9), 39-49, 64.

[2] Zhang, G. J. (2023). Research on performance appraisal deviation. Wuhan: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press.

[3] Tsui, A.S., J. L. L. Farh. Where guanxi matters relational demography and guanxi in the Chinese context. Work and Occupations,1997(1).

[4] Gioia, Dennis A. Pennsylvania State U, Smeal Coll of Business Administration, Dept of Management & Organization, US; Longenecker, Clinton O. Delving into the dark side: The politics of executive appraisal. Organizational Dynamics,1994, Vol.22(3): 47-58.

[5] Zhao, S. S. (2012). Performance appraisal politics and individual knowledge-sharing behavior: An empirical study. Nankai Business Review, 15(3), 150-160.

[6] Zhao, J., Zhang, Y. J., Liu, Z. Q., & Liu, Y. J. (2022). Structural dimensions of performance appraisal politics and their impact on counterproductive work behavior. Management Engineering Journal, 36(1), 99-110.

[7] Kahn, William A. Boston U School of Management, MA, et al. Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. Academy of Management Journal,1990, Vol.33(4): 692-724.

[8] Schaufeli, Wilmar B.,Bakker,et al. Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study. Journal of Organizational Behavior,2004, Vol.25(3): 293-315.

[9] Bandura, Albert. Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. Psychological Review,1977, Vol.84(2): 191-215.

[10] Eisenberger, Robert, Huntington, et al. Perceived Organizational Support. Journal of Applied Psychology,1986, Vol. 71(3): 500-507.

[11] Homans, George C. Social Behavior as Exchange. American Journal of Socilolgy,1958,63(3): 597-606.

[12] Blau, P. M. (1988). Exchange and power in social life (X. Sun, et al., Trans.). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House.

[13] Hobfoll, Stevan E. Conservation of Resources: A New Attempt at Conceptualizing Stress. American Psychologist,1989, Vol. 44(3): 513-524.

[14] Liao, H. H., Huang, L., & Hu, B. (2022). Conservation of resources theory in organizational behavior: Evolution and challenges. Advances in Psychological Science, 30(2), 449-463.

[15] Dong, Y. Q. (2024). The impact of organizational support perception on work engagement among grassroots civil servants (Doctoral dissertation, Harbin Normal University).