

# *A Review of Research on Organizational Citizenship Behaviors*

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**Abstract:** As a significant research object in the realm of organizational behavior, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has received extensive attention from researchers since it was proposed. Through a comprehensive analysis of a large number of English and Chinese literature, this article sorts out five important theoretical basis, including individual positive affect, social exchange theory, psychological contract, covenant relationships and equity theory. It also clarifies the concept and development of OCB and provide an overview of the current research in this field. Job satisfaction, perceived fairness, perceived supervisor support, and leadership styles have all been found to have significant effects on OCB. In academic circles, there are three main views about the association between OCB and organizational performance, showing that their relationship is still not clear enough. It turns out that positive effects are still the mainstream, while more and more scholars are studying on negative effects. Overall, this review article provides a comprehensive theoretical and practical reference for studying OCB and offers insights and guidance for the future development trend.

**Keywords:** organizational citizenship behavior, social exchange theory, organizational performance

## 1. Introduction

There has been a long-standing question that how employees' behaviors affect the development of organizations in the realm of organizational behaviors. Initially, researchers mainly focused on behaviors led by corporate regulations, trying to figure out how companies perform better through making rules. However, scholars gradually found that employees' behavior is not restricted by job descriptions or corporate regulations. Employees have initiatives to do extra-role behavior which affects organizational performance as well. Organizational citizenship behavior was proposed as an important kind of extra-role behavior. Therefore, scholars have gradually used the OCB as a bridge to understand the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance, and have developed and prospered this emerging variable. However, there is still much controversy in the research on organizational citizenship behavior. There has not yet been a unified perception of its theoretical basis and definition.

The academic theory journals with the year 1980 to 2023 and the main theme of OCB are selected from the SSCI database (searched from EBSCO), and there are 1648 English articles. Meanwhile, there are 406 Chinese literature with the main theme of OCB which are concentrated in the years

2000-2023. The Chinese databases are selected from China National Knowledge Network, and the journal sources were selected from Peking University Core and CSSCI. It can be seen that the concept of OCB in China started late and was mainly developed after 2000. However, high-quality literature in this research area are relatively abundant, both in China and abroad.

The research perspectives on OCB are still mainly concentrated on the fields of management, psychology, and sociology. In recent years there have also been many researchers who have linked the concept to the environment.

The aim of this paper is to explicate the development of the concept and to provide a clearer understanding of its theoretical foundations and definition, to explore the main antecedent and outcome variables of organizational citizenship behavior, and hopefully to provide some personal insights into the shortcomings and future directions of this research field.

## **2. The Development of OCB**

### **2.1. The Beginning of the Concept's Birth (1983-1994)**

OCB concept was originally proposed by Organ, but there were already studies that paved the way for the emergence of the concept long before that, such as the discovery of informal organizations in the Hawthorne experiment. In addition, Katz and Kahn found a set of conditions for the effective functioning of employees in organizations: first, employees' organizational participation is stable; second, employees' behavior must be consistent with the organization's specific role requirements; third, innovative behavior that employees perform on their own initiative, is beyond their original roles [1]. The third component, the category of extra-role behavior, is outlined by Bateman and Organ as organizational citizenship behavior.

Smith et al. discovered that one dimension of OCB, namely altruism, was significantly affected by job satisfaction, so he suggested that citizenship behavior might be just one manifestation of a broader pro-social behavioral tendency [2]. Organ views individual performance in organizations as two parts, work-specific behavior, as defined in the job descriptions, as well as non-work-specific behavior. OCB is the second one. He gives a formal definition of OCB as a discretionary personal behavior that is not explicitly and formally acknowledged by the organizations' reward system, yet contributes to the overall effective functioning of the organization [3]. The definition is actually composed of three parts, namely voluntariness, non-institutionalization, and effectiveness. It clarifies this concept clearly, so even now many scholars still use this to define or explain.

### **2.2. Rethinking the Definition (1995-1999)**

Some researchers questioned the definition of Organ, thinking that OCB can vary from employee to employee and between employee and supervisor. In addition to conceptual ambiguity, different observers and different times may produce different perceptions of what an extra role is.

Organ later responded to this by rethinking the defining characteristics of organizational citizenship behavior. He acknowledged that it was inappropriate to view OCB as extra-role behavior outside the bounds of formal job duties. On the one hand, not every discrete instance of OCB changes organizational outcomes. Therefore, OCB should only include behavior that contribute to organizational effectiveness in the aggregate. On the other hand, the concepts of "role" and "work" themselves are very vague. Organ suggested that the OCB contained five dimensions in 1988, namely, altruism, politeness, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, and civic virtue [3]. It can be seen that the dimensions of OCB include not exclusively extra-role behavior. Conscientiousness is an example. Hence, extra-role behavior is not well distinguished from in-role behavior. Their distinction is not clear and well differentiated. In addition, job descriptions now have more and more abstractions and generalizations. Also, employees' perceptions of extra-role jobs are disturbed by their own

perceptions of job breadth. Employees are more likely to expand their job responsibilities within the scope of their role when their job requires a broad range of tasks. Therefore, it is better to avoid citing ERB or using the term “beyond the scope of the job” when defining OCB.

From Organ’s correction of previous studies, it can be seen that he tried to consider OCB as a kind of environmental performance and compared it to task performance. This comparison clearly shows that OCB is not an enforceable work task and is unlikely to result in systematic rewards on a consistent basis. Therefore, a new definition emerges as contributions that help maintain and improve the social and psychological environment, thus fostering and enhancing task performance [4]. At this point, the concept of OCB was no longer limited to the realm of extra-role behavior. Regardless of how other scholars view the changes made by Organ, the above exploration illustrates that for organizational citizenship behavior, researchers should understand it from a broader perspective.

### **2.3. Introduction of Impression Management Perspective (after 1999)**

Another important change in the concept of OCB occurred. Bolino linked impression management with OCB. He found that OCB occurs more frequently when it benefits employees [5]. And key people in the organization influence the choice of the type of OCB of employees. Other studies have found that the motivation to manage impressions moderates the positive association between OCB directed towards supervisors and the leader-member exchange [6].

Impression management can be further divided into protective impression management and acquisitive impression management. The former aims to protect the image of an individual in the minds of others; the latter aims to gain recognition and praise from others. Some researchers argue that organizational citizenship behavior is an active self behavior that is taken proactively beyond the requirements of duty, and of which the purpose is to obtain positive evaluations of the self by others. In order to get positive evaluation from others, employees usually show weakness, justify, and apology to weaken their shortcomings, or adopt flattering catering, showmanship, and self-promotion behavior to deepen the good impressions. All these studies point to the conclusion that organizational citizenship behavior does not arise solely because of employees’ natural selflessness and friendliness, but rather may be due to the fact that employees see it as a tool to embellish their impressions in the minds of others.

### **2.4. Theoretical Foundation**

Bateman and Organ proposed that individual positive affect and social exchange theory are the theoretical foundations of organizational citizenship behavior [7]. This view is also accepted by most people. Some studies suggest that individuals are inclined to perform prosocially behavior when experiencing a generally positive affective state. This gives a rationale for organizational citizenship behavior to be theoretically based on individual positive emotions.

For the second theoretical foundation, social exchange theory explains the relationship between behavioral payoffs and potential rewards. In the perspective of OCB, employees’ the extra-role behavior is about getting reward or giving back. The former is better understood as the employee’s enthusiasm, contribution, and innovative actions in exchange for leadership recognition, pay, and promotion opportunities. The latter means employee satisfaction is derived from managerial effort, and employees pay back when they perceive that the effort is beneficial to them. And returns are often made in the form of organizational citizenship behavior, which are more easily controlled by individuals. It is important to note that inputs and outputs are not proportional. Social exchange behavior is a voluntary act of individuals based on trust, which means that giving is not necessarily rewarded.

There are many researchers who offer other perspectives. Rousseau, for example, offers the

psychological contract perspective. According to him, the psychological contract refers to the perceived expectations and responsibilities that exist between individuals and their organizations [8]. The obligations are mutual. When an employee forms a psychological contract with the organization, he holds a belief about the organization that it is obligated to reward him for his efforts. The major difference between this view and social exchange theory is that it introduces the concept of expectations. Both current organizational rewards and expectations of future organizational rewards can be the basis for the generation of employee organizational citizenship behavior.

Covenant relationships have also become a research perspective. Citizens are more willing to inform, solve problems, and contribute to the development of organizations because of their civic and moral responsibilities. Covenant relationships are rooted in both the commitment of each party to the interests of society and in the values of the individuals themselves. Companies and employees build a strong relationship based on shared values. The closer the employees' values are to the organization's values and the stronger their identification with the organization, the higher the probability that they will exhibit OCB.

Equity theory assumes that employees' perceptions of organizational fairness influence their organizational citizenship behavior. When employees perceive fair treatment, they tend to have more positive views of their managers and are more likely to exhibit proactive behavior in their work; when they perceive unfairness, they are less engaged in their work and even inclined to leave.

### **3. Common Antecedent Variables of OCB**

The determinants of OCB can be categorized into four main groups: individual traits (including both affective and personality factors), job features, organizational factors, and leadership practices. This paper concentrates on individual and leadership characteristics to explore their relationship with OCB in terms of job satisfaction, perceived fairness, perceived supervisor support, and leadership styles.

#### **3.1. Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is an affective characteristic that is often associated with job performance by researchers. OCB has been considered by many researchers as environmental performance, in which case job satisfaction is an easily noticed predictor. However, Organ argued that satisfaction is usually related to OCB rather than to traditional productivity or in-role performance [9]. He studied the association between employee satisfaction and citizenship behavior, finding a robust positive correlation. He considered job satisfaction as satisfaction with job, pay, promotion, collaborators, and supervision and found that employee satisfaction with promotion and supervision are more significantly correlated with OCB compared to other dimensions [7]. Smith, on the other hand, found that job satisfaction, serving as an indicator of long-term emotional state, directly predicts altruism rather than general compliance [2]. Organ also confirmed in a later study that satisfaction better predicts altruistic factors than dutifulness factors [3]. Moorman's research revealed that there is a positive relationship among job satisfaction, favorable work attitudes and an increased willingness among employees to demonstrate OCB as a means of repaying the organization [10].

#### **3.2. Perceived Fairness**

To uncover the relationship between perceptions about fairness and employee behavior, employees' extra-role behavior is a good entry point. Because these are non-traditional job behaviors, they are more likely to be controlled by personal control rather than traditional job descriptions. Therefore, employees have a tendency to change their extra-role behaviors when they encounter injustice. Organ proposed that there could be a similarity between the link of employee satisfaction and citizenship behavior and the link of perceived fairness and citizenship behavior [3]. In other words, if employees

feel they are treated fairly, they tend to hold favorable opinions about their supervisors, job-related consequences, and the job itself. Moorman investigated the correlation between perceptions of organizational justice and various aspects of citizenship behavior [10]. This is a causal model that includes a path between the fairness dimension and the OCB dimension. His findings also validate Organ's view. When employees perceive a lack of fairness, they may feel that the organization does not deserve their discretionary effort and then decrease the frequency or intensity of their citizenship behavior. In contrast, when employees perceive fairness, they are more possibly to have a sense of duty towards organizations and may prefer to go beyond their job requirements to help organizations. Perceptions of fairness, particularly the dimension of interactional justice in procedural fairness, help predict the occurrence of OCB.

### **3.3. Perceived Supervisor Support**

Many studies have investigated the link of perceived supervisor support and OCB, focusing on the mediating role of employees' subjective feelings. Smith et al. suggested that leader support may independently influence satisfaction and citizenship behavior and that its predictive power varies across the two dimensions of citizenship behavior [2]. Leader support, as an environmental factor, only indirectly affects altruism through its effect on satisfaction. Chen and Chiu discovered that perceived supervisor support influence organizational citizenship behavior by affecting employee satisfaction [11].

Others explained the intrinsic mechanisms from the perspective of employee behavior. Employees actively integrate into the organization upon entering it, playing a positive role in the socialization process. In the socialization process, employees who accept organizational culture and values are more likely to exhibit organizational citizenship behavior. Meanwhile, leaders' attitudes can profoundly influence employees' organizational socialization. When employees perceive that the organization recognizes their values, work, and contributions, they will be more actively engaged in their work and invest in the organization. Subsequent studies have also confirmed that employees' perceptions of supportive supervisors have a strong positive influence on their engagement in OCB. The stronger the perceived supervisory support is, the more organizational citizenship behavior employees' exhibit. Active socialization serves as a partial mediator in the association between perceived support from supervisor and OCB [12].

### **3.4. Leadership Styles**

Leadership styles can significantly influence employees' emotions and their job performance. Some researchers found significant departmental effects on citizenship behavior, which likely reflects differences in response sets due to different supervisors [2]. The above indirectly illustrates the possibility that leadership styles can influence OCB.

There are three common styles: transformational leadership, transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership. The most common one is transformational leadership. The theory emphasizes the role of the leader as a role model for employees. Leaders pay attention to their own conduct and inspire employees through their own values and intrinsic traits. Numerous studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership increases the probability of employee organizational behavior. It has also been discovered that transformational leadership can indirectly affect the occurrence of OCB through the degree of communication between leaders and members, internal motivation, and collective efficacy [13-15].

Transactional style is a style in which leaders motivate their subordinates to achieve their goals in an exchange, such as temporary rewarding behavior, punitive behavior, and scheduled rewarding behavior. It has a positive impact on improving employee performance [16]. Organizational fairness

is particularly important in transactional styles, and it is difficult for employees to be motivated when they perceive unfairness. Leaders must ensure that they deliver on their promises to employees. Daouk et al. found the important roles for perceived organizational fairness and psychological contract between the two variables [17].

Laissez-faire leadership style means that leaders, with low levels of both directive and supportive behavior, has a passive permissive attitude toward task responsibility and subordinates. Leaders avoid responsibility, are absent when needed, fail to make scientific individual or group decisions, struggle to produce high performance, and fail to keep employees in a positive emotional state in the organization. Compared with the abuse of power supervision, laissez-faire leadership is more detrimental to OCB [18].

In general, transformational and transactional leadership styles are positively associated with OCB, while laissez-faire style is negatively associated with OCB and causes more employee burnout which leads to turnover.

## **4. Impacts of OCB on Organizational Performance**

### **4.1. Positive Relationship**

Many researchers believed that the more significant impact on team performance is the extra-role behavior of employees, so they introduced OCB into the performance structures. Teams with higher levels of OCB tend to improve team performance through effective operations. Researchers have revealed that OCB can predict employees' task performance, and it also has an impact on individual psychological well-being, which in turn affects overall employee performance [19].

### **4.2. Negative Relationship**

Most of the earlier literature studied the positive impact of OCB on organizational performance. But now there is a growing number of researchers who doubt whether organizational citizenship behavior is necessarily beneficial to organizations. Some scholars recognized that many employees do get a good impression and make false OCB. Instead of improving organizational performance, it has a negative impact. This kind of behavior is then defined as coercive citizenship behavior (CCB). One study found that CCB is significantly and negatively related to employee peripheral performance and organizational commitment, but has no significant effect on task performance and in-role behavior [20]. It can also create a masking effect between high performance and creativity, leading to a decrease in creativity among high performing employees [21]. Thus, OCB may have probability to be harmful to employees by exerting pressure on them.

### **4.3. Inverted U-shaped Relationship**

Some researchers found an inverted U-shaped relationship between OCB and employee innovation performance in the individual level. Personalized HRM practices of personalized appraisal and personalized job placement have a significant positive effect on employees' innovative performance, while personalized training, personalized recruitment, and personalized job design affect innovative performance through the fully mediated role of organizational citizenship behavior [22]. Yan et al. found that there is an optimal level of employees' OCB, and only at the ideal level can employees keep a higher level of job performance [23]. When employees' OCB is over or under the ideal level, their job performance is more likely to be reduced.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research finds that there are different views on definition and dimensions of organizational

citizenship behavior, which has led to inconsistencies in the selection of OCB dimensions and measurement scales in empirical studies. So far, the dimensions of OCB have emerged in various structures such as two-dimensional, three-dimensional, five-dimensional, and seven-dimensional, making research more intricate and complex. Future research will be more difficult to advance without forming a consensus on the definition and dimensions of OCB. In addition, OCB is rated from a variety of perspectives, such as supervisor rating, colleague rating, and self-rating. It is also possible to combine two or three different rating approaches. It is still a challenge for researchers to reasonably select the assessment perspectives and integrate the ratings of different evaluators.

Today there are more and more studies about the negative effects of OCB, but the total number is still low, indicating that most researchers still focus on its positive effects. Another trend is the gradual transition of the focus on OCB from individuals to groups. But there are no clear conclusions about the content structure of group citizenship behavior and the differences between it and individual organizational citizenship behavior. Many group-level studies have drawn on individual-level studies, but given the complexity of groups, the research should be unique. It would also be necessary to examine whether there are significant differences in OCB across types of organizations.

In summary, the significance of this paper is that it reviews and analyzes the literature on OCB, which is important for enhancing the understanding of OCB and fostering the development of related research. The exploration of OCB definitions and dimensions can be increased in future studies to form a more authoritative, universal, and consistent view. Further research can be conducted on what negative effects OCB has on individuals, organizations, and families and what their mechanisms of action are.

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