

Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Purpose in Life: Dynamic Components for Sustainable Careers—Does Gender Matter?

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Abstract

The sustainability of careers has become a topic of relevance in the shift from a traditional concept of career to more self-directed, boundaryless careers. In this context, it's recognized that, while employees manage their careers, organizations should support their development. The present study aims to analyze the dynamics of reciprocal relationships between two components of the primary indicators of sustainable careers, namely, well-being (i.e., purpose in life) and performance (i.e., organizational citizenship behavior), and the moderating role of gender on those relationships. Two hundred and nine participants responded to the questionnaire three different times. A reinforcing relationship was found between these variables for women when the spiral analyzed started with organizational citizenship behavior, whereas men did not show any of the proposed relationships. Therefore, this study enhances understanding of the different workplace experiences of men and women, their well-being, performance, and career development.

Keywords

purpose in life, organizational citizenship behavior, sustainable careers, gender approach

Introduction

The traditional view of professional careers, characterized by long-term employment with one organization (Baruch, 2004), has evolved in response to the demands of the current dynamic and uncertain labor market. In this evolving landscape, individuals are increasingly expected to

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manage their own career paths (Hirschi, 2018), while organizations prioritize flexibility over long-term commitment (Meyer, 2012).

In response to these changes, De Vos and colleagues (2020) proposed the sustainable career model, which offers a comprehensive and dynamic approach to understanding and promoting sustainable careers. This model is built on three interrelated indicators: health (physical and mental well-being), happiness (subjective satisfaction and meaning), and productivity. These indicators are not only desirable in themselves but are also deeply interconnected and must be considered over time, as career sustainability is a longitudinal and context-sensitive process. The model emphasized the joint influence of individual factors, the context and time in shaping sustainable careers.

While the sustainable career model (De Vos et al., 2020) offers a solid theoretical foundation, empirical research still faces challenges in how to operationalize and measure career sustainability and its indicators (Tordera et al., 2020). In line with De Vos and colleagues (2020), we conceptualize well-being and performance as interconnected indicators of career sustainability. This approach is also consistent with the Happy-Productive Worker thesis (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001), which posits that well-being and productivity function synergistically to foster sustainable person–organization relationships. According to Tordera and colleagues (2020), the co-occurrence of high levels of both dimensions may serve as a proxy for sustainable careers, since neither alone is sufficient to ensure individual or organizational sustainability in the long term.

The operationalization of well-being at work and performance can take different forms, adding relevant information about both indicators, their relationship and possible antecedents (Warr & Nielsen, 2018). While most research is focused on job satisfaction and broad composites of performance, given that sustainable careers are inherently future-oriented, it is worth exploring indicators that reflect not only current functioning but also long-term direction and adaptability. In this study, we focus on two such indicators: purpose in life and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Purpose in life, which refers to a person's sense of directedness and the feeling that one's life is meaningful (Ryff, 1989). It is an eudaimonic indicator of well-being that integrates both health and happiness dimensions, and reflects individuals' long-term goals and direction in life aligning well with the conceptual framework of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). Regarding performance, we examine OCB, defined as discretionary behaviors in the workplace that exceed formal job requirements (Kozusznik et al., 2019; Organ, 1988). OCB promotes the kind of cooperative and proactive behaviors that help build sustainable work environments. This forward-looking orientation makes them especially relevant for studying sustainable careers, which require not only present functioning but also the capacity to grow and thrive over time.

Additionally, a core premise of the sustainable career framework is that career sustainability cannot be fully understood without considering its temporal and contextual dimensions (De Vos et al., 2020). So, the dynamic interplay between well-being and performance must be examined over time to capture processes that sustain or hinder careers. In line with this, the present study employs a three-wave longitudinal design, enabling the analysis of reciprocal relationships between purpose in life and OCB across multiple time points. This approach enables us to examine a potential virtuous cycle, where purpose and OCB mutually reinforce each other to support career sustainability over time. Contextually, sustainable careers are embedded in complex social environments that encompass both work and non-work domains. Prior research underscores the importance of adopting a holistic life perspective in career management (Hirschi et al., 2020), acknowledging that non-work elements, such as purpose in life, are interconnected with work-related behaviors like OCB. Accordingly, the present study investigates the reciprocal relationship between these non-work and work dimensions, emphasizing that sustainable careers emerge from the continuous interaction over time of individual experiences across life domains.

Furthermore, research suggests that social factors, such as gender, need to be further investigated in relationship to their influence in career sustainability (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020; Pace & Sciotto, 2021). Societal expectations and stereotypes associated with gender are known to have a strong impact on individuals' lives in different societies (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Indeed, research has found gender inequality to have a strong impact in the sustainability of careers showing an estimation of the gender gap of about 32% in different related areas (World Economic Forum, 2023). Previous research analyzing the well-being–performance relationship has also suggested the importance of considering the moderating role of social factors such as gender (Rego, 2009).

In summary, understanding how key indicators of sustainable careers interact over time and across domains is essential for effectively supporting individuals in their careers (De Vos et al., 2020). Building on a holistic and future-oriented perspective, the present study aims to analyze the reciprocal relationship between workers' purpose in life and OCB over time, considering the moderating role of gender.

Purpose in Life and OCB: Nurturing Careers

Empirical evidence has generally supported the positive relationship proposed by the Happy-Productive Worker Thesis: that an increase in performance could be explained by an increase in employee well-being (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). Although the unidirectionality of the relationship between well-being and performance is generally assumed, some authors have pointed to the need for more longitudinal research to test the causal (Judge et al., 2001) and reciprocal relationships (Alessandri et al., 2017; Dijkhuizen et al., 2018; Kozusznik et al., 2019). Some research has addressed this issue through longitudinal studies, and some support has been found for the effect of well-being on performance (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001), as well as for the opposite relationship (Alessandri et al., 2017). Empirical evidence indicating a reciprocal relationship between the primary markers of sustainable careers (i.e., well-being and performance) would strongly reinforce the validity of the concept itself; however, this research model has often focused on the job satisfaction–performance relationship, and the eudaimonic aspects of well-being have received limited attention (Dolan, 2014; Peiró et al., 2021). In fact, Tordera and colleagues (2020) have highlighted the importance of incorporating alternative configurations of well-being in sustainable career research, explicitly noting the relevance of eudaimonic constructs.

The eudaimonic approach defines well-being as fulfillment, purpose in life (Sonnentag, 2015), personal growth, and a sense of meaning in life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In this context, purpose in life has been highlighted as one of the essential components of eudaimonic well-being (Xi et al., 2018). It can be understood as the sense of directedness in life, the feeling that one's past and present life is significant, and the sense of having aims and objectives for living (Ryff, 1989). Thus, purpose in life answers core questions such as “what makes my life worth living?” (Xi et al., 2018). Empirical findings have consistently indicated that purpose in life positively enhances desirable work outcomes such as adjustment (Steger et al., 2010), cognitive functioning (Lewis et al., 2017), overall performance (Peiró et al., 2021), and OCB (Smith et al., 2014).

It is worth noting that emerging research underscores the importance of adopting a work–non-work perspective in developing a sustainable career (Hirschi et al., 2020; Hirschi & Koen, 2021). This perspective acknowledges the interconnectedness of various life domains and emphasizes the significance of considering indicators of non-work life outcomes alongside career sustainability, such as purpose in life. In this context, purpose in life can be seen as a unifying expression of both health and happiness (the two core dimensions of well-being proposed by De Vos et al., 2020). According to their model, health refers to the dynamic fit of one's career with their physical and mental capacities, while happiness captures subjective feelings of satisfaction and success, seen

from a broader life's perspective and aligned with personal values, career goals, and needs for growth or balance. Purpose in life reflects and supports both: it has been empirically associated with better mental and physical health (Kim et al., 2013) and it embodies personal coherence, values alignment, and goal-directedness (Hill et al., 2015), all of which are central to experiencing happiness in one's life and career. As such, purpose not only aligns with the well-being foundation of sustainable careers but also adds a future-oriented, holistic dimension to it.

Regarding job performance, it refers to the expected value to the organization of an employee's discrete behavior over a period of time (Motowidlo & Kell, 2012). This construct comprises the two main dimensions of task and contextual performance (Motowidlo & Kell, 2012): task performance refers to role-prescribed activities, whereas contextual performance refers to all other helping and productive behaviors not included in the job description. Research on work performance has predominantly focused on task performance due to its immediate organizational value; however, the contextual domain also contributes to organizational effectiveness through its effects on the psychological, social, and organizational context of work.

Within this contextual domain, the study of OCB has flourished in recent decades (e.g., Organ et al., 2011). OCB refers to those extra-role behaviors that are not explicitly prescribed, required, or rewarded by the organization but that supports the effective functioning of the workplace (Kozusznik et al., 2019; Organ, 1988). Although there were initially conceptual distinctions between OCB and contextual performance, the two constructs have largely converged over time, and are now often used interchangeably in empirical research (Koopmans et al., 2011; Organ et al., 2011). However, OCB remains distinct in its theoretical foundation, emphasizing the voluntary and interpersonal nature of employee contributions beyond formal role expectations.

In the context of sustainable careers, OCB represents particularly relevant indicators of performance that should be explored (Tordera et al., 2020). In today's evolving organizational landscape (characterized by declining job security and a growing emphasis on employee self-management), employees are expected not only to fulfill their formal roles but also to contribute to a cooperative and adaptive work environment. OCB supports this adaptability by fostering trust, reciprocity, and social capital within organizations, thereby creating conditions conducive to long-term career sustainability (Chiaburu et al., 2018). Moreover, unlike traditional task performance, OCB reflects a transformational exchange between employees and organizations, aligning with a long-term vision of mutual development and sustained contribution. Thus, emphasizing OCB over more transactional forms of performance offers a better fit with contemporary understandings of sustainable careers.

Therefore, maintaining a successful career depends on different components of health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). This study focuses on exploring the interaction between these crucial factors, by analyzing the relationship between purpose in life and OCB. By revealing a potential reciprocal relationship between key indicators of sustainable careers, we would not only confirm the concept of sustainable careers but also offer practical insights for promoting enduring and successful careers in the new labor context.

The Reciprocal Relationship Between Purpose in Life and OCB

When focusing on the influence that purpose in life may have on OCB, it is worth mentioning that one of the most representative characteristics of purpose in life is doing good for others (Prager, 1998), as greater purpose in life drives people to go beyond the urges and demands of their immediate surroundings (Baumeister, 2005). Thus, organizational research has shown that a sense of purpose is associated with positive work behaviors such as OCB (Schlechter & Engelbrecht, 2006). Additionally, workers with a high sense of meaning tend to invest more time and effort in

work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), regardless of whether this is compensated (Schlechter & Engelbrecht, 2006).

On the other hand, according to the eudaimonia model (Ryan et al., 2008) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), being aware of and fulfilling community-related organizational goals and values may also have a positive influence on well-being. Kumar and colleagues (2016) highlighted that people who perform prosocial behaviors also experience higher well-being; therefore, OCB would be expected to contribute to increasing workers' well-being due to its prosocial nature. Specifically, purpose in life has been found to be affected by factors such as helping, volunteering, and altruism (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Xi et al., 2018). Altruism, one of the main components of OCB (Organ, 1988), is seen as a key factor in a healthy, happy, and satisfying life (Lee et al., 2013). In this sense, engaging in helping behavior may be linked to individual values present in people's personal meaning and purpose in life (Maharaj & Schlechter, 2007), given that many people rely on these behaviors to make sense of their lives (Lee et al., 2013). Accordingly, research has found that OCB account for 15% of the variance in predicting purpose in life (Rastogi & Garg, 2011).

Based on the above, the present research aims to study the directional influences between purpose in life and OCB. With this in mind, we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. Purpose in life will positively influence OCB over time (specifically, purpose in life at Time 1 will positively predict OCB at Time 2, and purpose in life at Time 2 will positively predict OCB at Time 3).

Hypothesis 1b. OCB will positively influence purpose in life over time (specifically, OCB at Time 1 will positively predict purpose in life at Time 2, and OCB at Time 2 will positively predict purpose in life at Time 3).

Sustainable Careers: A Dynamic and Reciprocal Relationship

In recent years, the incorporation of time when studying well-being or performance has been highlighted, recognizing that both constructs are dynamic and evolve throughout a career (Sonnentag, 2015). Since well-being and job performance are primary indicators of sustainable careers, understanding their temporal development is essential for capturing how these elements influence career sustainability over time. This temporal approach allows us to move beyond static picture and provides deeper insights into the processes that support long-term career adaptability, growth, and fulfillment. Additionally, given that sustainable career development involves long-term processes, the chosen time interval for longitudinal analysis should be sufficiently extended to capture meaningful changes. Constructs such as purpose in life are relatively stable and unlikely to change dramatically in short periods, so a longer time frame better reflects their dynamic nature in relation to career sustainability.

Despite its importance, research investigating reciprocal relationships between well-being and performance over extended periods remains scarce and inconclusive (Dijkhuizen et al., 2018). For instance, Riketta (2008) found a weak but significant influence of job attitudes (including job satisfaction) and job performance over time, but not vice versa. Contrastingly, Alessandri and colleagues (2017) supported reciprocal effects between job performance and job satisfaction through a four-wave longitudinal study. Similarly, Dijkhuizen and colleagues (2018) found a short-term gain cycle between entrepreneurs' well-being (a composite measure of life satisfaction, job satisfaction, and work engagement) and performance (i.e., subjective personal and financial success), emphasizing the well-being's role in predicting long-term performance (2-year interval between time points). Nevertheless, Dijkhuizen and colleagues (2018) called for future

longitudinal studies that include more than two measurement points to investigate bidirectional influences between well-being and performance.

In the case of eudaimonic well-being, less literature has analyzed its dynamism. [Kozusznik and colleagues \(2019\)](#) conducted a 1-week diary study, the results of which suggested that the daily eudaimonic experience of meaning at work is a crucial factor in achieving better and more sustainable contextual performance. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, in this case, the dynamic relationships were analyzed considering the intraindividual variability in each variable within short periods; thus, non-reciprocal interindividual relationships over time were reported. In summary, these results show that there is some support for a relationship from well-being to performance and from performance to well-being, as well as for the reciprocal influence between them, although more longitudinal and comprehensive studies are needed to establish a stronger consensus ([Dijkhuizen et al., 2018](#)). Moreover, there is a clear gap in longitudinal evidence examining how specific facets of eudaimonic well-being (i.e., purpose in life) and performance (i.e., OCB) mutually influence each other over time, contributing to sustainable career trajectories.

Therefore, given that existing literature and empirical studies support the effect of purpose in life on OCB ([Schlechter & Engelbrecht, 2006](#)), whereas others show that OCB has an impact on purpose in life ([Greenfield & Marks, 2004](#); [Rastogi & Garg, 2011](#); [Xi et al., 2018](#)), and taking into account that, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that analyze the dynamic reciprocal relationship between purpose in life and OCB, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. There will be a reciprocal longitudinal relationship between employees' purpose in life and OCB, such that OCB at Time 1 will positively influence OCB at Time 3 through purpose in life at Time 2, and purpose in life at Time 1 will positively influence purpose in life at Time 3 through OCB at Time 2.

Gender as a Boundary Condition

Despite the widespread acceptance of the synergetic relationship between performance and well-being, it should be highlighted that empirical evidence has not always supported their association ([van Gelderen & Bik, 2016](#)). Indeed, different meta-analyses have shown weak or non-significant relationships between them ([Bowling, 2007](#); [Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985](#); [Judge et al., 2001](#)). Given these results, research has suggested that some environmental or personal variables may be able to perform a moderating role in this relationship, thus modifying it and depending on its condition ([Warr & Nielsen, 2018](#)).

Gender has been considered one of the most recognized social categories related to social identity ([Fiske & Taylor, 1991](#)), and the impact of gender roles and expectations on individuals' behavior has been widely acknowledged ([Eagly & Wood, 2016](#)). Stereotypes of men and women have generally been distributed in two dimensions: agency and communion ([Eisenchlas, 2013](#)). In this regard, research has associated female gender roles with higher levels of friendliness, unselfishness, and concern for others (communion), whereas the male role is associated with higher levels of confidence, independence, and assertiveness (agency) ([Eagly, 2009](#)). These differences appear also in work roles and careers ([Godoy & Mladinic, 2009](#)).

Taking these behavioral differences across genders into account, research has also explored differences in prosocial behaviors between men and women in the organizational context ([Allen & Jang, 2018](#); [Eagly, 2009](#)). In this regard, other-oriented behaviors such as OCB have been viewed as consistent with the characteristics associated with the stereotypical female role ([Kidder & Parks, 2001](#)). Since gender expectations on females are more communality oriented (helping and taking care of others) than for men (agentic), we could expect that complying with those

expectations (e.g. OCB) could be more important for the construction of the own identity and for the development of meaning and sense of purpose in life in females.

Recent research has brought to light the complex relationship between OCB and eudaimonic well-being, particularly through the lens of gender expectations. In this sense, [Sumner \(2020\)](#) suggests that women may experience greater increases in well-being, specifically in their sense of purpose in life, compared to men when engaging in behaviors that are aligned with their societal expectations (e.g., OCB). This phenomenon can be attributed to the differing social expectations placed on men and women, where women are often expected to embody communal traits focused on helping and caring for others, while men are typically associated with more agentic characteristics. These gender-specific expectations significantly influence an individual's identity formation and self-concept, making OCB more central to women's self-evaluations. Additionally, as [Allen and Jang \(2018\)](#) highlight, women who do not engage in helping behaviors tend to be judged more harshly by others and themselves compared to men in similar situations. This increased focus on helping behaviors may explain why OCB may have a higher influence on women's sense of purpose in life. This perspective might not only enhance the influence of OCB on women's eudaimonic well-being but may also create a reciprocal relationship where a strong sense of purpose motivates further engagement in OCB, reinforcing their communal orientation and overall sense of well-being in organizational settings. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Gender will moderate the dynamic reciprocal relationship between purpose in life and OCB, so that the relationship will be stronger for women than for men.

Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the dynamic reciprocal relationship between purpose in life and OCB over time, considering the moderating role of gender. Given previous research indicating that certain demographic factors can influence both purpose in life and OCB, we have included age, education level, and type of contract as control variables in our analyses ([Feldman, 2006](#); [Karasawa et al., 2011](#); [Mróz, 2011](#); [Ng & Feldman, 2009](#); [Ryff & Singer, 2008](#); [Wanxian & Weiwu, 2007](#)). Specifically, purpose in life tends to decline with age ([Karasawa et al., 2011](#)) but increases with higher education levels ([Ryff & Singer, 2008](#)) and having a permanent contract ([Mróz, 2011](#)). Similarly, OCB has been found to be positively associated with both education level ([Ng & Feldman, 2009](#)) and age ([Wanxian & Weiwu, 2007](#)), and permanent employees generally exhibit higher levels of OCB compared to temporary workers ([Feldman, 2006](#)).

Method

Sample and Procedure

The research group members contacted the CEO or human resources director of several Spanish organizations. Once they agreed to participate in the study, all employees in the organizations were invited to take part by completing a questionnaire through electronic devices during their work breaks. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and preceded by informed consent. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to analyze quality of working life in different types of organizations. They were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and used only in aggregate form. No compensation was offered for participation. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research at the University of Valencia (H1354632059685).

The sample at Time 1 contains a total of 1,647 workers from 41 companies. The attrition of the sample reduced the number of employee respondents to 879 employees from 27 organizations at Time 2 and 395 employees from 12 companies at Time 3. The data from the three time points were matched by using a specific self-generated code to ensure that the subjects' answers were anonymized but correctly matched across data waves. Finally, 209 participants from nine different companies responded to the questionnaire at three different times, with intervals of approximately 9 to 12 months between T1 and T2, and again between T2 and T3. The 9- to 12-month intervals between measurement waves were chosen to allow for meaningful changes in relatively stable constructs such as purpose in life, which evolves gradually (Hill et al., 2015). Furthermore, behavioral changes like OCB typically manifest over longer periods (Koys, 2001). Extending the intervals further was avoided due to the increased risk of sample attrition, balancing longitudinal depth and participant retention.

The final sample consisted of employees between 20 and 65 years of age ($M = 38.87$, $SD = 7.72$), 60.8% women and 39.2% men. Most participants (80.4%) worked in the service sector, while 19.6% were employed in production or construction-related sectors. Regarding educational background, 69.9% held a university degree, 12.0% had completed occupational training, 5.7% had a high school diploma, 2.9% had completed compulsory education, and 1.4% reported no formal education; 3.3% selected "other," and 4.8% did not provide this information. Concerning employment status, 81.3% of the participants held tenured or permanent contracts, 9.6% had temporary contracts, and 8.1% reported other types of employment; data on contract type was missing for 1% of the sample.

To assess potential attrition effects, we compared participants who completed all three waves with those who only completed the baseline survey. Statistically significant differences were found in purpose in life ($t = -4.09$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.31$) and citizenship behavior ($t = -5.13$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.36$), but these represent small effect sizes, indicating minor practical differences. In both cases, participants who remained in the study reported higher levels of purpose in life and OCB than those who dropped out. Sociodemographic comparisons showed small effect sizes for age ($\chi^2(2) = 20.34$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.11$), as younger employees (under 35) were more likely to remain in the study than older ones. No significant difference in sex nor sector ($p > .05$). These results suggest that attrition did not substantially bias the sample composition (Cohen, 1988).

Measures

OCB. OCB was measured using a reduced three-item version of the scale developed by MacKenzie et al. (2011), as adapted in Magdaleno's (2020). The original scale, developed in English, was translated into Spanish following the translation and back-translation procedure. Magdaleno (2020) reported acceptable reliability for this three-item version (Cronbach's α ranging from .65 to .68). A sample item is: "I willingly share my experience, knowledge, and information to improve the effectiveness of my colleagues." All items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). In the present study, Cronbach's α coefficients were .68, .72, and .77 for Times 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Omega coefficients were .69, .74, and .79 at the three time points.

Purpose in life. Purpose in life was measured using six items from the Psychological Well-Being Scale developed by Ryff (1989), using the Spanish adaptation by Díaz et al. (2006). This version was previously validated in Spanish-speaking populations and has shown acceptable psychometric properties. At Time 1, a reduced version of the scale was used, consisting of four items selected based on the highest factor loadings. However, due to suboptimal internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .58$; $\omega = .60$), the full six-item version was administered at Times 2 and 3.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the levels of the variables of interest in the current study

	Females		Males		T	p	1	2	3	4	5
	M	SD	M	SD							
1. OCB T1	5.60	.93	5.89	.71	−2.56*	.01	-				
2. OCB T2	5.62	.89	5.87	.80	−2.05*	.04	.65*	-			
3. OCB T3	5.81	.92	6.01	.69	−1.70	.09	.56*	.68*	-		
4. Purpose in life T1	5.92	.88	5.91	.85	0.11	.91	.34*	.31*	.31*	-	
5. Purpose in life T2	5.73	.76	5.84	.88	−1.01	.32	.37*	.47*	.44*	.53*	-
6. Purpose in life T3	5.98	.73	5.84	.73	1.39	.17	.29*	.39*	.39*	.45*	.57*

Note. * $p < .05$.

A sample item is: “I am clear about what I am trying to achieve in life.” All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). At Time 2, Cronbach’s α was .67 and ω was .66; at Time 3, reliability improved considerably, with $\alpha = .84$ and $\omega = .84$.

Gender: It was codified as a dummy variable: 0 (women) and 1 (men).

Data Analyses

We used Mplus to apply Structural Equation Modeling with three waves of survey data using a cross-lagged panel design to test reciprocal relations. In addition to allowing for the estimation of cross-lagged effects, cross-lagged path models also control for correlations within time points and autoregressive effects, or stability, across time (Kearney, 2017). The model fit was assessed by examining the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation), CFI (comparative fit index), TLI (Tucker–Lewis index), and SRMR (standardized root mean square residual) goodness of fit statistics. We considered it an acceptable fit when a model met the following criteria: RMSEA $\leq .10$, CFI $\geq .90$, TLI $\geq .90$, and SRMR $\leq .10$ (Hair et al., 1998; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). To test the significance of the indirect effects, we produced confidence intervals using the Monte Carlo method (Preacher & Selig, 2012) with 20,000 repetitions.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and significance tests for the differences between the “Female” and “Male” groups in the levels of the variables of interest in our sample. Figure 1

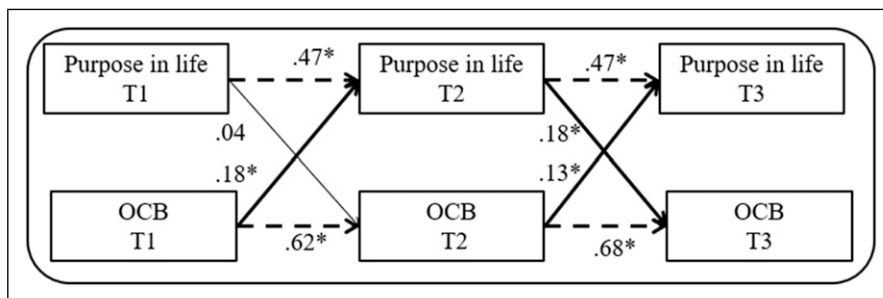


Figure 1. Results of the CLPM for the Total Sample. * $p < .05$

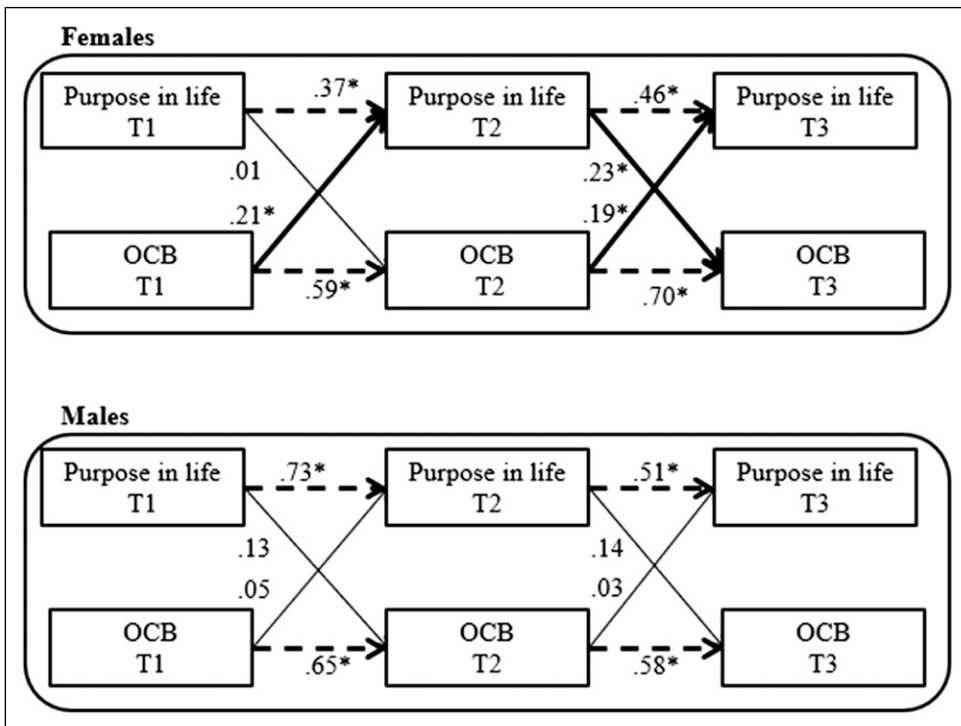


Figure 2. Results of the CLPM for both the Female and Male Groups. * $p < .05$

presents the results of the Cross-Lagged Panel Model (CLPM) for the female and male groups. The model fit for the general CLPM was acceptable: RMSEA = 0.093, CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.901, and SRMR = 0.045. Results of the CLPM are shown in Figure 1. Hypothesis 1a received partial support as a significant and positive relationship was found between purpose in life T2 and OCB T3, but not between purpose in life T1 and OCB T2. Additionally, yielding support for Hypothesis 1b, the results showed a significant and positive relationship between OCB T1 and purpose in life T2, and between OCB T2 and purpose in life T3. The results also support Hypothesis 2 because a significant reciprocal relationship was found between these variables when the spiral analyzed started from OCB (LL 0.005915; UL 0.06875), but not when the spiral started from purpose in life (LL -0.01093; UL 0.02557).

The model fit for the CLPM, introducing gender as a grouping variable, was good: RMSEA = 0.076, CFI = 0.972, TLI = 0.936, and SRMR = 0.051 (Figure 2). In the “female” group, a significant and positive relationship was found between purpose in life T2 and OCB T3, but not between purpose in life T1 and OCB T2 (partial support for Hypothesis 1a). Additionally, the results showed a significant and positive relationship between OCB T1 and purpose in life T2, and between OCB T2 and purpose in life T3 (Hypothesis 1b). Furthermore, a reciprocal relationship was found between these variables (Hypothesis 2) when the spiral analyzed started from OCB (LL 0.004675; UL 0.1083), but not when the spiral started from purpose in life (LL -0.03233; UL 0.03203). In the “male” group, the proposed relationships were not found (Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 2). Indirect effects were not significant either (LL -0.02845; UL 0.04076, starting from purpose in life; LL -0.02766; UL 0.04905, starting from OCB). Taken together, the results support Hypothesis 3, showing that gender plays a moderator role in the dynamic reciprocal relationship between OCB and purpose in life over time. More specifically, males presented higher stability in

purpose in life over time, and both genders presented rather stable OCB performance over time. In addition, females presented reciprocal influences between purpose in life and OCB over time. They also showed a positive spiral initiated with positive OCB that subsequently influenced purpose in life about 10 months later, and this improvement, in turn, had a positive effect on OCB about 10 months later. No lagged relations between these two variables were found for males.

Discussion

This study tested the reciprocal relationship (bidirectional influence) between eudaimonic well-being (i.e., purpose in life) and OCB, considering the moderating role of gender. To some extent, we found support for reciprocal relationships between the two constructs. However, gender was found to play an important role, given that different results were obtained based on it.

On the one hand, a reinforcing relationship between these variables was found for females when the spiral analyzed started from OCB. On the other hand, males did not show any of the proposed relationships. Therefore, in the present study, gender is presented as a main variable in understanding the reciprocal relationship between purpose in life and OCB over time.

Our research shows that, for females, a positive spiral develops starting with OCB and improving purpose in life, which, in turn, contributes to improving OCB. There may be different reasons for these results. First, other-oriented behaviors such as OCB have been viewed as consistent with the stereotypical female role (Kidder & Parks, 2001). This may suggest that relational orientation at work represents more clearly a female's style. Second, evidence shows that gender makes a difference in the strength of the relationship between OCB and various correlates (Allen & Jang, 2018). For example, when considering eudaimonic well-being as a consequence of OCB, research has suggested that, in response to gender expectations, women might show higher increases in well-being and, more specifically, in purpose in life, than men (Summer, 2020). In other words, because different social expectations depend on gender, it could be said that women build their eudaimonic well-being through the fulfillment of these expectations (their own and others') attributed to their gender stereotype, which enhances their OCB. Along the same lines, Allen and Jang (2018) highlighted that when women do not help others, they are evaluated by others and evaluate themselves more negatively than men in the same situation. Thus, helping behaviors play a more central role in women's self-evaluations and self-concept than they do in men, which may link their purpose in life to these helping behaviors (i.e., OCB). Therefore, the present results lead to reflecting on the importance of increasing these expectations for both genders, as this type of behavior is necessary in organizations, states, and the world as a whole.

Theoretical Implications

Building on the conceptual model of De Vos and colleagues (2020), this study addresses key gaps in the field of sustainable career development. First, we examined the reciprocal relationship between two central indicators—purpose in life and OCB—of sustainable careers. Second, in line with recent calls to adopt a holistic life perspective in career management (Hirschi et al., 2020), our results indicate a clear relationship in which actively considering context-free features of well-being (i.e., purpose in life) translates into enhanced work performance (i.e., OCB), and vice versa. Additionally, by actively considering context-free characteristics of personal life and how they interrelate with one's career, individuals can not only experience heightened work performance but also encounter fewer conflicts between work and personal life (Hirschi et al., 2020). This implies that career management from a holistic life perspective carries benefits for both the professional and personal spheres. Third, it has also been suggested that these findings should be

subjected to rigorous examination, not only through longitudinal studies but also by incorporating a minimum of three response time points (De Vos et al., 2020). Accordingly, the present research includes three response time points, illuminating the initial phase of a virtuous cycle guiding positive career development (in females' case).

The gender differences observed (where this virtuous cycle was present for females but not for males) are theoretically meaningful. They highlight the need for more nuanced models of sustainable careers that take into account how gender may influence the psychological mechanisms that sustain career growth over time (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020). Identifying gender-specific pathways or conditions under which similar positive dynamics might unfold is a promising direction for future theorizing.

Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, our findings offer important insights for both organizations and career development practitioners. First, they highlight the potential of fostering personal purpose as a lever for improving employee performance. Career counselors, coaches, and organizational leaders should consider integrating purpose-oriented interventions, especially with women, for whom purpose in life appears to act as both a source and outcome of OCB across time.

Second, from a policy and organizational learning perspective, the gendered nature of our findings is highly relevant. The fact that a virtuous cycle between helping others and finding life purpose emerged in females, but not in males, suggests an opportunity for interventions aimed at promoting greater gender equity in career development. If the goal is to build more inclusive and equal organizations, a key question becomes: How can we foster similar cycles of meaning and contribution in men? This could involve identifying barriers that prevent men from connecting helping behaviors with personal purpose and designing targeted programs that encourage this integration. At the same time, the absence of this pattern in men does not imply the absence of meaningful career development. It is possible that other forms of performance (i.e., task or creative performance) may serve as alternative sources of purpose for men. Thus, further research should further investigate this issue.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study has some limitations to consider when interpreting its findings. First, although we relied on validated scales to assess all our variables, the measures used were relatively brief, which may limit the coverage of the constructs. Additionally, internal consistency values (particularly at Time 1) were somewhat low, which may have affected their reliability. Future studies should consider using more comprehensive scales to ensure robust psychometric properties and better capture the complexity of these constructs.

Second, all data were measured with self-reported questionnaires, so there can be a risk of common method bias. However, measuring the constructs at three separated time points likely reduced this risk. Still, future research could improve upon this by incorporating multiple data sources, such as supervisor performance ratings.

Third, the data were collected at three time points with about a 1-year interval between them. While this interval allows for the observation of initial trends in the reciprocal relationship between purpose in life and OCB, it may also obscure shorter-term fluctuations or complex dynamic processes that unfold within that time. At the same time, even longer timeframes may be necessary to speak more conclusively about sustainable career trajectories. Future studies should explore alternative temporal designs to determine whether such dynamics emerge or stabilize over different timeframes, especially in men, where no significant longitudinal effects were observed under the current design.

Finally, although this study contributes to illustrating the impact of gender roles and expectations on individual's behavior (Eagly & Wood, 2016), it is important to acknowledge that the expression of these roles and associated behaviors can vary significantly across cultural contexts (Berry & Innreiter-Moser, 2002). For instance, in collectivistic cultures, where interdependence and harmonious relationships are emphasized, both men and women may exhibit higher levels of communion; in contrast, in individualistic cultures that prioritize independence and assertiveness, both men and women may display higher levels of agency. Given that our data were collected in Spain (a country with specific socio-cultural dynamics and persistent gender role expectations), future studies should explore the cultural specificity of these findings and their generalizability to other regions. However, in a national context where unemployment levels have largely remained high, understanding how to foster sustainable careers and enhance talent retention becomes especially critical. Identifying mechanisms, such as purpose-OCB dynamics, that promote long-term engagement, and fulfillment can offer meaningful insights for both organizations and career counselors operating in such labor markets.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study offers a better understanding of the differential workplace experiences of men and women, in terms of their well-being and performance and how they may impact their careers, based on the model recently built up by De Vos and colleagues (2020). Our results reveal the interdependence between work outcomes (OCB) and personal life (purpose in life), thus expanding the relationship between workers' well-being and performance beyond the organizational context and its relevance for the study of sustainable careers in the important transformation occurring in what has been described as the fourth industrial revolution.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Valencia H1354632059685.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during the current study are available in the RODERIC repository, <https://roderic.uv.es/handle/10550/83551>

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