Professional helpers' growth mindset, work engagement and self-reported performance

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Work engagement is a worker's state of mind which has benefits for individuals and the organization as a whole. Heslin (2010) suggested that people's work engagement can be enhanced by inducing a growth mindset. The present study examined on a sample of professional helpers whether the extent to which they have a growth mindset about their clients (GMC) and about professional helpers (GMP) predicted their work engagement (WE) and their (self-rated) performance (PERF). Structural equation modeling showed that a GMC predicted WE and that both GMP and WE predicted PERF.

Dataset (SPSS format)

1. Introduction

Work engagement is a fulfilling state of mind of people at work which is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement is associated with workers' creativity, their inclination to help colleagues, their organizational citizenship behaviors (Bakker, 2009; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010) and their mental health (Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008). Also, clients of engaged workers tend to be more satisfied (Salanova, Agut, Perió, 2005). Rather than being only simply an enduring state of mind of workers, work engagement tends to fluctuate on a weekly or even daily basis (Sonnentag, 2003; Christian, Garza, and Slaughter, 2011; Bakker & Daniels, 2012).

Work engagement is affected by both contextual factors, such as the social support, performance feedback, job control, task variety and learning opportunities (Hakanen, Perhoniemia, & Toppinen-Tannera, 2008), daily fluctuations in autonomy, supervisory coaching, and team atmosphere (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli, 2009) and personal factors such as self-efficacy, organizational based self-esteem, resilience (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli, 2007), how well rested workers go to work (Sonnentag & Niessen, 2008; Bakker, van Emmerik, Geurts, & Demerouti, 2010) and how well they are able to recover from stress during the day by taking breaks (Trougakos, Beal, Green, and Weiss, 2008) and by experiencing positive off-job social, creative, or sportive leisure activities (Hooff, Geurts, Beckers, and Kompier, 2011).

Heslin (2010) suggested that work engagement might also depend on people's mindsets about whether they can change their personal attributes. Believing that personal attributes are largely fixed and cannot be changed is called a *fixed mindset*; believing that they can be change with effort is called a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 1999; 2006). Heslin suggested that a having a growth mindset might contribute to one's work engagement because having a growth mindset is associated with first, a zeal for development, seeking challenging tasks, being eager to learn, to remedy mistakes; second, a positive view of effort, seeing it as essential for learning and succeeding, third, more alertness to new information, to error detection and to corrective information, and fourth, psychological presence and interpretation of setbacks, staying engaged after setbacks. He further suggested that managers' mindsets affect how they treat employees, which in turn influences their work engagement. Managers with a growth mindset tend to invest more in the development of employees (Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham, 2006) and are perceived as more fair (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2009).

If having a growth mindset would indeed stimulate work engagement that would be practically relevant for management practice. Because, while people's mindsets are generally relatively stable they may also be relatively easily influenced (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Aronson, Fried, and Good, 2002; Heslin, Latham, and VandeWalle, 2005; Visser, 2013). Thus, cultivating a growth mindset might be a good way to increase work engagement and thereby, employees' mental health and performance.

A field in which the impact of mindset on work engagement might also be strong, and possibly even stronger, is that of professional helpers like therapists, counselors and coaches. Indeed, the very choice for a helping profession seems to imply the belief that clients to some extent will be able to change. After all, what would be the usefulness of helping when clients would not be able to change, anyway? In fact, believing that clients can change may be a core prerequisite for being an effective professional helper.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated how expectations can lead to powerful self-fulfilling prophecies in a school setting. In their experiments, teachers who had been told that some of their students were gifted and others weren't, developed positive expectations about the first group of students and negative expectations about the second

group. Although the children had actually been assigned randomly to the two groups (gifted/non-gifted) and were thus equivalent in talents, the supposedly highly gifted students began to outperform the supposedly non-gifted students. The same may apply to the helping professions. When professional helpers implicitly have positive expectations about the capacity of clients to change they may subtly and implicitly influence the clients.

A more conscious process may also be at work. In solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) and solution-focused coaching (SFC) there is a deliberate tactic by professionals to create an expectation of beneficial change (Visser & Schlundt Bodien, 2009). Steve de Shazer (1985, 1988) wrote that solution-focused practitioners should help their clients create an expectation of beneficial change by getting a description of what they will do differently once the problem will be solved in order to induce a positive expectation in clients. This presupposes in the first place that the practitioner in question works from a belief that the client can change.

Thus, it is theorized that a growth mindset of professional helpers predicts their effectiveness. It is expected that work engagement mediates this relationship. A partial mediation is expected instead of a full mediation because also a direct effect from a growth mindset on the professional helpers' effectiveness is expected due to an implicit effect such as in the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) studies. The present study thus tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Professional helpers' beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person are positively correlated to their beliefs about their own ability to change as a person.
Hypothesis 2: Both professional helpers' beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person and their beliefs about professionals' ability to change as a person predict their work engagement.
Hypothesis 3: Both professional helpers' beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person and their beliefs about professionals' ability to change as a person predict their performance.
Hypothesis 4: The effect of between professional helpers' beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person and of their beliefs about professionals' ability to change as a person on their performance is partially mediated by their work engagement.

2. Method

Participants
A web-based survey was designed and administered to 258 self-identified professional helpers. 10.5% of them worked less than three years as a professional helper, 40.5% between three and 10 years, 28% between 10 and 20 years, and 20.2% more than 20 years. 47.1% of the participants were self-employed, 48.6% worked as an employee, and 3.5% was an employer. 0% fell in the age category of 24 or younger, 25.9% was between 25 and 44, 69.8% was between 45 and 64, and 4.3% was older than 65 years old. 182 respondents took a Dutch version of the survey; 75 took an English version.

Measures
Growth mindset about clients (GMC): items were adapted from the implicit person theory scale (IPT) developed by Levy and Dweck (1997). The original scale contained items about whether people can change as a person such as "People can substantially change the kind of person they are." Cronbach's alpha for this scale has been reported to be high (α = .93; Levy et al., 1998; α = .93; Heslin & VandeWalle, 2009). Visser (2013) used removed two items and found an α of .83 was found. These six items were used for the GMC scale. The modified items for this scale refer to whether clients can change as a person such as "Clients can substantially change the kind of person they are." Four items assess growth mindset beliefs and two items assess fixed mindset beliefs. Participants rated each item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 which represented high disagreement to 6 representing high agreement. Responses to the fixed mindset worded items were reverse-scored so that high scores represented a growth mindset. The internal consistency of the GMC scale was good; α = .86.

Growth mindset about professionals (GMP): this scale was made in the same way that the GMC scale was made and contained six items which refer to whether professionals can change as a person, such as: "Every professional has the potential to become excellent.". The internal consistency of the GMP scale was good; α = .78.

Work engagement (WE): Work engagement was assessed with the 15-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES: Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). This scale includes five items for each engagement dimension: vigor (VIG; e.g. 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy'), dedication (DED; e.g. 'My job inspires me'), and absorption (ABS; e.g. 'I get carried away when I am working'). Items were scored on a scale ranging from (0) 'not true at all' to (6) 'very true'. For all subscale good internal consistencies were found; for VIG α = .82; for DED α = .90; for ABS α = .74.

Performance (PERF): Four items were formulated to assess performance. Item1 asked: "How do you rate your own performance as a professional helper?". Items 2 to 4 asked for self assessments of performance through the eyes of relevant others. Item 2 asked: "How would your clients rate your performance as a professional helper?" Item 3 asked: "How would your professional colleagues rate your performance as a professional helper? Item 4 asked: "How does your manager rate your performance as a professional helper? (If you do not have an actual manager, imagine you had one and answer how this manager would rate your performance)". The internal consistency of the PERF scale was good; α = .84.

Theoretical expectations were tested with structural equation modeling (SEM) using the SPPS-AMOS software

package (Arbuckle, 2010). First, the measurement model was tested through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Then, the structural model was tested through a path analysis. Following a recommendation by Kline (2010) the χ2 test, the RMSEA, the CFI, and the SRMR are reported.

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations between the variables, and the internal consistencies of the scales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics

Measures	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. GMC	(.86)					
2. GMP	.68**	(.78)				
3. VIG	.28**	.20**	(.82)			
4. DED	.26**	.15*	.71**	(.90)		
5. ABS	.13*	.14*	.60**	.58**	(.74)	
6. PERF	.19**	.26**	.37**	.30**	.28**	(.84)
M	3.94	4.02	4.77	5.23	4.43	4.04
SD	.99	.86	.57	.61	.63	.39

Note. N=257; **p < .001; Cronbach's alpha estimates are reported within parentheses along the diagonal.

The data set contained no missing values because for all independent and dependent variables answers were required for all items. Several skewedness and kurtosis issues were solved by removing six cases. Only for the variable SRP there remained a kurtosis issue. Data screening showed there was homoscedasticity for all the composite variables that were used in the further analyses. Also there were no multicollinearity issues.

The measurement model was then tested through a CFA. In this model three latent variables were included: 'Growth Mindset Clients', 'Growth Mindset Professionals'. 'Work Engagement' and 'Performance'. The respective survey items were used as indicators except for the latent variable Work Engagement, for which the composite variables VIG, DED, and ABS were used. For this model test, the participants-to parameters ratio was greater than 5:1 which is considered acceptable (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). The CFA yielded a reasonably good model fit (χ2 = 350.434, P <.001; χ2/df = 2.400; RMSEA = .074; CFI = .962; SRMR = .0606). The only measure which did not indicate a good model fit was the χ2, which was significant, but this may have been partly due to the slightly larger sample size, for which the χ2 is quite sensitive.

Because the limited sample size did not allow for a latent variable path analysis, the composite variables GMC, GMP, WE and PERF were used. This path analysis showed that GMC had a positive direct effect on WE, GMP had a positive direct effect on PERF, and WE had a positive direct effect on PERF. No direct effects were found from GMC on PERF and from GMP on WE.
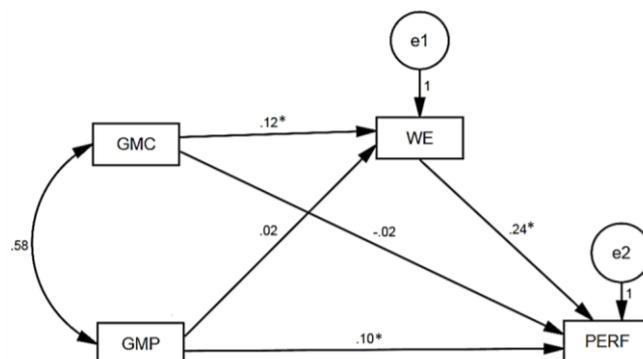

Figure 1. Path analysis. * p < .001.

4. Discussion

As was expected, professional helpers' beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person were positively correlated to their beliefs about their own ability to change as a person. Their beliefs about the ability of clients to change as a person predicted their work engagement, as was also expected. It did not, however, predict their self-rated performance. Their beliefs about professionals' ability to change as a person predicted their self-rated performance but not their work engagement. Work engagement, was, as expected, related to self-rated performance but did not, in any way, mediate the relationship between growth mindset and performance.

The differential effects of professional helpers beliefs about clients' ability to change and professionals ability to change were not expected. An explanation for this finding may lie in the way performance was operationalized. Although in three out of the four items on the PERF scale, respondents were asked to rate their performance from an outside perspective, that of clients, a supervisor, and professional colleagues, the self-ratings were likely to be biased. While self-report may be the best way to measure variables such as beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and opinions (Korb, 2011) using them to measure behavioral and performances variables may be less appropriate due to biases such as the social desirability effect (Cohen & Swerdlik,1999).

Two further serious limitations of this study were that all variables were based on self-report from a single source and that a common method was used. Taken together these limitations may be a source of bias and a threat to the validity of the conclusions. In order to explore the relationships between mindsets, work engagement, and performance more accurately multiple sources and methods should be used and a longitudinal design.

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