

RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL  
AND HUMAN RESOURCES  
MANAGEMENT

# RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN  
RESOURCES MANAGEMENT VOLUME 40

# RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# CHAPTER 1

## UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF OTHER-RATINGS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Jill E. Ellingson and Kristina B. Tirol-Carmody

### ABSTRACT

*Self-report questionnaires are the predominant method used in human resource management (HRM) research to assess employees' work-related psychological constructs (e.g., processes, states, and attributes). However, this method is associated with significant shortcomings, including the introduction of self-serving bias and common method variance when used exclusively. In this chapter, the authors challenge the assumption that individuals themselves are the only accurate source of the self-focused information collected in HRM research. Instead, the authors propose that other-ratings – ratings of a target individual that are provided by a workplace observer, such as a coworker, supervisor, or subordinate – can accurately assess commonly measured work-related psychological constructs. The authors begin by explaining the advantages of other-ratings for HRM research and practice, reviewing the history of other-ratings and how they emerged in the personality and person-perception literature, and outlining how they have been used in HRM research to date. Then, the authors build upon Funder's (1995) realistic accuracy model to develop a theoretical argument detailing why workplace others should be able to accurately judge how another employee thinks and feels about work. Next, the authors highlight existing evidence in the literature on the accuracy of other-ratings and present the results of a preliminary meta-analysis on the ability of*

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*other-ratings to predict self-ratings of work-related psychological constructs. Finally, the authors discuss potential moderators of other-rating accuracy and reflect on a number of practical considerations for researchers looking to use other-ratings in their own work. The authors intend for this chapter to meaningfully contribute to the larger conversation on HRM research methods. Other-ratings are a simple, yet powerful, addition to the methodological toolkit of HRM researchers that can increase flexibility in research design and improve the overall quality of research.*

**Keywords:** Other-ratings; self-other agreement; person perception; measurement; rating accuracy; self-serving bias

Psychological constructs are ubiquitous in human resource management (HRM) theory as a basis to explain how and why employees approach and respond to work and workplace practices. Whether it be personality traits and dispositions, attitudes and motivation, or more proximal intentions, employee psychological constructs are fundamental building blocks for theories of workplace behavior. Their centrality in theory-building leads quickly to their measurement, as assessing the viability of hypotheses requires evidence, and so we measure psychological constructs when testing HRM theory and have done so for many decades.

Self-report ratings have long been the dominant methodology for scaling employees on psychological constructs when conducting individual-level HRM research (Chan, 2009; Harrison & McLaughlin, 1993; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Schmitt & Klimoski, 1991). When drawing inferences about latent constructs, individuals are generally assumed to be the best-qualified reporters of this internal, self-focused information (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007; Pryor, 1980), and individuals often feel strongly that they know themselves best (Pronin et al., 2001). Individuals can draw upon intimate knowledge of previous public and private behavior across multiple situations and time, as well as internal thoughts, feelings, motives, and intentions when answering items about what they think and feel about work and how they behave. Individuals have a privileged perspective on their own work history and thus access to the most information about the self at work. Pragmatically speaking, self-report ratings offer researchers a practical and convenient way to collect data in organizations. Surveys may be constructed to measure multiple constructs via self-report at one time, resulting in an irresistibly efficient assessment method for accessing valuable explanatory data.

In contrast to this perspective, our goal is to argue that other-ratings, also referred to as informant reports (Vazire, 2006), can be used to measure work-related psychological constructs when HRM researchers seek an alternative to self-report. An *other-rating* involves asking an observer to make judgments about a target's level of a psychological construct. For example, one might ask a coworker, team member, or supervisor to rate a target employee's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, engagement, job involvement, or organizational identification. A common assumption is that observers are unqualified to make

such judgments. That is, the self-knowledge required for deriving an employee's level of commitment or engagement, for example, is accessible only through that employee's personal reflection upon their own feelings about work and their previous work behavior. We disagree and seek to explain why observers are, in fact, quite capable of weighing, inferring, and evaluating the actions and behaviors of a target in the manner necessary to render accurate ratings of a latent work-related psychological construct.

Our perspective follows from a rich tradition of research in the person-perception literature on *empathetic accuracy* which occurs when an observer accurately infers the thoughts, feelings, motives, and intentions of a target (Ickes, 1997). The notion that others are capable of such inferences extends from the sizable literature documenting a perceiver's ability to accurately judge a target's more stable and enduring dispositions (Connelly & Ones, 2010; Funder, 2012; Funder & West, 1993; Kenny & West, 2010). Indeed, it is well-established that observers can draw correct conclusions about the level and nature of a target individual's personality. It is also apparent that observer conclusions are sufficiently accurate to predict the target's future behavior. Although attitudes, self-conceptions, and one's thoughts and feelings are more transient, observers can accurately draw inferences about psychological states as well (Ickes, 1997), which implies that workplace observers should indeed be able to judge other employees' levels of work-related psychological constructs.

That said, we suspect the tangible reaction of HRM researchers to the notion that others in the workplace can sufficiently judge an employee's job satisfaction or commitment would, at best, include a healthy dose of skepticism and, at worst, manifest in strong protest. We understand the need to be circumspect when measuring the subjective experience of another person; after all, good measurement is the cornerstone of good management science. Yet, we believe other-ratings of psychological constructs have the potential to embody good measurement and thus devote our attention in this chapter to articulating a sound basis for that belief.

To be clear, the perspective advanced here is also reflective of pragmatic accuracy (Gill & Swann, 2004) which suggests that perceptual accuracy is naturally dependent on the social context within which the target and other interact, as it is within that context that the other's ability to judge the target has meaningful and salient implications for the other. Accordingly, our interest is also context-specific. Rather than investigating how others in general (e.g., family members and friends) might accurately judge a target across multiple different contexts (e.g., home and work), we focus on how a *workplace* other draws accurate inferences about a *workplace* target's *work-related* feelings, beliefs, and intended actions.

We begin by outlining the advantages of other-ratings for HRM research and practice. This is followed with a brief literature review of how other-ratings are typically used in HRM research compared to other disciplines and a historical account of how other-ratings emerged as a measurement tool. We then develop a theoretical explanation for why other-ratings can be used to measure work-related psychological constructs and consider their role as either substitutes or supplements to self-ratings. We outline some initial evidence from the literature

that points to other-ratings as a legitimate way to measure these constructs and report results from a preliminary meta-analysis which demonstrates that other-ratings of work-related psychological constructs predict self-ratings of those same constructs. We also discuss a series of moderator variables likely to improve or attenuate that relationship. Finally, we conclude by encouraging HRM scholars to view other-ratings as a viable measurement option and discuss practical considerations when including other-ratings in the design and conduct of HRM research.

## ADVANTAGES OF OTHER-RATINGS FOR HRM RESEARCH

A primary advantage of other-ratings for HRM research is the potential to mitigate the impact of common method variance by using an “observer” as a different measurement source. Common method variance emerges when two or more variables are measured using the same method, thus introducing the possibility that observed covariation is due to the common measurement method rather than the latent relationship between the constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2003). It is a notorious form of systematic error variance that afflicts cross-sectional survey research design, and thus has gained significant attention over the last few decades (Chan, 2009; Lance et al., 2010; Spector, 2006). For example, explanatory models wherein researchers test the relationship between a distal dispositional antecedent, a more proximal psychological mediator, and a performance-related outcome variable are common in HRM research, as we often seek to understand the psychological processes that undergird relationships between antecedents and outcomes. While outcome measurements can be secured from supervisors or organization leaders, self-report questionnaires are frequently used to measure both the predictor and mediating variables, thus introducing issues of common method variance. In contrast, the use of an other-rating in place of one self-report would evade the monomethod effect since data is collected from three unique sources (e.g., the employee, a coworker, and a supervisor).

To illustrate, consider the following example. Saks (2006) identified perceived organizational support (POS) as an antecedent and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) as an outcome of employee job engagement. Fig. 1 contains two models one might use to test the mediating effect of engagement in the relationship between POS and OCBs. In Model A, OCBs are measured using supervisor ratings, while POS and job engagement are both measured using self-ratings, thus introducing common method variance. In Model B, OCBs and POS are still measured using supervisor and self-ratings, respectively, but employee engagement is measured using a coworker rating, thus eliminating the potential for common method bias.

Thus, other-ratings provide a straightforward solution to a persistent problem. Yet, while scholars have periodically proposed that other-ratings could serve as an alternative to self-report to reduce common method variance (e.g., Campbell, 1982; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Podsakoff & Todor, 1985), the idea of

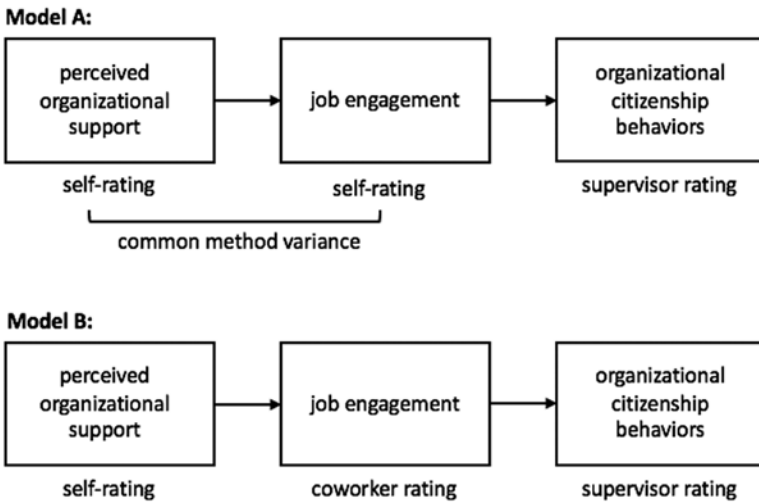


Fig. 1. Measuring the Mediating Role of Job Engagement Using Self- and Other-ratings.

using other-ratings to assess work-related psychological constructs instead of self-ratings has yet to be seriously examined. This lack of attention to a potentially viable solution is surprising given the prevalence of other-ratings in other disciplinary literatures. This neglect may simply be due to natural skepticism. In their review of common method bias and associated remedies, Podsakoff et al. (2003, p. 899) expressed that it is “doubtful whether the supervisors’ (or anyone else’s) perceptions of employees’ attitudes is as good a measure as the employees’ own self-reports.” In response, we respectfully point out that such conclusions about the illegitimacy of others’ perceptions warrant due process. Before assuming such measures are ineffective, the capacity of other-ratings to assess work-related psychological constructs deserves theoretical and empirical examination.

A second advantage of other-ratings for HRM research is the potential to measure latent psychological constructs in a manner that overcomes the inherent biases that exist within self-ratings. Scholars have long recognized that individuals are rarely fully objective and accurate in their sense of self-information due to both intentional and subconscious processes (Vazire & Carlson, 2011). When asked to describe their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and intentions, various cognitive factors including self-protection, self-enhancement, self-presentation pressures and impression management, and self-concept maintenance can upwardly bias resulting self-descriptions (Ashford, 1989; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Pryor, 1980; Wohlers & London, 1989). These motives can negatively affect accuracy, and under some conditions will do so to such a degree that responses may no longer predict behavior (Robins & John, 1997; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Swann et al., 2007; Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

For example, a self-report about one's thoughts and feelings may be derived more from a preconceived belief about how one should be at work or how one acted recently, rather than a full and balanced sampling of behavioral recollections. Indeed, the need to maintain one's self-worth is an unavoidably strong motive shaping self-perception. Socially desirable responding can be a concern when measuring constructs such as engagement or organizational commitment that would be seen as desirable by employers. This conscious sense that one must portray the self in favorable terms can be induced in organizational settings when employees believe it is possible their employer will come to know their responses, despite researcher assurances to the contrary (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). In addition, although management scholars tend to be most concerned about self-enhancement biases, self-ratings may also be biased downward due to deflation. For example, individuals with a low level of self-esteem may be unduly self-deprecating when making self-judgments (Yammarino & Atwater, 1993).

Observers are not susceptible to the self-serving biases that affect individuals' self-perceptual accuracy. In contrast to the self, observers are unable to over-weigh memories of internal, subjective experiences (i.e., thoughts and feelings) relative to true behavior, and instead will rely more upon memories of target behavior when making judgments. When HRM researchers are concerned about the susceptibility of self-report to self-serving biases, in light of the context for data collection or the particular psychological constructs to be measured, other-ratings could be used in substitution to evade the risk of upward or downward bias. In such situations, observers may be more forthcoming, which would make other-ratings more accurate indicators. Further, since individuals are predisposed to see themselves in a more positive light relative to how others see them (Kenny & West, 2010), other-ratings should typically be less upwardly biased, regardless.

A third, very "real" advantage of other-ratings is the opportunity to expand our methodological toolkit as researchers. More options for how we measure constructs increases design flexibility and permits more creativity in how we collect data in organizational settings. It also bears mentioning that using other-ratings offers a way to reduce target participant fatigue by limiting the number of scales that a single source must respond to. This could assist researchers in securing access to companies to collect field data and increase response rates by lessening the amount of time required by employees to participate.

## **ADVANTAGES OF OTHER-RATINGS FOR HRM PRACTICE**

Other-ratings offer great potential for HRM practitioners, as well. Employee attitude surveys are a common tool for gauging what employees think and feel about the workplace with the intent of facilitating organizational effectiveness through employee-supportive initiatives (Fauth et al., 2013; Kraut, 2006). However, survey usefulness depends heavily on employee response rates. Evidence suggests that employees with more positive attitudes are the individuals most likely to participate in such surveys, compared to employees with less

positive attitudes (e.g., [Fauth et al., 2013](#); [Mueller et al., 2014](#); [Rogelberg et al., 2000, 2003](#)). Employees who are more satisfied in their job are more likely to respond, in part because doing so is viewed as an act of organizational citizenship behavior ([Taris & Schreurs, 2007](#)). When employee non-response is linked to attitude levels, surveys can produce misleading results and misguided initiative decisions ([Podsakoff & Organ, 1986](#); [Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007](#)). Increasing the response rate of the discontent is often exceedingly challenging, as is identifying the extent to which non-response is indicative of attitude levels in the organization ([Rogelberg et al., 2003](#)).

Instead, other-ratings offer a viable alternative for identifying the full breadth of work attitudes by shedding light on the lower-tail of those distributions. Folding the methodology of other-ratings into employee attitude surveys can reveal greater degrees of dissatisfaction and frustration with work conditions. Asking colleagues to select another employee in their work group and rate that employee's level of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement, or engagement provides a means to incorporate the voice of non-respondents who would otherwise remain silent. Further, soliciting other-ratings represents a way to engage employees more actively in the attitude survey process. Research suggests that rating another person in terms of how that individual thinks and feels can be intrinsically interesting ([Vazire, 2006](#)). It is an opportunity to reflect on and offer insight about a colleague, and being asked to share their discerning perceptions can make employees feel valued in the process.

Regularly collecting other-ratings of job-related psychological constructs would allow HR to leverage colleague judgments as leading indicators and therefore respond more quickly to concerns. For example, research on the behavioral implications of workplace stress demonstrates that coworkers and managers are important diagnosticians capable of identifying when others in the workplace are experiencing (but not sharing) stress-related difficulties (e.g., [Dimoff et al., 2016](#); [Gulliver et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, [Gardner et al. \(2018\)](#) found that managers can independently and accurately predict subordinate turnover by attending to certain "pre-quitting" behaviors known to signal underlying employee intentions to leave. [Rosen et al. \(2009\)](#) also relied on supervisor ratings of turnover intentions when examining the impact of organizational politics on withdrawal. They argued that because supervisors are less susceptible to socially desirable responding, they provide more accurate evaluations of employee turnover intentions.

Indeed, more effective managers may well rely on the mental equivalent of an other-rating by consciously reflecting on the attitude levels of direct reports to better manage and meet employee needs. Managers and coworkers may also be able to sense when an employee's attitudes and feelings about work are changing. Regularly working together provides a natural point of comparison (i.e., an employee's actions and behaviors today relative to past actions and behaviors). That enriched perspective should further inform perceptions and further improve a manager or coworker's ability to provide insightful prediction. Thus, we suggest scaling up this activity by routinizing the process of collecting other-ratings in the interest of collectively viewing coworkers and managers as legitimate early detectors for when employees are struggling at work. A regular routine of assessing

and reflecting on the status of others can reveal problems sooner and allow remedial actions to be taken in advance of human capital loss.

Finally, collecting other-ratings would allow HRM practitioners insight into managerial allocations of valued resources and rewards. Decisions about which employees should receive promotions, raises or bonuses, or access to development opportunities are often the product of subjective managerial judgment. Managers make attributions about how committed, involved, or engaged employees are and allocate opportunities on that basis, presuming, of course, that possible candidates have met performance standards. For example, [Shore et al. \(1995\)](#) found that supervisor ratings of a target employee's commitment predicted supervisor beliefs about the target's management potential and promotability. [Allen and Russell \(1999\)](#) found that supervisor perceptions of a target employee's organizational and work commitment mediated the relationship between the supervisor's performance evaluation of the target and associated reward recommendations. Similarly, [Yun et al. \(2007\)](#) used supervisor ratings of commitment to understand how target employees' self-enhancement motives affect their work behaviors and subsequent supervisor reward recommendations. They found that the supervisor ratings of a target employee's affective commitment moderated the relationship between the employee's work behaviors and the supervisor's reward recommendations, such that the effect of the behaviors was a stronger determinant of reward allocation when supervisors believed employees were highly committed. If deserving candidates are equal on dimensions of skill and capability, a manager's assessment of an employee's psychological connection to the company provides a reasonable basis of differentiation. Thus, other-ratings of employees' levels of job-related psychological constructs provide a means to assess (and legitimize) the relative contribution of "will do" factors versus "can do" factors in managerial decision-making.

## HOW OTHER-RATINGS ARE TYPICALLY USED IN HRM RESEARCH

Before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge that other-ratings are used regularly in HRM research. However, their use is typically limited to assessing a target's competencies and/or observable work behaviors. For example, other-ratings provided by supervisors are widely used to assess performance and performance-related behaviors. Self-ratings of performance are often viewed as unreliable due to the potential for extensive leniency and social desirability biases, given the evaluative nature of the assessment. Further, employees often lack information about their relative performance. They are less likely to adjust a self-rating to account for personal discrepancies from the normative or standard level of performance displayed by other employees.

In contrast, supervisors are considered more accurate reporters of performance behavior, as they regularly direct and observe subordinates' work performance and are less motivated to provide an evaluation inconsistent with the level of behavior on the job. Supervisors have a stronger grasp of job expectations and