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**When are employees idea champions? When they achieve progress at, find meaning in, and identify with work**

**Abstract**

**Purpose**—Drawing from conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study investigates the relationship between employees' perceived career progress and their championing behavior and particularly how this relationship might be invigorated by two critical personal resources at the job (work meaningfulness) and employer (organizational identification) levels.

**Design/methodology/approach**—Quantitative data were collected from a survey administered to 245 employees in an organization that operates in the oil industry.

**Findings**—Beliefs about organizational support for career development are more likely to stimulate idea championing when employees find their job activities meaningful and strongly identify with the successes and failures of their employing organization.

**Practical implications**—This study offers organizations deeper insights into the personal circumstances in which positive career-related energy is more likely to be directed toward the active mobilization of support for novel ideas.

**Originality/value**—As a contribution to extant championing research, this research details how employees' perceived career progress spurs their relentless efforts to push novel ideas, based on their access to complementary personal resources.

**Keywords**—championing behavior; career progress; work meaningfulness; organizational identification; conservation of resources theory

**Paper type**—Research paper

## Introduction

Extant research underscores the importance of employees' championing behavior for an organization's well-being. Through such behaviors, employees actively mobilize support for novel ideas that can improve the organizational status quo and seek to convince other members of the value of these ideas (Walter, Parboteeah, Riesenhuber, & Hoegl, 2011). Why might employees be more or less likely to engage in such behavior though? This study addresses a critical but underexplored enabler of idea championing, namely, the extent to which employees feel supported in their career development (Fu, Liu, Huang, Qian, Wang, et al., 2018). *Perceived career progress*—defined as the degree to which employees believe that they have received adequate career opportunities and not suffered stalled careers (Foster, Lonial, & Shastri, 2011; Lin, Chen, & Lai, 2018)—provides critical, positive work energy that can fuel additional work activities (Conner, 2014; Nachbagauer & Riedl, 2002; Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995). Yet little research attention addresses *how* and *when* employees' positive evaluations of their career development might encourage them to perform discretionary behaviors to mobilize support for their novel ideas. This article proposes that the accumulation of positive work energy, derived from beliefs that the organization has helped them avoid the threatening situation of reaching a career plateau (Conner, 2014; Fu et al., 2018), may stimulate employees to champion their novel and potentially disruptive ideas, even if such championing efforts might be met with some resistance (Howell, 2005; Walter et al., 2011).

Furthermore, this study seeks to establish the circumstances in which this process is more likely to materialize. In particular, it investigates the catalytic roles of two pertinent personal resources, each of which might increase employees' propensity to go out of their way to channel their positive career energy into lobbying efforts to convince other members of the value

of their new ideas. First, *work meaningfulness* captures the extent to which employees sense that their daily job tasks are important and make a positive difference (Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005). Second, *organizational identification* reflects employees' perception of the connection of their organization's well-being with their own, such that they experience praise about their organization as a personal compliment and criticisms as personal insults (Brammer, He, & Mellahi, 2015). The extent to which perceived career progress leads to higher championing behavior may be greater when employees (1) experience their work as more meaningful and (2) strongly identify with their organization.

Notably, this study's conceptual focus is on the *concurrent* interplay of employees' perceived career progress with these two personal resources instead of how the resources might influence the extent to which employees feel satisfied with their career progress. Related research that examines employees' job satisfaction levels indicates that employees tend to be more satisfied with their work situation to the extent that they experience high levels of work meaningfulness (Glavas & Kelley, 2014) and organizational identification (Collins, Galvin, & Meyer, 2019; Knapp, Smith, & Sprinkle, 2014). An issue that has not been explicitly addressed, however, is how these two specific personal resources might enhance employees' propensity to engage in championing behaviors if they are already happy about how their career has evolved. This study therefore seeks to address the theoretically and practically relevant issue of the *conditions* in which organizations can leverage the likelihood that prevailing satisfaction among their employee bases with respect to their current career situation can be exploited as productive work behaviors in the form of idea championing.

In summary, this study seeks to contribute to extant research by examining how perceived career progress, an important source of positive work energy, spurs persistent efforts

to promote new ideas, as well as the personal conditions in which this conversion is more likely to take shape. Previous research identifies several favorable consequences that can arise from employees' positive judgments of their career situation, or the *absence* of concerns that their career might have reached a plateau, such as enhanced citizenship performance (Jawahar & Liu, 2016) and diminished withdrawal and absenteeism (Conner, 2014). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no studies have investigated how positive beliefs about career progress might lead to the active championing of new ideas, let alone identifying factors that may catalyze this process.

In response, this study draws from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000) to theorize and empirically demonstrate that employees' positive career energy resources play a key role in spurring their championing efforts to the extent that they can rely on valuable personal resources that increase the attractiveness of this process (Hobfoll, 2001; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Lam, 2012). Prior research has considered the *direct* roles of these contingency factors in stimulating positive work behaviors, such that employees' perceived work meaningfulness stimulates their voice behavior (Chen, Wang, & Lee, 2018) and their organizational identification enhances their creativity levels (Wang et al., 2019). Instead, this study focuses on how these personal features might encourage employees to leverage positive feelings about their career advancement as persistent efforts to mobilize support for their novel, potentially disruptive ideas (Howell, 2005; Van Laere & Aggestam, 2016). In so doing, it establishes *when* policies designed to support employees' career development may generate the greatest value.

Furthermore, this study extends extant idea championing research with its empirical focus on the underexplored nation of Angola. The cultural profile of this African country, particularly

its high level of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), might spur employees' resistance to risky work activities—including championing behaviors that may upset the status quo and likely evoke doubt and resistance—such that they are reluctant to mobilize support for such controversial ideas (Walter et al., 2011). Similarly, the high power distance that marks Angolan culture (Hofstede et al., 2010) implies that employees may be fearful that their efforts to champion disruptive ideas will be rejected by organizational leaders. In this sense, this study provides a conservative test of how employees' positive evaluations of their career progress might enhance their championing behavior. Yet such risk aversion and concerns of negative reactions by powerful organizational members also may render the invigorating roles of work meaningfulness and organizational identification especially salient in this country context (Hobfoll et al., 2010). Thus, the interaction of employees' perceived career progress and possession of selected personal resources, as input to predict their championing behavior, appears particularly compelling in this cultural context and should have similarly significant value in countries with comparable cultural characteristics.

### **Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

A critical pathway by which employees can contribute to their organization's success and competitive standing is their persistent promotion of new ideas for organizational improvement (Howell & Boies, 2004; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). Idea championing can prompt changes and improvements to current organizational situations, potentially producing solutions to extant organizational failures (De Clercq, Castañer, & Belausteguigoitia, 2011; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Van de Ven, 1986). Furthermore, employees' active championing of novel ideas might benefit not just their employing organization but also themselves, by potentially expanding their network of intra-firm relationships (Coakes & Smith, 2007), revealing in-depth insights into decision

processes in the organization (Van Laere & Aggestam, 2016), and earning them higher performance evaluations (Kissi, Dainty, & Tuuli, 2013) or an enhanced sense of personal accomplishment (Kim, Hon, & Grant, 2009). Persistent lobbying efforts are also challenging for idea proponents though, particularly when other organizational members might feel threatened by the proposed changes or fear a loss of their current privileges (Howell, 2005; Yuan & Woodman, 2010). The energy-consuming practice of idea championing may lead to disappointment if the proposed ideas evoke skepticism or resistance (Walter et al., 2011).

Noting that championing behaviors already are challenging, it is critical to establish which energy-enhancing work conditions might steer employees toward them, despite the challenges (De Clercq, Sun, & Belausteguigoitia, 2018; Howell & Shea, 2001; Wichmann, Carter, & Kaufmann, 2015). Moreover, this study's focus on investigating why employees actively *champion* their ideas, instead of their initial idea generation, is informed by the argument that the development or creation of novel ideas alone cannot increase organizational effectiveness, which instead requires efforts by employees to convince other organizational members of the usefulness of their ideas (De Clercq et al., 2011; Van de Ven, 1986). As Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017: p. 54) emphasize, "some creators might come up with groundbreaking ideas but never voice them because of a fear of being seen as different" and "either abandon a promising idea before presenting it to the relevant gatekeepers or strip the idea of its potentially groundbreaking novelty." Thus, there is need for continued studies that address why some employees persist in their idea championing efforts, which also diminishes the risk that valuable but potentially controversial ideas "die off" in the process (Lempiälä, Yli-Kauhaluoma, & Näsänen, 2018; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

In response, this study draws from COR theory to propose that employees' positive energy resources with respect to how their career has evolved thus far may enhance their championing behaviors, and that this process is more prominent when (1) their job activities are personally meaningful and (2) they strongly identify with the organization. Work meaningfulness and organizational identification, conceptualized herein as moderators, align with two COR resources listed in Hobfoll's (2001, p. 342) overview of pertinent resources, namely, "the feeling that my life has meaning/purpose" and "a sense of commitment." This study focuses on these resources, which have been studied together as relevant, complementary personal factors (Brieger, Anderer, Fröhlich, Bärö, & Meynhardt, 2019; Shantz & Booth, 2014), because each of them might encourage employees to channel their positive career-related energy into persistent championing efforts as a highly *desirable* direction for targeting their energy resources (Hobfoll, 2001). These two personal resources also complement each other, in that the first pertains to how employees perceive the usefulness of their daily *job* activities (Zhang, Sun, Lin, & Ren, 2018), and the second addresses how employees' personal well-being connects with that of their *employer* (Wang, Tang, Naumann, & Wang, 2019). In turn, this study offers a consistent, comprehensive view of how selected personal contingencies might inform the translation of positive career energy resources into enhanced championing behaviors.

The proposed theoretical model is summarized in Figure 1, which features a positive baseline relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior, complemented by catalytic roles of work meaningfulness and organizational identification. The arguments for the model's constitutive hypotheses are detailed next.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]



### *Perceived career progress and championing behavior*

Employees' beliefs about the career progress they have enjoyed thus far may increase their idea championing efforts. According to COR theory, employees are more determined to channel positive work energy—resulting from a sense of happiness about their current career situation (Jawahar & Liu, 2016)—into productive work activities when they expect these leveraging efforts to generate additional resource gains (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Employees who are content with how their employer has contributed to their professional growth, by providing adequate support for career development (Conner, 2014; Fu et al., 2018), derive more personal joy from enhancing the well-being of this employer, so they may pursue this objective by actively promoting novel ideas to benefit the organization (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). Conversely, employees who are frustrated because their career has stalled may be reluctant to devote their efforts to contributing to organizational effectiveness through relentless idea championing (Nachbagauer & Riedl, 2002; Tremblay et al., 1995). These employees gain fewer resources from leveraging their positive career perceptions to improve the organizational status quo (Hobfoll, 2001). Similarly, employees with positive beliefs about their career advancement likely sense that the organization cares for their professional well-being and appreciates their daily work efforts (Chang, 2003; Fu et al., 2018), so they may feel more personally fulfilled if they can advance their organization's success through their persistent championing efforts (Howell, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In parallel, perceptions of career progress may fuel employees' motivation to mobilize support for their novel ideas, in that their productive work activities may create the sense that they *deserve* the career support provided by their organization (Cao, Hirschi, & Deller, 2014; Wichmann et al., 2015). In contrast, employees who feel disrespected or sense that the organization has ignored their career development might give up

on promoting their novel ideas (Connor, 2014), even if they could improve the organizational status quo (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

In addition to the enhanced motivation that employees who perceive they have made great career progress may exhibit toward championing novel ideas for organizational improvement, there also may be an ability-based explanation. Efforts to mobilize support for novel ideas can be challenging, due to the persistent resistance offered by the targets of these efforts, who might feel threatened by the associated organizational changes (Hon, Bloom, & Crant, 2014; Howell & Boies, 2004). For example, other organizational members may feel personally attacked to the extent that the ideas could expose their own shortcomings or failures (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; Walter et al., 2011). Extant research that theorizes about the factors that might be specifically important in the idea championing phase of the innovation process suggests that peer resistance may be lower when the idea proponents have more influence and legitimacy in the organization (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). The extent to which employees have made significant progress in their career and been able to prove themselves can be an important means to achieve such influence and legitimacy (De Vos, De Clippeleer, & Dewilde, 2009). If employees believe they have made steady career progress, they may have greater *confidence* in their own abilities to deal successfully with the potential skepticism evoked by their championing efforts (Lent & Brown, 2019). This perceived career progress instills employees with a stronger conviction that their championing efforts will pay off and are not in vain. Regarding the influence of employees' perceived career progress on their idea championing, it is therefore hypothesized:

**Hypothesis 1:** There is a positive relationship between employees' perceived career progress and championing behavior.

### *Moderating role of work meaningfulness*

Employees' sense of work meaningfulness could help trigger the positive relationship between perceptions of career progress and championing behavior. According to the notion of resource gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011), people who possess positive work energy may undertake resource-enhancing work activities with more force, to the extent that this energy direction promises to generate even more resource gains and valued personal outcomes. Employees who experience their daily job tasks as highly meaningful tend to be inclined to aid their organization's performance, even if doing so is energy consuming, so they likely perceive great merit in directing their positive career energy toward persistent lobbying efforts to improve the organizational status quo (De Clercq, Haq, & Azeem, 2019; Glavas & Kelley, 2014). The work meaningfulness personal resource (Hobfoll, 2001) accordingly may generate elevated levels of personal fulfillment, which employees can exploit and devote to performance-enhancing championing activities.

Employees who perceive that their daily jobs can make a positive difference to others also tend to feel good about identifying and resolving organizational failures (Zhang et al., 2018), so they may be especially eager to leverage their positive feelings in championing activities designed to contribute to the success of their organization (Walter et al. 2011). Moreover, employees with a strong sense of work meaningfulness tend to be attracted to the challenge of difficult and stressful work situations; finding ways to succeed despite these difficulties can generate resource gains, in the form of a sense of personal accomplishment (Lease, Ingram, & Brown, 2019). Thus, work meaningfulness may strengthen the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behaviors because these employees enjoy

the challenge of finding effective ways to use their favorable career situation to convince others of the value of their new, potentially controversial ideas (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Therefore,

**Hypothesis 2:** The positive relationship between employees' perceived career progress and championing behavior is moderated by their work meaningfulness, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of work meaningfulness.

*Moderating role of organizational identification*

Employees' organizational identification similarly may strengthen the positive relationship between their perceived career progress and championing behavior. When employees strongly identify with their organization, they likely become more preoccupied with how they can add to the quality of their organization's internal functioning (Brammer et al., 2015; Chughtai & Buckley, 2010). The logic of resource gain spirals indicates that employees are more likely to channel positive work energy into resource-enhancing activities that *align* with their personal goals and interests, because such alignment may generate additional resource gains in the form of personal satisfaction (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011). Employees with a strong organizational identification tend to interpret organizational successes as personal successes—and organizational failures as personal failures (Mael & Ashforth, 1995)—so they may exhibit a particularly strong motivation to direct their positive career energy to relentless championing efforts that can contribute to organizational effectiveness, despite possible resistance to their energy-consuming efforts (Li, Liang, Zhang, & Wang, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). In contrast, employees with weak organizational identification tend to be less worried about whether their organization thrives (Lai, Chan, & Lam, 2013) and therefore may be less likely to go out of their way to use their perceived career progress as a motivation to promote novel ideas for organizational improvement. These employees experience less personal fulfillment from

directing their positive career energy to discretionary activities, and therefore, they are unlikely to anticipate additional resource gains for themselves (Hobfoll, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Greater organizational identification also might shift employees' attention away from worrying about the potentially negative outcomes of risky, change-invoking work behaviors and toward the need to contribute to their organization's success (Liu, Zhang, Liao, Hao, & Mao, 2016). They are likely to worry less about the chances that their disruptive ideas might be resisted or rejected, so they may be more persistent in defending their ideas (Walter et al., 2011). Consistent with the COR logic, they may feel motivated then to direct their positive career energy resources to undertaking productive championing activities (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Conversely, employees who do not strongly identify with their organization may focus on the risk that their championed ideas may be rejected and avoid directing their positive career energy to such championing efforts. These arguments suggest the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** The positive relationship between employees' perceived career progress and championing behavior is moderated by their organizational identification, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of organizational identification.

## **Research method**

### *Data collection and sample*

The hypotheses tests use data from employees in a large organization that distributes oil derivatives in Angola. The oil industry is critical to Angola's economy, and companies constantly seek committed, skilled employees who can generate ideas that might improve their status quo. The internal rivalry and strict hierarchical structures that mark these companies also create variations among employees in terms of their ability to move up the corporate ladder. Therefore, examining the interactive effects of perceived career progress and pertinent personal resources on positive work outcomes is a relevant issue. Moreover, this study focuses on one

specific organization, to diminish the likelihood of unobserved variation in employees' idea championing, which might be informed by their organization's exposure to pressures in the competitive external market environment (Dayan & Di Benedetto, 2011; De Clercq et al., 2011; Zahra & Garvis, 2000).

The data were collected with a pencil-and-paper survey instrument, administered among a random sample of employees selected from a list provided by the organization's human resource department. Following established procedures (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike 1973), the original English survey was first translated into Portuguese, the primary language of higher education and business in Angola, and then back-translated into English. After addressing any discrepancies, the survey was finalized in Portuguese. Several actions taken during the data collection help protect the rights of the participants and reduce the likelihood of social desirability biases. In particular, the invitation to complete the survey guaranteed complete confidentiality by noting that participants did not have to indicate their names, that any reports that would result from the study would include aggregate and not individual results, that participation was completely voluntary, that the organization would not know who participated, and that there were no right or wrong answers. From the 360 employees contacted, 245 completed responses were received, for a response rate of 68%. The lack of significant differences between early and late respondents suggests that response bias is unlikely (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Among the respondents, 44% were women, they were 44 years of age on average, and their average organizational tenure was 17 years.

## *Measures*

The measures for the study's four focal constructs—championing behavior, perceived career progress, work meaningfulness, and organizational identification—were assessed with seven-point Likert anchors, ranging from “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (7).

*Championing behavior.* Employee efforts to promote new ideas for organizational improvement were assessed with a three-item measure (Scott & Bruce, 1994). In particular, employees had to rate their agreement with a statement such as “I often mobilize support for new ideas that seek to generate organizational improvement” (Cronbach's alpha = .81). The reliance on a *self-rated* scale of championing behavior aligns with prior research (De Clercq et al., 2011; Markham, 1998) and is consistent with the logic that self-evaluations are preferable to others' evaluations; other members might not have in-depth insights into the various championing efforts that idea proponents undertake (Kissi et al., 2013; Maidique, 1980), so self-rated assessments offer more comprehensive insights. Idea championing behavior also has a strong intentional component, so there is merit in measuring this behavior according to its executors, who alone have complete knowledge about the energy that they direct to this behavior (Howell & Boies, 2004; Schon, 1963). Notably, Conway and Lane (1990) argue that concerns about common source bias are substantially lower when self-evaluations are relevant and preferred.

*Perceived career progress.* Employees' perceptions of their career development were assessed with a six-item scale of career plateau beliefs, which reflect beliefs about *limited* career progress (Foster, Shastri, & Withane, 2004). Thus, low scores on this scale indicate high levels of perceived career progress, and the participants' scores accordingly were reversed. An example item is “When I joined this organization, I thought that I would move up the corporate ladder fast, but I have not been given the chance to do so” (Cronbach's alpha = .74).

*Work meaningfulness.* Employees indicated the extent to which they experience their work as meaningful on a four-item scale (Spreitzer, 1995). One of the items read: “My job activities are personally meaningful to me” (Cronbach’s alpha = .82).

*Organizational identification.* To assess the extent to which employees experience a close connection between their personal well-being and that of their employer, a five-item scale of organizational identification was applied (Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as “When someone praises my organization, it feels like a personal compliment” (Cronbach’s alpha = .73).

*Control variables.* Three control variables were included in the statistical models: gender (1 = female), age (in years), and organizational tenure (in years). Male employees may have a stronger inclination to speak up about new and potentially controversial ideas than their female counterparts do (Detert & Burris, 2007; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). In addition, older and more experienced employees may hold stronger beliefs that they will be successful in their innovation-related behaviors (Gong, Kim, Lee, & Zhu, 2009; Ng & Feldman, 2013).

#### *Construct validity and common source bias*

In line with the procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a four-factor measurement model was evaluated to assess construct validity. The fit of this model was adequate:  $\chi^2_{(146)} = 243.09$ , confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .93, incremental fit index (IFI) = .92, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .90, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05. The outcomes offer evidence of convergent validity; the t-values for all items of each construct are strongly significant ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, a comparison of the fit indices, as reported in Table 1, indicated that the fit of the four-factor model was significantly better than that of (1) a three-factor model in which work meaningfulness and organizational identification were combined



into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 340.66, p < .001$ ); (2) a two-factor model in which perceived career progress, work meaningfulness, and organizational identification were combined into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 624.08, p < .001$ ); and (3) a one-factor model in which the four constructs were combined into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 842.96, p < .001$ ). The formal check for discriminant validity entails a comparison of the fit of six pairs of constrained models, for which the correlations were fixed to equal 1, against the fit of their unconstrained counterparts, in which the correlations between constructs were free to vary (Rahim & Wagner, 1995). All unconstrained models offered significantly better fit ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) > 3.84, p < .05$ ) than their constrained counterparts, which confirms discriminant validity.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

*Common method bias.* Two diagnostic analyses were undertaken to rule out concerns about common method bias. First, the comparison of the fit of the four-factor and one-factor models provided evidence against the presence of common method bias. In particular, the one-factor model showed a very poor fit ( $\chi^2(152) = 1,086.05, CFI = .29, IFI = .31, TLI = .11, RMSEA = .16$ ; Table 1), significantly worse than that of the four-factor model. Second, the marker technique based on confirmatory factor analysis provides comparative estimates of three distinct models: a baseline model, a Method-C model in which the method factor loadings are constrained to have the same values, and a Method-U model in which the method factor loadings are unconstrained and allowed to vary freely (De Clercq, Dimov, & Thongpapanl, 2013; Williams, Hartman, & Cavazotte, 2010).<sup>1</sup> In these models, the selected, theoretically unrelated marker variable captures whether employees work in a marketing or sales-related function (instead of a more internally oriented function). The fit of the two method models is *not*

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<sup>1</sup> Additional details about the statistical specifications of these models can be found in Williams et al. (2010).

statistically better than that of the baseline model, as evidenced by the lack of a significant difference in the fit of the baseline model ( $\chi^2(165) = 258.9$ ) with the Method-C ( $\chi^2(164) = 257.2$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 1.7, ns$ ) or Method-U ( $\chi^2(146) = 242.6$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2(19) = 16.3, ns$ ) models. Thus, there is no evidence of common method variance in scenarios with equal or unequal method effects. Finally, common source bias tends to be substantially less prevalent to the extent that the theoretical framework includes multiple moderating effects, as in this study, because the chances that participants can discern the nature of the tested hypotheses are low (Simons & Peterson, 2000).

## **Results**

The zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics are in Table 1. To test the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression was used (Table 2). Model 1 included the control variables, Model 2 added the three focal variables (perceived career progress, work meaningfulness, and organizational identification), and Model 3 added the product terms of perceived career progress and work meaningfulness, as well as of perceived career progress and organizational identification, to assess whether the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior is contingent on these two personal resources. In line with Aiken and West (1991), the well-established approach to mean-center the constructs before calculating the corresponding interaction terms was applied.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here]

The results in Model 1 indicated, somewhat surprisingly, that none of the control variables was significant. In line with Becker's (2005) discussions about non-significant control variables, a robustness check was performed with the control variables excluded from the statistical models. The results were completely consistent with those obtained when the control variables were included in the models. In line with the baseline prediction (Hypothesis 1),

employees' beliefs about the presence of organizational support for career development stimulated them to add to organizational success, as demonstrated by the positive relationship between employees' perceived career progress and championing behavior in Model 2 ( $\beta = .134$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Although outside the theoretical scope of this study, the results of Model 2 also indicated a direct positive relationship between work meaningfulness and championing behavior ( $\beta = .161$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not between organizational identification and championing behavior ( $\beta = .056$ , *ns*).

Model 3 provided support for the invigorating effect of work meaningfulness on the positive relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior ( $\beta = .126$ ,  $p < .01$ ); the relationship was stronger among employees who experienced their job tasks as more important and meaningful (Hypothesis 2). Figure 2 depicts this catalytic effect of work meaningfulness. A simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) indicated that the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior was significant and positive when work meaningfulness was high ( $\beta = .254$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not significant when it was low ( $\beta = .015$ , *ns*), consistent with Hypothesis 2. Similarly, the invigorating effect of organizational identification was confirmed by the significant, positive interaction between perceived career progress and organizational identification in Model 3 ( $\beta = .143$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as plotted in Figure 3. The relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior was significant and positive when organizational identification was high ( $\beta = .271$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not significant when it was low ( $\beta = -.010$ , *ns*), in support of Hypothesis 3.

[Insert Figures 2–3 about here]

*Post hoc analysis*

Even though the conceptual focus of this research study is on the simultaneous interplay of perceived career progress with the two selected personal resources, the positive energy that arises with work meaningfulness and organizational identification arguably might spur employees' championing behavior *through* the satisfaction that they experience with their career development. A path model in which perceived career progress served as a mediator between the two personal resources and championing behavior accordingly was estimated. The fit of this model was poor (CFI = .45, IFI = .64, TLI = -.82, RMSEA = .10). An additional path model also included the two interaction terms and covariances of perceived career progress with work meaningfulness and organizational identification. This model accounted for possible interdependencies between perceived career progress and the two resources. The signs and significance of the two interaction terms were completely consistent with those reported in Table 2, obtained through hierarchical regression analyses. Therefore, the post hoc findings underscored the important roles of the theorized personal resources in determining the *extent* to which perceived career progress leads to enhanced championing behavior, over and beyond any causal relationships that might exist between these resources and perceived career progress. Taken together, these outcomes generated additional evidence of the robustness and relevance of the proposed theoretical framework.

## **Discussion**

This study adds to current understanding of idea championing by examining how employees' perceived career progress spurs their active promotion of novel ideas for organizational improvement, with specific attention to how this process might be activated by employees' access to complementary personal resources. The limited attention to these topics is notable, in light of previous arguments that the translation of favorable organizational treatments

into change-invoking work activities is not automatic, because the activities might be received with significant resistance or even rejection (Hon et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2011). In response, this study has drawn from COR theory and its underpinning notion of resource gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000) to argue that employees' beliefs that their organization has supported their career development stimulates their idea championing to a *greater* extent when they have access to pertinent resources, whether those resources pertain to perceptions of the importance of their job tasks (Zhang et al., 2018) or their strong identification with the organization (Wang et al., 2019). The results support these theoretical predictions.

Specifically, the empirical results support the baseline hypothesis: Positive career energy, stemming from perceived career progress, stimulates persistent efforts to mobilize support for new ideas. This positive relationship is consistent with previous studies that reveal how employees' positive evaluations of their organization's efforts to encourage their professional growth and development steers them toward work activities to enhance organizational effectiveness (Jawahar & Liu, 2016; Yang, Niven, & Johnson, 2019). A critical mechanism of this process, in accordance with COR theory, entails the resource gains that employees seek to accomplish, such as personal fulfillment (Kim et al., 2009), by leveraging their positive work energy in discretionary, productive work activities. Moreover, the sense that they have made progress in their careers may fuel employees' confidence that they will be successful in convincing other members about the value of their ideas (Lent & Brown, 2019). Their beliefs about their career progress to date represent unexplored determinants of championing behavior.

The direction of positive career energy to such behavior is even more prominent to the extent that employees have access to personal resources that make this direction attractive, consistent with the notion of resource gain spirals—influences that have been predicted

theoretically but not subjected to much empirical testing (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). In the context of this study, the anticipated value of exploiting perceived career progress to generate additional resource gains, through persistent efforts to champion new ideas, is greater in the presence of certain personal factors that make these resource gains more attractive. Employees who experience their daily work as meaningful and whose personal well-being is closely linked to the success of their employing organization have a strong desire to overcome organizational failures, so they are particularly determined to leverage their positive career energy to improve the organizational status quo through relentless championing (Howell, 2005; Wichmann et al., 2015).

Notably, this investigation of the catalytic effects of work meaningfulness and organizational identification underscores the *relative* value of perceived career progress for stimulating active idea promotion. Thus, the findings must be understood according to the recognition that the direction of positive career energy to promotion efforts is not automatic and instead depends on personal circumstances. As the results from the simple slope analyses reveal, enhanced perceived career progress does *not* enhance championing behaviors among employees who do not experience their job tasks as meaningful or who are not interested in what others think about their employing organization. Even if employees' satisfaction with their career opportunities *might* stimulate active idea championing, the risk that their ideas will be resisted or rejected may prevent that championing if they cannot simultaneously rely on pertinent personal resources (Walter et al., 2011).

Overall, this study generates expanded insights for predicting employees' efforts to mobilize support for novel ideas. It pinpoints, in particular, the relative usefulness of positive perceptions about past career advancement, as informed by work meaningfulness and

organizational identification. In so doing, this study explicates the *indirect* beneficial effects of these two personal factors, based on their moderating effects on the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior instead of their direct effects on productive work activities (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Chen et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Employees' reliance on pertinent personal resources triggers their direction of positive career energy to relentless championing efforts to help them achieve even greater resource gains.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study has some shortcomings, which suggest avenues for continued research. First, the cross-sectional design means the presence of reverse causality cannot be completely excluded. Even if the study's arguments were anchored in the well-established COR theory framework—according to which employees are motivated to leverage positive career-related energy as productive work behaviors that can generate even more resource gains (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000)—it is possible that employees' championing efforts may generate a sense that their employer spurs their personal growth and development. Future studies could apply longitudinal research designs and use time lags to measure career progress and championing behavior. To establish causal claims formally, researchers might conduct field experiments that assess each of the focal variables at multiple points in time and estimate cross-lagged effects (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). Such research also could compare self-rated with supervisor-rated scores of championing behavior to establish whether the two parties agree on the extent of idea promotion undertaken, as well as to investigate how any *discrepancies* between them might reflect the intensity and quality of the interactions among actors who operate at different levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Second, this study theorizes an important role of motivation in explaining the positive relationship between employees' perceptions of career progress and championing behavior (e.g., the positive energy stemming from beliefs that the organization has supported their career advancement spurs idea championing due to personal fulfillment outcomes), and this motivation in turn may be enhanced further by a greater perceived ability to promote new ideas successfully by relying on the positive reputation that comes with career progress (De Vos et al. 2009; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). This study did not explicitly assess the presence of such positive career-related energy though, nor did it measure employees' *anticipated* personal fulfillment or success when they consider whether to promote their ideas. Further research could test these issues directly and also include pertinent mediators, such as employees' perceptions of organizational justice (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001) or work engagement (Fu et al., 2018). A related useful extension might examine whether and how employees' championing behavior, in response to their beliefs about their career advancement, effectively improves their personal well-being, as well as contributes to organizational effectiveness. Yet another avenue for future research would be to examine the relative value of perceived career progress and the two focal moderators across the four stages of the innovation process: idea generation, evaluation, elaboration, and implementation. Even if employees' career progress is closely associated with the presence of influence and legitimacy—two factors that are particularly valuable for idea championing (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017)—it would be useful to examine how employees' career beliefs, whether positive or negative, exert differential impacts on the efforts they undertake along these four stages.

Third, the focus on two specific personal resources is justified because both work meaningfulness and organizational identification render persistent championing efforts—and the



associated chances that ideas for organizational improvement will be accepted (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017)—more desirable, while complementing each other by operating at the job versus organizational levels (Brieger et al., 2019). Further studies could consider the invigorating roles of other personal resources too, such as employees' passion to work hard (Baum & Locke, 2004), creative self-efficacy (Tierney & Farmer, 2002), proactive personality (Jawahar & Liu, 2016), or career diversity in other organizations (Vicentini & Boccadelli, 2016). Pertinent *contextual* resources also might catalyze the conversion of perceived career progress into enhanced championing efforts, such as an organizational climate that supports innovation (Scott & Bruce, 1994), the provision of adequate reward systems (De Clercq et al., 2011), or organizational justice (Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoglu-Aygün, & Hirst, 2013).

Fourth, the focus on Angola might constrain the study's external validity, though the theoretical arguments that underpin the tested framework are country-neutral. As mentioned in the Introduction, the uncertainty avoidance and power distance that mark this country's culture could make employees hesitant to direct career-related energy to disruptive, potentially risky championing behaviors that may be rejected by powerful leaders, yet the relative usefulness and catalytic effects of the two focal personal resources also might be stronger than they would be in more risk-prone countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). The general support for this study's hypotheses indicates that the latter mechanism may be more salient. It would be useful to undertake cross-country studies to *compare* whether and how positive career energy can be exploited in productive work activities that change and improve the status quo, as well as the role of relevant contingencies in this process.

### *Practical implications*

The study outcomes suggest important implications for management practice. The benefits of providing employees with ample opportunities for career development, in terms of spurring their championing behavior, indicate that organizations should actively seek to prevent employees from sensing that their career has stalled or the employer has fallen short of stimulating their professional advancement and growth. A challenge in this sense is that some employees might be reluctant to express concerns about insufficient career support, to preserve face or avoid appearing weak (Howell, 2005; Walter et al., 2011). In response, organizations should create a work culture in which employees feel comfortable sharing their career-related concerns with immediate supervisors or human resource professionals, so that they can vent their frustrations and redirect their focus to finding ways to add to their organization's success with discretionary work activities. Organizations could organize formal training programs or stimulate informal on-the-job training as valuable pathways for employee learning and development (Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003).

Another practical insight that arises from this study is that positive perceptions about past career advancement do *not* automatically translate into persistent championing efforts. When employees are relentless in their mobilization of support for novel ideas, they encounter the risk that other members actively oppose them, especially if those others worry that their current situation will change; they even might engage in sabotage (Hon et al., 2014). If the employees can draw from valuable resources—a sense of the meaningfulness of their work or a strong identification with their organization—they are more likely to channel positive judgments about how their career has evolved into actual championing behaviors. When organizations seek to stimulate dedicated idea promotion activities by their employees, they accordingly should work

to convince employees that their daily job tasks can make a real difference to overall success and also establish an organizational climate that makes them feel personally connected to their employer, to the point that they believe their personal well-being depends on the organization's success. Ultimately, these measures should help reduce fears among employees that their proposed ideas could be rejected or that their championing efforts would be in vain, which also can motivate them to leverage their favorable career situation to undertake energy-consuming championing efforts.

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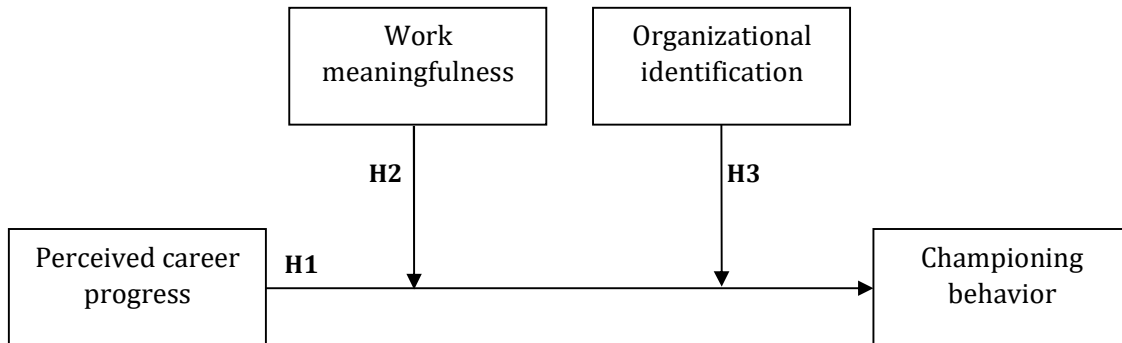
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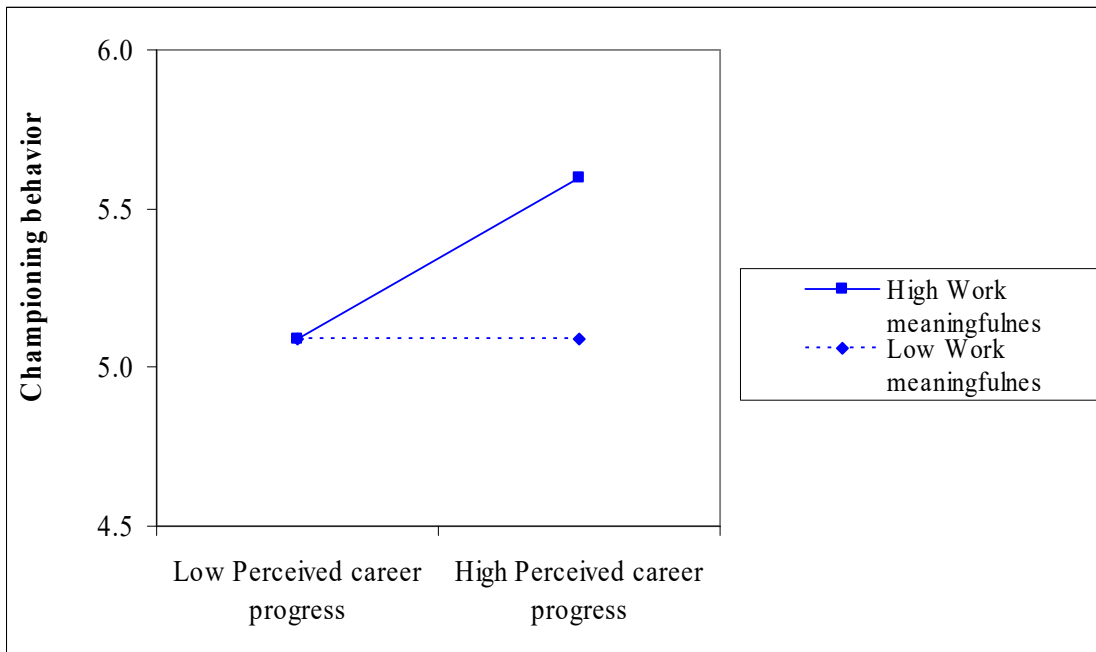
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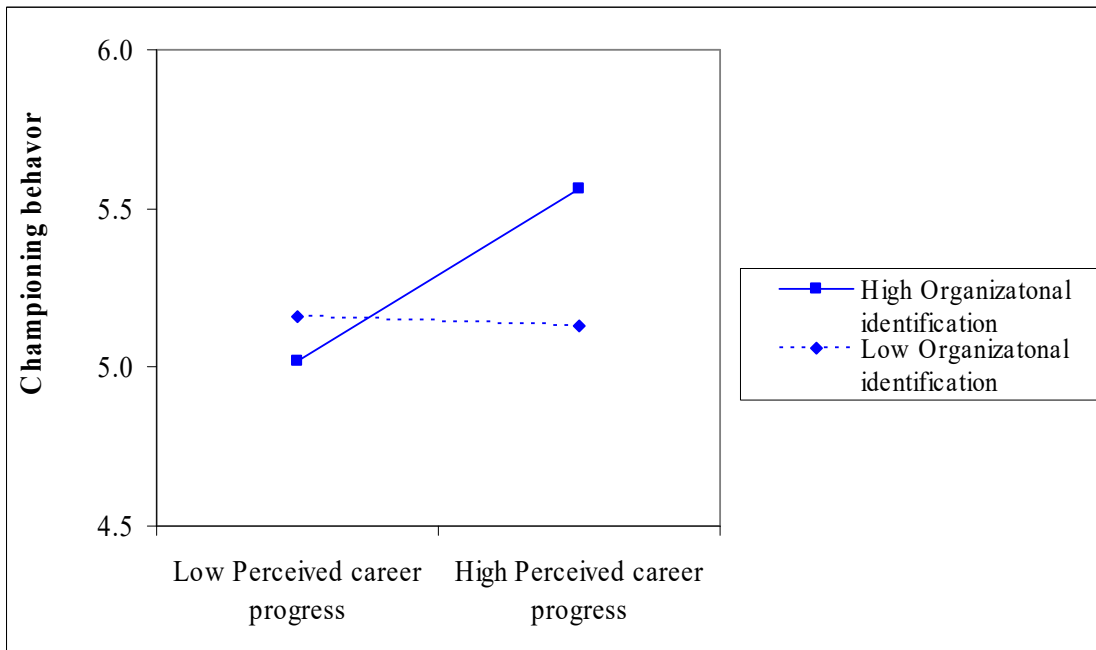
**Figure 1:** Conceptual model



**Figure 2:** Moderating effect of work meaningfulness on the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior



**Figure 3:** Moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between perceived career progress and championing behavior



**Table 1:** Comparison of confirmatory factor analysis models

	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Four-factor model	243.09	146	.93	.92	.9	.05
Three-factor model (WM, OI combined)	583.75	149	.67	.68	.58	.11
Two-factor model (PCP, WM, OI combined)	867.17	151	.45	.47	.31	.14
One-factor model	1086.05	152	.29	.31	.11	.16

Notes: N = 245; PCP = perceived career progress; WM = work meaningfulness; OI = organizational identification; CFI = confirmatory fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation



**Table 2:** Correlation table and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Championing behavior							
2. Perceived career progress	.142*						
3. Work meaningfulness	.177**	.091					
4. Organizational identification	.091	.174**	.117				
5. Gender (1 = female)	-.052	-.017	-.019	.042			
6. Age	.008	.052	-.081	.041	.111		
7. Organizational tenure	.014	.019	-.117	.004	.126*	.822**	
Mean	4.905	4.571	5.436	5.470	.443	43.785	17.310
Standard deviation	1.124	1.198	1.153	1.008	.498	8.501	9.395

Notes: N = 245.

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

**Table 3:** Regression results (dependent variable: championing behavior)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender (1 = female)	-.118 (.144)	-.108 (.141)	-.096 (.138)
Age	-.001 (.015)	-.005 (.014)	-.012 (.014)
Organizational tenure	.004 (.013)	.008 (.013)	.012 (.013)
H <sub>1</sub> : Perceived career progress		.134* (.062)	.128* (.061)
Work meaningfulness		.161* (.063)	.127* (.062)
Organizational identification		.056 (.073)	.073 (.072)
H <sub>2</sub> : Perceived career progress × Work meaningfulness			.126** (.044)
H <sub>3</sub> : Perceived career progress × Organizational identification			.143** (.054)
	R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.059
	R <sup>2</sup> change		.056**
			.114
			.055***

Notes: N = 245; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported (standard errors are in parentheses).

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; + $p < .10$