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# MODELING PROSOCIAL ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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## SUMMARY

The objective of this paper is to give visibility to the concept of 'prosocial organizational behavior' (PSOB) and its relevance to knowledge management (KM) for managing the intellectual assets represented by workers. The study starts with a scientometric survey, using the Publish or Perish™ tool, of PSOB's presence in the KM literature from 1987 to 2020, finding that PSOB is mostly absent. Then, a conceptual model is induced,

based on a hermeneutical analysis of a purposively sampled literature from 1978 to 2020, that describes the many ways PSOB is relevant to the social dimension of KM, and providing a framework to refine policies and procedures that can lead to improved KM outcomes for business organizations. The presented model shows how PSOB influences knowledge workers behavior affecting the social dynamics of KM.

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## Introduction

Knowledge management (KM), the discipline that concerns itself with the efficient handling of information and resources within a commercial organization, has an abundant literature. PSOB is defined as "Behavior which is (a) performed by a member of an organization, (b) directed toward an individual, group, or organization with whom he or she interacts while carrying out his or her organizational role, and (c) performed with the intention of promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed" (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986: 711).

Yet, in the extensive body of KM's literature related to social behaviors, mentions of the notion of

prosocial organizational behavior (PSOB) are uncommon. This represents a problem since core elements of PSOB motivators like empathy and altruism are required for knowledge workers to engage in critically important KM social processes. Modelling PSOB within KM not only gives the notion due visibility within the discipline, but also reveals practical implications for policies and procedures of business organizations engaged in KM initiatives. The purpose of this investigation is to answer why and how is PSOB relevant for KM in organizations, inducing a theoretical model that describes PSOB's motivators and inhibitors at the organizational level, their influence at the individual worker's level behavioral drivers, and how these drivers can lead to improved organizational behaviors that are specific to KM.

## The Strategic Dyad of Innovation and Knowledge Management

Innovation is more than ever pursued by companies worldwide, incentivized by the accelerating demand of customers predisposed to novelty (Zerpa and Rodriguez-Montoya, 2020). The increasing complexity of products, pressing time-to-market and, changing expectations drive companies to innovate for competitive advantages (Rauter *et al.*, 2019).

The pressure for innovation will continue and intensify, to accommodate the pivotal changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, like massive socially distanced work and education, and the cultural reboot of 2020. Companies need to manage their innovation process effectively to keep coming with new products and services, especially the ones that

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grant companies competitive advantages (Porter, 1990). Innovation management concerns organizing and directing both human capital and economic resources to generate and apply knowledge creating new products and services or to improve existing ones (De La Torre *et al.*, 2008). Innovation depends in no small part on maintaining, expanding and leveraging the organization's intellectual capital.

While KM initiatives traditionally have had three goals in mind: 1) to make knowledge visible and its importance recognized within the organization, 2) to foster a culture where knowledge sharing behavior is encouraged and, 3) to build a technical system that supports a knowledge infrastructure to encourage and facilitate interactions and collaboration among individuals (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), most of today initiatives are launched to generate new products, services, and businesses; increase operational effectiveness; and ensure attractiveness to stakeholders (North and Kumta, 2018). To reach these goals, most well-managed organizations have KM programs in place that entail the active participation of workers. Participation is in turn necessary for prosocial behavior (PSB) to take place. Promoting cooperation and positive interactions among co-workers enable KM processes like knowledge sharing (a prosocial organizational behavior) that rely heavily upon social patterns, practices, and processes (Bresnen *et al.*, 2003).

The effective use of knowledge depends on employees' willingness to share it (Kucharska and Bedford, 2019). This willingness represents a characteristic manifestation of a prosocial organizational behavior and underpins the relevancy of PSOB for KM, as the importance of knowledge sharing (Zhang *et al.*, 2014) for converting knowledge between its states (Nonaka and Konno, 1998) has long been established. In absence of PSOB, essential KM processes such as knowledge creation, validation, presentation, distribution, and application (Bhatt, 2001) can be imperiled. Knowledge sharing requires the willingness of workers to disclose knowledge to their peers. A lack of PSOB produces a reluctance to share knowledge that can harm an organization's KM. The absence of PSOB in the KM literature points to an unrecognized yet needed role that PSOB plays in the key KM processes, i.e., creating/acquiring, sharing, retaining, storing, using, updating, and retiring knowledge (ORS, n.d.)

The essential KM dynamics of organizational learning and knowledge sharing are interlinked and

mediated by PSOB influenced social interactions among individuals, facilitating vicarious learning (Huber, 1991) in the organization. PSOB engenders both proximity and informal ties that allow individuals to learn from the experience of others. There cannot be knowledge creation without knowledge sharing, and neither can there be knowledge sharing without prosocial behavior enabling cooperative actions among co-workers, as learning branches from the participation of these individuals in social activities within the organization (Reynolds, 2017). Learning does not originate solely in the minds of people; it also stems from their participation in social activities (Gherardi, 2013).

### Design/Methodology/Approach

A scientometric analysis to assess PSOB presence in the KM literature was made using the program Publish or Perish™ (Harzing, 2007) executing a query using 'knowledge management' as descriptor for the title field and "prosocial behavior" as descriptor anywhere within articles' text, on the dataset of Google Scholar™ from the year 1987 to the year 2020. Then, a hermeneutical analysis of a purposively sampled literature from 1978 to 2020 was used to build the conceptual constructs represented in the model. The perspective is that "theories can speak to models, and models can speak to theories" (Shoemaker *et al.*, 2004: 113). Hence, this paper engages in a conceptual model-building exercise that "freely participates in acts of imagination to produce a wide range of alternative insights to old problems" (Harvey and Reed, 1996, p. 309) to situate and give visibility to the notion of PSOB in KM. As stated by Harvey and Reed (1996: 309): "Models, as opposed to theories, are well-formed metaphors and analogies. They do not claim to express the truth of the world, but merely to provide heuristic insights. While theories claim to actually explain reality, models are only partial, fictitious constructions. They seek a language of "as if," not "what is." But if models can make few explanatory claims, they are rich in the conceptual materials upon which they can draw and are freer to organize those materials in a manifold of different direction".

### Participation and Prosocial Behavior in the Organization

In the broader context of social science, participation refers to the variety of mechanisms for the public to express opinions and exert a degree of influence relating to political, economic,

management or other social decisions, and is recognized as one of the success factors for KM implementation (Yip *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, active participation from workers is required for prosocial behavior to manifest. In the organizational context, PSB represents behaviors that go beyond the specified job requirements and entails prosocial actions such as helping, sharing, donating, cooperating, and volunteering, and similar positive social acts carried out to produce and maintain the well-being and integrity of others (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986).

PSOB comprises the behavioral patterns deemed necessary for effective organizational functioning (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Katz (1964) originally identified three basic behaviors for a functioning organization: first, workers are to enter and remain within the system; second, they must carry the specified duties of their job requirements dependably; and third, there should be innovative and spontaneous activity beyond their role prescriptions. As working definition to guide research on PSOB in KM's organizational settings, this paper view PSOB as the self-motivated, positive social actions of individuals towards co-workers and stakeholders that are either related to the aims of KM and/or its outcomes, in ways that are functional to the organization. Not all prosocial behaviors are beneficial to the organization and not even to the individuals it intends to benefit i.e., in some cases, helping a fellow co-worker, could be detrimental if it turns into a dependency. Conversely, it can be beneficial if it leads to self-sufficiency (Von Bergen *et al.*, 2018).

PSOB can be both organizationally functional and dysfunctional. Most PSOB expressions are organizationally functional and contribute to the attainment of organizational goals, however, other forms of PSOB still can undermine organizational effectiveness. For example, a manager extending leniency to a worker that is consistently underperforming, benefits the intended individual but in detriment to the company. For KM, PSOB benefits outweigh the drawbacks, since there are PSOB forms that are essential for KM yet very hard or not at all possible to prescribe as part of an individual's formal job and role requirements (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). For instance, sharing work-related information with co-workers is mostly unavoidable for any employee, but true knowledge sharing with colleagues at work depends entirely on the willingness of individuals and is contingent on their degree of prosocial orientation.

PSOB conceptually overlaps with the construct of 'organizational

citizenship behavior' (Smith *et al.*, 1983) or OCB. Both concepts are similar enough that it poses no harm to consider them one and the same.

### The Origins of PSB/PSOB

The alleged pervasive rational selfishness of individuals predicated by classical economics does not stand on firm ground empirically. There is a substantial body of research which shows that individuals tend to act in many instances out of concerns for others and the literature points to a strong evolutionary foundation of human prosocial sentiments. Empathy and concern for the welfare of others as motivators of PSB have evolutionary roots (Decety, 2011; Silk and House, 2011). For the individual, PSB involves paying a cost for another to receive benefits; then, being prosocial undermines one's own welfare. The explanation to this contradiction lies in the social proclivity of humans. Participation in social networks encourages individuals to behave prosocially, being reciprocity among members of a social network a motivating factor, as supported by both theoretical models and empirical data (Melamed *et al.*, 2020). For PSOB, empathy and altruism as well as general compliance with organizational requirements (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986) are motivating factors; however, workers can act prosocially not only due to empathy and altruism but also for self-interest, i.e., when having a reputation of being generous or helpful to co-workers can be deemed beneficial, career-wise. Other researchers point to personality and work environment as inducers of PSOB (Organ, 1983) as well as the influence of managers engaging in PSOB, when they are perceived as a valid role models to emulate, which signals workers to engage in PSOB themselves.

### Missing Prosocial Behavior in KM Literature: Scientometric Results

Starting with scientometric assessment of KM publications alluding to prosocial behavior, queries were made with 'knowledge management' as a descriptor on the dataset of Google Scholar™ for KM content published between 1987 and 2020, using the program Publish or Perish™ (Harzing, 2007). For the same period, a search was conducted for publications with the key phrase 'knowledge management' in the title and the descriptor 'prosocial behavior' anywhere in their text, to assess PSOB presence in the KM literature.

The first query performed on the Google Scholar dataset of

KM content published from 1987 to 2020, found 73,200 texts (articles, books, other content) with the descriptor 'Knowledge Management' in the title. A second query using the software Publish or Perish™ (Harzing, 2007) on the same Google Scholar dataset and period, using 'knowledge management' and 'prosocial behavior (or) behavior' identified 2003 as the year when the specific term 'prosocial behavior' began appearing in the KM literature, about 16 years after first KM's publications started. In that period, the query located only one KM paper by Kumar *et al.* (2007) that included 'prosocial behavior' in its title (paywalled KM papers with 'prosocial behavior' within their text might not be detected). Additional forty-two KM publications were found with 'prosocial behavior' within their texts, about 0.0005% of the total KM publications (73,200) that include 'knowledge management' in their title since 1987. The total citations for the 43 papers that mentioned PSB were 1,255 or only 0.003% of the total citations (340,994) for the first 1,000 most cited publications in KM for the same period. These findings point to PSOB having a negligible presence and impact in KM's literature. However, if terms such as 'knowledge sharing' (a behavior that is characteristically prosocial) is queried, the picture changes: 14,700 publications include 'knowledge sharing' in its title and about 800,000 mention it in their texts.

Yet, it is rather remarkable that the notion of PSOB as such has not been explored much further within the KM field, even though there is a prominent presence of social factors in KM literature, as most of them relate to behaviors that are in fact, prosocial. All this in light of the recognition of 'communities of practice' and 'communities of learning' in KM literature in the early 2000's, together with the importance of people: the actual 'knowledge' part of KM. Ever since, social interaction became regarded as essential for the success of KM, whether it takes the form of cooperation, collaboration, social networking, or communities of knowledge, to name a few. Furthermore, experiential observations also point to the PSB notion as mostly unknown by KM practitioners. The scarcity of the PSB notion in KM's literature and the lack of awareness by managers could prevent KM initiatives to benefit from a deeper understanding of the concept, particularly when research suggests the positive impact of PSB on worker's initiative (De Dreu and Nauta, 2009), task persistence, improved performance (Grant, 2008) and creativity (Grant and Berry, 2011), which are all necessary and highly

beneficial for the purposes and aims of KM.

### Discovering KM-Specific Functional Forms of PSOB

In the seminal paper by Brief and Motowidlo (1986) there are thirteen examples of PSOB forms, as follows:

1. Assisting co-workers with job-related matters.
2. Assisting co-workers with personal matters.
3. Showing leniency in personnel decisions.
4. Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally consistent ways.
5. Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally inconsistent ways.
6. Helping consumers with personal matters unrelated to organizational services or products
7. Complying with organizational values, policies, and regulations
8. Suggesting procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements.
9. Objecting to improper directives, procedures, or policies.
10. Putting forth extra effort on the job.
11. Volunteering for additional assignments.
12. Staying with the organization despite temporary hardships.
13. Representing the organization favorably to outsiders.

These were selected for a conceptual exercise to identify equivalent KM-functional forms of PSOB and to develop the corresponding actions by both managers and workers for each of these forms, as shown on Table I.

### Modeling POBS in KM

Subsequent to the conceptual exercise discovering KM-specific, organizationally functional forms of prosocial behavior and the corresponding actions by managers and workers shown on Table I, a PSOB-informed conceptual model of KM was developed, for both the organizational and individual levels (Figure 1). Organizational-level motivators identified: participative culture; cooperativeness; sense of community; job security and stability; rewards and values aligned to PSOB. Identified organizational-level inhibitors: non-participative culture; competitiveness; individualism; job insecurity and high turnover; misaligned rewards and values.

TABLE I  
KM-FUNCTIONAL FORMS OF PSOB AND CORRESPONDING ACTIONS BY MANAGERS AND WORKERS

General Forms of PSOB	KM-functional forms of PSOB	Corresponding actions by managers	Corresponding actions by workers
Assisting co-workers with job-related matters.	Assisting co-workers with learning and knowledge related matters.	Teaching, guiding, revealing, showing, suggesting, orienting.	Learning, accepting guidance, sharing knowledge, guiding co-workers.
Assisting co-workers with personal matters.	Assisting co-workers with personal matters specially when beneficial for preserving social and intellectual capital.	Supporting, listening, advising, helping, easing, deferring, facilitating.	Showing empathy and understanding towards co-workers, helping whenever possible.
Showing leniency in personnel decisions.	Assessing with benevolence workers' mistakes incurred when trying new things and ideas.	Appraising benevolently. Assessing employee's track-record and potential.	Accepting constructive criticism, internalizing lessons learned, doing better.
Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally consistent ways.	Providing services or products internally or externally in knowledgeable and organizationally consistent ways.	Sharing expertise about company's products or services, values, operations, policies, and strategies.	Seeking knowledge about company's products or services, values, operations, policies, and strategies
Providing services or products to consumers in organizationally inconsistent ways.	Filling knowledge gaps to avoid providing services or products in organizationally inconsistent ways.	Showing disposition to advise and share knowledge. Staying alert and situationally aware.	Seeking advice and consulting knowledgeable co-workers and supervisors.
Helping consumers with personal matters unrelated to organizational services or products	Learning to help customers with personal matters in non-detrimental ways to the company or self.	Regulating workers actions related to helping customers with personal matters.	Consulting with supervisor before helping customers with personal matters.
Complying with organizational values, policies, and regulations	Complying with organizational values, policies, and regulations with special attention to knowledge assets and its preservation.	Sharing knowledge about organizational values, policies, and regulations.	Learning organizational values, policies, and regulations.
Suggesting procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements.	Using KM to identify and suggest procedural, administrative, or organizational improvements.	Being situationally aware. Homing in recurrent problems. Focusing on measurable results.	Reporting recurrent problems. Offering own's perspective on how to improve the situation.
Objecting to improper directives, procedures, or policies.	Objecting to improper directives, procedures, or policies providing evidence-based knowledge.	Following internal channels and procedures for presenting evidence-supported objections.	Following internal channels and procedures for presenting evidence-supported objections.
Putting forth extra effort on the job.	Seeking ways to increase output and decrease effort by applying knowledge.	Leveraging knowledge to increase productivity. Keeping workers training ongoing.	Learning and applying productivity tools. Reflecting on work habits and ways to improve them.
Volunteering for additional assignments.	Volunteering for learning and knowledge sharing assignments.	Promoting and engaging in voluntary learning and knowledge sharing activities.	Participating in voluntary learning and knowledge sharing activities.
Staying with the organization despite temporary hardships.	Seeking and contributing knowledge to help the organization mitigate or overcome temporary hardships.	Projecting confidence in the company. Supporting efforts to overcome temporary hardships.	Keeping confidence and contributing to efforts to overcome temporary hardships.
Representing the organization favorably to outsiders.	Representing the organization favorably to outsiders.	Attracting, hiring, and retaining the best possible pool of qualified workers.	Being knowledgeable about the organization, its products, and services.

Based on Brief and Motowidlo (1986).

Organizational motivators and inhibitors are respectively positive or negative towards the individual workers PSOB's, where the driving factors are empathy, altruism, reputation, reciprocity, emulation, and compliance. These individual-level drivers, when sufficiently present, stimulate in workers the kind of actions that drives and improves the organizational behaviors concerning knowledge

sharing, knowledge conversion, organizational learning, knowledge community building, knowledge workers development, and collaborative knowledge discovery.

#### Practical Implications of the KM PSOB Model

The KM PSOB model suggests that companies would benefit if

their policies, practices, and procedures are fine-tuned for organizational motivators and for avoiding the corresponding inhibitors described by the theoretical model, from which three actions at the organizational level can therefore be induced:

- Promote a participation-oriented culture that both recognizes and rewards cooperativeness and instills in

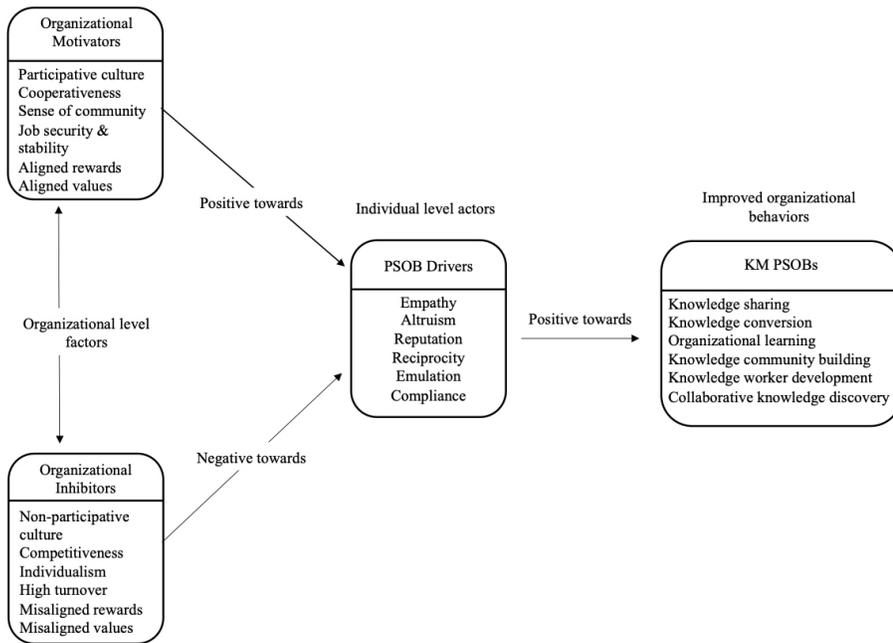


Figure 1. PSOB-informed conceptual model of KM for both the organizational and individual levels.

workers a sense of belonging in a community of knowledge.

- Establish or reinforce practices and procedures –including recruitment, compensation, and talent development– that are conducive to job stability and sense of security of knowledge workers.

- Align the corresponding company policies and values for PSOB motivators and reward managers and workers accordingly.

In terms of PSOB drivers at the individual level, the model's implications for managers are:

- Recruit (and foster) individuals with the desired personality traits i.e., empathy and altruism.

- Recognize and reward cooperativeness with co-workers i.e., sharing knowledge with colleagues.

- Align individual compensation and career paths appropriately.

- Conduct themselves in PSOB consistent ways to generate emulation.

- Signal in deeds and words what is expected from workers in terms of compliance.

As the KM PSOB model induces, PSOB-aware company's policies, practices, and procedures can positively impact organizational outcomes involving knowledge sharing, knowledge conversion, organizational learning, community

building, worker development, and collaborative knowledge discovery.

### Conclusion

The scientometric analysis found that the notion of prosocial behavior is overlooked in the KM literature, yet PSOB's relevance needs attention by KM practitioners, given the role it plays in knowledge workers' conduct, and the influence it has on the social dynamics of KM. The significance of PSOB for the cooperation among co-workers should not remain unnoticed within KM discipline, given the insights and realizations induced from this research. The implications and benefits for organizational KM initiatives or programs, in terms of encouraging PSOB-responsive policies, practices and procedures, along with the responsibility of managers to 'walk the talk', are clear.

PSOB's effect on the essential KM dynamics of knowledge sharing, knowledge conversion, organizational learning, knowledge community building, knowledge workers development, and collaborative knowledge discovery, when better known and understood, would guide practitioners to new pathways to better social management of KM initiatives.

### Limitations and Further Research

The study, concise by design, opens research pathways to further expand on the conceptual model

presented, as it generates questions that might deserve both KM scholars and practitioners' attention. The theoretical value of the KM PSOB model is supported by the literature and conceptually induced by the applied methodology, yet as a conceptual exercise to produce new theoretical insights to known problems (Harvey and Read, 1996), further empirical testing is deemed appropriate to assess the model's validity.

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## MODELADO DEL COMPORTAMIENTO ORGANIZACIONAL PROSOCIAL EN GESTIÓN DEL CONOCIMIENTO

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### RESUMEN

*El objetivo de este artículo es hacer visible el concepto de 'comportamiento organizativo prosocial' (COPS) y su relevancia para la gestión del conocimiento (GC) en el manejo del capital intelectual que representan los trabajadores. La investigación se inicia con una pesquisa bibliométrica usando la herramienta Publish or Perish™ sobre la presencia del COPS en la literatura de la GC de 1987 a 2020, encontrando que el COPS está mayormente ausente. A continuación, se induce un modelo conceptual,*

*basado el análisis hermenéutico de la literatura a partir de 1978, en una muestra por conveniencia. El modelo describe maneras en que el COPS es relevante en la dimensión social de la GC, proporcionando un marco para afinar políticas y procedimientos que pueden conducir a mejores resultados en GC para las organizaciones empresariales. El modelo presentado muestra también como el COPS influye en el comportamiento de los trabajadores del conocimiento, afectando la dinámica social de la GC.*

## MODELAGEM DO COMPORTAMENTO ORGANIZACIONAL PRÓ-SOCIAL NA GESTÃO DO CONHECIMENTO

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### RESUMO

*O objetivo deste artigo é dar visibilidade ao conceito de 'comportamento organizacional pró-social' (COPS) e sua relevância para a gestão do conhecimento (GC) no manejo do capital intelectual que representam os trabalhadores. A investigação se inicia com uma pesquisa bibliométrica usando a ferramenta Publish ou Perish™ sobre a presença do COPS na literatura da GC de 1987 a 2020, descobrindo que o COPS está em grande parte ausente. A seguir, é induzido um modelo conceitual, base-*

*ado na análise hermenéutica da literatura a partir de 1978, em uma amostra por conveniência. O modelo descreve as maneiras pelas quais o COPS é relevante na dimensão social da GC, proporcionando um parâmetro de ajuste fino para políticas e procedimentos que podem levar a melhores resultados na GC para as organizações empresariais. O modelo apresentado também mostra como o COPS influencia o comportamento dos trabalhadores do conhecimento, afetando a dinâmica social da GC.*