Journal of Management & Organization (2025), **31**, 1040–1055
doi:10.1017/jmo.2024.23

ANZAM
AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to trigger employee proactive behavior? Introducing the ritual perspective

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(Received 8 June 2023; revised 8 May 2024; accepted 15 May 2024)

Abstract
Much research on the antecedents of proactive behavior has appeared in the literature, but this research introduces a new ritual perspective to rethink this question. Drawing on the process model of interaction rituals, we propose that work rituals urge employees to share emotional energy, and then, employees are likely to experience a higher level of work meaningfulness. In turn, employees tend to engage in more proactive behavior. Using data from a random assignment field experiment involving 204 employees from a communication corporation in China, we found support for our hypotheses. The implications of our research for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: work rituals; sharing emotional energy; work meaningfulness; proactive behavior; field experiment

Proactive behavior, 'taking initiative in improving current circumstances; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting present conditions' (Crant, 2000, p. 436), has been shown to benefit individual and organizational outcomes across different fields (Becherer & Maurer, 1999; Kickul & Gundry, 2002; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). Proactive behavior not only allows employees to identify challenges and achieve one's success (Kim, Hon, & Lee, 2010; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001) but also is a determinant of organizations' competitive advantage and success (Parker, 2000). Due to increasingly uncertain, complex, and interdependent work environments, organizations are calling for employee initiatives to ensure adequate performance (Bindl & Parker, 2017; Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Thus, much research has examined its antecedents and verified that individual factors (e.g., proactive personality, positive mood, and learning goal orientation) and contextual factors (e.g., leadership, social support, and job characteristics) play a crucial role in one's proactive behavior (Cai, Parker, Chen, & Lam, 2019; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009; Kim, Liu, & Diefendorff, 2015; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006; Shin & Kim, 2015). Despite the importance of those findings, scholars have theorized that proactive behavior is probably more a function of situational cues (Morrison & Phelps, 1999) and called for exploring actions initiated by the managerial level intended to elicit employee proactive behavior (Crant, 2000).

Among those situational cues in triggering proactive behavior, rituals become our special focus. The key reason is that one major aspect of situational cues involves social interactions. Notably, rituals can be seen as situational cues characterized by a form of social interactions. We cannot possibly avoid rituals (e.g., weddings, inaugurations, funerals, and graduations) in our lives. Rituals not only maintain and reinforce social structures and incorporate people into a larger social entity (Trice, Belasco, & Alutto, 1969) but also form and change people's beliefs, emotions, and identities (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). It seems to play a crucial role in employees' behaviors, but the accumulated knowledge

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of its influences on proactive behavior is scarce (Brooks et al., 2016). In particular, little research has investigated whether work rituals – a form of social interactions in which members' values and identity are demonstrated or enacted in a stylized manner, within the context of an occasion or event (Islam & Zyphur, 2009) – affect employee proactive behavior, and, if so, through what psychological mechanisms.

This lack is problematic not merely because work rituals have been pervasive in organizations (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Lepisto, 2022; Smith & Stewart, 2011). More importantly, there is an essential link between work rituals and proactive behavior, given that work rituals involve the enactment of specified actions that may not exist in the past and may create a unique situational cue for proactive behavior. Prior research has highlighted that work rituals can be efficiently adopted as a tool to facilitate one's behavior (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Lepisto, 2022). Although previous research has begun to examine the antecedents of proactive behavior from the perspective of social interactions, most of them focused on either a favorable side, such as trust (Parker et al., 2006; Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2010), leader-member exchange (Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008), and social support (Brav, Andersson, & Lantz, 2009; Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride, 2008) or a negative side, such as interpersonal conflict (Chen, Sharma, Edinger, Shapiro, & Farh, 2011; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; Schraub, Michel, Shemla, & Sonntag, 2014) and being envied (Lee, Duffy, Scott, & Schippers, 2018). Unlike them, work rituals are typically initiated at the managerial level (Powley, 2004) and are not as explicit as those well-examined constructs (e.g., leader support, organizational structure, and job characteristics). Put differently, instead of playing a role directly and instantly, work rituals imperceptibly affect one's psychological reactions and then, ultimately, workplace behavior (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). Additionally, unlike other interpersonal actions that may change each time they are performed, work rituals are repetitive, standardized, and predictable (Nielbo & Sørensen, 2011, 2016; Smith & Stewart, 2011). This allows those ordinary actions to be transformed into symbolic expressions and enables their meaning to be reinforced each time they are performed. Given these rationales, it is necessary to provide more specific guidance for scholars and practitioners on what impacts such rituals may have on employee proactive behavior.

To address these issues, we draw on Lepisto's (2022) process model of interaction rituals and the interaction ritual literature (Collins, 1993, 2004) to explore whether and how work rituals influence employee proactive behavior. The process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022) highlights that interaction rituals as 'momentary encounters' (Collins, 2004, p. 3) may exist when employees interact in organizational settings to shape a shared focus of attention. Such encounters vary in their symbolic and institutional functions in producing social outcomes, relying on the features of the interaction and the situations in which they may occur (Wollschleger, 2012). Guided by the process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022), we consider work rituals, as a kind of interactional ritual in work, to assemble employees and allow for interacting with each other to develop a mutual focus of attention. In this research, the examples of work rituals include putting the roll screen for the activity at the door of the activity room so that employees can notice it, wearing formal suits to represent uniformity, bringing pens and notebooks for recording and sharing, and reading aloud about what they learned in the activity and discussing it in the group.

According to the theory (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022), interactions embedded in work rituals form daily social encounters. Such work rituals would evoke the emotional energy of individuals. After experiencing emotional energy, individuals do not stay internalized and private. Instead, they engage in the practice of sharing emotional energy with others, encompassing the sharing of feelings of elation, enthusiasm, strength, or initiative (Collins, 2004; Lepisto, 2022). This process enables them to cultivate a sense of meaningfulness toward their work, which reflects the extent to which individuals perceive their job as meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kim et al., 2021). In turn, this perception affects employees' behavioral reactions. In this study, we propose that work rituals are positively related to employee proactive behavior via sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness (Fig. 1).

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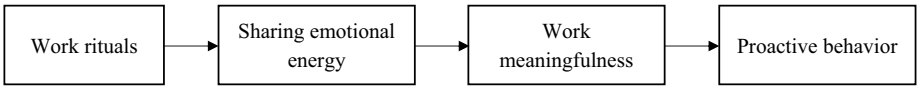


Figure 1. The theoretical model.

This research contributes to proactive behavior research and the organizational ritual literature. First, we apply a new theoretical lens of rituals to study the antecedents of employee proactive behavior. Researchers have focused on social interaction factors to explicate the reasons why employees engage in proactive behaviors. Our research departs from these existing perspectives of situational cues by emphasizing and testing the roles of work rituals characterized by social interactions. By doing so, our research not only adds a new antecedent to extend the nomological networks of proactive behavior but also provides valuable knowledge of how to induce more proactive behavior in employees.

Second, we add to the research on organizational rituals by linking work rituals to employee work-related behavior and examining its influential mechanisms. Recent research has begun to acknowledge the importance of rituals (Ozenc & Hagan, 2019), but the essential functions of work rituals in the workplace still need to be discovered. Our investigation helps us improve the understanding of the distal outcomes of work rituals and helps unpack the potential mechanism underlying the above relationship. Given the roots of rituals in anthropology, it is unsurprising that ritual research relies heavily on qualitative research (Ashforth, Kulik, & Tomiuk, 2008; Gephart, 1978; Vaught & Smith, 1980). These attempts are valuable to the literature, but our research uses a field experiment to offer a more robust examination of the functions of work rituals, adding additional value to the current ritual literature.

Third, our research advances the process model of interaction rituals and the interaction ritual literature (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022) by arguing and testing that a serial mechanism resulting from work rituals – sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness – is critical to employee proactive behavior. The current investigation is beneficial for obtaining more knowledge of the mechanisms embedded in the influences of work rituals and providing empirical evidence for the process model of interaction rituals.

Theory and hypotheses

The process model of interaction rituals and the interaction ritual literature

Based on interaction ritual chain theory (Collins, 1993, 2004), Lepisto (2022) developed the process model of interaction rituals. This theoretical model not only highlights that successful interaction rituals urge employees to share emotional energy but also underlines the construct of meaningfulness embedded in interaction rituals and emotions. Although those focal elements can be mutually associated with each other, a basic process model is highlighted (Lepisto, 2022).

Specifically, interaction rituals are typically considered as momentary encounters (Collins, 2004) when employees interact with each other to develop a mutual focus of attention. These encounters vary in their effectiveness in inducing social outcomes, relying on the characteristics of interactions and the situations in which they occur (Summers-Effler, 2010; Wollschleger, 2012). According to the process model of interaction rituals (Lepisto, 2022) and the interaction ritual literature, interaction rituals are closely and directly related to emotional experiences and expression (Collins, 1975, 1981, 1990, 2004). For example, previous studies have verified that rituals can reduce individuals' anxiety and sadness (Anastasi & Newberg, 2008; Brooks et al., 2016; Norton & Gino, 2014). More importantly, work rituals can proliferate one's emotional energy, encouraging one to share emotional energy, including displaying and talking about emotional energy (Lepisto, 2022). Indeed, Collins

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(1993) highlighted the influence of rituals on emotional energy and indicated that interaction rituals generate a variable level of emotional energy in each individual over time.

In turn, emotional energy can trigger a feeling of meaningfulness. The literature on interaction rituals suggests that 'individual thinking is determined by the emotional energy' (Collins, 1993, p. 205). High levels of emotional energy in individuals consist of enthusiasm and confidence (Collins, 1993), which can influence individuals' cognitive processing of the value of something. This is because emotional energy is one of the key resources and can create a focus of attention around themselves. Sharing emotional energy helps employees feel closer to others at work. This feeling increases the possibility that employees consider their current activities and work meaningful and valuable. Ultimately, a sense of meaningfulness resulting from sharing emotional energy affects one's distal outcomes. Based on the above rationale, we focus on one's psychological (i.e., sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness) and behavioral reactions to work rituals at the individual level. In the following section, we develop each hypothesis.

Work rituals and sharing emotional energy

Work rituals are a distinctive form of social interaction in which members express and embody their values and identity in a highly stylized manner, typically within the framework of a specific occasion or event (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). According to this definition, work ritual components of an interaction are structured, patterned, and observable. The process model of interaction rituals suggests that work rituals will work to make employees feel good and share emotional energy. Sharing emotion energy is defined as sharing a feeling of elation, enthusiasm, strength, or initiative (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022). We propose that work rituals are valuable to help employees share the feeling of emotional energy.

Specifically, work rituals can be seen as a situational cue to evoke substantive emotional responses, and one proximal outcome of rituals includes sharing emotional energy (Collins, 1993, 2004; Hill, Canniford, & Eckhardt, 2022; Lepisto, 2022; Smith & Stewart, 2011). Daily work tasks may be tedious, but the organization can mark those objects or activities embedded in work rituals. For example, organizations place the roll screen for the work activity to attract employees' attention. Employees are asked to wear formal suits, take pens and notebooks for making notes and sharing, and read and discuss the given contents. Those work rituals are out of the ordinary and can draw employees' attention away from mundane uses of behaviors. In essence, work rituals convey symbolism that distinguishes them from other organizational routines (Sosis & Ruffle, 2004), and they help connect employees with each other (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022; Stein, Hobson, & Schroeder, 2021). The repetition of rituals strengthens associated emotions or feelings and thus encourages employees to share their emotional energy (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022; Smith & Stewart, 2011). Prior research has verified that individuals who participate in rituals tend to feel connection and energy (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihaly, 1990; Joo, Cho, Woosnam, & Suess, 2023). This sense of energy is the product of distinct types of social interactions (Boyns & Luery, 2015; Methot, Rosado-Solomon, Downes, & Gabriel, 2021), which typically happen in rituals.

Additionally, work rituals emphasize objects or actions authorized by the organization, which underlies that people may pay attention to and highly value it. Thus, employees need to act in accordance with the expectations of the organization (Rappaport, 1999). Because work rituals can formalize and normalize some ingredients (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977), employees should follow the established rules of the organization to perform accordingly (Smith & Stewart, 2011). For example, employees physically assembled in the same place to wear formal suits and discussed some topics with each other. By participating in work rituals, as a result, employees focus their shared attention on a work object or activity and can have more opportunities to interact with coworkers, develop a relationship with others, and share information with them in the context (Kim et al., 2021), which probably induces their emotional energy sharing.

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Empirically, research indicated that rituals improve one's feelings of belonging (Smith & Stewart, 2011) and connectivity (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). Via interacting with others in work rituals, employees are likely to develop positive feelings, which brings more emotional energy (Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Collins, 2009). Boyns and Luery (2015) also suggested that encounters between individuals in rituals can induce emotional energy. As a result, work rituals can make employees more likely to display and talk about positive feelings and experiences, inducing more emotional energy sharing (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Work rituals are positively related to employee sharing emotional energy.

Sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness

We propose that sharing emotional energy is positively associated with work meaningfulness, defined as the extent to which individuals perceive a job to be meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Specifically, sharing emotional energy activates employees' cognitive systems associated with information processing (Lepisto, 2022). For example, employees who share emotional energy highlight the benefits they gain from the work rituals. Given that rituals are embedded in employees' daily work, positive emotional states expressed by employees help enhance their recognition of the work. Relatedly, one of the core categories of positive emotional resources is energy (Gilbert, Foulk, & Bono, 2017). Employees who share emotional energy can bring vitality and vigor in daily working (Baker, 2019; Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016), which stimulates them to value and enjoy their work. In other words, sharing emotional energy encourages employees to evaluate the level of meaningfulness of work in a more positive manner (Collins, 1993). As such, they are more likely to consider their work meaningful.

In addition, the precondition in sharing emotional energy is to give emphasis on employees' own emotional self-awareness, namely, recognizing and understanding one's emotional states, which was found to be closely related to promoted meaningfulness (Bar-On, 2004; Boyatzis & Sala, 2004). Because emotional energy is evoked in the working context, it may enable employees to recognize a meaningful aspect of work (Grewal & Salovey, 2006). Based on the above arguments and evidence, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2: Employee sharing emotional energy is positively related to employee work meaningfulness.

Work meaningfulness and proactive behavior

We propose that work meaningfulness is positively related to proactive behavior. Work meaningfulness allows employees to find purpose, significance, and importance in their jobs (Seligman, 2002). Given that meaningfulness itself is a fundamental human need for employees (Britt, Adler, & Bartone, 2001), it is expected to make employees feel better and then be motivated to take the initiative in their job, such as proposing suggestions to improve the current circumstances (Hasan & Kashif, 2021). A high level of work meaningfulness also permits employees to take ownership and obtain a sense of responsibility (Lee, Idris, & Delfabbro, 2017), making them more empowered in doing their tasks. Employees who feel that their job is meaningful, therefore, feel that they can achieve better work outcomes and invest their adequate efforts to fulfill more tasks that are not compulsory but benefit the organizations (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lee et al., 2017). As such, those employees who experience a high level of work meaningfulness are more likely to engage in proactive behavior.

In particular, work meaningfulness infuses employees with a personal purpose that directs their motivation, energy, and efforts toward those valued goals (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Spreitzer, 1995; Wu, Zhang, Wang, Zhou, & Hang, 2024). Given the beneficial feature of proactivity, employees probably spend extra effort on proactive behavior in the workplace. Empirically, previous

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research has provided evidence in this regard such that work meaningfulness generates the perceptions of challenge, interest, significance (Tims, Derks, & Bakker, 2016), and person-job fit (Spreitzer, 1995), which leads to more proactive behavior. For these reasons, we anticipate finding a positive link between work meaningfulness and proactive behavior. As a result, we propose this hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Employee work meaningfulness is positively related to employee proactive behavior.

A serial mediation effect

Based on the process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022), we expect that work rituals as interactional rituals in the working context can induce employees to share emotional energy. In turn, emotional reactions will stimulate cognitive systems (Lepisto, 2022) such that those employees who share emotional energy are likely to experience a high level of work meaningfulness. As such, they tend to actively engage in proactive behaviors in the workplace. Overall, we propose an integrative effect as follows:

Hypothesis 4: The indirect effect of work rituals on employee proactive behavior is mediated by employee sharing emotional energy and employee work meaningfulness.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were a total of 243 frontline employees in a large public communication corporation located in South China, which is one of the leading brands in the Chinese communication industry. The main business involves mobile communication services, fixed telephone services, broadband services, and data communication services. Those employees worked in the marketing planning department, human resources department, operation department, customer service department, sales department, etc. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the intervention group ($N = 121$) or the control group ($N = 122$). We ensured that the data was confidential and that participation was voluntarily. Participants were allowed to quit this study at any time. They were not aware of the content of the research and were only informed of the basic topic (i.e., members' interactions and workplace behavior). Finally, we obtained 204 valid questionnaires ($N = 103$ in the control condition; $N = 101$ in the intervention condition; 83.95% response rate). We conducted the online data collection with the help of the HR manager, who sent the survey links to participants. Among the 204 final samples, 53.90% were male, and the mean age was 25.57 ($SD = 2.42$). About 78.50% of them achieved a bachelor's degree or above. Their average organizational tenure was 3.14 ($SD = 1.66$).

Research design

Both the intervention and control groups were subjected to topic-based work activities – namely, learning the Chinese spirit lasting 4 weeks. The company was aiming to integrate and emphasize the Chinese spirit. The following four classical topics involve actual and classic stories in history. Specifically, the Chinese spirit in this study includes four topics: (1) the dedication spirit characterized by serving, helping coworkers or others in need, and considering the interests of others; (2) the spirit of the role worker characterized by being passionate in one's job and working hard; (3) the craftsmanship spirit characterized by persistence, meticulousness, and pursuit of excellence at work; (4) the spirit of reform characterized by taking risks, being innovative, and cooperating with each other.

Each week for 4 weeks, participants from the intervention group were asked to conduct the following work rituals: (1) put the roll screen for the activity made by the researcher team at the door of the

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activity room to attract attention; (2) wear formal suits to represent uniformity; (3) bring pens and notebooks for recording and sharing; (4) read aloud about what they learned in the activity and discuss in the group. The above intervention materials were developed based on the existing research on organizational rituals (e.g., Samier, 1997; Vaughn, 1995) and fully represent a stylized and symbolic manner (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Vaughn, 1995). For example, artifacts (e.g., dress, logos, pens, and notebooks, Ozenc & Hagan, 2018; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) as work rituals have been researched intensively in the literature (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). Interactive activities among employees are typically distinguished by a set of physical characteristics pertaining to the meaning of individuals' actions (Foster, Weigand, & Baines, 2006; Rossano, 2012), which become symbolic expressions in activities. Research assistants checked each participant to ensure the manipulation of work rituals. To avoid unexpected factors affecting our results, we asked participants from the control group to learn the same contents of the Chinese spirit as participants from the intervention group did in a designated activity room. However, they were learning by reading materials independently and then discussing them without any ritual requirements.

It is noted that those work rituals are embedded in working contexts in the following ways. The content of the intervention has physical relevance to the work and workplace because all of those rituals occurred in the workplace. It also has the communal feature embedded in the workplace because employees did not independently engage in those rituals. Instead, interpersonal interactions are necessary to finish work rituals. Moreover, the topics of the Chinese spirit that we selected are closely related to working or finishing a work task.

We ensured that those work rituals specifically reflect the working context by interviewing some employees in this company before conducting the experiment. We were informed that those rituals are not general for everyone in their daily lives. For example, when they had a meeting, they were not required to, such as, wear formal suits because there was no clear dress code in this company before. When they engaged in an activity, there were no roll screens for it. Thus, we consider the work rituals developed in our study are not necessarily general for every employee in their daily lives.

In the post-test survey, participants rated sharing emotional energy, work meaningfulness, and proactive behavior. After rating the above variables, they rated work rituals as the manipulation check. After the whole experiment, the research team debriefed that this study aimed to understand the influences of work rituals on employee working behavior.

Measures

We followed Brislin's (1970) back-translation procedure to translate the items into Chinese. All measures were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's αs for all scales in our study were equal or greater than .98.

Sharing emotional energy

We adapted the five-item emotional energy scale from Owens et al. (2016). Examples of the items are 'I share with others how I feel invigorated in work rituals when I interact with others' and 'I share with others how I feel increased vitality in work rituals when I interact with others.'

Work meaningfulness

We measured work meaningfulness with five items from Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) work meaningfulness scale. One example is 'The work that I do is meaningful.'

Proactive behavior

We measured proactive behavior with the three-item scale of proactive behavior developed by Griffin, Neal, & Parker (2007). An example of the items is 'I initiate better ways of doing my core tasks.'

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Variables	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	–	–								
2. Age	25.57	2.42	.19**							
3. Education	–	–	−.15*	.05						
4. Organizational tenure	3.14	1.66	.16*	.53***	−.28***					
5. Condition	–	–	.01	−.04	.15*	−.06				
6. Work rituals	4.17	0.91	−.02	.03	−.05	.03	.24***			
7. Sharing emotional energy	4.15	0.90	−.08	.03	.05	.08	.26***	.66***		
8. Work meaningfulness	4.20	0.82	−.18*	.06	−.03	.02	.25***	.50***	.69***	
9. Proactive behavior	4.06	0.87	−.15*	.07	.02	.12	.26***	.43***	.67***	.69***

Note. Condition: 0 = control condition ($N = 103$); 1 = intervention condition ($N = 101$). Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. Education: 1 = technical secondary school, 2 = college, 3 = a bachelor's degree, 4 = a master's degree. Organizational tenure was measured by years.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Control variables

As demographics have been found in previous research to be related to employee proactive behavior (e.g., Bohlmann, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2021; Strauss, Parker, & O'Shea, 2017; Wu, Deng, & Li, 2018), we included employee gender, age, education, and organizational tenure as control variables to rule out alternative explanations. With and without those control variables, we still reach a consistent conclusion.

Results

Manipulation check

Given that little research has developed the scale of work rituals of interest, we developed the items based on previous research on organizational rituals (e.g., Samier, 1997; Vaughn, 1995). The items are 'the work activity is of high rituality,' 'I'm impressed by the ritual of the work activity,' and 'I notice the work activity is full of ritual.' We also gave participants the definition of work rituals. We checked the effectiveness of manipulation using the ANOVA test in SPSS software. The results showed a significant difference in work rituals ($F(1, 202) = 12.56$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .50$) for the intervention condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.83$) compared with the control condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.94$). The above results confirmed our manipulation of work rituals successfully.

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 contains means, *SD*s, and correlations for the research variables. Table 2 shows the means and *SD*s among two conditions.

To test for construct distinctiveness, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses on the study constructs by examining the four-factor model as well as other alternative models. Since the small sample size-to-item ratio could impair overall model fit (Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, & Schoemann, 2013; Williams, Vandenberg, & Edwards, 2009), we parceled the items of the constructs involving many items (i.e., sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness). Specifically, the two constructs were parceled into two items respectively using the random algorithm recommended by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002). As shown in Table 3, the four-factor model demonstrates good fit ($\chi^2 = 64.06$, $df = 29$, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, SRMR = .02), and displays superior fit to any other alternative models. Hence, the constructs in the study are statistically distinct from one another.

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics among two conditions

	Control condition		Intervention condition	
Variables	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Gender	–	–	–	–
Age	25.67	2.62	25.48	2.21
Education	–	–	–	–
Organizational tenure	3.23	1.66	3.04	1.66
Work rituals	3.95	0.94	4.39	0.83
Sharing emotional energy	3.92	0.94	4.39	0.80
Work meaningfulness	3.99	0.87	4.40	0.71
Proactive behavior	3.83	0.87	4.29	0.81

Table 3. Comparison of measurement models

Models	χ^2	*df*	$\triangle\chi^2$ ($\triangle df$)	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Four-factor model (all constructs are independent)	64.06	29	–	.08	.99	.99	.02
Alternative three-factor model (sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness combined)	847.49	32	783.43*** (3)	.35	.81	.73	.12
Alternative two-factor model (sharing emotional energy, work meaningfulness, and proactive behavior combined)	1388.57	34	1324.51*** (5)	.44	.69	.58	.15
Alternative one-factor model (all four constructs combined)	2562.25	35	2498.19*** (6)	.60	.41	.25	.18

Note. $N = 204$. All models are compared with the four-factor model.
***$p < .001$.

Hypothesis testing

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the ANOVA results revealed that employees in the intervention condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .80$) reported higher levels of sharing emotional energy than those in the control condition ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .94$), $F(1, 202) = 14.67$, $p < .001$. The regression results (Table 4) also showed that work rituals were positively related to sharing emotional energy ($B = .65$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The ANOVA results revealed that employees in the intervention condition ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .71$) reported higher levels of work meaningfulness than those in the control condition ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .87$), $F(1, 202) = 13.64$, $p < .001$. Further, the results indicated there was a significant positive relationship between employee sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness ($B = .58$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Further, the ANOVA results revealed that employees in the intervention condition ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .81$) reported higher levels of proactive behavior than those in the control condition ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .87$), $F(1, 202) = 14.98$, $p < .001$. The results showed there was a significant positive relationship between employee work meaningfulness and proactive behavior ($B = .47$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

We used PROCESS macro (Model = 6) with 20,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS to test this hypothesis. The results showed that this serial indirect effect was significant (*indirect effect* = .18, CI = [.112, .257]). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

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Table 4. Regression results

Variables	Sharing emotional energy	Work meaningfulness	Proactive behavior
Constant	1.22* (.61)	1.20* (.53)	.58 (.54)
Gender	−.11 (.10)	−.24** (.08)	−.09 (.09)
Age	−.02 (.02)	.05* (.02)	−.01 (.02)
Education	.19* (.10)	−.19* (.08)	.05 (.09)
Organizational tenure	.07 (.04)	−.06 (.03)	.06 (.03)
Work rituals	.65*** (.05)	.07 (.06)	−.04 (.06)
Sharing emotional energy		.58*** (.06)	.37*** (.07)
Work meaningfulness			.47*** (.07)
F-test	32.37***	34.40***	36.55***
R^2	.45	.51	.57
R^2 change[a]	.43***	.47***	.52***

Note. $N = 204$. Standard errors (SEs) of the coefficients are shown in the parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients are reported.
[a]Each model was compared with the basic model that had the same dependent variable and the control variables.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

This study adopted the process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022) to examine the influences of work rituals on employee proactive behavior in the workplace. Our field experiment with randomization using the sample from a communication corporation showed that work rituals urge employees to share their emotional energy; in turn, employees were more likely to experience a high level of work meaningfulness, which ultimately increased their proactive behavior.

Theoretical contributions

The present study adds to the body of the proactive behavior literature and research on organizational rituals. First, our research contributes to the proactive behavior literature. Regarding the proactive behavior literature, prior research has generally emphasized the role of contextual factors in influencing employee proactive behavior (e.g., leadership and job characteristics; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011; Parker et al., 2006) while not fully examined relational or interpersonal predictors of proactive behavior. However, it is still little known about the consequences of work rituals, as a situational cue characterized by a form of social interactions, on proactive behavior. This is unfortunate because work rituals are widespread in the workplace, and it has been theoretically considered a crucial kind of situational cues that affect employee behavior (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Trice, Belasco, & Alutto, 1969). In comparison, our research explores a new antecedent of employee proactive behavior by introducing the construct of work rituals and linking it with proactive behavior. Different from those well-examined factors, work rituals are a special form of social interaction actions and emphasize that employees' values and identity are demonstrated or enacted within work rituals (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). We believe that bringing the concept of work rituals to the proactive behavior literature advances the nomological networks of proactive behavior, thereby shedding new light on proactive behavior research.

Given that we found that work rituals can exert an effect on employee proactive behavior, our investigation also confirmed the arguments of previous research that proactive behavior can be particularly a function of situational cues (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). The current research also further responds to the call for examining social actions initiated by the managerial level intended to enhance employee proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) because work rituals, different from most workplace actions, are typically conducted at the managerial level.

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Moreover, our study advances the proactive behavior literature by proposing and testing a new mechanism. Specifically, according to the recent review of Cai et al. (2019), prior research primarily focused on the three mechanisms of proactive motivation, namely, 'can do' (e.g., self-efficacy, control, and perceived costs), 'reason to' (e.g., goal selection and persistence), and 'energized to' (e.g., 'hot' affect-related motivational states). Our findings help further confirm the important roles of 'reason to' and 'energized to' in influencing proactivity, which enriches our understanding of the influencing mechanisms embedded in proactive behavior.

Second, we advance the knowledge of the construct of work rituals and their role in the workplace. Organizational rituals in different forms have long been shown to play an irreplaceable role in a working setting at different levels, and rituals profoundly affect employees' psychological and behavioral outcomes (Islam, 2015; Samier, 1997; Smith & Stewart, 2011). To date, however, the knowledge of whether and how work-related interaction rituals influence employee outcomes is limited. This ignorance is problematic since employees are constantly affected by rituals at work; without this knowledge, we cannot have a full picture of how employees experience and behave in work-related interaction rituals, impeding our understanding of its essential functions. Fortunately, our research takes a step further in this regard by linking work rituals to employee proactive behavior. We indicated that work rituals, characterized by social interactions conferring symbolic meaning in an organizational context (Islam & Zyphur, 2009), did have social influences on employees' outcomes.

More importantly, most scholars merely theorized (e.g., Brown, 2011; Matheson, 2019) or adopted a qualitative approach (Erhardt, Martin-Rios, & Heckscher, 2016) to examine the functions of interaction rituals in the workplace. Although a few scholars have begun to provide empirical evidence in this aspect using a quantitative approach, it explains comparatively less about the consequence of work-related interaction rituals on focal employees' outcomes (Brooks et al., 2016; Krishnan, Cook, Kozhikode, & Schilke, 2021). In the current research, we contribute to the research on organizational rituals by testing the process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022) using an experimental method in a working setting rather than using qualitative methods (e.g., case studies or interviews) as most previous research did. Our findings showed that work rituals intervention is a promising way to influence employee proactive behavior. Indeed, to our best knowledge, studies on ritual interventions are relatively scarce yet. Thereby, our experimental research provides a more robust test on the effects of work rituals in the workplace.

Last, our research verified the core arguments of the process model of interaction rituals and the interaction ritual literature (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022) by testing the mechanisms underlying the relationship between work rituals and employee behavioral outcomes. The study results indicated that work rituals play a crucial role in one's proactive behavior via sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness. Consistent with the argument of the literature (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022), the findings highlighted that both affective and cognitive mechanism in order explains the impact of work rituals on subsequent behavioral reactions. In particular, our research is in line with the previous research such that rituals are considered to be effective interventions to facilitate employee's work outcomes by stimulating employees to build positive psychological status first and then their behaviors (Smith & Stewart, 2011).

Practical implications

Our findings highlight that engaging in work rituals may ultimately benefit employees' proactive behavior. As a result, important approaches for organizations to improve proactive behavior focus on introducing and encouraging ritual activities in daily work. For instance, organizations can put the roll screen for the activity to attract employees' attention and request employees to wear formal suits, bring pens and notebooks to record and share, read aloud about what they learned in the activity, and discuss in the group. Meanwhile, employees themselves should not only enhance their awareness

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of the benefits of work rituals but also be encouraged to actively participate in such work rituals. By doing so, we can expect that employees can benefit from work rituals and are more likely to engage in proactive behavior as a result.

Additionally, the current findings underscore the need for more attention to the crucial role of sharing emotional energy. For example, organizations can encourage employees to conduct interpersonal interactions in an effective way so as to stimulate their emotional energy and, more importantly, to share rather than suppress them. As for the employees themselves, we suggest that employees should actively share their positive emotional experiences in the workplace. For instance, employees can actively share their desirable emotions in work rituals when interacting with other colleagues.

Given that our findings highlight the direct influence of work meaningfulness on promoting employee proactive behavior, organizations should try to make efforts to increase work meaningfulness for employees by broadening or redesigning the job, rotating employees to enrich the job content, and clearly communicating the meaningful features of work to them. From an employee's perspective, they should make efforts to be self-motivating by considering the broader purpose of their work. As such, we can expect that employees could be more proactively engaged in their routine work.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the above theoretical and practical implications, we acknowledge that our research has some limitations. First, the randomized field experiment helps us reach a causal conclusion to a large extent, but all variables were self-reported by employees, which may be subject to common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Although it is reasonable to ask employees to rate their psychological reactions, future studies could build upon our work by using objective data and other-reports to measure proactive behavior.

Second, the generalizability of our findings may be limited by the Chinese sample. Although operations and managerial practices in the Chinese communication corporation are similar to those in other countries, the collectivistic culture highlighted in China (Hofstede, 1980), which emphasizes the importance of societal norms embedded in rituals, may potentially influence our interventions' effects. We encourage future research to collect more data from different countries and regions to replicate our findings. Additionally, although our sample may consider work rituals not quite general in their daily lives, we cannot ensure whether other samples may consider them to be general in the working context. Thus, we encourage future research to collect additional samples to further test the model and refine the contents of work rituals if necessary.

Third, a remaining question is whether or not the effects of our interventions on employee reactions depend on some unexamined factors. Based on the process model of interaction rituals (Collins, 1993, 2004; Lepisto, 2022), work rituals play a role in employees' psychological and behavioral reactions without boundary conditions. However, in essence, employees not only have visible differences in attitudes toward rituals but also work in social interactions that may affect their attention to and recognition of rituals. Therefore, during the process of implementing our interventions, a variety of individual and situational factors may influence its effects, such as employees' personalities, attitudes toward work rituals, leadership, and team climates. For example, it is possible that employees feel burdened by work rituals and share negative emotions, depending on their attitudes toward and the amount of work rituals. It is promising for scholars to examine the boundary conditions of our model.

Moreover, it is noted that Chinese cultures may be a key confounding factor in our model, given that we focused on the Chinese spirit. However, we consider it not a huge issue because each condition experienced the Chinese spirit. The Chinese spirit is just one of the vehicles of work rituals. Although we included the Chinese spirit, those specific contents do not necessarily involve the Chinese culture, such as the collective culture. This is because the contents of the Chinese spirit, such as dedication to work, hard-working and contribution, being equipped with skills, and daring to reform and

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innovate, probably exist in many countries. Thus, we believe that our manipulation materials have some generalizability.

Last, our study focused on the serial process model where work rituals influence proactive behavior via sharing emotional energy and then work meaningfulness. However, it is noted that prior research has verified the three mechanisms of proactive motivation, namely, 'can do', 'reason to', and 'energized to' (Cai et al., 2019). Thus, it is possible that the effect of work rituals on proactive behavior is mediated by sharing emotional energy and work meaningfulness, respectively. Yet, we acknowledge that our findings did not fully support this possibility of multiple mediators in this model. One possible reason is that work rituals essentially capture a form of social interactions (Islam & Zyphur, 2009) and thus may first influence members' social reactions (i.e., sharing their emotional energy with others) and then their cold reactions – the cognition of their work (i.e., work meaningfulness). Overall, we encourage future research to further examine theoretically and empirically the alternative model.

Data availability statement. There are no prior use or publication of any part of this article. We guarantee that all authors would follow data sharing and data accessibility policy.

Acknowledgements. This research is supported by a grant awarded to Dr. Dan Ni from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 72202248).

Ethical standards. There are no potential conflicts of interest. Research involving human participants. As to ethical approval, we complied with the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines regarding data collection procedures.

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Cite this article: Ni, D., Lu, H., and Wang, Y. (2025). How to trigger employee proactive behavior? Introducing the ritual perspective. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 31(3), 1040–1055. https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.23

https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press