Economic downturns undermine workplace helping by promoting a zero-sum construal of success

Workplace helping is essential to the success of organizations and economies. Given the economic benefits of helping, it seems important that during difficult economic periods the amount of helping does not decline. In this research, we propose and show that it does. We argue that cues that signal the economy is performing poorly prompt a construal that the success of one person implies less success for others. This zero-sum construal of success in turn makes employees less inclined to help. Four studies found evidence consistent with our theory. Study 1 found that worse economic periods are associated with a more zero-sum construal of success using data from 59,694 respondents surveyed across 51 countries and 17 years and objective indicators of their macroeconomic environments. Studies 2 and 3 were experiments among employees of U.S. organizations that found an induced perception that the U.S. economy was performing poorly led to a more zero-sum construal of success and made employees less inclined to help. Study 4 was an unobtrusive experiment among freelance professionals from 47 countries that found that participants’ perception that the economy in their country was in a downturn was associated with a more zero-sum construal of success and less helping behavior. This research demonstrates the importance of bridging the macro-micro divide in organizational sciences and considering the impact of macroeconomic changes on individual employee psychology and behavior.
Economic Downturns Undermine Workplace Helping by Promoting a Zero-sum Construal of Success

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ECONOMIC DOWNTURNS UNDERMINE WORKPLACE HELPING BY PROMOTING A ZERO-SUM CONSTRUAL OF SUCCESS

Abstract

Workplace helping is essential to the success of organizations and economies. Given the economic benefits of helping, it seems important that during difficult economic periods the amount of helping does not decline. In this research, we propose and show that it does. We argue that cues that signal the economy is performing poorly prompt a construal that the success of one person implies less success for others. This zero-sum construal of success in turn makes employees less inclined to help. Four studies found evidence consistent with our theory. Study 1 found that worse economic periods are associated with a more zero-sum construal of success using data from 59,694 respondents surveyed across 51 countries and 17 years and objective indicators of their macroeconomic environments. Studies 2 and 3 were experiments among employees of U.S. organizations that found an induced perception that the U.S. economy was performing poorly led to a more zero-sum construal of success and made employees less inclined to help. Study 4 was an unobtrusive experiment among freelance professionals from 47 countries and it found that participants’ perception that the economy in their country was in a downturn was associated with a more zero-sum construal of success and less helping behavior. This research demonstrates the importance of bridging the macro-micro divide in organizational sciences and considering the impact of macroeconomic changes on individual employee psychology and behavior.

In many everyday situations at work, employees help coworkers perform better. Workplace helping consists of voluntary behaviors that are aimed at assisting coworkers attain their work goals in a way that is not contractually enforced by the organization (Sparrowe, Soetjipto, & Kraimer, 2006). For example, employees may get a coworker who has been absent up to speed with relevant developments in the organization or may adjust their work schedule to accommodate another employee’s desired schedule (Lee & Allen, 2002). Although over-emphasis on helping might in some cases detract from task performance (Bergeron, 2007; Rubin, Dierdorff, & Bachrach, 2013), workplace helping is on average positively associated with performance of teams and organizations (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997) and with the growth and dynamism of entire economies (Knack & Keefer, 1997). Given the economic benefits of helping to broader economic units, it seems important
that during difficult economic periods the amount of this behavior does not decline. In this research, we propose and show that it does.

We argue that exposure to cues that signal the economy is performing poorly prompts a more zero-sum construal of success, defined as a generalized view that success for some implies a loss for others (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Foster, 1965). Economic downturns, relative to upturns, are objectively associated with success being more of an exclusive good, so exposure to cues of economic downturns should make a zero-sum construal of success more salient. The salience of a zero-sum construal of success should influence how people approach everyday situations at work in which coworkers need help. People make sense of workplace situations in terms of how others’ success affects their own. For example, a colleague’s bonus gain might mean a personal loss (e.g., bonuses are given only to the top performer), but in many cases it does not (e.g., bonuses are given to all who attain a certain performance goal). People are unlikely to exhaustively scrutinize every situation they face (e.g., a situation that affords an opportunity to help a coworker’s success) and are likely to rely on a generalized construal of relevant situations (e.g., a view of whether in general helping another person’s success implies less success for others). Thus, even when the situation offering an opportunity to help is the same, a salient zero-sum construal of success (which we argue should be more pronounced during economic downturns) should reduce an employee’s tendency to help others succeed.

We report four studies testing this theory. Study 1 used data from 59,694 respondents surveyed across 51 countries and 17 years and objective indicators of their macroeconomic environments to test whether worse economic periods are associated with a more zero-sum construal of success. Studies 2 and 3 are
experiments among employees of U.S. organizations in which we manipulated participants’ perception of the state of the U.S. economy and tested whether exposure to cues that the economy is performing poorly makes a zero-sum construal of success salient and in turn makes people less inclined to help. Study 4 was an unobtrusive experiment among freelance professionals from 47 countries in which we tested how participants’ perception of their economic environment is related to a zero-sum construal of success and helping behavior. Across studies, we focus on situations in which helping does not come at a cost to the self as a way to provide evidence of the counterproductive nature of the effect.

Economic downturns have always been thought to be fueled and perpetuated, in part, by counterproductive individual reactions to initial cues that the economy was performing poorly. Examples of such behavior involve bank runs and panic selling. Our work identifies what is likely another counterproductive individual reaction to cues of economic downturns. As cited at the outset of the paper, past research documented benefits of helping for the success of organizations and economies. By showing that people reduce their level of helping behavior when it is needed the most, our work may point to an organizationally and economically problematic individual response to difficult economic periods with practical implications for managers and policymakers. This contribution is also theoretically noteworthy because past work on counterproductive individual reactions to economic downturns was primarily focused on actors other than employees (e.g., bank customers) or looked at work behaviors that do not concern the majority of employees (e.g., professional stock investing). We highlight that economic downturns can cause counterproductive individual reactions among the general population of employees and with respect to a core workplace behavior—coworker helping.
By demonstrating that macroeconomic contexts shape the behavior of individuals, our work opens up avenues for future research to bridge micro and macro levels of analyses in explaining employee behavior. The organizational literature has traditionally studied phenomena at the level of individuals and teams separately from those at the level of industries and economies (Buckley, Hamdani, Klotz, & Valcea, 2011). An implicit assumption of this approach is that individual behavior is largely unaffected by the state of the broader economic environment. Yet, employees have much interest in and information about the state of the economy, making this a very salient feature of their everyday psychological experience, and, as we show, an important determinant of how they act at work. On average, the U.S. economy fluctuated between economic downturns and upturns roughly every five years over the last one hundred and fifty years (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011). Such economic changes profoundly affect employees’ livelihood (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Eurofound, 2009). Employees can read about even minor macroeconomic changes in every newspaper, and smartphones provide instantaneous updates about the stock market. Given the importance and salience of macroeconomic changes to employees, it is unrealistic to build models of organizational behavior by assuming that employees act in a vacuum, oblivious to broader economic trends. By examining how economic changes shape a core organizational behavior—helping—our work presents an important step toward understanding individual employees in the context of a broader economic environment.

**THEORY**

We propose that one important psychological factor that affects employees’ decisions to help their coworkers is their construal of the extent to which the success of one person implies less success for others. Broadly, the generalized construal of
success can fall somewhere along a spectrum ranging from a zero-sum view whereby another’s success is construed as exhausting a limited pool of successful outcomes, to a more integrative view whereby success is seen more as a good that can grow so there is enough for everyone. Variation in the construal of success has been documented in a range of domains. For example, Esses et al. (1998) found substantial variation in the extent to which people construe gains of one social group to imply losses for other groups, and a more zero-sum construal of success was related to more negative attitudes of natives toward immigrants. Norton and Sommers (2011) found differences between social groups, where Whites construe improvements in the outcomes of Blacks in a zero-sum manner and therefore as threatening their own outcomes, while Blacks construe successes of other social groups in less of a zero-sum manner, believing instead that all social groups can enjoy good outcomes.

Much debate in relation to economic and organizational phenomena can be viewed as a product of diverging philosophical assumptions about the extent to which success is a zero-sum good. Malthus ([1798] 1985) saw wealth as a zero-sum good, such that improvements in the position of some would mean less wealth remaining for others. In contrast, Condorcet ([1795] 1955) believed that wealth was not a zero-sum good because of technological innovation, which he believed had the potential to generate new wealth and thus ensure that improvements in the position of some would not necessarily have to come at the expense of others’ success. In the popular business strategy literature, there is an effort to alter people’s construal of success from the one that emphasizes defeating one’s competitors in the market (“red ocean”) to the view that wealth can be generated anew and that success of one firm does not have to come at the expense of others (“blue ocean;” Kim & Mauborgne, 2015). Popular management and self-improvement books make a similar point. For example, in the
book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey (2004) suggests that people often “see life as a finite pie: If someone gets a big piece of pie, it means less for everyone else – and most importantly, for them. Our thinking should be that there is plenty out there for everybody” (p. 219). Such anecdotal evidence is suggestive of the relevance of people’s construal of success in a more or less zero-sum manner in the context of economic and business processes.

We draw on social cognition principles (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Lord, 1982; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985; Trzepinski, 1985) to propose that the salience of a zero-sum construal of success should make people less inclined to help. One basic principle of social cognition is that people are influenced in their approach to a particular situation both by the information contained in the particular situation as well as by their generalized construal of relevant situations. For example, when making a decision about whether they should trust a particular individual, people are influenced by their construal of whether trusting others is risky in general (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). In this example, when people’s salient generalized construal is that trusting others is risky, people would be less likely to trust a particular individual, even when the information contained in the situation (e.g., reputational information) is identical. People rely on a generalized construal of relevant situations when making decisions about particular situations because doing so is generally more efficient and less time and energy consuming than engaging in an exhaustive scrutiny of every particular situational detail (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994; Macrae, Stangor, & Milne, 1994). Exhaustive scrutiny may be particularly unlikely in the work setting, which is often marked by substantial time pressure and cognitive load (Mintzberg, 1975; Perlow, 1997).
People are thus likely to be influenced in their approach to a particular situation affording the opportunity to help (e.g., “Should I help this particular coworker perform her work successfully?”) both by the features of the situation as well as the generalized construal of relevant situations (i.e., “In general, does another person’s success imply less or more success for others?”). To the extent that the construal that the success of some (such as an employee in need of help) is something that might take away from the success of others (potentially including themselves) is salient, people should be more likely to act as if aiding others’ success is less of a desirable action. Thus, even when the situation is the same (e.g., helping would involve little or no personal cost to the self), a salient zero-sum construal of success should make people less likely to help.

Consistent with this notion, there is evidence that even in situations in which success is by definition not a zero-sum good people may still act in accordance with a generalized zero-sum construal of success. Negotiation research found that negotiators sometimes assume that negotiation outcomes are zero-sum, i.e., that their own and the other party’s gains obtained through negotiation are mutually exclusive, even when the situation is defined such that both parties can attain good outcomes (Bazerman & Neale, 1983). Educational research provides another demonstration that people can be guided by a zero-sum construal of success in particular situations over and beyond specific situational details. This work found that people often think of grades as a zero-sum good even when they are not. For example, people predicted that students graded later would receive lower grades if students graded earlier received high grades, even when grading was absolute and not relative (Meegan, 2010). These examples are consistent with the idea that when a zero-sum construal of success is
salient, it impacts people’s interpretations of and approach to particular situations over and above the features of the situation.

We argue that the exposure to cues that the economy is performing poorly (relative to well) will make a zero-sum construal of success salient. In worse economic periods, such as during economic downturns, less wealth is generated anew (Pfeffer, Danziger, & Schoeni, 2013). Economic success is objectively more of an exclusive good during more difficult economic times. Wealth by definition does not grow much during economic downturns, so during economically difficult times it is relatively more correct that success can only be accrued at the expense of existing wealth than it is during economically prosperous times. For that reason, we expect that exposure to cues of economic downturns will make a zero-sum construal of success salient. While this construal will be relatively accurate with respect to the general economic situation, as we argued above, it may lead people to apply the generalized construal to particular situations in which one can decide whether or not to aid others’ success. In the context of workplace helping, this means even when the particular situation affording the opportunity to help that employees face is the same, employees should behave in a less helpful manner due to a more zero-sum construal of success when exposed to cues of economic downturns. In fact, to the extent that people rely on a generalized construal of success rather than exclusively relying on the information contained in the situation, exposure to cues of economic downturns may reduce helping even when helping would not come at any cost to the success of others.

Anthropological work by Foster (1965) is suggestive of the possibility that harsher economic environments make a zero-sum construal of success salient, which in turn makes people less likely to aid the success of others, even when doing so
involves no personal cost. Foster argued that the harsh economic conditions of peasant economies promote an “image of a limited good,” such that people “see their universe as one in which the good things in life are in limited and unexpandable quantities, and hence personal gain must be at the expense of others” (p. 301). This zero-sum construal of success is believed to stem from the difficult conditions of peasant economies: “When the peasant views his economic world as one in which Limited Good prevails, and he can progress only at the expense of another, he is usually very near the truth” (p. 297). Foster argued that the zero-sum construal of success among peasants makes them less likely to benefit others through cooperative efforts, even when cooperation could potentially be personally beneficial: “If the ‘good’ in life is seen as finite and nonexpandable, and if apart from luck an individual can progress only at the expense of others, what does one stand to gain from a cooperative project?”

Foster’s observations focus on a context that is very different from business organizations of the modern economy, but a similar psychological process may be one explanation for a variation in workplace helping as a function of macroeconomic changes. Because people perceive a lower likelihood of new wealth generation at the level of the economy, a more zero-sum generalized construal of success should become salient. This, in turn, should make people less likely to aid the success of other employees even when the particular situation in which a coworker is in need of help is the same. Thus, formally stated, our theory is as follows:

*Hypothesis 1. Economic downturns promote a zero-sum construal of success.*

*Hypothesis 2. Economic downturns reduce workplace helping by promoting a zero-sum construal of success.*
OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We start by reporting a large-scale study across 51 countries and 17 years that examined how the extent to which people construe success in a zero-sum fashion varies as a function of their objective macroeconomic environment. Study 1 thus tests Hypothesis 1 only. Studies 2–4 test both hypotheses and exclude changes in mood as alternative explanations for the effect of economic downturns on helping. Specifically, prior research showed that both positive and negative mood, independently, can affect whether people are willing to help others (Weyant, 1978). Economic downturns are marked by adverse events such as unemployment and financial hardship. It is thus possible that exposure to cues of economic downturns puts people in a more negative and less positive mood, which might conceivably explain the effect of economic downturns on helping. Although we deemed it informative to test these alternative explanations, we thought the explanation focusing on the salience of a zero-sum construal of success was more likely because prior work on psychological effects of environmental resource scarcity did not find effects on either positive or negative mood (e.g., Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012). Figure 1 summarizes this test of mediators conducted in Studies 2–4.

Studies 2 and 3 use experimental methodology to manipulate employees’ perception of the state of the economy, while Study 4 capitalizes on natural variation in the state of the economy by sampling workers from 47 countries. In these studies, we operationalize helping behavior by examining responses to a hypothetical workplace situation (Study 2), by administering an established self-report measure of workplace helping (Study 3), as well as by measuring actual helping behavior (Study 4). Thus, taken together, we test our theory using both externally and internally valid methods, and conceptually replicate our theory tests through different
operationalizations of the key constructs. Across studies, we focus on situations in which helping comes at no apparent cost to the self. Our reasoning was that demonstrating that people choose not to help in such situations provides a particularly powerful demonstration of the irrational and counterproductive nature of the response. Except for data that are already publically available through the webpages of the relevant institutions (as detailed below), materials, data, and syntax for all our studies are available at:

https://osf.io/shxuc/?view_only=d1a7eb92003642c7839fbc6e04f8db40. The webpage also contains the syntax for all of the robustness checks mentioned in the paper.

**STUDY 1: LARGE-SCALE FIELD STUDY**

**Survey Data**

Individual level data were obtained from the World Values Survey (WVS; 2014). The WVS is a research project focusing on socio-cultural changes that has since 1981 surveyed representative random samples from numerous countries, with over 100 countries being currently represented. The WVS is conducted in cross-sectional waves with non-repeat observations several years apart. The data collection for each wave spans over several years so responses are almost continuously represented across years. The data are available for download at the webpage referenced above. For the combination of variables that were relevant to our theory, data were available from 59,694 respondents from 51 countries and responses were distributed across years ranging from 1995 to 2012. Respondents were roughly balanced in terms of gender (51.58% were women), had 41.17 years on average (s.d. = 16.24) and 68.47% were employed.

**Zero-sum construal of success.** The WVS included a measure of zero-sum construal of success that asked participants to indicate how they viewed success on a
scale ranging from 1 = “people can only get rich at the expense of others” to 10 = “wealth can grow so there is enough for everyone.” We reversed the scale so that higher values indicate a more zero-sum construal of success.

**Controls.** We controlled for several individual characteristics of WVS respondents. The selection of control variables was informed by prior research on zero-sum construal of success. Specifically, consistent with Bobo and Hutchings (1996), we controlled for respondents’ sex (0 = female, 1 = male), age, whether the respondent was working, whether the respondent was religious, and respondents’ income level (ranging from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest income level; for details see WVS, 2015). Next, we controlled for respondents’ occupational status classified based on the International Socio-Economic Index of occupational status (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Treiman, 1992) and for educational attainment classified based on the CASMIN classification of educational attainment (Braun & Müller, 1997). Both these measures are widely used and are designed such that higher scores indicate a higher occupation status and a higher educational attainment, respectively. The documentation cited above contains details. Finally, to more directly account for psychological responses due to participants’ social standing, the indicators of which were found to be associated with a zero-sum construal of success in Bobo and Hutchings (1996), we also controlled for self-reported social class. The scale ranged from 1 = upper class to 5 = lower class (cf. Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). It was reversed so that higher scores indicate a higher subjective social class.

**Data on Macroeconomic Situation**

To examine whether participants’ view of success was shaped by their macroeconomic context, we merged the WVS with the World Development Indicators (WDI) database produced by the World Bank (2015). WDI contains
internationally comparable macroeconomic indicators covering more than 150 economies. The WDI data are available for download from the World Bank webpage referenced above. We merged the two datasets so that for each individual response from the WVS there was a corresponding statistic from the WDI database for the country and year in which the response was collected.

As a proxy for the current state of the economy, we used the unemployment rate in respondents’ country in the year in which the response was collected. Unemployment has been used as a proxy for economic downturns versus upturns in past organizational (Bianchi, 2013) and psychological research (Hill et al., 2012). The National Bureau of Economic Research (2015), an institution that provides official estimates of economic cycles, also looks at unemployment to determine when the economy is in a downturn or upturn. Nevertheless, we note that some prior work operationalized whether the economy was in a downturn versus upturn by looking at GDP change rates (e.g. Sobotka, Skirbekk, & Philipov, 2011). Thus, as described below, we also checked the robustness of our findings by rerunning the analysis using GDP change rates as an alternative operationalization of the state of the economy.

Table 1 contains details of Study 1 variables.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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STUDY 1: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted a multilevel regression analysis with cases nested within countries (Table 2). The control variables were entered as predictors of zero-sum construal of success in the first step (Model 1) and the independent variable (unemployment rate) was added in the second step (Model 2). We also note that in this and all other studies reported in the paper, the results hold without control
variables. The results are displayed in Table 2 and show that when the economy was in a downturn, as indicated by a higher relative to lower unemployment rate, respondents construed success in a more zero-sum fashion ($b = 0.05$, s.e. $< 0.01$, $p < .001$). The results thus support Hypothesis 1.

Given the large sample, we deemed it informative to examine the size of the effect of economic cycles relative to other predictors. First, we note that while variance explained was admittedly not large in either model, the addition of the unemployment variable doubled the variance explained over major factors affecting attitudes such as gender, income, employment, education, occupation, subjective social class, and religiosity (see Table 2). Second, we computed standardized coefficients to facilitate effect size comparisons across predictors (see the online syntax for details). The standardized coefficient for unemployment was .14, which significantly surpassed the standardized coefficients of all other variables. The next largest standardized coefficient, that for religiosity, was almost three times smaller (.05) than the standardized coefficient for unemployment. Taken together, this analysis suggests that changes in macroeconomic environment constitute a notable explanation for people’s generalized construal of success.

**Robustness Checks**

We conducted several robustness checks to probe the reliability of our findings. First, we group-mean centered the unemployment rate to reflect deviations from the average unemployment rate in the given country (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998) and in that way take into account countries’ historical averages and trends. Second, as noted above, we also reran the analysis using GDP change as an alternative
independent variable, which also captures economic changes in a country relative to that country’s past economic situation. Third, instead of using multilevel modeling, we reran the analysis using OLS with Huber–White (robust) standard errors (Froot, 1989). Fourth, we tried adding fixed effects for year to this analysis to account for any time effects. In all cases the results led to the same conclusions as in the main analysis.

STUDY 2: FIRST EXPERIMENT AMONG EMPLOYEES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Study 1 provided a large-scale demonstration that people construe success in a more zero-sum manner when the economy performs poorly. In Study 2, we sought to replicate this finding and test its implications for helping behavior (Hypothesis 2). We used an experimental approach to testing the effect of economic downturns on individuals, which ensured a high degree of internal validity of our theory test. Specifically, we recruited U.S. employees working in organizations and we manipulated their perception of how well the U.S. economy was performing by asking them to read an article that purportedly described the actual state of the economy. Half of the participants read that the economy was in a downturn, and the other half that it was in an upturn. Afterwards, we observed whether the manipulation made participants less inclined to engage in helping behavior at work, and whether the effect was due to a more zero-sum construal of success. We also examined mood as a potential alternative explanation for the effect.

Participants and Design

We recruited 231 employees (average age = 48.57, s.d. = 11.29; 61.47% were women) working in various U.S.-based firms in exchange for $4.90. Participants were recruited through Clear Voice, a market research and intelligence firm, which
confirmed participants’ employment status through a comprehensive verification process. On average, participants had 25.74 years of work experience (s.d. = 11.29) and worked in the current organization for the past 11.42 years (s.d. = 9.53). Participants worked in different industries, with the most concentration in the health care and social assistance sector (12.99%), followed by professional, scientific, technical services (11.69%), finance and insurance (8.23%), retail trade (8.23%), and manufacturing (8.23%). The average size of the organization participants worked for was in the 1701-1800 range. Participants’ average yearly income was in the $50,001-$60,000 range. We randomly assigned participants to either the economic downturn condition or the economic upturn condition.

**Procedure and Materials**

After signing the consent form, participants were informed that they would be taking part in a study about economy and workplace decisions and were then asked to report their demographic information. Unless otherwise noted, all measures in this and the subsequent studies used a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Macroeconomic situation manipulation.** After reporting demographic information, participants were asked to read an article about the state of the U.S. economy. In reality, the article described the economy as either in an upturn or a downturn. We designed the article to appear like a genuine newspaper article, similar to prior research on psychological consequences of poor economic conditions (Griskevicius et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2012). Economic upturn was used as the natural control condition as economic cycles generally consist of periods of more or less pronounced growth that is intermittently interrupted by economic downturns (The World Bank, 2015). The length (498 vs. 493 words), structure, style, and wording of
both articles were highly standardized. To minimize the risk of participants’ suspicion about the articles’ authenticity, both articles relied on actual facts about the U.S. economy to illustrate its overall state as good or bad. Appendix contains the articles.

**Manipulation check.** The effectiveness of the manipulation was checked by asking participants to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following three statements: “The state of the economy is bad,” “The economy is in a downturn,” and “An economic recession is likely” ($\alpha = .93$).

**Hypothesized mediator: zero-sum construal of success.** Next, we administered a six-item measure of the extent to which participants construed success in a zero-sum fashion. We adapted this measure from prior work on zero-sum construal of success (Esses et al., 1998). The items were: “When some workers make economic gains, others lose out economically,” “People who want to get ahead economically must do so at the expense of others,” “The more employees a company employs, the harder it is for existing employees to advance,” “More good jobs for some employees means fewer good jobs for other employees,” “Not everyone can be wealthy,” “For every rich person there is usually a person experiencing financial hardship.” The items were internally consistent ($\alpha = .80$).

**Alternative mediator: mood.** We measured mood using the PANAS measure of mood (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Participants were asked to indicate to what extent ten positive mood states (e.g. enthusiastic, inspired, proud; $\alpha = .94$) and ten negative mood states (e.g., scared, nervous, upset; $\alpha = .94$) described how they felt ($1 = \text{very slightly or not at all}, 5 = \text{extremely}$).

**Dependent variable: helping behavior.** Next, participants were presented with a scenario describing a work situation in which they could help a coworker in need without any apparent personal cost. The scenario read as follows:
At the department meeting your superiors inform you that the company is planning to implement a new marketing strategy focused more aggressively on on-line platforms. They asked all department members to contribute by formulating their strategy proposals. High-quality proposals will be rewarded with a standard bonus. One day, you notice that a colleague from your department obviously misunderstood the purpose of the plan and was not emphasizing on-line platforms. Would you point this colleague in the right direction?

The scenario intended to specify that the coworker’s success would not mean a lower likelihood of own success because all proposals that satisfied a standard of quality would receive a bonus (see online for details of a supplementary data collection that verified that people reading the scenario generally thought that bonuses were determined in an absolute rather than relative fashion, and that helping in this situation would not come at a cost to the self). At the same time, as in a real world workplace setting, the situation was meant to be subtle and ambiguous enough for participants to still be able to impute a zero-sum construal of success in the situation. Participants indicated whether or not they would help the coworker (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Table 3 contains details of Study 2 variables.

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Insert Table 3 about here
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**STUDY 2: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Manipulation Check**

Participants in the economic downturn condition indicated believing that the economy was in a worse state (mean = 3.64, s.d. = 0.99) than participants in the
economic upturn condition (mean = 2.59, s.d. = 1.08), \( t_{229} = 7.69, p < .001 \). Thus, the manipulation was effective.

**Consequences of Economic Downturns**

Participants in the economic downturn condition, compared to participants in the economic upturn condition, reported a more zero-sum construal of success (economic downturn: mean = 3.48, s.d. = 0.79; economic upturn: mean = 3.18, s.d. = 0.73; \( t_{229} = 2.95, p = .004 \)) and were less likely to make a decision to help (economic downturn: 66.67%; economic upturn: 82.91%, \( \chi^2 = 8.10, p = .004 \)). The macroeconomic situation manipulation had no effect on mood (\( ps > .070 \)).

**The Role of Zero-Sum Construal of Success**

Table 4 (left) contains logistic regression analysis results showing that zero-sum construal of success (which we found to be amplified in the economic downturn condition) was associated with less helping, controlling for mood (\( b = -1.22, \text{s.e.} = 0.27, p < .001 \)).

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To test whether zero-sum construal of success mediated the effect of the economic situation manipulation on helping, we analyzed the multiple mediator model depicted in Figure 1 using generalized structural equation modeling with paths toward continuous variables estimated using OLS regression and paths toward helping decisions estimated using logistic regression (the online syntax contains details, including the random seed used). The significance of indirect effects was tested by computing bias-corrected confidence intervals of the product of the relevant paths using the bootstrap method with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The analysis found that reading that the economy was in a downturn...
significantly reduced the likelihood of helping by promoting a zero-sum construal of success [-.78, -.11]. As summarized in Table 5, confidence intervals of indirect effects through positive and negative mood included zero, ruling out these alternative explanations. The results thus support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

| Insert Table 5 about here |

**STUDY 3: SECOND EXPERIMENT AMONG EMPLOYEES IN ORGANIZATIONS**

In Study 2, we found support for our hypotheses using a measure of helping that was designed to map onto the situational features our theory focuses on. Nevertheless, the measure used in Study 2 was developed anew so we considered it desirable to replicate the findings by adapting an established, validated measure of workplace helping in Study 3. The design of Study 3 is thus similar to the design of Study 2 with the main difference being that we adapted an existing measure of the extent to which people are willing to go beyond their job requirements to help a coworker (Lee & Allen, 2002).

**Participants and Design**

We recruited 212 employees (mean age = 52.54, s.d. = 11.55; 53.77% were women) working in various U.S.-based firms in exchange for $4.90 through the same organization used to recruit Study 2 participants. On average, participants had 28.57 years of work experience (s.d. = 11.80) and worked in the current organization for the past 11.38 years (s.d. = 9.22). Participants worked in different industries, with the most concentration in the health care and social assistance sector (11.79%), followed by retail trade (8.49%), manufacturing (7.55%), arts, entertainment, and recreation (4.72%), and construction (4.72%). The average size of the organization participants
worked for was in the 1501-1600 range. Participants’ average yearly income was in
the $50,001-$60,000 range. We randomly assigned participants to either the economic
downturn condition or the economic upturn condition.

Procedure and Materials

The study procedure and measures were the same as in Study 2 except for two
differences. One difference was that we measured participant’s mood using a shorter,
ten-item version of PANAS (Kercher, 1992). The reason was that we sought to
minimize the risk of fatigue and inattention among participants. We reasoned that the
longer PANAS scale may have been taxing as it asked for introspection concerning
twenty states in a sequence. Because we had no theoretical basis for testing the effects
of specific emotional states and were only interested in the effects of an overall
positive and negative mood, we thought it might be more efficient to capture these
constructs using a shorter measure. The specific measure has also been validated in
prior work (Kercher, 1992).

The second and more important difference between the design of Studies 2
and 3 was that in Study 3 we used an established scale designed to measure
willingness to help. We adapted a widely-used, eight-item scale of interpersonal
organizational citizenship behavior developed by Lee and Allen (2002). The measure
is designed to capture voluntary employee behaviors that facilitate organizational
functioning and are aimed at coworkers, “primarily involving helping individuals at
work” (Lee & Allen, 2002). Thus, this operational definition fit our theoretical focus
on explaining a decline in helping behavior that would otherwise be useful to the
success of organizations and their employees.

We first described a work situation in which there was no interdependence
between the participant and the person in need of help. Thus, lower levels of helping
as a function of exposure to cues of economic downturns in this situation would show
a decline in helping as it occurs in a form in which it is actually not threatening to
one’s success and is thus particularly productive and desirable for organizations.
Participants read: “The situations below describe some behaviors you might engage in
with respect to an employee in your organization. Imagine that this employee is
working in another department, on a different type of work than yours. In a typical
day, neither too busy nor too slow, would you be willing to do the following for this
employee?”

Participants then responded to items from Lee and Allen (2002), each of
which described a situation that afforded the opportunity to help another employee.
Sample items are: “Help the employee because s/he has been absent,” “Willingly give
your time to help the employee because s/he has work related problems”; “Assist the
employee with his/her duties.” For each situation described, participants were asked
to indicate whether or not they would help the employee in need of help (0 = no, 1 =
yes). We averaged the responses to form a scale of helping behavior at work (α = .79).

Table 3 contains details of Study 3 variables. As displayed in the table, in
addition to the helping behavior measure, all other measures (which were the same as
in Study 2, with the exception of the PANAS measure, as described above) also
exhibited adequate internal consistency.

**STUDY 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Manipulation Check**

Participants in the economic downturn condition indicated believing that the
economy was in a worse state (mean = 3.79, s.d. = 0.95) than participants in the
economic upturn condition (mean = 2.64, s.d. = 1.07), \( t(210) = 8.34, p < .001 \). Thus,
the manipulation was effective.
Consequences of Economic Downturns

Participants in the economic downturn condition, compared to participants in the economic upturn condition, reported a more zero-sum construal of success (economic downturn: mean = 3.54, s.d. = 0.73; economic upturn: mean = 3.23, s.d. = 0.72; \( t_{210} = 3.10, p = .002 \)) and on average helped less (economic downturn: mean = 0.74, s.d. = 0.26; economic upturn: mean = 0.81, s.d. = 0.24; \( t_{210} = 2.07, p = .040 \)). The macroeconomic situation manipulation had no effect on mood (\( ps > .574 \)).

The Role of Zero-Sum Construal of Success

Table 4 (right) contains OLS regression analysis results showing that zero-sum construal of success (which was amplified in the economic downturn condition) was associated with less helping, controlling for mood (\( b = -0.07, \text{s.e.} = 0.02, p = .002 \)).

We tested the multiple mediator model depicted in Figure 1 with all paths estimated using OLS regression. The same strategy for testing indirect effects was used as in Study 2. The analysis found that reading that the economy was in a downturn significantly reduced helping decision by promoting a zero-sum construal of success [-.05, -.01]. As summarized in Table 5, confidence intervals of indirect effects through positive and negative mood included zero, ruling out these alternative explanations. The results thus support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Robustness Checks

We ran two robustness checks. As noted above, the dependent variable consisted of an average of a series of either one or zero values (denoting either a decision to helping or not to help, respectively, for each item). As such, it could be meaningfully interpreted as the proportion of times the participant decided to help, in which case a fractional logit model would be appropriate (Papke & Wooldridge,
1996). Rerunning the analyses with a fractional logit model yielded the same results as the results reported above. In addition, the dependent variable can be computed not as an average of decisions to help versus not to help, but as a sum of instances in which the participant decided to help. Computed this way, the dependent variable can be meaningfully interpreted as a count response (the number of times the participant decided to help), in which case a Poisson model would be appropriate. Rerunning the analyses with a Poisson model also yielded the same results. We thus concluded that the results are robust.

**STUDY 4: FIELD STUDY AMONG FREELANCERS**

Studies 2 and 3 provided internally valid tests of our theory by manipulating participants’ perception of the state of the economy. In Study 4, we sought to bolster the external validity of our conclusions by once again capitalizing on natural variation in economic conditions across countries, as we did in Study 1, but adding to Study 1, we were able to test our full theoretical model because we also measured helping. We recruited freelance professionals from 47 countries and gave them an opportunity to engage in helping behavior toward a professional in the same domain. The study was conducted unobtrusively, that is, freelancers were not aware they were participating in a study, which added to the psychological realism of this theory test. The final methodological advantage of Study 4 was that we were able to measure freelancers’ perception of the state of the economy and in that way not only operationalize our independent variable in a more direct manner, but also test the assumption of our theory that people are aware of the economic conditions in their country. We accomplished this goal by examining the relationship between people’s perceptions of whether the economy was in a downturn or upturn and objective macroeconomic indicators (the same ones we used in Study 1, in that way also providing evidence of
the convergent validity for our independent variable operationalizations across studies).

Participants

The study was conducted through Upwork, a global platform that facilitates the online hiring of freelance professionals from different industries. Upwork is currently used by more than 1 million businesses and offers access to more than 5 million freelance professionals. The platform enables businesses to find, interview, and hire freelance professionals who possess specific skills. Freelance professionals offering their services through Upwork are fully identifiable and possess profiles with details of their professional track record. Many of them are highly skilled and earn high hourly wages, including software developers, graphic designers, copywriters, and legal consultants.

We employed one hundred and one freelance professionals from the domain of marketing and sales. The focus on marketing and sales was in line with our cover story, which we describe below. All professionals were highly rated by prior clients and had significant experience working on jobs related to marketing and sales. We contacted each of them individually and offered them a small job from their area of expertise. We paid special attention to their place of residence, trying to recruit professionals from as many different countries as possible to ensure there was a natural variation in economic conditions across countries from which participants came. The sample consisted of freelance professionals from 47 different countries across 6 continents. Countries represented included Armenia, Austria, Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, Malaysia, New Zealand, Ukraine, and the U.S., among others. Those who accepted the job signed individual contracts specifying that they would engage in a short task concerning their area of expertise in exchange for
Participants had 34.67 years on average (s.d. = 9.67) and were roughly balanced in terms of gender (53.47% were women).

**Procedure and Measures**

Freelancers were informed that they were hired by a mid-Atlantic university to work on a real job. Until the end of the study, they were unaware that the job was research-related. The job they were required to perform purportedly consisted of assisting the University in evaluating the work of a marketing intern who created a new slogan for the sale of the University’s merchandise (apparel, collectibles, etc.). We explained that the University sometimes seeks external input on the work of its business-sector employees from professionals in the same domain to increase the objectivity of work evaluations and the quality of selection and promotion decisions. Freelancers were first introduced to the merchandise that the intern was hired to promote. To strengthen the cover story, we described the actual name used for the merchandise and the actual marketing slogan used for its promotion, which the marketing intern was ostensibly working on. After responding to some filler items about the interns’ work, participants were given an opportunity to engage in helping behavior toward the intern, which constituted our dependent variable.

**Dependent variable: helping behavior.** We gave participants the option to advise the intern on how to improve, i.e., to give the intern some professional advice on how to become a marketing specialist and succeed in the field. Participants were told that doing so was optional and would in no way affect their remuneration. Moreover, to highlight that helping the intern had no potential to come at the expense of participants’ own career outcomes, we explicitly noted that participants could not be considered for work in a similar position and that we were merely soliciting external input.
Economic downturn perception measure. After the option to give the intern an advice, participants were informed that it is the standard practice of the University to inquire about personal demographics, preferences, outlook on life, etc. It was explained that the University administers such a battery of measures as part of its HR procedure for employees hired online. Participants were first asked for demographic information, including their country of residence. After the question about country of residence, we asked participants about their view of the current state of the economy in their country. The answers to these questions served as the independent variable. The measure consisted of the same three items administered in Studies 2 and 3: “The state of the economy is bad,” “The economy is in a downturn,” and “An economic recession is likely” (α = .90).

Because freelancers were based in a range of different countries, we were able to test whether their perception of the macroeconomic situation correlates with the objective state of the economy in freelancers’ countries. We extracted data on unemployment and GDP change rate from the WDI dataset (used in Study 1; this information was missing for almost half of the sample because the data for the relevant year had not yet been published). Freelancers’ perception that the economy was in a worse state correlated positively with the unemployment rate and negatively with the GDP change rate in their country (rs > .20, ps < .048). These results demonstrate the convergent validity of our operationalizations of the independent variable across studies. In addition, this correlation is relevant for our theory more generally because it provides support for our assumption that people are sensitive to the objective state of their macroeconomic environment.

Hypothesized and alternative mediators. Next, we administered the same measures of the hypothesized (zero-sum construal of success) and alternative
mediators (positive mood and negative mood) as in Study 3. By omission, we did not
administer one item (“distressed”) from the negative mood subscale of the PANAS
measure. Nevertheless, the measure exhibited good internal consistency (α = .77).
Internal consistency statistics for all measures are summarized in Table 6.

**Controls.** Next, we administered several measures intended as control
variables. Specifically, in Studies 2 and 3 we used random assignment to
experimental conditions so any differences in zero-sum construal of success and
helping behavior between experimental groups could only have been due to our
manipulation. Study 4, like Study 1, relies on passive observational data, so we sought
to account for several potentially relevant individual differences. The selection of
control variables was guided by the same rationale as in Study 1. We asked
participant to report their age, gender, and education level, operationalized as total
years of schooling (Schneider, 2007). We administered an item asking about
participants’ income, but more than a third of the sample chose not to report their
income, so we could not use this variable in the analysis. Nevertheless, we also
measured participants’ overall socioeconomic status using the MacArthur Scale of
Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000).
Participants were asked to respond to the following question: “Think of a ladder with
10 steps representing where people stand in your country. At step 10 are people who
are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most
respected jobs. At step 1 are the people who are worst off – those who have the least
money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. Where would you place
yourself on this ladder?” Responses were recorded on a scale ranging from 1 to 10.

Finally, we informed participants that they participated in a research study,
explained the purpose of the study and the rationale for the deception. We asked for a
post-hoc consent and gave participants an option to opt out of the study, in which case their data would not be used. No participant opted out.

Table 6 contains details of Study 4 variables.

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Insert Table 6 about here
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STUDY 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For all analyses below, we report the results of regression models with robust standard errors (Froot, 1989). The results hold when multilevel models with cases nested within countries are used.

Consequences of Economic Downturns

As indicated in the Table 7, perception that the economy was in a downturn was associated with a more zero-sum construal of success ($b = 0.18$, s.e. = 0.06, $p = .003$) and had no effect on mood ($ps > .522$).

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Insert Table 7 about here
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Helping behavior consisted of written suggestions. There were thus two ways to analyze this variable. The first is to analyze whether participants attempted to help or not (44.55% did), in which case a logistic regression analysis is appropriate. Table 8 (Model 1) shows that the perception that the economy was in a downturn was associated with a lower likelihood that participants would help ($b = -0.44$, s.e. = 0.17, $p = .011$). In addition, another way to analyze helping behavior is to look at the extent of helping, that is, to analyze how much participants wrote. Analyzed this way, the dependent variable is a count of characters written. Count variables are usually analyzed using Poisson regression but in this case there was an overdispersion (mean = 152.36, variance = 54638.37), so negative binominal regression was more
appropriate (Long & Freese, 2006). Table 8 (Model 3) shows that the perception that the economy was in a downturn was associated with less helping ($b = -0.40$, s.e. = 0.15, $p = .007$). We also note that the results hold when a Poisson model is used.

The Role of Zero-Sum Construal of Success

Table 8 (Models 2 and 4) show that zero-sum construal of work (which was amplified when the participant perceived the economy to be in a downturn) was related to a lower likelihood of helping ($b = -0.65$, s.e. = 0.28, $p = .023$; Model 2) as well as less helping ($b = -0.82$, s.e. = 0.26, $p = .001$; Model 4), controlling for mood.

We tested the multiple mediator model depicted in Figure 1 with first-stage paths estimated using OLS regression and second stage paths estimated using logistic regression (to predict binary helping responses) or negative binomial regression (to predict continuous helping responses). The same strategy for testing indirect effects was used as in previous studies. The analysis found that participants’ perception that the economy was in a downturn indirectly reduced the likelihood of helping [-0.28, -0.01] as well as the extent of helping [-0.43, -0.02] by promoting a zero-sum construal of success. As summarized in Table 5, confidence intervals of indirect effects through positive and negative mood included zero, ruling out these alternative explanations. The results thus support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four studies found support for the idea that worse macroeconomic conditions bring about a more zero-sum construal of success, which in turn makes people less likely to help others at work. In Study 1, we used data from 59,694 respondents surveyed across 51 countries and 17 years and objective indicators of their
macroeconomic environments. We found worse economic periods to be associated with a more zero-sum construal of success. Studies 2 and 3 were experiments among employees of U.S. organizations in which we manipulated participants’ perception of the state of the U.S. economy. We found that when participants were made to think that the economy was in a downturn, they construed success in a more zero-sum fashion and were in turn less inclined to help. Study 4 was an unobtrusive study among freelance professionals from 47 countries in which we found that participants’ perception that the economy in their country was in a downturn was associated with a more zero-sum construal of success and less helping behavior. Studies 2–4 excluded changes in mood as a potential alternative explanation. Taken together, these studies provide both externally and internally valid evidence for the idea that economic downturns undermine workplace helping by promoting a zero-sum construal of success.

Theoretical Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

The most general theoretical contribution of our work is to demonstrate the importance of considering individual employee reactions to macroeconomic changes. Anecdotal evidence (e.g., Ip & Kulish, 2001) as well as work from domains other than organizational research (e.g., Bacchetta & Van Wincoop, 2013) suggest that people behave differently, perhaps fundamentally differently, in times of economic prosperity than in times of economic downturns. Some of this work highlights that people respond to cues of economic downturns in ways that are likely to exacerbate these economic problems further. For example, in response to cues of economic downturns, people sometimes fear for the stability of the banking system, which prompts them to withdraw money from the bank. Doing so is in itself sufficient to destabilize the banking system and thus exacerbates the very issues that prompted
individuals’ responses. Yet most work on such interesting and consequential
individual reactions to macroeconomic changes focuses on actors outside
organizations, such as bank customers. Less is known about consequences that
macroeconomic changes have for key economic agents—employees of business
organizations. The complexity of studying organizational phenomena led to
methodological specialization and divisions in organizational sciences that largely
precluded examining influences of macroeconomic contexts on the psychology and
behavior of individual employees. Because employees working in organizations are
central and the most represented agents of economic dynamics, counterproductive
behaviors in response to cues of economic downturns among this population are
likely more economically consequential than the reactions exhibited by less central
actors, such as bank customers.

The current work documents what is likely one such counterproductive
response to cues of economic downturns among employees: Economic downturns
undermine workplace helping. As we noted in the introduction, workplace helping has
numerous benefits for organizations and economies. The finding that workplace
helping declines in times when it is needed the most thus suggests that
counterproductive responses to cues of economic downturns also occur among
employees of business organizations. Our focus on counterproductive responses to
economic downturns opens up new avenues for research on the interplay between
macroeconomic environments and the behavior of individual employees in
organizations. At the same time, one limitation of our work is that we do not examine
consequences of the decline in helping as a function of economic downturns for
further macroeconomic performance. Future studies are needed to investigate how the
lower levels of helping in response to economic downturns aggregate to further
aggravate the problematic economic conditions that initiated this individual reaction.

While reduced levels of helping in response to cues of economic downturns
likely further impede economic performance of broader economic units, one might
wonder whether the reduced helping presents a functional response for the individual
employee. In our studies, we focused on situations in which employees had nothing to
lose by helping their coworkers. However, in some cases helping does come at the
expense of task performance (Bergeron, 2007; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2011;
Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2015; Rapp, Bachrach, & Rapp, 2013; Rubin et al., 2013).
In such situations, employees may intentionally reduce helping in response to cues of
economic downturns so as to be able to improve their task performance. However,
across situations employee helping is related to better managerial ratings of employee
performance and larger rewards (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997). Reduced
helping is also in the longer run likely to harm individual employees by jeopardizing
the economic health of the organization they work for. Thus, the response we
document is likely to be counterproductive not just for the organization as a whole,
but also for individuals withholding help, except in situations in which the individuals
would be of more value for the firm if they helped less. Future research is needed to
investigate more systematically what consequences the effect we document has for
individual employees, and thus the extent to which the reduced helping in response to
cues of economic downturns constitutes a rational versus a counterproductive
response for the individual.

Another potential undesirable individual reaction to cues of economic
downturns is that employees might reduce their cooperativeness. Cooperation is at the
root of economic value creation—people achieve more by working with others than
they could on their own (Smith, [1776] 1937). Yet because cooperation involves
interdependence, it also requires one to make oneself vulnerable to the other party’s
potential exploitative behavior (Axelrod, 1984). Difficult economic periods might
make people risk averse (Smart & Vertinsky, 1977) and weary of the uncertain and
potentially threatening implications of cooperation. Relatedly, it is also possible that
people adopt a more prevention-focused mindset in response to cues that the economy
is performing poorly, which should also make them less willing to engage in
interactions that involve potential risk but are on average profitable. These processes
might lead to a decrease in cooperativeness at the time when it is needed the most.

Another counterproductive reaction to economic downturns among employees
might occur due to an effect of a generalized construal paralleling the one
documented in our studies, but pertaining to employees’ view of the extent of control
they have over outcomes. Specifically, because economic downturns highlight the
inhibiting and unpredictable nature of the environment, a generalized construal that
people in general have less control over outcomes might become more salient to
employees. At a general level, the inference that people are less in control over
outcomes is objectively more correct during economic downturns. However, it is
possible that this generalized construal is also misapplied to specific situations at
work in a manner similar to the process we found in our studies. Given the exact same
situation and objective chances of success, a reduced generalized sense of control
among employees might make them less likely to embark on business endeavors or
initiate projects. Prior work found that employees’ generalized sense that they have
control over outcomes is a necessary prerequisite for work-related personal initiative
(Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). It is thus possible that another economically
counterproductive reaction to economic downturns among employees is that their
sense of control reduces, undermining initiative and in that way further hampering economic prosperity.

The final noteworthy theoretical implication of our work is that it demonstrates the usefulness of considering people’s generalized construal of success for understanding important organizational phenomena. People’s tendency to construe success in a zero-sum manner has been recognized as an important explanation for inefficient and even harmful behavior in negotiation (Bazerman & Neale, 1983), but we found virtually no research in other domains of organizational behavior that examined how people construe success and how this construal affects their behavior at work. One conceptually related construct is employee bottom-line mentality, or a focus on financial performance at the exclusion of other priorities, which can also harm interpersonal dynamics at work (e.g., Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012). The construct of zero-sum construal of success complements this work because it suggests that even when employees are focused on financial outcomes, they might behave in an irrational and financially suboptimal way when they incorrectly understand success to be a fixed pie. We thus believe that the construct of a zero-sum construal of success holds much promise for contributing to extant explanations of employee behavior. Economic success is an important component of why people work and why they join organizations. It seems fundamental to understand how employees’ own construal of economic success direct their behavior, and doing so might lead to novel predictions with respect to core organizational behaviors. A zero-sum construal of success is likely to be relevant for organizational phenomena in which considerations of others’ success are important, such as processes related to social exchange, distributive justice, and inclusion of others in one’s work endeavors. For example, it is possible that people who construe success in a more zero-sum
manner are less likely to reach out to others and include them in their business efforts because they are averse to sharing success, even when including others has the potential to lead to better outcomes for the self. Future research is needed to explore the role of a zero-sum construal of success in such important employee behaviors.

**Implications for Managers**

Our findings point to ways in which managers can ward off threats to organizational functioning during economic downturns. Most notably, the mechanism we identify suggests that to combat the effect of economic downturns on helping, managers should attempt to interfere with the more zero-sum thinking that economic downturns bring about. One important managerial policy through which this could likely be accomplished is to develop a strong cooperative or collective culture and emphasize it when hard times hit. Prior research in negotiation suggests that people in more collectivist contexts construe success in a less zero-sum manner (Gelfand & Christakopoulou, 1999). Thus, emphasizing the importance of cooperative and communal relationships through managerial interactions with employees offers a promise of buffering against the problematic effect we document.

Managers might also restructure organizational situations during economic downturns in such a way that the positive interdependence (i.e., cooperative nature of relationships) among employees is rendered more salient in the context of those relationships in which helping behavior is particularly needed. Many organizations possess workflow and social network maps of their workforce. This information allows organizations to detect areas in which helping is needed the most, for example when a newcomer who is not fully familiarized with organizational routines is joining a department. To ensure that helping does not decline during economic downturns in such situations in which it is particularly relevant for organizational functioning,
organizations might create more formal interdependence, for example by adding a joint incentive component to the department. This approach should help employees maintain a view of their coworkers’ success as a personally desirable outcome, and in that way buffer against the perils of economic downturns for helping.

A more general managerial implication of our research is that managers need to anticipate individual employees’ sensitivity to cues of economic downturns, and therefore additional care is needed to ensure that such employee reactions do not transform into an erosive force within the organization. This general warning is particularly relevant in light of the evidence that in certain difficult situations, such as when layoffs are necessary, managers engage in less instead of more considerate treatment of employees (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). Managers must thus be careful not to succumb in their interactions with employees to the stress that economic downturns impose because such a managerial style is likely to further aggravate the problematic consequences of downturns for individual employee behavior toward coworkers.

**CONCLUSION**

Four studies found support for the theory that economic downturns undermine workplace helping by promoting a more zero-sum construal of success. Our work identifies a widespread and systemic reason for why employees fail to engage in a behavior that underlies the effective functioning of organizations and economies, with important implications for both theory and practice. More broadly, we show the importance of considering the macroeconomic context for the understanding of core individual employee behaviors.
REFERENCES


Eurofound; ERM report 2009: Restructuring in recession;  


WVS; Who we are; [http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCContents.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCContents.jsp); February 13, 2015.
TABLE 1
Study 1: Variable Details

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<th>Variable Details</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td>1. Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
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<td>2. Unemployment</td>
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<td>3. Male</td>
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<td>4. Age</td>
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<td>16.24</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>5. Income Level</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
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<td>6. Employed</td>
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<td>9. Subjective Social Class</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Religiousity</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) All correlations are significant at p < .05 with the exception of the correlations between variable pairs 3–4 and 3–8.
TABLE 2
Study 1: Zero Sum Construal of Success Regression Analysis Results<sup>a</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Model 1: Controls</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2: Unemployment</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( s.e. )</td>
<td>( p )</td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( s.e. )</td>
<td>( p )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Level</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.431</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.801</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Status</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Social Class</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiousity</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 59,694 \)
\( R^2 = 0.0077 \)
\( R^2 = 0.0144 \)

<sup>a</sup> Multilevel linear regression with cases nested within countries. \( R^2 \) was calculated following the Snijders and Bosker (1999) formula.
### TABLE 3
Study 2 and 3: Variable Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Study 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>s.d.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Helping Behavior</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.25 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.77 -.39 (.80)</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.74 -.24 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Negative Mood</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.65 -.30 .30 (.94)</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.81 -.03 .13 (.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Mood</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.95 -.13 .02 (.94)</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.70 .14 -.06 -.34 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Macroeconomic Situation Manipulation</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.50 -.19 .19 .09 -.12</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.50 -.14 .21 -.04 .04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlations above |.13| are significant at \( p < .05 \). Cronbach’s alphas are displayed on the diagonal. *Coded 1 for economic downturn and 0 for economic upturn.*

### TABLE 4
Studies 2 and 3: Helping Behavior Regression Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Study 2: Helping Behavior</th>
<th>Study 3: Helping Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>( b = 6.55 ) 1.19 .000</td>
<td>( b = 0.83 ) 0.14 .000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomic Situation Manipulation ( b )</td>
<td>-0.60 0.36 .095</td>
<td>-0.05 0.03 .141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Mood</td>
<td>-0.70 0.27 .011</td>
<td>0.01 0.02 .553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Mood</td>
<td>0.06 0.18 .756</td>
<td>0.05 0.03 .039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
<td>-1.22 0.27 .000</td>
<td>-0.07 0.02 .002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 231 \) \( R^2 = .290 \) \( N = 212 \) \( R^2 = .085 \)

*Study 2 helping behavior is binary so logistic regression results are reported. Study 2 (pseudo) \( R^2 \) is computed using the Cragg-Uhler / Nagelkerke formula. Study 3 helping behavior is continuous so OLS regression results are reported. *Coded 1 for economic downturn and 0 for economic upturn.*
### TABLE 5
Studies 2–4: Mediation Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
<th>Study 3</th>
<th>Study 4: Binary Measure of Helping</th>
<th>Study 4: Continuous Measure of Helping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LLCI</td>
<td>ULCI</td>
<td>LLCI</td>
<td>ULCI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Mood</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Mood</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a LLCI (ULCI) denotes lower (upper) limit of the 95% confidence interval of the specific indirect effect of economic downturns on helping through the relevant mediator (listed in the column on the left).

### TABLE 6
Study 4: Variable Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Helping Behavior (Binary)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Helping Behavior (Continuous)</td>
<td>152.37</td>
<td>233.75</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Economic Downturn Perception</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Negative Mood</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Positive Mood</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Male</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Age</td>
<td>34.67</td>
<td>9.67</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Education (Years)</td>
<td>17.02</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Subjective Social Status</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Correlations above |.19| are significant at p < .05. Cronbach’s alphas are displayed on the diagonal.
TABLE 7
Study 4: Mediators Regression Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Zero-Sum Construal of Success</th>
<th>Negative Mood</th>
<th>Positive Mood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.68 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.69 (0.64)</td>
<td>2.90 (0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.18 (0.16)</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.13)</td>
<td>-0.23 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (Years)</td>
<td>-0.07 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Social Class</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Downturn Perception</td>
<td>0.18 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 101
R² = .149

a OLS regression with robust standard errors (Froot, 1989).
### TABLE 8

**Study 4: Helping Regression Analysis Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.986</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Mood</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>.369</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Mood</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>.850</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>.413</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.862</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (Years)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.634</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Social Status</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.663</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Downturn Perception</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero-Sum Construal of Success</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N$ = 101

$R^2$ = .122

---

*Binary responses were analyzed using logistic regression, continuous (count) responses using negative binomial regression. $R^2$ is computed using the Cragg-Uhler / Nagelkerke formula. All analyses used robust standard errors (Froot, 1989).*
FIGURE 1: MEDIATION MODEL TESTED IN STUDIES 2–4

Cues of Economic Downturns \(\rightarrow\) Zero-Sum Mindset \(\rightarrow\) Helping Behavior at Work

Zero-Sum Mindset \(\rightarrow\) Negative Affect \(\rightarrow\) Positive Affect
APPENDIX: ARTICLES DESCRIBING THE U.S. ECONOMY AS BEING IN A DOWNTURN (LEFT) VERSUS UPTURN (RIGHT)

Forbes

Economic Forecast 2015-2017

Five months ago Michael (now earned his college degree. Michael was doing well at age 23. He was on the brink of his new adult life. Today, however, Michael is standing in the street, unemployment line downtown. “I didn’t think this would happen to me,” he mutters while shucking his head. “I have a college degree and I can’t even get a job interview, let alone a job. I didn’t know where the money is going to come from.”

This depressing story is not unique. Although there has been a lot of talk about recovery from the seven-year-long recessionsary period, many economists now believe that hard times are yet to come. Unemployment lines are still overflowing. “Working in America, is in decline,” notes Mark Henderson, the head of the U.S. Economic Commission. The share of prime-age men and women who are not working has more than tripled since the late 1980s, to 15 percent. The United States, which had one of the highest employment rates among developed nations as recently as 1990, has fallen toward the bottom of the list.

What reasons are there for such gloomy economic reality? Perhaps the most important one is the fact that America has lost the ability to compete in the global economy. America’s competitiveness is primarily threatened by high labor costs, weak education system and creative corporate taxes. American workers’ wages are drastically higher than those in emerging economies such as China and Brazil. At the same time, those countries are making the US in terms of the quality of education, so American workers are no longer able to generate greater business value, resulting in American economic recession in such once-profitable sectors as manufacturing, auto industry, and real estate. The problem is compounded by high and continued corporate taxes that push companies and, consequently, jobs, abroad. In fact, the US has the single highest corporate tax rate among all industrialized nations (OECD countries).

Many economists agree that the current downturn trend is likely to continue. Mark Henderson notes that job creation had spiked around 2000, the U.S. stock market was heavily outperformed by most emerging economies and most new jobs being created are in local government and low-paying positions, in no way helping American global competitiveness. In fact, there has been a lot of talk about the recession being on its way. The Gene Fuller Forecasting Center, based in Mount Kisco, New York report that they see a staggering 75% chance of another difficult recession beginning in 2015. “Clearly the direction of most of the recent global economic news suggests movement toward a 2015 downturn,” chairman Gene Fuller told clients in an Oct. 31 2014 edition of a monthly forecasting report.

Seeing as the Gene Fuller Forecasting Center correctly predicted that the recession was imminent in October 2007 (it began two months later), their optimistic predictions for 2015 bear weight and sound very worrying.

Forbes

Economic Forecast 2015-2017

Five months ago Michael (now earned his college degree. Michael was doing well at age 23. He was on the brink of his new adult life. Today, however, Michael is standing in the street, unemployment line downtown. “I didn’t think this would happen to me,” he mutters while shucking his head. “I have a college degree and I can’t even get a job interview, let alone a job. I didn’t know where the money is going to come from.”

This reassuring story is not unique. Economists and business people agree that the seven-year-long recessionary period has ended and that the US economy is healthier than it has been in a long time. Unemployment lines are still overflowing. “American people are working again,” notes Mark Henderson, the head of the U.S. Economic Commission. The share of prime-age men and women who are not working has more than tripled since 2009. The United States, which had one of the highest employment rates among developed nations as recently as 1990, managed to regain that status; 2014 was best for job growth since 1999.

What reasons are there for such bright economic reality? Perhaps the most important one is the fact that America has regained the ability to compete in the global economy. America’s competitiveness is primarily boosted by high-quality labor, strong education system and efficient corporate taxes. American workers’ wages are dramatically higher than those in emerging economies such as China and Brazil. American workers are drastically more skilled and able to generate greater business value, resulting in American economic domination in such highly profitable sectors as high-tech, healthcare, and financial services. In addition, while the media is quick to point out minor imprecisions in the US tax code, the US still has one of the lowest and most efficient corporate taxes that attract companies and, consequently, generate jobs. In fact, the US has the highest number of deductions available to corporations among all industrialized nations (OECD countries).

Many economists agree that the current promising economic perspective is likely to last. Mark Henderson notes that job creation recently rapidly increased, the U.S. stock market is heavily outperforming most emerging economies and most new jobs being created are in highly profitable industries, further helping American global competitiveness. In fact, there has been a lot of talk about an even stronger economic growth being on its way. The Gene Fuller Forecasting Center, based in Mount Kisco, New York report that they see a astounding 75% chance of economic expansions of 5% or above in 2015. “Clearly the direction of most of the recent global economic news suggests movement toward a 2015 expansion,” chairman Gene Fuller told clients in an Oct. 31 2014 edition of a monthly forecasting report. Seeing as the Gene Fuller Forecasting Center correctly predicted that the recession was imminent in October 2007 (it began two months later), their optimistic predictions for 2015 bear weight and sound very encouraging.
**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES**

**Nina Sirola** is a postdoctoral fellow at INSEAD. She studies how the economy-level context of organizations (e.g., the extent to which the economy is prosperous, or the extent to which the economy is marked by corruption) affects the psychology and behavior of individual organizational actors.

**Marko Pitesa** is an associate professor at Singapore Management University. He received his PhD from Grenoble Ecole de Management. He studies organizational dynamics relevant to poverty, discrimination, and social harm.