Followers' daily reactions to social conflicts with supervisors: The moderating role of core self-evaluations and procedural justice perceptions☆

Judith Volmer

Industrial and Organizational Psychology Group, Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg, An der Weberei 5, Bamberg D 96047, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Building on affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), the present research examined the short-term within-person effects of social conflicts with supervisors at work (SCSs) on followers' state negative affect (NA) at home. Moreover, it was examined whether personal (i.e., core self-evaluations, CSEs) and environmental (i.e., procedural justice perceptions, PJPs) factors would moderate the SCSs–NA relationship. Hypotheses were tested with a diary study incorporating data from 98 civil service agents over five consecutive working days. Hierarchical linear modeling revealed that on the daily level, SCSs were related with employees' NA before bedtime. Furthermore, results provide support for the moderating role of CSEs and PJPs in the SCSs–NA relationship. These findings show that the detrimental effects of SCSs are not restricted to the work context but spillover to employees' private lives and help us to understand when SCSs are particularly detrimental for employees.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

People strive toward a positive evaluation by others in order to maintain a positive self-view (Epstein, 1980). At work, employees encounter many social interactions with different people, such as clients, colleagues, and supervisors. Particularly, interactions with supervisors are central sources for employees' self- and other-evaluations, and can either boost or diminish employees' self-view. Although most social interactions at work are positive, there are also negative ones. Especially social conflicts have been found to be the most distressing events with the strongest effect on people's mood (Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011). Moreover, and in contrast to other stressors, people show no habituation effect toward social conflicts (Bolger, De Longis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Existing conflict research has documented widespread negative consequences of social conflicts at work on employee performance and well-being, including lowered job commitment, decreased job satisfaction, and impaired health (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; Nixon et al., 2011).

However, although researchers have acknowledged the threat of social conflicts for organizational functioning and employee well-being and their affective experiences, there are some important limitations characterizing most conflict research that need further attention. First, most studies have assessed conflict with cross-sectional designs, conceptualizing conflict as a chronic work stressor rather than adopting a short-term perspective by viewing people's working experiences as a sequence of several episodes. Yet, it is

---

reasonable to assume that conflicts fluctuate from day to day and that they can have *short-lived effects* (Bakker & Daniels, 2013). Short-lived effects are important to consider because these daily changes might aggregate over time and transfer into more chronic impairments of well-being, such as anxiety and depression (Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008) as well as depletion of the physiological system (McEwen, 1998). Second, only scant conflict research has explicitly focused on conflicts with *supervisors* (e.g., Ismail, Richard, & Taylor, 2012; Liu, Spector, Liu, & Shi, 2011). This is surprising as supervisors play a central role in organizations. For instance, supervisors have more power compared to other members of the organization, they are authorized to delegate tasks and they decide about employees' future career development (Yukl, 2008). Thus, the effects of social conflicts with supervisors (SCSs) are likely to be crucial for employees' affective experiences. Third, more research on moderators is needed in order to determine which personal and/or environmental factors can buffer the assumed detrimental effects of SCSs on employees' affective experiences. Fourth, the study of effects of social conflicts at work on the non-work domain, so-called *spillover effects*, has been largely neglected in conflict research so far. Spillover describes "effects of work and family on one another that generate similarities between the two domains" (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000, p. 180). This study aims at addressing the limitations of previous research with a diary study over five consecutive working days with civil service agents.

Research aims

The present study contributes to the literature on workplace conflicts in several ways. First, the study examined the effects of supervisor conflicts on negative affective experiences across a day, therefore being able to assess real-time, dynamic relationships and within-person fluctuations in workplace conflicts and affective experiences which have been very rare until now (Ilies, Johnson, Judge, & Keeney, 2011; Meier, Gross, Spector, & Semmer, 2013). Second, the study extends previous research by aligning conflict research with spillover research. Only very few studies have investigated spillover effects of conflicts to the non-work domain (Dudenhöffer & Dormann, 2013; Volmer, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Niessen, 2012). Third, the study explicitly investigated conflicts with supervisors. Previous conflict research has been dominated by studies on customer and co-worker conflict (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). However, supervisors are very important for how subordinates feel as stated for example by George (1996): "Leaders who feel excited, enthusiastic, and energetic themselves are likely to similarly energize their followers, as are leaders who feel distressed and hostile likely to negatively activate their followers" (p. 84). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate SCSs as an antecedent of employees' affective experiences. Finally, there is still only scant research on moderators in conflict research (e.g., Dijkstra, Van Dierendonck, Evers, & De Dreu, 2005), particularly when considering studies that examined short-term effects of workplace conflicts (see Ilies et al., 2011; Meier, Semmer, & Gross, 2014; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004 for exceptions). By identifying such moderators, the present study helps to identify starting points for interventions.

Affective events theory (AET) as theoretical framework

Affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) offers a useful framework for the structure of the proposed relationships in this study. In contrast to more traditional approaches, AET suggests that affective states fluctuate over time due to discrete events. Moreover, AET proposes that individual affect levels are influenced by dispositions and a variety of environmental factors. On a general level, affect refers to a broad range of emotions, mood, and dispositions (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). In organizational research, the positive and negative affectivity model by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) with two orthogonal dimensions of positive and negative affectivity has received most attention. Positive affect (PA) describes one's degree of pleasant interaction with the environment (e.g., being joyful, excited, enthusiastic) whereas negative affect (NA) describes one's personal level of experienced distress (e.g., being distressed, angry, anxious) (Watson et al., 1988). State affect includes mood and emotions whereas trait affect is rather considered to function as a stable personality characteristic. In the present study, short-term fluctuations of NA (i. e, *state* NA) as a consequence of daily SCSs were analyzed in more detail. It is important to examine short-term affective reactions (here: state NA) because they can be considered as important mediators between stressful work events and long-term stress reactions such as psychological well-being, somatic complaints, and social functioning (Lazarus, 1990). Accordingly, state NA in turn has been found to be associated with higher levels of health complaints and physical symptoms (Watson et al., 1988), impaired job performance (Shockley, Ispas, Rossi, & Levine, 2012), negative job attitudes (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003), and increased work–family interface (Ilies et al., 2007). The present study focused particularly on NA as a consequence of daily SCSs because negative events have been found to be mainly related to NA (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000).

Besides the direct effect of SCSs on employees' affective experiences (i.e., state NA), the present study aimed at contributing to determining factors that moderate the SCSs–NA association. Following AET theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) which suggests that dispositions and environmental factors influence how people feel and react to affective events, the present study examined the moderating role of core self-evaluations (CSEs) (as a personal factor) and employees' procedural justice perceptions (PJPs) (as an environmental factor). CSEs "pertain to individual's global evaluation of themselves, other people, and the world" (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997, p. 179). It has been stated that "individuals with positive core self-evaluations appraise themselves in a consistently positive manner across situations; such individuals consider themselves capable, worthy, and in control of their lives" (Judge, Van Vianen, & De Pater, 2004, p. 326–327). PJPs refer to employees' evaluation of the fairness of procedures an organization uses in order to determine outcome distributions or allocations (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). By studying core self-evaluations and procedural justice perceptions, it was possible to examine both personal and environmental factors that were considered to moderate the SCSs–NA association. In the following, I will first discuss the direct relationship between SCSs and NA, followed by the moderator hypotheses. The conceptual model of the present study is depicted in Fig. 1.