



Linking perceived organizational support with employee work outcomes in a Chinese context: Organizational identification as a mediator



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ABSTRACT

Perceived organizational support (POS) is viewed as an important explanatory framework for understanding the relationship between employees and the workplace, and is regarded by some researchers as central in understanding job-related attitudes and behaviors of employees. However, less research has taken into account the role of organizational identification, which reflects how individuals define the self with respect to their organization, as a potential influence on such relationships. Drawing on a cross-organizational sample of 238 subordinate-supervisor dyads from the People's Republic of China, we examined whether organizational identification mediates the effect of perceived organizational support (POS) on work outcomes including turnover intentions, work performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Results from the current study showed that organizational identification fully mediates the relation of POS to OCB-directed to individuals, and partially mediates relations between POS and other work outcomes (turnover intention, work performance, OCB-directed to organization). Implications for management theory and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

The employment relationship between employees and their organizations has been described as an exchange relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Although numerous potential exchange relationships exist within organizations, the relationship between individuals and organizations is one seemingly preeminent relationship that all employees have at work (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1986) proposed perceived organizational support (POS) as a key influence on employee evaluations of the organization's role in the exchange relationship. POS refers to employees' "global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 501). There is considerable empirical support for the notion that POS is related to outcomes favorable to employees (e.g., job satisfaction) and their organization (e.g., reduced turnover, performance, lessened withdrawal behavior) (see Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

However, it has been argued that some aspects of employee–employer relationship are better understood on the

basis of self-definition and self-categorization, not simply in terms of reciprocity and exchange (e.g., Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Some researchers (e.g., Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes, 2008) have also noted that less research on the employee–employer relationship has taken into account the role of organizational identification, another vital component of organizational life (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Organizational identification is defined as "... perceived oneness between self and organization" (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), and is distinct from organizational commitment (Gautam, Van Dick, & Wagner, 2004; Riketta, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006) in that it involves a cognitive connection with the organization and describes the relationship between the individual and the organization in terms of the one's self-concept (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, 1998).

In fact, organizational identification might play an important role in the social exchange process. For instance, the social identity mediation hypothesis put forward by Tyler and Blader (2003) contends that organizational treatment (e.g., procedural justice) has a significant influence on employee identity judgments, and, in turn, shapes employee attitudes, values, and cooperative behaviors. These arguments are supported by Blader and Tyler (2009) who found that identification mediated the relationship between procedural justice and extra-role behavior. Although the notion of POS is distinct from that of procedural justice, the latter has been treated

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as an important antecedent of POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For these reasons, we propose that social identity processes might mediate the social exchange relationship between POS and employee outcomes.

Despite these theoretical propositions, little empirical research has documented how and whether social identity processes mediate the relationship between POS and outcomes. Because POS can contribute to enhancing feelings of self-worth and esteem, an analysis from social identity approach may be useful in supplementing the social exchange approach to better understand its impact on employee outcomes (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). Therefore, the current study was designed to investigate how the social identity process mediates relationships between POS and outcomes. Specially, we explored the mediating role of a key feature of social identity theory, organizational identification, in attempting to elucidate relations between POS and employment outcomes.

This study contributes to the applied psychology literature in at least four ways. First, we provided a new insight into explaining the POS-work outcome relations by exploring the mediating role of organizational identification from the social identity approach. To our knowledge, little research documented the role of organizational identification as an influence on the relationship between POS and its demonstrated outcomes. Second, our study addresses calls from scholars (e.g., Sluss et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, & Tavares, 2007) across social exchange, identity, and 'relationships at work' literatures. Although social exchange and identity greatly influence one's organizational experience, these two perspectives on the psychological relationship between individuals and organization has long been developed largely in isolation of one another (e.g., Sluss et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg et al., 2007). Third, unlike most identification-related research, our study was conducted in cross-organizational contexts, instead of a small group settings, and utilized data collected from multiple sources (i.e. supervisors and subordinates) instead of the self-report data that characterize most published studies in the area (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Tyler & Blader, 2002). Finally, because research on POS has been limited to samples in individualistic, Western countries, it is not clear whether findings are applicable to non-Western samples where the world's population is more heavily concentrated (Yoon & Lim, 1999). Numerous authors have noted that little is known about whether predictions of organizational theories established in the United States hold up in large collectivist countries such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Brockner et al., 2001; Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004; Spreitzer, Perttula, & Xin, 2005). Accordingly, we conducted the current study in the People's Republic of China to ascertain the applicability of POS theory to the Eastern collectivistic cultures.

Theoretical development and hypotheses

POS and the influences on employee work-related outcomes

The relationship between POS and outcomes has been explained primarily in terms of social exchange (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996). Following social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employees who experience more POS should demonstrate more organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and better work performance because such behaviors are beneficial to organizations. Some scholars (e.g., Eisenberg, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993) argue that employees who feel that they have been well supported by their organizations tend to reciprocate by performing better and engaging more readily in citizenship behavior than those reporting lower levels of POS. A growing number of studies have demonstrated that POS is positively associated with OCB. In a meta-analysis representing

more than 70 studies, for instance, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found POS had significant, moderate effect sizes in relation to both in-role and extra-role behavior. Shore and Wayne (1993) found that POS was significantly related to job performance ratings and OCB. Moorman, Blakely, and Niehoff (1998) found that POS may influence OCB, and can mediate the relationship between procedural justice and OCB. Kaufman, Stamper, and Tesluk (2001) also found that POS can explain significant variance in OCBs directed toward organizations, and individuals, respectively. Based on these findings, several hypotheses can be generated:

Hypothesis 1

POS will be positively related to two types of OCBs (OCBO and OCBI).

Theoretically, employees who experience a high level of POS should work harder to improve their work performance because it is beneficial to organizations. However, the evidence is mixed to date. Whereas some researchers have observed a positive association between POS and work performance (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1990; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Riggles, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009), others have found leader-member exchange, but not POS, predicts work performance (e.g., Settoon et al., 1996; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). However, as the matter stands, most researchers tend to believe that POS is positively correlated with employee work performance. For instance, Muse and Stamper (2007) evidenced that POS has an influence on work performance through the mediating role of job satisfaction. Thus, we expected that, among employees who experience high POS, better work performance should result in exchange for organizational support, in part, because POS elicits a sense of indebtedness that can be reduced by reciprocation (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Thus, a second hypothesis follows.

Hypothesis 2

POS will be positively associated with work performance.

As discussed above, in contrast to employees with low POS, employees who experience high levels of POS tend to have more feelings of obligation based on the norm of reciprocity. This, in turn, may contribute to such employees having more favorable attitudes and behaviors towards their workplace. One way for an individual to repay the organization is continued participation. March and Simon (1958) argued that an employee's decision to continue to participate in the organization is based on the balance between the inducements offered by the organization and the contributions expected of the employee. When an employee perceives more inducements from the organization (e.g., high POS), the desire to leave the organization may be reduced. Research has consistently shown a negative relationship between POS and both turnover intentions and actual turnover (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Riggles et al., 2009; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). On this basis a third hypothesis can be generated.

Hypothesis 3

POS should be negatively associated with turnover intention.

Organizational identification as a mediator between POS and work outcomes

Most empirical studies on the relationship between POS and outcomes are based on the social exchange perspective (e.g., Muse & Stamper, 2007; Settoon et al., 1996), yet some scholars also argued that other mechanisms should be considered when

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