

# Giving and receiving social support at work: The roles of personality and reciprocity<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Social support is an important variable in occupational stress research and theory, yet little is known about the factors that influence the amount of social support one gives, and receives at work. We examined personality (extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness) and reciprocity as potential antecedents to giving and receiving support from co-workers. Data collected from 108 participants employed in a number of organizations indicated that giving social support was positively associated with the receipt of social support. Both extraversion and agreeableness predicted giving and receiving non-job support and positive work-related support. The relationship between personality and social support received was, in many cases, mediated by social support given.

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## 1. Introduction

Social support has long been involved in theoretical models and empirical research on occupational stress (e.g., Beehr, 1995; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Karasek, Triantis, & Chaudhry, 1982; Marshall & Cooper, 1979). It seems to be important at least for its potential main effects on strains (individuals' aversive reactions to stressors in the work environment), even though research on the popular hypothesis about its moderating effects has not provided very strong support (see summaries by Beehr, 1995; Viswesvaran et al., 1999).

Beehr, King, and King (1990) identified three forms of emotional social support, each of which reflects the content of conversations between people at work: discussing non-work-related topics, discussing negative aspects of their work, and discussing positive aspects of their work. Such episodes are considered emotional support (rather than instrumental support) because they focus on the affective tone of the conversation more than on helping solve specific problems. Subsequent research confirmed the usefulness of these support measures in stress research (e.g., Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; Stephens & Long, 2000; Zellars & Perrewe, 2001).

Although social support is an important variable in occupational stress research and theory (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999), little is known about the factors that influence the amount of social support one gives to and receives from others at work. We examine the roles of personality and reciprocity in both the giving and receiving of social support from co-workers.

## 2. Personality: Giving and receiving social support

In non-work studies, personality is generally related to the receipt of social support. In particular, extraversion (e.g., Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Finch & Graziano, 2001; Parkes, 1986; Prenda & Lachman, 2001; Study 1; Stokes, 1985; Von Dras & Siegler, 1997), agreeableness (e.g., Finch & Graziano, 2001; Prenda & Lachman, 2001; Study 1), and sometimes neuroticism (e.g., Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Prenda & Lachman, 2001; Study 1; but not Parkes, 1986 nor Stokes, 1985) have been found related to the receipt of social support in non-work contexts. Overall, it appears that extraversion and agreeableness are related positively to social support outside the workplace, but that neuroticism has been either negatively related or unrelated to social support. In the present study, we examined a relatively new, three-dimensional, communication-based type of social support. One of the types is communication about negative aspects of the workplace; we expected neuroticism to be related to this index of social support positively and more consistently than past studies found it related to more global social support measures.

One other study has looked at personality in conjunction with the type of social support measure used in the current study, and its results regarding neuroticism were encouraging. Zellars and Perrewe (2001) examined whether the personality of social support recipients influenced the amount and form of

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