

The More You Care, the Worthier I Feel, the Better I Behave: How and When Supervisor Support Influences (Un)Ethical Employee Behavior

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Abstract This article investigates the effects of perceived supervisor support on ethical (organizational citizenship behaviors) and unethical employee behavior (counterproductive workplace behavior) using a multi-method approach (one experiment and one field survey with multiple waves and supervisor ratings of employees). Specifically, we test the mediating mechanism (i.e., supervisor-based self-esteem) and a boundary condition (i.e., employee task satisfaction) that moderate the relationship between support and (un)ethical employee behaviors. We find that supervisor-based self-esteem fully mediates the relationship between supervisor support and (un)ethical employee behavior and that employee task satisfaction intensifies the relationship between supervisor support and supervisor-based self-esteem.

Keywords Perceived supervisor support · Ethical and unethical employee behavior · Supervisor-based self-esteem · Task satisfaction · Organizational citizenship behavior · Counterproductive workplace behavior

Introduction

Supervisors play a critical role in every organization by influencing subordinates' behavior and thus organizational effectiveness (Eisenberger et al. 2002). Supervisors can enhance employee positive behavior by signaling that employees will get support to carry out their tasks and deal with stressful situations (George et al. 1993; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003). The literature on perceived supervisor support (PSS; Kottke and Sharafinski 1988) suggests that employees' beliefs that supervisors care about their well-being elicit felt obligations so that subordinates then reciprocate with actions exhibiting care for the organization's welfare (Foa and Foa 1980). Such caring may involve enhanced task performance, as well as important altruistic behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements. For example, several studies have shown that supervisor support promotes positive work outcomes such as reduced turnover (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Maertz et al. 2007), lower employee cynicism (Cole et al. 2006), higher job satisfaction (Griffin et al. 2001), and engagement in extra-role behaviors (Chen and Chiu 2008; Shanock and Eisenberger 2006). Recently, a small but growing number of studies have started to investigate the effects of first-line supervisor actions for ethical employee conduct (Jacobs et al. 2014; Lloyd et al. 2015). By adopting a behavioral ethics perspective, we contribute to this stream of research and investigate "how" and "when" supervisor support influences employees' ethical behavior.

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We start with the assumption that employees' ethical behaviors, such as protecting the organization from potential problems (OCBs, organizational citizenship behaviors) or refraining from working badly on purpose (CWBs, counterproductive workplace behaviors), are crucial for the proper functioning of organizations and, importantly, they are heavily influenced by supervisors' actions (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). Recently, research on employee ethics has expanded the construal of (un)ethical employee behavior to include actions that help or harm the organization's functioning, such as OCBs and CWBs (Jacobs et al. 2014). For example, Cohen et al. (2014) have provided empirical evidence that OCBs and CWBs are reflective of ethical and unethical work behaviors by surveying a sample of 443 US employees. On average, the CWB acts were judged as more immoral, while OCB acts were perceived as more moral.

The rationale is that organizational citizenship behaviors are ethical in the sense that they entail voluntary pro-organizational actions that go above and beyond the minimum ethical standards expected in organizations (Treviño et al. 2006). The same argument also applies to counterproductive behaviors, as they involve harmful actions toward the organization, or its stakeholders, that are far below the minimum ethical norms expected in the workplace (Kaptein 2008; Jacobs et al. 2014). In this regard, research on supervisor-subordinate guanxi (e.g., Han and Altman 2008; Cheung et al. 2008) highlighted the important role of supervisor care and concern in creating high-quality relationships, eventually affecting subordinate positive attitudes and ethical responses. In a similar way, supervisor demonstration of caring through actively listening to employees has been shown to increase employee pro-organizational behavior (Lloyd et al. 2015). More recently, Jacobs et al. (2014) have found that supervisor support increases pro-organizational proactive behaviors while decreasing counterproductive behaviors.

Although these studies investigating PSS have offered noteworthy advancements in understanding the role of supervisors for employee ethical conduct, the mediating mechanisms (how) and boundary conditions (when) regulating the effects of perceived supervisor support on ethical employee behavior remain an important, yet often unexplored, area of inquiry. For example, assuming a direct linkage between PSS and (un)ethical employee behavior (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2014) or focusing on instrumental motives such as reciprocity (e.g., Malatesta 1995) may underestimate or overlook other types of explanations for ethical conduct such as emotional mechanisms that unfold through time. Similarly, focusing on interpersonal reactions to support, such as commitment toward, and liking of, the supervisor (Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003), may overlook important "self-motives" that drive ethical

behavior, such as self-enhancement or self-assessment needs.

As such, investigating how self-esteem mechanisms translate supervisor support into followers' ethical behavior is important because people may act ethically or unethically not only as a response to economic calculations or affection for others (e.g., Bagozzi et al. 2013). That is, people may behave ethically also when moved by self-evaluations and related self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame or pride) that are consistent with the maintenance of their ideal self (e.g., Leary 2007), or as Tracy and Robins propose: "when they become aware that they have lived up to, or failed to live up to, some actual or ideal self-representation" (2004, p. 105).

In this regard, there is ample evidence that employees' affective experiences at work can lead to constructive work behavior (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996; Spector and Fox 2002; Isen and Baron 1991; George and Brief 1992; Parker et al. 2008), as well as counterproductive work behavior (Matta et al. 2014).

In studying the effects of PSS on (un)ethical employee behavior, we take an approach that is both similar and complementary to previous research based on affective events theory (AET, Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). It is similar to the AET framework in that it focuses on the emotional drivers of employee behavior over cognitive ones (i.e., instrumental motives). It complements this framework by positing a role for intrapersonal emotional mechanisms based on self-consistency rather than interpersonal emotional reactions (e.g., liking or affective commitment toward the supervisor). In fact, as Leary (2007) suggests, self-esteem is a "[...] bridge between the social events that occurred outside of the individual (including both interpersonal interactions and society more broadly) and the individual's own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (p. 318)."

Accordingly, we expect that subordinates may respond to supervisor support with ethical behaviors not only because of felt obligations but also because they care about what their supervisor thinks of them. This process involves intrapersonal consequences of receiving support. Indeed, through supervisor support, employees may gain not just merely a means to perform better but also an enhanced feeling of self-worth (Korman 1970; Brockner 1988). Given that supervisors can shape followers' self-perceptions (Lord et al. 1999), the support provided by supervisors should, consciously or unconsciously, influence subordinates' self-evaluations, ultimately enhancing their self-esteem (i.e., supervisor-based self-esteem; Landry and Vandenberghe 2009). According to self-consistency theory (Korman 1970), employees will seek to maintain their positive self-image by engaging in ethical behaviors that make them feel valuable in the supervisor's eyes.

Surprisingly, although it might be crucial in explaining subordinates' reactions to support, relational self-esteem with supervisors has apparently never been investigated as an explanatory construct mediating the influence of PSS on employees' (un)ethical behaviors.

We address this oversight by testing a model in which supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE) of employees mediates the effects of supervisor support on employee (un)ethical behavior. In line with previous research on supervisor support and employee ethical conduct (Jacobs et al. 2014; Lloyd et al. 2015), we analyze two types of employee (un)ethical behavior: OCBs, or organizational citizenship behaviors, which are behaviors that attempt to benefit the organization but are not formally required or rewarded, and CWBs, or counterproductive workplace behaviors, which are deviant behaviors engaged in with the purpose of harming the organization.

Previous research on supervisor support may also have overlooked situations in which the simple provision of support may not be enough to induce employee positive behavior (for a review, see Zeni et al. 2013). This is the case with employees unsatisfied with their task. We argue that for such disengaged employees, supervisor support will not elicit salient or sufficient emotional reactions and is thus unlikely to increase supervisor-based self-esteem. On the other hand, employees satisfied with their task will be more appreciative of supervisor support and will respond with higher SBSE, eventually increasing behaviors that help the organization and reducing those that harm it.

Summarizing, our research seeks to build on existing work and introduce novel explanations by investigating: (1) the mediating intrapersonal mechanism through which supervisor support influences (un)ethical employee behavior and (2) the conditions under which support effectively influences employee behavior. To explore these processes, we conducted two studies. Study 1 was an experiment with 200 subjects wherein perceived supervisor support was manipulated and the mediating mechanism of self-esteem was tested. Study 2 was a field study that surveyed 254 nurses and their supervisors over a 6-month period including three waves of data. We used confirmatory factor analysis and moderated mediation analysis to test our hypotheses on the relationships among supervisor support, task satisfaction, and (un)ethical employee conduct as rated by supervisors (i.e., OCBs and CWBs) (Fig. 1).

Self-Esteem and Self-Consistency Theory

Many studies have demonstrated that employee motivation and behavior depend on feelings of self-worth (Korman 1970, 1976; Pierce and Gardner 2004). According to Korman (1970), self-worth arises from daily experiences,

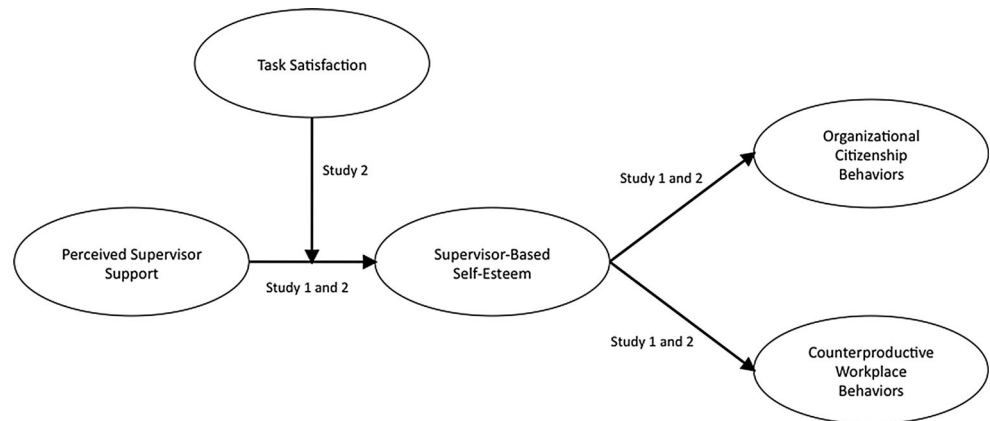
which include social interactions with significant others at work. Within organizations, and because of their hierarchical structure, the most important significant others for employees are usually supervisors. To the extent that supervisors consider employees worthy and important and communicate those perceptions through supportive behaviors (i.e., supervisor support), employees should internalize those evaluations into their self-concept. These evaluations therefore become an integrated part of the employees' selves (Pierce and Gardner 2004).

According to self-consistency theory (Korman 1970), once employees internalize this positive image, they "will engage in and find satisfying those behavioral roles which maximize their sense of cognitive balance or consistency" (Korman 1970; p. 32). Individuals naturally strive for cognitive consistency (Festinger 1957); therefore, they should be willing to maintain their own positive image (as created by supervisor support) by engaging in those behaviors that help maintain this image (i.e., ethical behaviors). In the next section, we discuss in more detail how a self-consistency approach helps explain the relationship between supervisor support and (un)ethical employee behavior.

Supervisor Support, Relational Self-Esteem, and (Un)Ethical Employee Behavior

Studies of supervisor support have defined PSS as employees' general perception that their supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Kottke and Sharafinski 1988; Maertz et al. 2007; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003). Research on PSS has generally suggested a direct effect of supervisor support on employee responsible behavior (Shanock and Eisenberger 2006). For example, the literature on organizational and social support has shown positive relationships between supportive supervision and increased employee extra-effort (Bhantumnavin 2003; Malatesta 1995; Olson and Borman 1989). These results have been corroborated by Shanock and Eisenberger (2006) who investigated the relationship between perceived supervisor support and extra-role performance among employees working for a chain of stores selling household goods. More recent investigations in the ethical domain also demonstrated both a direct effect of supervisor actions on employee (un)ethical behavior (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2014), or in other cases, a mediational mechanism based on experienced positive affect, affection, and reciprocity toward the supervisor (Lloyd et al. 2015; Malatesta 1995; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003). Through supervisor support, however, employees gain not just a means to perform better, eventually developing feelings of reciprocity toward the supervisor (i.e.,

Fig. 1 Theoretical model.
 *Study 1: scenario experiment.
 **Study 2: field study in a hospital



interpersonal orientation). Employees who receive support may also experience enhanced feelings of relational self-esteem (i.e., intrapersonal orientation).

In fact, a consistent interpretation of the effect of PSS from the standpoint of affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996) and proximity or salience of behavior (e.g., field theory; Lewin 1943) would suggest that supervisor support should initially elicit emotional reactions with the same level of specificity as the source of support. Employees should consider the support received as an informational cue when they engage in individual self-evaluations (Pierce et al. 1989), and support from their supervisor should lead them to believe that they are valued by their supervisors (Landry and Vandenberghe 2009). In other words, supervisor support should engender a specific *type* of relational self-esteem, namely supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE; Landry and Vandenberghe 2009; Pierce et al. 1989). It thus seems reasonable to suggest that supervisor support should increase self-esteem by fulfilling socio-emotional needs for caring and empathy (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). In fact, besides its mere instrumental function, supervisor support should make employees experience positive emotions themselves (Lloyd et al. 2015), which should resonate with positive feelings toward the source of these emotions, namely the supervisor.

In line with self-consistency theory, employees who experience high SBSE should strive to maintain their positive self-image by engaging in behaviors that are consistent with that image (Korman 1970; Landry and Vandenberghe 2009), thus reinforcing their supervisors' appreciation of them. This may happen by engaging in responsible pro-organizational behaviors and avoiding those behaviors that may harm the company. By contrast, the lack of supervisor support may hinder employees' self-esteem by enacting feelings of exclusion, eventually making subordinates believe that they are not worth being cared about and receiving attention from their supervisor because they possess characteristics that are unlikeable

(Ferris et al. 2009). For those employees, engaging in deviant behaviors, such as breaking rules or working overly slowly or carelessly, should not entail risks or threats to their ego. Indeed, the costs of being seen as bad employees by their supervisor will be nullified by an already lowered self-esteem (Whelpley and McDaniel 2016), which in turn, according to self-consistency theory, will make them more prone to engage in deviant behaviors without concern for their self-worth (Ferris et al. 2009).

This rationale is supported by social psychologists that have found a positive relationship between low self-esteem and unethical behavior (Graf 1971; Aronson and Mettee 1968). Specifically, in an experiment conducted by Aronson and Mettee (1968), participants were given fake feedback on a personality test aimed at inducing either an increase or a decrease in their self-esteem. After the feedback, in a subsequent task (a game of cards), all participants were given the opportunity to cheat. In line with cognitive consistency theory, participants that were induced to have low self-esteem were less ethical and cheated more than participants in the high self-esteem condition. Similar results were found within the organizational domain. On the one hand, Van Dyne et al. (2000) found that self-esteem predicted citizenship behaviors. On the other hand, Ferris et al. (2009) provided empirical evidence of a negative relationship between self-esteem and workplace deviance.

Research on employee ethics has also recently expanded the definition of (un)ethical employee behavior to also include those actions that either informally help the organization or avoid problems for it (Jacobs et al. 2014; Cohen et al. 2014). OCBs and CWBs represent two of these behaviors, and because of their common nature, they have been conceptualized as an (un)ethical behavioral cluster that share common antecedents (Treviño et al. 2006; Cohen et al. 2014; Jacobs et al. 2014). Accordingly, our focus is on counterproductive work behaviors and pro-organizational proactive behaviors, which are discretionary

(un)ethical work behaviors of particular relevance for organizations, and as such, that they can be influenced by supervisors' actions that induce feeling of self-worth in employees (Jacobs et al. 2014; Rotundo and Sackett 2002). We hypothesize that OCBs and CWBs are influenced by supervisor support, through the effect of supervisor-based self-esteem. Thus,

Hypothesis 1a Supervisor-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between perceived supervisor support and employee organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e., OCBs).

Hypothesis 1b Supervisor-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between perceived supervisor support and employee counterproductive workplace behaviors (i.e., CWBs).

The Moderating Role of Task Satisfaction

Do individual differences among employees moderate the relationships among perceived supervisor support, SBSE, and employee (un)ethical behavior? We explore one such potential moderator: task satisfaction, defined as positive feelings an employee experiences as a result of working on his/her assigned task.

We argue that for PSS to induce feelings of self-esteem, employees need to be receptive to the value of support. In this regard, while there is virtually no research on supervisor support that supports this claim, research on the substitutes of leadership have shown the moderating effect of intrinsically motivated tasks on the relationship between supportive leadership and employee attitude and behavior (Kerr and Jermier 1978; Podsakoff et al. 1996). From this contingency perspective, low intrinsic satisfaction should neutralize leadership positive influence (Howell and Dorfman 1981) and potentially hinder the positive effects of high-quality relationships between supervisors and subordinates (Dunegan et al. 2002).

Paralleling this line of research, we expect task satisfaction will act as a contingency factor that heightens or reduces employee sensitivity to supervisor support. That is, working on unsatisfying tasks should act as a neutralizer of the effects of support. As supervisor actions do not necessarily entail any perceived benefit for work-goal attainment for employees who are disengaged from their work, they should not feel more appreciated merely because they get support. Unsatisfied employees are likely to be unreceptive of, and even cynical toward, support from supervisors. We therefore hypothesize that supervisor support will influence SBSE to a lesser extent for unsatisfied employees.

In contrast, employees who are satisfied with their task should perceive supervisor support as confirmation of their

positive work attitudes, and more importantly, a symbolic emotional reward from their supervisors. Satisfied employees will consider supervisor support as an additional sign that they are important in the eyes of their supervisor, eventually experiencing enhanced feelings of self-esteem. We expect that those attained feelings of self-esteem will eventually mediate the effects of support on ethical and unethical employee behavior. Thus, we summarize our hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 2a Task satisfaction moderates the mediated relationship among perceived supervisor support, supervisor-based self-esteem, and employee organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e., OCBs), such that the higher the task satisfaction, the stronger the association between support and supervisor-based self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2b Task satisfaction moderates the mediated relationship among perceived supervisor support, supervisor-based self-esteem, and employee counterproductive workplace behavior (i.e., CWBs), such that the higher the task satisfaction, the stronger the association between support and supervisor-based self-esteem.

Study 1: How Supervisor Support Influences Employee (Un)Ethical Behavior

Study 1 was designed to explore how the receipt of supervisor support enhances employees' behaviors that protect the organization and reduces those that harm it. That is, we specifically tested how perceptions of supervisor support are first translated into feelings of self-esteem targeting the supervisor, which eventually channel (i.e., mediate) the effects of support on employee (un)ethical behavior (i.e., OCB and CWB).

Methods

Participants and Experimental Design

Two hundreds US subjects were recruited through the online web-based platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The sample consisted of 103 females and 97 males, average age was 36.4 years, and average work experience was 14.4 years. Results using MTurk have been shown to be comparable to those obtained in other online domains and in offline settings (Paolacci et al. 2010; Buhrmester et al. 2011).

Participants were randomly assigned to high/low supervisor support conditions (i.e., between-subjects design). Participants read a scenario describing a situation in which they imagined working for a company named Atla under the supervision of John. Following the

conceptualization of perceived supervisor support (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Maertz et al. 2007; Kottke and Sharafinski 1988; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003), participants in the high supervisor support condition learned that their supervisor John helped them when they had a problem, showed a lot of concern for them, and really cared about their well-being. In the low supervisor support condition, participants learned that John did not help them when they had a problem, did not show a lot of concern for them, and really did not care about their well-being. Perceived supervisor support was coded as 1 in the high PSS scenario and -1 in the low PSS scenario.

Manipulation Check After reading the scenarios, participants completed two items assessing the supervisor support perceived in the scenario. Respondents rated their agreement with two statements “I feel supported by my supervisor” and “My supervisor supports me” from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The item correlation was $r = 0.89$ for high support and $r = 0.96$ for low support.

Supervisor-Based Self-Esteem SBSE was measured with the eight-item scale developed by Landry and Vandenberghe (2009). Example items were “I am important for my supervisor,” “I am valuable for my supervisor,” and “I count for my supervisor.” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.97$).

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) We measured OCBs using the eight-item OCB scale of Lee and Allen (2002). After reading the scenario, respondents rated their likelihood of engaging in each of eight organizational citizenship behaviors, using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is “I will offer ideas to improve the functioning of the organization.” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.95$).

Counterproductive Workplace Behaviors (CWBs) We measured CWBs using eight items by Robinson and O Leary-Kelly (1998). As for OCBs, respondents rated their likelihood of engaging in each of eight counterproductive behaviors, using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is “I will work badly, incorrectly or slowly on purpose.” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$).

Control variables We controlled for respondents’ work experience and age. In addition, since (un)ethical behaviors were self-reported, we controlled for social desirability (five items by Reynolds 1982; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$).

Study 1: Results

As expected, participants who read the high PSS scenario rated supervisor support as significantly higher (mean 4.31, s.d. 0.86) than those who read the low PSS scenario (mean 1.80, s.d. 1.05), $p < 0.001$. We tested our first hypothesis—that SBSE mediates the effects of PSS on employee

(un)ethical behavior—using hierarchical regressions and the bootstrapping method, Process, for testing indirect effects (see Preacher and Hayes 2004; Shrout and Bolger 2002).

As shown in Table 1, the direct effect of manipulated PSS on SBSE was positive and significant ($b = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$; *SBSE column*), while the direct effect of manipulated PSS on intended organizational citizenship behaviors ($b = 0.15$, ns; *OCB column*) and intended counterproductive workplace behaviors ($b = -0.09$, ns; *CWB column*) were not significant. Further, the effect of SBSE on OCB was positive and significant ($b = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), while for CWB it was negative and significant ($b = -0.15$, $p < 0.05$), as expected. The coefficient for the indirect effect of PSS on OCB through SBSE was 0.35, and the 95 % bias-corrected confidence interval ranged from LLCI = 0.152 to ULCI = 0.553 (5000 bootstrap resamples). Similarly, the coefficient for the indirect effect of PSS on CWB through SBSE was -0.13 , and the 95 % bias-corrected confidence interval ranged from LLCI = -0.279 to ULCI = -0.002 (5000 bootstrap resamples). Because these confidence intervals do not include zero, the mediation tests are statistically significant at the level of 0.05. Therefore, we can conclude that the relationship between PSS and employee (un)ethical behaviors is mediated by SBSE, providing support for Hypothesis 1.

Study 1: Discussion

The scenario in Study 1 was designed to be realistic enough to enable participants to project themselves into the situation of receiving support and reacting to it. However, because the respondents were responding to a hypothetical scenario, we cannot know what their reactions would have been in an actual organization. In addition, in ongoing employment relationships, it is possible that the relationships between PSS, SBSE, and employee (un)ethical behavior could differ among employees depending on task perceived characteristics. For these reasons, we conducted Study 2 to (a) test our hypotheses in a real organization, (b) corroborate the external validity of the findings in Study 1, and (c) examine possible boundary conditions moderating the effect of PSS on employee (un)ethical behavior via SBSE, namely task satisfaction.

Study 2: When Supervisor Support Influences Employee (Un)ethical Behavior

To externally validate the results of our scenario experiment and understand how supervisor support, task satisfaction, and self-esteem influence employee (un)ethical behavior, we conducted a field survey investigation in a hospital setting. Understanding mechanisms behind employee (un)ethical

Table 1 Study 1—The mediating role of supervisor-based self-esteem

| Variable | Supervisor-based self-esteem | | | OCBs (outcome) | | | CWBs (outcome) | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|------|----------------|----------------|------|----------------|----------------|------|----------------|
| | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value |
| Constant | 2.48*** | 0.30 | 8.14 | 28.25*** | 0.38 | 73.98 | 3.40*** | 0.33 | 10.38 |
| Age | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.87 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 1.31 | −0.02* | 0.01 | −2.33 |
| Work experience | −0.01 | 0.01 | −1.18 | −0.01 | 0.01 | −0.99 | 0.03** | 0.01 | 2.71 |
| Social desirability | 0.20** | 0.07 | 3.08 | 0.15* | 0.07 | 2.06 | −0.25** | 0.06 | −3.92 |
| Manipulated PSS | 0.87*** | 0.05 | 15.96 | 0.15 | 0.09 | 1.73 | −0.09 | 0.08 | −1.15 |
| Supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE) | | | | 0.40*** | 0.08 | 5.21 | −0.15* | 0.07 | −2.23 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.57*** | | | 0.37*** | | | 0.20*** | | |

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

actions is of critical importance in the healthcare industry where things far more important than employee performance are at stake (i.e., patient life) and employee decisions can have dramatic consequences on patients.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The data were collected through a three-wave survey of nurses within a large U.S. healthcare organization (2 waves for the nurses followed by 1 wave for evaluations made by their supervisors). A 2-month interval occurred between the measurement waves. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept strictly confidential. We surveyed a total of 425 nurses, and 254 nurses (plus 72 supervisors) completed all substantive questions on the survey, for a response rate of roughly 60 % of the nurse sample. Each supervisor had on average 3 subordinates, and all responded.

The mean age of the respondents was 44.41, 92 % were women, and 84.7 % were Caucasians. Average employment tenure was 8 years. Supervisor support was measured at Time 1, task satisfaction was measured at Time 1, supervisor-based self-esteem was measured at Time 2, and employee OCBs and CWBs were measured using supervisors' ratings at Time 3. Consistent with previous studies, we controlled for tenure and age (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Jokisaari and Nurmi 2009; Maertz et al. 2007). To test our hypotheses, we used hierarchical regression, the bootstrapping method for testing conditional indirect effects (see Preacher and Hayes 2004), and the moderated mediation approach outlined by Preacher et al. (2007) and Hayes (2013).

Measures

Although it would be desirable to use a greater numbers of items, hospital administrators insisted that we keep the

questionnaire as short as possible because of the hectic and stressful work schedules of nurse respondents. We adapted shorter versions of previous scales (see "Study 1") for the employee self-reported measures, and one of the authors collaborating with the hospital ensured that the respondents understood and agreed with the final wording of the items.

The convergent and discriminant validity of these scales were quite satisfactory (see "Results"). In addition, we were able to use the full scales for the supervisor-rated dependent variables (OCBs and CWBs).

Perceived Supervisor Support We adapted 3 items from previous measures of perceived supervisor support (Cole et al. 2006; Eisenberger et al. 2002; Maertz et al. 2007; Kottke and Sharafinski 1988; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003). A sample item read "How caring and compassionate has your supervisor been to attending to your feelings?" We used seven-point scales ranging from "Very ineffective" to "Very effective," with "Neither ineffective nor effective" as a midpoint, to measure reactions to each item. (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Supervisor-Based Self-Esteem SBSE was measured with two items from Landry and Vandenberghe (2009). The first item read, "I am an important contributor in the eyes of my supervisor," and the second read, "I am valued by my supervisor." Both items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from "Does not describe me at all" to "Describes me very well," with "Describes moderately well" in the middle. (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.98$).

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) We measured OCBs using the eight-item OCB scale of Lee and Allen (2002). Employees' supervisors rated how much they agreed or disagreed with the assertion that their subordinates performed each OCB, using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample items are "This employee offers ideas to improve the functioning of the organization" and "This employee takes action to protect the organization from potential problems." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

Counterproductive Workplace Behaviors (CWB) We measured CWBs using eight items by Robinson and O Leary-Kelly (1998). Employees' supervisors rated how often their subordinates performed each CWB-O, using a five-point scale (1 = very infrequently to 5 = very frequently). Sample items are "This employee did work badly, incorrectly or slowly on purpose" and "This employee deliberately bent or broke a rule(s)" (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

Task Satisfaction We used two bipolar adjective pairs, boring/exciting and dull/stimulating, assessed on a five-point scale, to measure employee task satisfaction (Daniel and Esser 1980; Cherrington et al. 1971). The items were introduced by the question, "Using the scales below, please express your reactions as to how you personally find your work (tasks)." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Study 2: Results

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and moderated mediation analysis to test our hypotheses. The measurement model (CFA) employed the LISREL program (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1999). We assessed the goodness-of-fit of the

models with χ^2 -tests, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the non-normed fit index (NNFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Satisfactory model fits are indicated by non-significant χ^2 -tests, RMSEA values less than or equal to 0.08, NNFI and CFI values greater than or equal to 0.95, and SRMR less than or equal to 0.08 (see Hu and Bentler 1999; Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, composite reliability values, and correlations among all the variables. Table 3 shows the Cronbach's α for all constructs; these values range from 0.88 to 0.98, well above the cutoff suggested in the literature.

Discriminant Validity

As a test of discriminant validity of our measures, we tested a confirmatory factor analysis model (CFA) including all the latent variables used in the study (5 latent constructs and 23 measures in total excluding age and tenure). Results showed that our hypothesized model fits the data well. The goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were $\chi^2(220) = 654.82$, $p = 0.00$, RMSEA = 0.053, NNFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, and SRMR = 0.089.

Table 2 Study 2—Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's α values, and correlations

| Variable | Mean | s.d. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---------------------------------|-------|------|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|------|
| 1. Age | 44.41 | 1.58 | – | | | | | | |
| 2. Tenure | 4.37 | 1.36 | 0.35** | – | | | | | |
| 3. Perceived supervisor support | 3.85 | 0.88 | –0.01 | –0.03 | 0.88 | | | | |
| 4. Task satisfaction | 4.15 | 0.69 | 0.13* | 0.17** | 0.34** | 0.88 | | | |
| 5. Supervisor-based self-esteem | 5.48 | 1.59 | –0.02 | 0.03 | 0.56** | 0.24** | 0.98 | | |
| 6. OCBs | 4.21 | 0.64 | 0.03 | 0.22** | 0.25** | 0.26** | 0.38** | 0.93 | |
| 7. CWBs | 1.60 | 0.77 | 0.07 | 0.00 | –0.27** | –0.14* | –0.30** | –0.47** | 0.93 |

Cronbach's α values are shown in the diagonal

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 Study 2—Test of the moderated mediation model

| Variable | Supervisor-based self-esteem | | | OCBs | | | CWBs | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------|----------------|----------|------|----------------|----------|------|----------------|
| | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value | <i>b</i> | se | <i>t</i> value |
| Constant | 5.35*** | 0.39 | 13.56 | 3.23*** | 0.23 | 14.08 | 1.95*** | 0.29 | 6.64 |
| Age | –0.01 | 0.01 | –0.73 | 0.00 | 0.00 | –0.86 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 1.20 |
| Tenure | 0.07 | 0.07 | 1.11 | 0.10*** | 0.03 | 3.36 | –0.01 | 0.04 | –0.20 |
| Perceived supervisor support | 1.02*** | 0.10 | 10.18 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.41 | –0.11 | 0.07 | –1.65 |
| Task satisfaction | 0.20 | 0.13 | 1.54 | 0.14* | 0.06 | 2.34 | –0.06 | 0.07 | –0.82 |
| Interaction | 0.36** | 0.12 | 3.08 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.27 | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.12 |
| Supervisor-based self-esteem | | | | 0.13*** | 0.03 | 4.54 | –0.10** | 0.04 | –2.86 |
| R^2 | 0.34*** | | | 0.21*** | | | 0.11*** | | |

Interaction = perceived supervisor support X task satisfaction

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As a further check of discriminant validity of our measures, we then compared our five-factor measurement model with alternative four-factor models. For example, we tested a model where the items of task OCBs and CWBs loaded on a single factor (i.e., for a total of four factors). The goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were as follows: $\chi^2(224) = 1702.45$, $p = 0.00$, RMSEA = 0.22, NNFI = 0.84, CFI = 0.86, and SRMR = 0.13. As it can be seen from the goodness-of-fit statistics, our five-factor model fits the data better than this alternative four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(4) = 1047.63$, $p < 0.001$). We also tested a model where the items of PSS and SBSE loaded on a single factor (i.e., for a total of four factors). The goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were as follows: $\chi^2(224) = 1399.04$, $p = 0.00$, RMSEA = 0.11, NNFI = 0.87, CFI = 0.89, and SRMR = 0.083. Again, our five-factor model fits the data better than this alternative four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(4) = 744.22$, $p < 0.001$). Similar results were obtained when we compared our hypothesized five-factor model with other alternative CFA models (e.g., alternative four-factor models, three-factor models, two-factor models, and a one-factor model), thus exhibiting satisfactory discriminant validity for our measures.¹

The Mediating Role of SBSE and the Moderating Effect of Task Satisfaction

We tested the hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of task satisfaction on the mediated relationship among PSS, SBSE, and employee OCBs and CWBs following the procedures for moderated regression analysis outlined by Aiken and West (1991) and for moderated-mediated regression outlined by Preacher et al. (2007) and Hayes (2013). To reduce potential collinearity between the interaction term and its component, we centered all the continuous independent variables. As a stricter test of our hypotheses, we also included age and tenure as control variables. Support for our hypotheses requires (a) statistically significant increases in variance explained (ΔR^2) with the addition of the two-way interactions between supervisor support and task satisfaction, and both (b) simple slope test and (c) bootstrap indirect effect results consistent with our hypotheses. Table 3 shows the regression results with unstandardized coefficients.

Results indicate that the interaction between supervisor support and task satisfaction significantly predicted

¹ Because of their potential relatedness, the correlation between supervisor support and task satisfaction may raise concerns about multicollinearity. However, as shown in Table 2, the correlation between supervisor support and task satisfaction is significant yet moderately low 0.34**, thus further excluding evidence of multicollinearity if any.

supervisor-based self-esteem (interaction; $b = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.025$, $p < 0.01$; supervisor-based self-esteem column; see Table 4). To examine this interaction in more detail, we conducted simple slopes analyses and plotted unstandardized regression lines representing the significant interaction term (Aiken and West 1991) at one standard deviation below and above the mean of task satisfaction. As we hypothesized, the simple slope test indicated that the association between supervisor support and supervisor-based self-esteem was positive and significantly stronger for employees experiencing high task satisfaction, (+1 S.D.; $b = 1.27$, $p < 0.001$; see Fig. 2) than for employees dissatisfied with their task (−1 S.D.; $b = 0.77$, $p < 0.001$; see Fig. 2).

Regarding the mediating mechanism of SBSE on the relationship between perceived supervisor support and employee (un)ethical behavior, Table 2 (see OCB and CWB columns) shows that SBSE influences OCBs ($b = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$), while supervisor support ($b = 0.02$, ns) does not. Similarly, SBSE predicts CWBs ($b = -0.10$, $p < 0.001$), while supervisor support ($b = -0.11$, ns) does not influence directly CWBs. We also estimated bootstrap confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effect of SBSE on the relationship among emotional support, OCBs, and CWBs at a high versus low level of task satisfaction. In support of our moderated mediation model, the coefficient for the indirect effect of supervisor support on OCBs through SBSE at high levels of task satisfaction was stronger ($b = 0.16$; LLCI = 0.092 to ULCI = 0.246, 5000 bootstrap resamples) than the same mediated relationship at low levels of task satisfaction ($b = 0.10$; LLCI = 0.056 to ULCI = 0.151). Similar results were achieved for the moderated mediation model depicting the indirect effect of supervisor support on CWBs through SBSE at high levels of task satisfaction ($b = -0.13$; LLCI = -0.254 to ULCI = -0.015) when compared to low levels of task satisfaction ($b = -0.07$; LLCI = -0.160 to ULCI = -0.010). In sum, all our hypotheses were thus supported.

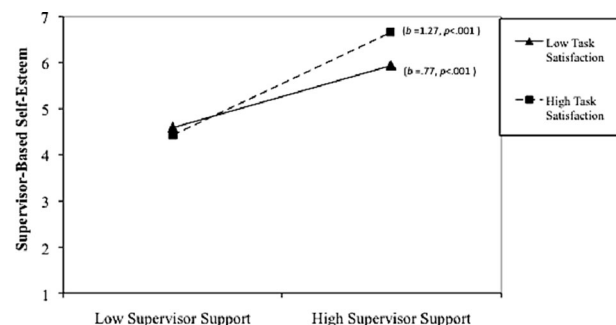


Fig. 2 The moderating effect of task satisfaction on the relationship between supervisor support and supervisor-based self-esteem

Study 2: Discussion

Through a field survey of actual nurses and their supervisors with multiple waves of data and external ratings by supervisors, Study 2 replicated the experimental findings of the scenario experiment in Study 1, corroborated these results in a real organizational setting, and tested a boundary condition regulating the effects of PSS on employee (un)ethical behavior.

General Discussion

Our research makes three contributions to our scholarly understanding of supervisor support and its implications for employee (un)ethical behavior. First, our findings demonstrate that supervisors can influence subordinates' ethical behavior by instilling perceptions of support. Although many supervisors may view support merely as a way to improve the performance of their team, they may surprisingly achieve even greater results, in terms of employees' ethical responses, by caring for employees' emotional well-being. In this regard, our findings contribute to previous research on work behavioral ethics (Treviño et al. 2006; Jacobs et al. 2014) by showing common additional antecedents of pro-organizational and unethical behaviors.

A second aim of our study was to examine the mediating mechanism through which support influences employee ethical behavior. Similar to previous researchers, we expected that subordinates would be more willing to engage in ethical behaviors to the extent that they perceived support from their supervisors. However, whereas previous studies presumed a direct linkage between supervisor's behavior and employee ethical behavior (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2014; Shanock and Eisenberger 2006), or interpersonal affective mechanisms (e.g., Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe 2003), we showed that subordinates' perceptions of support are also translated into intrapersonal emotional reactions focused on self-evaluations. That is, supervisor support increases self-esteem by fulfilling the socio-emotional needs of care and empathy (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). As a reaction to perceived supervisor support, employees experience higher supervisor-based self-esteem (SBSE) and try to maintain this positive self-image by engaging in behaviors that are consistent with that image (i.e., being a good performer, as Becker and Kernan 2003 showed in 2003, and a good citizen). We therefore contribute to the research on employee ethical behavior by demonstrating "how" supervisor support influences OCBs and CWBs through the intrapersonal mechanism of relational self-esteem.

Regarding the effect of supervisor-based self-esteem on both OCBs and CWBs, our results may seem to contradict the view that these behaviors are not two sides of the same

moral continuum—and therefore they should not share common antecedents (e.g., Mayer 2010; Crilly et al. 2008). Nevertheless, one specific rationale that supports these findings involves the effect of self-esteem, and more generally, people's need for self-consistency. According to self-consistency theory, when motivations are intrapersonal and focused on the maintenance of one's own ideal self, people engage in a wide range of proactive and reparative actions that may include OCBs, CWBs, and more generally, other types of socially responsible behaviors (Leary 2007; Tracy and Robins 2004; Crilly et al. 2008). Seen in this light, our findings complement recent calls in the behavioral ethics literature to investigate ethical and unethical behaviors as clusters that are influenced by common antecedents (see Treviño et al. 2006; Jacobs et al. 2014; Cohen et al. 2014).

Although we found that supervisor-based self-esteem reduces unethical behaviors aimed at damaging the organization, there can be situations in which employee need for positive image consistency may have unethical consequences. One instance is the case of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, which are behaviors that are positive for the organization yet violate some overarching ethical norms (UPBs; Umphress and Bingham 2011). On the one hand, we expect this problem to arise because unethical pro-organizational behaviors can be seen as self-esteem enhancers in that they benefit the organization, and eventually lead to supervisor's recognition. On the other hand, situations that represent a threat to employee self-esteem may trigger reparative behaviors, which although helpful for the organization may be unethical. For example, to regain a positive image in the eyes of the supervisor, employees may engage in unethical behaviors such as withholding negative information about the company from clients, in order to get a new contract and more personal recognition. We also expect these mechanisms to be moderated by the moral identity and ethical standards of subordinates, who may decide not to engage in UPBs upon recognizing the harm of their actions (Cojuharenco and Sguera 2015). Relational self-esteem and self-consistency theory in general represent a new and interesting venue for future research on work (un)ethical behavior, as this may help explain ethical actions through an individual's consistency needs.

As shown by this research, boosting employees' relational self-esteem induces remarkable positive work outcomes, mainly because when employees feel important they try to keep this rewarding sense of self-worth by engaging in proactive behaviors and avoiding behaviors that may damage the organization. Thus, besides official codes of conducts and reward systems for ethical behavior (Jacobs et al. 2014), supervisor support and personal recognition of employees should play an important role in

fostering ethical behavior because they bind recipient employees to a sense of responsibility toward their own image, which has specific benefits for organizations. Similar self-consistency mechanisms may also have important leadership implications, as a CEO or a manager may decide to act ethically, not only for the sake of the good but also to be consistent with followers' positive evaluations of them.

A promising avenue for future research specifically concerns the role of supervisor support in preventing unethical behaviors during organizational change. In line with previous literature on emotional capabilities (Huy 1999, 2002), we expect supervisor emotional support to function as a powerful facilitator for change, which will likely assist the adoption of new organizational routines, relieve employee stress (Sguera et al. 2016), and overcome employee deceptive and counterproductive behaviors such as boycotting and resisting change (Huy 2005). Thus, organizations should hire supervisors that show the skills necessary to instill perceptions of care among their subordinates, develop these skills through focused leadership training, or implement organizational interventions that foster perceptions of support among employees.

In addition, our findings show “when” supervisor support influences employee ethical behavior. That is, the effect of supervisor support on employee behavior is contingent upon employee task satisfaction, such as when employees who are dissatisfied with their task become less receptive to supervisor support and its beneficial effects on relational self-esteem. Accordingly, managers may want to help and address dissatisfied employees by enriching their task before providing them with the emotional support needed. Besides this important managerial implication, these findings generally suggest an interesting venture for future research by pointing to the role of substitutes (e.g., enhancers and neutralizers) of supervisors' ethical actions on subordinates' ethical reactions. Other examples of these moderating mechanisms may include both followers' and leaders' characteristics. On the one hand, we expect the mediated relationship between support and (un)ethical behavior to be enhanced or buffered by employees' ethical standards (Bagozzi et al. 2013; Sekerka et al. 2009), moral character (Cohen et al. 2014), or moral identity (e.g., Aquino et al. 2009). In fact, these traits should make subordinates more or less resilient to the effects of support. On the other hand, leaders' ethical conduct may enhance the relationship between followers' relational self-esteem and ethical behavior because the image to which they aspire may be more ethical than theirs (Burns 1978).

The research setting of Study 2 (i.e., a hospital) may also raise concerns about the generalizability of our findings, especially considering that engaging in CWBs within a hospital can have dramatic consequences. Although those concerns seem reasonable, we can actually conclude that

the empirical test of our model in a hospital underwent a stricter test. That is, nurses may have been worried (or not) about the consequences of their actions, yet they engaged (or did not) in those actions as a result of their relational self-esteem. In addition, other types of organizational settings may present employees with similar conditions and contingencies. For example, we expect similar results in those organizations that operate under high performance pressure—and wherein unethical behavior can have critical consequence—such as the military, firefighters, and consulting or financial firms. Finally, the fact that our findings were replicated across two different studies, using two different methodologies (i.e., experiment and survey), involving two different samples (i.e., a heterogeneous sample of U.S. workers in Study 1 and a sample of U.S. nurses in Study 2), while also adopting two different operationalizations of CWBs (i.e., self-reported and third-party observed) should attenuate these concerns.

Nevertheless, engaging in ethical or unethical behaviors by knowing that their effects will be more or less dramatic suggests an interesting avenue for future research on relational self-esteem, and (un)ethical behavior in general. For example, as in the case of moral dilemmas (e.g., the trolley problem; Foot 1967; Thomson 1976), it would be interesting to test if and how people evaluate the potential consequences of their actions, and if these evaluations influence future expectations related to self-esteem (e.g., feeling that they will destroy their self-image) and consequent engagement in CWBs or OCBs.

Future research should explore the multidimensionality of perceived supervisor support (e.g., Hammer et al. 2009). For example, we expect emotional support to be more important in environments that engender chronic burnout (e.g., hospitals and call centers), whereas task support might be more valuable in organizations where pay depends strongly on task performance or cultures that curtail the expression of emotions. Both environments should contribute to an increase in employee relational self-esteem depending on the organizational context and its requirements. Overall, future studies should also consider how the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of supervisors moderate the effects of perceived support on SBSE. This is important because some employees may receive support, yet consider it as unauthentic, thus dismissing supervisors' efforts and their effects on employee (un)ethical behavior.

Conclusion

In sum, more could be done to understand more deeply the nature and ethical consequences of supervisor support and employee relational self-esteem for organizations. Few, if

any studies, have analyzed the critical role of self-consistency processes on the relationship between supervisor support and employee (un)ethical behavior. Our study starts addressing these omissions, thus contributing to a greater understanding of this important ethical topic.

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