



## Social support reciprocity and occupational self-efficacy beliefs during mothers' organizational re-entry ☆, ☆, ☆

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### ABSTRACT

The present study assesses the effects of a lack of social support reciprocity at work on employees' occupational self-efficacy beliefs. We assume that the self-efficacy effects of received support and support reciprocity depend on the specific work context (e.g., phase in the process of organizational socialization). 297 women who returned to work after maternity leave participated at three measurement points (five weeks, eleven weeks, six months after re-entry). We measured self-reported received and provided support as well as occupational self-efficacy beliefs. Women who received a high amount but provided only little support at work (over-benefitting) reported lowered self-efficacy beliefs. As expected, this effect was not found at the beginning of re-entry, but only later, when over-benefitting began to be negatively related to recipients' self-efficacy beliefs.

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### Introduction

Social support at the workplace is often seen as being desirable and beneficial. There is evidence, for instance, that social support is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction (e.g., O'Discroll, Brough, & Kalliath, 2004; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; see also a meta-analysis by Ng & Sorensen, 2008). But at the same time, there are studies that have demonstrated that social support at the workplace can also be associated with negative outcomes, such as increased negative affect (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993; Deelstra et al., 2003). Why have different studies found such different outcomes? Former research showed that support reciprocity might be responsible for the diverging consequences of social support (e.g., Buunk et al., 1993; Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008).

Despite the aforementioned research on the effects of support at work on subjective well-being, the effect of support on self-efficacy beliefs has been neglected so far. This is surprising, given the well-documented positive effect of self-efficacy beliefs on employees' job-satisfaction and performance (Judge & Bono, 2001; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). The present study examines whether received social support might endanger an employee's self-efficacy beliefs, if the recipient does not provide comparable amounts of support to his or her co-workers. In other words, we propose that support reciprocity buffers the

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adverse effect that receiving high levels of support might otherwise have on an employee's capability beliefs. In addition, we assume that the self-efficacy effects of received support and support reciprocity depend on the specific work context. In the present study, we look at work context characteristics in terms of earlier and later phases of the organizational socialization process among mothers who re-enter the workforce after maternity leave.

Mothers' organizational re-entry after maternity leave represents a career phase in which women might feel burdened by the multiple demands within the work and family domains and therefore highly benefit from social support. In this situation, over-benefitting (receiving more support than one has provided) is individually and socially accepted, at least for some time. Therefore, at the beginning of organizational re-entry, receiving relatively strong support from colleagues should leave work-related self-efficacy beliefs unaffected. As time goes by, however, over-benefitting might start to have a negative impact.

#### *Receiving social support: chances and risks for recipients' self-efficacy beliefs*

Bandura (1997, p. 3) defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments." These beliefs influence whether an individual initiates coping behavior, how much effort a person invests, and how long he or she persists in face of difficulties and failures (see Bandura, 1977). Generalized self-efficacy beliefs can be distinguished from domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs. As the setting considered in this study is the workplace, occupational self-efficacy beliefs will be examined. They denote the beliefs in one's capacity and motivation to master work-related challenges and to successfully pursue one's occupational career (Higgins, Dobrow, & Chandler, 2008).

So far, theoretical models on the relationship between social support and self-efficacy beliefs have mainly focused on positive effects. Benight and Bandura (2004) assume that social support has an enabling function that can enhance self-efficacy beliefs (Enabling Hypothesis). In a study on posttraumatic recovery, they found that social support reduces the likelihood of trauma-related stress by increasing self-efficacy beliefs. The Cultivation Hypothesis by Schwarzer and Knoll (2007) posits the reverse pathway. Self-efficacy beliefs would thus operate as an establisher of support. That is, when people feel they can take the initiative, they cultivate their networks. Indeed, in a sample of patients with radical prostatectomy and their spouses, Knoll, Scholz, Burkert, Roigas, and Gralla (2009) found that people with higher self-efficacy beliefs also reported higher supportive resources. Note, however, that neither the enabling nor the cultivation hypotheses have been tested with respect to support at the workplace.

Regarding adverse effects of social support, as mentioned above, empirical research has focused on negative affect. Authors who have identified adverse mood effects have argued that being supported can be unpleasant because receiving social support might lead people to doubt their ability to accomplish their goals and cope with difficulties on their own (e.g., Gleason et al., 2008; Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001). Hence, implicitly, these authors refer to self-efficacy beliefs. Similarly, several other researchers have theoretically linked receiving support to lowered self-esteem (e.g., Barrera, 1986; Gleason et al., 2008). According to Barrera (1986), for instance, receiving aid might lower one's sense of self-esteem if it is interpreted as a sign of personal incompetence. Again, this line of interpretation links adverse support effects to self-efficacy beliefs. In a sample of organizational newcomers, Morrison (1993) found that information seeking was negatively related to task mastery. Asking for information might cast doubt on one's own task competence.

Given that the negative consequences of receiving support are typically reported to be due to feelings of incapacity (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Liang et al., 2001), we propose a direct test of the effects of social support on self-efficacy beliefs, as the latter represent capability-related self-beliefs. Although several authors have raised the point that self-efficacy beliefs might be affected by social support, none have empirically tested possible negative effects on these beliefs in the work domain.

#### *Support reciprocity as a shield against self-efficacy threats*

As shown above, research about the impact of social support has shown potential negative and potential positive effects (Buunk et al., 1993; Deelstra et al., 2003). How can these different results be tied together? While the receipt of too much support at work may be a potential risk to employees' self-efficacy beliefs, they may benefit from being support providers. That is, in contrast to passively receiving support, actively supporting others at work may foster work-related self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, providing support may serve as a buffer against the adverse effects of an abundance of unwanted support. Likewise, receiving support may be most aggravating and detrimental for the receiver's self-efficacy beliefs if he or she cannot return the help as a provider. The varying findings of previous research about the effect of social support can thus be explained by the moderating role of support provision.

Indeed, one explanation for the negative consequences of support is a lack of reciprocity (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003; Gleason et al., 2008; Uehara, 1995). Uehara (1995) found that people feel obligated to return benefits received from others. Over-benefitting in social interactions, i.e., receiving more support than one has provided, appears to be psychologically and emotionally distressing. Under-benefitting (providing more support than one has received) was also found to be adverse, but not as much as over-benefitting. In fact, with respect to daily affect experiences, Gleason et al. (2003) found that individuals reported increased negative affect and decreased positive affect on days on which they received more support than they provided as compared to days when they provided more than they received or when support was equitable. We thus propose that receiving support at the workplace is not threatening to self-efficacy beliefs as long as it is

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