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## Social influence and perceived organizational support: A social networks analysis

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## ABSTRACT

We suggest that employees' perceptions of organizational support (POS) are not solely a product of independent evaluations of treatment offered by the organization, but are also shaped by the social context. We argue that coworkers will directly (through inquiry via cohesive friendship and advice ties) and indirectly (through monitoring of employees structurally equivalent in advice and friendship networks) affect employees' perceived organizational support. Network studies in the admissions department of a large public university and a private company specializing in food and animal safety products indicate that employees' POS are similar to those of coworkers with whom they maintain advice relationships as well as to those who hold structurally equivalent positions in organizational friendship and advice networks. Our work contributes to organizational support theory by developing and testing a theoretical explanation for the relationship between the social context and perceptions of support among employees. Implications for research and practice are offered.

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## Introduction

Organizational support theory (OST; Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) suggests that treatment offered by the organization (in terms of fairness, job conditions, and supervisory relationships) serves as a signal to employees regarding the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (perceived organizational support; POS). Consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the reciprocity norm (Gouldner, 1960), POS obligates employees who feel supported to reciprocate by expressing greater affective organizational commitment, performing citizenship behaviors, and exhibiting lower levels of withdrawal (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As a result, organizations that foster POS within employees are thought to have a competitive advantage over organizations that do not (Pfeffer, 2005).

Our fundamental contention in this research is that the formation of POS is not solely psychological but also a social process influenced by information that employees acquire from the social context. Although OST research on the antecedents and consequences of POS offers relatively consistent results (see Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), for a meta-analysis), we argue that its explanatory power is limited because it implicitly assumes that

employees independently observe and interpret treatment offered by the organization. As a result, OST provides only individual-level psychological explanations for employees' perceptions of treatment offered to them by the organization. Yet social exchange relationships in general (Emerson, 1976) and the formation of POS in particular (Eisenberger, Jones, Aselage, & Sucharski, 2004) require that employees collect and interpret a great deal of information, much of which can only be obtained through interaction with coworkers (Eisenberger et al., 2004) or by monitoring the organizational environment (Kiewitz, Restubog, Zagenczyk, & Hochwarter, 2009). Despite this, past theoretical and empirical research has devoted scant attention to the effects of the social context on employees' POS (Kiewitz et al., 2009). Although Eisenberger et al.'s (2004) theoretical work suggests that employees develop POS through socialization processes, it does not explicitly describe the manner in which coworkers and the overall social structure of the organization are related to POS. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to clarify how employees' direct relationships (advice and friendship ties) and positions in the social structure of the organization (advice and friendship structural equivalence) shape POS. We suggest that by expanding organizational support theory to account for social influence, we will increase its predictive validity.

To make our arguments, we draw on research on employee socialization (Morrison, 1993), social referent selection (Shah, 1998), and social influence (e.g., Burt, 1987; Festinger, 1954; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) to specify relationships between the social context and POS. We test our hypotheses in two social network studies in different settings – the admissions department of a large

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public university and a private company specializing in food and animal safety product manufacturing and sales. We further elaborate on our theoretical model and predictions below.

## Literature review and hypotheses development

### *Organizational support theory*

Organizational support theory suggests that employees pay attention to treatment offered by the organization in order to discern the extent to which the organization is supportive and values their contributions (Eisenberger et al., 1986). To this end, employees infer that the treatment offered to them by agents of the organization is indicative of organization's overall favorable or unfavorable orientation towards them (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Accordingly, OST is rooted in Levinson's (1965) observation that employees personify and form social exchange relationships with their organizations. OST argues that treatment stemming from the organization or its agents serves as a signal to employees regarding the extent to which they are supported. For example, researchers have demonstrated that organizational justice promotes employee trust in the organization which reduces fears concerning inadequate compensation and job loss (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). Human resource practices such as inclusion, participation, rewards, developmental experiences, and promotions are indicative of the organization's respect for the ability of employees and thus relate positively to POS (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Hutchison, 1997; Wayne et al., 2002, 1997). Likewise, treatment offered by supervisors and leaders affects POS because they are regarded as a physical manifestation of the organization by employees (Eisenberger, Stinglehauser, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Levinson, 1965; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Wayne et al., 1997). Finally, treatment offered by the organization that is perceived as discretionary – or within the control of the organization – exerts a stronger influence on POS as this sends a stronger signal regarding the organizations' positive (or negative) orientation towards them (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). When employees perceive that they are supported, they tend to be committed to and identify with the organization as well as help the organization succeed through citizenship behavior and decreased withdrawal behaviors (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

### *The social context and organizational support theory*

Overall, OST offers a logical individual-level psychological explanation for the formation and consequences of POS. Yet the implicit assumption of social exchange theory and OST, that employees independently evaluate organizational treatment, leads to a relatively undersocialized view of employer–employee exchange. Emerson (1976) argues that social exchange theory (as conceptualized by Blau, 1964 and Homans, 1958) encompasses only the application of economic and individual psychological principles to dyadic relationships involving socioemotional resources. This view is limited, he reasons, because social exchange occurs within a social context which affects both perceptions of exchange relationships as well as the exchange behavior of individuals. The importance of the social context is exacerbated by the ambiguity and complexity characteristic of today's organizations (Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). In such environments, employees have difficulty discerning who to credit (or blame) for treatment provided to them (Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Rentsch, 1990; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). As a result, employees collect data from coworkers and use it to evaluate their jobs,

work environments, and organizations (Friedkin, 1998; Ho and Levesque, 2005; Kiewitz et al., 2009; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). While these studies highlight that the subjective nature of employer–employee exchange relationships makes the social context an important determinant of how such relationships are perceived, they do not specifically illustrate how the social context affects POS.

Research on socialization in organizations may help us to understand the effects of the social context on POS (Eisenberger et al., 2004). Festinger (1954) argues, and Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) demonstrate, that employees tend to rely on coworkers (as opposed to managers or even objective information) to understand norms, standards, and impressions of the organization. Morrison (1993) found that employees' acquire information through inquiry (asking questions directly) and monitoring (observation of the behavior and actions of others and asking third parties for information about what another thinks). Employees were more apt to look to coworkers (as opposed to supervisors) for information due to the perceived relevance of their views.

Eisenberger et al. (2004) argued that some of the same processes that occur during employee socialization shape the formation of support perceptions. Prior to employment, employees collect information about the way that the organization treats its employees from friends and family familiar with the organization. Upon beginning their employment, employees seek information which confirms and expands the knowledge that they have already collected. As a result, an employees' POS is a product of their observations of how the organization treats coworkers coupled with their view of organization treats them (Eisenberger et al., 2004). In sum, the research of Eisenberger et al. (2004) and Morrison (1993) suggest that employees' POS may be influenced by non-organizational agents via social influence which occurs through monitoring of and direct interaction with coworkers. Surprisingly, however, little or no empirical research has explored this proposition.

### *Social networks, social influence, and organizational support*

In his critique of social exchange theory, Emerson (1976) suggested that researchers draw on social networks to explain the effects of the larger social system on dyadic exchange relationships. Social networks research focuses on patterns of social relations among a set of actors to explain social phenomena (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social network ties provide opportunities for employees to understand what others think, feel, say, and do about organizational events and are therefore the medium through which social influence occurs in organizations (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Krackhardt & Brass, 1994). Emerson argued that utilization of social networks could explain how the interaction of an individual within broader social network of actors affects how perceptions of exchange relationships develop. We apply this logic and argue that social influence will affect employees' perceptions of their exchange relationships with organizations.

Social influence can affect an individual's belief structure directly through cohesion or indirectly through structural equivalence (Burt, 1987). Cohesion occurs when a direct relationship, such as a friendship or advice relationship, exists between employees (Burt, 1987). Such direct relationships result in information exchange which results in similarity in perceptions and beliefs. Alternately, employees are said to be structurally equivalent to the extent that they share the same relationships with the same set of other people in the organization regardless of whether they are connected themselves (Lorrain & White, 1971). Employees who are structurally equivalent tend to see each other as comparable or substitutes for one another (Ho & Levesque, 2005) and, at times, competitors (Burt, 1987). As a result, structural equivalents often

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