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Chloe Dingens
Grand Valley State University

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The Role of Perceived Organizational Support in Anxiety and Depression

Chloe Dingens

Grand Valley State University

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Mentor: Dr. Benjamin Walsh

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the relationships between employees' levels of perceived organizational support (POS) and their levels of anxiety and depression. Eisenberger et al. (1986, p. 500) defines POS as an employee's perception about how much the organization they work for values them and cares about their well-being. It was hypothesized that workers who experience higher POS will report lower anxiety and depression. Survey data were collected from 494 adults who worked an average of 39.9 hours per week ($SD = 8.3$). Participants completed survey measures of POS, anxiety, and depression, and reported demographics (e.g., job tenure) that were included as controls. Hypotheses were tested using ordinary least squares regression. After control variables were included, POS explained a significant portion of the variability in both anxiety and depression, and POS was associated with anxiety and depression in the hypothesized direction. Understanding the correlates of POS is important for work success, employee well being, and overall mental health.

Introduction

Mental health is important in every aspect of life, especially surrounding work, since work takes up a majority of each person's day. Having a work environment that feels supportive can be key to mental health, in this case being specifically linked to anxiety and depression. One indicator of a supportive environment is known as *perceived organizational support* (POS). Eisenberger et al. (1986, p. 500) defines POS as an employee's perception about how much the organization they work for values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) discuss that over time employees form global perceptions concerning their valuation by the organization, as well as develop POS over time with many interactions between the employee and their employer. These many interactions create a perception for the employee to interpret how much their work organization is committed to them through a variety of things: fairness, organizational rewards, job conditions, interpersonal treatment, and supervisor support.

The specific goal of this study is to examine the role of POS in reports of anxiety and depression by employees. Organizations having awareness of the effect their support can have on employees is important because it could allow for lower turnover. Having happy employees that feel supported could help the organization be successful in everyday work. Past research has looked at POS being relatable to favorable outcomes for both the employee and the organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Previous studies have looked at factors of POS, although research focusing specifically on anxiety and depression is lacking. This research connects to previous research in that POS has been looked at from many angles. Next, I summarize research on anxiety and depression, and theory and research that supports the link between POS and reports of anxiety and depression by workers.

Both anxiety and depression have emotional and physical characteristics that affect one's health, physically and mentally. Feeling tense or worried, high blood pressure, and a fast heart beat are the most prominent symptoms of anxiety, and often impact workers ("Anxiety," 2022). Depression can bring a lack of interest, pleasure, and/ or energy. Too much or too little sleep and nutrition are common with depression, as well as inability to concentrate, feeling worthless, and feeling guilty ("What is depression?," 2020). Suicide or thoughts of death also are common with depression ("Depression," 2022).

It is well known that anxiety and depression are common among humans, and with this, these disorders can impact one's functioning. The United States has a high percentage of people with anxiety disorders and depressive disorders (Kroenke et al., 2009). Unsurprisingly, anxiety and depression are the most common mental health disorders in inpatient and outpatient facilities. Anxiety and depression coexist, and disability often comes with them (Kroenke et al., 2009). Untreated anxiety disorders and depressive disorders can impact a person's functioning greatly. Reduced functioning and worsened well-being, both common in individuals with depression and anxiety, have great impacts on health. These health impacts can be equivalent or worse than chronic conditions (Schonfeld et al., 1997). A person's overall well being can affect one's work life too. Also, with employees having anxiety and depression comes an increase in medical costs, which in turn could cost organizations more money for health care costs. Employers should be aware that POS can be a resource for reducing stress and burnout, which could reduce anxiety and depression and in turn help the organization.

POS can reinforce socioemotional needs, which helps one's self enhancement (Kurtessis et al., 2017, p. 1876). Perceiving fairness and support from employers can make employees want success for their employer. There is an aspect of social exchange that happens with an employee

and their employer's support. Having a high sense of POS should elicit the norm of reciprocity. Effort and hard work is exchanged for loyalty, benefits, and resources from the employer (p. 1856). An employee is more likely to be open to helping their organization and increase performance when they feel they are being seen and could be rewarded. In addition, POS is assumed to fulfill socioemotional needs which can lead to a person feeling they have an identity in the organization. Socioemotional needs are approval, esteem, affiliation, and emotional support (p.1856), all basic needs. Hobfoll (2001) says that organizations that have workplace social support are more likely to support employees with stressors and strains, helping employees overall.

Organizational support theory (OST) proposes that employees form a generalized perception concerning POS (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Fairness and the perception of support employees perceive or receive, and the different levels of relationships are part of OST. Employees want to help and show up to work to support the organization to succeed when everyone feels supported. Valuing employees and showing consideration is important, this likely reduces employees' anxiety and depression. Likewise, if employees favor or do not favor the organization they work for, this may relate to how they feel at work. We know that psychological well-being is greater with POS.

Having organizational support examples such as work performance feedback, job autonomy, and supervisor support, are keys to one's POS. With this, individual workplace engagement can be predicted by organizational resources and personal resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 110). Core elements of health, well being, self esteem, a meaning in life, and a sense of purpose are commonly valued resources. Supportive behavior makes a difference to people, such as having a supervisor checking in with organizational and/or personal interactions. Employees

recognize when there is a difference or lack of positive feedback/ rewards given for different levels of performance, which creates an idea that the organization is not giving attention to the performance level of each employee (Eisenberger et al., 2016, p. 11). Having employers that are aware that providing positive work feedback and rewards for employees who perform high can be a tool in enhancing POS is important (p. 11). Organization supports actively impacts employees.

Having helpful resources from work is important to employees. Hobfoll et al. (2018) shows that employee engagement is predicted by job resources. The feeling of having resources at a workplace in turn can improve employee work performance feedback, job autonomy, and supervisor support. POS is a resource that employers can implement to help both parties involved. POS can help stop job stress and job burnout. Job burnout is the wearing down of performance due to intensive work, and can affect one's physically and psychologically. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal achievement all come out of job burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). POS should serve as an important resource for reducing these things. Based on this research and theory, I developed the following two hypotheses concerning the potential relationship between POS and anxiety, and POS and depression.

Hypothesis 1: POS is negatively related to anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: POS is negatively related to depression.

Method

Institutional Review Board approval was secured by my mentor prior to initiating the data collection, and anonymized data were analyzed for my study. The Prolific (www.prolific.co) crowdsourcing website that allows researchers to collect data from willing participants was used for three reasons. First, Prolific is a trustworthy data source due to the fact that they take

numerous steps to ensure that participants are high quality (e.g., verifying phone numbers of participants; cf., Bradley, 2018). Survey data collected via crowdsourcing are comparable to more traditional data sources (e.g., single organization samples) in terms of reliabilities and effect sizes (Walter et al., 2019). Peer et al. (2017) also showed that Prolific participants are less dishonest and provide similar data in terms of quality as MTurk participants.

Procedure

Participants were recruited who (a) were at least 18 years old, (b) currently employed, (c) had a direct supervisor at work, (d) and who currently reside in the U.S. or Canada. Participants were asked to complete three surveys with one week in between each survey, although for this project only data from the first survey were used. 500 participants were recruited. Respondents were paid \$1.17 per survey, and surveys took 7 minutes (\$10.02/hour payment).

Participants

494 adults completed the Prolific survey: 50.2% of participants were male, 48.8% were female. This sample was primarily white, European, or European American, 80.2% identified themselves as such. 8.1% of participants identified themselves as or Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander.

Measures

Participants were presented with the informed consent, after which they reported their Prolific ID. Participants had to pass a CAPTCHA verification (Aguinis et al., 2021), prior to being asked to think about their primary job. Measures were presented in random order.

Perceived organizational support. The first 10 items from Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) short version of the Survey of POS were captured, although only the five positively framed items

were used in the analysis. An example item is “The organization really cares about my well-being.”

Anxiety and depression. Anxiety and depression were measured with two-item scales from the PHQ-4 (Kroenke et al., 2009). Instructions were, “During the last week, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?” The anxiety items included “Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge,” and “Not being able to stop or control worrying.” The depression items included “Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless,” and “Little interest or pleasure in doing things.” Responses are on a “0” (*not at all*) to “3” (*nearly every day*) scale.

Results

Ordinary least squares regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Participant sex and job tenure were included as controls, after which POS was entered into the model. The hypotheses were supported. People who reported higher levels of POS tended to report lower levels of anxiety and depression. Specifically, a one point increase in POS was associated with reports of depression that were 0.29 points less (95% CI: -.38, -.21), and this effect is significantly different from zero. In addition, a one point increase in POS was associated with reports of anxiety that were 0.19 points less (95% CI: -.28, -.09), and this effect is significantly different from zero. In summary, if more support is perceived, then employees tend to be less anxious and depressed.

Discussion

A limitation of this study is that data was collected from only one survey, so the causal ordering of variables cannot be established. Additionally, over 80% of the sample population was white so we did not take into account a culturally diverse group of participants. Also, it is possible that people who are more anxious may tend to perceive their organization as less

supportive, for example. Future research is needed to better understand the impacts that POS can have on both employees and employers. Likewise, future research could look at the impact that coworkers can have in addition to POS.

Conclusion

POS is important for organizations to be aware of with our findings that people who reported higher levels of POS tended to report lower levels of anxiety and depression. Having a work environment that feels supportive can be key to mental health. Understanding the role of POS in anxiety and depression is important for work success, employee well being, self enhancement, and overall mental health. With this, organizations having awareness of the effect their support can have on employees is important and could allow for lower turnover and happier employees. A reinforcement of socioemotional needs from POS helps one's self enhancement, and in turn this can help the employer/ work organization be successful.

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