Communication Motives, Satisfaction, and Social Support in the Workplace: Are Supervisors Effective Support Sources in Employee Networks?

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Abstract

In this study we examine the relationship among supervisors’ social support skills, employees’ communication motives, and supervisor-subordinate relationship satisfaction. A network approach focuses on the relational tie between actors, as opposed to characteristics of the actors themselves. Using a sample of employees (N=222) from a wide range of occupations, we found that supervisors’ emotional, informative, and instrumental social support skills are positively correlated with employees’ communication motives of pleasure, affect, inclusion, and relaxation. While network studies suggest the need to navigate one’s social web in order to acquire different types of support from different proximate alters, employees herein report attaining emotional, informative, and instrumental support from one singular tie: Their supervisor at work.

1. Introduction

According to the American Psychological Association [59], three quarters of Americans experience symptoms related to stress in a given month. Among people who experience stress and burnout, 77% have physical symptoms and 73% have psychological symptoms. While these phenomena might be caused by personal and family problems, it should be realized that work stress can lead to severe consequences for workers, including physical, attitudinal, and emotional exhaustion [39], drug and alcohol abuse, and low morale [49]. Therefore, researchers have examined supportive communication within the workplace and highlight the important role that social support plays in protecting workers from job-related stress and burnout [42]. According to a survey on addiction and mental health [17], the top ten stressors in the workplace include “no feedback”, “no appreciation”, and “lack of communication,” indicating the need for improved superior-subordinate interaction.

To date, organizational scholars have paid an abundant amount of attention to superior-subordinate communication, yet the relationship between supervisors’ social support and general employee satisfaction in the workplace remains unclear. Therefore, this study intends to explore the correlation between supervisors’ social support skills and superior-subordinate communication satisfaction. During this process, employees’ motives to talk with their employers might be the mediating factor.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Supervisor-subordinate Communication Satisfaction

In general, communication satisfaction is conceptualized as one’s affective response to the fulfillment of a message exchange process [31, 58]. To date, scholars have considered communication satisfaction in three contexts; namely dyads, groups, and organizations [16, 44]. Through evaluating the quality of conversation and the relationship among workplace individuals [44], communication satisfaction is a crucial factor to accomplish positive organizational outcomes. Studies have consistently reported that high communication satisfaction in the workplace contributes to job satisfaction [70], task performance [48], productivity [58], occupational commitment [64], and morale [62].

It is important to consider the organizational context within which satisfaction arises, rather than merely addressing individual characteristics or traits [69]. Network scholars argue that social actors are embedded in a web of relations that define that actor’s situation in a social structure [12]. Within such a structure, the individual actor is simultaneously provided with opportunities and constraints that influence behavior, attitudes, etc. Therefore, the social
In any organizational setting, the interrelationships of actors across various functional roles contextualize action. For example, supervisor-subordinate interactions, also known as supervisory communication, are an important element contributing to communication and workplace satisfaction [7]. Supervisor-subordinate communication behaviors have been broadly defined by Jablin [33] as “an exchange of information and influence among organizational members where one of those members has official authority to direct and evaluate other members of organizational activities.” Researchers have offered compelling arguments that effective supervisory communication may have a positive impact on other organizational outcomes, such as improving employees’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment [57], and maintaining fulfilling workplace relationships [35].

One way to evaluate supervisor-subordinate satisfaction is Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX), which was originally developed to assess the dyad relationship quality between leaders and members [55]. Although not intended to examine communication satisfaction between supervisors and subordinates, LMX can be used as an effective tool to study this issue because the exchange between leaders and members is fundamentally achieved through communication processes [10]. McCroskey and Richmond [40] claim that when supervisors are more assertive and responsive, subordinates will have a higher evaluation of the supervisors’ credibility and attractiveness, which may contribute to a positive attitude toward their communication. Individual characteristics, such as gender, race, educational background [34], and workplace diversity [64] may influence the supervisor-subordinate relationship as well. In the organizational environment, a variety of non-material goods can be exchanged in social interaction [36], which includes information, advice, and other types of social support [37]. These different types of social currencies may lead to certain leader-member relationships [23, 29]. However, there is still a lack of evidence showing that supervisors’ capability to facilitate these social exchanges, such as social support skills, can impact supervisor-subordinate communication quality.

2.2. Social Support in the Organizational Context

Since the 1980s, a growing body of studies has attempted to explore the connections between social support and well being through examining supportive communication [15]. Network scholars in particular have explored the health-related repercussions of social relationships, considering social support as a network resource [e.g. 27, 30]. Social support is “the verbal and nonverbal behavior that influences how providers and recipients view themselves, their situations, the other, and their relationship…and is the principal process through which individuals coordinate their actions in support-seeking and support-giving encounters” [1]. Social support literature, while diverse and multidisciplinary [26], uniformly suggests the benefits of such communicative interactions for individuals’ physical and psychological health [46].

Although most research about supportive interaction focuses on the interpersonal context [11, 13, 14], when invoked in the organizational setting, social support also plays an important role in protecting workers from job-related stress and burnout [42]. For example, a study exploring occupational stress found that schoolteachers who received various forms of support from their supervisors were less susceptible to work-related burnout [53]. Moreover, Cromwell and Kolb [18] suggest that social support within an organization can improve efficiency, showing how knowledge transfer was impeded in an organization due to lack of time as well as lack of managerial support.

Although social support is an essential component to achieving relational (and organizational) goals, scholars have diverse perspectives on classifying types of social support in various settings [32, 71]. According to Miller [42], work-related social support may come in three forms: emotional, informative, and instrumental support. Emotional support attempts to boost one’s self-esteem (“I know that you are bright enough to do well”), show unconditional regard (“You know I’ll be proud of you no matter what you do”), or guarantee for help (“You can always come to me when you have problems”), among other things. Emotional support behaviors range from listening to providing advice, usually in order to help another cope with a life experience [6]. Informative support aims to reduce uncertainty and job-related stressors through providing advice about work (e.g., strategies for time management), clarifying job descriptions, and giving suggestions to balance work and life (e.g. suggesting a good health club for exercise). Finally, instrumental or tangible support refers to providing physical or material assistance (e.g., resources such as technology and support staff) to cope with a stressful situation.

In this study, we employ Miller’s [42] viewpoint for three reasons: first, this classification was developed in an organizational context, rather than adopted from the interpersonal setting. Second,
although House’s [32] four types of social support were also made within the workplace, Miller has the most straightforward and up-to-date version. Third, compared with House [32] and Xu & Burleson [71], Miller’s argument on supportive types owns an obvious advantage: clarity and parsimony. House labeled the fourth type as “appraisal,” which was identified as evaluation and praise. In addition, Xu and Burleson divided social support types into esteem, network (generating social connection and the sense of belonging), tangible (material assistance, similar to instrumental), emotional, and informational support. However, there is little evidence to show the boundary of “appraisal,” “esteem,” or “network” from emotional support. Behaviors such as confirming one’s work performance, boosting one’s esteem, and providing a sense of involvement should be a part of emotional support, because these are all comforting behaviors that attempt to reduce personal difficulties or disappointments. Therefore, we believe that Miller’s opinion on types of social support in the workplace—emotional, informational, and instrumental support—is the most parsimonious and straightforward.

These three types of support may be offered by various sources in the workplace. In fact, network scholars agree that various forms of social support are sought and received from various forms of relational ties [68, 69]. Wellman and Gulia examine the support networks of community members in a Toronto borough and conclude: “87% of the ties provide at least one dimension of support. However, only 39% of the ties provide at least three dimensions. To obtain a wide range of support, people must actively shop within their networks for those who specialize in giving this sort of help to them. They cannot count on most ties within their networks to give them the kinds of support they might need.” In another study, Cutrona and her colleagues [19] found that social support from parents predicted children’s GPA, yet social support from friends or romantic partners was not a significant predictor. Taken together, these studies suggest that social support is a resource that networks provide; however, any single tie may only provide one type of support meaning that individuals require strategic maneuvering through their social networks to get the variety of support needed. So who does an individual turn to when dealing with stress at work?

The three most common sources—supervisors, co-workers, and friends and family—all provide potentially stressed workers the support they need to cope with burnout [42]. Supervisors are more likely to provide instrumental and informational support, such as clarifying job expectations to reduce employees’ role ambiguity. Coworkers usually give informational and emotional support because they have valuable experience and clear understanding of the workplace context. Support from friends and family is typically emotional and instrumental, because friends and family members can not only provide “a shoulder to lean on” [42], but can also help the individual balance home and work by freeing him/her from home responsibilities. Because studies suggest that approximately one half of one’s support network is comprised of friends, family, and neighbors [69], it becomes increasingly important to explore other contexts of support that constitute the other half, such as one’s work environment.

Scholars have found that supportive communication in organizational contexts is related to reduced uncertainty, increased job satisfaction [43] and occupational commitment [2]. Allen suggests that employees’ perception on organizational support is important, because if they don’t feel they are supported or valued by their organization, they would be less likely to develop organizational commitment. Social support also contributes to decreased job stress and burnout [49], attitudes toward an immediate supervisor and the whole organization [6, 54], and emotional stress in multi-cultural organizations [3].

Social support has been described as an advanced form of workplace stress intervention [60]. However, supervisors’ skills to provide support, particularly the possibility to express care, boost self-esteem, and offer other types of comforting/emotional messages, has been understudied. The current study explores supervisors’ social support skills (as perceived by their subordinates) in terms of their ability to provide informational, instrumental, and also emotional support to employees. Moreover, supervisors’ support skills may relate to employees’ motive to engage in communication in the workplace and their overall satisfaction with their supervisor-subordinate relationship. Empirical research in interpersonal contexts suggests that social support is more effective when it matches the goals of the support recipient. More specifically, married couples were found to perceive sensitivity from their respective relational partners when they received the type of social support that matched their goals [67]. In other words, an individual would describe their partner as relationally sensitive if they sought and were therefore given emotional support. The existence of nonmatching support across these married couples affected relational satisfaction. This optimal matching model of social support [20, 21] plays a key role in connecting the dots (or variables) here: While Cutrona and her colleagues assert that a relational partner is satisfied when he/she finds social support to attend to a personal goal, here we similarly argue that in an organizational context, employees may be satisfied in relation to goals that they have in communicating with supervisors and the
ultimate social support received. Therefore, the next section addresses communication motives and the role it can play in the optimal matching of and benefits reaped from social support at work.

2.3. Interpersonal Communication Motives (ICM)

Scholars exploring communication motives suggest that communication is goal-oriented to satisfy interpersonal needs for affiliation, security, and ego-achievement [9, 50]. The early motives research explored media contexts, using Gratification Theory to explain media selection and effects [41]. Based on Schutz’s [56] Interpersonal Needs Theory, Rubin, Perse and Barbato [51] identified six primary motives for communication: pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control. Pleasure refers to the need for fun, excitement, and entertainment; affection is the need to express caring and love; inclusion reflects the need to participate and maintain relationships with others; escape focuses on the avoidance of other activities; relaxation involves the need to unwind and rest; control is used to maintain power and influence over others. These motives influence who we talk to, how we talk, and what we talk about [28]. In response to the motives described above, Rubin and Martin [50] later developed the theory of Interpersonal Communication Motives (ICM) to expand on the outcomes of such goal driven communication.

Rubin and Rubin [52] argue that socio-psychological factors such as locus of control and life-position, are predictors of interpersonal motives. Paulsel and Mottet [47] examine temperament traits, such as communication apprehension and nonverbal immediacy as antecedent factors. Anderson and Martin [4] investigate how communication competency skills (assertiveness and responsiveness) affect interpersonal motives, suggesting through self-report data that competent communicators are more likely to talk in response to affection and pleasure needs, while non-competent communicators talk more from control-and escape-related motives.

Communication motives have been explored in various interpersonal contexts, including family members [9, 25], friends [5], romantic relationships [45], elders [8], as well as teacher-student interactions [38, 67] among other relational contexts. However, this topic has yet to receive enough attention from scholars who study organizations.

One study examining motives in the organizational setting indicates that employees’ Machiavellianism was found to have a negative relationship with the affection motive; however, escape, relaxation, and control motives were positively related to Machiavellianism. In addition, affection and pleasure motives also directly influence employees’ satisfaction with supervisors [66]. The previously-discussed literature provides rationale for exploring how supervisors’ social support skills can relate to employees’ motives to communicate with them. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Supervisors’ social support skills (employees’ perception) are positively related to employees’ communication motives of pleasure, affection, inclusion, and relaxation.

As discussed in the previous section, studies about supervisor-subordinate communication satisfaction have been pervasive. Nevertheless, the link between supervisors’ social support skills and employees’ perceived satisfaction needs to be explored, and may be mediated by employees’ motives to communicate with supervisors. Therefore, we predict the following hypotheses:

H2: Employees’ communication motives of pleasure, affection, inclusion, and relaxation with supervisors are positively related to supervisor-subordinate communication satisfaction.

H3: Supervisors’ social support skills are positively related to supervisor-subordinate communication satisfaction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Procedures

Data was collected via students taking communication courses at a large Midwestern university. Students, in exchange for extra credit points, were asked to distribute an online survey link to a person they know who is 1) over 18 years of age; and 2) currently employed full-time. The heterogeneous sample (N=222) was varied in terms of gender (Male=90, Female=141), age (M=41, SD=11.7), and educational level (high school 22%, college 58%, and graduate school 21%). Employees are also from diverse types of organizations and positions. Nine job categories, originating from the 2000 Census Job Classification Guide, include such work-related positions as “professionals,” “technicians,” “sales workers,” etc. Organizational level is measured along three levels: executives (19%), managers (25%), and general staff (59%). The primary content of the online survey examined measures of employees’ perspective
and attitude about their immediate supervisors’ social support skills, motives to interact with supervisors, and their relationship quality.

3.2. Measures

Perceived social support skills. A scale was adapted from Xu and Burleson’s [71] study about desired and experienced social support among marital couples. In that study, authors combined and rewrote items from several existing measures including the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors [61], the Supportive Actions Scale [63], and the Social Support Behavior Scale [65]. The final instrument by Xu and Burleson consisted of 35 items that fit into five support types—emotional, esteem, informative, tangible, and network. In the current study we used their scale; however, instead of keeping the original support types, we re-categorized these items as three types: emotional, instrumental, and informational support to assess perceived supervisors’ social support skills. The re-organized scale shows a high reliability: emotional support α=0.90 (M=3.59, SD=1.00), instrumental α=0.92 (M=3.09, SD=1.32), and informative α=0.84 (M=3.30, SD=0.85). Four items were deleted because of their inappropriateness in an organizational setting (e.g., “Telling you that he/she loves you and feels close to you,” “Doing laundry or cooking for you while you are preparing for an important task.”) The final version of perceived supervisors’ social support skills includes 31 items, with responses ranging from 1=don’t receive at all to 5=receive a great deal.

Interpersonal Communication Motive Scale (ICMS). Rubin et al.’s [51] ICMS was employed to measure the six primary motives for individual communication: pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control. The scale has 28 items, assessing employees’ motives in talking with their supervisor, ranging from 1=not at all like me, to 5=exactly like me. One concern is the effectiveness of using this measurement in the organizational setting since it was developed to address interpersonal motives. Employees’ motives in talking with supervisors can be more limited because the possibility that employees communicate with supervisors from “affection” and “control” motives, for example, is quite rare. However, one study [66] has used this scale to measure employees’ communication motives with supervisors, showing the feasibility of using the scale within the organizational context. In this study, the measurement got a reliability of 0.94 for pleasure (M=2.81, SD=0.83), 0.83 for affection (M=3.20, SD=0.75), 0.87 for inclusion (M=2.37, SD=0.86), 0.89 for escape (M=1.81, SD=0.75), 0.90 for relaxation (M=2.34, SD=0.87), and 0.72 for control (M=2.48, SD=0.84).

Leader-Member Exchange Scale (LMX) was used to test employees’ relationship satisfaction with their supervisors [36]. The 12-item inventory includes four dimensions: affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect. The responses ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree, to examine the relationship quality between supervisor and subordinate, from the subordinate perspective. The Cronbach’s Alpha in this scale is 0.92 (M=3.78, SD=0.73).

4. Results

All three hypotheses were supported using Pearson’s r Correlation. See Table 1 which shows the correlation for all variables.

4.1. Supervisors’ Social Support Skills and Communication Motives [H1]

Perceived social support skills of immediate supervisors (emotional, informative, and instrumental combined) are positively related to employees’ motives of pleasure (r=0.42, p<.001), affection (r=0.43, p<.001), inclusion (r=0.30, p<.001), and relaxation (r=0.38, p<.001). Hypothesis one was therefore supported. In addition to the predicted variables, the escape motive was also significant to a lesser degree (r=0.17, p<.05), and the control motive was not significantly related to support skills.

Further tests were run to explore the relationship between each of the five significant motive types and each of the three support skill types. Emotional support was positively correlated with motives of pleasure (r=0.43, p<.001), affection (r=0.43, p<.001), inclusion (r=0.24, p<.001), and relaxation (r=0.35, p<.001). Informational support was positively related to motives of pleasure (r=0.38, p<.001), affection (r=0.31, p<.001), inclusion (r=0.24, p<.001), escape (r=0.17, p<.05), and relaxation (r=0.32, p<.001). Instrumental support was positively related with motives of pleasure (r=0.32, p<.001), affection (r=0.38, p<.001), inclusion (r=0.30, p<.001), escape (r=0.19, p<.001), and relaxation (r=0.33, p<.001).

4.2. Communication Motives and Satisfaction [H2]

Employees’ communication motives of pleasure (r=0.53, p<.001), affection (r=0.53, p<.001), inclusion (r=0.31, p<.001), and relaxation (r=0.35, p<.001) were positively related to supervisor-subordinate
communication satisfaction. Hypothesis two was also supported. The remaining communication motives of escape and control did not yield any significant results.

4.3. Supervisors’ Social Support skills and Communication Satisfaction [H3]

Perceived social support skills of immediate supervisors (emotional, informative, and instrumental combined) were positively related to supervisor-subordinate communication satisfaction (r=0.36, p<.001). Hypothesis three was also supported.

Results from further tests show that all types of social support were positively correlated with satisfaction individually. Emotional support was found to have the highest correlation (r=0.43, p<.001), followed by informative (r=0.29, p<.001), and instrumental (r=0.25, p<.001) types of social support.

5. Discussion

Employees in disparate organizations, occupying various roles in divergent job types, report significant relationships between perceptions of supervisors’ social support skills with their personal communication motives and overall relational satisfaction. Interestingly, employees appear satisfied with supervisor-subordinate interactions regardless of the type of social support skills possessed by their supervisors.

One of the major contributions of this study is the importance of emotional support from supervisors and how this behavior can improve the organizational outcome. We reap various resources from networks that we belong to. Earlier, it was suggested that supervisors would be likely to provide instrumental and informational support, and that more horizontal relationships such as coworkers and friends and family would be more oriented towards emotional support for employees [42]. However, here we find that supervisors do indeed provide all three types of social support in various organizational contexts.

Network scholars have long suggested that various forms of social support are situated across a network of relations, and it is up to the individual to seek out the type of support needed from the appropriate other [18, 53, 69], aptly referred to by Wellman and Wortley [69] as “different strokes from different folks.” In attempting to uncover the “network basis of social support,” Wellman and Gulia [68] argue that heterogeneous, densely knit networks provide more resources in terms of the availability of actors that may provide various forms of social support. One interesting finding found here suggests that in organizations this may not be necessary, but instead employees may find most types of social support in one individual – their supervisor.

This empirical finding suggests important implications for network scholars. Future research must explore social support as a network resource, and uncover other contexts whereby multiple forms of social support may be found in a singular tie. In addition, network ties must take into account the diversity of resources that characterize relations. In other words, when two ties are connected by multiple edges, they are described as multiplex in that multiple types of relations serve to connect them in the social network. For example, a next-door neighbor may also be a best friend and simultaneously a math partner and fellow soccer teammate. This reductionistic approach to multiplexity is a quantitative count of ties connecting any two nodes. Amongst the employees sampled herein, one type of relation is measured and explored: the supervisor-subordinate interaction at work. This singular relation may also be defined in terms of multiplexity, as a qualitative assessment of relational quality. Employees reap multiple forms of support from the same alter type: their supervisor. One important implication of these findings is the critical need to differentiate quantitative from qualitative assessments of multiplex ties, especially in studies exploring the exchange of network resources and the need to navigate one’s near-peers to acquire specific resources from specified alters.

Additionally, emotional support has traditionally been thought of as the byproduct of interaction with intimate others such as friends and family [42, 69], and not necessarily within the purview of vertical organizational relations. Data here suggest that the organizational landscape does not need to be devoid of emotions; in fact a supervisors’ ability to emotionally support their staff is related to their staff’s relational satisfaction.

In sum, the findings here suggest that employees can find social support from their supervisors, even emotional support. One question arises, upon the confirmation of such results. Cutrona and her colleagues [22] explored neighborhood stressors and the lack of support that neighbors feel due to lack of resources in a given area. Above and beyond intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics, they focus on the context of support (including the resources available to the community as a whole). Therefore, to what extent do these employees report receiving social support from their supervisors not because of any inherent characteristics of the supervisor him/herself or the supervisor-subordinate relationship, but rather because of the resources at hand and the social support opportunities of the organizational context?
Although this study furthers our understanding of social support in the work-environment, it also leads to several open-ended questions as well. Supervisor’s ability to provide support for their workers is an important realization and early step in continuing to understand and prevent burnout and stress in organizational life. Future studies must unpack the causational chain of events to determine whether motives lead to perceptions of skill, or vice versa.

Among all the social support types, emotional support from supervisors is found to be the most important element that enhances supervisor-subordinate communication satisfaction and relationship quality. Although interaction in the workplace is usually stereotyped as rational, structured, strategic behavior [24, 72], when done effectively, emotional communication between supervisors and employees can potentially contribute to a positive and healthy communication environment. This finding illustrates the relevance of emotionality within organizational contexts and should encourage future research to continue exploring the process of emotional interaction in the workplace.

Moreover, the perceived social support skills of supervisors seem to be more paramount than the actual support offered. Employees seek communication with their supervisors for various reasons, yet five different communication motives were significantly related to all three types of social support (except for the escape motive, which doesn’t relate to emotional support). This may suggest that communication motives in an organizational setting need to be reassessed. One observation made during data analysis was the lack of corresponding motives that may lead to informational social support. Many interactions in the workplace, we assume, might be information seeking behaviors. Simply, the typology borrowed from Rubin et al does not identify a purely informational motive, which typifies many communication situations. Future research should re-evaluate the motives scale and suggest more exhaustive categories that correspond more explicitly to support types.

In all, this paper contributes to an otherwise undersupplied body of literature on social support in the workplace; an increasingly vital topic as employees continue to face work strain, burnout, etc. Although we reap various resources from networks that we belong to, this study demonstrates that social support is within the purview of the superior-subordinate relationship. Not only is informational support key to the satisfaction of workers, but instrumental and emotional types of support are related to a healthy working environment as well. Organizational leaders are encouraged to promote the development and employment of social support in the workplace to promote a more worker-satisficing climate.

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*p < .05, **p < .01 Control Motive was found not to relate to any variable, so it is excluded in the study
6. References


