https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN25.3.272

Supervisors' Gratitude and Employees' Feelings About Their Supervisor and Organization

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ABSTRACT. A 2012 survey by the John Templeton Foundation found that a majority of employees said they would feel better about themselves and that they would work harder for a supervisor who was more grateful (Kaplan, 2012). These findings prompted the present study in which we investigated whether employees' perceptions of their supervisors' expressed gratitude were predictors of employees' perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. We used MTurk to recruit participants and they took online surveys. Using data from 278 respondents, we ran a series of linear regressions. We found that the perception of gratitude expressed by a direct supervisor positively predicted perceived organizational support ($\beta = .64$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .41$), perceived supervisor support ($\beta = .82$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .67$), affective organizational commitment ($\beta = .62$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .38$), and job satisfaction ($\beta = .50$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .25$). Our results imply that supervisors who express gratitude could increase employees' positive feelings about their workplace and supervisors.

Keywords: gratitude, perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction

Gratitude is a familiar aspect of positive psychology and has been defined over the years as an emotion, a mood, and/or an affective trait; it is often referred to as dispositional gratitude (Fehr et al., 2017). McCullough et al. (2002) defined dispositional gratitude as "a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains" (p. 112) and included within their definition four facets: intensity, frequency, span, and density.

The frequency facet is a particularly important one, as McCollough et al. (2002) stated that individuals with a grateful disposition reported feeling grateful more often than others, and that this grateful feeling could be brought on even by simple favors done by others. It has also been shown that those who perceive someone to have helped more in a situation are more grateful to that person, supporting the idea that people who participate in prosocial behavior more often will receive more gratitude, thus encouraging them to continue that behavior (Chow & Lowery, 2010). Wood et al. (2010) suggested that gratitude plays a role in psychological health and physical well-being.

Looking specifically at the workplace, Fehr et al. (2017) provided a model of gratitude in the workplace, called the Multilevel Model of Gratitude in Organizations. This model suggested that there are three levels of gratitude experienced in three different ways: episodic gratitude experienced at the event level, persistent gratitude experienced at the individual level, and collective gratitude experienced at the organizational level. In particular, they suggested that gratitude at the individual employee level could increase well-being and communal relationships within the workplace. Similar results were found by Ford et al. (2018). They found that daily gratitude felt toward one's organization predicted higher organizational citizenship.

Other studies have also corroborated this claim that gratitude can increase employee well-being, specifically in that positive visualizations

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and writing-based interventions can increase job performance, and that gratitude interventions can decrease job burnout (Allen & McCarthy, 2016; Chan, 2011). These research findings reinforce the idea that experiencing gratitude in the workplace can be good for employees. However, most of these studies focused on employee-generated gratitude, but did not investigate how external gratitude (i.e., from one's supervisor) affects employees. A survey by the John Templeton Foundation found that employees believed having a supervisor that expressed their gratitude towards them would increase their morale and work ethic, suggesting that the effects of this external gratitude may be extensive and should be studied (Kaplan, 2012).

Perceived supervisor and organizational support and perceived supervisor gratitude are concepts that are most likely closely related. Generally, gratitude may be one facet of support. Support, or social support specifically, is usually grouped into five categories: supportive actions, appraisal, social cognition, symbolic interactionism, and relationships (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Perceived gratitude falls into the supportive actions category, as this category is defined as "supportive behaviors provided by others" (p. 30). Because support is a multifaceted concept, it may be helpful to investigate every aspect of it individually and how each category plays a part in the overall perception of support. External gratitude may also affect other facets of employees' opinions about their organization such as affective organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Eisenberger et al. (1986) defined perceived organizational support as "the extent to which the organization values [an employee's] contributions and cares about their well-being" (p. 504). They found that employees form global beliefs about perceived organizational support and that these beliefs influence absenteeism. Eisenberger et al. (2002) also found that perceived organizational support was related to other positive employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, positive mood, and lessened withdrawal behavior. However, Tucker et al. (2018) cautioned that supervisors who have low emotion regulation often create more stress for their employees when attempting to show support. They suggested that emotion regulation is an important skill to have as a supervisor.

Perceived supervisor support is similar to perceived organizational support, but it involves employees' relationship with their direct supervisor instead of the organization as a whole. Eisenberger et al. (2002) found a relationship between perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support. The researchers found, using data from many different organizations, that perceived supervisor support was positively related to a temporal change in perceived organizational support, suggesting that perceived supervisor support can lead to perceived organizational support.

Affective organizational commitment is the emotional bond that an employee feels they share with their organization, and job satisfaction is often an antecedent to affective organizational commitment (Chordiya et al., 2017). For retail sales workers, Eisenberger et al. (2002) found a negative relationship between perceived supervisor support and employee turnover, mediated by perceived organizational support, suggesting that the role and position of the supervisor can have a significant effect on perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, and affective organizational commitment.

Job satisfaction was defined by Locke (1969) as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one's job" (p. 309). It has been shown to be significantly related to positive affectivity by Connolly and Viswesvaran (2000), suggesting that those with more positive affect, including a proclivity for gratitude, could experience more job satisfaction than their peers with lower positive affectivity. Job satisfaction has also been shown to be positively correlated with individual and institutional gratitude (Waters, 2012).

For the current study, we investigated whether supervisors' expressions of gratitude would predict employees' feelings about the organization and their supervisor. We hypothesized that employees' perceptions of their supervisors' expressed gratitude would be a predictor of their perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

Method

Participants

We recruited 320 participants to take our online survey. We excluded data from 22 participants because they gave the same answers throughout the survey, and we thought it was possible that they did not read some of the questions, especially because some of the items from the scales were positive and some were negative. Another 20 participants' data were excluded because they discontinued the survey during or after the first scale.

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We asked participants to write their sex on the survey, and 147 participants identified as women and 131 participants identified as men. The average age of the participants was 39.08 (*SD* = 11.16). They listed their ethnic/racial background as being European American or White (80.9%); African American or Black (8.3%); Asian (5.0%); multiracial (3.6%); and Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (2.2%). None of the participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native; Middle Eastern or North African; or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. They also did not mark "other" or "prefer not to answer." The participants reported living in the United States in the Midwest (22.7%), the Northeast (15.9%), the South (34.3%), and the West (27.1%). Three participants did not answer the question about where they lived.

The participants characterized their jobs as an employee of a for-profit company/business or as an individual working for wages, salary, or commission (71.9%); a local, state, or federal government employee (13.3%); an employee of a not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organization (10.4%); or self-employed in a personal or family business, professional practice, or farm (4.7%). They worked on average 42.58 (*SD* = 7.43) hours the week before taking the survey, and this also included work not performed at their workplace. Three participants did not report their work hours. Fourteen percent of the participants had more than one job. They were instructed to take the survey based on the job where they worked the most hours. For salary, participants reported making less than $35,000 (32.5%), making between $35,000 and $49,999 (21.7%), and making between $50,000 and $74,999 (30.7%). Fewer participants reported making between $75,000 and $99,999 (9.4%) or making over $100,000 (5.8%).

Measures

Affective Organizational Commitment

Like Rhoades et al. (2001), we used five items from the Affective Commitment Scale (Meyer & Allen, 1997; Meyer et al., 1993) and one item about pride in organizational membership from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1979) to assess affective commitment. Example items include "I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization" and "I am proud to tell others I work at my organization." Participants responded using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Rhoades et al. (2001) reported an alpha coefficient of .85 for the scale, and we found an alpha coefficient of .95 for this study. To establish validity evidence, Rhoades et al. (2001) found the scale to positively correlate with perceived organizational rewards, organizational support, procedural justice, and supervisor support.

Job Satisfaction

The Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire-Job Satisfaction subscale (Cammann et al., 1979, 1983) was used for this study. The subscale consists of three items including "All in all I am satisfied with my job," "In general, I don't like my job (reverse-coded)," and "In general, I like working here." Other authors have used 5-, 6-, and 7-point Likert-type scales (Bowling & Hammond, 2008), and for this study a 5-point Likert-type scale was used ranging from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*). Bowling and Hammond (2008) found an alpha coefficient of .84 for the scale, and we found an alpha coefficient of .95 for this study. They also found evidence for validity of the subscale by finding positive correlations with affective commitment, career satisfaction, coworkers, job involvement, justice (i.e., distributive, interactional, procedural), normative commitment, organizational commitment, pay, promotional opportunities, satisfaction with work itself, and supervision. They also found negative relationships with anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, frustration, general psychology strains, job tension, and physical symptoms.

Perceived Organizational Support

The Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986, Eisenberger et al., 1990; Shore & Tetrick, 1991; Shore & Wayne, 1993) was developed to assess an individual's feelings about being supported by their organization. For this study, we used the 8-item short form listed by Rhoades et al. (2001). Example items include "My organization really cares about my well-being" and "My organization strongly considers my goals and values." Participants used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Rhoades et al. (2001) found an alpha coefficient of .90 for the scale, and we found an alpha coefficient of .95 for this study. To establish evidence for the validity of the scale, Rhoades et al. (2001) found it to positively correlate with affective organizational commitment, perceived organizational rewards, procedural justice, and supervisor support.

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Perceived Supervisor Support

To evaluate participants' beliefs that their supervisors cared about their well-being and valued their contributions, we used an adapted form of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support like Rhoades et al. (2001) used. They replaced the word "organization" with "supervisor" for four of the items. Example items include "My supervisor cares about my opinions" and "My work supervisor really cares about my well-being." Participants used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Rhoades et al. (2001) found an alpha coefficient of .90 for the scale, and we found an alpha coefficient of .95 for this study. To establish evidence for the validity of the scale, Rhoades et al. (2001) found that it positively correlated with affective organizational commitment, perceived organizational rewards, perceived organizational support, and procedural justice.

Supervisor's Gratitude

One question was used to assess supervisor's gratitude: "My direct supervisor shows his or her gratitude towards me." Participants used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Procedure

After Agnes Scott College institutional review board approval, participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). To be considered for the study, individuals had to be employed at least 30 hours per week and live in the United States. Participants were each paid $0.50. Participants were asked to complete a 10-minute online survey using SurveyMonkey. The survey contained scales about gratitude, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational support, and supervisor support. The survey also asked about demographic information. Participants were directed to a page thanking them for taking the survey, but no formal debriefing was given.

Results

An examination of the correlations in Table 1 showed that all variables were positively and significantly correlated with each other. We expected the correlations to be positively related to one another because the variables were assessing positive feelings about supervisors and organizations.

We then analyzed our data to evaluate our hypotheses using four separate linear regressions. We used regression because we wanted to see if perceived gratitude expressed by a supervisor affected organizational support, supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. In support of our hypotheses, we found that the perception of gratitude expressed by a direct supervisor positively predicted perceived organizational support ($\beta = .64$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .41$) and perceived supervisor support ($\beta = .82$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .67$). In addition, we found that the perception of gratitude expressed by a direct supervisor positively predicted affective organizational commitment ($\beta = .62$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .38$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = .50$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .25$).

Discussion

For this study we hypothesized that employees' perceptions of their supervisors' expressed gratitude would be a predictor of employees' perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. We found perceived supervisor gratitude to be a significant positive predictor for each of our dependent variables.

In the proposed Multilevel Model of Gratitude in Organizations by Fehr et al. (2017), they suggested that gratitude initiatives such as appreciation programs and developmental feedback could help increase episodic gratitude, which in turn could lead to increased organizational citizenship and resilience. The findings from the current study support their findings with perceived supervisor gratitude predicting perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

Our findings show that increasing expressed supervisor support could be a good method to increase employee felt support, satisfaction, and commitment. Using our research findings,

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Expressed Supervisor Support and the Dependent Variables

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. My direct boss shows his or her gratitude to me	278	4.90	1.69	–				
2. Perceived organizational support	278	37.47	11.91	.64*	–			
3. Perceived supervisor support	278	19.96	6.34	.82*	.75*	–		
4. Affective organizational commitment	275	27.92	10.12	.62*	.82*	.73*	–	
5. Job satisfaction	278	11.18	3.38	.50*	.70*	.57*	.74*	–

Note. Higher score indicates greater magnitude. All analyses were two-tailed.
*$p < .001$.

organizations could develop training programs and initiatives to encourage supervisors to express gratitude to their workers and to use values of positive psychology in their everyday work. Organizations could also promote employees to the level of supervisor who are more prone to showing gratitude.

Strengths and Limitations

There were several strengths of our research. One strength was the diversity and size of our sample. Because we recruited our participants using MTurk, we were able to reach a wide range of people from different geographical regions, types of jobs, and incomes. This suggests that our findings may be more generalizable than if we had only recruited individuals locally. Another strength was that we used reliable measures that had evidence for their validity. In addition, not much research has been conducted on gratitude and the workplace, and the findings from this study can be used to develop future studies on the topic.

Our research did have a few limitations. Although the use of MTurk had benefits, it also limited our sample in the sense that those who do not use MTurk could not participate. Another limitation was that most of our sample identified as being White. We would have hoped to have a more racially/ethnically diverse sample so that our sample more fully represented the workers in the United States. Another limitation is that we used just one item to assess supervisor gratitude. Because gratitude is a complex, multifaceted concept, using just one item to measure gratitude could have influenced our results. For example, the respondents could have felt their supervisors showed gratitude in some ways and not in other ways, but had to give an overall assessment. Finally, supervisors' behaviors, including expressions of gratitude, change throughout the day, so when we asked participants about their supervisors, they could have been thinking about one specific instance of behavior that did not represent their supervisors' typical behaviors (Ford et al., 2018).

Future Work

We believe that the significant data, along with our perceived limitations, provide a wealth of future research ideas for this topic. First, because of the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in our sample, it would be beneficial to repeat our study but recruit participants who are more representative of the workplace domestically and globally. Researchers may also want to evaluate whether these findings generalize to different classes, genders, and sexuality represented in the workplace.

Another avenue of research could be experimental. Because gratitude interventions have been shown in the past to increase gratitude (Krejtz et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2005), it may be valuable to see if gratitude interventions could increase supervisors' expressed gratitude. For instance, there could be two groups, one where supervisors simply write about events of their day in a journal every day for a set period of time (i.e., control), and the other where supervisors write in a journal every day about things that they were grateful for, specifically in reference to their employees (i.e., experimental). It is possible that the experimental group could, during and/or after the study, show higher levels of expressed gratitude, which could in turn impact their employees.

A third possible study could include evaluating specific ways that supervisors express gratitude and how this affects employees' perceptions of the workplace. Different expressions of gratitude may produce more effective or salient reactions in employees, and thus may be more effective to use. These different expressions can include raises, compliments, notes/letters, awards, and others. If one expression of gratitude was found to be more effective in boosting employee morale, it would be advantageous to use that. The opposite is also true. If another expression of gratitude is found to be significantly less effective than the others, it would be important for supervisors to know that.

One thing to note is that we asked employees to tell us if they thought their supervisors showed gratitude toward them. Our participants' perceptions were important for our study because those ultimately impact the employees' perceived support, job satisfaction, and commitment, but it could be the case that their supervisors were actually showing gratitude and the employees were not realizing it. This would be an interesting topic for future research.

This study sought to answer the question of how supervisors' expressed support affected various measures of job satisfaction and commitment in employees. We found that this expressed gratitude was a strong predictor of all our factors (i.e., perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment). These findings have many implications for the workplace in terms of increasing employee well-being by encouraging supervisors to express their gratitude and support to their employees.

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The third author of this article was also the Invited Editor for this special issue of *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*. Therefore, this article was masked and assigned to a different editor in order to reduce potential bias and ensure that it received a consistently rigorous peer-review process.

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Correction to McKeon et al. (2020)

Regarding the article, "Supervisors' Gratitude and Employees' Feelings About Their Supervisor and Organization" by Emma J. McKeon, Kayla M. Trumbull, and Jennifer L. Hughes (Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp 272–277. https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN25.3.272)," the first author now identifies as Joseph W. McKeon.

The correct authorship listing (Joseph W. McKeon, Kayla M. Trumbull, and Jennifer L. Hughes) has now been corrected on the *Psi Chi Journal* website and should be used in all citations and references moving forward.

Psi Chi Journal recognizes challenges faced by transgender and nonbinary authors when updating their records to reflect their identities. The journal's Editorial Team is committed to supporting authors and facilitating name changes to best "respect the language people use to describe themselves" (APA Publication Manual 5.2 & 5.5).

https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN29.2.167

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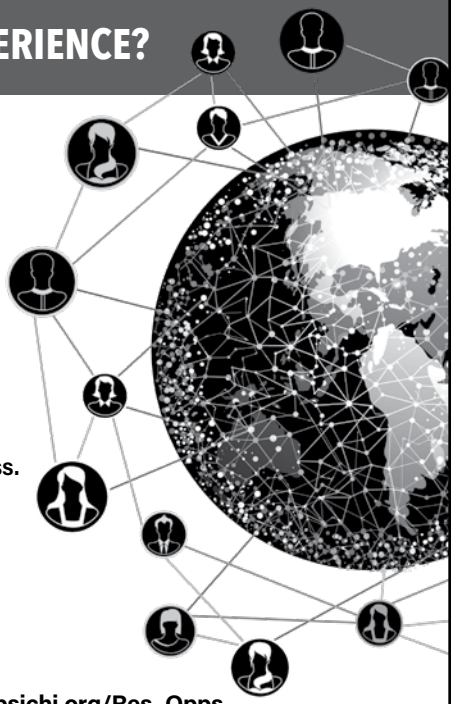
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