

How Social Identification Alters the Role of Reciprocity in Professional Employee Performance

The purpose of this research is to investigate how professional employees' social identification with their organization and their profession influences their performance in response to perceived organizational support (one type of favorable treatment) and perceived psychological contract violation (one type of unfavorable treatment). My study focuses specifically on practicing physicians employed by a large managed care organization. Drawing mainly from research on social exchange (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1989) and social identification (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1991), I develop a model describing interactional asymmetries that appear difficult to explain from the standpoint of organizational research on social exchange (see Figure 1).

Managed Healthcare Organizations and the Medical Profession

My research site is a large health maintenance organization (i.e. "Healthcorp," which is a pseudonym), which directly employs more than 800 healthcare providers (both general practitioners and specialists) to care for its members. Employees view organizational administrators as the organization's representatives in social exchanges (Rousseau, 1995; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). Practicing physicians vary in the degree to which they view organizational administrators as different from themselves (e.g. Golden, Dukerich, & Fabian, 2000; Hoff, 1999). Both the organization and profession are expected to be primary bases of social identification for physician-employees at Healthcorp (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, forthcoming; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Physician-employees who socially identify with the organization will view themselves to be socially close to administrators, and socially distant from employees of other healthcare organizations, while those who identify with the profession will

view themselves to be socially close to fellow members of their profession, and distant from people outside the profession (Brewer, Ho, Lee, & Miller, 1987; Pratt et al., forthcoming).

SOCIAL EXCHANGE AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL DISTANCE

Perceived organizational support and perceived psychological contract violation are two organization science constructs founded on social exchange theory that can be used in combination to investigate employee reactions to favorable and unfavorable organizational treatment (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Organizational support theory proposes that to the degree employees feel they have been treated favorably by their organization, they develop a global belief regarding the extent to which the organization cares for and supports them, and values their contributions (Eisenberger, Huntington, Huntington, & Sowa, 1986). Higher levels of organizational support lead employees to respond with better attitudes and performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). A psychological contract reflects the employee's understanding of the mutual promises between the two parties (Rousseau, 1989). Psychological contract theory posits that when organizations violate employees' psychological contracts, employees respond with worse attitudes and performance (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Porter, Pearce, Tripoli, & Lewis, 1998; Robinson, 1996). The psychological contract embodies how employees expect to be treated, while organizational support is a benefit that exceeds employee expectations (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Perceived organizational support and perceived psychological contract violation are distinct conceptually and empirically (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005).

I contend that individuals desire to receive identity consistent treatment—the exchange of treatment that meets expectations with distant relations, and treatment that exceeds expectations with close relations (Gregory, 1982; Sahlins, 1972; Vivian & Berkowitz, 1992). However, individuals also receive treatment that is identity-inconsistent, such as when individuals receive worse than expected treatment from close relations, or better than expected treatment from

distant relations. I argue that individuals use their identities to make sense of and respond to both identity-consistent (e.g. hypotheses 1 and 2) and inconsistent treatment (e.g. hypotheses 3 and 4) (Stroebe, Lodewijckx, & Spears, 2005).

Exchange of favorable treatment with socially close partners. Social proximity intensifies the tendency to repay favorable treatment with favorable treatment (Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999) because people tend to appraise resources more highly when they come from those who are relationally close rather than from those who are more distant (Levinger, Senn, & Jorgensen, 1970). Highly organizationally identified professional employees are likely to highly value and be quite prepared to reciprocate perceived organizational support.

Hypothesis 1: As professional employees' identification with the organization increases, perceived organizational support will be more positively associated with professional employees' performance.

Exchange of unfavorable treatment with socially distant partners. Socially distant people view their relationship to be transactional and arms-length (McLean Parks, Kidder, & Gallagher, 1998), and also desire to limit their mutual responsibility to each other (Rousseau, 1990; Rousseau & McLean-Parks, 1993). Socially distant individuals are likely to retaliate against worse than expected treatment (i.e. contract violation), because retaliation is the best way to discourage future renegeing (Axelrod, 1984), and enforce the contract (Rousseau, 1995), which, when fulfilled, is consistent with the identities of socially distant employees. This reasoning suggests that when professional employees' identification with the profession is high, administrators will be seen as socially distant, and the more likely they will be to think that the appropriate response to contract violation is retaliation.

Hypothesis 2: As professional employees' identification with the profession increases, perceived psychological contract violation will be more negatively associated with professional employees' performance.

In the following two hypotheses, I contend that individuals also use their social identities to interpret and respond to treatment that is identity-inconsistent.

Receipt of unfavorable treatment from socially close partners. Receiving worse than expected treatment from close others is identity-inconsistent, and triggers sensemaking that is guided by one's social identity (Weick, 1995). Because close others reserve unfavorable treatment for deviants, people whose identity informs them that they are socially close will make sense of unfavorable treatment by viewing it as a message that their behavior is inadequate (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Tyler & Blader, 2003). This interpretation of unfavorable treatment motivates individuals to change their behavior so that the unfavorable behavior will cease, and be replaced with identity-consistent, favorable treatment (Swann, 1990). As a result, they will return favorable treatment in response to the receipt of unfavorable treatment from close others in an effort to recover standing with their close exchange partner.

Hypothesis 3: As professional employees' identification with the organization increases, perceived psychological contract violation will be more positively associated with professional employees' performance.

Receipt of favorable treatment from socially distant partners. In interactions between socially distant people, individuals anticipate receiving treatment that meets or is worse than their expectations. Because socially distant individuals desire to minimize their obligations to each other, better than expected treatment triggers sensemaking processes that are guided by one's identity. People whose identity informs them that they are socially distant view excessively favorable treatment as a means to draw distant others to themselves or to patronize socially distant recipients. By giving worse than expected treatment in exchange for better than expected treatment, socially distant individuals will discourage their partner from giving excessively favorable treatment in the future (Schroeder, Josephs, & Swann, 2003).

Hypothesis 4: As professional employees' identification with the profession increases, perceived organizational support will be more negatively associated with professional employees' performance.

METHODS

Sample

Our initial sample consisted of all 255 primary-care physicians (i.e., family practitioners) who were directly employed by Healthcorp. I had 133 usable responses (52.2% response rate).

Dependent Variables

Both performance measures capture physician effort on behalf of the organization. The first is physician productivity, which is the number of patients seen in a given time period. The second measure is the physician's level of adherence to medical guidelines; more specifically, I measured the standardized prescription rates of particular medications for patients that possess precise disease criteria. Both metrics are beneficial to Healthcorp. The physicians are not rewarded or compensated based on these metrics.

Independent Variables

Social identification. I measured the extent to which physicians identified with their organization and profession using the same five-items based on Mael and Ashforth (1992). The target of the items were changed based on the scale (i.e. "my organization" in the organizational identification scale was replaced with "doctors" in the professional identification scale). The composite reliability of this measure was .80 for organizational and .75 for professional identification.

Perceived Organizational Support. I measured the physicians' perceptions of the organization's commitment to them using an eight-item Likert scale based on Eisenberger et al. (1986). The composite reliability of this measure was .94.

Feelings of Violation. I measured the extent to which physicians felt violated by their organization using a four-item Likert scale based on Robinson and Morrison (2000). The composite reliability of this measure was .96.

Control Variables

I controlled for several relevant variables that may impact physician performance: physician full-time status, whether or not the physicians was a pediatrician, number of patients in panel, average patient age, ratio of female/total patients, and average chronic sickness of panel.

RESULTS

All four hypotheses were confirmed. For hypothesis 1, I found that physician-employees are more likely to reciprocate perceived organizational support with increased performance when they are strongly identified with Healthcorp. Confirming hypothesis 2, I found that when professional identification is high (+1 s.d.), there is a stronger negative relationship between perceived psychological contract violation and the two measures of performance than when professional identification is low (-1 s.d.). Confirming hypothesis 3, I found that perceived psychological contract violation is positively related to performance when organizational identification is high (+ 1 s.d.). Physician-employees may be attempting to regain lost status within their valued psychological group (i.e., Healthcorp) by increasing their performance. For hypothesis 4, I found that professionals whose self-concept is highly connected to their profession interpret the favorable treatment as a sign that distance from the organizational administrators may need to be more clearly asserted by reducing their performance as they receive more organizational support.

References

- Aselage, J., & Eisenberger, R. 2003. Perceived organizational support and psychological contracts: A theoretical integration. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24: 491-509.
- Axelrod, R. 1984. *The evolution of co-operation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Blau, P. M. 1964. *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley.
- Branscombe, N. R., Wann, D. L., Noel, J. G., & Coleman, J. 1993. Ingroup or outgroup extremity: Importance of the threatened social identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19: 381-388.
- Brewer, M. B., Ho, H., Lee, J., & Miller, N. 1987. Social identity and social distance among Hong Kong school children. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 13: 156-165.
- Coyle-Shapiro, J. A.-M., & Conway, N. 2005. Exchange relationships: Examining psychological contracts and perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90: 774-781.
- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Huntington, S., & Sowa, D. 1986. Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71: 500-507.
- Golden, B. R., Dukerich, J. M., & Fabian, F. H. 2000. The interpretation and allocation of resource allocation issues in professional organizations: A critical examination of the professional-manager dichotomy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37.
- Gregory, C. A. 1982. *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Hoff, T. J. 1999. The Social Organization of Physician-Managers in a Changing HMO. *Work and Occupations*, 26: 324-351.
- Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. 2000. Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 121-141.
- Levinger, G., Senn, D. J., & Jorgensen, P. W. 1970. Progress toward permanence in courtship: A test of Kerckhoff-Davis hypotheses. *Sociometry*, 33: 427-443.
- Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. 1992. Alumni and their alma maters: A partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13: 103-123.
- McLean Parks, J., Kidder, D. L., & Gallagher, D. G. 1998. Fitting square pegs into round holes: mapping the domain of contingent work arrangements onto the psychological contract. *Journal of Organisational Behavior*: 697-730.
- Morrison, E. W., & Robinson, S. L. 1997. When employees feel betrayed: A model of how psychological contract violation develops. *Academy of Management Review*, 22: 226-256.
- Porter, L. W., Pearce, J. L., Tripoli, A. M., & Lewis, K. M. 1998. Differential perceptions of employers inducements: Implications for psychological contracts. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19: 782-796.
- Pratt, M. G., Rockmann, K., & Kaufmann, J. B. forthcoming. Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy Management Journal*.
- Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. 2002. Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87: 698-714.
- Robinson, S. L. 1996. Trust and breach of the psychological contract. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41: 574-599.

- Robinson, S. L., & Morrison, E. W. 2000. The development of psychological contract breach and violation: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21: 525-546.
- Rousseau, D. M. 1989. Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee Rights and Responsibilities Journal*, 2: 121-139.
- Rousseau, D. M. 1990. New hire perceptions of their own and their employer's obligations: a study of psychological contracts. *Journal of Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 11: 389-400.
- Rousseau, D. M., & McLean-Parks, J. 1993. The contracts of individuals and organizations. In L. L. Cummings & B. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*, Vol. 15: 1-43.
- Rousseau, D. M. 1995. *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sahlins, M. D. 1972. *Stone Age Economics*. New York: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Schroeder, D. G., Josephs, R. A., & Swann, W. B., Jr. 2003. Foregoing lucrative employment to preserve low self-esteem, *University of Texas*. Austin.
- Stroebe, K., Lodewijkx, H. F. M., & Spears, R. 2005. Do unto others as they do unto you: Reciprocity and social identification as determinants of ingroup favoritism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31: 831-845.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. 1990. To be known or to be adored? The interplay of self-enhancement and self-verification. In R. M. Sorrentino & E. I. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior*, Vol. 2: 408-448. New York: Guilford.
- Tekleab, A. G., & Taylor, M. S. 2003. Aren't There Two Parties in an Employment Relationship? Antecedents and Consequences of Organization-Employee Agreement on Contract Obligations & Violations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24: 585-608.
- Turner, J. C. 1991. *Social Influence*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Tyler, T. R., & Blader, S. L. 2003. The Group Engagement Model: Procedural Justice, Social Identity, and Cooperative Behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7: 349-361.
- Van Maanen, J., & Barley, S. 1984. Occupational Communities: Culture and control in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 6: 287-365.
- Vivian, J. E., & Berkowitz, N. H. 1992. Anticipated bias from an outgroup: An attributional analysis. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 22: 415-424.
- Weick, K. E. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yamagishi, T., Jin, N., & Kiyonari, T. 1999. Bounded Generalized Reciprocity: In-group Boasting and Ingroup Favoritism. *Advances in Group Processes*, 16: 161-197.

FIGURE 1
Organizational Treatment, Social Identification,
and Professional Employee Performance

