

Why Do Social Support Affect Prosocial Service Behaviors? The Moderating Role of Service Climate

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Abstract

Taking the multifoci perspective, the present study integrated social exchange and climate research to evaluate the effects of social exchange relationships (i.e., perceived organizational support [POS] and perceived team support [PTS]) on contact employees' prosocial service behaviors. A dyad data of 197 contact employees and supervisors in a large supermarket chain of Taiwan showed that POS and PTS were positively associated with the exhibition of extra-role customer service. However, only PTS contributed to role-prescribed customer service. This paper also demonstrated the relationship between POS and extra-role customer service was enhanced within a strong service climate. Through empirical examination, theoretical and managerial implications were discussed.

Keywords: perceived organizational support; perceived team support; role-prescribed customer service; extra-role customer service, service climate.

Introduction

Contact employees in service organizations often offer customers the first and the only impression of the service organization (Bowen & Schneider, 1985). As services are often intangible, customers will rely on employees' behavior to form opinions about the service offered (Clark, 1997). While role-prescribed behaviors are basic requirements for contact employees, extra-role customer service is an unexpected behavior that delights the customer through the provision of little extras and spontaneous exceptional service during the service encounter. Such service-related behaviors, which are going beyond simply meeting customer expectations, positively benefit the firm (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). How employees behave in a service setting actually becomes part of the service and influences customer perceptions about a service organization (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990).

Since how employees treat customers is a reflection of how the organization treats its employees (Bowen, Gilliland, & Folger, 1999), internal social exchange within an organization must operate effectively and satisfactorily to have the organization achieve its goal of positive external exchange with customers (Yoon, Seo, & Yoon, 2004). Perceived organizational support (POS) (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986; Shore & Tetrick, 1991; Shore & Wayne, 1993) and perceived team support (PTS) are two essential components of the internal

social exchange relationships associated with employee outcomes (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

Despite the proximal difference between POS and PTS, employees are more sensitive to support from their teams than organizational support (Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000). The multifoci notion of social exchange suggests that employees can and do form multiple relationships at work with multiple parties (Cropanzano, Chrobot-Mason, Rupp, & Prehar, 2004). To advance understanding of this question, the current study examines the effects of POS and PTS on this prosocial service behavior by applying the multifoci perspective of social exchange.

Traditionally, service research has focused on identifying the individual attributes, such as personality or attitudes, that are associated with work behaviors in service settings (Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter., 2001; Koys, 2001). There is a need to examine how service climate affects the relationship between multiple social exchanges and prosocial service behavior. As such, the other objective of this study is to examine the direct effect and the moderating effect of service climate when leveraging the impacts of POS and PTS.

Theoretical Background

Social Exchange Relationships

A pattern of mutually contingent social exchanges of gratification exists between two parties who support reciprocity under a generalized moral norm and two parties who conform to the norm of reciprocity to discharge their obligations in the future (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Employees differentiate and react to the level of social exchange they perceive they have with the organization (as reflected in POS), their supervisors (as reflected in perceived supervisory support [PSS]), and their team (as reflected in PTS) (Bishop et al., 2000; Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002).

From the multifoci perspective, an employee's perceived social exchange with a particular party should impact the behavior they direct toward that party (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). POS and PTS are essential components of the social support associated with employee outcomes (Bishop et al., 2000; Wayne et al., 1997).

Prosocial Service Behaviors

A prosocial service behavior includes both role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Organ 1988). Role-prescribed customer service refers to expected employee behaviors when serving a firm's customers (Brief & Motowild, 1986). In contrast, recent marketing researchers stress the importance of contact employees "delighting" the customer by providing spontaneous and exceptional service that influences customer satisfaction and emotional responses in both internal and external service encounters (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Bitner et al. 1990).

POS and Prosocial Service Behaviors

According to the reciprocity rule, as employees perceive greater organizational support, their sense of obligation to the organization to reciprocate with helpful behaviors increases (Shore & Wayne, 1993). When a high-quality employment relationship exists, one way contact employees can reciprocate this social exchange is by performing the type of behavior valued in their work environment and extending that behavior beyond the normal role requirements (Coyle-Shapiro, Morrow, & Kessler, 2006). High-quality employment relationships will prompt contact employees to perform more prosocial service behaviors (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are thus proposed:

H₁: Contact employee perception of organizational support will positively relate to employee prosocial service behaviors.

H_{1a}: Contact employee perception of organizational support will positively relate to employee role-prescribed customer service.

H_{1b}: Contact employee perception of organizational support will positively relate to employee extra-role customer service.

PTS and Prosocial Service Behaviors

Team member exchange (TMX) is the quality of the exchange relationships that exist among coworkers in the work group (Seers, 1989). When individuals perceive team members as supportive and concerned for their welfare, they will reciprocate by carrying out activities that contribute to the effectiveness of their entire team (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Although employees can distinguish between and reciprocate actions directed at co-workers versus those directed toward the organization, positive feelings about the team members can produce a spillover effect toward customers. As such, contact employees who feel supported by their team are likely to exhibit discretionary, extra-role service behaviors.

H₂: Contact employee perception of team support will positively relate to employee prosocial service behaviors.

H_{2a}: Contact employee perception of team support will positively relate to employee role-prescribed customer service.

H_{2b}: Contact employee perception of team support will positively relate to employee extra-role customer service.

Service Climate and Prosocial Service Behaviors

A service climate refers to a set of practices and procedures for service delivery and service quality that differentiates one organization from others. These practices and procedures influence the service-related behaviors of individuals in the organization (Kelley, 1992). Employees in these environments will receive stronger and more frequent demands related to the attainment of their goals for meeting customer expectations. As a result, employees in a stronger service climate are more likely to perform extra-role customer service behaviors. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₃: Service climate will positively relate to contact employees' prosocial service behaviors.

H_{3a}: Service climate will positively relate to contact employees' role-prescribed customer service.

H_{3b}: Service climate will positively relate to contact employees' extra-role customer service.

Service Climate as Moderator

Social exchange theory predicts that if employees perceive that the organization is concerned with their well-being, employees will develop an implicit obligation to reciprocate by carrying out behaviors that benefit the organization (Blau, 1964). In particular, employees may reciprocate those positive experiences they have in the work environment by carrying out their core tasks to a high standard and performing citizenship activities (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). In the service literature, Schneider and his colleagues (2005) argue that when employees work in an environment in which customer service is a concern and is a rewarded behavior, they are likely to follow suit and perform extra-role service behaviors as reciprocation for organizational support. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₄: The positive relationship between POS and prosocial service behaviors will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

H_{4a}: The positive relationship between POS and role-prescribed customer service will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

H_{4b}: The positive relationship between POS and extra-role customer service will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

Good social exchange relationships between team members does result in a positive effect on role-prescribed service behaviors as well as extra-role service behaviors. In addition, team support can enhance team cohesion and elicit more frequent interaction between coworkers (Dobbins & Zaccaro, 1986 ; Zaccaro & Lowe, 1988).When there is a strong service climate,

contact employees who are supported by their team members are likely to understand the importance of customer service behaviors. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₅: The positive relationship between PTS and prosocial service behaviors will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

H_{5a}: The positive relationship between PTS and role-prescribed customer service will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

H_{5b}: The positive relationship between PTS and extra-role customer service will be moderated by service climate, such that this relationship is stronger when the service climate is strong.

Methods and Materials

Procedure

The current study drew its sample from a large supermarket chain in Taiwan. The supermarket chain has 36 branch stores around Taiwan. We contacted each store manager to by telephone and then sent questionnaires to those store managers who agreed to distribute the study to their employees and supervisors. This effort produced a pool of 14 branches and supervisor-contact employee dyads. Overall, the effective response rate of branches was 33 percent.

The data were collected through the use of two separate questionnaires and two survey instruments: One for contact employees and one for supervisors. The contact employee survey included measures of POS and PTS. Employees completed their forms in a room during working hours. Supervisor surveys included measures of service climate and each employee's prosocial service behavior.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of employee-supervisor dyads at 14 branches of Taiwan's largest supermarket chain. A total of 280 employee-supervisor dyads were surveyed. The data from the remaining 197 fully completed survey packets were analyzed. The effective response rate was thus 70 percent. The final sample of contact employees averaged 28.41 years old ($SD = 5.81$), and had been employed by the supermarket chain for an average of 3.82 years ($SD = 3.26$). Males represented 60 percent of the contact employee sample and 30 percent of these were married. The final sample of supervisors averaged 31.56 years old ($SD = 4.12$), and had worked for the organization for an average of 6.35 years ($SD = 2.89$). Males represented 76 percent of the supervisor sample and 45 percent of these were married.

Measures

Perceived organizational support (POS)

To assess contact employees' perception of the organizational value of their contributions and care for their well-being, this study selected six high-loading items from the SPOS (*Survey of Perceived Organizational Support*; Eisenberger et al., 1986) with factor loadings ranging from .71 to .82.

Perceived team support (PTS)

To assess employees' perceptions that their team members provide assistance and share information, this study adapted four items developed by Zhou and George (2001) with factor loadings ranging from .69 to .83.

Prosocial service behaviors

Prosocial service behaviors were measured, using the 10-item customer service scale by Bettencourt and Brown (1997). The 10 items had 2 dimensions, including role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service. In the present study, supervisors were asked to assess their subordinates' prosocial service behaviors on a five-point Likert scale.

Service climate

The branch's service climate was measured, using the seven-item Global Service Climate Scale (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). The supervisors responded to a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*) on the basis of their observations.

Control variables

Several control variables were included in our statistical analysis to reduce the possibility of spurious relationships based on unmeasured variables. Employee gender, age, tenure, and level of education are commonly specified control variables in studies of POS and job performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003). Participating contact employees reported gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age, level of education (0 = high school, 1 = college), and tenure (number of years).

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations between the major variables and their descriptive statistics. POS had statistically significant positive relationships with role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service ($r = .14$, $.18$, $p < .05$). PTS had a statistically significant positive relationship with both customer service behaviors ($r = .15$, $.16$, $p < .01$). Service climate was also

correlated with role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service ($r = .28, .49, p < .01$)

The regression analysis results are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted effects of POS and PTS on role-prescribed customer service. The results show that only PTS was positively related to role-prescribed customer service ($\beta = .277, p < .01$). Only H_{1b} was supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted effects of POS and PTS on extra-role customer service. In support of this hypothesis, both POS ($\beta = .120, p < .05$) and PTS ($\beta = .274, p < .01$) were positively related to extra-role customer service. H₂ was thus supported. Hypothesis 3 predicted an effect of service climate on both forms of prosocial service behaviors. In support of this hypothesis, service climate was positively related to both role-prescribed customer service ($\beta = .200, p < .01$) and extra-role customer service ($\beta = .716, p < .01$). H₃ was thus supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that service climate would positively moderate the effect of POS on both dependent variables. As shown in Table 2, the interaction between POS and service climate was significant for extra-role customer service ($\beta = .085, p < .05$), but not for role-prescribed customer service. Only H_{4b} was thus supported. Hypothesis 5 predicted that service climate would positively moderate the effect of PTS on both forms of prosocial service behaviors. The interaction between PTS and service climate was not significant for either extra-role customer service or role-prescribed customer service. H₅ was thus not supported.

To explore the nature of the significant interaction noted above, this study conducted a simple slope analysis to graph the interaction and test differences between different levels of service climate (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). As shown in Figure 2, the simple slope for the regression of extra-role customer service onto POS within high service climates was significant (simple slope = 0.45, $t = 2.079, p < .05$). Within low service climates, the relationship between POS and extra-role customer service was non-significant (simple slope = 0.18, $t = 1.15$).

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

In this study, PTS was positively related to in-role customer service, whereas POS was not. These findings are consistent with a large body of prior research, indicating that social exchange with team members or supervisors are better predictors of in-role work behavior than social exchanges with an organizational focus. (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Wayne et al., 1997). There may be an importance in taking a multifoci perspective of social exchange relationships at work when examining factors that contribute to in-role work behavior or in-role job performance. On the other hand, both POS and PTS were found to be positively associated with extra-role customer service. One possible explanation is that team member social exchange can predict organization- directed as well as individual-directed extra-role behavior.

As predicted, employees who belonged to groups with a strong service climate reported that they delivered more role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service. These

findings are quite consistent with the literature. A growing number of service climate studies indeed show that employee perceptions regarding their organization's commitment to service excellence and delivery of clear service policies at the organizational level are linked to individual in-role service behavior (Schneider & Bowen, 1992; Schneider et al., 1998).

The most notable finding of the current investigation is that the organizational climate acts as a contextual moderator of the relationship between POS and extra-role customer service. In the study, the positive relationship between POS and extra-role customer service was strengthened by service climate. These findings are consistent with the view that organizational climate establishes a context that emphasizes certain extra-role behaviors as being important and that POS then predicts the degree to which contact employees integrate such extra-role behaviors within this domain into their prescribed work roles.

Managerial Implications

Given the importance of contact employee performance (both role-prescribed customer service and extra-role customer service) to service organizations, the results here can provide valuable feedback to managers and supervisors. In terms of role-prescribed customer service, the quality of the social exchange relationship between an employee and his or her work group is of critical importance, seemingly more so than the relationship with the organization. In contrast, both the social exchange relationship with the organization and co-workers positively relate to employee performance of extra-role customer service. These findings remind managers that the various sources of social exchange partners are not necessarily equivalent in their relation to prosocial service behavior. If the goal of management is to promote role-prescribed customer service, it will be necessary to foster social exchange with team members. If the goal is to promote extra-role customer service, it is necessary to foster social exchange relationship with the organization as well as team members.

This current study also highlights the importance of service climate. The climate can signal employees on the organization's expectations of certain prosocial service behaviors (Schneider et al., 1998). Organizational efforts to shape employee perceptions of the service climate – via detailed service codes, customer-related training programs, and strategic use of reward systems that signal to employees the importance of extra-role behaviors – can enhance the overall extent to which employees will deliver extra-role customer service (Schneider & Bowen, 1993).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the above-mentioned implications, several limitations of this study should be recognized. First, some possibility exists for response biases to occur, for example, social desirability. While subordinates might have inflated the exchange relationship, supervisors were also likely to rate subordinates' service behaviors higher than they were in reality. Previous research has convincingly demonstrated that observed levels of socially desirable responses do vary with the level of anonymity (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). To deal with the

effects of socially desirable responses, the researchers assured respondents that their names would never be associated with the findings. It is hoped that emphasizing both confidentiality and anonymity alleviated response bias among the respondents. Another limitation is related to the sample used in this study. Our sample included 197 employees who had been with the organization three years or more. Because of the complexity of the hypothesized model, it is important that the model be tested using a larger and more diverse sample. Future research is needed to examine how POS and PTS develop over time with new employees. Finally, the design was cross-sectional, circumscribing our ability to make causal inferences; thus, longitudinal inquires would be extremely valuable.

The results of this study have a number of implications for future research. First, the researchers take the multifoci perspective here to examine the relationship between multifoci social exchanges and prosocial service behavior. Although we use the spill-over effect to explain why PTS is positively related to extra-role customer service, there is a lack of evidence to prove that employees reciprocate team support by exhibiting cooperation behavior toward co-workers and extra-role customer service toward customers. We did not assess the helping or cooperation behavior of employees in this study. Future studies might investigate the cross-foci or spill-over effects in terms of multifoci social exchanges that predict multifoci work behaviors toward different beneficiaries (i.e., the organization, co-workers, and supervisors).

Second, the results of this research show that service climate is actually a more dominating factor for predicting prosocial service behavior than are POS and PTS. Service climate does not strengthen the relationship between PTS and both forms of prosocial service behavior. Borrowing from the multifoci perspective, we propose that team service climate may play a key role in moderating the relationship between PTS and prosocial service behavior. Future research is suggested to measure team member consensus for team service climate as well as organizational service climate so as to examine further the proposed notion of multifoci climate.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intecorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	Mea	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.60	0.48	-							
2. Age	28.4	5.81	-.03	-						
3. Tenure	3.82	3.26	-.07	.47*	-					
4. Level of education	0.64	0.47	-.07	-.03	-.07	-				
5. Perceived organizational	2.97	0.61	.02	.09	.06	-.16*	-			
6. Perceived team support	3.49	0.60	.02	.07	.11	.01	.49*	-		
7. Role prescribed	3.75	0.52	-.01	.27*	.17*	.15*	.14*	.15*	-	
8. Extra-role customer	3.82	0.87	-.03	.34*	.17*	-.02	.18*	.16*	.52*	-
9. Service climate	3.70	0.6	.01	.22*	.11	-.03	.20*	.17*	.28*	.49*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Prosocial Service Behaviors

Step	Variable	Role-prescribed Service		Customer	Extra-role Customer Service		
		Step1	Step2	Step3	Step1	Step2	Step3
1.	Gender	.020	.005	.066	-.023	.010	.008
	Age	.021**	.018**	.018*	.028**	.029**	.014**
	Tenure	.001	.002	.002	.001	.001	.002
	Level of education	.164*	.193*	.135	-.012	.010	.020
2.	POS		.066	.067		.120*	.119*
	PTS		.277**	.278**		.274**	.234**
	Service climate		.200**	.196**		.716**	.710**
3.	POS × Service climate			.132			.085*
	PTS × Service climate			.050			.011
	R ²	.094	.211	.218	.084	.700	.722
	Adjusted R ²	.076	.178	.183	.065	.687	.698
	ΔR ²		.117	.124		.616	.638
	F value	5.009**	6.322**	8.881**	4.419**	46.930**	42.584**

Note. The displayed coefficients are standardized beta weights at each step. One-tailed tests of significance were used to evaluate the significance of the beta weights for the main and moderating effects of POS and PTS.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

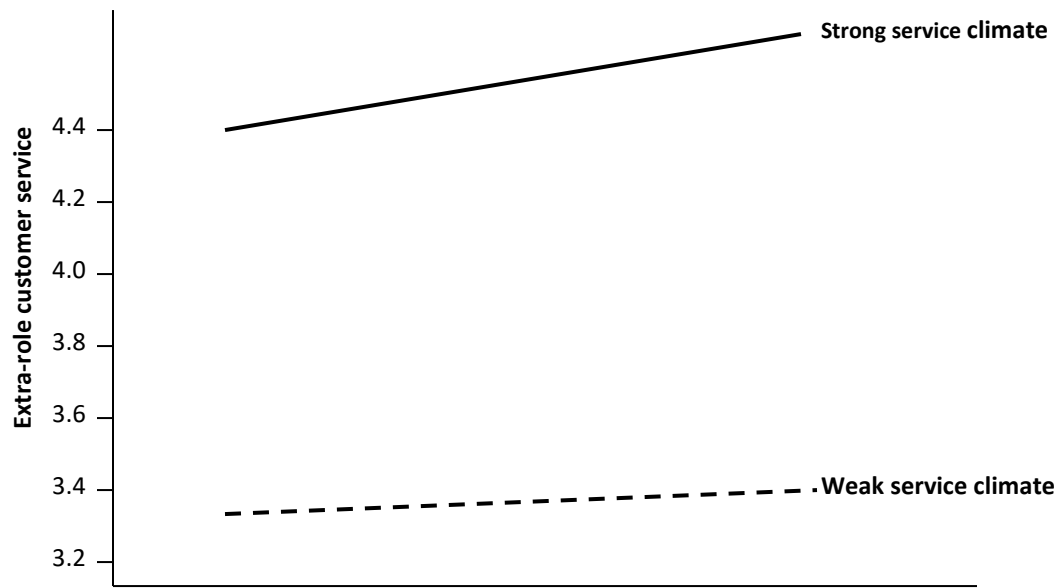


Figure 1. Plot of Simple Slopes of the Relation between POS and Extra-role Customer Service as a Function of High and Low Values of Service Climate