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Profiles of Social Support in the Workplace and Outcomes: The Potential Role of Gender

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Abstract

Relying on organizational support theory, this research analyzed how perceptions of three sources of social support at work (organization, supervisor, and colleagues) combined within distinct profiles of employees. Additionally, it examined whether the associations between these identified profiles and outcomes (overcommitment at work, emotional exhaustion, sleep problems, absenteeism, and performance) differed between samples of men and women employees. Results of latent profile analyses reported five profiles, which were replicated among men and women: (1) moderately supported, (2) weakly supported, (3) well-supported, (4) supervisor supported, and (5) highly supported. In addition, the most desirable outcomes (i.e., job performance) was associated with the highly supported and supervisor supported profiles, while the lowest levels of overcommitment were observed in the highly supported profile. Finally, the relationships between profile membership and outcomes did not differ between men and women. The theoretical and practical implications as well as limitations of this research are discussed.

Keywords: Perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, perceived colleagues support, emotional exhaustion, overcommitment, performance.

Organizational support theory (OST) suggested that employees can develop perceptions “that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (perceived organizational support; POS) (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p.501). Over the years, OST was applied to other organizational constituencies such as the support from supervisor (PSS) and colleagues (PCS). Since POS, PSS, or PCS may fulfill employee’s fundamental socioemotional needs and foster a sense of obligation to reciprocate positive treatment, these perceptions have been found to enhance employees’ well-being, positive attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). To date, most studies have shown the beneficial effects of POS, PSS, and PCS on various outcomes independently (e.g., job satisfaction, performance, emotional exhaustion; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Ng & Sorensen, 2008) using a variable-centered approach.

In recent years, some scholars have argued that POS, PSS, and PCS should not be analyzed in isolation, as they likely involve compensatory or mutually reinforcing dynamics (e.g., Caesens et al., 2020). Accordingly, POS, PSS, and PCS might go in hand, by creating a global social support climate. Alternatively, one source of support may act independently and be more (or less) effective than others in addressing stressors (e.g., Caesens et al., 2023). For instance, Maertz et al. (2007) observed that the negative relationship between POS and turnover was stronger when PSS was low. Likewise, they found that low POS levels amplified the negative association between PSS and turnover. Building on this, studies (Caesens et al., 2020, 2023) examined the potential complementary roles of POS, PSS, and PCS using a person-centered approach (latent profile analysis, LPA), which is best suited for analyzing their potential multiplying or compensatory effects. Indeed, LPA removes the assumption of population homogeneity, which is a hallmark of traditional variable-centered approaches (e.g., regression). This makes LPA especially effective in identifying naturally occurring subgroups (i.e., profiles) of employees based on their experiences or perceptions (e.g., Caesens et al., 2023).

These prior findings indicated that five to six profiles of social support emerged: moderately supported, weakly supported, well-supported (moderately high levels of support), or highly supported (very high levels of support) (only in Caesens et al., 2023) from the three sources, isolated (very low levels of POS, but moderate levels of PSS and PCS), and supervisor supported. Additionally, the most desirable outcomes (e.g., highest levels of performance) were associated with the well-supported profile, while the isolated or supervisor supported profiles were linked to the lowest levels of psychological health (e.g., highest levels of emotional exhaustion and sleep problems). Interestingly, Caesens et al. (2023) found that the highly supported profile was predominantly composed of women and not linked to the most desirable psychological health outcomes. They suggested that “sex plays a central role in explaining this complex association between extreme levels of support and psychological health” and urged future research to “explore the sex-based underpinning of these relations” (p.862).

According to social role theory, gender differences emerge from societal power dynamics and social learning processes, shaping employees' workplace attitudes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Researchers have further suggested that gender may moderate the relationship between POS and outcomes, such as job satisfaction, burnout, performance, or turnover intentions (e.g., García-Cabrera, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Lundmark et al., 2023; Mehta & Kaur,

2024). Specifically, POS may affect male and female employees differently, with women more likely to reciprocate favorable treatment (Kurtessis et al., 2017) and to cope with stress by seeking social support (Taylor et al., 2000). Given the higher stress and overload often faced by women, work-related social support (PSS, PCS) may be a more critical resource for them (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Additionally, “women are more socially oriented and more likely to establish supportive relationships with superiors and coworkers” (Li et al., 2023, p. 1184). In contrast, men may respond differently to work-related social support, as traditional masculine roles prioritize independence and competence, making PSS or PCS potentially conflict with these values. Empirically, however, findings on gender’s moderating role in the relationship between work-related social support and outcomes remain inconsistent. Some studies (e.g., Mehta & Kaur, 2024) and meta-analyses (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Ng & Sorensen, 2008) found no moderating role of gender, while other studies did (e.g., Li et al., 2023). For instance, Thompson et al. (2020) observed that the relationship between POS and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) was stronger and mediated by felt obligation for men, while it was not the case for women. In the same vein, Li et al. (2023) found that PSS had a stronger impact on Chinese men’s turnover intentions as compared to women. Yet, most prior research has been variable-centered, analyzing only one source of support in isolation. Despite theoretical acknowledgment that gender may influence how employees benefit from social support, no study has thoroughly examined gender differences in social support profiles altogether using a person-centered approach (LPA) or the outcomes of these profiles in relation to gender differences.

This research addresses this gap by examining whether social support profiles (POS, PSS, and PCS) differ between men and women. Additionally, it explored whether the effects of these profiles on a series of work-related outcomes including employees’ attitudes (overcommitment at work), well-being (emotional exhaustion and sleep problems), and behaviors (absenteeism and performance), known to be associated with workplace support perceptions, varied between men and women. Based on prior findings (e.g., Caesens et al., 2023), we expected that profiles with high levels of POS, PSS, and PCS might be more prevalent among women. Furthermore, we expected that women would respond more strongly to profiles characterized by high levels of support (POS, PSS, and PCS), showing higher levels of positive outcomes and lower levels of negative outcomes, compared to men.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were invited via individual survey links shared on social media to complete an online questionnaire. The inclusion criteria for participants in the study were to be currently working in an organization and not self-employed. We also followed online survey reporting guidelines (Sischka et al., 2022; Turk et al., 2018). Before accessing the survey, participants were told that participation was voluntary, confidential, and could be discontinued at any time. They could contact the second author at any time by e-mail for questions. Only one submission per participant was allowed, and answers could not be changed once submitted the first time. Yet, participants could skip any question, and IP addresses were not used to detect duplicates. Data collection was stopped as soon as we reached a targeted sample size of 500 (see Spurk et al., 2020). The final sample comprises 518 French employees from various organizations. Of this sample, 57.14% were women (42.86% of men), average age

was 42.45 years ($SD=10.60$), and professional tenure was 11.32 years ($SD=10.57$). Most participants held a university diploma (82.63%).

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, items were assessed using five-point Likert agreement scales.

Perceived Support. POS, PSS, and PCS were measured using four items from Eisenberger et al. (1986). The term “organization” was replaced by “supervisor” or “colleagues” for PSS and PCS. Responses were reported on a seven-point Likert-type agreement scale.

Overcommitment was measured using six items from Siegrist (2004).

Emotional Exhaustion was assessed with five items from Schaufeli et al. (1996).

Sleep problems were assessed with four items of Jenkins et al. (1988). Respondents reported how often they had sleep problems during an average month using a six-point Likert-type scale (1-“Not at all” to 6-“22 to 31 days/month”).

Absenteeism was measured using a single item (Kessler et al., 2003). Employees reported how many days they were absent from work due to physical or psychological problems during the past year.

Performance was assessed with a single item (Kessler et al., 2003). Employees rated their usual job performance over the past four weeks using a 10-point Likert-type scale (0-“the worst job performance anyone could have done” to 10-“the performance of a top worker”).

Results

LPA were performed in Mplus 8.4. Preliminary factor analyses, profile similarity, and the relationships with outcomes (while considering the moderating role of gender) were performed following Morin et al.’s (2025) procedure (see the online supplements for details). Results displayed in Figure 1 indicated that five profiles should be retained. These profiles were similar among men and women. The mean profile-specific levels of each outcome are reported in Table 1, which indicates differences across profiles (see the online supplements for a complete description of these results). Finally, none of these associations were moderated by gender (see the online supplements).

Discussion

This research explored profiles of POS, PSS, and PCS and their associations with outcomes, considering potential gender differences. Results revealed that five profiles best summarized perceived social support configurations, that are similar in both samples of men and women. The moderately supported, weakly supported, well-supported, and highly supported profiles were characterized by average, low, high or very high levels of support among the three sources. The last profile (supervisor supported profile) was characterized by diverging levels of support across the three sources: low POS but high PSS and moderate PCS. These findings replicated and extended those from Caesens et al. (2020, 2023), except that an isolated profile was not identified. These results support the idea that workers can perceive an overall climate of support but may also experience differing levels of support from distinct entities, particularly between the organization and the supervisor (Caesens et al., 2023).

Additionally, results showed that the highly supported profile was associated with the lowest levels of overcommitment and emotional exhaustion. The highest performance levels

were observed in both the highly supported and supervisor supported profiles. Unlike Caesens et al. (2023), who found the highly supported profile to be not optimal for employee health, this study suggests it benefits both well-being and performance. This is consistent with OST suggesting that POS, PSS, and PCS are beneficial for employees' health and work behaviors (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Additionally, contrary to Caesens et al. (2020), the supervisor supported profile was associated with higher performance levels. These discrepancies of results warrant further investigation. The use of a convenience sample of highly educated French employees may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should replicate this study across diverse worker populations to address these inconsistencies and explore potential cross-cultural differences.

Finally, contrary to scholars (e.g., Thompson et al., 2020) suggesting gender differences in reactions to social support, our findings showed that the associations between social support profiles and outcomes were not different for men and women. This aligns with prior meta-analytic results reporting no significant moderating role of gender in the relationship between POS or PSS and outcomes (e.g., Kurtessis et al., 2017; Ng & Sorensen, 2008), and prior studies that did not report significant interaction effect of gender (e.g., Mehta & Kaur, 2024). This non-significant effect of gender may be explained by the fact that the binary gender categorization used in the present research could be too restrictive to capture the potential effects of gender roles. Other individual differences (e.g., ethnicity, disability) or organizational factors (e.g., organizational culture) may play a more significant role in explaining workplace dynamics (e.g., Jetha et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023).

These results contribute to OST by demonstrating that POS typically functions in conjunction with PSS and PCS rather than operating independently, with no gender differences. At a practical level, enhancing any form of support (POS, PSS, or PCS) to generate a supported profile can be useful to drive positive outcomes for both men and women. Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. It focused only on gender's impact on the relationship between profiles of workplace social support and outcomes, excluding other demographic factors like age or race. Additionally, it did not consider how ethnicity/age and gender intersect to affect POS, PSS, PCS, and subsequent outcomes. Future research should examine this intersectional perspective and how factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, or cultural factors influence the effects of workplace social support on outcomes. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data might lead to social desirability bias and a cross-sectional design limits the ability to determine causal effects or establish temporal relationships. Future longitudinal research is needed to explore changes in social support profiles over time. In conclusion, this research contributes to understanding workplace social support profiles on outcomes, showing no gender differences.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in the current study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the authors on request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Acknowledgment

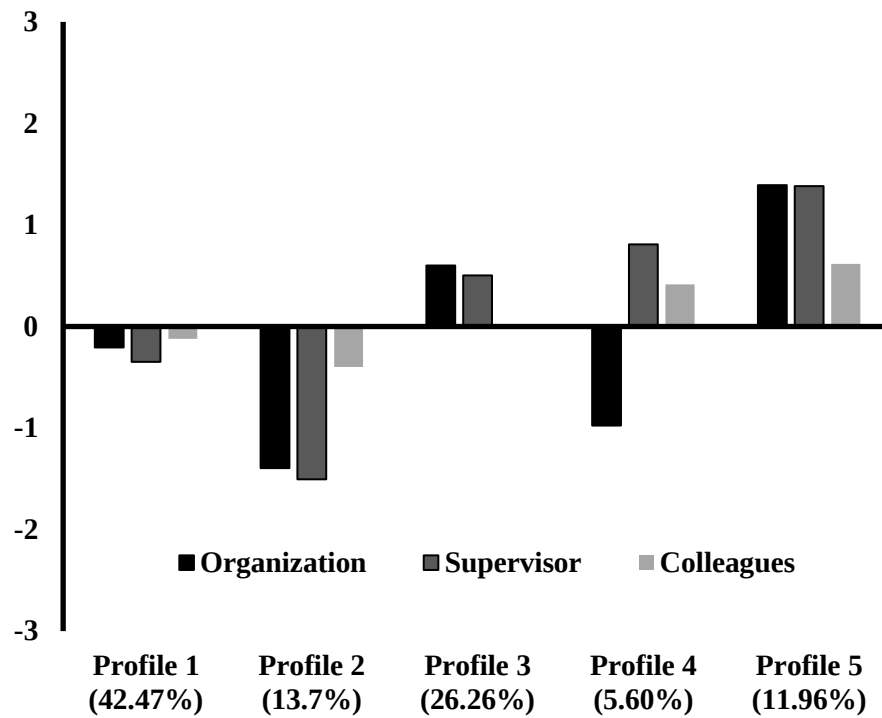
ChatGPT provided assistance in sentence editing (improve spelling, grammar, clarity, and overall readability).

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Figure 1.*Final Five-Profile Solution.*

Note. Profile 1: moderately supported; Profile 2: weakly supported; Profile 3: well-supported; Profile 4: supervisor supported; Profile 5: highly supported.

Table 1

Associations between Profile Membership and the Outcomes Taken from the Model of Distributional Similarity

	Profile 1 <i>M</i> [CI]	Profile 2 <i>M</i> [CI]	Profile 3 <i>M</i> [CI]	Profile 4 <i>M</i> [CI]	Profile 5 <i>M</i> [CI]	Summary of Statistically Significant Differences
Overcommitment	.029 [-.203; .261]	.568 [.338; .799]	-.069 [-.467; .330]	.525 [.022; 1.028]	-.810 [-1.200; -.420]	2 > 1 > 5; 2 > 3 > 5; 2 = 4 > 5; 1 = 3 = 4
Emotional exhaustion	-.020 [-.256; .217]	.951 [.698; 1.205]	-.208 [-.597; .180]	.570 [-.079; 1.220]	-.776 [-1.095; -.457]	2 > 1 > 5; 2 > 3 = 5; 2 = 4 > 5; 1 = 3 = 4
Sleep problems	-.027 [-.243; .188]	.484 [.216; .752]	-.216 [-.557; .125]	.549 [-.268; 1.66]	-.194 [-.549; .162]	2 > 1 = 3 = 5; 1 = 3 = 4 = 5; 2 = 4
Absenteeism	1.907 [.807; 3.008]	6.000 [1.872; 10.128]	1.351 [.502; 2.200]	18.693 [-7.246; 44.631]	2.232 [.167; 4.296]	2 > 1 = 3; 1 = 3 = 4 = 5; 2 = 4 = 5
Job performance	7.122 [6.868; 7.376]	6.323 [5.807; 6.838]	7.368 [7.128; 7.608]	7.068 [5.958; 8.177]	7.892 [7.642; 8.141]	5 > 1 > 2; 5 > 3 > 2; 1 = 3 = 4; 2 = 4; 4 = 5

Note. *M*: Mean; CI: 95% confidence interval; the indicators of overcommitment at work, emotional exhaustion, and sleep problems are estimated from factor scores with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1; Profile 1: *moderately supported*; Profile 2: *weakly supported*; Profile 3: *well-supported*; Profile 4: *supervisor supported*; Profile 5: *highly supported*.