

Comment on van Knippenberg and Lee (2023): SOE is walking the talk of the organization

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In issue 1 of 2023 of this journal, van Knippenberg and Lee argued that leader group prototypicality (LGP) and supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE) are redundant constructs. With this commentary, we provide a historical timeline about the conceptualization of SOE within organizational support theory to explain the lack of construct redundancy at the theoretical level. We offer the metaphor of SOE as the supervisor "walking the talk of the organization." In contrast, LGP is a construct developed using Social Identity Theory that refers to the leader "walking like other organizational members walk." We offer alternative explanations to the redundancy arguments and evidence presented by van Knippenberg and Lee. We suggest that given the untested construct validity and reliability of both SOE and LGP operationalizations, using a single sample of cross-sectional self-report data is an incomplete methodological approach to provide empirical evidence and make theoretical-level decisions about construct redundancy. We conclude by providing some preliminary ideas that may help address the construct operationalization confusion in future research.

Keywords: *perceived organizational support; social identity theory; leadership*

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With this commentary, we would like to respond to the construct redundancy argument built by van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) around leader group prototypicality (LGP) and supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE). We also take the opportunity to provide some preliminary ideas that may help address the construct operationalization confusion in future research. We will start with a little bit of history and theoretical perspectives to set up the stage.

History, theoretical framework, and differentiation

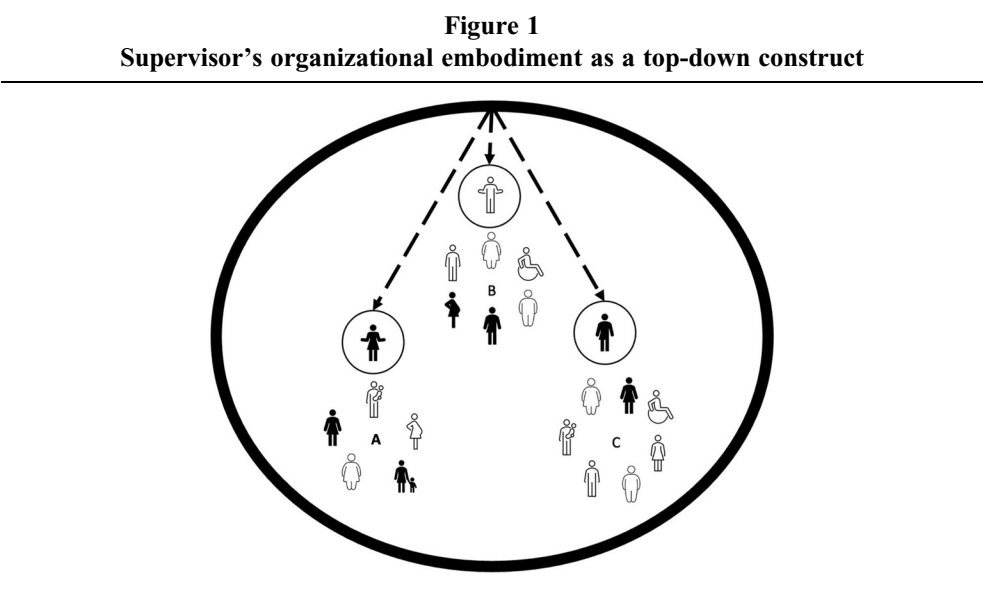
During the decade of the 2000s, our esteemed late colleague Robert Eisenberger and other organizational behavior scholars, including the authors of this commentary, theorized, and conceptualized the SOE construct. During this time, our work was focused on further developing organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The core construct of organizational support theory is perceived organizational support (POS), rooted within the social exchange theory and defined as the overall perception that employees form about how much the organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being. Similar constructs, such as perceived supervisor support (PSS) were adapted to understand the exchange relationship between supervisors and employees, and not only between organizations and employees. At the beginning of 2000s, Eisenberger's team started to question how the overall perceptions formed by employees of POS and PSS were related (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002): How much is PSS overlapping with POS? Do supervisors need to embody the organization to be able to transmit the organization's care and value to employees? Is it a boundary condition? That was the fundamental question that we were working with during that time.

SOE is defined as the extent to which "the employee identifies the supervisor with the organization (SOE) based on a comparison of the supervisor's characteristics with what the employee believes to be the defining characteristics of the organization (perception of shared characteristics) and the experience of treatment received from the supervisor as treatment received by the organization (perception of shared experiences)" (Eisenberger et al., 2010, p. 1086). According to social identity theory, group prototypes and prototypicality refer to our subjective mental representation of how we define our group in terms of commonalities within group members and distinguishing characteristics from other groups (Turner et al. 1987). The construct of LGP is the result of applying social identity theory to leadership to explain leaders' influence in terms of how they are perceived to embody the shared identity of the group (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023). The key theoretical difference between LGP and SOE is that organizational support theory includes a social exchange mechanism that is absent in social identity theory: over and above the need to create subjective prototypical representations of the leader embodying the shared *social identity* of the organizational members, "employees are motivated to determine the degree to which their social exchange relationship with the supervisor is indicative of their exchange relationship with the organization" (p. 1086). Following organizational support theory, there is an instrumental goal for the employee to form overall perceptions of support and value, fulfilling socioemotional

needs through their exchange with the organization and learning if their work effort will be recognized and rewarded (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

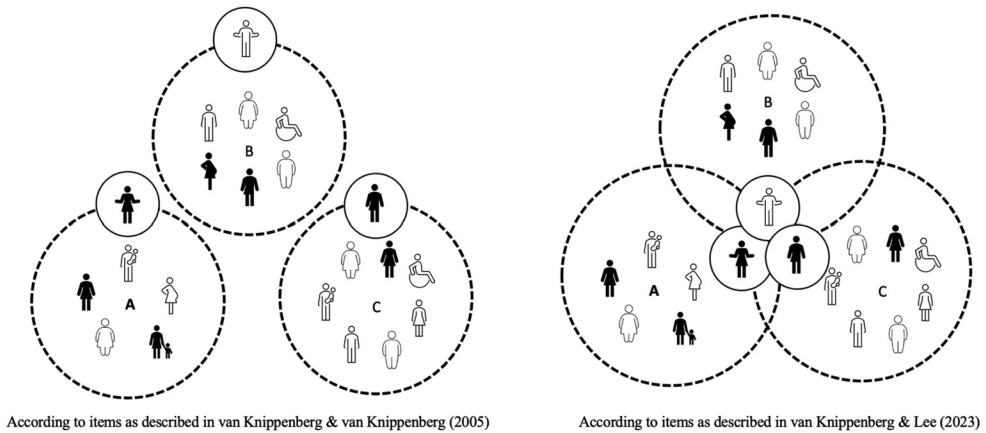
As it can be deduced by this core assumption of organizational support sheory, our SOE theorizing is based on anthropomorphizing the organization through the supervisor personifying it and embodying it. That is why the construct is labeled SOE. We offer the metaphor of SOE as the leader “*walking the talk of the organization*.” As supported in Eisenberger et al.’s (2010, Study 1), supervisor’s self-reported identification with the organization is positively related to supervisor’s expression of positive statements about the organization (i.e., expresses positive views regarding the organization, shares the values and objectives of the organization, and promotes the organizational policies), which is positively related to subordinates’ SOE self-reports. Figure 1 shows a *top-down contextual influence*: an individual-level perception of the supervisor as an agent of the organization, which is an entity (higher level), within a nested structure of teams or groups.

In contrast, there is no need to anthropomorphize the organization using social identity theory, as the concept of prototypicality does not refer to the group or the organization in itself as an entity, but solely to the characteristics *of the members* of the group or the organization. LGP is “*walking like other organizational members walk*.” Figure 2 depicts a



Note. The thick solid circle enclosing all members represents the organization as an entity exerting a top-down influence on supervisors (enclosed in thin solid circles) as they embody the organization with their behavior that is translated into SOE: subordinates’ appraisal of how much the supervisor shares the defining characteristics of the organization (perception of shared characteristics) and how much the treatment received from the supervisor is experienced as treatment received by the organization (perception of shared experiences). Members of the organization are depicted using surface-level diversity characteristics (color, shape, gender diversity, parental and caregiving status) to show diversity within teams.

Figure 2
Leader Group Prototypicality as a bottom-up emergent construct



Note. LGP is a bottom-up emergent process that indicates the group/organizational members perception that the leader (enclosed in solid circles) is representative of a shared group identity based on prototypical characteristics shared with the members of the groups (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). The dashed circles represent the shared social identities of each team. In the right-side figure, the dashed circles intersect to represent the shared social identity of the organizational members, independent from the shared characteristics of each group, as adapted in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) items. Group members are depicted using surface-level diversity characteristics (color, shape, gender diversity, parental, and caregiving status) to show diversity within groups.

bottom-up construct emergence of leader prototypicality as the individual-level perception of the supervisor in relation to the other organizational members (individual level), where the nature of team or group nesting is not clearly addressed. The two figures depict the theoretical differences in terms of the referent and direction of the construct development in a multilevel space (although aggregation or composition is not discussed in relation to LGP or SOE).

According to organizational behavior scholarship, and in contrast to straightforward applications of social psychology to leadership, an organization is not just a group of persons, just as a workgroup can be. In our research, we discuss supervisors as members of an organization with managerial functions who act as organizational agents, not as a leader who emerges from a group whose prototypicality moderates their ability to exert influence on the in-group (Hogg, 2001). Moreover, organizational factors and characteristics, such as organizational culture, transcend organizational members' identity; when we anthropomorphize the organization, we are capturing a more complex manifestation of embodiment, that goes above and beyond prototypicality. We believe that the explanation of these fundamental theoretical differences is enough to explain why there is no construct redundancy, and why the SOE construct has taken off in the organizational psychology and organizational behavior scholarship. However, using the same spirit of constructive criticism and rigorous methodological approach, we would like to provide point-by-point counterarguments to specific claims made by van Knippenberg and Lee (2023).

Counterarguments

LGP being established first

Eisenberger's team developed the first items in 2000. Many surveys and projects were developed to test this idea, actually, Stinglhamber presented about the topic in a 2002 conference and the first paper on SOE was submitted to *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2004 (before van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005, published an adaptation of the manipulation check items to use with an applied sample in their study 4 about leader prototypicality in relation to their team members, not the organization). Finally, after a decade's worth of theoretical development, empirical tests, and submissions (another 2007 submission to *Journal of Applied Psychology*), we published the first paper about SOE in 2010 (Eisenberger et al., 2010).

This suggests that both frameworks were developed in parallel, with the organizational support theory development work taking place at the same time as a group of social psychology scholars were applying social identity theory to understand leadership as a group process (Hogg, 2001). The idea of LGP responds to the need to explain how "leadership may emerge through the operation of ordinary social cognitive processes associated with psychologically belonging to a group" (p. 185; Hogg, 2001). Therefore, and as explained in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023), leader prototypicality is the "extent to which the leader is perceived to be representative of shared group identity" (p. 2) and refers to a shift of referent from group prototype (i.e., a mental representation of the group by their members) to a leader representing the work, team, or organization that the leader is leading (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). As already explained in Costa, Daher, Neves, and Velez (2022, p. 223), "SOE is positioned in the literature reflecting the organization as a collective unit and being perceived as embodying the characteristics of the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010) whereas the focus of group prototypicality is on encapsulating the norms of one's group."

Given the different theoretical perspectives on leadership coming from two different streams of scholarship in organizational behavior and social psychology, it is not surprising that these two streams of research were developed and published independently from each other. Maybe social identity theory applications to organizations and leadership did not permeate organizational behavior scholarship enough at the time (as the seminal work on social identity theory of leadership is published to a great extent in personality and social psychology journals, e.g., Hogg, 2001; Hogg et al., 2005, 2012) to find a common intersection during this parallel research development of the theoretical constructs.

Construct redundancy

Our humble opinion, based on the differences described in terms of theoretical conceptualization (see Figures 1 and 2), is that the similarity, in terms of a leader being the referent of both constructs, does not constitute a problem of construct redundancy. We propose that this intersection leads to confusion at the operationalization level because certain LGP items, initially created as experimental manipulation checks items adapted for survey studies by Van Knippenberg and colleagues, are similar to certain SOE items. We propose that the potential confusion is at the operationalization level and, therefore, both LGP and SOE scholars need to provide additional evidence of the reliability and validity of the operationalization of their unique and distinct theoretical constructs.

The crux of the matter is that a simple adaptation of experimental manipulation check items (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005), or scale justification through CFA (Eisenberger et al., 2010), without a full-scale development and validation effort (Hinkin, 1998) clearly warrants additional scrutiny. Given the untested construct validity and reliability of these operationalizations, empirical tests provide imperfect data to make theoretical-level decisions about construct redundancy. Both LGP and SOE scholars need to provide evidence of the reliability and validity of the operationalization of their unique and distinct theoretical constructs before claims of construct redundancy and establishment in the literature can be made.

Empirical evidence

Factor analyses. We understand the need to provide empirical support to construct redundancy claims. However, as we noted above, there is no evidence of comprehensive scale development and validation (Hinkin, 1998) for construct operationalizations of LGP and SOE. As the saying goes: “what you put in, is what you get out.” This may be the reason why the CFAs in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) show marginal and poor fit indexes, no matter the combination of items used. Without a proper content validity analysis that indicates content adequacy as a preliminary step, factorial analyses will just let us know how items can be summarized in factors based on responses, but we do not know if those responses are actually reflecting relevant parts of the construct as theoretically and conceptually defined. For instance, LGP items were developed as manipulation check measures of experimental studies with no real leaders, and participants were mostly students responding to experimental scenarios. Based on an overview of the LGP items, it looks like the current items lack content validity because they do not reflect all the facets of the theoretical construct (prototypicality in terms of leaders’ shared values, norms, and aspirations). With the exception of a single item referring to group norms in Study 4 (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005), there is no mention of values or aspirations. Experimental participants in van Knippenberg et al. social psychology studies are provided information related to the intended content of LGP according to the experimental manipulation, however, survey participants do not have any previous context or content and we do not know if when reporting to these items, survey participants are thinking about prototypicality in the theoretically intended deep-level terms (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998) or if they are just responding according to surface-level characteristics (e.g., same kind of people, resembles to, similar to, has a lot in common with). We will come back to this later in our discussion.

In terms of SOE and for the sake of argument, let’s take a look at the PCA analyses in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023). SOE items were originally developed in several rounds of surveys in applied settings, asking about real supervisors to real employees, but unfortunately, Hinkin (1998) steps were never documented in a published paper. The SOE items break down in two factors, not because it is a weak construct, but because the item generation back in the early 2000s involved representing both facets of the theoretical construct: the shared identity with the organizational entity and the shared experience through the supervisor embodying the organization (see the complete list of items in the Appendix). The fact that SOE items can be summarized into two factors in the PCA results in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) is suggesting some evidence of content validity. Unfortunately, two SOE papers

(Eisenberger et al., 2014; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013) dropped the shared experiences items. van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) repeatedly label these items problematic, without providing a clear rationale to why. There is some confusion about the content of these items, maybe because the structure of the items is similar to double-barreled items (González-Morales, Tetrick, & Ginter, 2012). However, the content is not double-barreled: the first clause of the experience items refers to frequent behaviors enacted by supervisors as part of their managerial responsibilities, asking for employees' perceptions about organizational embodiment when, and not if, the behavior is enacted. After reviewing the empirical data presented in van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) and past and current studies of SOE, we propose that the shared experiences items provide a unique operationalization of SOE, distinct from LGP as van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) show, that is consistent with the construct definition and our original work in SOE. Within our temporal pressure to provide a timely response to the focal paper, we were able to locate at least 11 papers in a review of the literature of the last 5 years that used these items, as part of the SOE measure with the initial 9-item scale (Amin & Ali, 2022; Du et al., 2023; Hussain & Shahzad, 2018, 2019; Mackey, McAllister, Brees, Huang, & Carson, 2018; Rice, Massey, Roberts, & Sterzenbach, 2023, 2022; Su, Lin, & Ding, 2019; Wang, Xu, & Liu, 2018; Zhang & Su, 2020; Zhu, Tang, Zhang, & Wang, 2022).

Correlations. The fact that the SOE and LGP scales correlated 0.92 in a cross-sectional design reflects the overlap in operationalization and common method bias: people answer questions about their supervisors similarly and in a consistent manner in the same survey, biasing correlations (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Spector, 1987). Evidence of this artifact in the data set collected without temporal separation is that LMX and leadership effectiveness correlate 0.90. Interestingly, a 0.02 difference seems enough to discard, or ignore, the very straightforward syllogism of these two different theoretical constructs being also redundant. Let alone that in organizational behavior, there are many examples of constructs that are strongly related yet different (e.g., in-role and extra-role performance correlate 0.80 in Eisenberger et al. (2010; see Study 1). In addition, and interestingly, the correlational data provided by van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) seems to suggest that SOE is more strongly related to other relevant constructs than LGP, either in the realm of leadership (e.g., LMX, leadership effectiveness) or in the employee–organization relationship (e.g., organizational commitment), including organizational identification.

Moreover, as an example of how a single data set does not provide enough evidence to make substantiated claims about construct redundancy, Steffens, Munt, van Knippenberg, Platow, and Haslam (2021) meta-analysis shows a lower effect size, $r = .21$ (CI is 0.12–0.41) between SOE and a meta-analytical combination of leader outcome indicators labeled leader outcome, whereas the LGP measures have weighted sample size corrected correlation coefficients of 0.45, 0.50, and 0.51 (CIs overlap narrowly from 0.34–0.41). Given how wide the CIs are and the lack of evidence supporting the validity of the scales, in addition to the diversity of constructs included in the leader outcome variable, deciding that the variance of the moderation by scale is nonsignificant based on a p -value of 0.051 (Steffens et al., 2021) is questionable, and further suggests that an analysis with one self-reported cross-sectional single sample does not provide enough evidence to claim construct overlap. We encourage scholars to further test competing theories and constructs with robust methodologies, such studies are welcome in the *Journal of Management Scientific Reports*.

Replication tests. Given the problems signaled in terms of common method bias concerns and unsupported construct operationalization, comparing certain findings of linear regression analyses using cross-sectional self-report data are an imperfect approach to provide empirical evidence for construct redundancy claims. When testing interactions, hierarchical multiple regression analyses should be performed using a stepwise method that allows to estimate the proportion of variance explained by the added terms, and evaluating how substantive is the effect size of the relationships. van Knippenberg and Lee (2023) only report interactions without hierarchical equations and fail to report coefficients of determination and explained variance.

Moving forward, we should measure LGP and SOE using surveys temporally separated after we have a full measurement development and validation of SOE and LGP. Given that both operationalizations refer to the leader/supervisor, we would expect them to be correlated. We should calculate relative importance indices as a supplement to multiple regression analyses “to partition explained variance among multiple predictors to better understand the role played by each predictor” in the regression equations (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011, p. 1), providing a way of quantifying construct redundancy in terms of effect sizes.

Discarding SOE

There is some degree of similarity between the prototypicality items of leaders and their groups (i.e., walking like other *group/organizational* members walk) and the embodiment items of the organization by supervisors (i.e., walking the talk of the organization) that may lead to consistent and similar responses from survey participants, especially when answering to them in the same survey. However, we hope that we have made clear that SOE is a different construct theoretically, not only in relation to those items but also the shared experience items that form a second factor and that are the core of SOE (i.e., the original ones submitted for publication in 2004 and 2007 by Eisenberger’s et al., and the highest loading items in Eisenberger et al., 2010).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion. Given this key aspect of SOE, we can provide an example where using SOE can help us advance our understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion using organizational support theory. In Figures 1 and 2, we have depicted members of the organization using surface-level diversity characteristics (color, shape, gender diversity, parental, and caregiving status). The three teams have diverse members.

Given the demographic composition respondents from team A and B may self-report in the van Knippenberg and van Knippenberg (2005) LGP measure that leader A (a black woman in a team with 5 women) and B (a white man in a group with a majority of white people) are somehow prototypical; however, leader C (a nonbinary black person) may not be reported as prototypical by team C members, who are a majority of white and cisgender people. It is true that respondents may be using deep-level diversity characteristics to respond, but with the available items from 2005, we do not know if that is the case.

However, respondents to the SOE measure may answer that any of these supervisors embody or not the organization, independent of their surface-level diversity characteristics. SOE is a construct that involves the experience with the supervisor as an organizational agent (not only their prototypicality in relation to other members). The shared experience items refer to deep-level

characteristics of the supervisor that can go above and beyond surface-level prototypicality. In this scenario, scores in each measure could be different and lead to different findings depending on the research questions posed by researchers. If we used only LGP scores, we could confound surface-level prototypicality of leaders, in terms of how similar they are to other members, with deep-level embodiment of the organization as an entity, in terms of how a supervisor represents and embodies the organization through their actions. Therefore, if we discarded SOE as a construct, we would not be able to explain variance and relationships over and above the mere prototypicality of surface-level characteristics.

Given the current direction of diversity, equity, and inclusion research, SOE can help us understand how organizational members experience their belonging and their supervisors over and above in-group prototypicality, using their experience related to deep-level characteristics and embodying behaviors. What if the organization is diverse, and the leader is not prototypical or prototypical according to which characteristics? This is one of the main reasons why we think that it is important that we maintain both constructs: to further understand how each contributes to leadership and organizational support processes as diversity and inclusion becomes more important in organizational research.

Other embodiment. SOE has also been used to extend our understanding of organizational embodiment to other organizational members or entities, such as Manager Organizational Embodiment and Employee Organizational Embodiment (Rice, Mchiri, & Massey, 2022), Group Organizational Embodiment (Stackhouse, Boon, & Paulin, 2023), and even HR Organizational Embodiment (Kim, Clark, & Messersmith, 2022). It is easy to see how the HR department can embody the organization, but it is not clear how HR prototypically can apply or even be useful in terms of organizational research questions.

Conclusion

We applaud van Knippenberg and Lee for initiating this conversation, and we would like to invite them to transform together the adversarial primary paper into a reconciliation of social identity theory and organizational support theory. Organizations are more than a large(r) group of people and organizational scholarship involves organizational science, theory, culture analysis, communication, management, and many other disciplines that contribute to our understanding of organizational behavior. Different disciplines allow us to take different perspectives. For instance, Morgan (2006) offers eight different organizational metaphors to explore the complexity of organizations and diverse organizational theories are used to explain organizational phenomena as diverse as environment, structure, technology, culture, identity, power, politics, decision-making, conflict, etc. (Hatch, 2018). Instead of taking a competitive approach to claim who is first and who should prevail, we invite scholars to carefully consider the conciliatory nature of the theoretical and methodological arguments exposed here. We can work together with different disciplines or applications of psychology to better understand behavior within the complex phenomena of organizational life. For instance, González-Morales and Neves (2015) weaved occupational health psychology and organizational behavior theories to understand employee performance in relation to challenging stressors.

But first, we should be engaging in measurement development and validation (Hinkin, 1998). In our case, we will be using the original SOE items as a starting point and taking into account the proximity of the LGP items. This means that the development effort will include LGP items when assessing content, convergent, and discriminant validity. This step is a key to support organizational scholars as they continue using organizational support theory and SOE in their theoretical frameworks. After that, we can start asking substantive questions, such as: is prototypically a necessary condition for embodiment? That is a research question that we can only answer if we continue to treat these constructs as theoretically distinct. As we do so, we should keep in mind the nested nature of organizational phenomena and the need for slow science that is robust, open, and multidisciplinary as recently advocated by the Leadership Quarterly outgoing editor, Antonakis (2023).

Author Note

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Appendix

SOE Items (Eisenberger et al., 2010)

Shared Characteristics: Supervisor's shared characteristics with the organization

- My supervisor is characteristic of (name of organization).
- My supervisor and (name of organization) have a lot in common.
- My supervisor is representative of (name of organization).
- My supervisor is typical of (name of organization).

Shared Experiences: Experience of treatment received from the supervisor as treatment received from the organization

- When my supervisor encourages me, I believe that (name of organization) is encouraging me.
- When my supervisor is pleased with my work, I feel that (name of organization) is pleased.
- When my supervisor compliments me, it is the same as (name of organization) complimenting me.
- When my supervisor pays attention to my efforts, I believe that (name of organization) is paying attention to my efforts.
- When I am evaluated by my supervisor, it is the same as being evaluated by (name of organization)