Examining Supervisor Support through the Lens of Conservation of Resource Theory (COR): A Sequential Path Model

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Abstract

The study was conducted to identify the antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety and feeling trusted with some additional mediators, resulting in positive and negative outcomes. The study is novel as it was the first attempt to test the dual pathways in terms of psychological safety and trust. The study used the positivism research philosophy followed by the deductive approach to meet the objectives of the study. The survey method was used to collect the data. 400 questionnaires were distributed among subordinates and 318 returned, representing a response rate of 79.5%. On the other hand, we also took the responsibility of supervisors to rate the level of creativity of their subordinates (dyadic), with an average of 8-10 employees working under one supervisor, so we selected 40 supervisors after collecting subordinate level data and distributed questionnaires using the questionnaire coding method. The response rate from supervisors was 98%. The results suggested that supervisor support through feeling trusted and voicing behavior on employee creativity is having a significant relationship and supervisor support through feeling trusted and perceived workload on employee creativity is also having a significant relationship supporting partial mediation. Subsequently, another relationship i.e. supervisor support and employee creativity was also tested and results identified that the relationship is mediated by perceived workload and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, supervisor support relationship with employee's creativity mediated by psychological safety and voicing behavior is also having the mediation effects. Therefore, our entire hypotheses were accepted.

Keywords: Supervisor's Support, Feeling Trusted Psychological Safety, Perceived Work Overload, Emotional Exhaustion, Voicing Behavior, Employee Creativity

Introduction

Supervisors and/or managers are commonly referred to as an organization's "human faces" in the organizations. According to Eisenberger, Foslo, and LaMastro (1990), supervisors and managers must maintain a relationship with their employees to achieve the desired performance. Supervisor support was identified as an important determinant of the positive development of employee attitude and behavior (McCollkennedy & Anderson, 2002), and such attitude and behavior are dependent on the quality of relationship exchange with supervisors (Malik & Khan, 2020). In the literature on the positive psychological development of the employee, it has been identified that organizational support or supervisory support could lead to feelings of being trusted as well as enhance psychological safety. Baer, Dhensa-Kahlon, Colquitt, Rodell, Outlaw, and Long, (2015) defined the concept of feeling trusted as the perception that another party is willing to accept vulnerability to one's actions (e.g. Baer et al., 2015). In organizations where supervisors tend to delegate critical tasks, providing stretch assignments, or increasing requests for benefits, employees feel that they are trusted to become a source of satisfaction for them (Baer et al., 2015). Feeling trusted has certain positive outcomes such as voicing behavior, psychological empowerment, employee engagement (Kahn, 1990), and creative performance (Madjar, 2008). Supervisor support is essential to generate feelings of trust that have a significant impact on the creative performance of employees. As discussed by Madjar, (2008) that supervisory support initiatives play a significant role in enhancing creativity through the element of trust and voicing behavior. The study further argued that if the supervisors praise their subordinates,

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respect them, provide support, and welcome their ideas then the employee reciprocates their efforts and becomes more creative (Madjar, 2008). The path of supervisor support, feeling trusted, voicing ideas, and creativity is very much linked with social exchange theory. Supervisor support has also the capacity to promote a psychological safety environment, where employees feel safe for taking the initiative and perform their assigned tasks. A thorough review of the literature on psychological safety by Newman, Donohue, and Eva (2017) revealed that empirical evidence supports the strong influence of leader's support, inclusiveness, openness, trustworthiness, and behavioral integrity on employee perceptions of psychological safety (May, Gilson, & Harter., 2004; Bienefeld & Grote, 2014; Detert & Burris, 2007; Madjar & Ortiz-Walters, 2009; Polanski & Vogelgesang, 2011), consequently resulting in outcomes like voice behaviors, engagement in creativity and job performance.

The current study has extended the thoughts through the inclusion of another path that is formulated by the guidelines for the conservation of resource theory. It has been identified that overdose of feeling trusted and psychological safety have some sort of negative outcomes (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). The researchers proposed a model "TMGT (too-much-of-a-good-thing)" and record its several effects through a meta-theoretical principle based on the counter-intuitive or counter theoretical findings in the past studies of management research which suggests that when the level of antecedents, which are intuitively and theoretically thought to bring about positive results, reach to a point where negative outcomes start becoming prominent. Later on, the research used TMGT as a guiding mechanism and found leadership effectiveness to have a detrimental impact on employees' assertiveness. Ames and Flynn, (2007) and Baer et al., (2015) further extended the concept and found that feeling trusted has some sort of negative impact on employee attitude and behavior. They suggested for future research to encompass negative outcomes of feeling trusted as opposed to its positive relations in the past studies. Researchers like Baer et al., (2015); Lawler, (1992); Mayer et al., (1995) and Mishra, (1996) found that overdosed trust could be perceived as a burden by the employees. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) explained that when the demands (perceived workloads) and expectations are too high, there are two options to meet those high expectations; one is provision of extra psychological or physiological resources, so-called strain coping mechanism, and the other is the passive coping mechanism like reduction in in-role or extra-role performance (Hockey, 1997). Drawing on Hobfoll's (2001) conservation of resources theory (COR), the situation when increased workloads are eliciting out of perceived trust of supervisors, and less availability of job resources or threat of loss of resources, the stress level will increase which may elicit negative emotional responses like employees anxiety, depression, or emotional exhaustion: one of the most consistent and centered dimensions of job burnout. Emotional Exhaustion has been described as a physical and emotional depletion or strain due to work stressors. Based upon the literature and theory, the current study included a negative path to study the impact of feeling trusted and psychological safety on job stress through perceive workload.

Literature Review

Supervisor's Support, Psychological Safety, Voicing Behavior, and Employee Creativity

As the environment of business continues to require its employees to be creative (voicing ideas) to improve their processes or to gain a competitive edge, it is important to verify the mechanisms by which these activities can be induced. Employee creativity conceptualized as the individual's characteristic has worked through a process (Amabile, 1988) and has been activated through the initiatives of an organization. Following the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), a supportive environment (supervisor support) stimulates psychological safety, followed by an employee producing a voice that leads to creativity. Madjar, (2008) explained that employees who feel they are respected and praised for their good performance and are not criticized or threatened for voicing unique ideas and suggestions would encourage them to process more information uniquely and worked for creative solutions to a problem. The concept was also provoked through the conservation of resource theory. The theory suggested that the supervisor support (job resource) generates trusted feelings in employees that lead to voicing ideas (resource investment) and it further leads to creative performance (Ortega, et al., 2014).

In addition to discussing the aspect of psychological safety above, researchers have also linked it in previous studies with creativity, innovation, communication, knowledge sharing, voicing behaviors, employee attitudes, and others (see Chen et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2013; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Previous studies suggest that better performers of the employee can be

differentiated from their counterparts based on psychological safety climate in a way that employees who feel psychologically safe due to organizational support, including supervisor's support, feel comfortable in investing their existing resources (like communication and knowledge sharing; forms of voicing behaviors) that leads to positive individual and team level work outcomes like innovation, learning, and performance (Newman et al.,2017).

H1 (a): Psychological Safety and Voicing Behavior serially mediate between Supervisor's Support and Employee Creativity.

H1 (b): Feeling Trusted and Voicing Behavior serially mediates between Supervisor's Support and Employee Creativity.

Supervisor's Support, Feeling Trusted, psychological safety, perceived workload, and Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, one of the components of burnout is a prolonged feeling of physical and emotional depletion. Emotional exhaustion is of significant concern in several job settings including employees working in semi-government job positions with a structured work environment where there is less availability of job resources to deal with increased job demands. Keeping in view the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, a supervisor accepting vulnerability to an employee has implications for resource loss dynamic as risk-taking behaviors associated with feeling trusted is often manifested in the form of additional assignments given to an employee which he/she perceives as an additional workload (Baer et al., 2015). The employees who perceive a high workload believe that they are expected to do a lot of work, which means a lot of hard work is required of them (Baer et al., 2015). The perceived workload cannot be measured in terms of hours worked or several assigned tasks as it is a perception, which means it largely depends on the aptitude and the personality of the employee and the support provided by the work environment (Baer et al., 2015). Several theoretical and empirical research which has applied COR theory to the workplace has identified job demands such as perceived workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity as resource losses (Luchman & Gonz´alez Morales, 2013; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gorgievski, Hobfoll, 2008; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). The reason why perceived workload has been classified as a resource loss is that addressing it drains the individual of its emotional, physical, and mental strengths (personal resources) (Hobfoll, 1989; 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Therefore, it is expected to predict stress and strain-based outcomes (Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). COR theory suggests that perceived workload will consequently lead to emotional exhaustion (Baer et al., 2015) as it has detrimental effects on several resources like free time, work time, adequate sleep, stamina, endurance, and a perception that life is peaceful (Hobfoll et al., 1992). A meta-analysis by Lee and Ashforth (1996) also supported the notion that perceived workload is one of the strongest predictors of emotional exhaustion. In a semi-government work setting where resources are limited to deal with the perceived workload as resource loss, originating from feeling trusted due to the supervisor's support, would consequently lead to an increase in emotional exhaustion. Thus current study conceptualizes the hypothesis as under:

H2 (a): Feeling Trusted and Perceived Workload serially mediates between Supervisor's Support and Emotional Exhaustion.

Similarly, Newman, Donohue, and Eva (2017) proposed that supportive job resources like organizational support and supervisor's support lead to developing a climate of psychological safety which ensures protection from resource loss; yet, negative individual outcomes can still incur like stresses and strain and team outcomes like conflict. As discussed above, drawing on the COR theory, when employees value resource such as supervisor's support, they would wish to retain and protect it by investing existing resources like engaging in risk-taking behaviors, e.g., knowledge sharing with others to collect additional resources like positive feedback and acknowledgment from co-workers to protect the valued resource. It is important to understand here that the investing of existing resources means a decrease in resources (depletion) to gain more, and sometimes resource gain is less salient than an equivalent amount of resource loss (Baer et al., 2015). In a structured semi-government work environment where additional resources may be limited, the depletion of resources can have an adverse impact on emotional exhaustion before additional resources are gained to manage the stress induced by resource depletion. Thus, deriving the following hypothesis:

H2 (b): Psychological Safety and perceived workload serially mediate between Supervisor's Support and Emotional Exhaustion.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study used the guidelines of positivism research stance that is followed by deductive approach. The survey method was used to collect the quantitative data for the employees working in exploration and production (E & P) sector-related organizations of Pakistan. It serves as an appropriate research setting for testing our hypotheses for several reasons. First, E & P sector is the most important sector for the country which is having a significant contribution to the economy. Organizations must understand the concept of psychological safety, its consequences (positive and negative) on employees. Second, the organizations working under the umbrella of the E & P sector need to remain competitive; to consolidate their market share and continuously finding new opportunities. Hence, middle managers are increasingly expected to show more creative work, personal initiatives which will ultimately support the company's strategic changes. So, the current study selected the said sector for empirical testing of our model.

Data Collection

Before starting the study informed consent was taken by the organization. For this purpose, informed the managers and got the approval of conducting a study in the selected organization. After that the employees were briefed about the study ensuring anonymity and invited to participate in the study voluntarily, also offered the management the sharing of study results as an incentive to allow us to conduct the study. For the collection of data, the study used a self-administrative questionnaire which consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of demographic analysis (i.e. age, gender, qualification, designation). Participants concerning designations were identified as a geologist, human resource officers, engineers, and joint venture officers. 400 questionnaires were distributed among subordinates and 318 were received back representing the response rate of 79.5%. On the other hand, the study also used the response of supervisors for rating the creativity level of their subordinates (dyadic), on average 8-10 employees are working under one supervisor, so the current study selected 40 supervisors after collection of subordinate's level data and distributed the questionnaires by using coding method on questionnaires. The response rate from supervisors was identified as 98%. Among 318 subordinates (employee) responses 76.4% were male and 23.6% were females. Most of the employees had a master's degree (91.5%) and the rest had graduated (8.9%). The employees reported their age bracket 25-30 (68%), 31-35 (22%), and (10%) reported their age between 35- 40.

The procedure of the study

Participants of the study were selected after formal approval taken from the competent authority and the study was conducted by using different time lags. To avoid common method bias collected the responses of mediators by using the interval contingent experience sampling methodology suggested by different researchers (Alliger & Willians, 1993 and Wheeler & Ries, 1991). For meeting the maximum effectiveness criteria of this methodology, researchers gave the gap of two weeks, and participants were asked to fill the questionnaire (each variable on a day). Supervisor-related questionnaires were also distributed Visa-Vis at the time of getting responses from employees.

Sampling Technique

Since the study's population was unknown, so the current research adopted non-probability sampling (i.e. purposive sampling technique). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is very much aligned with the current study's objectives. It served the study's purpose, so the researcher employs this sampling technique to collect data.

Measures

Supervisor Support was adopted from the Greenhouse, Parasuraman & Wormley (1990) study which consisted of 9 items. The dependent variable employee creativity was assessed by using the Zhou and George (2001) supervisor reporting scale. 04 items scale adopted from Lau, Liu, & Fu (2007) was used for assessment of feeling trusted. The sample items taken from the scale are "My supervisor empowers me with great decision-making power", "My supervisor consults with me confidential information within my organization" and "My supervisor informs me of his/her personal developmental plans". All the items were rated on a five-point Likert scale as mentioned above. Emotional exhaustion was assessed by using the Maslachi, Jackson, & Leiter, (1996) scale. The said scale consisted of 09 items. For assessment of Psychological Safety Edmondson, (1999) scale was used. This scale consists of 7-items. The perceived workload was measured using an adapted version of the NASATLX questionnaire (Braarud 2001). The said scale consisted of six items.

Results

The study conducted CFA- (confirmatory factor analysis) before running the formal regression and the values are showing good fit [$\chi 2$ = 881.25, df = 561, P = 0.000, RMSEA = 0.033; CFI = 0.968 and TLI = 0.964]. The fit of the model is significant and the factors are also perfectly loaded at the required place as indicated in Table 1. Furthermore, the current study tested the discriminant validity by using the correlation test. Table 2 indicates the eight multi-item constructs all exhibiting satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 1: *EFA/CFA, Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted outcomes*

Constructs & Items	ρ	λ	CR	AVE
FEELING TRUSTED				
FT1	.876	.847**	0.967	0.681
FT2	.818	.884**		
FT3	.874	.886**		
PERCEIVED WORKLOAD				
PWL1	.874	.810**	0.936	0.605
PWL2	.954	.997**		
PWL3	.781	.665**		
EMPLOYEE CREATIVITY				
C1	.874	.810**	0.936	0.605
C 2	.954	.997**		
C 3	.781	.665**		
C 4	.788	.715**		
C 5	.585	.617**		
C 6	.531	.430**		
C 7	.858	.774**		
SUPERVISOR SUPPORT				
SS1	.775	.627**	.931	.667
SS2	.921	.997**		
SS3	.764	.619**		
SS4	.918	.912**		
EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION				
EE1	.720	.656**	.926	.646
EE2	.941	.997**		
EE3	.834	.752**		
EE4	.858	.791**		
EE5	.822	.691**		
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY				
PS1	.774	.713**	.937	.715
PS2	.852	.788**		
PS3	.961	.997**		
PS4	.877	.791**		
PS5	.885	.776**		
VOICING BEHAVIOR				
VB1	.787	.725**	.814	.522
VB2	.814	.754**		
VB3	.811	.711**		
VB4	.734	.699**		
Measurement model fit statistics:				
a. Absolute fit indices				

$\chi 2$= 4411.198, DF =1680, CFI=.922, RMR= .056, CMIN/DF= 2.626, GFI= .750, AGFI=.718, TLI=.915, and RMSEA=.067

Note. **p<.01, ρ = Factor loadings at .4 using EFA; λ = standardized factors loadings using CFA; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.*

Hypothesis Testing
Table 3: **Hypotheses Results for Direct Effects**

Hypotheses	Path Coefficients	S.E	T-Value	P-value
SS-->FT	.394	.071	5.551	***
SS--> PS	.389	.045	8.686	***
PS-->PWL	.247	.084	2.954	*
VB-->FT	.551	.083	6.646	***
FT-->PWL	.096	.057	1.683	†
PS -->VB	.338	.122	2.779	*
PWL -->EC	.288	.053	5.419	***
EE -->VB	.036	.025	1.425	.154
VB-->EC	.197	.034	5.767	***
PWL-->EE	.253	.039	6.441	***
SS-->EC	.288	.056	5.131	***
SS-->EE	.292	.041	7.046	***

† $p < 0.100$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, SS= Supervisor Support, FT= Feeling Trusted, PS= Psychological Safety, PWL= Perceived Workload, VB= Voicing Behavior, EC= Employee Creativity, EE= Emotional Exhaustion

     The results displayed in the above table are proving support for all the hypotheses. Moreover, Figure 2 is also displaying the sequential role of feeling trust, psychological safety, perceived workload, voicing behavior in the sequence of supervisor support, employee creativity, and emotional exhaustion. The direct impact of supervisor support on employee creativity, and emotional exhaustion, thus the partial sequential mediation have been found.
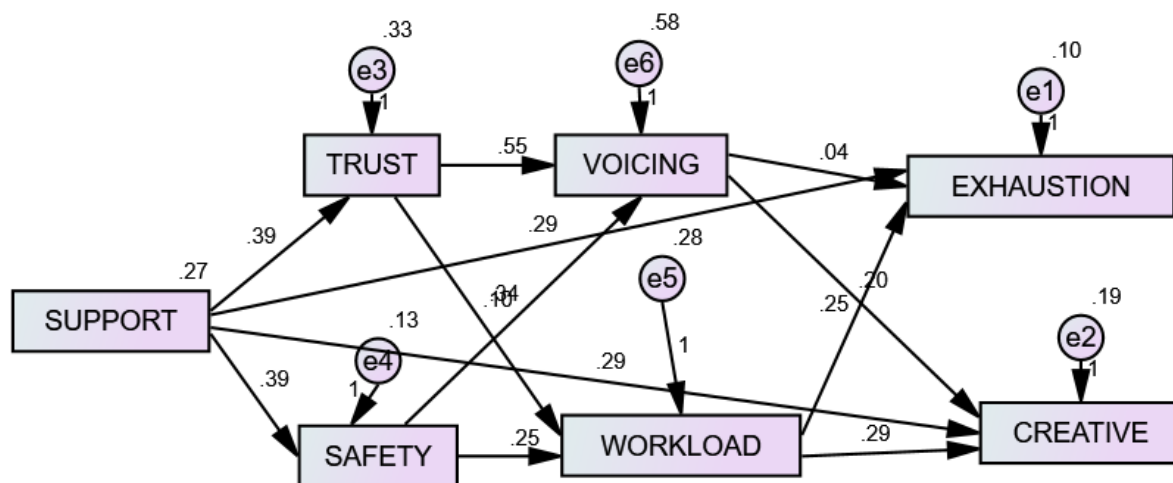

Figure 2: Sequential Path Model

Discussion

Previous work on supervisor's support followed by two very important psychological outcomes, which have been the core of this study, feeling trusted and psychological safety has empirically and intuitively, within the context of various theories like a social exchange, social learning, etc., brought about positive work outcomes; employee creativity through the mediating mechanism of voicing behavior is one such outcome empirically tested in this study as well. To our expectations, all our hypotheses were accepted. Interpersonal trust between supervisor and employees, and psychological safety due to support by the supervisor have benefits for the supervisor as well as the reciprocal behavior not only benefit the individual him/herself and the organization by working out ways for improvement or finding solutions to the problems, but it also helps supervisor focus on other important elements of his/her work (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Therefore, the supervisor's support is a valuable resource to the employees as the trust and psychological safety it evokes, makes them feel better about themselves and their association with the organization. As per COR theory, the retention of the valuable resource becomes vital for employees due to which existing resources are invested in the spirit of feeling trusted and psychological safety like knowledge sharing, a form of voicing behavior, to gain additional resources like supervisor's constructive feedback and acknowledgment.

Consequently, leading to employee engagement in creativity; one of the positive and very important outcomes as it tends to form a competitive edge which is one of the main requirements of the business world today and the researchers identified that the role of supervisors and leaders is inevitable to improve the business process (Malik, Khan, & Mahmood, 2021).

However, up until recently, the positive aspects of feeling trusted and psychological safety have been challenged which lead us to further explore their detrimental effects. Feeling trust can lead to feelings of workload, which can make employees feel more emotionally exhausted (Baer et al., 2015). Similarly, psychological safety can urge employees to re-invest their resources which depletes the existing pool of resources, and as resources are limited in a structured environment, the sense of depletion emotionally exhausts the employee before additional resources are gained to sustain that stress. Our findings have endorsed the current trend of studying the detrimental outcome of conceivably positive psychological phenomena, grounded on a theory new to trust and psychological safety literature; conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001). Examining the supervisor's support in association with feeling trusted and psychological safety through the lens of COR theory provides a more robust insight into the employee's side of the supervisor-employee relationship. A high-quality relationship leads to positive outcomes; however, COR theory suggests that an individual does not have to go through a negative experience to suffer stress. A positive and delightful experience may also lead to stressful situations when resources get chipped away in order, rather, to retain the good experience (Baer et al., 2015). Thus, the COR framework allowed us to examine the phenomena of feeling trusted and psychological safety in both positive and negative ways. Our study provides a useful add-on to the existing knowledge of supervisors about using tools such as their support which was initially conceived to extract only the positive results from their employees. Now, they will have a clearer understanding of the detrimental effects of the dynamics of feeling trusted and psychological safety, which may not bring about the positive results to the level of their expectations due to the emotional exhaustion of their employees. One way supervisors may be able to deal with the negative situation even after providing support is to manage the perceived workload followed by feeling trusted. A few tasks, depending on trust in employees, can be designated to different employees rather than loading onto one, or the trusted employee can be given the authority to distribute the sub-tasks to co-workers which they would do so conscientiously as he/she would be accountable for the final results and he/she would not want to lose the valuable resource of supervisor's support which brings the delightful feeling of interpersonal trust.

Future research directions

The study was conducted in Pakistan which is having different cultural backgrounds, but the culture-related variable was not incorporated in the current model. Future researchers need to include cultural variables such as collectivism for a better understanding of the concept. Moreover, the study was conducted at one level, for researchers, it is suggested that they can test the model by including the organizational and group levels in this model. Moreover, the employees especially in Pakistan if feel that they are supported by their supervisors, trust, and psychologically safe then it may possible they can involve in procrastination or non-work-related Presenteeism (Akhtar & Malik, 2016). So on the negative side, the researcher can also add these outcomes in the future.

Limitations

Undoubtedly, the current research is covering almost every aspect of psychological safety (positive and negative), but there are some limitations identified. The data was collected only from one organization which cannot be generalizing the results of the study.

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