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The relationships of perceived organizational support (POS) with organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention: Mediating role of felt obligation

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Abstract

The conceptual framework for this research was POS theory. According to this theory (Eisenberger et al. 1986), employees form general beliefs concerning how much the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. This perceived organizational support leads to employees' felt obligation to help the organization reach its goals. Present study tested a mediation model consisting of organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention as dependent variables and POS as independent variable, with felt obligation as its mediator. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), the relationships were examined in a sample of 325 full-time employees in an industrial organization in Iran. Results showed that a) pos was positively related to employees' felt obligation; b) POS was positively related to organizational commitment and in-role performance, and negatively related to turnover intention, and c) felt obligation mediated the relationships of POS with organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention. Discussion and implications of the results are presented in the study.
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Keywords: perceived organizational support; felt obligation; organizational commitment; in-role performance, turnover intention

Introduction

The employee-organization relationship is the focus of the perceived organizational support construct (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986). Eisenberger and colleagues (1986) argued that employees aggregate the treatment that they receive from representatives of the organization to form "global perceptions concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986: 501), or perceived organizational support (POS). When employees have high levels of POS, the reciprocity norm (Gouldner, 1960) motivates them to help the organization reach its goals and objectives (Eisenberger et al, 1986).

Social exchange theorists have alluded to employment as the trade of effort and loyalty for tangible benefits and social rewards (e.g., Bateman & Organ, 1983). When one person treats another well, the reciprocity norm obliges the return of favorable treatment (Gouldner, 1960). To the extent that both the employee and the employer apply the

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reciprocity norm to their relationship, favorable treatment received by either party is reciprocated, leading to beneficial outcomes for both.

Consistent with Eisenberger's proposition, research reveals that employees with high levels of POS are more committed to the organizations they work for and more satisfied with their jobs (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Such employees are less likely to be tardy, absent, or resign (e.g. Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Eisenberger et al., 1986); and have higher in-role performance (e.g. Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Lynch, 1998).

On the basis of the reciprocity norm, POS should create a felt obligation to care about the organization's welfare (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). The obligation to exchange caring for caring (Foa & Foa, 1980) should enhance employees' affective commitment to the personified organization.

POS should also increase affective commitment by fulfilling such socioemotional needs as affiliation and emotional support (Armeli et al., 1998; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Such need fulfilment produces a strong sense of belonging to the organization, involving the incorporation of employees' membership and role status into their social identity. POS should strengthen employees' beliefs that the organization recognizes and rewards increased performance (i.e., performance-reward expectancies). These processes should have favorable outcomes both for employees (e.g., increased job satisfaction and heightened positive mood) and for the organization (e.g., increased affective commitment and performance, reduced turnover).

The relationship of POS to behavioural intentions to leave (i.e., turnover intention) have been assessed (e.g. Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994), as have actual withdrawal behaviors such as tardiness, absenteeism, and voluntary turnover. Retention of organizational membership, high attendance, and punctuality provide publicly identifiable ways for employees to reciprocate POS.

A key concept associated with POS is the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). According to organizational support theory, POS can have a positive impact on employee attitudes and behaviors mainly because it creates a sense of obligation within the individuals to repay the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). Despite this contention, most POS studies have only examined the direct effect of POS on various outcomes, while little research has been conducted to investigate the mediating mechanisms through which POS influences employee behaviors and attitudes. One exception is Eisenberger et al.'s (2001), which specifically examined reciprocation's role in the relationships of POS with employee commitment and job performance. Their research suggests that an important mediator of the POS-outcome relationship is felt obligation. This finding supports social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory's (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) contention that the norm of reciprocity applies to the employer-employee relationship. Specifically, employees respond to favorable treatment by the organization with feelings of obligation to care about the organization's welfare and to act in the organization's behalf, which, in turn, enhance positive work attitudes and behaviors. Following this research, to further validate the role of the reciprocity norm in explaining the mediating mechanism for the relationship between POS and important organizational outcomes, Present study examine the role of felt obligation as a mediator of the effects of POS on a variety of work attitudes and behaviors. In the POS literature, organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention have been outcome variables that are usually found to be related to POS. Therefore, in present study, these variables have been used as the outcome variables.

The present study and hypotheses

The model tested in this research, states that POS will promote felt obligation in employees to care about and aid the organization (H1), and felt obligation relate positively to organizational commitment, in-role performance, and negatively to turnover intention (H2, H3& H4 respectively). That is, felt obligation is the mediator between POS and organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention (H5, H6, & H7 respectively). The proposed model presented in Figure 1.

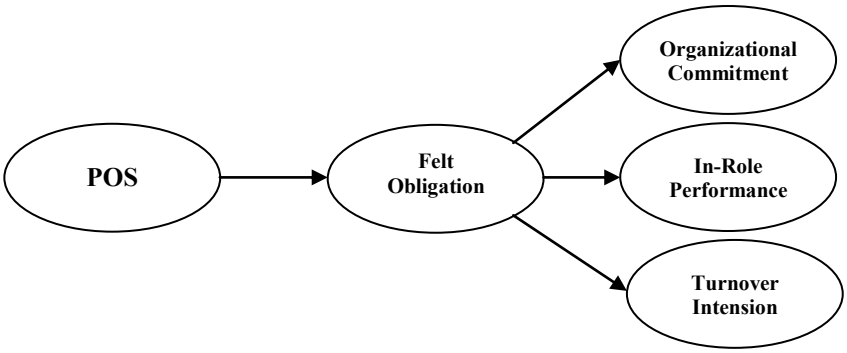

Figure 1. Proposed model of the relationships among POS, felt obligation, organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention

Method

Participants

Data were gathered from a sample of full-time employees who were selected by stratified random sampling method from all departments of an industrial organization in Iran. Anonymous questionnaires were distributed to 400 employees. All together, 325 questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The response rate was 81.25%. Of the employees in the final sample, 75 percent were men, and the average age was 39.

Measures

Perceived organizational support. Six-item questionnaire (Eisenberger et al. 2001) was used for assessment of perceived organizational support. Respondents were asked (1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree) to indicate how much their organization supported them. Eisenberger et al. (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .77 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .82.

Felt obligation. Seven items designed by Eisenberger et al. (2001) were used for assessment of employees' felt obligation to care about the organization and to help it reach its goals. This measure used a 1-7 response scale (1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree). Eisenberger et al. (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured with the 15-item scale developed by Mowday, Steers & Porter (1979). Participants responded on 7-point Likert-type scale from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree). Mowday et al. (1979) reported Cronbach's alpha of .82 to .93 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .89.

In-role performance. In-role performance was measured with the 7-item scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). This measure used a 1-5 response scale (1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree). Williams and Anderson (1991) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .89 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .91.

Turnover intention. Turnover intention was measured with the 3-item scale developed by Camman, Fichman, Jenkins & Klesh (1979). Participants responded on 7-point Likert-type scale from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree). Camman et al. (1979) reported aCronbach's alpha of .78 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .79.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Before all proposed relationships were tested simultaneously, first a correlational analysis was conducted (Pearson correlations) among all variables included in this study. The correlations of variables/means and standard deviations are reported in table 1.

Structural Model

Structural modeling results suggested that the hypothesized model fit the observed data adequately, $\chi 2/df=2.3$, GFI=.97, CFI=.96, TLI=.96, NFI=.95, and RMSEA=.045.

All of the hypothesized relationships were supported based on the structural modeling results. The path estimates for the hypothesized model are shown in Figure 2.

As expected, hypothesis 1 was supported, POS was related positively to felt obligation (β=.41, $p < .001$). Consistent with Hypothesis 2 through Hypothesis 4, felt obligation was positively related to organizational commitment, In-role performance, and negatively to turnover intention (β=.48, $p < .001$; β=.22, $p < .001$, and β=-.20, $p < .001$, respectively).

Because of the proposed mediation effects (felt obligation mediating the relationship between POS and organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention), the procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) was followed. Accordingly, three regression models were investigated for three mediating paths. For the first path, that is, POS → felt obligation → organizational commitment, three regression models are: the organizational commitment on POS, the proposed mediator (felt obligation) on POS, and the organizational commitment on POS and felt obligation together. For the second path, that is, POS → felt obligation → in-role performance, three regression models are: the in-role performance on the POS, the proposed mediator (felt obligation) on the POS, and the in-role performance on the POS and felt obligation together. For the Third path, that is, POS → felt obligation → turnover intention, three regression models are: the turnover intention on the POS, the proposed mediator (felt obligation) on the POS, and the turnover intention on the POS and felt obligation together. If the beta of the POS is significant in the first model but non-significant or substantially reduced in the combined model, we have a pattern consistent with mediation. Mediation of felt obligation in relationship between POS and organizational commitment was indicated; as the beta of POS became non-significant when felt obligation was added to the regression model. A similar pattern of reduced but still significant POS beta is shown for POS - in-role performance relation and POS – turnover intention relation. Thus, the emerged pattern suggests a mediating role of felt obligation (H5, H6, & H7).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. POS	3.89	1.30	—	—	—	—
2. Felt Obligation	4.02	1.61	0.54**	—	—	—
3. Organizational Commitment	7.14	2.23	0.71**	0.65**	—	—
4. In-Role Performance	4.44	1.45	0.22**	0.28**	0.11*	—
5. Turnover Intention	3.20	1.11	-0.30**	-0.26**	-0.15*	-0.52**

* P<0.01 ** P<0.001

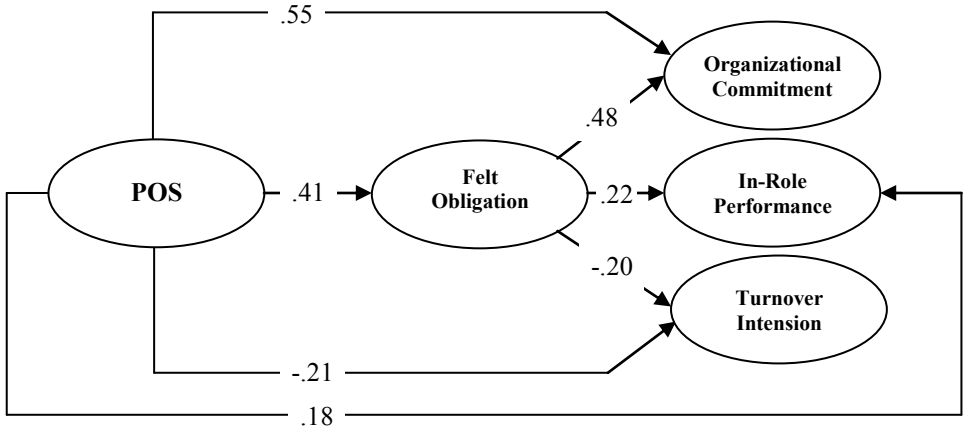

Figure 2. structural equation model of the relationships among POS, felt obligation, organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine a mediation model, with POS can influence employees' felt obligation to care about the organization and to help it reach its goals, and this obligation can exert pervasive effects on organizational commitment, in-role performance, and turnover intention. The model, which had received support from previous studies, was examined with data from employees in an industrial organization in Iran.

Testing the relationship between POS and a variety of important work outcomes provide further insight into the effects of POS. Consistent with previous research, POS was found to have both direct impact on organizational commitment, in-role performance, turnover intention, and indirect impact mediated by felt obligation. Higher levels of POS create a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well-being and helping achieve its goals (Eisenberger et al., 2001). These results favor organizational support theory, which emphasis on felt obligation in relationships between POS and outcome variables. Thus when managers keep in mind that higher levels of POS are related to a variety of positive work outcomes, organizations should find ways to promote higher POS beliefs among employees. Results of this study can help guide this endeavor.

It is important to highlight some limitations of the present study which can guide future research. First, given the cross-sectional design of this study, causal relationships among the variables cannot be established. Longitudinal studies should be employed to test the hypotheses. Second, the use of self-report measures may have inherent limitations (e.g. inability to recall, social desirability). A combination of self-report questionnaires and objective assessments would be ideal. Finally, because the participants were full-time employees, care should be taken in generalizing and extending the findings to part-time employees.

This research also points to some future research directions that can help further understand the phenomenon of interest and overcome the limitations of current research. First, one direction for future research is to study the outcomes of POS through longitudinal data. Longitudinal research clarifies whether the effects of POS on work outcomes would diminish or strengthen over time. Second, future research is needed to further understand the other possible mediators and moderators in this process.

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