

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF  
PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

by

A. Pazy

Working Paper No 3/2012

April 2012

**Research No. 06480100**

This paper was partially financed by the Henry Crown Institute of Business Research in Israel.

The Institute's working papers are intended for preliminary circulation of tentative research results. Comments are welcome and should be addressed directly to the authors.

The opinions and conclusions of the authors of this study do not necessarily state or reflect those of The Faculty of Management, Tel Aviv University, or the Henry Crown Institute of Business Research in Israel.

## Phenomenological Exploration of Perceived Organizational Support

Asya Pazy<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the study was to explore the individual's phenomenological experience of organizational support. The construct of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was originally defined by Eisenberger *et al* (1986) as "the degree to which the organization values employees' contribution and cares about their well-being." More than two decades of research, yielding over 150 published empirical studies, have established the critical role of POS in the social exchange between organizations and employees (for meta analyses see Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Riggle *et al*, 2009). The major finding is that employees reciprocate to a supporting organization by exhibiting favorable attitudes and by acting pro-organizationally.

Previous research has uniformly measured POS with an eight-item Likert-type scale (for items\*, see Table 2). Beyond its original construction, the content of this measure has not been re-visited. We are not aware of any studies that examined whether the complex experience of being supported or unsupported while being employed in contemporary organizations is adequately captured by this numerical measure. In particular, no study has addressed the phenomenological experience of the high end of the scale (i.e., receiving support) or of its low end (i.e., when support is withheld, not receiving support). The present study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the phenomenological experience of the POS construct with a qualitative methodology. Specifically, it identified major themes, prominent categories and sub-categories of its meanings. It proceeded to examine content variation according to the sign of the variable, namely, whether the occurrence of POS and its lack were expressed merely in degrees or whether they are qualitatively different from one

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dana Shefer for her help in organizing and coding the data

another (thus examining the continuity between the high and low ends of the POS scale). Finally, we validated the components that were suggested in the original definition of POS and its eight items.

At the start, we formulated a mapping sentence which underlies the construct of support:

*Party A receives* (does not receive)

*Something* (support, e.g., favor, or lack of) from

*Party B*

*In response to* (as a result of, in return for) *something*, and

*Consequences* follow.

The six major content categories ( Recipient, Receives, Support, In response to, Provider, and Consequences) of which this mapping sentence is composed served as the basis for content analysis of respondents' accounts of incidents when they experienced support, or withdrawal of support, from their employing organization.

The sample consisted of Israeli full-time employees (most of them were part-time graduate or undergraduate business students) who were asked to describe an incident in which they perceived that their organization was supportive or not supportive<sup>2</sup>. 254 accounts were collected, 201 contained specific incidents: 131 specific incidents contained positive accounts (i.e., incidents or examples where the organization was supportive of the respondent) and 70 contained negative accounts (i.e., incidents of examples where the respondent experienced that the organization

---

<sup>2</sup> In one sub-sample, where opening instructions were counterbalanced, we found that the order did not affect the sign of the account (Chi square=0.6, df=1, n.s.) [Support first: 14 P, 12 N; No support first: 20 P, 26 N. Out of 72 accounts, 34 P(47.2%) and 38 N (52.8%)]

was not supportive). The remaining 53 responses are excluded from the current analysis because they did not provide specific incidents but rather consisted of lists of evidence of supportive (not supportive) practices from their organization, without going into detail of any one incident.

Two independent trained experts conducted content analysis of the written material. In the first step of the analysis the two judges identified categories and sub-categories within each of the six major categories above. They next proceeded to collapse similar sub-categories to single units. In the second step the judges recorded the frequencies in which each category and sub-category was mentioned in each account. Disagreements regarding coding were resolved through discussion.

In what follows we report preliminary findings from this analysis. Sub-categories of very low frequencies are not included in this report. See Table 1 for summary category frequencies.

As presented in the table, the great majority of accounts illustrated the notion of support by telling an incident in which the recipient was oneself (84.6%) and or members of one's family (4%), while 19.4% reported of incidents in which they were observers of support, namely cases in which they witnessed others (colleagues or subordinates) as the recipients. Often (62.5%) the incidents were experienced in private, when no one else (other than the support provider) was aware of what is happening or actually present, but some (14%) were experienced in public, with other people around (as in a ceremony or during a work meeting). To illustrate,

"Today a client called the office and complained that his investment portfolio was losing value. While he was complaining he got onto the subject of his last meeting in which he had met the investment manager. The client mentioned that when he had asked the investment manager about the state of his portfolio, the latter first made a mistake in the amount and immediately corrected him. Since this is a large and important client, the managing director, who was speaking to him while the person in charge of trade and I sat quietly next to her, was very patient throughout the conversation. However, when the client attacked the investment manager blatantly

about the momentary confusion, the managing director responded assertively and in a refined manner that the investment manager is a very professional person and that she could not accept that a momentary confusion that was corrected immediately could result in such an aggressive response."

The providers of support were supervisors, immediate or higher up the hierarchy (62.7%), or a more abstract entity, namely "the organization" (45.3%).

Most common of various types of support was person-directed support (80%), such as in occurrences of caring (or being careless) for one's well-being, showing (or not showing) concern or appreciation, or being in/considerate for one's needs. For example,

"My story has to do with a complicated medical operation that my mother had to undergo. My place of work was very considerate in that I was under great stress emotionally and time-wise. During the period that my mother had the operation, the pre-operative hospitalization, the surgery itself and the recovery period in the hospital, my workplace was very considerate about my absences and about the fact that I was less focused and slower at work. Even when my mother was released from the hospital and had to deal with post-operative complications, my workplace was considerate, displayed interest and tried to help in every way. I should mention that this support came from my direct supervisor and from the entire organization."

"My example refers to the support the organization gave to an employee who worked on the same team with me in the past. That employee went through a difficult divorce which had a strong negative effect on him – both personally and professionally. During that time, that lasted for an extended period (about six months), the organization treated his lack of productivity very leniently (in my opinion too much so). Many hours were expended on dealing with his personal matters at the expense of work time and resources sometimes including those of other employees. On the personal level too, the employee enjoyed great support, both from his colleagues at work (myself included) and from the managers who had long talks with him and helped him through the process of coping with the crisis. All of this was even more significant given the fact that, for a long time, this employee had not functioned effectively and was not considered a good worker, long before the crisis. I had somewhat mixed feelings – on the one hand the employee is a friend of mine and I supported him and helped him when he needed it, and, on the other hand, as a manager I believe that I would have been less forgiving and would have demanded more cooperation from him. In addition, it is encouraging to think that the organization does support people who are part of it regardless of their professional importance."

However, 32% of the cases consisted of task-directed support. Examples in the positive accounts were receiving training, getting reimbursed for tuition of

academic studies, being included in professional decisions, *or* in the negative accounts, lack of backing, not giving credit, not providing tools needed for performing the job. Two respondents are quoted below:

"A few months ago we had a shortage of personnel in my place of work. Although many of the workers offered their help in filling in for the absent staff, the managers expressed their esteem for me and for my work and let me take the place of absent workers in jobs for which I had never received training. The manager asked me to get up to speed in the new role quickly even though the job was only temporary and he said that he relied on me to learn the job quickly and do it well. I felt really good about the support and the friendliness of the managers. I felt that they were relying on me and they even gave me positive feedback about my performance on the job. The results of this event were very positive for me – my status at work improved, I realized that they were relying on me and believed in my abilities, and even now I sometimes fill in for that same job if and when they need me."

"The team I work in is small – me, my colleague, and my direct boss. When we were working on some software we are developing, my colleague got the idea of writing an algorithm that would allow us to find an approximation for optimal solutions for various problems we were dealing with. In order to carry this idea out we had to free up a chunk of development time at the expense of ongoing development. At first the boss expressed doubt about the need for this algorithm, but the insistence of my colleague paid off, and eventually it became clear that the development had been worthwhile because the algorithm contributed immeasurably to speeding up future research. Problems that had previously required many skilled personnel are now carried out (semi) automatically, efficiently and very rapidly. It should be noted that the boss gives us great leeway to decide how to carry things out as well as on new developments and he takes part in discussions as one of the staff –something that contributes greatly to the development."

. 79% of the accounts consisted of non-material support (i.e., in the positive accounts, praise, recognition, consideration, backing, delegation, load reduction, allowing flexibility, *or* in the negative accounts, desertion, discrediting, insensitivity, not listening, insults, disrespect, over-demanding, blackmail, treating as replaceable). 55% of the accounts consisted of material support, oftentimes small or symbolic (i.e., raise, promotion, bonus, benefits, small gifts, vacation, a fancy dinner).

Only in 16.9% of the cases the respondent specifically mentioned that the provision deviated from the recipient's own expectations, while none mentioned that the support corresponded to expectations. However, in another part of the analysis

conducted on a sub-set the analysis of content revealed that in 75.3% of the positive accounts and in 58% of the negative ones the narrative was based on an "in spite of" notion. To illustrate, the supervisor defended the employee, who was criticized by a client for committing an (inadvertent) mistake, *in spite of* the fact that the client was a very important client; the person was allowed to work less, when recovering from an illness, *in spite of* the fact that he ran out of sick-leave days; the organization showed great concern of an employee who felt ill *in spite of* the fact that she had just started to work there; no holiday presents were given *in spite of* the fact that the organization had made a big profit in the previous year. Four incidents ran as follows:

"Today a client called the office and complained that his investment portfolio was losing value. While he was complaining he got onto the subject of his last meeting in which he had met the investment manager. The client mentioned that when he had asked the investment manager about the state of his portfolio, the latter first made a mistake in the amount and immediately corrected himself. Since this is a large and important client, the managing director, who was speaking to him while the person in charge of trade and I sat quietly next to her, was very patient throughout the conversation. However, when the client attacked the investment manager blatantly about the momentary confusion, the managing director responded assertively and in a refined manner that the investment manager is a very professional person and that she could not accept that a momentary confusion that was corrected immediately could result in such an aggressive response. I felt proud of my director's defense of her employees even when the client was an important one and I learned that it was a paramount virtue to defend and support your workers and that this feeling of security makes work more efficient because the employee does not feel as though he will be "thrown to the dogs" in case of a mistake and therefore he works better"

"In the project I head, a conflict arose between me and a senior manager in the company (not someone I report to at all) about the definition of a certain process. In a joint meeting, I discovered that he was the source of the conflict but I didn't manage to raise the problem for discussion. Next week, I am scheduled to be in the army reserves and this problem is of great concern to me. I discussed it with my team leader and with my group leader and they both assured me that they would help me to cope with this problem in relation to the other manager. My team leader also stressed that that particular manager is well-known in the company as having a problematic approach and that everyone was aware of it. After getting support like this from both my team leader and my group leader, I felt that I had support in the workplace even though it was really only professional backing."

"Two and a half weeks ago I had surgery to remove my appendix and got 11 days sick leave. At the beginning of the week, Mickey, my team leader, told me that although my sick leave was officially over, I should return to work gradually and only

work 4 hours a day instead of full time. I felt that she really cared about me and not only about my output."

"A few months ago, I unexpectedly became ill with a disease that caused me to be absent from work for about 3 weeks. Although I was a relative newcomer at work, the way I was treated by the people in the organization was amazingly supportive. The day I took ill and spent in hospital, all the team members called me several times and sent me messages to find out how I was. During my convalescence at home, many people wanted to come and visit me and sent flowers and gifts. The outcome of this negative event was positive in terms of my feeling about my place of work. When I returned to work, I felt glad and very grateful to all those who had been concerned about me, and I learned that my place of work and the people in it is a good place for me and suits me."

In less than half the cases (43.8%) support was granted due to a special condition of the recipient (i.e., health condition, pregnancy, family or financial problems, school load, work-related problems such as customer's complaint). In 18.9% it was given in exchange to the recipient's own contribution (i.e., exertion of special effort, exceptional commitment), and in 24.4% the support was granted in response to the recipient's request (i.e., for raise, for leave). To illustrate,

"I work for a large American organization. There is a very well-established procedure for half-yearly evaluations. At the beginning of the half-year I was promoted to a managerial position; I worked extremely hard, learned the job quickly, and managed it well (in my view). Background – for workers to get promoted, it is well-known that the manager's evaluations must be high and indeed, during the year prior to my promotion, I was given very high grades up until my promotion. Not all workers can get a high grade and of course the grade comes with an annual bonus. During that same half yearly period, a colleague of mine was supposed to get a promotion, so I expected to get a grade of "good" or more likely "meets" while my colleague would get "exceeds most..." However, the managing director thought otherwise. He noted my effort and my rapid advancement and despite my manager's recommendation, he gave me "exceed some...", to my surprise. I learned that the managing director had marked me as an important worker who he wanted to retain and therefore he took steps to express his appreciation for my work. The result was that I had a good feeling; my motivation grew as well as my will to continue and to excel."

Finally, 45.3% of the consequences of these support occurrences affected the recipient's sense of self-evaluation (i.e., self-worth and belief in self in the positive accounts, *or* worthlessness and disrespect for oneself in the negative ones), 34.8% of



the consequences affected how the person appreciated his or her workplace (i.e., regard and high evaluation, *or* criticism and disrespect). Strong emotions were reported to arouse as a consequence of receiving support or being denied of support (i.e., good feeling, joy, *or* bad feeling, anger, apathy, frustration) in 36.3% of the cases. Two examples are quoted below:

"I work for a software company. About two years ago the company was acquired by a gigantic international company that wanted to expand its product list in the software domain. At the time, I was an unremarkable engineer; I had no options, shares or anything else that would have allowed me to benefit from the exit strategy. Other than the annual evaluation sessions, I didn't get any other ongoing feedback, but I knew they were pleased with my work. A few weeks after the acquisition, I was summoned at short notice to the office of the managing director of my original company and was informed that I had been found worthy of getting a grant to stay on and as acknowledgement of excellence. This was a grant awarded to 5% of the veteran staff by the new company that had bought us out, on the basis of managerial recommendations. It was introduced in order to keep the best staff members and to ensure their loyalty to the company even after its name change and affiliation. Both the generous award and being part of a small club, motivated me, energized me and gave me a sense of belonging that propelled me forward for many months."

"For the past six months I have been working in a financial institution through a manpower company. To my delight, after only two months I started getting compliments after jobs that I did or discussions that I conducted – both from my direct manager and from those above him; despite the fact that I am working for an external company, they make sure to invite me to meetings and to professional conferences of the company staff. Recently, I was informed that the directors of the financial institution had started the process with the manpower company and the human resources department to get me transferred to the company as a direct employee. I see this as real support because they stand behind their words of praise and because I am being given a feeling that I am a special, talented worker."

## **Major themes**

### **Supportive vs. unsupportive organizations**

Five distinct themes emerged in analyzing complete positive/support accounts:

1. Providing opportunities for development.
2. Signaling appreciations of competence
3. Emotional care during difficult or joyful periods
4. Professional backing and protection

## 5. Expressing recognition and gratitude

Six distinct themes emerged in analyzing complete negative/non-support accounts:

1. No use of professional contribution
2. Ungratefulness, evil for good: Exploitation or offense in spite of contribution
3. Unjustified blame, no backing
4. Breaking promise
5. No response for personal need
6. Inaccurate evaluation

In sum, the data indicated that the individual's perception of an unsupportive organization is not simply a mirror image of a supportive organization. Each kind entails some unique characteristics. As an example, loss of appreciation and negative feelings are more pronounced as consequences of lack of support than (their opposites are) as consequences of support. Negative accounts contain insults, broken promises and betrayal, and there is no parallel reversal in positive accounts; showing consideration towards one's difficulties is prominent among incidents of support considerably more than its lack is among incidents of denial of support. Put differently, the experience of lack of organizational support does not correspond to the low end of the POS scale, as there is often a qualitative difference between the two.

### **Material vs. non-material support**

Second, the experience of organizational support consists of both material and non-material favorable treatment, but the non-material is more salient in people's accounts. Furthermore, the material benefits that constitute support are qualitatively different from those whose lack constitutes no support. Furthermore, in negative accounts the denial of expensive material benefits is considerably more apparent than

the denial of inexpensive, perhaps symbolic benefits. On the other hand, expensive and inexpensive benefits are similarly frequent in positive accounts.

### **Person- vs. task-focused support**

Third, POS can be distinguished to person-focused and task-focused support, though the former is more pronounced, particularly in the negative accounts.

Consistent with previous research (Pazy, 2011), the qualitative study validates the task-person distinction. Results indicate that POS can be distinguished to person-focused and task-focused support, though the former is more pronounced, particularly in the negative accounts. This is a significant contribution to the POS literature, which so far has almost solely emphasized the person-focus of the concept. With the growing identification of people with their careers and the salience of professional vocation, organizations that exhibit support to various aspects of task accomplishment not only boost their employees' performance, but also directly enhance their sense of trust and commitment.

### **Phenomenological vs. scale-measured POS**

POS refers to the generalized beliefs that employees adopt concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The phenomenological analysis indicated that 37.4% of the accounts contained the two elements of the definition, 45% contained only caring about the employee's well-being and 13.4% contained only valuing the employee's contribution.

Table 2 presents frequencies in which each of the eight POS scale items was captured in the respondents' accounts.

Compared to the original definition of the construct and the composition of its scale, it seems that the symbolic, personalized recognition of one's well-being is more

essential to the experience of POS than other components addressed by previous research.

It seems that the prevalent POS does not effectively capture the denial of support. It also does not capture the "in spite of" element which turns out to be an essential feature in the cognitive construction of organizational support. In the denial of support, it expresses a perceived breach of exchange relations (stemming either from entitlement or from need). In the provision of support, it expresses an unexpected, though temporary, transformation of the impersonal bureaucratic entity into a personal, i.e., a caring, entity. Consistent with social exchange theory, we suggest that this "in spite of" element is the reason behind the extensively-documented link between POS and its consequences, primarily organizational commitment.

## References

- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., and Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 71 (1), 500-507.
- Pazy, A. and Ganzach, Y.(2009). Pay contingency and the effects of perceived organizational and supervisor support on performance and commitment. *Journal of Management*, 35(4), 1007-1025.
- Pazy, A. (2011). The relationship between pay contingency and types of perceived support: Effects on performance and commitment. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, 6(3), 342-358.
- Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87: 698-714.
- Riggle, R.J., Edmondson, D.R., and Hansen, J.D. (2009). "A meta-analysis of the relationship between perceived organizational support and job outcomes: 20 years of research." *Journal of Business Research*, 62 (10), 1027-1030.

Table 1: Frequencies of categories within each major category (specific incidents only, n=201)

<b>Major category of Mapping Sentence</b>	<b>Sub-Category</b>	<b>Percentage mentioning sub-category</b>
<b>Recipient</b>	Self	84.6
	One's relatives	4
	Colleagues & subordinates	19.4
<b>Receives</b>	Privately	62.5
	Publicly	14
<b>Support</b>	Person-directed support	80
	Task-directed support	32
	Material benefits	55
	Non-material benefits	79
	Unexpected	16.9
	Expected	0.5
<b>In response to</b>	Recipient's contribution	18.9
	Recipient's special condition	43.8
	Recipient's request	24.4
<b>Provider</b>	Organization	45.3
	Supervisor	62.7
<b>Consequences</b>	Evaluation of self	45.3
	Feelings	36.3
	Evaluation of organization	34.8
	No consequence	0

Table 2: Frequencies of incidents that contain the content of POS scale items (N=250)

PERCENT	ITEM
24.0	The organization strongly considers my goals and values
79.6	The organization really cares about my well-being
94.0	The organization shows concern for me
3.6	The organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part
13.6	The organization cares about my opinions
10.8	If given the opportunity, the organization would take advantage of me ®
35.6	Help is available from the organization when I have a problem
16.8	The organization is willing to help me when I need a special favor