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# SEEING EYE TO EYE ON FAMILY SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISOR BEHAVIORS: THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

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## INTRODUCTION

Supervisors are crucial sources of help for employees to balance their roles in work and non-work domains (Hammer et al., 2007). In particular, recent research has demonstrated that family supportive supervisors behaviors (FSSBs) (i.e. supervisors' emotional and instrumental support, their actions as a role-model and their use of creative work-family management actions towards their subordinates; Hammer et al., 2009), improve work-family enrichment (Bagger & Li, 2014) and reduce work-family conflict (Odele-Dusseau et al., 2012). However, despite the growing evidence of the benefits associated with FSSBs, relatively little is known about the underlying processes and boundary conditions of how FSSBs influence employee outcomes.

### **Family Supportive Supervisor Behaviors and its (Dis)Agreement**

Since the development of this construct, research has consistently shown the benefits of FSSBs for organizations as it increases employees' levels of job satisfaction, work engagement as well as reduces their turnover intention and drives their work performance (Bagger & Li, 2014; Hammer et al., 2009; Hammer et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2014; Rofcanin et al., 2017). Yet, employees and supervisors might not necessarily see eye to eye concerning FSSBs. In this study, we combine research on the work-family interface and the self-other agreement (SOA) paradigm to argue that a potential (dis)agreement might exist between employees' and supervisors' perceptions of FSSB which thwarts its beneficial impact on employee outcomes (i.e. turnover intention and intrinsic motivation). The majority of research on FSSBs has built on the assumption that subordinates' and supervisors' perceptions of FSSBs are accurate and aligned (e.g., Rofcanin et al., 2017; Bagger & Li, 2014). However, perceptions are socially constructed by employees and often based on incomplete information. For example, a supervisor could view him- or herself as family supportive, while subordinates of the same supervisor may disagree with this. This might be because of the inflation of self-ratings, a lack of self-awareness and the psychological reality that every individual perceives reality in a different way depending on their own experiences, background, preferences and incomplete information (Fleenor et al., 2010; Wright & Nishii, 2007). More importantly, this disagreement has a potentially large impact on employees (Fleenor et al., 2010). Hence, our first contribution is to bring a (dis)agreement perspective into the FSSB literature and fine-tuning recent research which has focused on the

consequences of FSSBs.

Based on the SOA paradigm, we can divide supervisors into four categories: in-agreement/high FSSB, over-estimators, under-estimators and in-agreement/low FSSB. The most effective leaders are those who are highly rated by their employees as well as themselves (in-agreement/high FSSB). These supervisors have an accurate view of their strengths and weaknesses, set realistic goals and have high beliefs of self-efficacy, e.g. regarding their ability to support employees in balancing their work and private life (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Tekleab et al., 2008). This creates a positive level of understanding between employee and supervisor as well as a situation in which both parties exchange positive feedback and share realistic expectations. As a result, this agreement additionally fosters retention and intrinsic motivation. The second most effective leaders are those that underestimate their leadership behavior as opposed to their employees. Because of their low self-perception and self-efficacy, they tend to set relatively easy and unchallenging improvement goals for themselves as well as employees (Tekleab et al., 2008; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). As a result, they fail to foster the benefits mentioned above. Yet, they tend to compensate their lack of self-efficacy through humility and hard work towards their employees (Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino & Fleenor, 1998). As a result, although this situation has positive features that create a positive environment, it might be suboptimal when we compare it to the previous one (in-agreement/high FSSB).

More unfavorable to employees' turnover intention and intrinsic motivation are supervisors who overestimate their FSSBs. They are typically unable and unwilling to accept negative feedback from employees; set unnecessarily high and unrealistic goals; and display egoistic and arrogant behaviors (Atwater et al., 1998; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). As a result, they harm retention and intrinsic motivation. Finally, the least effective leaders are those that have a low self-rating of their leadership behavior which is shared by their employees (in-agreement/low FSSB). Not only do they fail to provide employees with FSSB (and its benefits), but they are also aware of it, yet typically take few actions to improve, either because they are unwilling or unable to do so (Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). This results in a destructive spiral in which employees' willingness to stay within the company as well as their intrinsic motivation is harmed.

In sum, the above leads to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a: Turnover intention is lowest for in-agreement/high FSSB supervisors, second lowest for under-estimators, third lowest for over-estimators, and highest for in-agreement/low FSSB supervisors.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Intrinsic motivation is highest for in-agreement/high FSSB supervisors, second highest for under-estimators, third highest for over-estimators, and lowest for in-agreement/low FSSB supervisors.*

## **Boundary Conditions**

Though previous research has shown that FSSBs are likely to lead to positive employee attitudes and behaviors, (Russo et al., 2015; Hammer et al., 2009), little is known about the conditions under which organizations can reap and maximize the benefits of FSSBs.

Understanding the boundary conditions is important to allow organizations and managers to utilize and allocate limited resources with a maximum return on investment (e.g., Md-Sidin et

al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2009). To address this limitation and contribute to the FSSB literature in a second manner, we integrated two boundary conditions: work-family culture (as an organizational characteristic) and segmentation preference (as an individual characteristic).

*Work-family Culture.* With respect to work-family culture, recent research has suggested that employees' perceptions of FSSBs and work-family culture are complementary and mutually reinforce each other (e.g., Rofcanin et al., 2017) in influencing employee attitudes and behaviors. We argue that in the absence of a strong work-life culture, the beneficial effects of having an in-agreement/high FSSB supervisor, may be substantially lower. Employees might for example believe that there will be negative career consequences if they make use and/or accept supervisors' emotional and instrumental support (Greenhaus et al., 2012). As a result, whether or not employees agree on the supervisors' level of FSSB might be less relevant and have less of a beneficial impact on their intention to leave the company and intrinsic motivation. In contrast, when supported with a strong work-life culture, we expect FSSB agreement to be a strong catalyst for favorable employee outcomes. Specifically, the case of in-agreement/high FSSB would be a particularly powerful situation as we can think of it as a triple agreement or fit between the supervisor, the employee and the organizational culture. In such situation, both the organization as well as the supervisor sends a uniform message to employees concerning the value and support of work-life balance. As a result, employees' turnover intention will decrease while intrinsic motivation increases. In other words, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2a. A strong (weak) work-family culture will reinforce (thwart) the negative impact of FSSB-agreement on employees' turnover intention.*

*Hypothesis 2b. A strong (weak) work-family culture will reinforce (thwart) the positive impact of FSSB-agreement on employees' intrinsic motivation.*

*Segmentation Preference.* Finally, no research to date has explored whether and how the influence of FSSBs may vary as a function of individual characteristics, i.e., in particular employees' segmentation preferences. Scholars distinguish between "segmentation" and "integration" as two ends of a continuum. While employees who prefer segmentation tend to keep their roles at work and at home separate by drawing temporal and spatial boundaries between them, integrators are comfortable with an overlap between both roles (e.g., working at home, addressing personal matters at work) (Nippert-Eng, 1995; Rothbard, Philips & Dumas, 2005).

We argue that for those who prefer segmentation, the impact of FSSB agreement on their intrinsic motivation will be stronger and positive, while the impact on their turnover intention will be stronger and negative. FSSBs are aimed at offering solutions that relieve the conflict coming from incompatible work-family demands. By acting as role models, discussing the importance of managing conflict between work and family lives, providing emotional and instrumental support and offering solutions (e.g., flexi-time), supervisors encourage employees to avoid conflict, achieve work-life balance, and thus set appropriate boundaries between work and family lives, which likely benefits those that prefer such clear boundaries (i.e. segmentation) (Hammer et al., 2007). In contrast, for integrators, the impact of FSSBs on their motivation and intention to leave the organization is likely lower, as they have a lower need for clearer boundaries. Supervisors who display FSSBs offer opportunities to segment work and family.

Yet, integrators do not value such opportunities, as they prefer to constantly focus on both work and family simultaneously and have no need to disconnect from work during off the job hours (Derks, Bakker, Peters & van Wingerden, 2016). This results in the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3a. A preference for segmentation (integration) will reinforce (thwart) the negative impact of FSSB-agreement on employees' turnover.*

*Hypothesis 3b. A preference for segmentation (integration) will reinforce (thwart) the positive impact of FSSB-agreement on employees' intrinsic motivation.*

## METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

### Sample and Measures

We collected data in El Salvador, a democratic Central American country, in 2015 and 2016. We collected data from supervisor-employee dyads using two different questionnaires, i.e. one for the employees and one for the supervisors. We gathered data from four companies: a financial institution, a retail chain company, a call center and a fast food chain. Across all four firms, we have matched data from both the employee and supervisor for 593 employees across 139 teams. The average team size is 4 (SD = 2.3; min = 3; max = 18). The average age of the sample is 34.44 (SD = 8.13) years old and a tenure of 10.52 years (SD = 6.38).

All variables (FSSBs, work-family culture, preference for segmentation, intrinsic motivation and turnover intention) were measured using validated scales (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Grant, 2008; Hammer et al., 2013; O'Reilly et al., 1991; Thompson et al., 1999). A 5-factor confirmatory factor analysis provided support for the validity of our measures (RMSEA = .07; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; SRMR = .07) (Bentler, 1990; Byrne, 2001). Additionally, we included control variables: organization, gender (both employee and supervisor), marital status, educational level, tenure and the number of children. Moreover, we controlled for the nested nature of our data (i.e. employees within teams within organizations) using the TWOLEVEL procedure in MPLUS which clusters data at the team level.

### Results

We made use of polynomial regression analyses with a response surface analysis (see Shanock et al., 2010 for a detailed overview of this technique). It enabled us to verify whether the level and direction of agreement concerning FSSBs affects employees.

*FSSB (dis)agreement.* Firstly, for turnover intention, we find that in-agreement/high FSSB is associated with lower turnover intention among employees as opposed to in-agreement/low FSSB. Moreover, both the situation of underestimation (right side of the graph) as well as overestimation (left side of the graph) produce levels of turnover intention which are in between the two in-agreement conditions. Yet, we find no evidence that these conditions are statistically different from one another, nor from the in-agreement situations. Hence, hypothesis 1a is only partially confirmed. Secondly, in-agreement/high FSSB supervisors produce the best intrinsic motivation, followed very closely by underestimators. Overestimators generate a

significantly lower amount of intrinsic motivation, followed by in-agreement/low FSSB supervisors. This largely confirms hypothesis 1b.

*Interaction with Work-family Culture.* For turnover intention, and in support of hypothesis 2a, we only find FSSB agreement to matter when the work-family culture is strongly perceived by employees. Only in this case, we find that in-agreement/high FSSB is associated with lower turnover intention among employees as opposed to in-agreement/low FSSB. Moreover, we find that, on average, disagreement is better than agreement. This is largely driven by the fact that for disagreement, the values of turnover intention are relatively close to, yet lower than, the optimum (in-agreement/high FSSB). Yet, we find no evidence that the two different types of disagreement are significantly different. Moreover, we find no evidence for hypothesis 2b.

*Interaction with Preference for Segmentation.* For turnover intention, employees' preference for segmentation was found to be irrelevant which disconfirms hypothesis 3a. For intrinsic motivation, however, our results are intriguing. When employees prefer integration, FSSB agreement lowers intrinsic motivation in the sense that in-agreement/low FSSB leads to higher intrinsic motivation than in-agreement/high FSSB. The opposite is true for employees preferring segmentation. In this case, in-agreement/high FSSB leads to higher intrinsic motivation than in-agreement/low FSSB. Moreover, we find that, on average, disagreement is better than agreement. This is largely driven by the fact that for disagreement, the values of intrinsic motivation are relatively close to, yet lower than, the optimum (in-agreement/high FSSB).

## DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research was to offer a (dis)agreement perspective in relation to how subordinates and supervisors perceive FSSBs. Building on this perspective, we explored the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which (dis)agreement of FSSBs impact on employee work outcomes, i.e. intrinsic motivation and turnover intentions. Adopting polynomial regression analyses, this is the first study to date to bring a supervisor/employee (dis)agreement perspective to research on FSSBs and explore its influence on two key outcomes.

First of all, our results show that understanding (dis)agreement in relation to FSSBs is important. In short, we demonstrated that employees exhibit the lowest turnover intention and highest intrinsic motivation when they perceive high FSSBs *and* when this perception is shared by their supervisor. In sharp contrast, a situation in which both employees and their supervisor agree that the supervisor exhibits weak FSSBs results in a maximum amount of turnover and a minimum amount of intrinsic motivation. Not only do employees suffer from a lack of FSSBs but these employees might also find themselves in a situation in which the supervisor has little ability or motivation to make changes (Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). Hence, this situation might be a sign of a toxic relationship between employees and their supervisor as well as a lack of support for employees' work-life balance and basic needs, which leads to dire consequences. Moreover, a situation in which employees experience weak FSSBs while their supervisor is convinced that he or she exhibits these behaviors, also results in low intrinsic motivation. This situation might be characterized by an overconfident supervisor who is unwilling to accept negative feedback and change his/her behavior accordingly which hurts the quality of his/her

relationship with the employee (Atwater et al., 1998; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997).

Secondly, our findings also contribute to a better understanding of the boundary conditions for the associations between ((dis)agreement of) FSSBs and employee work outcomes. We investigated both an organizational as well as individual characteristic which might act as boundary conditions. Interestingly, work-family culture (as an organizational characteristic) was found to matter only with respect to turnover intention, while employees' individual preference for segmentation only played a role for intrinsic motivation. Firstly, our primary results for turnover only hold in an organization characterized by a strong work-family culture. In other words, only in this situation do employees experience less turnover intention when they share a strong perception of FSSBs with their supervisor (as opposed to a weak one). In this case, we can argue that there is a "*triple fit*" in the sense that both the organization, supervisor and employee send and perceive consistent and positive signals, i.e. support for work-life balance which binds employees to the organization. Previous research has supported the value of such "consistency" in messages (Marescaux et al., 2018; Matta et al., 2016; Rofcanin et al., 2017). Yet, we also find evidence for a "*compensation*" effect of work-family culture as such a culture seems to compensate to some extent for a misfit between employee and supervisor. The question as to whether and why the organization's culture and offering of work-family policies creates a synergic effect or compensates for the lack of FSSBs clearly needs to be further examined in future research.

Finally, with respect to the role of employees' preference for segmentation, we find opposite effects for segmentors as opposed to integrators. Integrators do not seem to benefit from FSSBs, as their intrinsic motivation is highest when they perceive FSSBs to be weak *and* when this perception is shared by their supervisor. In all other cases, their intrinsic motivation is relatively lower. Clearly, integrators see little value in FSSBs as they do not require supervisors to help them set boundaries between work and private life. On the contrary, such help is considered counterproductive as they prefer both worlds to blend in with one another (Derks et al., 2016). Segmentors on the other hand, are intensely and intrinsically motivated by a shared strong perception of FSSBs with their supervisor, while their intrinsic motivation hits rock bottom when they share a weak perceptions of FSSBs with their supervisor. Again, this contributes to the FSSB literature by showing the importance of *fit*, yet in this case, a fit between FSSB and an individual's predisposition towards the management of boundaries.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)