Social Comparisons and Organizational Support: Implications for Commitment and Retention

Abstract

Organizational support theory (OST) suggests employees develop a general perception of the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (perceived organizational support; POS), and respond to that support through attitudes and behaviors that are beneficial toward the organization. Although OST emphasizes both social exchange and self-enhancement processes, most accounts of POS's effects are rooted in social exchange. For example, POS's linkages with commitment and retention have been explained as an exchange of support for positive attitudes and continued employment. This research sheds light on self-enhancement's less-understood role in fostering these reactions by demonstrating the influence of social comparison effects. Drawing on a sample of 342 employees nested in 82 work-units of a US hospitality company, our analysis demonstrates favorable POS comparisons with peers in one's work-unit are positively associated with commitment and retention, while unfavorable comparisons are negatively related. Results also show comparisons taking place in less-supported work-units have stronger impact than comparisons made in those with better support. Our findings extend OST by revealing the importance of social comparisons in engendering responses to organizational support, and in so doing potentially explicate the differential ways social exchange and self-enhancement operate with regard to POS.

Key Words: Perceived Organizational Support; Organizational Support Theory; Retention; Social Comparisons; Self-enhancement

Organizational support theory (OST) holds that perceptions of organizational support (POS), the extent to which an employee believes the organization values an individual's contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986), elicits positive attitudinal and behavioral responses. Linkages between POS and these responses are explained as a process of social exchange, where employees reciprocate organizational support with organizational commitment (Campbell et al., 2013; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Maertz et al., 2007; Rhoades et al., 2001; Shore and Wayne, 1993; Wayne et al., 1997), and retention (Allen and Shanock, 2013; Allen et al., 2003). However, there is reason to believe these linkages are also influenced by social comparisons which allow for socioemotional need fulfillment, a key mechanism of POS effects as posed in OST (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Specifically, in addition to social exchange processes, POS is theorized to foster positive attitudes and behaviors by fulfilling socioemotional needs such as approval and self-esteem (Aselange and Eisenberger, 2003; Eisenberger et al., 2004; Kurtessis et al., 2015). Indeed, Kurtessis et al. (2015: 3) suggest OST is "often mischaracterized as predominantly a social exchange theory," and that its emphasis on need fulfillment is often omitted. Because it is well-accepted that social comparisons have a strong bearing on self-enhancement (Collins, 1996; Hoorens, 1993; Wood et al., 1994), OST can be enriched by explicating the ways in which social comparisons operate with regard to POS.

A long-held tenet of social comparison theory is that individual self-evaluations are determined not only by one's raw standing but also by one's standing *relative* to their reference group (Davis, 1966). Evidence suggests employees use social comparisons to make sense of their own standing in the organization (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007; Moore, 2007). The social comparison literature demonstrates that people experience self-enhancement when they make favorable comparisons, and feel worse about themselves when they make

negative comparisons (Buckingham and Alicke, 2002; Wood, 1989; Zell and Alicke, 2010). Davis (1966: 17) termed these relative evaluations and their associated outcomes "frog-pond" effects. In the context of OST, unfavorable comparisons of one's POS with that of a reference group could harm self-enhancement and therefore lessen the likelihood of a positive response, while positive comparisons could augment self-enhancement and foster positive attitudes and behaviors.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to extend OST by examining the role of POS social comparisons in employee attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, we investigate the influence of these comparisons on an important attitudinal response, organizational commitment, and an important behavioral one, retention. We further investigate the cross-level moderating impact of the reference point against which comparisons are made. Drawing on a lagged investigation of 342 service workers nested in 82 work-units of a large hospitality company in the United States, we test the idea that POS is sensitive to within-group comparison effects and cross-level interaction effects. In so doing, we suggest that support is more likely to elicit a positive response when it compares favorably and thus contributes to self-enhancement. We also seek to extend OST by suggesting that social exchange may play a larger role when employees' work-units are generally well-supported, while self-enhancement may play more of a role when people are in less-supported work-units. Hence, this paper takes steps toward exposing the differential ways in which social exchange and self-enhancement operate with regard to POS.

Organizational Support Theory

Organizational support theory suggests employees view the caring or uncaring treatment they receive as an indication that the organization favors or disfavors them (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). OST draws on the norm of reciprocity to suggest that employees repay POS

through a process of social exchange (Emerson, 1976) by, among other things, becoming more committed to the organization and continuing to participate in it (Allen et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2013; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Shore and Wayne, 1993; Wayne et al., 1997). Although social exchange is often offered as OST's primary explanation for POS's relationships with outcomes, self-enhancement gained through the fulfillment of socioemotional needs is also posited as a factor (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 1997; Eisenberger et al., 2004; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). The caring, approval, and respect connoted by POS may engender socioemotional need fulfillment, and therefore foster positive reactions that are good for the organization.

OST theorizing acknowledges the caring, approval, and respect signified by POS should fulfill socioemotional needs and create favorable outcomes for both employees and the organization (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002), and explicitly highlights the possibility that these self-enhancing aspects provoke employee reactions (Eisenberger et al., 2004). For example, Armeli et al. (1998) found that socioemotional need fulfillment impacts the strength of the POS-performance relationship. Broader empirical insight on how self-enhancement from POS impacts responses has been somewhat limited, however, hindering the development of OST's self-enhancement component. A social comparisons approach addresses this underdeveloped mechanism of POS. The idea that social comparisons are made for the purposes of self-enhancement has been a tenet of social comparison theory for quite some time (e.g., Taylor and Lobel, 1989; Thornton and Arrowood, 1966; Wood et al., 1994), suggesting social comparisons may be highly salient in the POS context. Supporting this idea, Zagencyzk et al. (2010: 136) suggest employees "may not feel as important" when they make unfavorable support

comparisons. Explicating how social comparisons impact responses to POS is therefore a key step in further developing OST.

Social comparison theory and POS

Social comparison theory suggests individual assessments of one's raw standing have less influence on attitudes and behaviors than assessments of relative standing contrasted with a reference group (Bassis, 1977; Davis, 1966; Dunn et al., 2012). Literature supports social comparison's influence on employee attitudes and behaviors (see Greenberg et al., 2007 and Wood, 1989 for reviews). Research suggests the quality of employee-employer social exchange relationships forms a basis for social comparisons. For instance, in the realm of psychological contract (PC) fulfillment, Ho (2006) theorized that referent information influences individual PC fulfillment evaluations, a contention supported by Henderson et al.'s (20008) finding that favorable social comparisons regarding leader-member exchange positively influenced PC assessments.

Social comparisons serve two functions, to create self-evaluations of one's standing, and to create self-enhancement through socioemotional need fulfillment (Suls et al., 2002). Festinger (1954) suggests that comparisons to people who are similar are important for generating accurate self-evaluations. Comparisons provide a sense of relative standing in the group, and a measuring stick for assessing the adequacy of one's skills, abilities, and other attributes (Helgeson et al., 1995). The second function of social comparisons, self-enhancement, involves comparing oneself to others in order to fulfill socioemotional needs such as self-esteem and approval (Suls and Wheeler, 2000). Social comparison theory suggests self-enhancement is boosted by favorable comparisons, and damaged by unfavorable ones (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). In the context of OST, POS comparisons that prove unfavorable may lessen commitment and retention

because they do not provide self-enhancement. Conversely, POS comparisons that prove favorable may evoke positive responses because they do provide such enhancement.

Analyzing social comparison effects is accomplished via the frog-pond approach. Bliese and Jex (2002: 272-273) explain the theoretical basis of the frog-pond approach:

> The distinguishing characteristic of this model is that it emphasizes the relative position of an individual within his or her group. For instance, a frog-pond model might propose that an individual's perception of work overload is, by itself, of little interest in terms of predicting individual strain. What is important instead is the individual's rating of work overload relative to other group members' ratings.

The frog-pond approach therefore draws upon individual comparisons to a reference group to explain how one derives a sense of relative standing within their environment, and how this relative standing influences their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Kelley, 1968). The reference point for the focal variable in frog-pond studies is conceptually and operationally represented by the group average in the individual's work-unit (Bliese and Jex, 2002; Klein et al., 1994; Henderson et al., 2008). The average support in one's work-unit is the most salient reference point because individuals interact and share information about support to form an aggregate understanding of the general level of individual support in the unit, especially when the work-unit consists of individuals similarly classified by type of job (Alicke et al., 2010; Buckingham and Alicke, 2002; Klein, 2003; Radzevick and Moore, 2013). Comparisons versus the work-unit average, or aggregate social comparisons, are therefore powerful in shaping individual behavior, as demonstrated by numerous studies highlighting their effects (e.g., Alicke et al., 2010; Buckingham and Alicke, 2002; Henderson et al., 2008; Klein, 2003; Klein, 1997; Zell and Alicke, 2009).

In the realm of OST, aggregate comparisons may be specifically important as POS relies on norms of obligation to foster positive responses to the organization. As Henderson et al.

(2008: 1210) suggest, “Comparison processes are particularly relevant when individuals are likely to share a sense of what the organization is obligated to provide to them in return for their efforts, such as what might occur in a work group in which individuals are performing relatively similar roles.” Comparisons could be quite powerful when they involve obligations, because the potential damage or enhancement of one’s socioemotional needs may be high under such conditions (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1993).

Substantial research suggests individuals reciprocate organizational support through commitment to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). However, this relationship is likely also influenced by social comparisons. Individuals making unfavorable POS comparisons to their peer group may not experience the self-enhancement organizational support is supposed to provide. Unfavorable POS comparisons may make individuals surmise that being committed to the organization in response to POS may not be warranted. Research suggests unfavorable comparisons with one’s reference group often create negative feelings (Bassis, 1977; Davis, 1966). Experiencing harm rather than enhancement via unfavorable comparisons could therefore diminish one’s commitment to the organization. Conversely, favorable comparisons should create self-enhancement, and thus engender greater commitment.

Hypothesis 1: Individual POS relative to the group average is associated with organizational commitment, such that more favorable comparisons are associated with higher levels of commitment, while unfavorable comparisons are associated with lower levels of commitment.

Eisenberger et al. (1990) suggest another way individuals react to POS is by continuing to participate in the organization. Citing social exchange as an explanation, studies have linked POS to retention (Allen and Shanock, 2013; Allen et al., 2003). Comparison effects also likely

play a role, however. This possibility is supported by two rationales. The first involves the idea that individuals make comparisons to facilitate self-enhancement. Invalidating comparisons could harm the employee's self-image, driving them to leave the organization. Negative comparisons in this way indicate that support received by the individual is inferior to that received by one's reference group. In turn, this discrepancy may suggest to the individual that staying with the organization is not warranted because they are supported less than others which lowers experiences of self-enhancement. Conversely, favorable comparisons should provide self-worth and elicit continued participation.

The second rationale involves the idea of shocks, or jarring events, and their association with impulsive quitting (Maertz and Campion, 2004). Substantial research suggests people sometimes quit impulsively after experiencing a shock, such as a psychological contract violation, abusive supervision, or unexpectedly negative feedback (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). The damage to self-enhancement associated with unfavorable POS comparisons could constitute a shock. Negative comparisons might represent a violation of one's identity, an injury to one's self-esteem, or signify injustice to the employee (Suls and Wheeler, 2000). Individuals might react by quitting their jobs in an impulsive fashion. Based on both rationales, we suggest favorable POS comparisons will be positively associated with retention, and unfavorable POS comparisons will negatively associated with retention

Hypothesis 2: Individual POS relative to the group average is associated with retention, such that more favorable comparisons are associated with staying in the organization, while unfavorable comparisons are associated with leaving the organization.

Cross-level effects

Empirical development of social comparison theory suggests that information obtained through frog-pond, or within-group, comparisons are more salient than outside, or between-group comparisons (Alicke et al., 2010; Zell and Alicke, 2009). This phenomenon is demonstrated by the "paradoxical finding that poor students in higher quality schools tend to have less favorable academic self-concepts than good students in lower quality schools, despite objectively similar (or even better) performance" (Zell and Alicke, 2009: 470). While research on the relative importance of within- and between-group effects is limited, Zell and Alicke (2009) drew upon five studies to show that individuals typically value within-group comparisons more. Thus, individuals prioritize comparisons of their own standing with that of the social aggregate in the group, and generally consider their group's relative standing with other groups considerably less (Alicke et al., 2010; Zell and Alicke, 2009; 2010).

However, frog-pond comparisons are not immune to cross-level interaction effects. The relative standing of the group can have a significant impact under certain conditions (Chen et al., 1998). The group's standing is most salient when its members perform the same job in the organization (McFarland and Buehler, 1995; Zell and Alicke, 2009), as is the case in the present study. We posited in Hypotheses 1 and 2 that POS comparisons would be associated with commitment and retention behavior. However, work-units vary in how well they are supported, and comparisons, both favorable and unfavorable, can take different forms depending on the reference point against which they are made. For example, favorable comparisons by individuals embedded in well-supported work-units could have a stronger or weaker impact on attitudes or behavior than favorable comparisons made by individuals embedded in low-POS work-units. Consider an example of two hypothetical students. Imagine student A's academic performance compares favorably to the group average at a higher-quality school, while student B's academic

performance compares favorably to the group average at a lower-quality school. Although extant frog-pond research suggests both of these comparisons will yield a positive self-evaluation and provide self-enhancement, unanswered questions remain. Will the effect of the positive comparison be greater for student A because it is made against the average at a better school? Or is the effect greater for student B because the positive comparison demonstrates this individual is unique and special in the group?

Integrating Baumeister et al.'s (2001: 323) idea of "bad versus good" offers a framework for understanding these potential cross-level interaction effects. Baumeister et al. (2001) found that 'bad' events are more powerful than 'good' in impacting psychological, social and behavioral processes. They also highlighted studies that show negative events are more likely to be reciprocated (e.g. abuse for abuse), while positive events (e.g. caring for caring) are reciprocated less often (Wills et al., 1974). In this context, this suggests favorable and unfavorable comparisons may have a differential impact when they are made versus 'good' (well-supported groups) and 'bad' (poorly-supported groups) reference points. While reference points are not necessarily 'events' as conceptualized by Baumeister et al., they do serve as anchors for decision-making, and therefore may influence the effect of the comparisons made against them.

Drawing on Baumeister et al.'s (2001) framework, we suggest the positive responses to favorable comparisons made against higher, or 'good,' reference points, may be lessened because the support may not seem as individualized or special. When all members of a group are supported well, favorable POS comparisons may carry less meaning because the support is not viewed as recognition for individual contributions. This logic is consistent with a central tenet of OST that "favorable treatment contributes to perceived organizational support to the extent that it

is considered discretionary rather than being impelled by circumstances" (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011:.44). When well supported, individuals seek to understand why they are being treated favorably A generally well supported work unit can raise questions as to whether the support is discretionary since all employees are favorably treated, but also whether the good treatment is an indication of the individual employee's positive valuation by the organization.

By contrast, we theorize favorable comparisons contrasted with low-POS referents are likely to have a much stronger effect. As a 'bad' referent, low aggregate POS in the work-unit is more salient and enduring, and thus should be more impactful. Individuals making favorable comparisons in low-POS work-units may feel as if the organization has recognized them specifically, thus signaling value and respect that is not offered to the average group member. This sense of distinction and accomplishment associated with recognition in an unsupported group is not present for those making favorable comparisons in well-supported units. This may strengthen the relationship between favorable comparisons and positive responses.

High and low reference points inform unfavorable comparisons as well. Unfavorable comparisons in low POS work-units should generally be more impactful. Given the increased impact of negative events, being the "worst of the worst" may be far more poignant than being the "worst of the best." Research suggests people desire positive evaluations, especially when they feel threatened (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1993; Taylor and Lobel, 1989). Comparing unfavorably to a poor referent may be especially disconfirming, as it directly conflicts with the desire for self-enhancement. By contrast, a poor comparison may be dismissed somewhat when an individual can rationalize the comparison as a by-product of membership in an elite group. Consequently, the feelings associated with a poor within-group comparison are likely to be much worse when the reference point is derived from an unsupported work-unit. While the primacy of

within-group effects suggests the direction of the proposed relationships in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 should hold in most situations, between-group effects could moderate the magnitude of these effects. Hence, comparisons made by people embedded in low-POS work-units should have stronger effects than those made by individuals in high-POS work-units.

Hypothesis 3: The effects of POS comparisons on commitment and retention behavior are moderated by the average POS in the reference group, such that the effects of comparisons made against lower averages are stronger, while the effects of comparisons made against higher averages are weaker.

Methods

Sample and procedures

The sample consists of employees of a large, national hospitality company in the United States. Participants performed various types of service functions in 23 casino/hotels across the country, and were embedded within 82 work-units. Data were collected at two points in time. At time 1, data related to occupation, demographics, and POS were collected. Six weeks later at time 2, data regarding organizational commitment was collected. Employee retention was collected from organizational records 468 days after the initial survey.

The surveys were mailed to 1,205 employees. Of those, 549 responded to both surveys, and 342 provided complete data, for a response rate of 28%. None of the 342 participants were involuntarily terminated. The sample was 56% female, and the average age of participants was 36 years. Eighty-two percent of the participants were full-time employees, with the remainder employed part-time. Thirty percent of the sample were minorities.

The POS data were aggregated for the 82 job units, with each unit originating from one location only and grouped by the job employees were performing. Sample work groups are desk clerks at the Las Vegas location, or maids at the Reno location. Individuals within these work

groups work in close proximity and interact frequently. Most of the work-units have job interdependencies, while a few do not. For instance, security officers coordinate to keep the grounds safe, workers at the concierge desk coordinate to service guests' needs, and cocktail servers coordinate to provide beverages for patrons. Others workers, such as casino cashiers, work with minimal coordination but in close physical proximity with one another. A few jobs, such as blackjack dealers, work mostly without coordinating. However, the organization provides employees with break rooms and free meals as a matter of corporate practice, and employees also often take breaks and have lunch with others in their work-units. Hence, work-unit members in this context interact and share information. The mean size of the 82 groups was 4.2 (SD = 1.7; Min = 3; Max = 14), which is consistent with previous multilevel research (Maas and Hox, 2005).

Measures

Perceived organizational support. Perceived organizational support was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree." The items were adopted from Eisenberger et al.'s, (1997) short form measure of POS. The six items demonstrated excellent reliability (α=.85). Sample items included "This company really cares about my well-being," and "This company strongly considers my goals and values."

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured with five-items adopted from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) on a five point Likert-type scale from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree" (Mowday et al., 1979; α=.92). Bozeman and Perrewe (2001) found that some OCQ items are confounded with attachment. Based on this finding, we used five items absent of that confound. A sample item was "I really care about the future of this company."

Retention behavior. Retention behavior was collected from organizational records. Drawing on Allen et al. (2014), who suggest moving away from dichotomous measures of retention, we operationalized retention as the number of days the participant was employed before separating from the organization. The number of days was measured from the initial survey administration.

Control variables. Because meta-analytic results suggest that women are slightly more committed to the organization than men (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Mayer et al., 2002), we controlled for gender in our commitment model. Drawing on Holtom et al. (2008) and Griffeth et al. (2000), who noted that studies show minorities and men are slightly more likely to quit their jobs, we controlled for these factors using dummy variables in our retention behavior model. Gender was coded "0" for male and "1" for female, while race was coded "0" for non-minorities and "1" for minorities.

Aggregation and analysis

We used random coefficients modeling (RCM) to test all hypotheses (Cohen et al., 2003; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Two-level models were employed, where individuals constituted level-1 cases nested within level-2 groups based on work-unit membership (n=82). The idea that the perceptions of individuals may aggregate into a level-2 variable representing the average individual is methodologically well-grounded, as Chan's (1998) discussion of composition models details the ways in which individual perceptions are aggregated to a within-group average for comparison purposes. The work-unit mean is formed from individual responses of support. These responses are aggregated into a reference point for perceptions of organizational support representing the average in the work unit. This approach is well-accepted in frog-pond studies (e.g., Bliese and Jex, 2002; Henderson et al., 2008; Kozlowski and Klein, 2000), and

research shows that referent attitudes are compositional and emergent from individual-level attitudes because interactions and interdependencies in work units are common (Ostroff, 1992; Schulte et al., 2009).

Random coefficients modeling (RCM) was conducted using *HLM for Windows*, v. 7.0 (HLM; Raudenbush et al., 2011). The level-1 POS variable was group-mean centered because Hypotheses 1 and 2 propose frog-pond effects, making it critical to determine unbiased estimates of within-group slopes (Hofmann and Gavin, 1998). The literature suggests group-mean centering is the proper technique for testing such hypotheses (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992; Kozlowski and Klein, 2000; Van Yperen and Snijders, 2000), as "frog-pond models are tested by creating a new individual-level variable from the raw individual variable and the group mean" (Bliese and Jex, 2002: 272). As Hypothesis 3 proposes cross-level moderation, group-mean centering the level-1 POS variable allows the researcher to assess cross-level interactions (Hofmann and Gavin, 1998). A group-mean centered level-1 independent variable also "removes all between-cluster variation from the predictor and yields a 'pure' estimate of the pooled within-cluster (i.e., Level 1) regression coefficient" (Enders and Tofighi, 2007: 128). Group-mean centered estimates of level-1 slope variation are generally more accurate than grand-mean centered estimates because the latter produce a vague amalgam of level-1 and level-2 associations between *X* and *Y* variables (Enders and Tofighi, 2007). The level-2 variable work unit POS was grand-mean centered in the cross-level interaction models to facilitate the interpretation of results, as suggested by Raudenbush and Bryk (2002).

Results

Correlations, means, standard deviations, and reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) for individual- and group-level variables are displayed in Table 1. POS and commitment were

significantly correlated (0.71). Retention behavior was significantly correlated with POS (.18) and commitment (.17). Due to their high correlation, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the distinctiveness of our commitment and POS measures. Following Bentler (1990), we reviewed the χ^2 test, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Normed Fit Index (NFI), and the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) to assess model fit. A hypothesized two-factor model with distinct commitment and POS measures was compared to an alternate one-factor model. The results indicate that our hypothesized two-factor model fit the data well, (χ^2 = 84.35, *df* = 41, $p < .01$; RMSEA = .056, 90% Confidence Interval RMSEA = .039-.073; NFI = .96, GFI = .96). All items loaded significantly on their respective factors. The alternative one-factor model fit the data poorly (χ^2 = 301.36, *df* = 44, $p < .01$; $\Delta\ \chi^2$ = 217.01, *df* = 3, p < .01; RMSEA = .131; 90% Confidence Interval RMSEA = .117-.145; NFI = .87; GFI = .82. Thus, the hypothesized two-factor model fit the data significantly better on all model fit statistics, supporting examining commitment and POS as distinct constructs.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results from RCM analyses of the relationships among POS comparisons and commitment in Hypothesis 1 are displayed in Table 2. The results show that favorable comparisons positively predict individual commitment (β = .66; $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Table 2 also demonstrates that work-unit POS is directly associated with commitment (β = .71; $p < .01$). Results from RCM analyses of the relationships among POS comparisons and retention behavior are presented in Table 3. Results demonstrate that favorable comparisons positively predict individual retention (β = 24.68; $p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Table 3 also shows that work-unit POS is directly associated with retention behavior (β = 49.35; $p < .05$)

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Hypothesis 3 proposed that work unit POS would moderate the effect of POS comparisons on commitment and retention behavior, such that comparisons made in high-POS work units would weaken the relationships, and comparisons made in low-POS work units would strengthen the relationships. Results from Table 2 show that work unit POS significantly and negatively moderates the POS comparisons-commitment relationship (β = -.28; $p < .01$). Results from Table 3 demonstrate that work unit POS significantly and negatively moderates the POS comparisons-retention behavior relationship (β = -79.06; $p < .01$).

To further explore the effects of these interactions, we provide interaction plots for groups at the 20th (the bad), 80th (the good) and 45th (mean) percentile of work unit POS. As shown in Figure 1, although the slopes of all three lines are significant ($p < .01$), the relationship between POS comparisons and commitment is stronger when comparisons are made at lower levels of average POS, and weaker when made against higher levels of average POS. The effect of work unit POS on the relationship between POS comparisons and retention behavior is more complex. As Figure 2 illustrates, at low levels of work unit POS the relationship is positive and significant ($p < .01$). At average levels of POS the relationship remains positive but is non-significant ($p = .57$). At high levels of work-unit POS, the relationship is also non-significant ($p = .23$). This finding appears to be contradicted by the apparently strong negative slope of the 80th percentile line in Figure 2. However, that particular depiction is misleading because the standard error of the β coefficient of the 80th percentile is about 42% higher than those of the 20th and 45th percentiles (i.e., 19.98 vs. 12.55 and 14.04, respectively) Thus, for retention behavior, frog-pond effects are present when comparisons are made versus low work-unit POS, but not when made versus average or high levels of work-unit POS. Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported for commitment, and partially supported for retention behavior.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Discussion

Although OST holds that POS operates through both social exchange and self-enhancement processes, past OST research has been rooted mostly in social exchange (Kurtessis et al., 2015). For example, POS's positive relationships with attitudes and behaviors such as commitment and retention (e.g., Allen and Shanock, 2013; Rhoades et al., 2001) have been characterized as exchanges of support, downplaying the role of self-enhancement. Our findings contribute to OST by demonstrating how social comparisons operate in the realm of POS.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings underscore the importance of social comparisons in eliciting responses to POS. Work-unit POS was positively and significantly associated with commitment, buttressing the idea that social exchange plays a role because well-supported units reciprocated through higher overall levels of commitment. However, Figure 1 demonstrates that although commitment is generally higher in well-supported work units, it is also influenced by social comparisons. Analysis showed favorable POS social comparisons were associated with higher levels of commitment, while unfavorable comparisons were associated with lower levels of commitment. Further examination of Figure 1 sheds light on the differential impact of social exchange and self-enhancement. The positive (and significant) slopes at the 20th, 45th and 80th percentiles suggest while comparison effects have significant impact on commitment even in well-supported work-units, these relationships are more pronounced in less-supported work units, as evidenced by the increasingly steeper lines for work-units at the 45th and 20th percentiles. Put differently, the direct effect of work-unit POS on commitment suggests POS does evoke attitudinal

responses via social exchange, but the self-enhancement gained from POS comparisons influences the extent of that response within the work unit.

This differential impact is brought into specific relief by results on retention behavior. Table 3 shows that work-unit POS was directly associated with longer retention, supporting the idea that social exchange fosters retention because well-supported work-units generally reciprocated with longer retention. However, social comparisons were quite influential. Analyses showed favorable POS social comparisons were associated with longer terms of employment, while unfavorable comparisons were associated with shorter terms of employment. Figure 2 demonstrates that POS comparisons at the 20th percentile of work unit POS were significantly and strongly associated with retention, suggesting continued participation is spurred by self-enhancing comparisons in these units. The relationship between POS comparisons and retention became less pronounced and was statistically non-significant at the 45th and 80th percentiles, however, suggesting self-enhancement may be less involved in retention in well-supported work units. Hence, both commitment and retention models suggest employees respond to POS via social exchange, and the level of that response is influenced by comparisons within work-units. Comparison effects are stronger for both variables in low-POS work-units, however, and for retention behavior the frog-pond effects are present *only* within poorly-supported work-units.

This finding sheds light on the differential circumstances in which social exchange and self-enhancement might operate in evoking responses to POS. The more robust presence of comparison effects in poorly supported work-units suggests self-enhancement may play a larger role when social exchange norms are less salient. Social exchange appears to be the mechanism when levels of support in the work-unit are generally high, although self-enhancement may have some influence as it did in the present study for commitment. For low-POS work-units, results

suggest self-enhancement may be the primary mechanism for evoking positive attitudes and behaviors. OST has long held that both social exchange and socioemotional need fulfillment are mechanisms that play a role in how POS operates (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2015). This study extends OST by clarifying self-enhancement's importance.

Finally, results suggest the notion of "bad versus good" is relevant for social comparisons. Comparisons contrasted with lower reference points were more impactful for both commitment and retention; bad referents thus yielded stronger comparison effects than good (Baumeister et al., 2001). The bad versus good effect has been empirically supported in other organizational endeavors such as mentoring (Eby et al., 2010), but has not been conceptually or operationally applied to reference points for social comparisons. Our findings may provide a direction for future research by supporting the idea that comparison effects may be more powerful when comparisons are made against bad reference points. Future research should explore this possibility further.

Practical implications

This study offers implications for managing employees. Study results suggest support may be most effective when it is individualized because individuals compare the support they receive with peer groups, and those comparisons impact attitudes and behaviors. Clearly, organizations should not be unsupportive of some employees to make others feel special, but insights into employee social processes gleaned here might support what Rousseau et al. (2006) term "idiosyncratic work arrangements" or "I-deals." I-deals are special employment terms that meet the needs of both the employee and the organization. Rather than supporting some employees better and others worse, organizations might consider tailoring support to the needs of individuals (when possible). I-deals may be especially important with regard to POS because

past research suggest support that is discretionary rather than obligatory is most valued by employees (Eisenberger et al., 1997). Such arrangements could signal that the employee is uniquely valued and therefore engender greater POS. As such, findings here suggest the value of their continued use.

Because we found that negative comparisons were less harmful in well-supported work-units, building employee POS seems to be important. Meta-analysis shows that aspects of fairness, such as procedural justice, voice, and politics are the strongest antecedents of POS (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Organizations that are just, offer employees say in important matters, and that aren't viewed as overtly-political are best at engendering feelings of support. This suggests organizations that are socially responsible toward employees might lessen the effects of negative comparisons by having generally well-supported employees. Thus, in addition to I-deals, programs that are generally supportive of employee wellness and well-being, such as on-site child care, employee fitness centers, and family leave programs, might be effective in fostering broad-based POS.

Limitations and Directions for Research

The study's findings are subject to limitations. Although our retention dependent variable is behavioral, all measures for our model of commitment were survey-based. However, features of our research design help mitigate any concerns over common method bias. First, we separated the collection of independent and dependent variable data in time, thus removing "occasion factors" that could affect measurement at any one time (Spector, 2006: 229). Second, Siemsen et al. (2010) found not only that common method variance cannot create an artificial interaction effect, but also that it can only deflate existing interactions. Given the temporal separation of

study independent and dependent variables, the presence of a behavioral outcome in one of our models, and the cross-level interactions in both, common method bias should not be an issue.

Although theory strongly suggests individuals doing the same jobs in the same work-units make referent comparisons to an aggregate social referent, this is an assumption that was not measured. However, our approach to this frog-pond analysis is well-accepted and prescribed in the literature (Bliese and Jex 2002; Henderson et al., 2008; Klein, 1997; Klein et al., 1994; Kozlowski and Klein, 2000). Further supporting our approach, past POS research suggests organization members interact and share their perceived levels of organizational support with one another (Zagenczyk et al., 2010).

Another limitation is our study response rate, which was 28%. Baruch and Holtom (2008) found that the average response rate in field research was 35.7%, with a standard deviation of 18.8%. Although this suggests our response rate falls well within one standard deviation of the mean of organizational field research, the possibility exists that non-responders might differ from those who participated in the study. Further, given our focus on group-POS, it is also possible that the overall POS of those who participated may not accurately reflect the average POS of the group. Future research should follow techniques suggested by Baruch and Holtom (2008) for improving response rate, such as increased use of electronic surveying.

Our findings for retention behavior may not necessarily generalize to other behaviors. Results for retention behavior may be less powerful than for other behaviors such as job performance because quitting one's job is a major decision rife with risk and consequence (Vardaman et al., 2008). It is therefore possible that social exchange is an adequate motivator to remain with an organization as long as one feels they are receiving satisfactory support. Although important, attitudinal responses such as commitment, and less extreme behavioral

responses such as performance, may be more sensitive to comparison effects because they have less consequence for the employee. By contrast, comparison effects may have had less impact on retention behavior because quitting on the basis of diminished self-enhancement may be too extreme of a response when one is adequately or well-supported in general. Put differently, less risky behavioral responses may be more sensitive to comparison effects than retention behavior because shifting one's performance or citizenship behaviors might "cost" the employee less than severing an employment relationship (Vardaman et al., 2015). Given that commitment was subject to comparison effects even in well-supported work-units, while retention behavior is subject to comparison effects only in poorly-supported work-units, this explanation is quite plausible. Future research should consider studying POS comparison effects on less risky behaviors such as job performance or citizenship behavior in an effort to determine if those effects are more like those for attitudes.

Finally, our findings support the idea that OST research could benefit from studies on how social networks operate in the realm of POS. Zagenczyk et al. (2010) found co-workers with network ties tend to have similar levels of POS, while work on social exchange (Ho et al., 2006) demonstrates that network position plays a role in employee feelings of obligation toward their employer. Network research has shed light on social influence in a variety of behavioral and attitudinal domains (e.g., Bardon et al., 2015; Mao and Shen, 2015; Vardaman et al., 2012), and integrating social comparisons with a network approach could provide significant theoretical insight into OST by considering how intra-organizational social networks impact POS's relationships with employee attitudes and behaviors.

Concluding Remarks

In closing, we note the relevance of the study findings for OST. Our research departs from most prior work on OST by more fully integrating the role of self-enhancement processes into the study of POS and its effects. The social comparison effects uncovered in our findings serve as an initial step in delineating the ways in which social exchange and self-enhancement might differentially operate in POS's relationship with attitudes and behavior. As OST research further explores how self-enhancement processes operate with regard to POS, we hope our work provides a platform for future research.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

	Mean	**Std. Dev.**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Level-1							
1. POS	4.08	0.80	(0.85)				
2. Commitment	4.48	0.75	0.71**	(0.92)			
3. Retention Behavior	371.88	148.29	.18**	.17**			
4. Gender	.56	0.50	-0.07	-0.07	-0.07	-	
5. Minority	.30	.46	-.03	-.02	.13*	-.07	-
Level-2							
Work-unit POS	4.07	0.44					

Note: POS and demographics were collected at time 1; Commitment was collected at time 2; Reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) are reported in parentheses on the diagonal. N = 342 at individual level. N = 82 at group level. ICC(1) = .09 ($p < .05$).

Gender and Race variables are dummy coded (0,1); Female, Minority = 1.

*$p < 0.05$

**$p < 0.01$

Table 2. Random coefficients models of commitment.

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Level-1 Variables (β_0)			
Intercept (γ_{00})	4.47**	4.46**	4.46**
POS (γ_{10})		0.66**	0.57**
Gender		0.01	0.02
Cross-level Effects of Level-2 Variables on Intercept β_{0j}			
Work-unit POS (γ_{01})		0.71**	0.57**
Cross-level Effects of Level-2 Variables on Coefficient β_{1j} (POS)			
Work-unit POS (γ_{11})			-0.28**
Goodness-of-fit and Variance Explained Statistics			
Deviance	768.15	529.28	510.59
Number of parameters	3	6	9
Δ Deviance from previous model		-238.87**	-18.69**

Note: POS and demographics were collected at time 1; Commitment was collected at time 2; N = 342 at individual level. N = 82 at group level. The dependent variable is organizational commitment. Full maximum likelihood estimation is used. The level-1 POS variable is group-mean centered. The level-2 Work-unit POS variable is grand mean centered for cross-level interactions. Dummy (0, 1) variables were used for gender and race. Female and Minority = 1.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

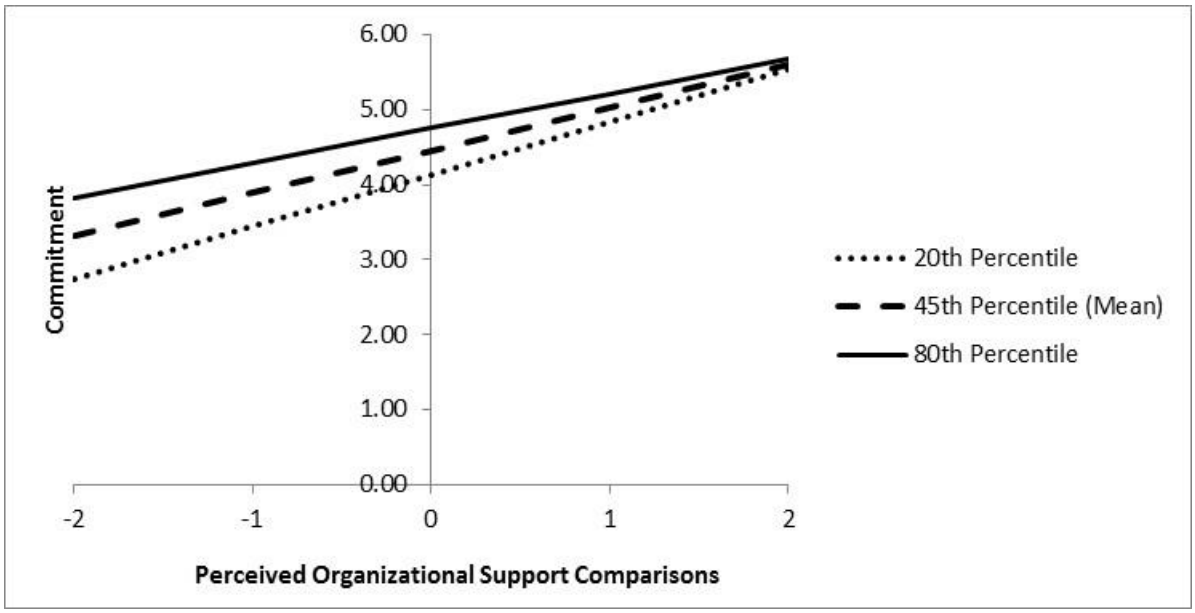
Table 3. Random coefficients model of retention behavior

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Level-1 Variables (β_0)			
Intercept (γ_{00})	370.98**	370.14**	369.84**
POS (γ_{10})		24.68*	7.92
Gender		-21.38	-20.94
Race		46.58**	42.39*
Cross-level Effects of Level-2 Variables on Intercept β_{0j}			
Work-unit POS (γ_{01})		49.35*	48.16*
Cross-level Effects of Level-2 Variables on Coefficient β_{1j} (POS)			
Work-unit POS (γ_{11})			-79.06**
Goodness-of-fit and Variance Explained Statistics			
Deviance	4384.49	4366.20	4354.64
Number of parameters	3	7	10
Δ Deviance from previous model		-18.29**	-11.56**

Note: POS and demographics were collected at time 1; Commitment was collected at time 2; N = 342 at individual level. N = 82 at group level. The dependent variable is retention behavior expressed as number of days employed. Full maximum likelihood estimation is used. The level-1 POS variable is group-mean centered. The level-2 Work-unit POS variable is grand mean centered for cross-level interactions. Dummy (0, 1) variables were used for gender and race. Female and Minority = 1.

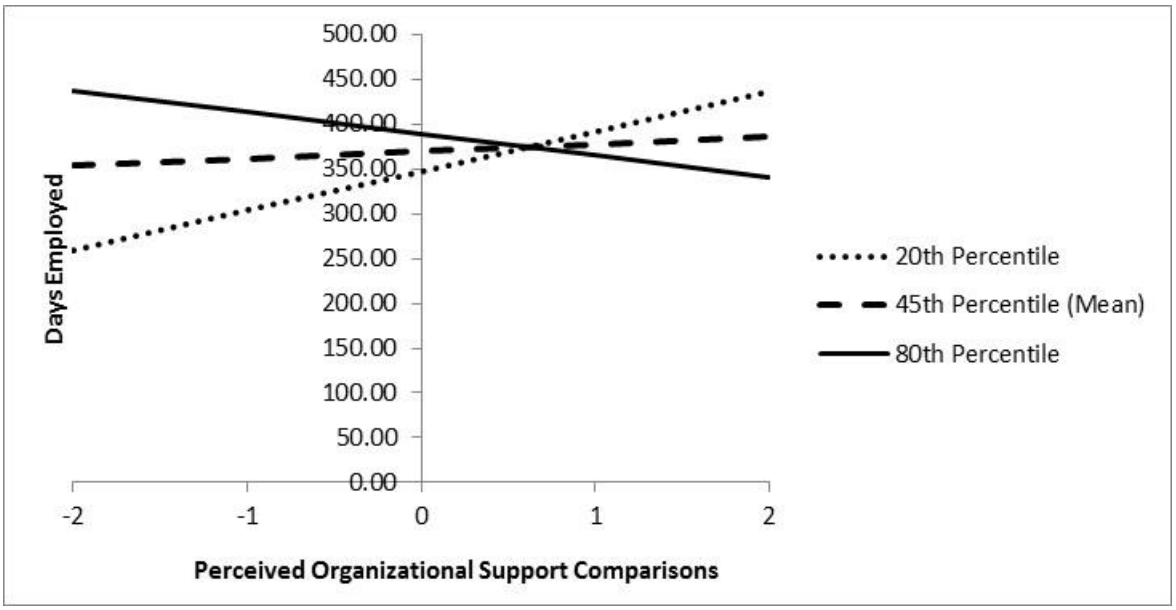
*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$



Note: Work-unit POS mean = 4.07. Work-unit POS standard deviation = 0.44. Y-intercepts correspond to γ_{00} values in HLM analyses. POS values are group-mean centered.

Figure 1. Moderating role of work-unit POS in the POS comparisons-commitment relationship.



Note: Work-unit POS mean = 4.07. Work-unit POS standard deviation = 0.44. Y-intercepts correspond to γ_{00} values in HLM analyses. POS values are group-mean centered.

Figure 2. Moderating role of work-unit POS in the POS comparisons-retention behavior relationship