

## Summary

# The Relationship Between Supervisor and Employee Emotional Exhaustion: The Role of Procedural Justice

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Emotional exhaustion refers to deprivation and draining of employees' feelings in the workplace (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and depletion of employees' emotional resources (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). General findings of prior research indicate that emotional exhaustion is a widespread phenomenon with severe outcomes for employees and organizations (Alarcon, 2011; Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). While there is extensive research on the antecedents and consequences of employee emotional exhaustion, there is limited research on how a supervisor's emotional exhaustion influences employees (Bakker, Westman, & Hetty van Emmerik, 2009; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018; Petitta, Jiang, & Härtel, 2017; Ten Brummelhuis, Haar, & Roche, 2014; Wirtz, Rigotti, Otto, & Loeb, 2017). Existing research focuses on crossover theory (Bakker, Westman, & Schaufeli, 2007; Westman, 2001) and suggests that supervisor emotional exhaustion influences employee emotional exhaustion through emotional contagion (Bakker et al., 2009), negative affect (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2014), and increased job demands (Chullen, 2014).

In the present study, we argue that in addition to the previously studied factors supervisors might also exhaust employees through behaviors perceived by employees as unfavorable or harmful. Specifically, lack of procedural justice by the supervisor who is exhausted may be one of the mechanisms that can emotionally harm employees. Considering conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989) and resource/ego depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) theories, we expect that emotionally exhausted supervisors would try to protect their remaining resources from depletion. However, this might lead to transferring fewer resources to perform behaviors that require self-control, which in turn might lead to a decrease in the appropriate performance of such behaviors. Importantly, procedural justice is an

important example of such behaviors that require execution of self-control (Johnson, Lanaj, & Barnes, 2014; Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1978). Thus, an emotionally exhausted leader might not act procedurally fairly due to resource depletion, and employees might see the lack of procedural justice as a threat to their own resources. Based on conservation of resources theory, this possible resource threat coming from the lack of procedural justice might result in employees' experience of emotional exhaustion. Through these explanations, we aim to provide a new explanation to the relationship between supervisor and employee emotional exhaustion. The theoretical model of the present study can be seen in Figure 1 (Please see Figure 1).

Based on our theoretical framework outlined above, we offer the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Supervisors' emotional exhaustion is negatively related to employees' perception of procedural justice.

*Hypothesis 2:* Employees' perception of procedural justice is negatively related to their emotional exhaustion.

*Hypothesis 3:* Supervisors' emotional exhaustion will indirectly predict employees' emotional exhaustion through employees' perceptions of procedural justice.

This study has two main contributions. First, we offer a different mechanism for the crossover of stress at work. In doing so, we respond to previous calls by scholars for understanding the mechanisms through which emotional stress is spread in work groups (Bakker et al., 2009; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2014; Westman, Etzion, & Danon, 2001). Secondly, and on a more general level, by integrating employees' and supervisors' experiences in a multilevel model, we might provide a more complete description of how employees' and supervisors' perceptions and experiences may be interrelated compared to single level models.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The study was conducted on supervisors and employees working in organizations that operate in the Aegean Region of Turkey. We implemented a survey with supervisors and at least three of their employees. After the data collection and basic data screening, the final sample was composed of 74 supervisors and 212 employees.

### Measures

**Emotional Exhaustion.** We measured employees' and their supervisors' emotional exhaustion on a five-point frequency scale (1: once a month or less; 5: several times a day) using Wilk and Moynihan's (2005) 4-item measure adapted from Maslach and Jackson (1981). This measure had acceptable internal consistencies for employees,  $\alpha = .83$ , and for supervisors,  $\alpha = .75$ .

**Procedural Justice.** We measured employee's perception of procedural justice with Colquitt's (2001) seven items on a five-point scale (1: Very little; 5: To a great extent). The measure had acceptable internal consistency,  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Control Variables.** Based on prior research, we used gender (Purvanova & Muros, 2010), age, and tenure (Brewer & Shapard, 2004) as control variables at both levels of analysis. In addition, we controlled for supervisors' span of control and organization size (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995) at the supervisor level.

### Data Analysis Strategy

Since employees were nested within supervisors, we used hierarchical linear modelling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Consistent with our theoretical framework, we used random intercepts model (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). All of our variables, except the dependent variable and categorical control variables, were grand mean centered (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). Mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 3) was tested via Monte Carlo simulations (Bauer, Preacher, & Gil, 2006; Selig & Preacher, 2008). All of the analyses were conducted using R statistical software (R Core Team, 2016) with the lme4 package (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

We provide our descriptive statistics at Table 1 (Please see Table 1).

### Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 claimed that there is a negative rela-

tionship between supervisors' emotional exhaustion and employees' perception of procedural justice. According to Model 1 at Table 2 (Please see Table 2), supervisors' emotional exhaustion negatively predicted employees' perceptions of procedural justice ( $\gamma = -.47, p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 claimed that employees' perception of procedural justice was positively related to their emotional exhaustion. According to Model 2 at Table 2 (Please see Table 2), employee's perception of procedural justice was negatively related to their emotional exhaustion ( $\gamma = -.24, p < .001$ ). This finding supported Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 claimed that supervisors' emotional exhaustion was related to employees' emotional exhaustion through employees' procedural justice. To test whether the confidence interval of the indirect effect included zero, we used Monte Carlo simulations (Preacher & Selig, 2012). We found that the confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero ( $\gamma = .13, \%95$  CI [0.02, 0.23]). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

## Discussion

Our study proposed a positive relationship between supervisors' emotional exhaustion and employees' emotional exhaustion as mediated by employees' procedural justice perceptions. Our findings supported our conceptual model.

### Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The present research suggests employees' perceptions of procedural fairness as a potential mechanism through which supervisors' emotional exhaustion is carried over to employees. While, prior research has mainly focused on the role of emotional contagion between supervisors and employees, we provide evidence that supervisors may transmit their exhaustion to employees through procedurally unfair acts. We also contribute to the justice literature by showing that emotionally exhausted supervisors may engage in acts that may be perceived as procedurally unfair. Our findings suggest that emotional stress is a multilevel phenomenon and can spread from managers to employees through behaviors that lack deliberation and self-control.

The present findings also have notable practical implications. Specifically, our study indicates that organizations may benefit from stress intervention programs specifically designed for managerial staff. Programs, such as mindfulness interventions, designed to reduce managers' emotional exhaustion may extend their positive effects to employees as well (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 2016). Organizations may also develop organiza-

tional policies and procedures so that supervisors will know what to do in specific circumstances. The more a person practices policies and procedures, the fewer executive resources will be required to implement procedural fairness (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). This may reduce the unfavorable effect of supervisors' emotional exhaustion on procedural fairness, and therefore on employees' emotional well-being.

### ***Limitations and Future Studies***

The first limitation is the cross-sectional design of the study. Due to this reason, we cannot fully eliminate the possibility of reverse causality. Even though our further analysis indicates that there is no significant reverse effect at the supervisor level, future studies should test the model with a time-lagged design. The second limitation is the possibility of a spurious relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. Although our data collection from different sources reduces the potential effect of common method variance (CMV) in our test of mediation (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), other potential sources of CMV might still have confounded the present findings. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal designs in more controlled settings.

Future studies could examine different mechanisms that explain the relationship between supervisors' and employees' emotional exhaustion. For instance, destructive leader behaviors, such as abusive supervision and supervisor undermining, could be other mechanisms worthy of examination.

### ***Conclusion***

Our study contributes to the crossover literature by examining employees' perceptions of procedural justice as a potential mediating mechanism between supervisors' and their employees' reports of emotional exhaustion. Consistent with resource depletion and conservation of resources theories, our study highlights that supervisors' emotional exhaustion might negatively influence employees' perceptions of procedural justice which in turn might increase employees' emotional exhaustion.