

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The importance of provision and utilization of supervisor support

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## Abstract

Three cross-sectional studies examined the benefits of provision of supervisor support while controlling for subordinate utilization of supervisor support. Data were collected from workers in a subordinate role (Study 1  $N = 355$ ; Study 2  $N = 229$ ; Study 3  $N = 109$ ). Consistent with expectations, provision of supervisor support consistently explained unique variance in affective job criteria while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. The results indicate that supervisors should acknowledge that their workers experience the affective benefits of supervisor support even if the workers do not consistently use the support provided. Contrary to expectations, provision of supervisor support did not consistently explain unique variance in perceived job stressors while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. However, workers must utilize the supervisor support provided in order to perceive fewer job stressors. We recommend supervisors to take caution when relocating their support to different subordinates based solely on a lack of utilization of support, as this may cause higher perceived job stressors for their subordinates based on the lack of provision of that support.

## KEYWORDS

job affect, job stressors, provision, supervisor support

## 1 | THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVISION AND UTILIZATION OF SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

Supervisors are expected to oversee subordinates and make decisions of how to allocate valuable organizational resources. The tangible (e.g., equipment) and intangible (e.g., feedback) resources provided by supervisors, which are referred to as *supervisor support*, are associated with subordinates' affective job criteria (i.e., job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment) and perceptions of job stressors (e.g., Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001; Väänänen et al., 2003; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Although there are many positive effects of supervisor support, the provision of such resources requires considerable effort and is finite. Unfortunately, organizational resources may go unused by workers (Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005). As a result, supervisors are often faced with determining the amount of supervisor support to provide subordinates. The current research was intended to help supervisors manage their finite resources by determining if the provision of supervisor support is beneficial beyond the effects of the subordinate's utilization of supervisor support. This information will enable supervisors to more effectively determine if support should be redirected to other workers based solely

on whether or not a subordinate uses the support provided. In addition, workers in stress management programs will benefit from an understanding of how the provision of supervisor support affects work outcomes. Three samples of full-time workers in subordinate roles were used to examine the unique effects of provision of supervisor support on affective job criteria and job stressors while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.

## 2 | SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

Supervisor support is evaluated based on the resources provided to subordinates by the supervisor. The resources provided to subordinates can be both emotional/intangible (e.g., empathy, sympathetic listening and love) and instrumental/tangible (e.g., money, labor, time, or a modification to the work environment). Emotional support and instrumental support are strongly correlated (correlation corrected for error = .68,  $k = 21$ ,  $N = 5,416$ ; Mathieu & Eschleman, 2016), which indicates that the type of resources provided during supervisor support are not easily distinguishable by workers. The current studies examined emotional supervisor support in Study 1, instrumental

supervisor support in Study 2, and a combination of both forms of support in Study 3. The type of support was intentionally varied between Studies 1 and 2 to examine the reproducibility of the findings regardless of the type of support measured. Study 3 included an archival applied data set, which limited how support was measured.

The provision of supervisor support and utilization of supervisor support are inherently intertwined within common conceptualizations of the support process. For example, Dewe, O'Driscoll, and Cooper (2010) state "people who have access to and utilize support from other people in their environment are less likely to experience strain" (p. 97). Subordinate responses to supervisor support are rooted in organizational support theory (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) and conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989). According to organizational support theory, support from a powerful member of the organization (e.g., supervisor) is a valuable resource to workers as it sends implicit and explicit messages to the worker about the workers' value to the organization and the necessary steps for how to be successful in the job. According to COR (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), people constantly strive to protect, retain, foster, and obtain resources. Positive affective job criteria occur when a worker experiences a surplus of resources, whereas strain occurs when a worker experiences either actual depletion of resources (e.g., less supervisor support) or potential threat to resources (e.g., a change in supervisor). The management of one's resources occurs through two simultaneous resource mechanisms. The protection mechanism is the process whereby workers activate (or utilize) their current resources to prevent from losing other valuable resources. That is, workers may utilize supervisor support to protect from the loss of other valuable resources. For example, a worker may embrace a friendly approach from a supervisor to emotionally vent about a problem and experience less negative affect while at work in general. Similarly, a worker may accept the help of a supervisor on unusual work problems to gather information about one's role responsibilities. Both of these examples demonstrate how utilization of supervisor support can have positive effects on affective job criteria and job stressors. However, the positive effects of provision of supervisor support may extend beyond the utilization of the support through the accumulation mechanism.

### 3 | UNIQUE EFFECTS OF PROVISION OF SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

The accumulation mechanism is the process whereby individuals regulate their behaviors and exert control over their environment to gain and store new resources. In other words, workers may refrain from utilizing valued resources to ensure that resources are available in the future. The accumulation of resources serves an important purpose for the worker. The provision of supervisor support may act as a support safety net, which in turn may change a worker's affective job criteria and perception of job stressors. For example, a worker may have a supervisor who shares personal information about nonwork issues. Although the worker may disregard these efforts to connect emotionally with their supervisor, the worker may benefit from knowing this outlet of support has been established. As a result, the worker may experience greater commitment to the organization and job

satisfaction. Similarly, a worker may refuse a supervisor's effort to help on job duties. Although the support is not utilized, the worker may perceive fewer challenges in their work environment because they have a safety net of support to resort to if needed.

In order to establish a pattern of relationships with outcome variables, two positive job affective outcomes and two job stressors were chosen. Job satisfaction is one of the oldest (Hoppock, 1935) and most studied organizational attitudes in the organizational sciences and has been linked to a variety of job related outcomes such as job performance, (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985), stress, (Blegen, 1993), and health (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005). Additionally, organizational support has been shown to be related to a number of important organizationally relevant outcomes (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). Lastly, meta-analytic evidence has shown that role ambiguity and role conflict are related to 10 organizational context variables, five individual characteristics, 10 affective reactions, and four behavioral reactions (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Because of the evidence supporting the popularity and importance of these outcomes they were chosen as the outcomes to test the hypothesized relationships.

There is widespread empirical evidence that the provision of supervisor support can result in positive affective job criteria and fewer perceived job stressors (e.g. Ng et al., 2008; Viswesvaran et al., 1999). However, there is limited organizational research that examines the beneficial effects of the provision of supervisor support while controlling for the utilization of supervisor support. Insight into the unique effects of provision of supervisor support can be gleaned from research on organizational benefits/policy utilization. For example, an empirical examination of family-friendly policies indicated that benefit packages might have a positive impact beyond the individual employees who utilize the benefits (Grover & Crooker, 1995). Based on theoretical importance of the accumulation of resources, we propose that the provision of supervisor support will serve as a resource associated with greater positive (less negative) affective job criteria and reduced levels of perceived job stressors while controlling for the utilization of supervisor support.

**Hypothesis 1a.** *Provision of supervisor support will be positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, positive job affect, and vitality while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.*

**Hypothesis 1b.** *Provision of supervisor support will be negatively associated with negative job affect and emotional exhaustion while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.*

**Hypothesis 2.** *Provision of supervisor support will be negatively associated with job stressors (role conflict, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, and organizational constraints) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.*

### 4 | METHOD

Three studies were conducted to test the hypotheses for replication purposes. Each study included one measure of available supervisor

support, one measure of utilization of supervisor support, two measures of job stressors, and two measures of affective job criteria. Studies 1 and 2 had similar sample recruitment strategies (e.g., internet convenience sampling) and survey design, but different measures of similar constructs were implemented between the studies. Study 3 relied upon an archival data set from an organizational health assessment, which restricted the scales used.

## 4.1 | Data collection and participants

### 4.1.1 | Study 1

Participants were recruited using StudyResponse (The StudyResponse Project, n.d.) for Study 1. Three hundred fifty-five participants completed the survey and provided useable data. The survey included 167 questions, and participants were paid \$5.00. Data were excluded from participants ( $n = 28$ ) if they missed at least one of four attention check questions (e.g., "Please mark strongly agree"; Meade & Craig, 2012) or if they had changed supervisors during the past thirty days. Participants lived within the United States, worked in a variety of occupations (e.g. cashier, sales, and elementary school teacher), were 51% female, an average of 37 years old, and worked an average of 40 hr per week.

### 4.1.2 | Study 2

Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mechanical Turk, N.D.). Two hundred twenty-seven participants completed the survey and provided useable data. The survey included 104 questions, and participants were paid \$0.25. Data were excluded from participants ( $n = 123$ ) who missed at least one of four attention check questions, if they had changed supervisors during the past thirty days, or they did not indicate they were fluent English speakers. Participants primarily lived within the United States ( $n = 48$ , 21%) and India ( $n = 169$ , 74%). Participants worked in a variety of occupations (e.g., college professor, janitor, and IT specialist), were 38% female, an average of 30 years old, and worked an average of 41 hr a week.

### 4.1.3 | Study 3

Participants completed an organizational health assessment survey at the request of their supervisors as part of a quarterly evaluation of worker attitudes. All participants were from the same organization and worked as science researchers within laboratories. The supervising scientists of the laboratories were not surveyed. One hundred nine participants completed the survey voluntarily and anonymously over a 2-week period. The survey included preexisting scales and items written specifically for the needs of the organization. Participants completed 104 to 120 questions depending upon the job title and laboratory, and participants were given the opportunity to win a raffle for one of ten \$10 gift cards to a local eatery. All participants had worked for their current supervisor for at least 3 months and held a Doctoral ( $n = 41$ , 39%), Masters ( $n = 40$ , 37%), or Bachelors ( $n = 28$ , 26%) degrees. Participants lived within the United States, were 67% female, an average of 29 years old, and worked an average of 48 hr per week.

## 4.2 | Measures

### 4.2.1 | Provision of supervisor support

For Study 1, provision of supervisor support was assessed with five items from Zellars and Perrewé's (2001) 14-item supervisor support scale, which emphasizes the exchange of emotional resources. Participants rated the frequency of their supervisor's behavior from almost never (1) to almost always (5). The five items were (a) "My supervisor reassures me about the actions I've taken or my feelings," (b) "My supervisor tells me he/she understands how I am feeling," (c) "My supervisor and I share personal information about backgrounds and families," (d) "My supervisor and I talk about the good things about work," and (e) "My supervisor expresses confidence in me." The provision of supervisor support scale in Study 1 had an internal consistency reliability of .90.

For Study 2, provision of supervisor support was assessed with a five-item scale from Ducharme and Martin (2000), which emphasizes the exchange of tangible task-related resources. Participants rated the frequency of their supervisor's behavior from almost never (1) to almost always (5). The five items were (a) "My supervisor fills in while I am absent," (b) "My supervisor is helpful in getting the job done," (c) "My supervisor gives useful advice on job problems," (d) "My supervisor assists me with unusual work problem," and (e) "My supervisor pitches in and helps with my job duties when necessary." The provision of supervisor support scale in Study 2 had an internal consistency reliability of .85.

For Study 3, provision of supervisor support was assessed with three items written for the organizational assessment survey. The items emphasize the exchange of both emotional resources and task-related resources. Participants rated their agreement to each statement from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The three items were (a) "My supervisor supports me emotionally," (b) "My supervisor supports me in my research," and (c) "My supervisor supports me in my career." A post hoc pilot study of workers ( $N = 30$ ) was conducted to ensure the convergent validity of the customized provision of supervisor support scale used in Study 3 with the scales used to measure the same variables in Studies 1 and 2. Within the pilot sample, the provision of supervisor support scale used in Study 3 strongly correlated with the provision of supervisor support scales used in Study 1 ( $r = .70$ ) and Study 2 ( $r = .77$ ). The provision of supervisor support scale in Study 3 had an internal consistency reliability of .87.

### 4.2.2 | Utilization of supervisor support

Utilization of supervisor support was assessed with two methods (behavior intention and behavior reaction), which overcome limitations to each approach. Studies 1 and 2 incorporated behavior intention statements ("if-then" statements) to measure how participants intend to react to supervisor support instead of relying on the participants' memory of past behaviors. If support had been provided less frequently, respondents may have difficulty accurately recalling their reactions. Conversely, Study 3 incorporated a behavior reaction statement to measure participants' past reactions to supervisor support.

For Study 1, utilization of supervisor support items were created and modeled similar to the aforementioned provision of supervisor support scale. A pilot study of workers ( $N = 48$ ) was first conducted

to evaluate 15 potential items. Five items were selected from the pilot based on internal consistency and factor loadings. Participants rated their agreement to each behavior-response scenario from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The five items that assessed utilization of supervisor support were (a) "I would take it to heart if my supervisor reassured me about the actions I've taken or my feelings," (b) "I would listen to my supervisor if he/she told me that he/she understands how I am feeling," (c) "If my supervisor discussed non-work issues, I would tune him/her out" (reversed scored), (d) "If my supervisor were friendly to me, I would embrace it," and (e) "I would allow my supervisor to help me emotionally if he/she tried." The utilization of supervisor support scale in Study 1 had an internal consistency reliability of .82.

For Study 2, utilization of supervisor support items modeled after the provision of supervisor support scale also used in Study 1. A pilot study of workers ( $N = 21$ ) was first conducted to evaluate 15 potential items. Five items were selected from the pilot based on internal consistency and factor loadings. Participants rated their agreement with each behavior-response scenario from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The five items that assessed utilization of supervisor support were (a) "If my supervisor were to pitch in and help with my job duties, I would accept his/her help," (b) "If my supervisor showed me how to become better at my job, I would ignore him/her" (reverse scored), (c) "If my supervisor were to offer me help in getting my job done, I would listen to him/her," (d) "I would accept my supervisor's help with unusual work problems if it were offered", and (e) "If my supervisor provided me with useful advice on job problems, I would engage in those behaviors." The utilization of supervisor support scale in Study 2 had an internal consistency reliability of .78.

For Study 3, utilization of support was assessed with a single item on a scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Participants rated their agreement to "I use the support given to me by my supervisor." A post hoc pilot study of workers ( $N = 30$ ) was conducted to test the convergent validity of the single item scale. The single item scale strongly correlated with the utilization of supervisor support scales in Study 1 ( $r = .76$ ) and Study 2 ( $r = .85$ ).

#### 4.2.3 | Affective job criteria

For Study 1, job satisfaction and organizational commitment were selected as affective job criteria. Participants rated their agreement with affective statements about their work from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Job satisfaction was assessed with the three-item Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979), which is believed to be an affect-oriented scale of job satisfaction (Bowling & Hammond, 2008). An example job satisfaction item is "All in all I am satisfied with my job." Organizational commitment was assessed with the six-item Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974), which evaluates a worker's emotional attachment to the organization. An example organizational commitment item is "I am proud to tell others that I am part of the organization where I work." In Study 1, the job satisfaction and organizational commitment scales have internal consistency reliabilities of .84 and .90, respectively.

For Study 2, positive job affect and negative job affect were selected as affective job criteria. Participants rated how often they

experience specific emotions while at work from almost never (1) to almost always (5). Positive job affect and negative job affect were assessed with 10 items each from the Job-related Affective Well-being Scale (Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000). An example positive job affect item is "My job makes me feel at ease." An example negative job affect item is "My job makes me feel angry." In Study 2, the positive job affect and negative job affect scales had internal consistency reliabilities of .88 and .91, respectively.

For Study 3, vitality and emotional exhaustion were used as affective job criteria. Participants rated their agreement with affective statements about their work from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Vitality was assessed with 3-items from the Thriving at Work Scale (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). An example vitality item is "I feel alert and awake during my research." Emotional exhaustion was assessed with a 5-item version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). An example emotional exhaustion item is "I feel emotionally drained by my research." In Study 3, the vitality and emotional exhaustion scales had internal consistency reliabilities of .81 and .92, respectively.

#### 4.2.4 | Job stressors

For Study 1, role conflict and role ambiguity were selected as job stressors. Participants rated their agreement with statements that describe their work environment from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Role conflict and role ambiguity were assessed with five items each from Glazer and Beehr (2005). An example role conflict item is "I receive incompatible requests from two or more people." An example role ambiguity item is "I know exactly what is expected of me at work" (reversed scored). In Study 1, the role conflict and role ambiguity scales had internal consistency reliabilities of .72 and .87, respectively.

For Study 2, interpersonal conflict and organizational constraints were selected as job stressors. Participants rated how often they experience work situations from almost never (1) to almost always (5). Interpersonal conflict (e.g., "How often do you get into arguments with others at work?") was measured using four items from the interpersonal conflict at work scale (Spector & Jex, 1998). Organizational constraints (e.g., "How often do you find it difficult or impossible to do your job because of poor equipment?") were measured using 11 items from the Organizational Constraints Scale (Spector & Jex, 1998). In Study 2, the interpersonal conflict and organizational constraints scales had internal consistency reliabilities of .86 and .92, respectively.

For Study 3, role conflict and organizational constraints were used as job stressors. Participants rated their agreement with statements that describe their work environment from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Role conflict was assessed with the same scale and instructions used in Study 1. Organizational constraints were assessed with three items written for the organizational assessment survey. The three items were (a) "I do not have enough freedom in my research to do my job well," (b) "I do not have the equipment necessary to do my job well," and (c) "Policies and procedures prevent me from doing my job well." A post hoc pilot study of workers ( $N = 30$ ) was conducted to ensure the convergent validity of the customized organizational constraint scale used in Study 3 with the validated scale used

to measure the same variable Study 2. Within the pilot sample, the organizational constraint scale used in Study 3 strongly correlated with the organizational constraint scale used in Study 2 ( $r = .83$ ). In Study 3, the role conflict and organizational constraints scales had internal consistency reliabilities of .83 and .87, respectively.

## 5 | RESULTS

Prior to hypothesis testing, the relationships between provision of supervisor support and utilization of supervisor support were tested to demonstrate construct divergence. Provision of supervisor support was positively correlated with utilization of supervisor support in Study 1 ( $r = .51, p < .01$ ; Table 1), Study 2 ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ; Table 2), and Study 3 ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ; Table 3). The moderate strength of the correlation indicates that provision and utilization are distinct constructs and that some subordinates may not utilize supervisor support.

Multiple regression analyses were used to examine the unique effects of provision of supervisor support on work criteria while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. Hypothesis 1a was fully supported across the three studies, which predicted that provision of supervisor support would be positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, positive job affect, and vitality while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 1 (Table 4), provision of supervisor support was positively associated with job satisfaction ( $\beta = .34, \Delta R^2 = .09, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $\beta = .42, \Delta R^2 = .14, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 2 (Table 5), provision of supervisor support was positively associated with positive job affect ( $\beta = .52, \Delta R^2 = .21, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 3 (Table 6), provision of supervisor support was positively associated with vitality ( $\beta = .29, \Delta R^2 = .07, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.

Hypothesis 1b was also fully supported across the three studies, which predicted that provision of supervisor support would be negatively associated with negative job affect and emotional exhaustion

while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 2 (Table 5), provision of supervisor support was negatively associated with negative job affect ( $\beta = -.32, \Delta R^2 = .08, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 3 (Table 6), provision of supervisor support was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -.32, \Delta R^2 = .08, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. Overall, provision of supervisor support was consistently associated with affective job criteria while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported across the three studies, which predicted provision of supervisor support would explain unique variance in job stressors while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 1 (Table 4), provision of supervisor support was not significantly associated with role conflict ( $\beta = .05, \Delta R^2 = .00, p > .05$ ), but was negatively associated with role ambiguity ( $\beta = -.23, \Delta R^2 = .04, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 2 (Table 5), provision of supervisor support was not significantly associated with interpersonal conflict ( $\beta = -.06, \Delta R^2 = .00, p > .05$ ), but was negatively associated with organizational constraints ( $\beta = -.27, \Delta R^2 = .06, p < .01$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. In Study 3 (Table 6), provision of supervisor support was not significantly associated with role conflict ( $\beta = -.13, \Delta R^2 = .01, p > .05$ ) and organizational constraints ( $\beta = .15, \Delta R^2 = .02, p > .05$ ) while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. Overall, provision of supervisor support was not consistently associated with perceived job stressors while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Consistent with family-friendly workplace support programs (e.g., Hammer et al., 2005) and Employee Assistance Programs (e.g., French, Roman, Dunlap, & Steele, 1997; Milne, Blum, & Roman, 1994), provision of supervisor support was moderately correlated with utilization of supervisor support. The moderate relationship may indicate that

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for variables in Study 1

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Supervisor support								
1 Provision of supervisor support	3.17	1.00	(.90)					
2 Utilization of supervisor support	5.36	1.03	.51**	(.82)				
Job stressors								
3 Role conflict	3.65	1.60	-.08	-.13**	(.87)			
4 Role ambiguity	5.70	1.10	-.29**	-.30**	.27*	(.72)		
Affective job criteria								
5 Job satisfaction	5.18	1.53	.42**	.29**	-.32**	-.47**	(.84)	
6 Organizational commitment	4.91	1.45	.47**	.35**	-.20**	-.48**	.68**	(.90)

Note.  $N = 355$ . Uncorrected correlations presented below the diagonal. Alpha reliabilities are presented on the diagonal in parentheses.  $SD$  = standard deviation.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for variables in Study 2

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Supervisor support								
1 Provision of supervisor support	5.31	1.09	(.85)					
2 Utilization of supervisor support	5.51	0.85	.49**	(.78)				
Job Stressors								
3 Interpersonal conflict	2.26	0.92	-.24**	-.39**	(.86)			
4 Organizational constraints	2.43	0.84	-.32**	-.29**	.70**	(.92)		
Affective job criteria								
5 Positive job affect	3.41	0.70	.54**	.24**	-.04	-.22**	(.88)	
6 Negative job affect	2.27	0.80	-.38**	-.32**	.65**	.69*	-.36**	(.91)

Note.  $N = 229$ . Uncorrected correlations presented below the diagonal. Alpha reliabilities are presented on the diagonal in parentheses.  $SD$  = standard deviation.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 3** Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for variables in Study 3

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Supervisor support								
1 Provision of supervisor support	4.68	1.54	(.87)					
2 Utilization of supervisor support	3.67	1.12	.39**	—				
Job stressors								
3 Role conflict	4.02	1.46	-.22*	-.30**	(.83)			
4 Organizational constraints	3.64	1.22	-.15	.13	-.02	(.87)		
Affective job criteria								
5 Vitality	4.02	1.31	.36**	.33**	-.12	-.12	(.81)	
6 Emotional exhaustion	4.25	1.51	-.42**	-.33**	.13	.13	-.78**	(.92)

Note.  $N = 109$ . Uncorrected correlations presented below the diagonal. Alpha reliabilities are presented on the diagonal in parentheses.  $SD$  = standard deviation.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 4** Unique effects of provision supervisor support controlling for utilization of supervisor support in Study 1

Criteria	Predictors	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Role conflict	Utilization of supervisor support	-.27**	.08**
	Provision of supervisor support	.05	.00
Role ambiguity	Utilization of supervisor support	-.16**	.11**
	Provision of supervisor support	-.23**	.04**
Job satisfaction	Utilization of supervisor support	.16**	.12**
	Provision of supervisor support	.34**	.09**
Organizational commitment	Utilization of supervisor support	.13*	.12**
	Provision of supervisor support	.42**	.14**

Note.  $N = 355$ .  $\beta$  = Standardized regression coefficient after each set of predictors were added.  $\Delta R^2$  = unique variance explained by use of supervisor support and provision of supervisor support.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

not all workers use (or intend to use) support provided to them. The notion of unused support raises questions about the positive effects of provision of supervisor support on worker outcomes.

Provision of supervisor support was consistently correlated with affective job criteria and job stressors, but two hypotheses were tested to examine the unique effects of provision of supervisor support on

**TABLE 5** Unique effects of provision of supervisor support controlling for utilization of supervisor support in Study 2

Criteria	Predictors	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Interpersonal conflict	Utilization of supervisor support	-.34**	.17**
	Provision of supervisor support	-.06	.00
Organizational constraints	Utilization of supervisor support	-.13	.09**
	Provision of supervisor support	-.27**	.06**
Positive job affect	Utilization of supervisor support	-.03	.07**
	Provision of supervisor support	.52**	.21**
Negative job affect	Utilization of supervisor support	-.14*	.11**
	Provision of supervisor support	-.32**	.08**

Note.  $N = 229$ .  $\beta$  = Standardized regression coefficient after each set of predictors were added.  $\Delta R^2$  = unique variance explained by use of supervisor support and provision of supervisor support.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 6** Unique effects of provision of supervisor support controlling for utilization of supervisor support in Study 3

Criteria	Predictors	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Role conflict	Utilization of supervisor support	-.24*	.06*
	Provision of supervisor support	-.13	.01
Organizational constraints	Utilization of supervisor support	-.35**	.11**
	Provision of supervisor support	.15	.02
Vitality	Utilization of supervisor support	.21*	.04*
	Provision of supervisor support	.29**	.07**
Emotional exhaustion	Utilization of supervisor support	-.12*	.03*
	Provision of supervisor support	-.36**	.11**

Note.  $N = 109$ .  $\beta$  = Standardized regression coefficient after each set of predictors were added.  $\Delta R^2$  = unique variance explained by use of supervisor support and provision of supervisor support.

\* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ .

affective job criteria and job stressors. Supportive of Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b, provision of supervisor support was consistently related to affective job criteria while controlling for utilization of supervisor support. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, provision of supervisor support was not consistently related to job stressors while controlling for utilization of supervisor support.

Support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 1b across all three studies provides evidence that the beneficial effects of supervisor support are not solely encompassed by the utilization of supervisor support. According to COR, resources can be banked and stored for later use. The banking of these resources may act as a safety net that promotes positive affective job criteria. This is also consistent with the family-friendly policy literature, which shows that even if all available benefits are not used there is still a positive effect (Grover & Cooker, 1995). Overall, the results indicate that provision of supervisor support serves as a resource that is associated with greater positive affective job criteria that are unique from the utilization of supervisor support.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, provision of supervisor support did not have a consistent effect with job stressors. Across all three studies, the unique effects when predicting job stressors were either nonsignificant or weak. The unique effects predicting job stressors ranged between 0% and 6% of variance explained (sample weighted mean = 2%), whereas the unique effects predicting affective job criteria ranged between 7% and 21% (sample weighted mean = 12%). The unexpected findings may indicate that the provision of supervisor

support is more uniquely important for affective job criteria than for job stressors. That is, the positive effects of provision of supervisor support on job stressors are largely dependent upon a subordinates' utilization of the support.

The pattern of unique effects of provision of supervisor support also sheds light onto how the accumulation and protection mechanisms within COR can be applied into the workplace. The accumulation mechanism may be more relevant to workers' affective job criteria, whereas the protection mechanism may be the primary explanation for how workers manage current job stressors. The accumulation of resources may enable workers to have more positive affective job experiences and attitudes because they believe they will be able to handle future work challenges. A positive affective state can occur without action being taken to change the work environment. Conversely, the protection mechanism indicates that current job stressors are most effectively reduced through action. Although future research should directly assess the proposed underlying mechanisms, these studies provide evidence about the importance of both provision and utilization of supervisor support in the workplace that is consistent with COR.

## 6.1 | Practical implications

The current studies have several practical implications for supervisors and organizations. From a leadership perspective, it is advantageous

to know that workers likely experience the provision and utilization of support as distinct resources. Providing support can promote positive affective experiences within workers even if this supervisor support is unused. Organizational Support Theory stipulates that workers may receive fewer organizational resources if the workers fail to meet a supervisor's expectations (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). In addition, supervisors consciously shape their behaviors in an effort to evoke responses from their subordinates (Ferris, Bhawuk, Fedor, & Judge, 1995). As a result, supervisors should not expect all resources provided to workers to be utilized and could be made aware that even if resources are not utilized they may still be beneficial.

Organizations may also consider incorporating the findings into stress management programs offered to workers. Workers will benefit by learning that supervisor support need not be utilized in order for the worker to see changes to their job stressors. The implications may be greater for some organizations more than others. For example, first-line supervisors in bureaucratic organizations may not have the ability to provide support that can be used to reduce the amount of organizational constraints. Under these circumstances, supervisors should still provide support to their subordinates because the mere presence of support may result in greater positive affective job criteria for workers.

## 6.2 | Limitations

A significant limitation to the practical and theoretical applications is the cross-sectional research design. We cannot statistically examine the causal direction of the variables studied and expect a bidirectional causal relationship. For example, poor affective job criteria and greater job stressors are likely to cause workers to increase their utilization of supervisor support. Similarly, a supervisor may react to these negative circumstances and increase their provision of supervisor support. Future research should examine these phenomena longitudinally so that mediating processes can be more accurately tested. It is important to note that the cross-sectional nature of the data likely increased the relationship between provision and utilization of supervisor support because of common method variance. However, the greater shared variance between the two variables likely made it more difficult to find significant unique effects on our criteria. As a result, we expect the unique effects of available supervisor support to be even greater when capitalizing on a longitudinal design.

The inconsistency of the measures used to assess several variables is also a limitation. Utilization of supervisor support was measured in Studies 1 and 2 with a behavior intention scale. The hypothetical behaviors may not reflect how a worker actually behaves. This limitation is mitigated by the use of a single item measure of behavioral reflection in Study 3, which yielded similar findings as Studies 1 and 2. Unfortunately, the behavioral reflection item used in Study 3 was from an archival data set and was not written for purposes of the current study. The behavioral reflection measure can be improved by either increasing the number of items to ensure reliable assessment or by referencing specific supervisor support behaviors as in Studies 1 and 2. Despite the limitations of relying upon an archival data set, a post hoc evaluation indicated a strong convergence between the different measures.

The measure used to assess organizational commitment is also limited because the scale fails to distinguish the multiple dimensions of this attitudinal construct (affective, continuance, and normative commitment; Allen & Meyer, 1996). The findings were consistent with other affective job criteria variables despite this limitation. As a result, the findings pertaining to affective job criteria may extend to other job attitudes. Overall, the variety of scales used across the three studies and the consistency in the results reduces the concern for the measurement limitations, but the limitations noted do provide guidance for future researchers examining utilization of support.

## 6.3 | Future research

Future research should examine if provision of supervisor support has unique effects on other job stressors. Provision of supervisor support explained unique variance in job stressors in only two of six relationships examined and the significant effects were relatively small. Unique effects may be stronger and more frequent for stressors that are more susceptible to the accumulation mechanism in COR. Job stressors that have a long-term time perspective (e.g., organizational change, retirement planning, and job insecurity) are likely to motivate workers to psychologically bank resources to a greater degree than the job stressors that need to be addressed immediately.

The implications of the current studies are predicated on the notion that supervisors adjust their supportive behaviors based on the use of support. Future research should extend upon the current studies by examining the utilization of support from the supervisor perspective. It is necessary to understand if and when supervisors provide and withhold support to their workers. The positive correlations between provision of support and utilization of support may indicate that less utilization of supervisor support results in less provision of supervisor support. In other words, supervisors may adjust their supportive behaviors in response to their subordinates' actions. Additionally, supervisors may not be the only workers adjusting their behaviors. Subordinates may react to the amount of support provided by changing how much support they use. Given the positive correlation between provision and utilization, it could be that workers begin to use support more when it is in abundance. Future research should further examine the provision utilization relationship from a supervisory perspective.

Despite the consistent effects found across the three studies, future research should examine boundary conditions for when the effects are greater. Individual differences, such as openness to experience, will likely correlate with utilization of support and influence the likelihood of an accumulation mechanism. Organizational culture is also a likely boundary condition, as it has been found to influence utilization of workplace support programs (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999).

## SUMMARY

Data from subordinates in three cross-sectional studies indicate that provision of supervisor support is associated with greater positive affective job criteria after controlling for utilization of supervisor



support. Surprisingly, the unique effects of provision of supervisor support on current job stressors were not consistently found. The findings indicate that provision of supervisor support can be beneficial to workers' affective job criteria via an accumulation mechanism in which resources are stored for a later date. In addition, current job stressors are most effectively mitigated via a protection mechanism in which resources are activated and used to combat an immediate threat. This study has implications for supervisors with limited resources who may decide to redirect their support based on whether or not a worker utilizes the support provided. We recommend supervisors consider the affective state of their workers to determine the effect of the support provided rather than relying solely on whether or not their support was used.

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