

Role Clarity As Mediator Between Employees' Perceived Supervisory Support & Its Work Outcomes

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This study examines employees' perceived supervisory support and its association with their levels of task performance and work tensions when such relationships are mediated by their extent of role clarity. Through relevant literature review, the study hypotheses are postulated and linked by a conceptual latent variable model. The model is tested using data collected from 828 managerial executives working in India. Data were then subjected to various statistical techniques including structural equation modeling procedures. All the study hypotheses were found acceptable as was the latent variable model. Subsequently, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings were discussed. The study concluded by noting its limitations and scope for future research.

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Introduction

It is common knowledge that the support of others at work entices individuals to strive towards greater utilization of their abilities and attain higher levels of performance (Chou et al., 2015; Ghosh, 2015). An extension of this cogitation is advocated by several empirical studies wherein employees' perceived supervisory support (PSS) has resulted in positive role-related outcomes such as task identification, in-role and extra-role performance, commitment, and lesser work-related stress and anxiety (Chan, 2017; Ma & Tsui, 2015).

While extant research has verified that employees' PSS encourages opportune workplace activities, how such perceived facilitation translates to enhanced task performances (TP) and reduced disquietude at work such as work tensions (WT) remains to be examined (Akram et al., 2018). In

this connection, it has been suggested that PSS helps reduce task-related uncertainties by clarifying subordinates' work expectations and communication of the same through supportive behaviors (Mihalca et al., 2021). As a result, role clarity (RC) was determined as a possible mediator between employees' PSS and their enhanced TP and reduced WT. Thus, the objective of this study was to investigate and fulfill the above-stated research gaps by exploring the relationship between employees' PSS as the antecedent of employees' TP and WT while examining the possibility of RC as a potential mediator.

Literature Review & Hypotheses Development

The relevant literature is examined here to find out the associations among the constructs to formulate the relevant study hypotheses.

PSS & RC: According to earlier studies, employees' workplace behaviors are influenced by several organizational and contextual factors among which is the favorable nature of their relationship with their employing organization and its agents (Tuzun et al., 2017). PSS assumes importance as it has been noted to be representative of organizational support towards its employees or subordinates as manifested through its delegates namely, their managers or supervisors (Iplik et al., 2011). Within the ambit of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), it has been observed that employees often anthropomorphize their organization based on their interaction with their immediate supervisor (Dawley et al.,

2010). This is because, for employees, their immediate supervisor is the most proximate organizational representative who communicates the organization's values, norms, and expectations while at the same time, through their supportive actions, clarifying the utility and worth of the subordinates' skills, job fitment, and developmental requirements, thus, contributing to the latter's RC (Wnuk, 2017).

Extant research indicates that PSS results in the augmentation of several job-related consequences such as satisfaction, commitment, task performance, trust, and loyalty while negating untoward work attitudes by creating a climate of unambiguity and outcome orientation (Khaleel et al., 2017). A review of literature pertaining to social identity (Hewstone & Jaspars, 1984; Hogg et al., 1995) reveals that PSS addresses subordinates' RC by encouraging interactional behaviors and fulfillment of in-role task assignments as per stated norms. The discussion above leads to the postulation of the following hypothesis.

H1. Employees' perceived supervisory support shall have a significantly positive association with the extent of role clarity.

RC, TP & WT: The previous discussion indicated that favorable interactions between supervisors and their subordinates help the former to clarify the role-related requirements expected of the latter. An immediate outcome of this is informational adequacy as perceived by the subordinate regarding his/her in-role performance (Cassidy & Stanley, 2018; Iqbal

et al., 2019). Based on the informational justice theory (Colquitt, 2001), PSS has been regarded as providing informational fairness to subordinate employees which leads to RC and extends to managing their role-related problems and providing effective solutions for the same as displayed by their expectedly higher levels of TP (Khattak et al., 2021).

As discussed earlier, PSS results in tacit and explicit knowledge sharing between supervisors and their subordinates which further contributes to the development of the latter in terms of their performance standards and, in turn, the overall growth of organizational competitiveness (Andreeva & Kianto, 2012; Zhao & Xia, 2017). An extension of this process is found in the argument that knowledge-sharing behaviors that promote employees' RC lead to the development of mutual trust, organizational identification, realization of task significance, and at the same time, greater uncertainty reduction leading to the suppression of their WT (Riaz et al., 2019). Furthermore, RC projects and promotes individuals' behavioral integrity which inculcates an overall sense of ethics and fairness prevalent at the workplace which also helps assuage employees' WT (Andrews et al., 2015). This discussion leads to the proposal of the following hypotheses.

H2. Employees' role clarity shall have a significantly positive association with their task performance.

H3. Employees' role clarity would be associated significantly with reduced levels of work tensions.

RC as a Mediator: PSS is characterized by supervisor-subordinate respect, cohesion, and knowledge-sharing (Singh et al., 2021; Singh & Rangnekar, 2016). Such relational characteristics enhance subordinates' RC as well as meaningfulness of work which leads not only to positive task performance but also attenuated levels of negative workplace attitudes and behaviors (Jiang & Johnson, 2017; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2016). PSS, by creating RC for subordinates, therefore, leads to a cordial work environment that contributes to subordinates' enhanced TP and reduced WT. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is posited.

H4. Employees' role clarity shall significantly mediate the relationship between their perceived supervisory support as the primary antecedents of their task performance and work tensions.

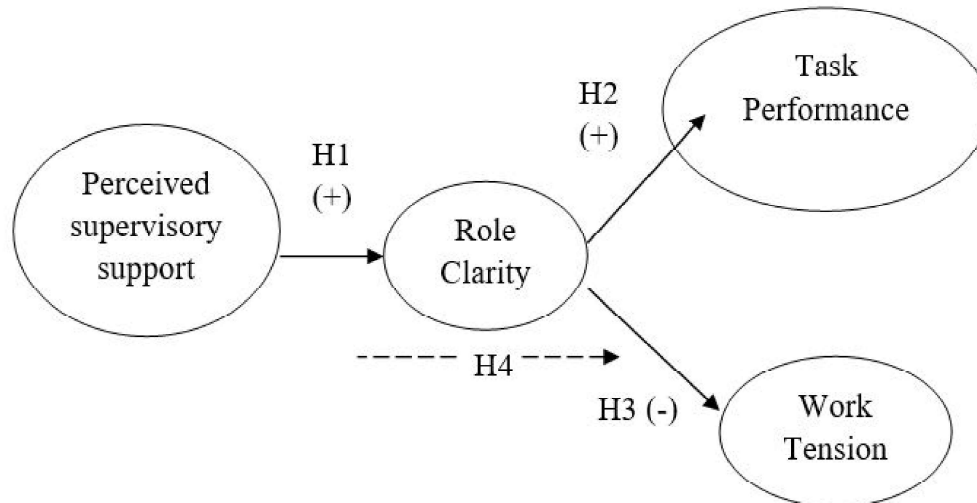
Overall, all the study hypotheses are put together as a conceptual latent variable model (LVM) in Fig. I.

Sample & Procedures

A random survey was conducted in multiple organizations spread across India. With exact data not available for the workforce population, the sample size was approximated using the method when the population was infinite. Accordingly, the recommended sample size was 772 (Liu, 2014)

To collect data for this study, 60 organizations, as listed in the yellow pages business directory of India, were randomly

Fig. I. The Proposed Conceptual Latent Variable Model



selected. 12 out of the 60 organizations allowed their employees to take part in the study survey. Five of these 12 organizations were from the manufacturing sector and the remaining seven were from the services sector. Next, participants who agreed to fill up the study questionnaire were listed. A cover letter was also attached to each questionnaire outlining the study objectives, the researcher's profile, respondent anonymity, and also a note, that, the data being collected was only for academic purposes and served no commercial interest was attached along with each questionnaire. About 1300 study questionnaires were distributed of which 828 filled and usable forms were returned. Thus, the response rate of this survey was 63.7 percent.

All respondents of this survey were full-time executives in their respective organizations. Their average age was 36.90 years and their average work experience was 10.46 years. While 227 respondents be-

longed to organizations from the manufacturing sector, the remaining 601 were from organizations in the services sector. Further, 432 of the respondents were males and 396 were females. Moreover, 61 of the respondents were from the senior level, 319 from the middle level, and 448 from the junior level of managerial cadres of their respective organizations.

Measures

All the study variables have been measured on a five-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

PSS was measured with the nine-item scale reported by Greenhaus et al. (1990). A sample item of this scale was: 'gives me helpful advice about improving my performance when I need it'. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .81.

Employees' RC was measured with three items of the scale reported by

Brown and Leigh (1996). A sample item of the measure was 'The amount of work responsibility and effort expected in my job is clearly defined'. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .72.

Employees' TP was operationalized with nine items of the employee performance inventory reported by Lynch et al. (1999). An example item of this inventory was 'Employees in my organization adequately complete assigned duties'. One of the nine items, that is, 'Employees in my organization spend time in idle conversation' was reverse scored. Its Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .79.

WT. The seven-item scale developed by Cook et al. (1981) was utilized to measure employees' WT. A sample item was 'I work under a great deal of tension'. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .83

Control variables. In all analyses that follow, respondents' age, work experience, sex, managerial position, and the sector to which their organization belonged were treated as control variables. While the respondents' sex (1 = male, 2 = female) and sector to which their organization belonged (1 = manufacturing, 2 = services) were categorized as dichotomous variables, their managerial position had three categories (1 = senior, 2 = middle, and 3 = junior). The age and work experience of the respondents were treated as ratio variables and were calculated by rounding them off to the nearest year (Kim et al., 2020).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A single-latent factor approach was also considered to inspect the presence of latent variable common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For this study, a common latent measurement model (CLMM) associated with the manifest variables of the four study constructs namely, PSS, RC, TP, and WT was tested against the measurement model of the conceptual LVM proposed earlier (Fig. 1) to check for differences in model fit. The comparative-fit-index (CFI) and the incremental-fit-index (IFI) of the proposed model were .93 and .93, respectively whereas, the same indices were .78 and .78, respectively for the CLMM. As such, the CLMM could not be accepted, eliminating the CMB risk in the proposed LVM.

Evaluation of the Measurement Model

The measurement model was tested by scrutinizing its reliability and validity as the main assessment criterion (Ramayah et al., 2011). As per Table I, the composite reliability values ranged from .72 to .83 thus establishing construct reliability while the AVE values varied between .53 and .69 demonstrating convergent validity. As per the results denoted in Table I, the squares of the intercorrelations between the study variables were less than the AVE values providing evidence of discriminant validity (Koufteros, 1999). Additionally, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method (Henseler et al., 2016) was applied and as shown in Table I, these values were

Table I Evaluation of the Measurement Model

Variables	CR	1	2	3	4
1. PSS	0.83	.69			
2. RC	0.74	0.40 (.77)	.53		
3. TP	0.77	0.14 (.52)	0.26 (.42)	.60	
4. WT	0.72	0.08 (.45)	0.20 (.51)	0.14 (.69)	.63

Note. $n = 828$; CR is 'Composite reliability'; The diagonal values of the matrix represent the average variance extracted while the off-diagonal values are the squares of the inter-correlations between the study variables; Off-diagonal values in parentheses are results of the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) analysis; 'PSS' is 'Perceived supervisory support', 'RC' is 'Role Clarity', 'TP' is 'Task Performance', and 'WT' is 'Work Tension'.

spread from .42 to .77, thus providing further substantiation of discriminant validity.

Configural Invariance Tests

Before carrying out further analyses, the proposed model was tested for configural invariance using the grouping variables namely, sector, gender, and LoM. Configural invariance examines the equivalence concerning the indicator variables and validity of the study constructs across groups. As per the results, the measures used were found to be invariant between sectors ($\Delta\chi^2=512$, $\Delta df=496$, $p=.30$), gender ($\Delta\chi^2=385$, $\Delta df=369$, $p=.27$), and LoM ($\Delta\chi^2=739$, $\Delta df=722$, $p=.32$), and therefore, the results obtained are equally applicable to all groups considered in the present study.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the mean, standard deviations, inter-correlations, and internal reliability indices of the key study variables. As per analyses, PSS and RC correlated positively and significantly ($r = .63$, $p \leq .01$). Also, RC correlated sig-

nificantly and positively with TP ($r = .51$, $p \leq .01$) and negatively with WT ($r = -.45$, $p \leq .05$). Further, the internal reliability indices for the measures of all the study variables as expressed by Cronbach's alpha estimates were between .72 and .83.

Mediation by RC

Three competing LVMs namely, LVM1, LVM2, and LVM3 represent path models in the absence of mediation, with *quasi* mediation, and with full mediation respectively by RC between PSS as the primary exogenous and TP and WT as the final endogenous latent variables. The three competing LVMs were subjected to structural equation modeling (SEM) procedures with maximum likelihood estimates using AMOS 24.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999). To meet the objectives of this study, three absolute fit indices and four comparative fit indices were investigated. The absolute fit indices comprised the normed χ^2 , the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and the root-mean-square-error-of-approximation (RMSEA). The comparative fit consisted of the comparative-fit-index (CFI), the incremental-fit-index (IFI), the normed-fit-

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics, Inter-correlations & Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Indices

Values (→) Variables (↓)	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	36.90	8.71	1.00								
2. Work experience	10.46	8.15	.82*	1.00							
3. Sector	1.73	.45	-.05**	.08	1.00						
4. Sex	1.48	.50	-.02*	.05*	.06	1.00					
5. LoM	2.47	.63	-.16	.06*	-.06	-.08	1.00				
6. PSS	3.38	.81	-.05**	-.09*	-.12	-.12	-.03	(.81)			
7. RC	3.57	.74	.08	.04*	-.03	-.07*	.06**	.63**	(.72)		
8. TP	3.65	.50	.04	.03	-.03*	-.05	.02	.37*	.51**	(.79)	
9. WT	3.47	.60	.01	-.03*	.08	.33	.15*	-.29*	-.45*	-.38**	(.83)

Note. n = 828; * p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01; SD, Standard Deviation. Cronbach's Alpha reliability indices are reported in parentheses on the diagonal; short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and the text.

index (NFI), and the relative-fit-index (RFI). As per the literature, the suggested cutoffs are: for RMSEA ≤.06, 1.00 ≤ normed χ^2 ≤ 3.00, and for all the fit indices that is, GFI, CFI, IFI, NFI, and RFI ≥ .90 (Byrne, 2001). Following these suggested cutoff points a model could be accepted for further analyses only when it met these minimum acceptable threshold values.

For the two LVMs namely, LVM2 and LVM3, which incorporated RC as a mediator, RC regressed significantly and positively on PSS (standardized $\beta = .56, p \leq .01$; standardized $\beta = .28, p \leq .01$). As a result, the H1 of the present study was accepted. Furthermore, for LVM1, TP regressed significantly and positively on PSS (standardized $\beta = .59, p \leq .01$) but WT did not regress significantly on PSS (standardized $\beta = -.33, p = NS$). For LVM2, TP regressed significantly and positively on PSS (standardized $\beta = .30, p \leq .01$) as did WT which regressed significantly negatively on PSS (standardized $\beta = -.32, p \leq .01$). Finally, for LVM2 and LVM3, TP regressed significantly and positively on RC (standardized $\beta = .48, p \leq .01$; standardized $\beta = .37, p \leq .01$, LVM3), but WT regressed significantly and negatively on RC for LVM2 only (standardized $\beta = -.38, p \leq .01$; standardized $\beta = -.35, p = NS$). As such, H2 and H3 of this study were accepted.

While checking the absolute and comparative fit indices of the three LVMs, those related to LVM2 were found to not only be above the recommended threshold levels but also had the best fit. For LVM2, the absolute fit indices specifically, the normed χ^2 was 2.61, GFI was .96, RMSEA was .05, and the comparative fit

indices namely, CFI and IFI were both .94, NFI was .92, and RFI was .90.

The standardized regression estimates of the accepted model that is,

LVM2 are presented in Table 3, and the fit measures comparing the three LVMs namely, LVM1, LVM2, and LVM3 are presented in Table 4.

Table 3 Regression Analyses Result for the Conceptual LVM[†]

Values (→)Paths(↓)	Unstandardized coefficients				
	b	Standard error	Standardized \hat{a} estimates	C.R. [†]	Remarks
PSS à RC	1.11	.07	.56	3.68	H1 accepted
RC à TP	1.37	.05	.48	6.79	H2 accepted
RC à WT	-1.04	.06	-.38	-2.71	H3 accepted

Note. $n = 828$; short-forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and the text; [†]LVM is 'Latent Variable Model'; [†]C.R. is 'Critical Ratios', a recommended basis for testing the statistical significance of SEM components. C.R. $\geq\pm 1.96$ indicates significance at the 95% level and C.R. $\geq\pm 2.58$ indicates significance at the 99% level.

Table 4 Analysis of Competing LVMs

Values (→)Models(↓)	Fit Indices						
	Absolute Fit Indices			Comparative Fit Indices			
	Normed χ^2	GFI	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI	RFI
LVM1 (<i>no</i> mediation)	5.29	.81	.11	.77	.77	.75	.73
LVM2 (<i>quasi</i> -mediation model)	2.61	.96	.05	.94	.94	.92	.90
LVM3 (<i>full</i> -mediation model)	2.95	.94	.06	.93	.93	.91	.87

Note. $n = 828$; short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and the text; Minimum acceptable values of the fit indices are as mentioned in the text.

Additional Mediation Analysis

Additional mediation analyses as per the procedures suggested by MacKinnon et al. (1995) were also carried out. With RC as a mediator, two conditions were checked which were (i) whether the direct path from the primary antecedents to the final consequent variables was greater than the indirect path through the designated mediator variable and (ii) whether the direct path remained significant under conditions of mediation. Since both conditions were

fulfilled for LVM2 and as such, RC was considered a *quasi*-mediator in the proposed LVM.

Finally, although the application of SEM procedures established RC as a full-mediator and precluded problems of correlated measurement errors, it was decided to conduct the Sobel's (1982), the Aorian's (1944), and the Goodman's (1960) tests as per the z-prime method (MacKinnon et al., 2002) to discount the possibilities of Type-I error while exploring the strength of

mediation. Additionally, the ratios of the indirect effects on the total effects of all the mediated paths were computed and expressed as percentages and labeled as ‘percentage of mediation’. These results are presented in Table 5.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study indicate that supervisors’ supportive behaviors in terms of information and knowledge-sharing provide RC to subordinates. Not only does this exemplify a reciprocity norm between these two entities manifesting the social exchange theory, but it also substantiates the leader-member exchange theory (Liden et al., 1997) which propounds that the quality of exchange between a leader and his/her followers, represented in this instance by the supervisor and his/her subordinates create positive influences as far as the latter’s workplace and work-related outcomes are concerned.

In so far as the relationship between employees’ RC and their TP and WT are concerned, it is implied that subordinates’ RC reduces their work uncertainties. This, in turn, and as per the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), motivates employees to display higher levels of TP and suppresses their WT.

Practical Implications

First, supervisors who are supportive towards their subordinates may os-

Table 5 Additional Analysis of Mediation

Values (→) Paths (↓)	Additional Mediation Tests			Percentage of mediation	Path Analyses		Results of the additional mediation analyses
	Sobel’s test	Aorian’s test	Goodman’s test		Whether regression estimate of (direct paths) >(paths under mediated condition) is significant	Whether regression estimate of (paths under mediated condition) is significant	
PSS à RC à TP	13.72**	13.71**	13.73**	31.40	Yes	Yes	Role Clarity, designated as a mediator fulfills the quasi-mediator role
PSS à RCàWT	-11.69**	-11.68**	-11.71**	28.00			

Note. n = 828; * p d” .05, **p d” .01; short forms are as mentioned in the previous table(s) and the text.

tensibly do so by supporting the latter's job-related developmental needs such as approval for required training, regular performance feedback, and specific assignments that further hone the latter's skills and abilities. Such elements of the supervisor's behavior shall increase his/her subordinates' PSS and also lead to their RC as posited by the H1 of this study. Furthermore, employees who are clear about their role expectations may feel empowered and inclined to show greater enthusiasm towards not only the completion of delegated tasks but also taking upon additional responsibilities. This shall result in a marked improvement in their TP and lower levels of WT.

Limitations & Research Scope

The results and findings of this study are constrained by certain limitations. These also give rise to opportunities for future research. First, this study was conducted on managerial staff in Indian organizations. As a result, it could not consider cross-national comparisons of the paths as depicted in the accepted LVM2. Additionally, since data was collected cross-sectionally, causal inferences had to be precluded. However, these study limitations give rise to scope for future research. The accepted LVM2 may be checked for cross-national and/or cross-temporal validity. The model may further be contextualized based on business sectors and/or socio-economic demographics.

Conclusion

The findings suggested that a particular LVM namely, LVM2 could be ac-

cepted as the most empirically valid model which satisfied the study objectives.

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