Help me if you can: Psychological distance and help-seeking intentions in employee-supervisor relations

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Abstract

Social support at work is considered useful in treating job-related stress, and supervisors' emotional support has been found to be the most effective source of support at work. But an understanding of what elements make employees use supervisors as a source of emotional support is lacking. The present qualitative study included in-depth interviews with 24 teachers and 12 principals, and a focus group with 12 school counselors. The findings pointed at two groups of determinants of subordinates' intentions of asking socio-emotional help from supervisors. The structural-organizational factors included low formalization structure, supportive and open work climate, shared goals, and manager's professional expertise; the dyadic factors included quality of relationship and demographic similarity. The determinants reflected different dimensions of psychological distance forming a close construal level that played a central part in employees' viewing the supervisor as an accessible socio-emotional resource. The role of construal fit is discussed.

Keywords: help seeking, psychological distance, social support, work

1. Introduction

Help-seeking is considered to be an adaptive tactic for coping with difficulty (Tatar, 2009). The paradox is that helping is seldom a spontaneous behavior, and it rather frequently follows the help seeker's solicitation of help (Flynn, 2005; Grodal, Nelson, & Siino, 2015). Nir (2009) expanded on this point as follows: "Help-seeking behaviors are fundamentally interpersonal and their occurrence is contingent on the willingness of the help seeker to actively ask for help. Therefore, help seekers play an active role in determining whether or not they get the help they need" (p. 177). The topic of help seeking is underexplored in the occupational literature (Bamberger, 2009; Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015).

In the present study, we want to determine which elements are associated with employees' intentions to seek emotional help from supervisors who have high socio-emotional abilities. To this end, we selected a qualitative design that included interviews with participants in a setting characterized by supervisors' high socio-emotional abilities (based on a prior quantitative study). We also conducted a focus group session with counselors who have acquired a rich experience with various organizational cultures and supervisors, having worked in multiple organizations, and who were able to identify elements relevant to help-seeking behavior.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1 Overview of organizational theories on social support

First, we wish to communicate our theoretical orientation by providing a brief overview of organizational theories on socio-emotional support in the workplace. For the purpose of generating a conceptual organizational framework of theories on social support at work, we turn to the larger discourse on social influence at the workplace.

This enables us to derive theoretical distinctions from a parallel domain, with the aim of mapping the theoretical landscape on social support at the workplace and position our study in it. One useful theoretical distinction can be found in Day and Miscenko's (2016) work about positive leadership theory, as support of others is often explicitly or implicitly part of it. The researchers identified four main theoretical approaches to positive leadership: (a) traits/characteristics theories, focusing on identifying stable core features involved in the phenomenon; (b) situational theories, focusing on identifying moderating factors that enhance or inhibit the effect associated with the phenomenon; (c) motivational theories, focusing on identifying symbolic, emotional, and self-concept elements associated with the phenomenon; and (d) information processing theories, aspiring to understand the enactment and interpretation of the phenomenon (with specific emphasis on categorization and prototype matching processes).

Using these theoretical distinctions, we conclude that many of the influential theoretical models addressing social support in the workplace are based mainly on motivational and situational perspectives. For example, Social Support Resource Theory, also known as Conservation of Resource (COR) Theory, is a "motivational model" (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990, p. 465) according to which employees are driven to protect their personal resources (i.e., self-esteem, and efficacy) and gain social resources (i.e., social recognition) with the aim of maintaining the individual's identity. "When circumstances threaten or result in loss" (Hobfoll et al., p. 466), social support is viewed as a mechanism used to counter negative effects on the individual's resources. Another influential theory, perceived organizational (and supervisor) support (POS) theory, reasons that employees' obligation to their organization is an outcome of reciprocal norms between workers

and their employers (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, "workers are motivated to compensate beneficial treatment by acting in ways valued by the organization" (Eisenberger et al., p. 42). Lastly, social exchange theory (SET) contends that social transactions stem from expectation of social or economic value (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET also suggests "separating the exchange relationship from the form of exchange," and refers to two dimensions: the type of relationship (i.e., social or economic), and the type of transaction (i.e., social or economic) (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 887). We contend that the current theoretical understanding of social support at work and its focus on motivational and situational perspectives falls short of explaining help-seeking intentions in hierarchical work relations. This is because information processing related to such intentions is unaccounted for. Therefore, additional research is needed to formulate a theory.

2.2 Employees' help seeking

Help seeking involves proactive steps, asking for help, which could assist the person in need to better cope with difficulties (Brooks et al., 2015). Although the concept of help seeking has been widely researched in relation to learning difficulties in adolescence, marginalized group members, and various emotional disorders (Nir, 2009), it has been less explored in relation to occupational matters. Only in recent years, research attention has been devoted to exploring help seeking as a key topic in work settings (Geller & Bamberger, 2012).

Employees can use different coping strategies to handle work-related difficulties and the stress they generate. Employees' coping strategies can take one of two forms (Howard & Johnson, 2004): disengagement strategies aimed to relax and

direct engagement strategies. According to Tatar (2009), disengagement strategies may assist in some cases, but at times they include recreational methods, such as drinking and smoking, which in prolonged periods of stress might become dysfunctional addictions. By contrast, direct engagement strategies are considered safer and more effective because they target the affect or the stimulators, for example, by increasing one's self-regulation of emotions, seeking help from family, friends, or colleagues, restructuring work priorities, maximizing work time utilization, and so on. Of the direct engagement techniques, help seeking is considered a highly desirable coping strategy because it is regarded as adaptive and effective (Geller & Bamberger, 2012). The reason for this perception may be that help-seeking behavior represents one's attempt to tap into social sources of support, with the aim of expanding one's repertoire of social, material, intellectual, and psychological resources in a manner that may enhance one's success in resolving the problem at hand (Brooks et al., 2015; Nir, 2009).

The literature on help seeking assumes that individuals preform utilitarian analysis, which is reflected in the classic "help seeker's dilemma," as they weigh the perceived benefits and costs of asking for help (Bamberger, 2009). Help seeking as a coping strategy is not without disadvantages. The dilemma of approaching others for help often requires weighing two undesirable alternatives: ask for help at the cost of a certain personal (self-image) and societal (associated stigma) price, or continue suffering and coping alone (Erdogan, Bauer, & Walter, 2015; Nir, 2009). The psychological costs are said to involve mostly the negative emotional and social outcomes that might result from one's sense of threat to one's sense of self-efficacy and mastery, because asking for help includes acknowledging inferiority, admitting incompetence, and accepting dependence on others (Sandoval & Lee, 2013).

Help-seeking interaction is theorized to involve three elements (Bamberger, 2009): (a) perception of a problem or a distress in a manner that requires some solution or relief; (b) interaction between social actors as a result of one side soliciting help; and (c) proactiveness of the help seeker in achieving the desired solution or relief. Research on the initiation of helping encounters at work is limited (Grodal et al., 2015). Prior findings indicate several factors that employees perceive as enabling them to seek help at work. For example, organizational norms have been found to increase the general likelihood of seeking help (Sandoval & Lee, 2013), as have the quality of the existing relationship in a given relational situation, and perceptions that the potential help provider is an expert, knowledgeable, accessible, empathic, and trustworthy (Tatar, 2009). The limited knowledge becomes even more scarce when it comes to employees' intentions to turn to supervisors for help. The lacuna becomes apparent when investigating the significance of supervisors extending socio-emotional support at work.

2.3 Supervisors as a source of socio-emotional support at work

Social support is commonly defined as social resources that individuals view as available or that are provided to them in practice by nonprofessionals, in the setting of both formal and informal relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). Social support at work has been considered a valuable element in protecting employees against the negative mental and physical health implications of work-related stressors (Almeida et al., 2016; Halbesleben, 2006). For example, teachers with high levels of social support were found to enjoy better physical and mental health (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996). Individuals working in organizations can receive support from various social actors, including work support sources, such as supervisors and

coworkers, and non-work support sources, such as family and friends (Halbesleben, 2006; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Van Daalen, Willemsen, & Sanders, 2006). The occupational stress literature acknowledges that work support and non-work support can have different effects on reducing stress. In general, supervisors and coworkers have been found to be more effective in assisting employees in dealing with stressors at the workplace than are family and friends (Beehr, 1985; Halbesleben, 2006). Organizational research found that employees who received stronger emotional support from coworkers and supervisors experienced less stress than their peers, who received stronger support from non-work sources (El-Bassel, Guterman, Bargal, & Su, 1998). Work support is, therefore, particularly important for employees.

Social support is a complex construct to explore because it includes several functional aspects. Two functions or types of social support are frequently explored in the occupational stress literature: instrumental and emotional support (Abendroth & Den Dulk, 2011; Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Instrumental support refers to practical assistance with tasks and the provision of tangible resources (e.g., funding, infrastructure, or knowledge) to the individual in need. Emotional support refers to other actors listening sympathetically and providing indications of accepting the individuals in need and caring for them (Cohen et al., 2000; Scott, Zagenczyk, Schippers, Purvis, & Cruz, 2014).

Empirical studies indicate that supervisor support is the most effective means of reducing work stress (Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Woodhead, Northrop, & Edelstein, 2016), and it is said to reduce the negative emotions that employees have about themselves and their work, and to decrease their stress (Dworkin, 1987; Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). Employees who received support from supervisors

were less likely to be emotionally exhausted, and were less cynical (Hakanen, Bakker, Wilmar, & Schaufeli, 2006). Supervisors' socio-emotional support was found to be particularly effective because it helps reduce the stress experienced by employees more than other types of support do (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994). Supervisors' socio-emotional support was reported to assist employees in reducing the strain associated with ethical situations in their work (Hanhimaki & Tirri, 2009), and is said to help them cope successfully with organizational restructuring pressures (Lee & Yin, 2011). Burke, Weir, and Duncan (1976) found that about 90% of interactions in which managers extended support to employees were not initiated by the managers but by the employees. Yet, it has been shown that power distance in hierarchical relationships with supervisors inhibits employees at work from seeking their help (Ji, Zhou, Li, & Yan, 2015).

Because we were interested in better understanding the information processing related to help-seeking intentions in employee-supervisor relations, we began our study by asking the following research questions:

(1) What factors encourage subordinates to seek socio-emotional help from supervisors with high socio-emotional capabilities?

(2) What factors restrain subordinates from seeking socio-emotional help from supervisors with high socio-emotional capabilities?

(3) What tactics do supervisors with high socio-emotional capabilities use to increase their perceived accessibility?

Although our research did not originate in *a priori* theory about the role of psychological distance in help seeking in supervisor-subordinate relations, the notion of psychological distance as a key meta-theory of help-seeking intentions emerged from the thematic analyses of the qualitative data.

3. Method

To shed light on the factors that determine employees' help-seeking intentions in their relationships with supervisors, we adopted a qualitative research paradigm (see Patton, 2014). A qualitative design can help explain a phenomenon in a natural setting because it makes it possible to reveal the meaning given to it by the individuals involved in the experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Consistent with the qualitative tradition, we conducted a broad exploration to achieve a rich description of the many elements involved in the phenomenon (Patton, 2014). To this end, we used data from in-depth interviews and from a focus group.

3.1 Context

We explored help-seeking intentions in principal-teacher relations in schools. Teaching is considered a high-stress profession (Cherniss, 2016). Research shows that teachers who receive their principals' support appear to be less susceptible to burnout than are those who lack such support (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014), and that principals' emotional support is a more effective way of reducing teachers' stress than are other types of support at work (Littrell et al., 1994). We focused on primary schools, because with their flat hierarchical structure, they are ideal for examining interpersonal emotional processes in supervisory relations, and because principals have few formal means to motivate the teachers' engagement (Oplatka, 2007).

3.2 Participants

In-depth insights about a phenomenon are more likely to emerge when working with a group of comparable participants selected according to information relevant for the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To assist in the selection of principals for the in-depth interviews, we used data from prior quantitative research that investigated the extent to which public primary school principals contribute to teachers' emotional sensemaking and to positively transforming teachers' negative affect (see Authors, 2017). The data, which originated in a random national sample, were used to identify principals who were perceived by teachers as highly effective in providing emotional support (i.e., in the top third of 69 principals in the sample). Twenty four principals were identified as having high emotional support capabilities, of whom 12 participated in the study, representing a 50% response rate. We also interviewed two teachers working with each principal. Principals served as informants and recommended teachers with whom they have had an emotional exchange about work events in the recent months, and who had reflective and discursive inclinations. In total, 12 principals (10 women, 2 men) and 24 teachers (23 women, 1 man) working with the principals (two teachers per principal) participated in the in-depth interviews. The gender composition of the sample was similar to the gender composition of the public primary school system (90% female teachers, 67% female principals; Author, 2017). Principals' ages ranged from 44 to 64 years, and they had 3-33 years of seniority in the managerial position (M = 14.33 years, SD = 7.99). One principal had a PhD degree, three had a Bachelor's degree, and rest had a Master's degree. Teachers' ages ranged from 26 to 58 years, and they had Bachelor's or Master's degrees. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 35 years (M = 14.83 years, SD = 8.39). We also conducted a focus group session with 12 school counselors (9 women, 3 men) aged

35-52, with an average experience of 11.76 years ($SD = 7.28$), to gain their insights on the phenomenon explored. School counselors are considered to be in a unique position to feel the "pulse" of the school, because their role allows them to roam the hallways and interact with all school personnel throughout the work day (Ponec & Brock, 2000).

3.3 Data Collection

In-depth interviews. The interview questions were formulated based on prior reviews of emotions of educational personnel (Principals: Authors, 2015; Teachers: Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). The interview protocols contained questions exploring the participants' perceptions of their work settings, job-related emotion-eliciting situations and affective outcomes, factors facilitating teachers' asking for principals' help, and inhibitors in asking for the principals' help. The questions differed by role, but shared many topics as they explored similar issues. For example, the teachers' protocol included questions such as "What are the factors/circumstances that evoke negative emotions among teachers?" "How do you cope with such negative emotions?" "Does the principal help you cope with negative emotions at work? If so, do you turn to the principal or he/she to you?" "Can you recall and describe a specific event in the past in which you felt negative emotions toward a specific issue and conducted an exchange with the principal?" and "What factors encourage teachers to turn to principals for emotional support?" The principals' protocol included questions such as "What are the factors/circumstances that evoke negative emotions among teachers?" "How do teachers cope with such negative emotions?" "Do you help teachers cope with negative emotions at work? If so, do you turn to them or they to you?" "Can you recall and describe a recent exchange with a teacher in which a

teacher came with negative emotions and you assisted him/her?" and "What factors encourage teachers to turn to principals for emotional support?" The questions were developed by the first author and verified for face validity by the second author. Semi-structured interviews are suited for this goal because they allow researchers to determine the topic of the conversation, and at the same time give interviewees the freedom to respond and steer the conversation to other topics, at their discretion (Patton, 2014).

Focus group. We asked focus group participants to tell us from their experiences with principals who have high socio-emotional skills, what elements are associated with teachers' intentions to turn to those principals for emotional support. To prevent thought leaders from dominating the conversation, and less confident participants self-censoring themselves (Cowton & Downs, 2015), we first asked the participants to write out five factors they considered to be relevant. Next, we asked participants in turn to explain their thoughts, then opened the discussion to comments by group members.

3.4 Procedure

In-depth interview procedure. Before each interview, the participant received a personal agreement form and signed a consent form. We assured participants in writing and orally that their accounts will not be shared with school staff, that the anonymity of the individuals and the schools will be observed in the publication, and that the interview was voluntary and could be stopped at any time (no interview was stopped by participants). All interviews were performed during the school year, at the schools, in settings that ensured privacy, in a closed room or isolated location in the school yard. Saturation appeared after interviews with eight

principals and 16 teachers, and extending the number of interviews confirmed that

saturation was indeed reached. Interviews ranged from 50 to 80 minutes. They were

all audio-taped and transcribed by a professional service. All texts were anonymized,

and identifying information was replaced by anonymous codes.

      Focus group procedure. The focus group session took place during a

professional development program for school counselors at the university. The head

of the program agreed to hold the voluntary focus group session, and participants

were notified about it in advance. We presented the general topic to participants, and

obtained their consent. One counselor in the group left the activity. The focus group

session lasted 50 minutes, and the discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed by a

professional service. The first author served as the discussion facilitator, paying

careful attention not to control the discussion or inhibit it (Cowton & Downs, 2015).

3.5 Data analysis and authentication strategies

The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis (Silverman, 2016). Initially, we

identified the relevant data and segmented preliminary meaning units in a non-

uniform or interlinked manner, with the aim of understanding the meaning emerging

from the data. Next, we performed a preliminary mapping of the meaning units into

similar groups, and outlined the connections between the groups. Finally, we focused

the mapping analysis on defining and refining vertical associations between each

theme and its sub-themes, and on defining and refining horizontal associations of each

theme with others. At the end of the coding process, the two researchers discussed

how to refine the categories and their labeling.

      In coding the data, the authors made a conscious attempt to avoid forcing *a*

priori conceptions onto the data (Patton, 2014). It took two months to create the

categories and themes. The analysis was preformed separately, face-to-face, and over the phone, reflecting jointly on labeling and grouping the data. We discussed differences in coding until we reached agreement. Next, we returned to the data with an open mind, and finished the categorization with a strong sense of agreement between us.

4. Results

We learned about the perceived accessibility of supervisors, from supervisors, their subordinates, and from the counselors. Therefore, we obtained data from both the actors involved in the process and from observers (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies of themes and sub-themes that emerged in the analysis

Theme	Interview data (principals and teachers, N=36)	Focus group data (school counselors, N=12)
Theme one: Structural and climate determinants of employees' help-seeking intentions		
• Low formalization	20	10
• Open and supportive climate	24	9
• Shared goals	10	-
• Professional expertise	4	5
Theme two: Dyadic determinants of employees' help-seeking intentions		
• Quality of relationship	18	4
• Demographic similarity	4	-

The data indicate that principals' perceived emotional support and accessibility to teachers is associated with structural and climate elements in the school on one

hand, and with the relational elements of the principal-teacher dyad on the other. First, we present the range of factors that emerged in the analyses, then we outline a model developed from these findings, which integrates and interprets them in light of current research on psychological distance. In this way, we produce a meta-explanation of employees' help-seeking intentions in supervisory relations.

4.1 Structural and climate determinants of employees' help-seeking intentions

Four school structural and climate elements associated with principals' perceived accessibility to teachers emerged in the analysis: low formalization structure, supportive and open work climate, shared goals, and professional expertise.

Low formalization. Low formalization of the organizational structure in school emerged as a key factor in explaining the teachers' help-seeking intentions, and it appeared to be associated with a perception of low hierarchical emphasis. Participants related that the principals' approach makes a key contribution to this "informal" structure, and used anti-hierarchical language to stress this point. For example, teachers said that accessible principals are "not strolling about wearing their ranks on [their] shoulders" (S#1-T1), and "do not flaunt [their] authority" (S#3-T1). Several teachers compared the principal in the previous school where they had worked with the current one. One teacher considered a highly formal approach on the part of principals to inhibit help-seeking greatly (S#10-T2): "Other principals I worked with emphasized their position as principals, which is why I never shared or discussed my emotions with them." In the words of one focus group participant (FG-2), teachers approach principals and seek help when they sense that "the [hierarchal] pyramid is not too tall."

Low formalization emerged in the interviews as associated also with the physical distance between the principal and the teachers. One principal commented (S#9-P): "People are also trying to [seek help], but if I'm not there to help them when they're looking for it, they won't seek it again." Thus, help-seeking intentions take place at a psychological-functional intersection. Principals have two key strategies to be more spatially accessible to teachers, which can encourage the likelihood of teachers' help-seeking intentions. First, principals noted that they make routine appearances in the teachers' lounge. For example, in one interview the principal (S#2-P) went to eat her sandwich in the teachers' lounge, and teachers came and conversed with her. Later she explained that in her opinion, spatial accessibility is vital for stimulating help-seeking by teachers, and therefore she considered spatial closeness to subordinates to be mandatory:

> I'm not abandoning the staff room. There's not a day or a break that I don't go by there or sit down. It's always with someone different, and you see things... I can come in the morning and take a look around, and see a teacher with a long face.

This strategy was also pointed out in the focus group. One counselor (FG-10) described it as follows: "A principal who found the time to be regularly accessible to teachers."

The second low formalization strategy repeatedly noted by principals and teachers alike involved an "open door" policy, indicating the principals' accessibility to teachers in help-seeking situations. One teacher noted (S#12-T2): "Her door is always open, there is no situation that someone cannot get to her office, there is no situation that someone cannot talk to her." Similar comments were made in the

counselors' focus group, where two counselors (FG-7, FG-11) referred to it as "the open door policy." The private delimitation of a public physical space at work is associated with higher status and a hierarchical position. The principal's office was portrayed as being much more than a mere physical space, rather as the symbolic representation of the principal's hierarchical superiority to the teachers. Whereas the principal had a private workspace, teachers in the public schools we investigated had no equivalent space on the school grounds.

Supportive and open climate. The second element linked with the principals' perceived accessibility to teachers who intended to seek help with emotional issues at work was related to a supportive and open climate. Principals promoted this type of climate by means of a "personal regard," "consideration," and "support" behaviors toward to the team. One teacher noted that (S#6-T1):

> Personally, I feel that she [the principal] is very human, it really helps me, she is very supportive. For example, if my child doesn't feel well, and I call and I tell her I cannot come in today... there is no such thing as "find someone to watch him, and come to school." She understands and says "You should be at home, the child needs you."

Support takes not only reactive forms but can also be proactive. For example, one principal said (S#9-P):

> I really feel that my work is done mainly by empowering the teachers... I cannot go to the teacher and demand that she take into account all the students'

needs and attend to them individually, while I'm a rigid manager, treating all

the teachers the same way.

Principals also indicated acceptance of teachers' flaws as an important element

in fostering a supportive climate (S#12-P): "Each person has his or her so-called

defects or weaknesses... [so it is important] to see the best in people, accept them as

they are, and find a way to work with their strengths."

An open communication style also emerged as vital. Principals can accomplish

this by serving as role models. One of the male principals spoke about the importance

of the principal expressing his feelings of weakness in front of the team to encourage

teachers to also express their emotions (S#11-P):

If I say things that transmit emotional vulnerability it makes people feel

good... I could very well be sad and tell them that I'm sad right now or

frustrated... It [doesn't conflict with] leadership... On the contrary, it makes me

more human... it makes me more human [in the teachers' eyes].

By expressing feelings of weaknesses, principals legitimize others doing the

same. Another principal noted the importance of authentic communication to

encourage seeking help (S#8-P): "I say things from the heart to the heart, the words

are truthful. I always say it like it is, not using slogans." On the issue of an open

communication style, one teacher commented that (S#7-T1): "The fact that she [the

principal] is always accepting, always listening… makes you feel like you're sitting in

front of a person who has feelings, not only someone sitting there filling a position."

Similar ideas were expressed in the focus group, suggesting that "principals who invite conversation and do it with an open interaction" (FG-3) are likely to encourage teachers to seek help.

Shared goals. The third element related to the principals' perceived accessibility to teachers had to do with a perception of shared goals, but only the principals identified this factor. Principals indicated that shared goals foster a sense of togetherness around mutual objectives and organizational values, which makes principals more accessible to teachers. Participants used terms such as "partnership," "together," "our goal," and "our mission" to describe this element. One principal (S#10-P) specified how she made sure to communicate messages about their common mission to her teachers to increase the likelihood that they would turn to her for help: "In the staff room, I hear teachers' conversations... and I tell them: 'I am part of you and we together manage this school to achieve maximum success.'" Another principal mentioned this issue (S#11-P): "I think it is very, very significant to give a sense of partnership at work. [I tell them] 'we're all together, we want to get somewhere so let's do this together.'" Pragmatically shared goals appear to be more relevant than abstract ones. A principal from a religious school in a small community stressed this point, emphasizing that for shared faith and values to encourage help-seeking intentions, they must be broken down into applicative goals (S#9-P): "We are here... on behalf of the holy mission to educate these students. Just like that. And not as a slogan or a larger-than-life enterprise, but quite the opposite, we focus on the smallest detail and the simplest of actions." Although a vision may be motivating, it is the concrete goals that one can relate to that cause principals to be perceived as accessible to teachers seeking help.

Professional expertise. The fourth factor associated with teachers' intentions to seek emotional help from principals was the perception of professionalism. Although this aspect seemed to be almost completely absent in the principals' and teachers' accounts, it has emerged clearly in the focus group. Several school counselors in the focus group emphasized the principals' expertise as serving to promote teachers' help seeking. One focus group participant (FG-12) described it as "the principal's professional background and mentoring experience," another participant (FG-11) described it as the principals' perceived problem-solving ability, and yet another participant (FG-1) described it as "respect for the principals' abilities." Accessibility of the supervisors' socio-emotional help in the workplace also appears to be related to the perception of the supervisor as competent. In a sense, the expertise of the help provider legitimizes seeking his or her advice.

4.2 Dyadic determinants of employees' help-seeking intentions

The analysis revealed that principals' perceived accessibility to teachers depends not only on structural and climate elements of the school, concerning the group as whole, but also on elements linked specifically with characteristics of the principal-teacher dyad.

Quality of relationships. The quality of principal-teacher relationships is perceived as being related to the likelihood that teachers will approach the principal for emotional help. Teachers in particular mentioned how the quality of their relationship with the principal is associated with their perception of the principal as a source for emotional help in case of need. Teachers used terms such as "close," "attached," and "good relationship," and described their inclination to be "honest," "tell everything," and "pour my heart out." One teacher noted that her personal

relationship with the principal affected her intention to seek the principal's emotional

help (S#6-T2): "The truth is that I'm very open with the principal. I tell her

everything. I tell her all my frustrations on one hand, and on the other, all my

successes... I have a very strong emotional relation with the principal. She's very

attached to me, and I'm very close to her; and I run everything by her and with her."

Therefore, the emotional bond increases the likelihood of seeking the principal's help.

One of the principals emphasized that her interpersonal relationships with some of

teachers are a key element in increasing the probability that these teachers will seek

help (S#2-P):

> Principal: "From my perspective, most of it depends on the personal
>
> relationship between [principal and teacher], on the quality of the interpersonal
>
> relationships [between them]."
>
> Interviewer: "Before the actual conversation?"
>
> Principal: "Yes... and I think that's what principals should do. Strengthen the
>
> interpersonal relationship with the staff."

A similar idea emerged in the focus group, where participants also

acknowledged the importance of quality relationships in motivating help-seeking

behaviors. One counselor commented (FG-5): "A sense of personal closeness between

teacher and principal can go a long way and assist [in seeking help]."

Demographic similarity. A second relational element viewed as associated

with principals' perceived accessibility to teachers is demographic similarity between

the principal and the teacher. In general, these superficial characteristics emerged only

marginally, both in the interviews and the focus group. Two components of

demographic similarity appeared to play a key role: gender and age. The pool of primary schools teachers consists overwhelmingly of women, therefore the issue of gender similarity arose primary with regard to male principals. One female teacher noted (S#3-T2): "I worked with a male principal. He was also very supportive, but it was harder to open up and talk to him. Our discussions were technical and professional: 'what do I do, what do I need.' We never discussed anything more."

A male principal (S#5-P) also acknowledged that gender differences were associated with teachers' willingness to seek emotional help: "It is a matter of gender, because I'm a man, so teachers told me 'we cannot go into your office and just talk about such stuff.'" Participants also identified age difference between teacher and principal as related to the teachers' view of principals as a source of emotional support. When the teacher is older than the principal, it appears to be less likely that the teacher will seek the principal's emotional help. One of the principals (S#10-P), an outsider who was brought in to turn around a failing school, noted that age difference, particularly when the principal is younger, makes it difficult for the principal to be perceived a source of emotional help: "It's a little hard to get a person sometimes more mature than you to make the switch after all these years." It may be that age and experience reinforce a socio-cultural hierarchy that reduces the likelihood of emotional help seeking.

5. Discussion

Bamberger (2009) argued that "the fact that unit members may often make their advice-sourcing decisions on the basis of factors other than the quality of the advice likely to be received reflects a basic dilemma in seeking help" (p. 86). The present work sheds light on this dilemma, revealing the determinants that encourage

employees' intentions to seek help from supervisors who are possible socio-emotional resources of support.

5.1 Employees' help-seeking intentions: An emergent model focusing on the psychological distance from supervisor

The findings described above can help develop new ways of thinking about help-seeking intentions, taking into account the various determinants related to psychological distance. Psychological distance is an "egocentric" perception of "the different ways in which an object might be removed" from one's reference point, which is self-located in the here and now (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). It has been suggested that psychological distance was related to preferences and intentions to act (Fiedler, 2007), and was therefore likely to play a key role in subordinates' help-seeking intentions. We used Trope and Liberman's (2003) construal level theory (CLT) as the organizing framework of our model, because it groups together various dimensions under the "umbrella of psychological distance" (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007, p. 94). We argue that the different psychological distance dimensions influence the representation of the construal level of a potential help provider in a manner that influences subordinates' help-seeking intentions. Figure 1 provides an overview of the model of psychological distance dimensions that emerged in the determinants revealed by our data analysis.

We draw on the psychological and consumer literatures to interpret the types of psychological distance at the root of the determinants found in our analysis. Our findings point to several organizational, structural, and dyadic factors that subordinates take into account in help-seeking situations, which are associated with their intentions to ask for help when supervisors are a possible source of socio-

emotional support. We begin by introducing the various types of psychological distance. Traditional CLT focuses on four main dimensions (Trope & Liberman, 2010): (a) temporal distance, shaped by the extent to which an event is perceived to take place in immediate time, as opposed to the future (near future vs. distant future); (b) spatial distance, shaped by the perception that an object takes place in a near as opposed to a remote physical location (here vs. there); (c) social distance, shaped by the extent to which a social object is viewed as removed from oneself (us vs. them); and (d) hypothetical distance, shaped by the perceived likelihood that an event will occur, or by its perceived correspondence with the perceiver's reality (certain vs. uncertain). Fiedler (2007) extended CLT by suggesting that "distance effects may not be totally automatic, overlearned, and detached from informational differences between near and distant objects" (p. 105), and proposing three more distance dimensions, two of which are highly relevant to the interpretation of our results: (e) informational distance, shaped by the amount of data (number of facts, experiences, and details) that is available to the individual (dense vs. thin); and (f) affective distance, shaped by the level of emotional charge, expressed in the language of sensory stimulation: vivid, colorful, etc. (warm vs. cold).

The low formalization determinant, which refers to the principals' informal and non-hierarchal attitude and psychical accessibility in school, seems to be a multidimensional factor that integrates both social and spatial distance dimensions. These two dimensions emerged in our findings as somewhat related to organizational settings, and they are consistent with the growing acknowledgment in organizational research that the social and material elements in organizational life are inherently entangled (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2013). A supportive and open climate, which includes a caring approach by principals and support for two-way

communication, appears to be a multifaceted element that incorporates dimensions of social and affective distance. Managerial openness was found to be a key element associated with employees' sense of psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007); the belief that they will not be harmed is a vital consideration by employees when they think about voicing criticism (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). The shared goals determinant, which includes shared objectives, seems to be related to three distance dimensions: social, temporal, and hypothetical. Berson, Halevy, Shamir, and Erez (2015) argued that setting concrete goals and addressing the *how* aspect (viewed as linked with close temporal and hypothetical distances), produce a shared understanding of the present situation that decreases psychological distance. Professional expertise may be linked with an informational dimension, with experts providing denser information (Fiedler, 2007). The demographic similarity determinant, which involves the mismatch between principal and teacher in the areas of gender and age, seems to reflect the social distance dimension. The literature on social identification and categorization suggests that demographic resemblance motivates individuals to work together (Hogg & Terry, 2000) because it amplifies perceptions of connection and desirability (Byrne, 1971). The quality of relationships appears to incorporate the social and affective distance dimensions. High-quality relationship at work was found to be associated with employees' sense of psychological safety (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009).

CLT further suggests that psychological distances are interrelated (Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to our findings, the different dimensions converge to shape the construal level of the supervisor. Psychological distance from the object shapes the manner in which individuals think about it (i.e., construal level), either as an abstract one (high-level or the *why*) or as a concrete one (low-level or the *how*)

(Trope, 2012). Popper (2013) suggested that leaders who are perceived by followers as being distant are represented mentally in an abstract manner, because they are perceived as having stable traits. Thus, supervisors viewed as distant are perceived as unchangeable and unapproachable, by comparison with supervisors who are viewed as close. A somewhat similar interrelation between psychological distance dimensions is described by Kroth and Keeler (2009), in their work about caring managers who manifest a range of behaviors, such as being available to employees, helping employees to succeed, assisting in their growth, sharing emotions, and developing relationships with them.

Our psychological distance model, outlined above, makes a significant contribution to the underused information processing perspective in the exploration of social support and socio-emotional support in the workplace. Although the development of this theoretical focus has long been encouraged in the general social support research (Lakey & Drew, 1997), it remains under-developed in the research domain of social support at the workplace, which is dominated by motivational and situational perspectives. Our new theoretical focusing on psychological distance can also shed light on these influential motivational and situational models by offering possible theoretical extensions to them. For example, if integrated with POS theory (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), our psychological distance model can show that part of creating a sense of obligation and reciprocal relations has to do with information processing of distance from supervisor. Therefore, we expect our psychological distance model to contribute to the corpus of social support scholarship in organizations by diversifying and extending it.

5.2 Practical implications

The model that outlines employees' help seeking from supervisors has several

practical implications for counselors. First, it provides counselors with a diagnostic

tool to assess the likelihood of emotional support from supervisor being accessible to

employees. An organizational environment in which the determinants are found to be

low, probably discourages employees from approaching supervisors for emotional

help, and employees are expected to experience greater burnout and lower wellbeing.

Managers can use the model to assist organizations in forming supporting structures

that increase emotional exchanges between employees and supervisors, including

such initiatives as scheduled one-on-one conversions with superiors, shared practices

that foster a caring organizational climate (Houghton, Pearce, Manz, Courtright, &

Stewart, 2014), and others. Second, the model creates a range of opportunities for

coaching and group interventions that target supervisors. Shamir (2012) suggested

that distance is partly the result of leaders' actions, and our findings strongly support

this claim. This view provides a less deterministic perspective on psychological

distance. Thus, one effective intervention could focus on encouraging supervisors to

adopt behavioral patterns that make them more spatially accessible, opening their

work space and being present in areas where employees socialize. Another

intervention could focus on rhetorical training to assist managers in communicating

visions in a more appealing manner (Frese, Beimel, & Schoenborn, 2003).

5.3 Limitations and future research

The present study has several limitations. The literature suggests that aspects of the

help-seeking process are related to individual differences (Bamberger, 2009). For

example, extroverted individuals are expected to reach out more to higher status

others despite low structural and dyadic determinants of help seeking (Bidjerano &

Dai, 2007). Therefore, additional examination of individual differences is

recommended. Moreover, in different cultures power distance is known to have

different cultural value. For example, research shows that in Anglo-Saxon societies,

power distance has had a great influence on employees' voice when the quality of

their relations with the leader was good; by contrast, in Latin societies, employees'

high-quality relations with their leader and power distance did not have an interactive

effect on employees' voice (Botero & Dyne, 2009). Therefore, further exploration of

the effects of different cultures on help seeking is recommended. Finally, the study

did not address the supervisors' proactiveness in help giving or the topic of

supervisors' need for support. Nevertheless, accounts of principals' help seeking (e.g.,

Nir, 2009), understood in light of the psychological distance model of help-seeking

intentions, provide new insights on earlier findings, in particular regarding upward

interactions of supervisors. Future research may use the model introduced here as a

theoretical basis for exploring lateral and downward help-seeking interactions at the

workplace.

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