WORK CONTEXT AND THE DEFINITION OF SELF: HOW ORGANIZATIONAL CARE INFLUENCES ORGANIZATION-BASED SELF-ESTEEM

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We investigated how work context leads to employee self-definition. We propose that the employees of organizations whose values and organizing principles center on fulfilling employees' needs and acting in their best interests will report higher levels of organization-based self-esteem. Further, we argue that perceptions of organizational fairness and job authority mediate this relationship through the social-psychological process of reflected appraisal. Results based on analyses of data from a sample of 186 managers and professionals from 69 different organizational settings support our model.

Self-perceived competency and self-evaluation may be assumed to be a function of social learning experience and the value a person has come to place on himself as a function of his interaction with others. Thus, organizations, and their environments, and their actors may be viewed in terms of the self-evaluations that such environments cultivate. Korman, 1970: 33

Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) reflects "an employee's evaluation of his or her personal adequacy and worthiness as an organizational member" (Gardner & Pierce, 1998: 50) and "the self-perceived value that individuals have of themselves as organizational members acting within an organizational context" (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989: 625). Employees with high OBSE are secure in the belief that they are trusted, valued, contributing organization members (Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1993; Gardner & Pierce, 1998). Because of major transformations in the context of work in many organizations—reduced reliance on bureaucratic controls, increasingly decentralized decision-making authority, and accelerated adaptation to changing business conditions—the importance of OBSE to employee and organizational effectiveness may be on the rise (Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Pierce et al., 1993). Empirical findings show that work-based self-esteem is associated with increased comfort with, and sustained commitment during, radical change (Hui & Lee, 2000; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996) and improved job performance when traditional forms of work support are absent (Pierce et al., 1993). Positive self-regard is now considered an essential building block in human-resource-based competitive strategies (Lawler, 1992; Pfeffer, 1998), and OBSE has been associated with such key outcomes as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, and organizational citizenship (Pierce et al., 1989, 1993; Gardner & Pierce, 1998).

Although researchers have learned much about the consequences and importance of OBSE over the last ten years, there has been, in comparison, little systematic theory-driven research on its antecedents. Initial theorizing (Korman, 1970) and recent correlational reports (e.g., Pierce et al., 1989, 1993) have suggested that organizational context factors influence OBSE. Korman, among the first to consider the foundations for self-esteem at work, viewed workplace self-concept as being largely socially determined, grounded in social learning experience, and shaped by interactions with others and the institutional arrangements within which interaction takes place (Korman, 1970). Pierce and colleagues echoed this theme: "We concur with Korman's view that the structural features of work environments can and do send strong messages that shape individuals' beliefs about their organizational value" (1989: 645).

We would like to thank Chad Higgins, Jackson McAllister, Marcia Miceli, Gretchen Spreitzer, Carolyn Weithoff, and Andy Wicks for their comments on earlier versions. In addition, we are grateful to Maureen Ambrose and the three anonymous reviewers from this journal for their valuable assistance.
text are particularly relevant to OBSE development and change or the psychological mechanisms through which context brings about self-definition. Our study investigated these two issues. Extending the work of Korman (1970) and Pierce and colleagues (1989), we describe here how organizational care, an emerging concept defining central aspects of work context, influences employees' OBSE through the pivotal perceptions of organizational fairness and job authority. Organizational fairness and job authority have both been implicated by organizational care scholars as variables intervening between context and self-concept, and they have been linked, in their respective literatures, to employee attributions of self-worth. We systematically integrate them into a framework for understanding OBSE.

ORGANIZATIONAL CARE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF OBSE

Organizational care is a “deep structure” (cf. Denison, 1996) of values and organizing principles centered on fulfilling employees’ needs, promoting employees’ best interests, and valuing employees’ contributions (Derry, 1999; Liedtka, 1999, 1996; Tronto, 1998). Conceptual work on the role of an “ethic of care” in organizations makes explicit the connection between core organizational values of responsiveness to member needs and members’ healthy social-psychological development (Frost, 1999; Held, 1990; Liedtka, 1999, 1996; Wicks, Gilbert, & Freeman, 1994), including the development of self-esteem (Benner, 1984; Bowden, 1997). Organizational care is “growth enhancing for the cared for in that it moves them towards the use and development of their full capabilities within the context of their self-defined needs and aspirations and in service to the larger community of care” (Liedtka, 1999: 13).

Sustained responsiveness to employee needs and best interests in organizations requires concerted effort from organizational representatives and the support of a care-enabling infrastructure (Kahn, 1993; Liedtka, 1996; 1999; Tronto, 1998). Korman (1970) identified elements of such an infrastructure, including training, support systems, and employee involvement as mechanisms for ego enhancement. However, from an organizational care perspective, we understand that care cannot be easily equated with any particular configuration of managerial and human resource practices. Equally constructive sets of caregiving practices can exist in different organizations, varying as a function of factors such as basic task requirements, employee developmental needs, resource constraints, and the innovativeness of organization members (Liedtka, 1999). Furthermore, specific practice sets reflective of organizational care may change over time in response to shifting situational contingencies (such as changes in employee needs or task environments).

Given the highly variable nature of ego-enhancing caregiving practices, the essence of organizational care is contained in the values and principles that bring coherence over time and across situations to organizational routines and practices (Burton & Dunn, 1996; Liedtka, 1999). The emerging literature on people-centered and visionary companies echoes this distinction between organizational care and its more ephemeral manifestations. Although the practices of people-centered organizations vary widely, convergence and consistency remain regarding the beliefs and values upon which such programs and policies are based (O’Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000). Similarly, Collins and Porras (1994: 90) have separated core ideology from specific noncore practices:

A visionary company carefully preserves and protects its core ideology, yet all the specific manifestations of its core ideology must be open for change and evolution. For example... HP’s ‘Respect and concern for individual employees’ is a permanent unchanging part of its core ideology; serving fruit and doughnuts to all employees at ten A.M. each day is a noncore practice that can change... 3M’s ‘Respect for individual initiative’ is a permanent, unchanging part of its core ideology; the 15 percent rule (where technical employees can spend 15 percent of their time on projects of their choosing) is a noncore practice that can change.

We should note that organizational care is similar in important respects to perceived organizational support (POS), which refers to employees’ “global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values general contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986: 51). However, although organizational care and POS have similar content—organizational support of and care for employees—they exist at different levels of analysis. POS is an individual-level phenomenon, representing the perceived, individualized receipt of support (or care) from an organization. It is egocentric in nature, expressed in terms of a belief about the extent to which the organization cares for “me.” In contrast, organizational care is an organization-level and organization-centered phenomenon reflecting perceptions regarding the broad provision of care by the organization to all employees. It captures beliefs about the extent to which the organization cares for employees in general. Thus, as conceptu-
alized here, organizational care is the organization-level equivalent of perceived organizational support.

In keeping with Korman’s (1970) initial insights, in our model we propose that organizational context affects employee self-esteem at work. Distinguishing our research, however, is a focus on the underlying values and principles of organizational care that help bring concordance to various human resource policies and programs and also promote responsive and coherent adaptations of them over time. Our argument is that the consistent enactment of practices expressing an employee-need-centered focus provides the integrated experiential base upon which employee beliefs about self-worth, including organization-based self-esteem, develop.

We have argued that organizational care is related to OBSE. However, the critical question of our study remains: What are the psychological mechanisms linking organizational care with an employee’s assessment or reassessment of self-concept in terms of self-worth as an organization member? One important way in which people form self-concepts is through inferences drawn from how others (including individuals, groups, and organizations) treat them (Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1979). This basic idea of “reflected appraisal” is foundational to sociological theories of the self (Gecas, 1982), and it has been extended to describe more fully how members’ perceptions of treatment within groups and organizations influence their understandings of who they are (e.g., Brockner, 1988; Tyler, Kramer, & John, 1999). Fairness (Tyler & Lind, 1992) and job authority (range of discretion and influence; Pierce et al., 1989; Schwab, 1985; Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980) are highly salient signals employees use to determine the degree to which they are valued by their organizations. We argue that fairness and job authority represent for employees crucial reflected appraisals on the part of the organization that mediate between organizational care and OBSE.

**Effects of Organizational Care on OBSE through Perceived Organizational Fairness**

Employees in organizations see themselves as fairly treated when they believe they have received, or will receive, what they are entitled to or deserve (Tyler, 1989). Management scholars and social psychologists alike readily acknowledge that the standards of fair treatment individuals use in continuing relationships extend well beyond the perceived equitability of material reward distributions to matters of perceived responsiveness to need, the integrity of decision-making processes, and the appropriateness of interpersonal treatment (Bies & Moag, 1986; Deutsch, 1975; Konovsky, 2000). Accordingly, a caring value system—centered on fulfilling employees’ needs and attending to employees’ best interests—can be expected to shape organizational practices, programs, and managerial behaviors so that the various fairness standards employees use are met over a range of fairness domains (such as rewards and punishments, formal procedures, and informal interpersonal treatment) and organizational issues (such as compensation, performance evaluation, and promotion) (Burton & Dunn, 1996; Liedtka, 1996). Thus, we would expect organizational care to be positively related to perceived organizational fairness.

Perceived organizational fairness, in turn, is expected to influence OBSE. Fairness assessments are particularly important to employees because experienced fairness is a highly salient indicator of an individual’s status in, and therefore value to, an organization (Tyler & Lind, 1992). For example, individuals consistently treated more poorly than they think they deserve over a broad range of organizational issues (for instance, they consider their pay or promotion rate to be disproportionately low) and fairness domains (for instance, the process used to produce reward distributions is consistently less respectful than they expected it to be) are likely to incorporate these reflected appraisals, which indicate they are not highly valued, into their self-concepts by decreasing personal assessments of their worth at work (Brockner, 1988). Further, such self-redefinition may be more likely to occur when a major inconsistency between treatment quality and OBSE level generates significant cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Empirical findings from both cross-sectional field studies (Wiesefeld, Brockner, & Thibault, 2000) and controlled experiments (Koper, Van Knippenberg, Bouhuijs, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1993) indicate that fairness perceptions are associated with OBSE and context-specific self-esteem. We should emphasize that our focus is on organizational fairness in general, since treatment quality differing from what one believes is deserved in a variety of specific work situations strongly suggests that self-redefinition may be in order.

In summary, we predict organizational care will influence OBSE through perceived organizational fairness. Organizations emphasizing employee development and well-being are likely to be perceived as fair in a wide variety of justice domains. Perceived fair treatment, in turn, conveys to employees that they are valued and worthy organization members. In turn, these reflected appraisals
are likely to be incorporated into OBSE. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Perceived organizational fairness positively mediates the positive relationship between organizational care and organization-based self-esteem.

Given the similarity of organizational care and perceived organizational support, it may seem that Hypothesis 1 runs counter to existing research suggesting procedural justice is an antecedent of POS (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff, 1998). Yet, because organizational care (an organization-level construct) is distinct from POS (an individual-level construct), no contradiction is implied. Organizational care is a likely antecedent of POS, and justice may mediate this relationship.

Effects of Organizational Care on OBSE through Job Authority

Just as we expect perceived organizational fairness to mediate the relationship between organizational care and OBSE, we also expect perceived job authority to mediate this relationship. Job authority refers to the amount of discretion and influence employees believe they can exercise in decisions about the work they do (Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Rather than creating enduring dependence, caretakers in effectual caring relationships work to nurture those for whom they care, working to develop contributing community members (Held, 1990; Liedtka, 1999; Tronto, 1998). Similarly, caring organizations are likely to place particular emphasis on employee development, to promote the confidence and skill employees need to exercise discretion and, thus, to use external controls sparingly (Korman, 1970; Pierce et al., 1989). In other words, caring organizations cultivate empowerment-capable employees and provide them with job authority commensurate with their capabilities. Further, as these capabilities increase, greater job authority can be forthcoming (Liedtka, 1999).

Job authority is, then, expected to influence OBSE. The degree of constraint built into jobs represents a major source of information employees use to develop beliefs about themselves at work (Pierce et al., 1989). Organizationally imposed behavior controls that reduce job authority are likely to signal to employees that they are incapable of self-direction and self-control—that they are less trusted, less competent, less valuable, and less contributing individuals (Pierce et al., 1989). As reflected appraisals, suppositions such as these may be incorporated into self-concept through reduced self-esteem. Conversely, increased job authority can provide a basis for a positive view of self—that is, a view of oneself as being trusted, competent, valuable, and contributing—leading to increased self-esteem. Empirical findings are consistent with this view, showing strong links between systemic constraints on job authority (mechanistic organizational structures) and OBSE (Pierce et al., 1989), between professional discretion and self-esteem at work (Schlenker & Gutek, 1987), and between autonomy and OBSE (Aryee & Luk, 1996).

Summarizing, we argue that caring organizations develop employees capable of exercising decision-making discretion in their jobs and then empower them accordingly through increased job authority. Further, we expect job authority, like fairness, to convey that employees are valued, an attribution likely to be incorporated into self-concept in terms of higher levels of OBSE. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Perceived job authority positively mediates the positive relationship between organizational care and organization-based self-esteem.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

Our sample consisted of managers and professionals from a broad range of organizations and industries. Students and alumni of a major Southern California executive MBA program participated in this study together with their peers from work. Each student or alumnus was asked to identify two work peers and a supervisory person (someone familiar with the work performance of all three individuals) to participate in the study with them. Nominated peers were individuals from functional areas different from their own but with whom they had significant work-related interaction. Initial contacts and nominated peers participated in the study as separate respondents. All surveys were hand-distributed and returned directly to the researcher (the first author) by mail. Of 240 surveys distributed to students, alumni, and nominated peers, 186 usable surveys were returned (a 78 percent response rate). Respondents provided data on OBSE, organizational fairness, job authority, and peer reputational effectiveness (a control variable). Respondents were mature (38 years old on the average), well educated (57 percent had some graduate training), experienced (the average professional tenure was 11.7 years), and predominantly men (74.7%).

In addition to the self-report surveys from focal subjects, we obtained assessments of organizational
care in each organizational setting from individuals familiar with the work performance of the study participants (in most cases, their immediate supervisors). Use of informant data allowed us to overcome the significant limitations commonly associated with common method variance. Key informants are frequently used in multiorganizational studies to provide organization-specific data (Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993; Seidler, 1974), a practice conditioned on their knowledge and willingness to provide information (Campbell, 1955). In this study, the supervisors were uniquely positioned to know about organizational care, because they had insider perspectives on organizational values and organizing principles, as well as knowledge of the study respondents; further, to varying degrees, they participated in the actual provision of care to respondents. The high response rate of the supervisory individuals (69 of 80 surveys were returned, for an 86 percent response rate) suggests little informant apprehension about providing care-related information. Individuals in direct contact with study participants have been shown to be more knowledgeable than higher-level executives of the specific organizational values shaping these employees’ treatment (Osterman, 1994) and less inclined than human resource executives to overstate the virtues of organizational policies and practices (Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001). Following recommendations from Miller, Cardinal, and Glick (1997), we protected the integrity of informant responses by requesting frank responses, focusing on current conditions rather than retrospective accounts, using established measures with sound psychometric properties, providing assurances of anonymity, having informants mail completed forms directly to the researcher, and maintaining transparency in the data collection process (providing contact information for accessing the researcher directly). Potential response biases remain—these might include overestimation (making the organization look good) and underestimation (expressing frustration in the lack of organizational support for personal caring initiatives)—but the multiorganizational design of the study (69 business units spanning 63 different organizations) provides a practical constraint on the extent to which any individual informant could systematically bias the study results.

Measures

All measures were drawn from previously published research. For each measure, respondents assessed their agreement with statements on a seven point Likert-type scale on a response format ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). Reliability assessments for all scales exceeded the minimum standard of .70 suggested by Nunnally (1978).

**Dependent variable.** Organization-based self-esteem was assessed using the ten-item instrument validated by Pierce et al. (1989). Two sample items are “I am valuable around here” and “I count around here” (α = .92).

**Independent variables.** Organizational care was adapted from Eisenberger’s 16-item measure of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Items were rephrased to capture supervisor-as-informant assessments of the organization’s care for its employees. Sample items include, “The organization strongly considers the goals and values of these employees,” “The organization is willing to help any of these employees when they need a special favor,” and “The organization shows very little concern for these employees” (reverse-coded). This measure incorporates elements central to organizational care—caring about employees, taking care of employees, and valuing employee contributions (α = .88). Organizational fairness was measured with eight items that assess the distributional and procedural fairness of performance evaluation, pay, job change, and voice (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Sample items include, “The process used to conduct my performance appraisal is fair” and “The rating or evaluation I received on my last performance appraisal was fair” (α = .90). Job authority was measured with four items addressing the extent of authority, initiative, discretion, and control found in work (Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Sample items include, “The person in this role personally determines what tasks (s)he will perform from day to day” and “Individuals in this role have authority to set quotas for how much work they must complete” (α = .74).

**Control variable.** A peer assessment of reputational effectiveness was included in the study as an indicator of competence, which might represent an alternative predictor of self-esteem. We used Tsui’s three-item measure of reputational effectiveness (Tsui, 1984), together with one additional item incorporated into McAllister (1995). Peers were asked to consider their colleagues’ total jobs, including job-specific duties, additional activities not formally required, and overall dependability, and to assess their satisfaction with aspects of the target individuals’ job performance. Sample items include, “Overall, to what extent do you feel that this person is performing his/her total job the way you would like it to be performed?” and “To what extent has this person met all of your expectations in his/her roles and responsibilities?” (α = .95).
TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Organization-based self-esteem</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.92/ .92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organizational care</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.88/ .88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perceived organizational fairness</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.90/ .91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Perceived job authority</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.74/ n.a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Reputational effectiveness</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.13†</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.95/ n.a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a n = 186. Items in parentheses are Cronbach alphas: The first value is for scales, and the second value is for composites. Correlations were computed by the EQS program using the measurement model.

† p < .10
* p < .05
** p < .01

Analysis

We adopted a two-step approach to data analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) using the EQS structural equation modeling program (Bentler, 1995). First, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate measurement model adequacy. Given the large number of items (41) relative to the sample size (n = 186), we took steps to reduce the number of construct indicators and improve the size-to-estimator ratio (e.g., Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000). For constructs with four or fewer indicators (job authority and reputational effectiveness), we used the individual items as observed indicators of the latent constructs. For all other multi-item constructs (organizational care, organizational fairness, and OBSE), we created three “composite” indicators following procedures set out by Mathieu and Farr (1991).

Second, we analyzed the structural model of the hypothesized relationships (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Hypothesized mediation effects were assessed in accordance with standards outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Baron and Kenny specified three conditions that must be satisfied in order to infer mediation: (1) the independent variable must be significantly related to the dependent variable in the absence of the mediator, (2) the independent variable must be significantly related to the mediator, and (3) when both the independent variable and the mediator are considered simultaneously, the direct relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable should either decrease significantly (for partial mediation) or become nonsignificant (for full mediation). Baron and Kenny’s conditions require a simultaneous assessment of the significance of direct and indirect relationships between independent and dependent variables. Therefore, we partitioned the total effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable into direct and indirect components (cf. Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). In our decomposition-of-effects analysis, a significant indirect effect indicates that the mediators significantly reduce the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

Results

All measurement model factor loadings were significant at the p < .01 level. A chi-square of 122.15 on 109 degrees of freedom (p = .18) and other goodness-of-fit statistics (CFI = .99, NNFI = .99, GFI = .93, RMSEA = .03) indicated that the hypothesized factor structure fitted the data well. 1 Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for the measurement model are shown in Table 1. Composite reliabilities all exceed the .70 minimum standard (Nunnally, 1978).

The structural model used to test our hypotheses is depicted in Figure 1. We predicted that organizational care would be related to OBSE through job authority (Hypothesis 1) and fairness (Hypothesis 2). Consistent with Baron and Kenny’s first requirement for mediation, organizational care was significantly associated with OBSE in the absence of mediator variables (r = .23, p < .01, in Table 1). In accordance with Baron and Kenny’s second requirement, organizational care was significantly associated with both job authority and fairness perceptions. As reported in Figure 1, the path coefficient from organizational care to job authority was .36 (p < .01) and the path coefficient from organizational care to organizational fairness was .23 (p < .01). Finally, consistent with Baron and Kenny’s third requirement, organizational care was not significantly associated with OBSE in the pr-

1 “CFI” is the comparative fit index; “NNFI” is the non-normed fit index; “GFI” is the goodness-of-fit index; and “RMSEA” is the root-mean-square error of approximation.
FIGURE 1
Final Model Predicting Organization-Based Self-Esteem*

Model Fit Statistics
\[ \chi^2(df) = 131.81(113) \]
\[ \chi^2/df = 1.17 \]
CFI = .99
NNFI = .99
GFI = .93
RMSEA = .03

*Path coefficients are standardized, maximum-likelihood estimates. Ellipses denote latent factors. The dashed ellipse and line represent the control factor and its path. To simplify the presentation, the measurement model and the disturbance error effects are not shown. \( n = 186 \). The indirect effect of leader-assessed organizational care on organization-based self-esteem has a coefficient of .14**.

\* \( p < .10 \)
\* \( p < .05 \)
\** \( p < .01 \)

The essence of mediator variables (\( b = .09 \), n.s.). However, the indirect effects of organizational care on OBSE were substantial and significant (\( b = .14, p < .01 \)). Finally, as Figure 1 shows, the control variable (reputational effectiveness) did not have a statistically significant effect on OBSE. Taken together, the findings provide support for both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2.

DISCUSSION

Our study investigated how work context leads to employee self-definition or self-redefinition. We demonstrated that organizational care is a fundamental contextual source of OBSE. Employees working for organizations possessing values and organizing principles centered on fulfilling employee needs and acting in employee best interests reported higher OBSE levels. Further, we hypothesized and found that the relationship between work context and self-esteem is indirect, mediated by organizational fairness and job authority perceptions. Organizational fairness and job authority appear to represent for employees highly salient reflected appraisals from organizations that employees internalize through assessment or reassessment of their own worth as organization members. Here we address key implications of our research findings.

First and foremost, our findings provide insight into the psychological mechanisms through which work context influences employee OBSE. Prior research on OBSE antecedents has offered neither a substantive theoretical rationale for the proposed cross-level relationship between context and self-concept nor insight into the psychological processes involved. Over a decade ago, Brockner (1988) argued that psychological states evoked by the treatment individuals experience are more proximal antecedents of self-esteem at work than contextual factors, and that reflected appraisal is "perhaps the most straightforward process mediating employees' self-esteem" (1988: 140). Our findings support this view. Organizational fairness and job authority perceptions were shown to mediate the relationship between organizational care and OBSE, and the form of this mediation is consistent.
with the understanding of fairness and job authority as reflected appraisals that inform assessments of self-worth.

Second, our conceptualization of work context brings specificity and parsimony to models of OBSE antecedents. Prior research (Korman, 1970) identified disparate organizational practices (training and performance management programs, employee counseling, job rotation, and so forth) that might influence employee self-worth assessments. However, an almost infinite number of these practices could possibly affect OBSE. Furthermore, different configurations of practices could conceivably lead to similar OBSE levels. Our focus on the more stable underlying values and principles that produce coherence in employee-treatment across individuals and over time (that is, organizational care) appears more conducive to systematic, empirical study of the relationship of organizational context to organization-based self-esteem than prior approaches.

A third contribution of our study is that it extends research on organizational care and helps to bring the concept into more mainstream organization sciences. Interest in the idea of care in social and organizational settings now spans 20 years (Derry, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Liedtka, 1999; Wicks et al., 1994). However, this work has been almost exclusively conceptual (and critical) in nature. Our operational measure of organizational care, along with the empirical support for key relationships suggested by the organizational care literature, may open the door for further empirical research on the antecedents and consequences of organizational care.

The organizational care concept merits consideration in mainstream organization science research, especially the work on people-centered organizations. It emphasizes human development as an organizational imperative independent of concern for profit or competitive advantage. Thus, it makes the connection between organizational context and the development of employee self-concept, a relationship central to our study, much more explicit than the highly related work on people-centered organizations (e.g., Pfeffer, 1998). More generally, the organizational care literature highlights the non-contractual and communal aspects of human organization. Recent empirical findings suggest that, beyond acknowledged instrumental and strategic considerations, organizations may adopt people-centered practices specifically because they hold concern for employees as a central organizational value (Osterman, 1994). Indeed, to the extent that the focus of research extends beyond legitimating people-centered practices on strategic and competitive grounds to more fully understanding the dynamics of employee-organization relations in general, consideration of the role and impact of values such as organizational care, as a complement to instrumental values, appears indispensable (Held, 1990; Mansbridge, 1990).

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings should be considered in light of several limitations. It is difficult to fully substantiate causal arguments with cross-sectional data. However, and as discussed, the hypothesized relationships between organizational justice and OBSE and between job authority and OBSE are supported by findings from either controlled experiments or longitudinal studies, which both permit stronger causal inference. In addition, different sources provided data on organizational care and OBSE in our study. It seems unlikely that employee perceptions of organizational fairness, experienced job authority, and appraisals of self-worth influenced supervisory informant reports on organizational care. Still, longitudinal or experimental research is needed to test our model before we can have complete confidence in the findings.

Our work also raises issues about the possible effects of constructs not included in this study. In particular, global self-esteem and POS warrant attention. Global self-esteem and OBSE are correlated constructs (Jex & Elaqua, 1999; Pierce et al., 1989), and one possible approach to the study of global self-esteem is to view it as a personality trait that is relatively unsusceptible to change in adults. Our model may be underspecified insofar as global self-esteem, as a highly stable trait, is modeled as an OBSE antecedent. However, most recent research (including longitudinal studies of adolescents and mature adults) on the relationship of global self-esteem to facet-specific self-esteem (including OBSE) suggests that global self-esteem is a malleable aspect of self-concept (e.g., Marsh & Yeung, 1999; Morse & Gergen, 1970) that stems from context-specific components (Reitzes, Mutran, Fernandez, 1996; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Brockner (1988) and Tharenou (1979) further suggested that global self-esteem may moderate the effects of social context on OBSE. If this is the case, the associations we reported may be understated for individuals with low global self-esteem and overstated for individuals high on this aspect of self-concept. Thus, future research on the organizational context–OBSE relationship might benefit from modeling global self-esteem as a moderator.

Previous research has shown that perceived or-
organizational support can be an outcome of procedural justice perceptions, but we did not include it as an additional mediator in our study for two main reasons. First, our objective was to predict organization-based self-esteem. Although organizational fairness and job authority have both received theoretical and empirical support as OBSE antecedents, we were unable to locate a single study that attempted to model POS in the same manner. Second, standard measurements of OBSE and POS appear too closely related to warrant inclusion in the same study. That is, the appraisals of employees that they are valuable, trusted, and cared about in their organizations (OBSE) go hand-in-hand with their appraisals that the organization values, trusts, and cares about them (POS). Current conceptualizations and measurements of these two constructs do not appear to allow scholars to distinguish adequately between them. Future research attempting to improve the explanatory power of our model through the inclusion of POS as an additional link between organizational fairness and OBSE will have to demonstrate that POS and OBSE are conceptually distinct and devise measures permitting support of this distinction.

Although we believe supervisors, whom we used here as our source of information about organizational care, are a useful source of such information, this approach does not permit an evaluation of the shared aspects of the core values that comprise organizational care. As an organization-level phenomenon, perceptions of organizational care should be shared among employees and supervisors alike. Therefore, our findings are best viewed as an initial empirical test of our theoretical framework that merits replication using multiple respondents to assess organizational care.

Finally, the finding that reputational effectiveness was not a statistically significant control variable merits further attention. Perhaps competence is not a basis of OBSE. Alternatively, basic perceptual and attributional biases (for instance, self-serving bias or fundamental attribution error) may render reputational effectiveness a poor proxy for competence. Thus, it seems necessary that the effects of competence on OBSE be further investigated in research using different measures of competence.

Conclusion

These limitations notwithstanding, our cross-level study provides insight into how organizational context may influence employee self-concept. It highlights the central role of organizational fairness and job authority as psychological mechanisms that, through a process of reflected appraisal, mediate the relationship between organizational care as a facet of organizational context and employee articulations of themselves as organization members. The model proposed and tested is intended as a framework for continued research on the foundations of organization-based self-esteem.

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