

Social Support Reciprocity and Occupational Self-Efficacy Beliefs during Mothers'
Organizational Re-Entry

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Abstract

The present study assesses the effects of a lack of social support reciprocity at work on employees' occupational self-efficacy beliefs. We assume that the self-efficacy effects of received support and support reciprocity depend on the specific work context (e.g., phase in the process of organizational socialization). 297 women who returned to work after maternity leave participated at three measurement points (five weeks, eleven weeks, six months after re-entry). We measured self-reported received and provided support as well as occupational self-efficacy beliefs. Women who received a high amount but provided only little support at work (over-benefitting) reported lowered self-efficacy beliefs. As expected, this effect was not found at the beginning of re-entry, but only later, when over-benefitting began to be negatively related to recipients' self-efficacy beliefs.

Keywords: reciprocity; social support; occupational self-efficacy; maternity leave; return to work, organizational socialization

Introduction

Social support at the workplace is often seen as being desirable and beneficial. There is evidence, for instance, that social support is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction (e.g., O'Discroll, Brough, & Kalliath, 2004; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; see also a meta-analysis by Ng & Sorensen, 2008). But at the same time, there are studies that have demonstrated that social support at the workplace can also be associated with negative outcomes, such as increased negative affect (Deelstra et al., 2003; Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993). Why have different studies found such different outcomes? Former research showed that support reciprocity might be responsible for the diverging consequences of social support (e.g., Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008; Buunk et al., 1993).

Despite the aforementioned research on the effects of support at work on subjective well-being, the effect of support on self-efficacy beliefs has been neglected so far. This is surprising, given the well-documented positive effect of self-efficacy beliefs on employees' job-satisfaction and performance (Judge & Bono, 2001; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). The present study examines whether received social support might endanger an employee's self-efficacy beliefs, if the recipient does not provide comparable amounts of support to his or her co-workers. In other words, we propose that support reciprocity buffers the adverse effect that receiving high levels of support might otherwise have on an employee's capability beliefs. In addition, we assume that the self-efficacy effects of received support and support reciprocity depend on the specific work context. In the present study, we look at work context characteristics in terms of earlier and later phases of the organizational socialization process among mothers who re-enter the workforce after maternity leave.

Mothers' organizational re-entry after maternity leave represents a career phase in which women might feel burdened by the multiple demands within the work and family domains and therefore highly benefit from social support. In this situation, over-benefitting (receiving more support than one has provided) is individually and socially accepted, at least

for some time. Therefore, at the beginning of organizational re-entry, receiving relatively strong support from colleagues should leave work-related self-efficacy beliefs unaffected. As time goes by, however, over-benefitting might start to have a negative impact.

Receiving Social Support: Chances and Risks for Recipients' Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Bandura (1997, p. 3) defines self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.” These beliefs influence whether an individual initiates coping behavior, how much effort a person invests, and how long he or she persists in face of difficulties and failures (see Bandura, 1977). Generalized self-efficacy beliefs can be distinguished from domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs. As the setting considered in this study is the workplace, occupational self-efficacy beliefs will be examined. They denote the beliefs in one’s capacity and motivation to master work-related challenges and to successfully pursue one’s occupational career (Higgins, Dobrow, & Chandler, 2008).

So far, theoretical models on the relationship between social support and self-efficacy beliefs have mainly focused on positive effects. Benight and Bandura (2004) assume that social support has an enabling function that can enhance self-efficacy beliefs (Enabling Hypothesis). In a study on posttraumatic recovery, they found that social support reduces the likelihood of trauma-related stress by increasing self-efficacy beliefs. The Cultivation Hypothesis by Schwarzer and Knoll (2007) posits the reverse pathway. Self-efficacy beliefs would thus operate as an establisher of support. That is, when people feel they can take the initiative, they cultivate their networks. Indeed, in a sample of patients with radical prostatectomy and their spouses, Knoll, Scholz, Burkert, Roigas, and Gralla (2009) found that people with higher self-efficacy beliefs also reported higher supportive resources. Note, however, that neither the enabling nor the cultivation hypotheses have been tested with respect to support at the workplace.

Regarding adverse effects of social support, as mentioned above, empirical research has focused on negative affect. Authors who have identified adverse mood effects have argued that being supported can be unpleasant because receiving social support might lead people to doubt their ability to accomplish their goals and cope with difficulties on their own (e.g., Gleason et al., 2008; Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001). Hence, implicitly, these authors refer to self-efficacy beliefs. Similarly, several other researchers have theoretically linked receiving support to lowered self-esteem (e.g., Barrera, 1986; Gleason et al., 2008). According to Barrera (1986), for instance, receiving aid might lower one's sense of self-esteem if it is interpreted as a sign of personal incompetence. Again, this line of interpretation links adverse support effects to self-efficacy beliefs. In a sample of organizational newcomers, Morrison (1993) found that information seeking was negatively related to task mastery. Asking for information might cast doubt on one's own task competence.

Given that the negative consequences of receiving support are typically reported to be due to feelings of incapacity (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Liang et al., 2001), we propose a direct test of the effects of social support on self-efficacy beliefs, as the latter represent capability-related self-beliefs. Although several authors have raised the point that self-efficacy beliefs might be affected by social support, none have empirically tested possible negative effects on these beliefs in the work domain.

Support Reciprocity as a Shield against Self-Efficacy Threats

As shown above, research about the impact of social support has shown potential negative and potential positive effects (Deelstra et al., 2003; Buunk et al., 1993). How can these different results be tied together? While the receipt of too much support at work may be a potential risk to employees' self-efficacy beliefs, they may benefit from being support providers. That is, in contrast to passively receiving support, actively supporting others at work may foster work-related self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, providing support may serve as a buffer against the adverse effects of an abundance of unwanted support. Likewise, receiving

support may be most aggravating and detrimental for the receiver's self-efficacy beliefs if he or she cannot return the help as a provider. The varying findings of previous research about the effect of social support can thus be explained by the moderating role of support provision.

Indeed, one explanation for the negative consequences of support is a lack of reciprocity (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & ShROUT, 2003; Gleason et al., 2008; Uehara, 1995). Uehara (1995) found that people feel obligated to return benefits received from others. Over-benefitting in social interactions, i.e., receiving more support than one has provided, appears to be psychologically and emotionally distressing. Under-benefitting (providing more support than one has received) was also found to be adverse, but not as much as over-benefitting. In fact, with respect to daily affect experiences, Gleason et al. (2003) found that individuals reported increased negative affect and decreased positive affect on days on which they received more support than they provided as compared to days when they provided more than they received or when support was equitable. We thus propose that receiving support at the workplace is not threatening to self-efficacy beliefs as long as it is balanced with providing support. Positive or negative outcomes of social support would therefore depend on support provision and reciprocity.

Social Support after Maternity Leave

The effects of support as well as of support reciprocity might also depend on the specific work situation, in which support is given and received. Imagine, for instance, an organizational newcomer. This person probably has a lot of questions and may depend on and highly benefit from social support. We specifically examine organizational re-entry in women who were on maternity leave at the time of recruitment, but planned to go back to work within the next weeks. Maternity leave is the time a woman takes off from paid work after birth or adoption of a child. In this study, we refer to any period of time for this leave (from a few weeks to several months or years). Although return to paid work after maternity leave is a common transition of most mothers, psychological research on this topic is rather rare.

Previous studies mostly concerned leave length, i.e., they aimed at predicting length of leave, or at examining the impact of leave duration on health/well-being and career outcomes (e.g., Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Smeaton, 2006; Staeheling, Berteau, & Stutz, 2007; Wiese & Ritter, in press).

During this specific career phase of organizational re-entry, the effects of support reciprocity on women's self efficacy-beliefs are of particular importance, as these women must catch up with new organizational developments, and in addition might feel burdened by the multiple demands within the work and family domains. They are thus very likely to need a degree of social support, both if they return to the organization where they worked before their maternity leave, and if they go back to working life in a new organization. The latter might even have to familiarize themselves with a completely new organizational environment. Despite the importance of both social support and self-efficacy beliefs in the context of return to work after maternity leave, to our knowledge to date no study investigated the impact of support reciprocity at the workplace on self-efficacy beliefs during this transition. Since we expect lacking support reciprocity at the workplace to have detrimental effects on women's self-efficacy, this study seeks to close this research gap.

As the effects of support reciprocity might depend on the specific work situation, we do not expect the proposed threat of lacking reciprocity at the very beginning of organizational re-entry. During the very first weeks back at work, receiving help from co-workers without returning an equal amount of help might be perceived as normative and natural and therefore not yet as self-threatening. Lacking reciprocity would thus not be a problem at this point in time. After a while, however, the work situation changes, and the returner becomes experienced again. Now, we suggest the rule of reciprocity to become salient. Hence, as time goes by, lacking reciprocity may be perceived as inappropriate and the returner's period of grace may be over. Thus, we expect the described consequences of over-benefitting for employees' occupational self-efficacy beliefs to evolve only after some time.

In other words, we posit that the relation between support reciprocity and self-efficacy beliefs will depend on the time since women's re-entry. At the beginning of organizational socialization, associations may be nonexistent. Later, lacking reciprocity may lead to lowered self-efficacy beliefs.

In sum, as over-benefiting in social support, i.e. receiving more support than one provides, has been found to have negative consequences and these have been attributed to feelings of incapacity, we test its effect on self-efficacy beliefs. Since mothers who return to work from a maternity leave are likely to receive social support at the workplace, and self-efficacy is highly important for their success in the work and family domains, it seems very appropriate to investigate this question in this sub-group of employees.

Thus, hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1a. Over-benefiting from social support at work is negatively associated with occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

Hypothesis 1b. The negative effect of over-benefiting on self-efficacy beliefs increases over time.

In sum, although several authors have speculated about a negative relation between support reciprocity and self-efficacy beliefs, none have empirically tested this link. The aim of the present study is to close this research gap by analyzing the self-efficacy effect of support at the workplace. We examine this phenomenon during the phase of organizational re-entry in order to determine whether the norm of reciprocity only comes into play after an initial orientation period, i.e., after returners have reacquired routines and established themselves well enough to be able to support their co-workers.

Method

This study is part of a larger longitudinal project on successful re-entry into paid working life after maternity leave, which comprises four measurement points (for further information on the project see Seiger & Wiese, 2011; Wiese & Ritter, in press). Participants

were women on maternity leave at the time of the recruitment who planned to go back to work in the next weeks. The first measurement (T0) took place two weeks before re-entry. This measurement point will not be considered here because it does not comprise information on social support at the workplace. We refer to data from the following three measurement points, i.e., five weeks (T1), eleven weeks (T2), and six months after the return to the job (T3).

We recruited participants via newspaper advertisements and asking career advisers, human resource departments of large companies, daycare centers, midwives and pediatricians to distribute flyers. Participants received questionnaires in German and pre-stamped envelopes by mail. Participating women received 20 Swiss francs and took part in two lotteries for 5 x 500 and 3 x 300 Swiss francs.

Participants

Two hundred and sixty seven women completed the first questionnaire, 238 women the second questionnaire, and 208 the third questionnaire. 74.8 % of the women were Swiss residents, 15 % were Austrian residents, and 10.2 % were German residents. The women were between 20 and 53 years old ($M = 34.3$; $SD = 5.32$). 57.4 % of the women had a higher university degree. On average, they had 1.61 children ($SD = .79$) and 3 % of the participants were single parents. They were employed in a broad range of occupations, mostly in the service domain. 20.6 % worked in organizations employing less than 10 workers, 35.5 % in organizations with 10-100 employees, and 41.5 % in organizations with more than 100 employees. 16.1 % had a managerial position and 73.9 % had regular working hours (i.e., no shift work, weekend shifts, or similar). 21.6 % had an individual annual income of less than 20'000 Swiss francs, 38.8 % between 20'000 and 40'000, 23.9 % between 40'000 and 60'000, 9.1 % between 60'000 and 80'000, 3.3 % between 80'000 and 100'000, and 1.5 % more than 100'000. On average, they worked $M = 21.46$ hours per week ($SD = 9.1$).

According to Massarelli (2009) it is normative for Swiss, Austrian and German mothers to

work part-time. As the children's ages ranged a lot, the women's child care arrangements were diverse. Their average leave duration was 25.59 months ($SD = 42.74$). 63.4 % of the women returned to the same organization, and for 71.6 % it was the first return to work after a maternity leave.

Given our sampling strategy, i.e. recruiting via flyers and newspaper advertisements, it is not possible to determine response rate. We did, however, analyze if women who continued to participate did differ from those who dropped out. Using t -tests, we could not find any differences in socio-demographic characteristics, the big five personality traits, or central study variables (i.e., received support, provided support, self-efficacy beliefs, work-family conflict).

Measures

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alphas and inter-correlations of the study variables are shown in Table 1. *Received social support* was assessed adapting six items equivalent to the ones in the German version (Schwarzer, 1991) of the California Social Support Inventory (Dunkel-Schetter, 1986). A sample item is: "How often did your co-workers provide you with information or advice in the past two weeks?". This inventory contains questions on emotional, instrumental, and informational support and participants rated each item using a 5-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "very often" (5). Women reported significantly more received support at T1 and T2 than at T3 ($F[2, 386] = 17.71, p < .001, \eta_{part}^2 = .08$). Ratings at T1 and T2, however, did not differ (see Table 1).

Provided social support was assessed using two items, which were again equivalent to the ones in the German version (Schwarzer, 1991) of the California Social Support Inventory (Dunkel-Schetter, 1986), e.g. "How often have you supported your co-workers for example by giving them advice, encouraging them and listening to them in the past two weeks?". Again, participants rated each item on a 5-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "very often" (5). Women reported significantly more provided support at T1 and T2 than at T3 ($F[2,$

376] = 11.46, $p < .001$, $\eta_{part}^2 = .06$). Again, values at T1 and T2 did not differ (see Table 1).

Received and provided social support was significantly positively correlated at all measurement points (see Table 1).

Occupational self-efficacy beliefs were measured using five items taken from the German version (Schyns & von Collani, 2006) of Schyns and von Collani (2002), e.g., “I can remain calm when facing difficulties in my job because I can rely on my abilities”.

Participants rated each item on a 6-point scale ranging from “not at all“ (1) to “very much“ (6). Women reported significantly lower self-efficacy beliefs at T1 than at T2 and T3 ($F[2, 400] = 27.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{part}^2 = .12$). There were no mean level differences between T2 and T3 (see Table 1).

Work-family conflict served as a control variable in our additional analyses. To measure work-family conflicts, we used a 23-items-scale, mostly consisting of items from Carlson and Frone’s inventory (2003; e.g., “How often does your home life interfere with your responsibilities at work, such as getting to work on time, accomplishing daily tasks, or working overtime?”). To ensure equivalence to the items in the original English version, the translation was double-checked by English native speakers. Participants rated each item on a 6-point scale ranging from “not at all“ (1) to “very much“ (6).

Modeling Procedure

The analyses were conducted using the Mplus 5.21 program (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2009). To deal with missing values, maximum-likelihood estimation was used. The use of latent variables can overcome the biasing effects of measurement error in path analysis models (Coffman & MacCallum, 2005). Moreover, latent variable modeling leads to increased statistical power to test interactions (Jaccard & Wan, 1995). We therefore used three item parcels as indicators for the latent variable received social support, two parcels for

the latent variable provided social support and two for the latent variable occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

Our hypotheses were tested in three models, one for each measurement point (see Figure 1). Prior research indicates that the effects of lacking support reciprocity occur rather immediately (e.g., Gleason et al., 2003). The intervals between our measurement points, however, were large (six weeks and three months). This was one reason for not testing a single long-term effect. Moreover, and most importantly, we aimed at testing whether the role of support reciprocity changes at different phases in the re-entry process. Hence, we wanted to be able to compare the effects of support reciprocity at three different measurement points. The effect of social support reciprocity was examined by testing whether the latent interaction between received support and provided support (shown in Figure 1 as a filled circle) predicted self-efficacy beliefs.

Results

First, a basic model including the three latent variables of received social support, provided social support, and occupational self-efficacy beliefs was tested at each measurement point, not yet including an interaction. The measurement models fitted the data well (T1: $\chi^2 = 14.2$, $df = 11$, $p = .22$; TLI = .986; CFI = .993; RMSEA = .033; T2: $\chi^2 = 22.3$, $df = 11$, $p = .02$; TLI = .958; CFI = .978; RMSEA = .066; T3: $\chi^2 = 22.2$, $df = 11$, $p = .02$; TLI = .951; CFI = .975; RMSEA = .070). In a second step, models testing the reciprocity hypothesis were conducted for each measurement point, including the same set of latent variables as the basic models as well as the interaction effect of received and provided support on occupational self-efficacy beliefs (see Figure 1). As models including interactions of latent variables have to be estimated using numerical integration, common fit indices as TLI, CFI, and RMSEA are not available. Therefore, we compared the fit of models with and without interactions using the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC; see Table 2). At T2 and T3, models

including the interaction had a better fit than models without interaction, as indicated by lower AIC values.

In models T2 and T3, the hypothesized interaction between received and provided support was significant (T2: $B = .274$, $p = .01$; T3: $B = .218$, $p = .00$). In the T1 model, the interaction effect was in the same direction but did not reach significance ($B = .282$, $p = .13$; see Table 3). Figure 3 illustrates the results for T1, T2, and T3. The figures were drawn using a model specification suggested by Ferrer, Balluerka, and Widaman (2008) to ensure that the latent variables have means of 0 and standard deviations of 1. The simple slope for those who provided high support was $-.03$ ($p = .58$) at T1, $-.10$ ($p = .42$) at T2, and $-.34$ ($p = .01$) at T3. The simple slope for those who provided low support was $-.59$ ($p = .06$) at T1, $-.65$ ($p = .00$) at T2, and $-.77$ ($p = .00$) at T3. Hence, as expected (hypothesis 1a), a high amount of received support in combination with a low amount of provided support was negatively associated with occupational self-efficacy beliefs. This association was only found at T2 and T3 (hypothesis 1b). A high amount of provided support in combination with a low amount of received support is associated with the highest self-efficacy beliefs. Reciprocal amounts of both high and low support levels are associated with moderate self-efficacy beliefs.

We tested three additional models (one for each measurement point) similar to the ones described above, including two control variables, that is work-family conflict and whether women returned to the same organization or not (see Figure 2). Inclusion of these variables did not change the results.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between lacking reciprocity in social support at work and occupational self-efficacy beliefs in a sample of female employees re-entering the workforce after maternity leave. Although this transition is common, psychological research on this context is rare and to our knowledge there is no study on the interplay of support reciprocity and self-efficacy. We assumed that a high amount of received support in

combination with a low amount of provided support (over-benefitting) would be associated with reduced self-reported self-efficacy beliefs, and hypothesized that this effect would become more pronounced over time.

As expected, at eleven weeks as well as six months after job re-entry, women who received a high amount and provided a low amount of support reported the lowest self-efficacy beliefs. Women who provided high amounts and received low amounts of support reported the highest self-efficacy beliefs. Our results further showed that for women who provided and received similar amounts of support, self-efficacy beliefs were moderate. Overall, these findings support our hypotheses that over-benefitting in social support is associated with decreased occupational self-efficacy beliefs and that this effect of over-benefitting is more pronounced in later phases of organizational socialization.

The finding that getting a lot of help without providing some in return is related to lowered self-efficacy beliefs is consistent with other research that found lacking reciprocity in social support to lead to negative outcomes such as negative affect (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Gleason et al., 2003; Gleason et al., 2008; Uehara, 1995). Note, however, that former research on reciprocity did not include self-efficacy beliefs as an outcome criterion. Our results are especially similar to the ones of Gleason and colleagues (2003, 2008) who found that the receipt of support is detrimental to recipients' mood, but only on days in which the recipient of support did not provide support. Also Uehara (1995) demonstrated that receiving more support than one has provided (over-benefitting) is psychologically distressing. Providing more support than one has received (under-benefitting) has been shown to be less adverse (Gleason et al., 2003, 2008; Uehara, 1995). In our sample, women providing much support but receiving only little showed the highest levels of self-efficacy beliefs. This implies that under-benefitting might be even more beneficial than reciprocal support. In contrast, Uehara (1995) found that under-benefitting might be distressing as well. An explanation may be that under-benefitting in social support might be interpreted as a sign of a lack of social

integration and this might be negatively related to mood. This aspect is probably not relevant for perceiving oneself as able to deal with difficulties, i.e., self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, self-efficacy beliefs may not suffer from augmented provided support. Consequently, providing support neutralizes the negative effect of received support and can even enhance self-efficacy beliefs. This is in line with the assumption of Gleason et al. (2003, 2008) that a person can demonstrate his or her efficacy and competence by providing social support. Receiving social support is therefore only self-threatening when reciprocity is not given.

As mentioned above, previous research suggests that the negative effects of lacking support reciprocity are short-lived (e.g., Gleason et al., 2003). Gleason et al. (2003) explained that even if a recipient provides support at a later point in time, an inequitable support transaction already had its negative consequences. Hence, reciprocity effects need to be tested rather immediately. This holds especially true if one suggests differential effects of support reciprocity at different points in time as we did with respect to organizational socialization. Therefore we did not hypothesize one single long-term effect, but rather different effects for each one of the time points. Post-hoc tests using a longitudinal model including all of the three measurement points did not reveal any interaction effects, however. Since there was no lagged effect between T2 and T3 (i.e., the time when reciprocity started to play a role for self-efficacy beliefs), we assume that shorter time lags have to be considered to find longitudinal effects (for a discussion of temporal designs, see Collins, 2006).

The present results underline the importance of taking reciprocity into account when examining how social support affects self-efficacy beliefs at work. On a raw correlation level (see Table 1), received support and self-efficacy beliefs were mainly unrelated both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. In fact, there was only one significant association; i.e., a negative correlation between received support and self-efficacy beliefs at T2. These findings run counter to Schwarzer and Knoll's (2007) cultivation hypothesis, which suggests that self-efficacy enhances support. With respect to provided support, although few correlations were

significant, all were positive, providing some support for another form of enabling. That is, self-efficacy may promote support provision, and support provision may strengthen self-efficacy beliefs.

Limitations and Outlook

Our analyses were based on women's self-reports. It would be interesting to measure reports of received and provided support of co-workers as well to verify the concordance between the different report sources at different points in the re-entry process. Note, however, that for an employee's self-efficacy beliefs, his or her view of social support should be of utmost importance. It should, in fact, be more relevant than whether or not support perceptions of provider and receiver coincide.

Clearly, our sample was restricted in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. As mentioned in the participants section, 63.4 % of the women in our sample returned to the same organization, and therefore were not new organizational entrants. For future research it is important to replicate our findings with other samples of organizational newcomers. As reported above, in this study, inclusion of whether women returned to the same organization or not, did not change the results. Therefore, in general, we expect to find similar results with male and female employees who enter an organization as complete newcomers because of other reasons, e.g., a change of the employer. But there might be differences in terms of the length of time, in which lacking reciprocity has no effects on the newcomer's self-efficacy beliefs. For those transitioning from another employer, this time might be shorter than for individuals with an employment gap, as the latter group must not only acquire organization-specific knowledge, but also catch up with recent developments in his or her professional field. Hence, the time until the newcomer feels to be obliged to be supportive to his or her co-workers may differ depending on their individual work history.

As mentioned in the introduction, other authors have proposed and partly shown that there are also positive effects of receiving social support on self-efficacy (Benight & Bandura,

2004; Knoll et al., 2009; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). On a bivariate correlational level, we did not find evidence for such associations. The factors responsible for the contradictory findings concerning this question should be explored in the future. One might speculate that in the aforementioned studies from the field of clinical psychology, support recipients strongly sought support. According to Barrera (1986), it is useful to differentiate between help seeking (an active coping activity) and help obtained without the assertive actions of the recipient. Unfortunately, we did not ask our participants whether they were actually asking their colleagues for support. We did, however, assess whether the amount of support that they received from co-workers and their supervisors either fit their needs or was too low/high. Post-hoc analyses did not suggest that self-efficacy was more strongly affected when the amount of received support was judged as being too high. Future studies, however, should include active support seeking as a possible moderator.

How can the present results be translated into practical recommendations? Of course, our advice is not to refrain from supporting new colleagues! One should, however, create opportunities for more established returners to boost their self-efficacy beliefs, for instance, by asking them for advice based on their earlier job experiences, or by explicitly stressing how much one profits from their input. The insight in the growing importance of support reciprocity might be informative for career counselors who coach women who plan their return to work as well as for human resource managers who want to implement formal return-to-work programs. Supervisors should pay attention to possible support imbalance in their team and encourage reciprocity. If there is a member going to return to the team, it might be helpful to discuss in advance the topic of reciprocity with the other team members. In addition, after some while, it is probably a good strategy to assign to the “new” person responsibility for helping the next newcomer to become acquainted with the organizational rules and his or her work tasks. This would also stand as a symbol for being seen as a fully

integrated and highly competent team member, which, in turn, might be very beneficial for an individual's occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

Organizational returners themselves have to find a fine balance between asking for help and being helpful. Clearly, they have to figure out when their advice is wanted or needed to not endanger their early social re-integration. Moreover, mothers who return to work should not forget that they are not the only ones who have family obligations. Probably, many of their established co-workers have children, too. Older co-workers may additionally have elder parents in need of care. This awareness of others also having to deal with work-family demands might contribute to a supportive climate of mutual understanding and reciprocal helpfulness.

Conclusions

The interplay of support reciprocity and self-efficacy, two highly important concepts in the context of return to employment after maternity leave, one representing a social and the other one representing a personal resource, has not been investigated so far and contributes to research on social interaction at the workplace as well as to our understanding of transitions in the work-family domains.

The present study extends understanding of the role of support reciprocity in the work context. It shows that reciprocity is important for those returners who feel highly supported by their colleagues. Otherwise, their self-efficacy beliefs are endangered. Our results demonstrate that the negative effects of lacking reciprocity start to operate only several months after women's re-entry into professional life. Inequality in support is tolerated at the beginning of the transition, but after about three months, women's period of grace is over. To our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically examine negative effects of social support on self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, further research has to shed light on the question whether the identified reciprocity effect also holds true for other samples of organizational newcomers.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Model Testing the Effect of Social Support Reciprocity on Occupational Self-Efficacy Beliefs: Item Parcels used as Indicators for Latent Variables. The latent interaction between received and provided social support is symbolized by a filled circle.

Figure 2. Model Testing the Effect of Social Support Reciprocity on Occupational Self-Efficacy Beliefs, including return to the same organization and work-family conflicts as control variables (item parcels not pictured). The latent interaction between received and provided social support is symbolized by a filled circle.

Figure 3. Occupational Self-Efficacy Beliefs: A at T1, B at T2, C at T3.

Table 1

Correlations, Descriptives, and Internal Consistencies of the Major Study Variables (N = 267)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Received support T1	2.20	.80	.83											
2. Received support T2	2.14	.78	.71**	.85										
3. Received support T3	1.94	.65	.47**	.44**	.83									
4. Provided support T1	2.40	.90	.56**	.44**	.34**	.58								
5. Provided support T2	2.45	.91	.39**	.54**	.31**	.52**	.66							
6. Provided support T3	2.16	.92	.37**	.42**	.62**	.47**	.44**	.74						
7. Self-efficacy T1	4.50	0.80	-.06	-.11	-.03	.16**	.07	.16*	.81					
8. Self-efficacy T2	4.71	.72	-.05	-.16*	-.09	.11	.06	.09	.67**	.87				
9. Self-efficacy T3	4.83	.68	-.08	-.06	-.07	.10	.10	.12	.60**	.59**	.86			
10. Work-family conflicts T1	2.35	.53	.11	.08	.09	.18**	.12	.21**	-.24**	-.19**	-.14*	.90		
11. Work-family conflicts T2	2.28	.51	.12	.12	.14*	.21**	.11	.22**	-.23**	-.19**	-.17*	.83**	.90	
12. Work-family conflicts T3	2.26	.54	.08	.09	.18**	.16*	.09	.24**	-.25**	-.20**	-.29**	.77**	.86**	.92
13. Newcomer / returner ¹	--	--	-.10	-.06	.07	.03	-.06	.03	.12	.14*	.02	.04	-.00	.02

Note. ¹Organizational newcomer = 0, organizational returner = 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Cronbach's alphas are displayed in the diagonal.

Table 2

Fit Indices of the Models Tested for T1, T2, and T3 (N = 267)

Model	χ^2	df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	AIC
T1						
Basic model	14.2	11	0.986	0.993	0.033	4479.7
With interaction						4480.1
T2						
Basic model	22.3	11	0.958	0.978	0.066	3731.3
With interaction						3729.1
T3						
Basic model	22.2	11	0.951	0.975	0.070	3213.9
With interaction						3206.8

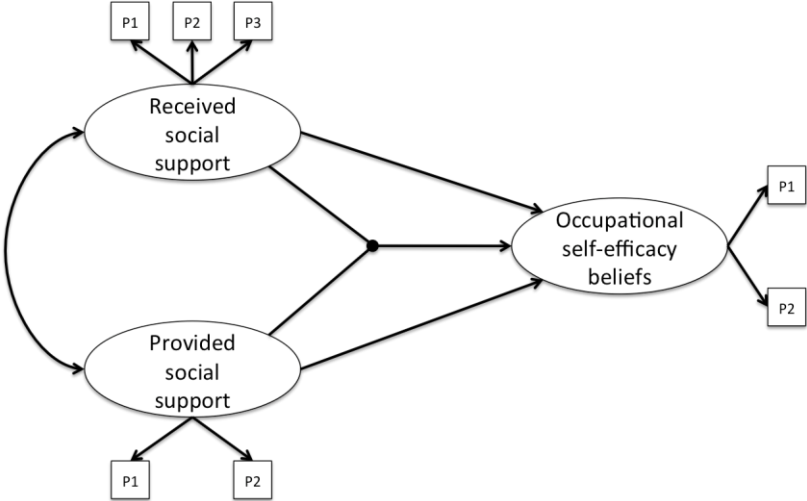
Note. For models including an interaction: Only AIC was available.

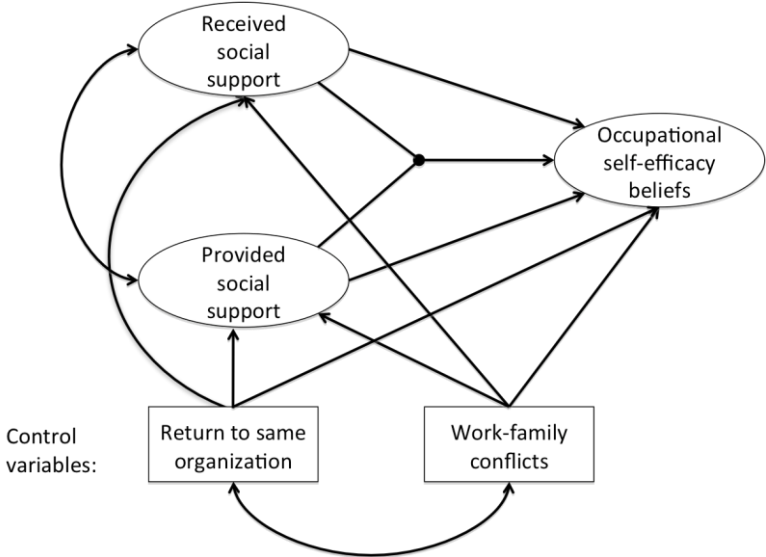
Table 3

Effects on Occupational Self-Efficacy Beliefs: Unstandardized Estimates, and Standard Errors of Regression Coefficients (N = 267)

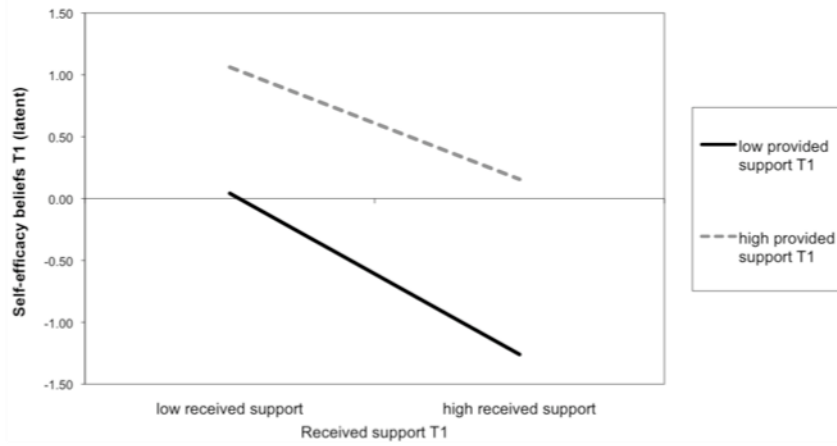
Coefficient	Estimate (S.E.)
T1	
Received support	-0.312 (0.168)
Provided support	0.437** (0.156)
Interaction	0.282 (0.184)
Work-family conflicts	-0.525** (0.095)
Newcomer / returner ¹	0.138 (0.103)
T2	
Received support	-0.377** (0.141)
Provided support	0.239* (0.113)
Interaction	0.274** (0.102)
Work-family conflicts	-0.307** (0.102)
Newcomer / returner ¹	0.174 (0.110)
T3	
Received support	-0.555** (0.166)
Provided support	0.115 (0.100)
Interaction	0.218** (0.072)
Work-family conflicts	-0.542** (0.103)
Newcomer / returner ¹	0.066 (0.095)

Note. ¹Organizational newcomer = 0, organizational returner = 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

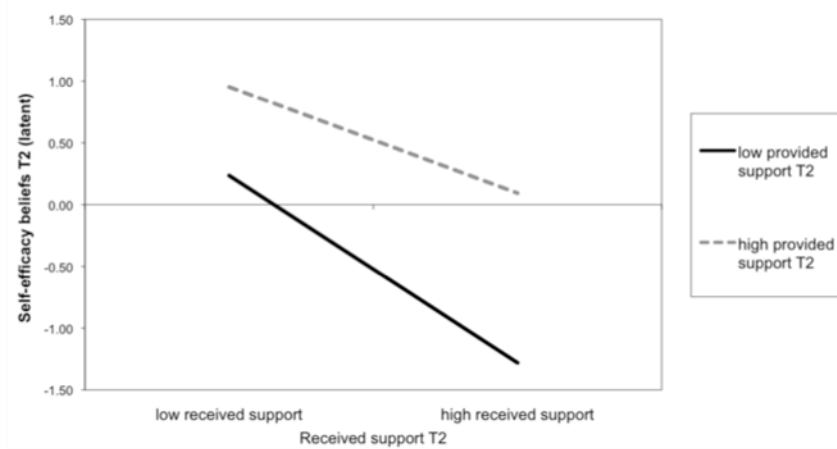




A



B



C

