

How could you think that? Supervisor misattribution leads to reduced subsequent employee organizational citizenship behavior

European Journal
of Management
Studies

321

Received 6 February 2024
Revised 17 June 2024
Accepted 18 September 2024

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Abstract

Purpose – From a social cognitive perspective, the current study examines how the relationship between the employee and the organization changes following supervisor motive misattribution of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB).

Design/methodology/approach – The current study utilizes an experimental vignette methodology (EVM), linear regression and Hayes' (2017) Process Version 4 macro in SPSS to examine the relationships between supervisor misattribution of employee OCB, personality and individual differences and future organizational citizenship behavior intentions.

Findings – Results indicate that supervisor misattribution of employee OCB, specifically when the act is attributed to impression management, will reduce the intention to engage in future OCBs. Results also indicate that this negative relationship is enhanced when subordinates are high in openness.

Research limitations/implications – This study extends social exchange theory by demonstrating how the misattribution of motivation to perform OCBs creates a negative social exchange and discourages future organizational citizenship behavior from the employee. The current research demonstrates the importance of supervisors understanding employees' motivations for engaging in (OCB). If an employee engages in OCB based on intrinsic motivation, such as a desire to help others, and their motivation is attributed to external motivation, such as impression management, the employee may feel misunderstood and believe their values and motivations are incorrectly perceived, leading to reduced OCB.

Originality/value – The current research is examined using EVM. By immersing participants in realistic hypothetical scenarios, experimental vignette methodology allows researchers to explore the intricacies of decision-making across unique scenarios, unraveling both the "why" and the "what next" behind decision-making.

Keywords Organizational citizenship behavior, Social exchange theory, Experimental vignette methodology, Motive misattribution, Personality

Paper type Research paper

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) refers to voluntary employee actions that go above and beyond job descriptions or written responsibilities and contribute to the effectiveness of an organization (Organ, 1990). OCB is essential for both organizations and



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European Journal of Management
Studies
Vol. 29 No. 3, 2024
pp. 321-337
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2635-2648
p-ISSN: 2183-4172
DOI 10.1108/EJMS-02-2024-0014

employees (Organ, 1990). For organizations, employees' extra-role helping behaviors enable the efficient and smooth operation of the organization (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000). For employees, OCBs are important because they are a key element of performance ratings despite being voluntary (Organ *et al.*, 2005), as well as a social activity (Farmer and Fedor, 2001) and a mechanism for expressing their values (McNeely and Meglino, 1994; Rioux and Penner, 2001). Given this mutual criticality, it is in the organization's and supervisor's best interest to encourage OCB from employees and not inadvertently discourage the performance of these acts. Therefore, the current research will examine OCB from the supervisors' and employees' perspectives through the lens of OCB motive attribution.

A possible path to discouraging or reducing employee OCB is a conflict in motive attribution between the employee and the supervisor. Scholars have thoroughly examined motivations for employee OCB (Rioux and Penner, 2001; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2015). These motivations include a desire to help others, to look good in front of their peers or supervisors, and to "get ahead" in the organization. An employee may have been motivated to perform an act of OCB out of concern for or desire to help their coworker or the organization; however, if their supervisor incorrectly assigned a negative or self-serving motivation to the performance of the action, such as impression management, it could discourage future acts of OCB by the employee.

Research has shown supervisors are not exceptionally skilled at ascertaining employee motive attributions for extra-role behavior (Cheung *et al.*, 2014). In our study, we posit that when employees perceive supervisors have negatively and incorrectly misattributed their acts of citizenship or helping behavior, the relationship between the supervisor, acting as a proxy for the organization, and the employee undergoes an undesirable change. Consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the relationship changes from a social exchange relationship between the employee and the organization to a transactional relationship based on formal duties, which decreases subsequent acts of OCB on the part of the maligned employee.

In this study, we empirically test the relationship between employee OCB motive attribution, the supervisor's perceived motive attribution of the OCB, and how misalignment of motive attribution impacts the performance of subsequent acts of OCB. We demonstrate this by conducting two experimental vignette methodology (EVM) studies. In addition, we examine how employee individual differences (i.e. openness) moderates this relationship. Results support the theory that this misattribution reduces subsequent acts of employee OCB. Further, in Study 2, we find that employee openness strengthens the negative relationship between misattribution of OCB motives and subsequent acts of employee OCB.

This research provides two distinct theoretical contributions. First, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) is drawn to explore and explain how the relationship between the employee and the organization changes after the motive misattribution (Williams *et al.*, 2002). One of the fundamental tenets of social exchange is that the quality of social exchange motivates individuals to reciprocate the beneficial actions of another (Blau, 1964; see Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005 for a review). Simply put, you give what you get. This study will extend social exchange theory by demonstrating how misattribution of motivation to perform OCB creates a negative social exchange and discourages future OCB from the employee. Results of the current study suggest that when employees perceive that a supervisor attributes their helping behavior to impression management, they may be less likely to continue engaging in these behaviors in the future. As such, this type of perceived negative social exchange has the potential to impact multiple levels of the organization (e.g. culture and organizational effectiveness). Second, by examining how supervisors and employees can have diametrically opposing views and opinions on motivations for employee acts of OCB, knowledge of how this can discourage employees from engaging in future acts of OCB is extended. This study also examines how the employee personality trait of openness may act as a boundary condition, further extending OCB literature and personality literature.

Addressing the concerns within the current literature also generates practical managerial implications within the workplace. Practically, the findings suggest that motive misattribution by the supervisor leads to decreased subsequent acts of OCB by the employee, which can impact key organizational operations. It is moderated by openness, which enhances understanding of how supervisors may inadvertently reduce a critical component of healthy organizational life. We provide practical suggestions on how organizations may address or avoid the negative outcomes of misattribution altogether. Finally, we will offer suggestions for future research to understand potential outcomes from misattribution.

Theoretical background and Hypothesis

Organizational citizenship behavior

OCB is defined as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organization” (Organ *et al.*, 2005, p. 3). Unlike in-role task performance, which is prescribed, employees are free to increase or decrease the amount of extra-role effort and behavior they exhibit as a matter of personal choice and without fear of reprisal (Haworth and Levy, 2001; Organ, 1988). However, without the employee behavior fostered through OCB, the organization’s formal structure would be little more than a Potemkin village unable to fulfill its mission (Organ, 1990).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior is conceptualized by numerous behaviors, including nearly 30 constructs identified using meta-analytic techniques (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000). However, scholars have identified similarities among the constructs and have summarized them through seven unique constructs: altruism/helping behavior, sportsmanship, organizational loyalty, organizational compliance, individual initiative, civic virtue, and self-development (George and Brief, 1992; Graham, 1991; Organ, 1988; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000). These dimensions involve actions that assist others, maintain a positive work environment, uphold organizational rules, exceed job expectations, participate in governance activities, and pursue personal skill development for the organization’s benefit (George and Brief, 1992; Graham, 1991; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000; Organ, 1988; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000,).

In addition, OCB is related to organizational performance as it functions to increase the productivity of coworkers and supervisors (Bachrach *et al.*, 2006; Kizilos *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Kuo, 2015). OCB assists with making production stable and predictable when employees cover shifts for peers or volunteer to take work from an overloaded colleague (George and Brief, 1992; Organ, 1988). Other pertinent examples include assisting a coworker in solving a problem or resolving an issue hindering his or her production, helping a supervisor by contributing creative and novel ideas to increase productivity, and serving as a bridge between different groups in the organization to ensure coordination and good relations (Graham, 1991). Finally, OCB improves employee morale, thus creating an attractive culture that may enhance retention and recruitment (Podsakoff and MacKenzie, 1997; Van Scotter and Motowidlo, 1996).

Williams and Anderson (1991) created two broad categories of OCB based on whom the OCB behavior is directed. Helping behavior (often referred to as altruism in the literature) helps a specific individual with a particular issue. Thus, it is called Organizational Citizenship Behavior – Individual (OCBI). Citizenship behavior that benefits the organization is referred to as Organizational Citizenship Behavior – Organization (OCBO). The distinctions are necessary due to the varying antecedents associated with OCBI and OCBO.

Motivations for organizational citizenship behavior

In an effort to better understand the complexities around the antecedents and motivations for OCB, Organ and Ryan (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of dispositional variables to

determine the correlates between OCBI and OCBO. These researchers found that attitudinal variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceptions of fairness, and perceptions of leader consideration had the strongest correlations to both categories of OCB and predicted motivation for this behavior. Later research (Rioux and Penner, 2001) examined the role of personal motivations for performing OCB and found three personal motivations for OCB: prosocial values, impression management, and organizational concern.

First, prosocial values describe a range of motivations and behaviors around helping others. Therefore, it would be considered OCBI (Rioux and Penner, 2001). Second, impression management involves performing OCB because of a desire to look good in front of others – i.e. one's peers or supervisor (Rioux and Penner, 2001; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2015). Behaviors motivated by impression management are generally meant to benefit individuals (OCBI) rather than the organization as a whole (OCBO) (Finkelstein, 2006). The third and final motivation for OCB is organizational concern, which describes behavior motivated by an individual's commitment to the organization (Rioux and Penner, 2001). As its name implies, organizational concern behavior is focused on helping the organization (OCBO) (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2015). Recent research also supports supervisors' critical role in enhancing employee OCB. For example, servant leadership has been found to positively impact individual and group-level OCB (Kiker *et al.*, 2019). Research also shows that perceived supervisor support is positively related to OCB (Bishop *et al.*, 2020), and supervisor support for HR practices (i.e. pay for performance, training, and career development initiatives) is positively related to the propensity to engage in OCB towards the organization and the supervisor (Pandey *et al.*, 2018).

Misattribution of motivation and the changing employee-organization relationship

Supervisor attribution of motivations of employee OCB is a complex paradigm, and as a result, research indicates supervisors struggle with determining correct motivations (Cheung *et al.*, 2014). Attributing motivation for employee OCB is made even more difficult because, many times, these actions occur outside of what the supervisor can observe firsthand (Williams *et al.*, 2002). As expected, when supervisors attribute altruism and other-focused motivations rather than self-focused motivations for an employee's OCB, they recognize the employee has genuinely performed a good deed for the organization (Bolino *et al.*, 2006). However, when a supervisor assigns an inaccurate motivation attribution for an employee's OCB, the relationship between the employee and the organization can change in negative and organizationally detrimental ways.

Robinson and Wolfe Morrison (2000) argue that employees view their relationship with the organization as a contract with the organization itself. This perception makes the organization an agent in an implicit contract in which the employee expects the organization to fulfill specific duties in exchange for the employee performing not only in-task roles but also extra-task roles like OCB. When organizations are perceived to have broken this social contract with employees (e.g. through motive misattribution of OCB), the relationship changes from one based on social exchange to one based on economic exchange (Organ, 1990).

Social exchange theory describes a more spontaneous relationship with hard-to-define obligations regarding the characteristics of the benefits given and received by both sides (Blau, 1964; Williams *et al.*, 2002). This type of social contract is outside a formal or prescribed agreement, so it easily allows for more (or less) voluntary acts of extra-role citizenship behavior by employees. Employees are motivated to exchange "social rewards" with the organization because they perceive they are treated fairly (Moorman, 1991). Employees who are satisfied with their supervisor will reciprocate through increased citizenship behavior (Bateman and Organ, 1983). It is important to note that supervisors represent the larger organization to subordinates, and reciprocation benefits the supervisor as a proxy for the organization (Bateman and Organ, 1983).

Clear-cut obligations characterize relationships based on an economic exchange regarding the nature and value of both given and received benefits. Economic exchange relationships resemble transactional relationships in which something of value is given in return for something of value (Organ, 1990). Moorman (1991) described this relationship recalibration process as an “internal tension” for the employee who then attempts to resolve the issue. For example, if employees believe the organization has done something inequitable, they may respond by stopping or reducing voluntary (extra-role) behavior. However, they would not react by decreasing in-role behavior, which could result in disciplinary actions. Thus, by lowering extra-role behavior, they are better able to adjust the ratio of “inputs” to “outputs” (Williams *et al.*, 2002). This reduction of extra-role behavior would also be consistent with Organ’s (1990) prediction of a reduction in subsequent acts of OCB.

Therefore, consistent with social exchange theory, it is posited that when an employee senses a violation of the social contract with the organization (via the supervisor acting as a proxy for the organization) through supervisor motive misattribution of an act of OCB, the employee’s relationship with the organization changes from one based on social exchange to one based on an economic exchange which will result in a reduction of subsequent acts of OCB. Formally, we hypothesize:

- H1.* Supervisor misattribution of employee acts of organizational citizenship behavior will reduce intent to engage in future organizational citizenship behavior.

Openness to experience

In addition, it is posited that individual personality traits can moderate the relationship between the supervisor’s misattribution of the employee’s motivation for their OCB and subsequent acts of OCB on the part of the employee. Specifically, the openness to experience dimension of the Five-Factor Model of personality traits is examined. Openness involves high intellectual curiosity, a preference for novelty and variety, and a strong interest in artistic and aesthetic experiences (Digman, 1990; Donnellan *et al.*, 2006).

Although openness to experience is a weak predictor of task performance whereby routine, job-specific tasks are less influenced by openness, it is one of the strongest predictors of adaptive and proactive performance (e.g. problem-solving, citizenship behavior). Highly open individuals excel in situations requiring innovation, problem-solving, and initiative (Neal *et al.*, 2012). Individuals who exhibit openness display a need to continually search for new experiences and expand their horizons (McCrae and Sutin, 2009).

Highly open individuals tend to be intellectually curious and articulate (Sneed *et al.*, 1998). These employees are also creative when solving problems, independent, and readily challenge the status quo, which makes them prized by their supervisors (Moss *et al.*, 2007). These employees thrive when their roles enable them to produce novel solutions, examine problems from various non-conventional angles, and express their creativity (Tett and Burnett, 2003).

However, when highly open employees perceive their work environment does not provide the resources (i.e. raw materials, equipment) to enable them to express their openness, their organizational commitment decreases (Moss *et al.*, 2007). As such, when supervisors misinterpret an employee’s OCB motivations, it may be particularly demotivating for individuals high in openness, as these employees may feel undervalued or constrained when their actions are misjudged. The misattribution is perceived as a limitation on their ability to explore new ideas and solve problems creatively, leading to a decrease in their commitment and a subsequent reduction in their willingness to engage in further OCB. Formally stated, we hypothesize the following:

- H2. Openness will moderate the relationship between supervisor misattribution of employee organizational citizenship behavior and the reduced intent to engage in future acts of organizational citizenship behavior such that this relationship will be strengthened when openness is high.

Methods

Sample and procedure

The current study utilizes an experimental vignette methodology (EVM). In experimental research, vignettes are “a short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics” (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010, p. 128). EVM “consists of presenting participants with carefully constructed and realistic scenarios to assess dependent variables including intentions, attitudes, and behaviors” (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014, p. 352). We believe EVM is an appropriate way to study our research question for several reasons. First, vignettes offer a practical utility. As Aguinis and Bradley (2014, p. 359) noted, EVM allows a “focus on explicit responses to hypothetical scenarios and have been widely used in a variety of research domains” and allows for examining how a decision gets made and the subsequent outcomes. Second, vignettes allow for more accurate capturing of the variables or factors the decision-maker deems most important (Alexander and Becker, 1978). In addition, vignettes more accurately specify the context of the research question. This context helps participants think about the specifics of the issues and scenarios the vignette is inquiring about rather than asking in a more general way as a survey would (Finch, 1987).

Using EVM, we empirically tested the relationship between employee OCB and the supervisor motive attribution of the OCB. We examined how misalignment between the two impacted the motivation to perform subsequent acts of OCB. At the beginning of the control and experimental vignettes, written instructions asked participants to imagine the following work scenario the vignette describes. These instructions also included the caveat that the following scenario in the vignette may or may not be in line with their experience, but to imagine it is. In Study 1 (pilot study), we focused on establishing the core relationship between supervisor misattribution of OCB motives and subordinate intentions to engage in future OCB. However, based on the theoretical insights gathered from relevant literature (Iles *et al.*, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2010; Newman *et al.*, 2017; Pletzer, 2021), Study 2 incorporates openness to experience to explore contingencies in this relationship, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how subordinate personality influences the effect of misattribution of prosocial behavior motives on future engagement in prosocial acts within an organizational context.

Regarding similarities and differences between Study 1 and Study 2, both studies include working professionals. However, Study 1 contains participants sampled via a University Research Pool as well as Prolific, while Study 2 only contains data collected via Prolific. Second, more than 60% of participants in both studies work full-time, and participants were randomly assigned to groups in both studies. The mean age between the samples only differed by approximately 3 years.

In the vignettes, respondents were presented with a work scenario where they were asked to imagine themselves engaging in organizational citizenship behavior. Then, a manipulation check described the supervisor’s reaction to the behavior. Following the presentation of the work scenario, participants were then asked to complete surveys to assess their perception of a supervisor’s assessment of their motivation to perform the helping behaviors described in the scenario. Then, participants were asked to complete a brief survey on the perception of their likelihood to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors in the future. Respondents were then asked to complete a survey. The Institutional Review Board of the university approved this study (IRBNet ID: 1781980-4).

Study 1. Data ($N = 402$) were collected from respondents through Prolific, an online participant recruitment service, and a university research pool in the Southeastern United States in 2021. The initial survey of the university research pool was designed as a pilot study. Those results were also included in the Study 1 sample. Prolific respondents were compensated \$1.32 per completed survey, and students from the research pool received course credit for participation. The recruitment samples were restricted to currently employed participants, 18 years of age or older and located in the United States of America. There were 310 respondents in the Prolific sample and 92 respondents in the university sample, combined to create a total sample of 402. Of the respondents, 64% were female, 80.9% were Caucasian, 63% worked in full-time positions, and the mean age was 31.71 years ($SD = 11.07$). Participants were randomly assigned to groups. There were 203 participants in the control group and 199 participants in the experimental group.

Study 2. Data ($N = 307$) were collected from respondents through Prolific in 2022. Respondents were compensated \$1.40 per completed survey. The recruitment samples were restricted to currently employed participants, 18 years of age or older and located in the United States of America. There were 307 participants in the sample, with 73% working in full-time positions, 21% in part-time positions, and 6% other (i.e. self-employed). Of the respondents, 51% were male, 73.9% were Caucasian, and the mean age was 34.41 ($SD = 10.74$). Participants were randomly assigned to groups. There were 154 participants in the control group and 153 participants in the experimental group. Initial analysis of the variables within the datasets indicates less than 2% missing data for each variable (in Study 1 and Study 2). Data is missing at the person level, likely due to human error (e.g. non-response to questions in the survey), and appears to be random. Given the acceptably low percentage and a sufficient minimum sample for model estimation (Hair *et al.*, 2018), missing data were excluded listwise for the purpose of the analyses, which is the default option in SPSS statistical software.

Measures

Previously validated measures and seven-point scales were utilized for all constructs in the current study to ensure response variability.

OCB Motives. OCB motives were measured using Rioux and Penner's (2001) 30-item scale ($\alpha = 0.90$) Citizenship Motive Scale. The dimensions for this scale include impression management (Study 1 $\alpha = 0.93$; Study 2 $\alpha = 0.93$), prosocial values (Study 1 $\alpha = 0.96$; Study 2 $\alpha = 0.97$), and organizational concern (Study 1 $\alpha = 0.97$; Study 2 $\alpha = 0.97$). A sample item for impression management is "to avoid looking bad in front of others." A sample item for prosocial values is "because I feel it is important to help those in need." A sample item for organizational concern is "because I want to understand how the organization works." Scale items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree," with higher scores indicating higher levels of OCB motives.

OCB Intentions. Subsequent intentions to engage in organizational citizenship behavior were measured using a modified version of Lee and Allen's (2002) 16-item scale (Study 1 $\alpha = 0.96$, Study 2 $\alpha = 0.96$). A sample item for OCBI is "help others who have been absent," and a sample item for OCBO is "attend functions that are not required but that help the organizational image." Scale items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree," with higher scores indicating higher levels of OCB intentions.

Openness. In Study 2, openness was measured using the five questions associated with the openness dimension in Domellan *et al.* (2006) 20-item Mini-IPIP Scale ($\alpha = 0.77$). This scale measures the Big Five factors of personality, and four items are used to measure the openness construct. A sample item for openness includes "have a vivid imagination." Scale

items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree,” with higher scores indicating higher levels of openness.

Control Variables. Consistent with a literature review on organizational citizenship behavior (Ng and Feldman, 2008), we controlled for age (measured in years).

Results

Study 1

We utilized SPSS version 27 to perform the reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlations, and linear regression models. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities among the variables used in this analysis. Cronbach’s Alpha is listed in parenthesis on the diagonal in Table 1. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients ranged from 0.93–0.97; thus, all scales demonstrated good reliability. As indicated, the correlation between the impression management dimension of OCB motives is significant and in the expected direction (i.e. negative).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in SPSS to assess meaningful differences between the groups (Hair et al., 2018). Table 2 provides the analysis of variance between the variables, indicating a sufficient difference between the treatment and control groups for each citizenship motive dimension. Results indicate an overall significance of $p < 0.001$.

Table 3 provides the results of the linear regression model. Hypothesis 1 predicted that supervisor misattribution of employee acts of organizational citizenship behavior would reduce subsequent employee acts of organizational citizenship behavior. As predicted, supervisor misattribution of employee acts of OCB, specifically when the act is attributed to impression management, will result in a reduction of subsequent employee acts of OCB ($\beta = -0.16, p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, results suggest that MCIM, when controlling for age, contributes to 5.4% of the variance ($p < 0.01$) in the outcome variable.

Table 1.
Study 1: descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|-------|---------|--------|
| 1. Gender | 1.70 | 0.55 | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 31.71 | 11.07 | -1.05* | | | | |
| 3. Ethnicity | 1.56 | 1.35 | 0.02 | -1.09* | | | |
| 4. MCIM | 3.28 | 1.47 | -0.08 | -0.17** | 0.08 | (0.93) | |
| 5. OCB | 4.53 | 1.40 | 0.08 | 0.19** | -0.03 | -0.19** | (0.96) |

Note(s): $N = 402$. Reliabilities (Coefficient Alpha) appear in parentheses on the diagonal
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
Study 1: ANOVA

| | | F | Sig |
|---------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| MCOC | Between Groups | 734.412 | 0.000 |
| MCPV | Between Groups | 522.434 | 0.000 |
| MCIM | Between Groups | 368.138 | 0.000 |
| $R^2 = 0.036$ | $\Delta R^2 = 0.036$ | $\Delta F = 14.56$ | 0.000 |

Note(s): $N = 402$. MCOC = manipulation check organizational concern. MCPV = manipulation check prosocial values. MCIM = manipulation check impression management
Source(s): Table by authors

Study 2

We utilized SPSS version 27 to perform the reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlations, and linear regression models. Table 4 provides the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha values listed on the diagonal) among the variables used in this analysis. The Cronbach’s Alpha values in Study 2 ranged from 0.77–0.96, thus demonstrating sufficient scale reliability. As indicated, the correlation between the impression management dimension of OCB motives is significant and in the expected direction (i.e. negative).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess meaningful differences between the groups (Hair et al., 2018). Table 5 provides the analysis of variance between the variables, indicating a sufficient difference between the treatment and control groups for each impression management variable. Results indicate an overall significance of $p = 0.000$.

Table 6 provides the results of the simple linear regression model. Hypothesis 1 predicted that supervisor misattribution of employee acts of organizational citizenship behavior would reduce subsequent employee acts of organizational citizenship behavior. Results of this study show that by manipulating the type of attribution toward engaging in OCB, if it is a

| Model | Unstandardized B | Coefficients Std. Error | Standardized coefficients beta | t | Sig |
|------------|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------|-------|
| (Constant) | 4.40 | 0.284 | | 15.52 | 0.000 |
| MCIM | -0.149 | 0.047 | -0.158 | -3.121 | 0.002 |

Note(s): $N = 402$. MCIM = manipulation check impression management. CI = confidence interval. Dependent Variable: subsequent organizational citizenship behavior

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Study 1: linear regression predicting subsequent organizational citizenship behavior

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|--------------|-------|-------|---------|--------|-------|---------|--------|--------|
| 1. Gender | 1.59 | 10.74 | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 34.41 | 1.40 | -0.22** | | | | | |
| 3. Ethnicity | 1.71 | 1.59 | 0.15 | -0.10 | | | | |
| 4. MCIM | 3.21 | 1.48 | -0.13* | -0.04 | -0.00 | (0.93) | | |
| 5. Openness | 3.97 | 0.79 | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.08 | -0.07 | (0.77) | |
| 6. OCB | 4.84 | 1.27 | -0.05 | 0.18** | 0.09 | -0.31** | 0.01 | (0.96) |

Note(s): $N = 307$. Reliabilities (Coefficient Alpha) appear in parentheses on the diagonal

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 4.
Study 2: descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities

| | | F | Sig |
|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| MCOO | Between Groups | 532.860 | 0.000 |
| MCPV | Between Groups | 405.923 | 0.000 |
| MCIM | Between Groups | 167.537 | 0.000 |
| $R^2 = 0.096$ | $\Delta R^2 = 0.096$ | $\Delta F = 31.480$ | 0.000 |

Note(s): $N = 307$. MCOO = manipulation check organizational concern. MCPV = manipulation check prosocial values. MCIM = manipulation check impression management

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 5.
Study 2: ANOVA

misattribution, the individual is less likely to engage in subsequent OCB. As predicted, supervisor misattribution of employee acts of OCB, specifically when the act is attributed to impression management, will result in a reduction of subsequent employee acts of OCB ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.001$), supporting **Hypothesis 1**. Additionally, results suggest that MCIM, when controlling for age, contributes to 11.7% of the variance ($p < 0.001$ in the outcome variable).

In Study 2, we utilized Hayes' (2017) Process Version 4 macro (Model 1) in the SPSS software to examine the moderation. **Hypothesis 2** predicted that openness would strengthen the negative relationship between supervisor misattribution of OCB Motives and subsequent acts of OCB. Based on the results in **Figure 1**, we found support for **Hypothesis 2**, specifically when the misattribution was OCB Motives Impression Management. The t-value of the interaction between OCB Motives and openness has a significant, negative effect on subsequent OCB intentions ($\beta = -0.18, t = -3.08, p < 0.01$). The 95% percentile bootstrap confidence interval of the interaction terms effect is $[-0.29, -0.06]$. The graph of the significant interaction is shown in **Figure 1**.

Discussion

The current study aims to examine whether subsequent acts of employee OCB are impacted when motive attributions between an employee and supervisor do not align and to explore if

Table 6.
Study 2: linear regression predicting subsequent organizational citizenship behavior

| Model | Unstandardized B | Coefficients Std. Error | Standardized coefficients beta | t | Sig |
|------------|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------|-------|
| (Constant) | 5.010 | 0.283 | | 17.01 | 0.000 |
| MCIM | -0.262 | 0.047 | -0.303 | -5.528 | 0.000 |

Note(s): $N = 307$. MCIM = manipulation check impression management. CI = confidence intervals. Dependent Variable: subsequent organizational citizenship behavior
Source(s): Table by authors

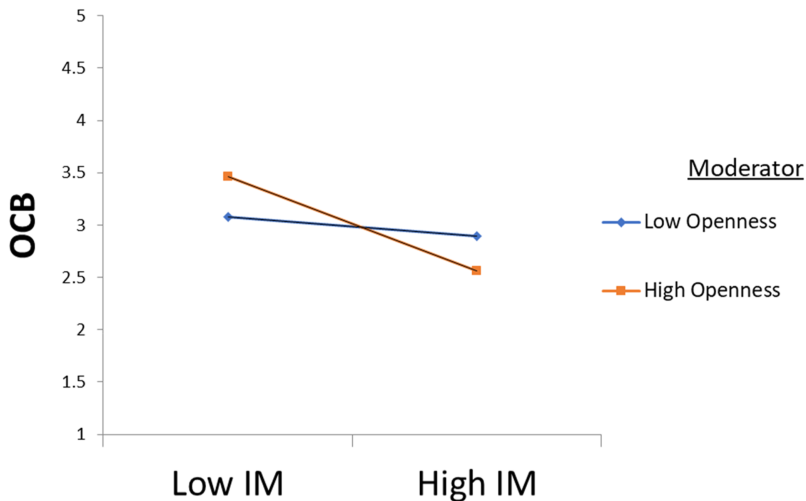


Figure 1.
Study 2: Interaction between impression management and openness on OCB

Note(s): IM = impression management. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior
Source(s): Figure by authors

personality traits like openness moderate this relationship. Results suggest negative organizational outcomes when supervisors assign negative motivations for employee OCB. Specifically, when supervisors assume an employee's motivation for performing OCB is driven by impression management, the employee is less likely to engage in future acts of OCB. Additionally, the relationship between the employee and the organization changes from one based on social exchange to one based on economic exchange, whereby the employee is less likely to perform certain types of OCB.

The reciprocal nature of social exchange theory underscores this finding, as it posits that positive actions by one party lead to positive responses from the other, fostering a cycle of mutual benefit and trust. However, this reciprocity can also result in negative organizational outcomes when trust is broken between the organization and an employee. Specifically, when a supervisor, acting as a proxy for the organization, communicates through words or actions that they believe the employee had negative motivations for performing an act of citizenship are negative, the employee is less inclined to "go the extra mile" to assist the organization (OCBO). However, our findings suggest supervisor misattribution does not appear to impact subsequent employee OCB directed toward other employees (OCBI). This aligns with research by [Bolino and Grant \(2016\)](#), who found that if an individual is motivated to help others due to prosocial values, they do not view the supervisor's misattribution as a valid reason to withhold helping behavior from their colleagues.

In addition, the findings suggest that openness acts as a moderator and strengthens the relationship between supervisor misattribution and subsequent acts of OCB from the employee. As [Moss et al. \(2007\)](#) found, openness can also lead to reduced organizational commitment when employees high in this trait perceive limited resources and are inhibited from expressing their creativity. It is not a stretch to believe that an employee high in openness who experienced their supervisor wrongly misattributing their motives for their act of OCB would interpret this as a limitation on their need to solve problems creatively or look for novel solutions. Therefore, organizational commitment decreases, as do subsequent acts of OCB.

Theoretical implications

Social exchange theory was utilized to address the connection between supervisor and employee attribution of OCB motivation. One of the fundamental tenets of social exchange theory is that employees will assess the quality of social exchanges and reciprocate their behavior accordingly, whether that be an assessment of negative treatment and reciprocate with a negative response or a positive response to positive treatment ([Blau, 1964](#)). This research confirmed this tenet by demonstrating that the employees' perceived negative social exchange (supervisor misattribution of helping behavior motivation) resulted in a negative response (reduced future OCB acts). Additionally, this research extends past findings that show direct relationships between supervisor and employee relationship quality and OCB ([Dulebohn et al., 2012](#); [Gerstner and Day, 1997](#); [Ilies et al., 2007](#)). But more importantly, this research demonstrated the importance of supervisors understanding their employees' motivations for engaging in OCB in the first place. If an employee is engaging in OCB based on intrinsic motivation, such as a desire to help others, and their motivation is attributed to an external motivation, such as impression management, the employee may feel misunderstood and believe their values and motivations are incorrectly perceived, leading to reduced OCB.

Secondly, our results suggest that the personality trait openness moderates the relationship between the misattribution of OCB motivation and future OCB acts. Social exchange theory assumes that a balance between costs and rewards drives relational decision-making. When the relationship costs are worth less than the rewards, the individual will eventually end the relationship or discontinue a behavior ([Thibaut and Kelley, 1959](#)).

By isolating openness as a boundary condition, we were able to demonstrate that individual differences, specifically openness, may strengthen the negative association between the misattribution of OCB and future OCB. Our results demonstrated that employees may interpret supervisor OCB motive misattribution as a curtailment of resources and a barrier to expressing their values, leading to reduced OCB. As such, the current model indicates that when individuals high in openness perceive that their costs (i.e. time and service) do not equal rewards (i.e. respect and social approval) from leaders, the time spent engaging in these acts of service will discontinue.

Managerial implications

The present study's research offers a critical managerial implication: incorrectly assigning a negative motivation to an employee's organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) can discourage future acts of OCB by that employee. This finding is important, given the critical role OCB plays in the organization's proper functioning and the success of employees. For the organization, OCB is associated with decreased employee turnover, increased organizational commitment, enhanced flexibility and efficiency, and faster new employee onboarding (Koopman *et al.*, 2016; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000). For employees, OCB leads to higher performance ratings from supervisors and personal satisfaction from contributing positively to others and the organization (Bateman and Organ, 1983; Park and Van Dyne, 2006).

Given these benefits, the study suggests practical and interventionist steps organizations can take to mitigate the reduction of employee OCB and enhance managerial effectiveness and employee satisfaction. Awareness is the first step toward prevention and remedy. Managers may not be fully aware of the concept of OCB or the multiple positive outcomes associated with employee OCB. Therefore, it is essential to bridge this knowledge gap. Organizations should educate managers on the importance of OCB for organizational well-being and proper functioning, as well as cultivate a culture of helping and serving others to encourage future acts of citizenship. Training should include practical examples of OCB's organizational outcomes, as outlined in this study. This training could be incorporated into any "new manager" training programs for employees moving into supervisory or management roles.

Second, it is critical for managers to undergo training to assess the motivations behind employee acts of citizenship more accurately to avoid decreasing future acts of OCB. This training should cover the identification of employee personality traits and motivations, as well as bias recognition, to help managers avoid potential unconscious judgments based on individual characteristics like race, gender, talent, and character. Managers should also be made acutely aware of the detrimental outcomes associated with misattributing motivations for employee OCB. For instance, as suggested by Eastman (1994), if a supervisor mistakenly perceives an employee's self-focused motives for OCB rather than other-focused motives, this negative perception can significantly affect the employee's evaluation and potentially harm their standing within the organization. By implementing these strategies, organizations can better support and sustain a culture of citizenship behavior, ensuring both organizational and employee success. Educating managers, fostering an inclusive and supportive culture, and training on accurate motive assessment are essential steps in preventing the misattribution of employee motivations and maintaining the positive cycle of OCB. Organizations can promote a more effective, committed, and satisfied workforce through these measures.

Limitations and future research

As with all research, the current study has limitations that can be addressed through future research. First, the sample population was somewhat racially homogeneous (80.9%

Caucasian) and based in the United States. This research design was a lab study based on responses to realistic but hypothetical vignettes. Future research should strive to sample a more diverse population of working adults in an organizational setting to determine if the results hold in the “real world” of organizational life. Examining potential differences in these effects cross-culturally may yield additional insights. For example, in collectivist cultures, supervisors may be less likely to misattribute the intentions of OCB because of how helping behavior is contextualized in these cultures. More specifically, [Perlow and Weeks \(2002\)](#) find that collectivist cultures view helping behavior as an opportunity for skill development as opposed to individualistic cultures, which may view it as more of a disruption in one’s workday.

This research could also be expanded to determine if different processes provide more clarity on how and why misattribution leads to decreases in subsequent acts of OCB. Besides openness, are there any specific characteristics that indicate an individual is more likely to respond in this way? From a motivational perspective, employees who are extrinsically motivated and possess a higher need for recognition may also be more discouraged by the misattribution of motives, as these individuals place greater value on supervisor acknowledgment ([Ryan and Deci, 2000](#)). Understanding the relative influence of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation on employee OCB may shed light on how supervisor misattribution differently impacts their future behavior. By examining these relationships, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how supervisors can foster work environments that encourage OCB despite individual differences in motivation.

Researchers might also consider how work environment characteristics moderate these relations. A strong organizational justice climate (i.e. employee perceptions of fair treatment within the organization) has the potential to mitigate the negative impact of misattribution if employees believe their efforts are recognized equivalently to others ([Ambrose et al., 2021](#); [Qiu and Dooley, 2022](#)). On a similar note, although the current study is limited by indeterminate data on industry-specific analyses due to a primary focus on core variables and limitations in the data collection process, future research should consider collecting industry-specific data on participants to provide more specific insights into industry-specific effects of supervisor misattribution of OCB on subordinates’ intentions to engage in future OCB.

Future research should also focus on subsequent outcomes of supervisor misattribution beyond decreased subsequent OCB. For example, does supervisor misattribution lead to poor performance evaluations, lower organizational commitment, increased turnover intention, or workplace deviance? What is the temporal aspect of this process - e.g. how long does the employee withhold from performing subsequent acts of OCB? Longitudinal designs will ultimately be warranted to enhance the understanding of these processes. In addition, research on how the individual “reconciles” (or does not reconcile) with the organization and recalibrates their relationship to one of social exchange would be an essential contribution. These critical questions would further the understanding of employee OCB.

Conclusion

Support was found for the negative relationship between supervisor misattribution of an employee’s OCB motivation and subsequent engagement in future OCB. In addition, employee openness strengthens this relationship. Given the importance of OCB in the organizational context, this is an important finding regarding how supervisors may inadvertently suppress employee OCB. Scholars are encouraged to refine and extend this line of research by exploring potential mediating and moderating processes involved in this phenomenon.

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