

SAM AND BONNIE RECHTER FELLOWSHIP

Research Report

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APPRECIATION AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT IN SUPERVISOR- SUBORDINATE DYADS: A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON WORKPLACE APPRECIATION

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In organizations, a primary source of appreciation is direct supervisors (Larson, 1984; 1986). Appreciation is important to employees, who universally report both expecting and desiring appreciation from supervisors (Luthans, 2000; White, 2016). Despite expecting appreciation, subordinates report receiving little appreciation in the workplace (Kaplan, 2012). This is in contrast to manager reports that they express gratitude to others at work very frequently (Kaplan, 2012). Because employees feel that they are not appreciated and managers report that they express appreciation at high rates, there seems to be disagreement in perceptions and experiences surrounding appreciation in supervisor-subordinate dyads. Given this disconnect, it is important to explore the relationship between supervisors' expressions of appreciation and subordinates' resulting feelings of appreciation to understand the causes and consequences of disagreement about appreciation. To do so, both manifestations of appreciation—expressed appreciation and felt appreciation—must be explored.

Though explicit research on appreciation in organizations is nascent, behavioral manifestations (i.e., expressions) of appreciation have long been implicitly studied by

management scholars in the form of praise, recognition, awards, and expressed gratitude. More recently, appreciation has also been examined as an emotion, in the form of felt appreciation. Although expressions and feelings comprise two parts of the appreciation phenomenon, the literatures on expressed appreciation and felt appreciation are siloed. With few exceptions, scholars do not concurrently examine the relationship between expressions of appreciation and the feelings of appreciation that should result from those expressions. Instead, researchers tend to explore expressed and felt appreciation separately, and at times assume that expressed appreciation is a meaningful indicator of felt appreciation and vice versa.

Both as an expression and a feeling, appreciation is a relational construct (Algoe et al., 2008), in that it generally requires two individuals—an expresser and a receiver. Despite being inherently relational, manifestations of appreciation tend to be examined from the perspective of one member of the exchange. That is, examinations of expressed and felt appreciation tend to focus either on the expresser or the target of expressions, without consideration of both parties simultaneously. Ignoring the relational nature of appreciation has important limitations. First, examining relational phenomena from the perspective of one member of the dyad is theoretically deficient (Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012) because it ignores the perspective of one relationship member. Examining the perspective of both relationship partners is necessary to understand the nature of the disconnect between expresser and receiver seen in the literature (e.g., Kaplan, 2012; O.C. Tanner Group, 2020) and might help explain the inconsistent results seen in the broader appreciation literature (e.g., Gallus & Frey, 2017; Loewy & Bailey, 2007; Sandrin et al., 2019). Second, by examining only one relationship partner, these models often assume that the reports of expressions of appreciation from either the expresser or the receiver are objectively true, and

not the results of an individual's specific understanding of such behaviors. Extant research has implicitly assumed that expressers and receivers agree on the appreciation in their relationship by default—that is, that expressers' ratings of their own expressions of appreciation are congruent with the receiver's feelings of appreciation resulting from the receipt of those expressions.

However, recent research has suggested that this assumption may not be merited (e.g., Kaplan, 2012; Kumar & Epley, 2018). As such, assuming that one dyad member's perspective is sufficient to describe the nature of that relationship is problematic because it ignores that the perceptions of both dyad members—and their agreement or disagreement in perceptions—may theoretically and empirically impact important workplace relationship outcomes.

With the limitations of the appreciation literature in mind, the purpose of this dissertation is to define appreciation as a relational construct and explore appreciation agreement and disagreement in supervisor-subordinate dyads across three chapters. In Chapter 1, to understand the current state of the literature, I review research on expressions of appreciation and specific types of appreciative behaviors such as recognition, praise, awards, and expressed gratitude. I also review the literature on appreciation as an emotion, delineating the definitional differences between two constructs associated with the label “appreciation”: feeling appreciative and feeling appreciated. Finally, I present a model of relational appreciation between supervisors and subordinates and demonstrate that both agreement and disagreement about appreciation can occur.

In Chapter 2, I investigate antecedents and outcomes of (dis) agreement in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. To do so, I derive hypotheses from role theory (e.g., Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978) to examine the influence of supervisor and subordinate role expectations for

appreciation on expressed and felt appreciation in dyads, as well as examine the influence of appreciation (dis)agreement on supervisor and subordinate perceptions of relational outcomes. Results from a time-lagged survey study of 157 supervisor-subordinate dyads indicate substantial disagreement between supervisors and subordinates regarding appreciation. As predicted, supervisors' role expectations predicted supervisors' expressions of appreciation. Moreover, polynomial regression analyses suggest that agreement on high appreciation, relative to low appreciation, is positively related to relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, positive relational tone, and relational maintenance behaviors.

After establishing the construct of appreciation agreement, in Chapter 3 I draw on communicative responsibility theory (Aune et al., 2005) to suggest that the disconnect in supervisors' and subordinates' perceptions of appreciation might be due to the illusion of transparency—the tendency for people to overestimate the extent to which others can discern their internal states, understand their expressions, and comprehend their communications (Gilovich et al., 1998). To address this disconnect, I suggest a supervisor and a subordinate awareness intervention to increase supervisors' expressions of appreciation and increase subordinates' attention to the expressions of appreciation they receive (cf. Fischhoff, 1982; Whiteside & Barclay, 2018). Results of this intervention study, in a sample of 161 supervisor-subordinate dyads, reveal support for the interventions' effects. The supervisor awareness intervention increased supervisors' expressions of appreciation and the subordinate awareness intervention increased subordinates' feelings of appreciation as a result of receiving expressions of appreciation. Supplemental analyses also show support for the positive influence of agreement on high appreciation for relational outcomes (i.e., relationship satisfaction, positive relational

tone, and relational maintenance behaviors), replicating the results found in Chapter 2.

Implications and future directions are discussed.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on workplace appreciation in four ways. First, I recognize and review the many constructs that fall under the umbrella of appreciation: recognition, praise, awards, and expressed gratitude. As such, I identify key theoretical perspectives, research themes, and limitations of each literature in order to translate existing work into future research directions for research on workplace appreciation. In doing so, I emphasize the need for a relational perspective on workplace appreciation, involving both the expresser and the receiver of appreciation to fully understand the process of appreciation in organizations. Second, using a relational view of appreciation, I develop the construct of appreciation (dis)agreement as a way to understand how and why supervisors and subordinates do not always see eye to eye on the appreciation in their relationship. This is important because examining appreciation relationally—as agreement and disagreement—allows understanding of the perspective of both the expresser and the receiver in the appreciation process. This contributes to the literature by providing explanations for how it is possible that supervisors report expressing appreciation at high levels, but subordinates reporting receiving little appreciation in the workplace (cf. Kaplan, 2012).

Third, the current examination contributes to the literature by examining relational outcomes of appreciation agreement and disagreement. Theory and research in psychology have suggested that a main function of appreciation is fostering and strengthening interpersonal relationships (e.g., Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; 2020; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2010). However,

almost no organizational research has examined the relationship outcomes of appreciation at work. Because promoting high-quality connections is significant to organizational scholars (e.g., Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Rosseau, 2007), this is an important next step for workplace appreciation research.

Finally, given the benefits of consensus to dyads (e.g., Landry et al., 2014; Matta et al., 2015), I contribute to the literature by demonstrating a practical way to increase agreement on high appreciation. Encouraging appreciation agreement is important because it should have positive outcomes for individuals and their relationship. Therefore, a mechanism to decrease appreciation disagreement (by encouraging agreement on high appreciation) may be able to encourage the positive relational outcomes associated with appreciation agreement.

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