Examining the Relationship Between Trust in Supervisor–Employee Relationships and Workplace Dissent Expression

Holly J. Payne

Organizational dissent can be a valuable, constructive form of communication in organizations and is influenced by a variety of communication factors. This study explores how employees’ trust in their supervisors relates to dissent expression. Data collected from 179 full-time employees were analyzed using correlational analysis. Results indicated trust in supervisors was significantly related to employees’ use of articulated dissent. Additionally, there was a significant, negative relationship between trust in supervisors and latent and displaced dissent. Limitations and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Organizational Dissent Expression; Supervisor–Employee Communication; Trust

At some point, all employees face the difficulty of deciding when, if, and how to communicate disagreement within their organizations (Graham, 1986). Communicating dissent or expressing an opposing opinion is a way employees can take ownership in their workplaces and negotiate roles (Gorden, 1988). According to Kassing (1997), dissent involves “feeling apart from one’s organization” and “expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about one’s organization” (p. 312). While some organizations invite and value employee dissent, viewing it as a creative process, others dole out punishments for such acts (Sprague & Ruud, 1988; Warren, 2003).
Placed in situations where they feel contradiction or disagreement, employees respond to trigger events based on individual, relational, and organizational factors (Kassing, 1997). Individual influences include employees’ communication predispositions, relational factors include the quality and types of relationships employees have at work with supervisors and peers, and organizational influences on dissent involve communicative practices and patterns regarding participation and voice. Existing research addressing these components provides great insight into the dissent process; however, little work has addressed the supervisor–employee relationship, which is salient to employee communication behaviors.

The relationship quality between supervisors and employees is especially relevant to dissent expression (Kassing, 2000a). When employees perceive a supportive climate with their supervisor, their work performance benefits and they are likely to work collaboratively in helping supervisors meet business goals (Dysik & Kuvaas, 2012; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). In order to work collaboratively, employees should feel a sense of trust and support, which would allow them to communicate openly even about difficult issues that might be in contrast to the perspective of the organization or individual supervisor. This study addresses how trust between supervisors and employees affects the ways in which employees communicate dissent in their organizations.

**Dissent Expression and Trust**

Dissent expression is an important form of employee communication practice that has the potential to improve workplaces and work lives. Employees make decisions to dissent based on the seriousness of an issue, their personal responsibility for communicating dissent as part of their role, and their ability or skill in designing dissent messages (Graham, 1986). Employees also consider the likelihood of corrective action being taken against them, available channels for dissent expression, and the personal cost of dissenting. Kassing’s (1998) model of dissent expression offers a systematic approach for studying how employees communicate their contrary opinions and focuses on employee perceptions of their own communicative behavior in addition to relational qualities with supervisors or coworkers and general organizational communication practices related to input.

Kassing (1998) identifies three primary types of dissent as articulated, latent, and displaced. Dissent can be expressed directly to supervisors (articulated dissent), to coworkers or other members of similar status in the organization (latent or lateral dissent), or to individuals outside the organization such as friends, family, or the media (displaced dissent). Multiple research studies provide a sense of how individual factors impact dissent strategy selection (Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, & Patterson, 2007; Kassing, 2000a, 2000b; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999, 2001; Payne, 2007). Employees who are argumentative, in managerial roles, and have an internal locus of control use more articulated dissent strategies, while employees who are verbally aggressive, have an external locus of control, and low positional status use more latent or lateral dissent (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999, 2001). More recently, Payne (2007) found that
employees with high levels of organization-based esteem (feelings of worth to their organizations) used more articulated dissent strategies, and Avtgis et al. (2007) found that employees experiencing burnout are less likely to use articulated and latent dissent tactics.

At the organization level, employees who perceive high levels of workplace freedom of speech view their workplaces as more participative, which results in higher levels of employee identification with the organization (Infante & Gorden, 1991). Kassing (2000b) further confirmed this connection and found that employees who perceive high levels of workplace freedom of speech use significantly more articulated dissent strategies, while those perceiving low levels of workplace freedom of speech used more latent dissent.

In addition to the work on individual and organizational influences on dissent expression, researchers have also explored connections between supervisor–subordinate relationships and dissent. The quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships affects employee communication strategies, satisfaction, and commitment (Infante & Gorden, 1991). Kassing (2000a) found that employees in the supervisor’s out-group reported using more latent dissent tactics. Employees in the supervisor’s in-group, however, used more articulated dissent strategies. Regarding employees’ with in-group status, he states, “High levels of involvement, influence, and persuasion create a communication climate within the superior-subordinate relationship that invites opinion-sharing, apparently when these opinions may be contradictory” (p. 65). According to Graham (1986), relational and organizational elements of communication climate influence the ways in which employees choose to express disagreement. Researchers have focused primarily on the quality of communication as well as the level of involvement supervisors have with subordinates in determining if employees will use articulated, latent, or displaced dissent (Kassing, 2000a). This study extends this focus by exploring the role trust plays in the supervisor–subordinate relationship and its connections with dissent expression. Research suggests that employees’ trust in supervisors has a more direct connection to performance and citizenship behaviors than trust in the organization or organization’s leadership (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Similarly, Tan and Tan (2000) found significant relationships between supervisor trust and both satisfaction with supervisors and innovative behaviors. Specifically, when employees had high levels of trust in their supervisor they were more likely to communicate openly, develop improved interpersonal relationships with supervisors, develop and explore new ideas, and rely on supervisors for guidance and support. The literature suggests that trust plays a key role in developing a positive relationship climate with supervisors, which may facilitate open dissent expression. With this in mind, this study seeks to determine the degree to which trust relates to dissent expression.

Definitions of trust typically emphasize intentionality and motivation. Lewicki and Bunker (1995) define trust as “confident positive expectations about another’s motives with respect to oneself in situations entailing risk” (p. 139). Research on trust in organizations focuses on behavioral elements in terms of holding positive expectations about another and becoming vulnerable. When trust is established, the reciprocation or exchange of positive behaviors increases (Lewicki, McAllister,
A recent study by Huang (2012) explores the connection between empowerment, supervisor trust, feedback-seeking behavior, and job performance, finding that supervisor trust is a significant mediator. When employees trust their supervisor, they are more likely to engage in feedback-seeking behavior, which enhances their job performance.

A trust relationship evolves when supervisors are open to employee input and willing to share control. Levels of supervisory support, including care and concern for employees, an interest in career development, and general valuing of employees’ work, have a stronger connection to trust than employees’ perceived relationship with their organization (Zhang, Tsui, Song, Li, & Jia, 2008). In other words, support provided in the supervisor relationship affects overall trust levels more than employees’ perception of support with the organization in general. Employees reciprocate trust by assisting in meeting important business goals (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). To the contrary, when supervisors engage in distrustful behaviors or are abusive, employees produce less and engage in fewer organizational citizenship behaviors (Tepper, 2000; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002).

While research confirms that trusting and supportive supervisor relationships are related to employee feedback-seeking behaviors (Huang, 2012; Nifadkar, Tsui, & Ashforth, 2012), little has been done to see if these qualities contribute to feedback-giving behaviors such as dissent. Gaines (1980) suggests that high levels of trust in supervisors may encourage employees to voice upward (articulated) dissent. Trust likely influences employees’ expression of differing opinions with a supervisor; therefore the following hypothesis was posed:

H1: Employees’ perception of trust with their supervisor is positively related to articulated dissent.

Research suggests that when employees have low-quality relationships with their supervisors they are less likely to voice their concerns directly because they feel their ideas will not be well received (Kassing, 2000a). The quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships is connected with fairness perceptions, which influence dissent expression as well as managerial trust (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005). Goodboy, Chory, and Dunleavy (2008) found that when employees’ perceived low levels of interpersonal justice with regard to unfair pay that was explained with sufficient information but communicated disrespectfully, they were more likely to communicate their dissent with other employees (latent). Kassing and McDowell (2008) also found that when managers perceived low levels of justice, they were more likely to communicate their dissent to others outside of the organization (displaced); whereas, nonmanagers’ justice perceptions negatively related to displaced and latent dissent. The research suggests that when employees have low-quality relationships with their supervisors and perceive injustice, they are more likely to communicate dissent to coworkers or with others outside of the organization. These relationships are marked by a lack of trust; therefore, the following hypotheses were posed:

H2: Employees’ perception of trust with their supervisor is negatively related to latent dissent.
H3: Employees’ perception of trust with their supervisor is negatively related to displaced dissent.

Method

Participants

In order to measure employees’ individual perceptions of climate without bias toward one single organization or one type of industry (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005), participants were solicited from a variety of organizations. A total of 179 full-time employees from various types of workplaces (i.e., education, health care, service, and manufacturing) in the southern United States participated in this study. The participants represented a variety of industries, including banking/finance ($n=6$), computers/information technology ($n=3$), education ($n=37$), engineering ($n=3$), government ($n=12$), health care ($n=22$), insurance ($n=2$), legal ($n=4$), manufacturing ($n=12$), service ($n=17$), retail sales ($n=13$), and others ($n=48$). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 64 years ($M=36$), and approximately 44.7% were male ($n=80$) and 55.3% were female ($n=99$). The average tenure with the organization for the sample was 7.6 years.

Procedures

Respondents were recruited by undergraduates enrolled in communication courses at a large south-central university. Students were given the opportunity to earn credit for recruiting up to three full-time employees to participate. The students themselves were not allowed to participate even if they had a full-time work status. All students were given the survey packet, including a project description and consent form or the Web site instructions for employees opting to complete the online version of the survey. Each participant completed a separate page with their name and phone number so that their surveys could be verified. The researcher followed a procedure similar to that used by Kassing (2002) and contacted 20% of the total sample. All participants contacted verified personal completion of the surveys.

Measurement of Variables

Employees received a questionnaire packet or took the survey online. A comparison of Web- versus paper-based surveys revealed no significant differences in responses. Participants completed scales on organizational dissent, supervisor trust, and support for innovation. Kassing’s (1998) Organizational Dissent Scale (ODS) was used to measure articulated, latent, and displaced dissent. This 20-item scale asks participants to consider how they express concerns at work using a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The ODS consistently produces a stable 3-factor solution with reliabilities ranging from .66 to .86 (Kassing, 2000a, 2000b; Kassing & Avtgis, 2001). In this study, acceptable Cronbach’s alphas were calculated for each dimension, including articulated dissent (.83), latent dissent (.72), and displaced dissent (.71).
Supervisor trust was measured using a scale from Koys and DeCotiis’s (1991) measure of psychological climate, which includes autonomy, cohesion, trust, pressure, support, recognition, fairness, and innovation. In their initial construction and validation of the scale, Koys and DeCotiis (1991) found that the items measuring the perception of supervisor trust and support loaded as 1 factor. Similarly, in a study of emotional intelligence and psychological climate, Klem and Schlechter (2008) found that support was not a distinct factor within the climate scale. Their EFA found that trust explained 35.16% of 61.6% of the total variance. Among their findings, these researchers found trust significantly related to perceptions of managers’ emotional intelligence ($r = .38$), explaining 14.14% of the variance, the most robust relationship of all the psychological climate dimensions. Based on these studies, 10 items were used from the original scale combining trust and support such as “My boss has a lot of personal integrity,” “My boss is the kind of person I can level with,” “I can count on my boss to help me when I need it,” “My boss is easy to talk to about job-related problems” using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This scale has shown strong reliabilities of .88 to .94 (Klem & Schlechter, 2008; Koys & DeCotiis, 1991; Ward, 1998) In the current study, an acceptable Cronbach alpha was calculated to be .92.

Results

The hypotheses were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. The means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients for each scale, and a correlation matrix of the variables examined in the study, are noted in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1, predicting that trust in supervisors would be positively related to the use of articulated dissent, was supported ($r = .16$, $p < .04$). The second and third hypotheses, predicting a negative relationship between trust in supervisors and latent dissent ($r = -.23$, $p < .002$) and displaced dissent ($r = -.34$, $p < .0005$), were supported.

Discussion

The present study explores the relationships between employees’ trust in their supervisors and forms of dissent expression. Although the analysis does not determine causation, significant relationships were found. The findings indicate that as employees’ trust in their supervisors increases, their use of upward or articulated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Supervisor trust</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Articulated dissent</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Latent dissent</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Displaced dissent</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.
dissent also increases, while their use of latent and displaced dissent decreases. This study lends further support to the significance of supervisor relationships on dissent expression; however, the low amounts of variance explained for each type of dissent is indicative of a more complex relationship, which likely includes individual and organizational factors (Kassing, 1997).

Articulated dissent or disagreements voiced to managers can be an important tool for improvement. To date, the research supports the idea that when organizations encourage participation and when supervisors maintain quality relationships where employees perceive fairness in decision making, employees are more likely to openly communicate their ideas up the chain of command (Kassing, 2000a; Kassing & McDowell, 2008). This study extends this work in establishing a significant albeit small link between supervisor–employee relationships that are marked by high levels of trust and articulated dissent. The small correlation suggests a more complex relationship between dissent and the quality of communication between supervisors and employees. Although trust is a significant component of employees’ perception of psychological climate, other dimensions may explain more variation in the expression of disagreement. According to Koys and DeCotiis (1991), perceptions of psychological climate “serve as the individual’s cognitive map of how the organization functions and therefore, help determine what is appropriate behavior in a given situation” (p. 266). Given this, other elements of climate-tapping characteristics of the supervisor–subordinate relationship, such as recognition and fairness, might provide more robust results. Also, as reviewed earlier, dissent expression is influenced by individual and organizational variables. While this study highlights the significance of the supervisor–subordinate relationship, situational and individual-level variables likely combine to more strongly predict dissent behaviors.

Future research could examine the connection between trust and dissent in relation to other communication qualities in the supervisor–employee relationship, such as empowerment and information sharing. Moye and Henkin (2006) make a connection between employee trust of supervisors with empowerment, claiming that when employees feel empowered they have higher trust in managers. Additionally, Ellis and Shockley-Zalabak (2001) connect trust with information receiving. Analysis of these communication phenomena can provide supervisors with strategies for building trust and nurturing dissent.

Latent dissent—disagreement expressed to organizational members of equal or lesser status—significantly decreased as employees’ level of trust in their supervisor increased. As distrust increases, employees are likely to go to coworkers to communicate disagreement because they lack confidence that their supervisor will listen to their concerns, take action to initiate change, or avoid forming negative impressions. This finding is similar to the body of work showing that latent dissent correlates negatively to commitment, satisfaction, perceptions of out-group membership, and injustice (Kassing, 1998, 2000a; Kassing & McDowell, 2008). Together these findings suggest that employees with high trust in supervisors may have less reason to dissent laterally because they are receiving adequate information, being empowered, not being coerced, and perceive procedural and distributive justice. When employees
have trusting relationships, they may feel less motivated to communicate dissent to others because they are comfortable sharing their thoughts with supervisors without fear of reprisal. This connects with the research on trust in that trusting relationships build communication climates where employees not only solicit feedback but may be more inclined to give unsolicited feedback (Huang, 2012; Nifadkar et al., 2012).

Finally, displaced dissent, the expression of disagreement to people outside the organization, decreased when supervisor trust increased. Displaced dissent is likely to occur when employees fear retaliation for voicing their concerns. In this sense, distrust of one’s supervisor or others in the organization would likely push employees to seek alternative forums for expressing their discontent outside of the organization. Kassing (1998, 2000b) also found that when employees perceive low levels of workplace freedom of speech or have lower levels of commitment, they more likely use more displaced dissent. Similar to the findings on latent dissent, employees may be more inclined to communicate directly to supervisors when trust is high, as opposed to going to coworkers or outside parties.

This study had several limitations, including the regional nature of the survey, a reliance on self-reported data, and a focus on one-time relational perceptions. Further, and perhaps not surprisingly, the analysis revealed significant but small relationships between the variables. This points to the complexity of communication variables on employee disagreement and highlights the importance of studying the degree to which different variables impact dissent. The findings from this study contribute to the creation of a model for communicative variables within the supervisor–employee relationship that directly impact the enactment of dissent. Additionally, this study examined a narrow range of communication variables within the coworker and supervisor relationship. Future research should expand this effort at identifying key relational issues relevant to dissent expression.

In sum, this study confirms previous research by parceling out the relationships between dissent behaviors and trust in the supervisor–employee relationship and provides insight into the significant relationships between trust and the expression of disagreement.

Note

[1] While correlational analysis does not provide a causal connection between dissent and supervisor trust, it is an important step for identifying which relational communication variables are most salient to the expression of dissent. The work on psychological climate (Koys & DeCotiis, 1991) and Kassing’s (1997) dissent model detail potential relational factors influencing dissent and pushes us toward exploratory investigation, which can be the springboard for more complex multidimensional designs.

References


