Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships, Accountability and Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is vital to public sector employees. The paper examined the impact of supervisor-subordinate relationships upon police officers' perceptions of accountability and in turn, wellbeing. Mixed methods were used to collect data. The findings provide new insight into whether the supervisor-subordinate relationship is adequately "cushioning" police officers from organisational demands for increased efficiency and accountability. The implications of the findings are that the present supervision practices are not ideal for delivering high quality services to the public, nor are they ideal for ensuring the wellbeing of police officers. The LMX lens and the findings from this study challenges policing managers in OECD countries to rethink the direction and substance of control-centred management aimed at ensuring professional conduct within a cost-driven efficiency agenda.

INTRODUCTION

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is vital to public sector employees. Since the implementation of reforms in numerous Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, such as such as Australia, UK and NZ, supervisors have become even more important to employees because the workloads of numerous groups of employees such as police officers have increased because of an increase in accountability and in turn, governance (Dick, 2010; Hoque *et al.* 2004; Long, 2003; Ackroyd, et al, 2007). Additionally, the implementation of reforms within policing adopted a focus on centralising control in contrast to empowering police officers (Wright, 2002). Hence, whilst supervisors now have greater discretionary power and have become the "gatekeeper" of workloads/job demands for their employees; the extent to which police officers are negatively affected depends on the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate (Brunetto et al, 2011; 2010).

When the relationship is positive, supervisors are more likely to mediate between, increased accountability checks coupled with higher organisational demands for achieving specific outcomes (such as arrests) and, on the other hand, their role of mentoring employees (Kirkpatrick, Ackroyd and Walker, 2004, Brunetto, Farr-Wharton and Shacklock, 2011; Farr-Wharton, Brunetto and Shacklock, 2011; Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick and Walker 2007). The outcomes have implications because policing in OECD countries has been undergoing a process of continuous reform aimed at improving services to the public and the subsequent impact on police officers' performance in different countries is of concern (Furnham, 2004). One reason for the concern is that the reforms have been undertaken within the context of cost-driven rationalising of activities in turn using increased accountability to drive the

agenda to deliver quality policing (Wright, 2002). As a consequence, police officers work harder and are expected to do more with less (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005).

Hence, examining the impact of supervisor-subordinate relationships upon police officers' perceptions of accountability and in turn, wellbeing may provide new insight into whether the supervisor-subordinate relationship is adequately "cushioning" police officers from organisational demands for increased efficiency and accountability. The findings have implications for retaining police – an growing issue which is only now being recognised (Lynch & Tuckey 2008). The primary research question is:

> *What is the impact of supervisor-subordinate relationships upon police officers'*
> *perception of accountability and in turn, wellbeing and why?*

This paper has four parts. The first part provides a targeted review of the literature from which the hypotheses emerge. The second part describes the sample and methods to test the research questions. The third part reports the results and uses the discussion section to identify pattern-matching with relevant past research, outlining implications for human resource management and limitations of the study. Fourth, we conclude the paper by providing an overview of the study and where it fits in relation to contribution.

Background

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is often examined using Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. LMX theory argues that reciprocity in workplace support develops over time when interactions between the supervisor and subordinate are perceived as friendly and mutually beneficial (Gerstner & Day 1997; Scandura, 1999). However, LMX theory argues that supervisors treat employees differently and therefore, only some employees experience high quality 'social exchanges' with their supervisors and benefit from the exchange of

support, information, trust, participation in decision-making and respect (Mueller & Lee 2002), as well as higher perceptions of discretionary power (Yrie, Hartman, & Galle, 2003; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and access to interesting work assignments and greater control over workloads (Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang and Chen, 2005; Yukl, 2006). Over time, an expectation based on a reciprocal relationship exchanging tangible and intangibles develops for some employees (Wang, et al, 2005).

When poor exchanges occur, a low quality supervisor-subordinate relationship develops, and it is argued that in those cases, employees perceive a high level of accountability and consequently, this negatively affects their perception of wellbeing. This is especially the case for occupations such as policing that involve high job demands because Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, and Walker (2007: 18) argue that the role of the supervisor is pivotal in buffering employees facing high job demands with often inadequate job resources. Additionally Scotti et al (2007) argue that when work demands exceed resources; a supporting empowering workplace environment is required to provide high quality service to the public.

Further, previous research has already identified the importance of the supervisor-subordinate relationship in affecting commitment to the organisation, wellbeing and retention (Brunetto et al, 2011, 2012; Cohen 2006; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Masterson et al, 2000), and Brewer and Walker (2010, 421) argue that perceptions of red tape/accountability is a "subject-dependent concept". This paper adds to the literature by examining the relationship between the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship and one group of public sector employees' perception of accountability. The reason for examining police officers is because Hoque et al. (2004, 77) argues that police officers experience greater accountability because of greater public scrutiny for their actions and strong managerial imperative to ensure professional conduct.

Accountability

Accountability occurs via rules and procedures set up to regulate employee practices. When employees perceive that rules are excessive because they do not address the original intended purpose; and instead enforce a compliance mentality, Bozeman (2000) argues that accountability becomes "red tape". Police officers are similar to other occupations such as social workers and teachers who have argued about the negative impact of the proliferation of red tape (Brewer and Walker, 2010). There has been limited research examining the impact of reforms on police officers compared with other public sector employees (Flynn, 2007; Dick, 2010; Brewer and Walker, 2010) and en less in Australia. Further, policing is different to other public sector employees because the focus has been more on assuring that police officers are doing the "right thing" rather than ensuring that services are delivered (Vickers et al.,2001), although, to the author's knowledge, no studies have examined whether police officers' perception of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship affects their perception of accountability measures.

The LMX concept is useful in examining the issue of red tape in policing because previous research has already identified that policing is characterised by high job demands and that red tape is one of the main causes (Dick, 2010; Brunetto et al, 2011; Hoque *et al.* 2004; Long, 2003) and without the support of supervisors, Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick, and Walker (2007: 18) there is no buffer in place to mediate between high job demands and (often) (in)adequate job resources. Using LMX theory, employees should be shielded by unnecessary red tape and instead should be provided with easy access to knowledge, resources and support so that they can negotiate their tasks efficiently and effectively. If however, supervisors are using their greater discretionary power to enforce red tape by police officers, then contrary to LMX theory, it is expected that police officers will have a low level of satisfaction with their supervisor-subordinate relationship, and are likely to be somewhat dis-satisfied with the

accountability in the workplace. Additionally, they are also likely to have a lower sense of wellbeing.

Psychological Wellbeing in the workplace

Numerous authors within different disciplines have conceptualized wellbeing differently. Most authors within the management discipline identify psychological wellbeing as one type of wellbeing, however, the definitions vary somewhat. For example, Keyes, Shmotki, and Ryff (2002) conceptualize psychological wellbeing as being about employees' mental state in terms of satisfaction in the workplace. This definition is not dissimilar to the definition for psychological wellbeing provided by Grant *et al*. (2007) who are more specific in arguing that it refers to employees' levels of satisfaction with processes and practices in the workplace. This paper adopts Diener's (2000) definition of psychological wellbeing, which states that it reflects employees' attitudes and feelings about their work context (Diener, 2000). It differs from job satisfaction because it is conceptualized to capture both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the job, not just an employee's satisfaction with the job.

Past researchers have identified that wellbeing affects job satisfaction (Brunetto *et al*. 2011a; Wright and Cropanzano, 2000) and affective commitment (Brunetto *et al*. 2011b). Further, LMX is a significant antecedent of wellbeing (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Hodson, 2004; Thomas and Lankau, 2009). However, the relationship between LMX, accountability and the wellbeing of police officers is unclear. This is an important issue for police officers they are in a position of having to balance high job demands with limited resources and this may negatively affect wellbeing (Wright *et al.* 2006). It is expected that if satisfaction with LMX is high, then perception of accountability will be satisfactory and this will in turn, lead to perceptions of high levels of wellbeing.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Police officers reporting more positive exchange relationships with their supervisors will report higher levels of satisfaction with accountability measures.

Hypothesis 2. Employees reporting more positive exchange relationships with their supervisors will report higher levels of wellbeing.

Hypothesis 3. Employees who report higher levels of satisfaction with accountability will report higher levels of wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses mixed methods (both quantitative and qualitative methods) to gather data to examine the relationship between satisfaction with supervisor-subordinate relationships, accountability and wellbeing. Multiple sources of data were collected during 2010-2011 using a survey-based, self-report strategy, plus interviews with police officers (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002). The emerging patterns of the combined data were then compared with the findings of previous research.

Survey Measures

We used previously validated scales to operationalize the constructs in the path model. These were measured on a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Leader-member exchange. The leader-member exchange (LMX) validated test-bank survey traditionally measures the satisfaction of employees with the quality of the relationship with their supervisor-subordinate relationship (Mueller & Lee, 2002). In this study, a seven-item uni-dimensional scale (LMX-7), developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), was used.

Accountability: The four-item scale has been developed based on previous surveys capturing "red tape" by Brewer and Walker (2010). Typical questions include "New

policies/procedures get put into action in this station" and "There are adequate checks to ensure police officers implement new policies and procedures appropriately". An exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach Alpha reliability test indicated that the second question had to be removed.

Wellbeing. The four-item scale developed by Brunetto et al. (2011) was used to measure wellbeing. This measure differs from others because it addresses Grant *et al's* (2007) call to include both a hedonic section (which focuses on employees' perceptions of pleasure invoking either negative or positive thoughts or feelings - usually measured by employees' levels of job satisfaction) and/or a eudemonic section (which refers to employees' perceptions of whether they have reached their potential - measured by employees' feelings of fulfillment in reaching their goals). Typical items include "Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment in what I do at work" and "Overall, I get enough time to reflect on what I do in the workplace".

Validity and reliability of survey data

An exploratory factor analysis is required because accountability is a new variable. The correlation matrix identified many correlations exceeding .3, indicating the matrix was suitable for factoring. The Bartlett's test for Sphericity was significant (Chi-square value=2,695.98, p<.001. df 171) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .862 - well above the .7 requirement. When Principal Axis Factoring was undertaken to extract the variables, three factors had eigenvalues greater than one and 53.54% of the variance could be explained using these three factors –ensuring the validity of the variables (See Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Analysis of surveys

Path analysis is used to test the relationship between the quality of supervisor-subordinate relationships, accountability and employees' perception of wellbeing. In particular, path analysis using an ordinary least square (OLS) approach is used to test the hypotheses. The advantage of path analysis is that it permits more than one equation to predict the dependent variable (i.e. wellbeing) and therefore it includes the indirect impact of LMX into the bigger equation. OLS is an explanation of variance and the overall R^2 measure identifies the goodness of fit overall for the proposed model (Ahn, 2002).

Analysis of Interview data

Police officers who completed a survey were invited to be interviewed and 74 agreed to the interview, lasting 25 minutes on average. In this paper, the responses of police officers to four questions were analysed. The questions were 1. 'Do you follow standard XX policies and procedures when attending to work related tasks?'; 2. 'What are the main factors affecting whether standard policies and procedures are used?'; 3. "Do you have a good perception of wellbeing in the workplace?" and if the answer was no to the last question, interviewees were asked "What factors negatively affect your perception of wellbeing?" Interview data were transcribed, analysed by searching for "commonalities and differences" across emerging themes and then frequencies for each category were determined (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002). The systematic patterns that emerged were then used to draw conclusions to address research questions.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Police officers came from one region of an Australian state police service. They were offered the opportunity to complete a survey when attending training over a four-month period. In total, 750 surveys were distributed and we received 193 usable surveys (representing a

response rate of 26%). The majority of the respondents were male (N=132, 68.4 percent) and held the rank of senior constable (31.6 percent). The average tenure in their current police station was less than 5 years and most have been employed with this police force for 3-10 years.

Addressing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (Police officers reporting more positive exchange relationships with their supervisors will report higher levels of satisfaction with accountability measures) is supported because police officers are somewhat satisfied with their supervisor-subordinate relationship and almost somewhat satisfied with accountability measures. The relationship is significant with 12.5 percent of police officers' perception of accountability being accounted for by their perception of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (See Table 3, model 3: Model 1 and 2 are included to demonstrate that demographic factors are not significant in explaining perceptions of accountability).

Hypothesis 2 (Employees reporting more positive exchange relationships with their supervisors will report higher levels of wellbeing) is supported because police officers are somewhat satisfied with their supervisor-subordinate relationship and perceive themselves as having some level of wellbeing. The relationship is significant with 11.6 percent of police officers' perception of wellbeing is accounted for by their perception of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (See Table 4, Model 2. Model 1 and 4 indicates that gender and age do not significantly affect perceptions of wellbeing, and Model 5 indicates that wellbeing is accounted for by both accountability and the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Hypothesis 3 (Employees who report higher levels of satisfaction with accountability will report higher levels of wellbeing) is also accepted because police officers are almost somewhat satisfied with their accountability levels and perceive themselves as having some

level of wellbeing. The relationship is significant with 13.3 percent of police officers' perception of wellbeing is accounted for by their perception of accountability (See Table 4, Model 3).

Additionally, analysis of the qualitative data suggests that police officers' perception of accountability measures significantly depends on the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship because police officers believe that supervisors (via their management approach in facilitating or thwarting the quality of relationships at work) control access to knowledge, time and resources (See table 5, 6). Further, Table 7 suggests that poor management practices are big contributors to poor perceptions of wellbeing for police officers. Consequently the qualitative data supports all three hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the relationship between supervisor-subordinate relationships upon police officers' perception of accountability and in turn, wellbeing. The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data identified that there was a significant relationship between the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, accountability and wellbeing. Further the means for satisfaction with the supervisor-subordinate relationship suggests that police officers are barely somewhat satisfied, and additionally, they are somewhat dis-satisfied with the accountability in place in the police stations. It is therefore not surprising that they perceive themselves as having only some level of wellbeing in the workplace.

These findings suggest that supervisors are only somewhat effective in their "gatekeeper" role of buffering police officers from "red tape". In particular, the quantitative findings from this study suggest that police officers are barely somewhat satisfied with their supervisor-subordinate relationship and the qualitative data suggests that potential reasons for their dis-satisfaction include poor management practices (43%) and lack of time (35%) (which previous research suggests is much at the discretion of the supervisor (Ackroyd et al, 2007;

Brunetto et al, 2011). Hence, the findings suggest that increased accountability in policing has led to police officers being vulnerable to the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship and only some supervisors mediate between the competing demands on their subordinates.

Further, the findings suggest that the almost 60% of police officers adhere to policies and procedures on most occasions and a further fifth of the sample adhered to policy when possible (See Table 5). The main reason for not adhering to standard policies and procedures were negative management practices and lack of time to follow through and complete tasks (See Table 7). The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research suggest that police officers do not perceive that their supervisors are adequately "cushioning" them from high workloads associated with high accountability.

Table 7 indicates that approximately 70 percent of the police officers do not have a good perception of wellbeing. This finding is supported by the quantitative data that suggests that police officers perceive that they only slight levels of wellbeing (Table 3). The reasons given by police officers for their slight level of wellbeing is the impact of control-centred negative management practices along with poor levels of support in the job that thwart their wellbeing (See Table 8). The findings suggest that the present approach to management is not conducive to creating effective workplaces capable of high productivity.

Limitations

The response rate is low and could be potential limitation. Also the opinions and responses captured in this paper cannot be assumed to represent the perceptions of all police officers or all police stations in that police service. Secondly, there will be differences in the management of police officers between the various police stations, yet these differences are not identified within this report. More studies are required across greater numbers of nursing samples to test the generalizability of these findings. The other limitation is the use of self-

report surveys causing common methods bias. However, Spector (1994) argues that self-reporting methods is legitimate for gathering data about employees' perceptions, as long the instrument reflects an extensive literature review and pattern-matching is used to support interpretations of the data.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study add new knowledge about the importance of an effective workplace relationship on police officers' satisfaction with accountability and in turn, their perception of wellbeing. Police services in OECD have embarked on a reform agenda that has real implications for the wellbeing of police officers. The research suggests that the increased workloads of police officers resulting from increased accountability are impacting negatively on wellbeing.

The LMX lens and the findings from this study challenges policing managers in OECD countries to rethink the direction and substance of control-centred management aimed at ensuring professional conduct within a cost-driven efficiency agenda as argued by Hoque et al. (2004). The present supervision practices are not ideal for delivering high quality services to the public, nor are they ideal for ensuring the wellbeing of police officers and this has implications for retaining them in policing (implications for retaining police – an growing issue which is only now being recognised (Lynch & Tuckey, 2008). On the other hand, using an empowerment management approach is better frameworks for ensuring police officers have a higher perception of wellbeing and this would in turn, promote the development of engaged committed workers, capable of high performance in the job (Brunetto et al, in print).

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Table 1: Factor Analysis using Principal Axis Factoring as the extraction method and Varimax with Kaiser Normalization as the Rotation method (used to classify variables)

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship			
My supervisor is satisfied with my work	**.861**		
My supervisor understands my work problems and needs	**.856**		
My supervisor knows how good I am at my job	**.852**		
My supervisor is willing to use her/his power to help me solve work problems	**.801**		
I have a good working relationship with my supervisor	**.8**		
My supervisor is willing to help me at work when I really need it	**.78**		
Accountability			
New policies/procedures get put into action in this station		**.521**	
I get relevant information about how to implement new policies and procedures		**.635**	
There are adequate checks to ensure police officers implement new policies and procedures appropriately		**.536**	
Everyone takes part in discussions before new policies/procedures are implemented			
Wellbeing			
Overall, I am reasonably happy with my			**.755**

work life.

Overall, I fulfil an important purpose in my work life	**.733**
Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment in what I do at work	**.724**
Overall, I get enough time to reflect on what I do in the workplace	**.583**

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations

	Mean a	SD	1	2	3
1. LMX	4.24	1.1	.82		
2. Accountability	3.89	1.0	.423***	.72	
3. Wellbeing	4.3	.87	.296***	.35***	.82--
4. Location			.08	.03	.10

N = 194, ***p < .001 Cronbach Alpha vales are underlined

Table 3: **Hierarchical Regression analysis: The impact of the Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship on Police Officers' perception of Accountability**

Variables	Police Officers		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	.059	.08	
Age	.009	.054	
LMX		.431**	.423**

F	.261	11.657**	33.476**
R²	**.03**	**.187**	**.179**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * $p < .05$

Table 4: **Hierarchical Regression analysis: The impact of the Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship and Accountability on Wellbeing**

Variables	Police Officer's Wellbeing				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gender	.037			.032	
Age	.068			.086	
LMX		.296**		191*	179**
Accountability			.354**	271**	.279**
F	.409	25.04**	33.476**	7.144**	20.10**
R²	**.005**	**.116**	**.179**	**.159**	**.175**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * $p < .05$

Table 5: Emerging Themes from interview data asking police officers "Do you follow standard policy and procedures?"

	Rarely	When possible	Mostly	Total
Constables	6	3	20	29
Senior Constables	5	8	8	21
Sergeants	2	3	9	14
Senior Sergeants	1	1	4	6
Inspector		1	3	4
Total	**14**	**16**	**44**	**74**

Table 6a: Emerging Themes from interview data asking police officers "What are main factors affecting whether standard and procedures are used?"

	Lack of Knowledge	Lack of Time	Lack of Resources	Negative Mgt	Total
Constables	2	13	5	9	29
Senior Constables	1	6	3	11	21
Sergeants		4	4	6	14
Senior Sergeants		2		4	6
Inspector		2		2	4
Total	**3**	**27**	**12**	**32**	**74**

Table 6b: Typical Quotes from police officers "What are main factors affecting whether standard and procedures are used?"

	Lack of Knowledge	Lack of Time	Lack of Resources	Negative Mgt
Constables	*"- lack of information on relevant issues or worse, unaware of polices as they are too hard to find"*	*"No time to think for yourself – too many rules and regulations so we can't help those who I'd like to help (community policing")*	*"Lack of resources – can't get advice from those who have it"*	*"Chain of commands puts out orders but doesn't listen to police officers- they enforce rules but they don't comply"*
Senior Constables	*"Procedures about 'use of force' is the thing you have to fill out to ensure it gets to court and it is just too complex"*	*"Most frustrating is the workload – no time given in shifts to follow-up on investigation – so go to court without adequate evidence"*	*"Lack of resources to make an inquiry – if you need to ask a question – using radio – could take 5-10 minutes before you get an answer... too late in a life and death situation"*	*"Sometimes hard to implement in practice – Night Shift –get complaints – bosses don't understand how hard it is on the street"*
Sergeants	*"There are 24 different operating manuals-constables take time to learn them"*	*"Need to fund more staff – so that police are less stressed and jobs get done properly"*	*"Communications in car is a joke – no one answering emergencies"*	*"Conflicting messages - some bosses have 'pet police officers'- double standards"*
Senior Sergeants		*Lack of information at the time of urgent decision making. "Sometimes you*		*"Some bosses screams and yells – so disrespectful"*

		have to make a decision on limited information 90% of the time we get it right, 10% wrong – get over scrutinized"		
Inspector		*"Workload is too high Paperwork takes staff of the road for hours"*		*"Knee jerk management – often use policies harshly on police officers when they do something wrong"*

Table 7: Emerging Themes from interview data asking police officers "Do you have a good perception of wellbeing in the workplace?"

	Yes	No	Total
Constables	8	21	29
Senior Constables	7	14	21
Sergeants	2	12	14
Senior Sergeants/ Inspector	5	5	10
Total	**22**	**52**	**74**

Table 8: Emerging Themes from interview data asking police officers who answered "no" to the previous question. They were asked "What factors negatively affect their perception of wellbeing?"

	Control-centred negative management practices	No follow-up for injured officers or those dealing with difficult work tasks (such as suicides or murder of children)	Other reasons	Total
Constables	5	11	5	21
Senior Constables	6	8	0	14
Sergeants	4	7	1	12

Senior Sergeants/ Inspectors	4	1		5
Total	**19**	**27**	**6**	**52**