

# **Determinants of employee mental health in the South African public service: The role of organizational citizenship behaviors and workplace social support**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

**Objective:** The paper explores the mediating effect of workplace social support on the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and employee mental health amongst public service employees in South Africa.

**Methods:** A survey approach was utilized amongst a sample of 289 conveniently selected public service employees in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

**Results:** The results confirm that a direct relationship exists between organizational citizenship behavior and employee mental health. Further, the association is made significant only through the mediation effect of workplace social support.

**Discussion:** The study focuses on the importance of intra-organizational behaviors such as organizational citizenship in promoting employee mental health aspects. Such a focus becomes essential, especially when the South African public service is noted to be in a state of flux and often affects employee work behaviors, including their health. The findings heighten focus on the importance of developing behaviors such as those that promote organizational citizenship coupled with efforts related to workplace social support. In essence, by serving others within the workplace and the entire organization, employees contribute to their mental health. The findings are a valuable precursor to interventions that assist not only the organization but also employees.

## **Keywords**

Organizational citizenship behavior; workplace social support; mental health; public service; well-being; South Africa

## **Introduction and background**

Working within the South African public service is noted to come with challenges. These challenges emanate from work conditions (Chinyamurindi, 2019) coupled with societal challenges (Nyabvudzi & Chinyamurindi, 2019). The source of these challenges has to do with changes believed to have happened within the public service. There is an acknowledgment that these changes have to do with control, autonomy, and decision-making power (Schmidt et al., 2017). This has resulted in increased work pressure and heightened work intensification, and more anxiety concerning work-related issues (Farr-Wharton et al., 2017). Regrettably, this has resulted in an increase in turnover (Shibiti, 2019; Zondo, 2018) and increased mental health challenges (Chinyamurindi, 2019). Coupled with a downturn in the economy, employees also deal with stress and burnout within the public service (Brunetto & Beattie 2020; Perko et al., 2016). All these potentially become stressors (Okeke & Dlamini, 2013) but also result in mental health challenges (Payne et al., 2020; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021) and a source of poor work outcomes (Khamisa et al., 2017).

Despite all these noted challenges, the importance of public service employees, especially for nation-building (Kheswa, 2019), is acknowledged, as is the need to address the scourge of mental health challenges they face (Chinyamurindi, 2019; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021). For this study, mental health issues consisted of the framing by Furukawa, Kessler, Slade and Andrews (2003) to include aspects related to conditions of a) nervousness; b) hopelessness; c) restlessness or being fidgety; d) depression; e) constantly feeling everything in life is an effort and finally, f) worthlessness. These mental health issues within organizations can serve as stressors (Montani & Dagenais-Desmarais, 2018). A starting point could be to monitor these conditions within the public service and how they influence how employees not only function but also flourish within the confines of the workplaces (Redelinghuys & Rothmann, 2020) and how this affects aspects related to employee mental health (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021).

Others add the need to pay attention to prosocial behaviors, defined as organizational citizenship behaviors, to solve challenges stemming from the work environment (Alessandri, Filosa, Eisenberg & Caprara, 2021). The focus appears to be centered on paying attention to the individual and organizational factors and how they help employees experience better health (Chinyamurindi, 2019; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021). In essence, at the core, there is a need

to address contingencies that affect work and health outcomes (Joubert & Hay, 2019) as stressors and threats to employee productivity and performance (Montani & Dagenais-Desmarais, 2018). In turn, this can potentially affect how public service employees provide a critical service to the public (Kanyane, 2019; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021).

There is renewed empirical focus on the importance of paying attention to workplace social support as an organizational construct (Resh et al., 2018; Switaj et al., 2021) and how this relates to organizational stressors (Montani & Dagenais-Desmarais, 2018). This extends from the general literature that often emphasizes the family's critical role and significant others' support (Sprigg et al., 2019). Such support can come in the form of networks that provide employees with emotional, social, and physical support (Sias, 2008) and, in essence becoming a vital work resource to assist in addressing employee health challenges (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021). Given mounting challenges experienced at work, such support helps manage any forms of uncertainty and enact individual control of such situations (Suseno et al., 2020; Mikkola et al., 2018). Through social interaction, employees have an essential basis for working together and supporting others (Tufan & Wendt, 2020).

There is noted importance of constructs such as organizational citizenship behaviors (de Geus et al., 2020) determines how employees work (van Loon, 2017). Scholars define organizational citizenship behaviors as the performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which employees' tasks happen (Taskiran & Iyigun, 2019). Research is emanating, showing organizational citizenship behaviors linked to healthy work environments linked to emotional, social, and work self-efficacy (Alessandri et al., 2021). Others have found organizational citizenship behaviors to consist of prosocial behaviors and related to workplace support aspects (Montani & Dagenais-Desmarais, 2018), including crucial individual and organizational outcomes (Lowery et al., 2021). One such outcome is employee mental health-related to a range of individual and corporate behaviors and experiences (Tanase et al., 2012).

Empirical evidence shows a link between employee identification with values and goals to organizational citizenship behavior (Psychogios et al., 2019). Despite organizational citizenship behavior being technically discretionary in nature, public service employees often feel overloaded, resulting in a resourcing struggle given role requirements (Ozer et al., 2014). This has also been hypothesized within the international literature outside the public service

(Montani & Dagenais-Desmarais, 2021). The lack of enactment of OCB has been found to lead to poor physical and mental effort at work (Ensher et al., 2001) and lead to a lack of commitment to the organization (Teresa, Yasmina & Sangwon, 2020).

Conversely, organizations with higher social support ratings have shown more positive employee affective responses (Suseno et al., 2020). Others have found how employees identify themselves with the organization to influence aspects related to organizational citizenship behaviors (Yu, Lou, Eng, Yang & Lee, 2018) and subsequent organizational experiences. In turn, employees show positive health outcomes when working in environments with high levels of affective organizational commitment as part of OCB (Boyd & Nowell, 2020; Colenberg et al., 2020) and the presence of social support (Cvenkel, 2018; Engelen et al., 2019). A study has found a link between the importance of social support in off-setting poor mental health outcomes associated with driving cessation (Stinchcombe et al., 2021).

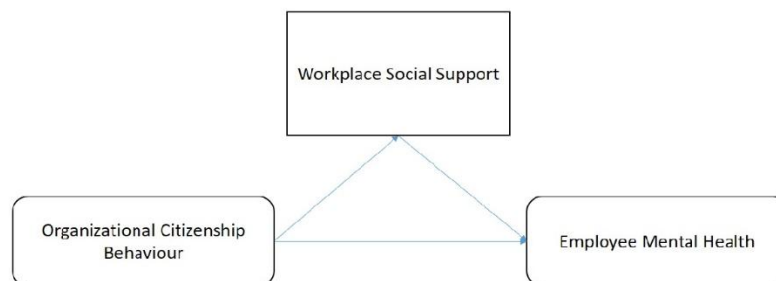
Based on the presented theoretical and empirical literature, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis one: Organizational citizenship behavior predicts employee mental health.

Hypothesis two: Workplace social support predicts employee mental health.

Hypothesis three: Workplace social support mediates the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and employee mental health.

In addition to these hypotheses, figure 1 provides the research model that was tested.



**Figure 1: Research model**

Guided by the presented literature, the authors note the study making some significant contributions to theory and practice by filling some critical research gaps. First, calls exist in the literature for studies that explore determinants of mental health, especially from the organization's lens (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021). Further, such studies are warranted, especially with the South African public service, given the noted challenges (Chinyamurindi, 2019). Second, the authors observe with concern that despite literature that advances the study of employee discretionary efforts (de Geus et al., 2020; Shim & Faerman, 2017), little is known about the role of workplace social support regarding such actions and employee outcomes of health, especially mental health. However, it is essential to link organizational citizenship behavior to mental health and work behaviors. To the best of our knowledge, this is something that has not been explored. Yet, there is an acknowledgment of the importance of health issues with work (Bruno et al., 2017) and the necessity for support structures to this end. The role of organizational variables (Sprigg et al., 2019; Gokda, 2021) such as workplace social support and organizational citizenship behaviors also become essential. The authors note the scant focus on these issues.

## **Methods**

The University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval of the research (Reference number: CHI151SHAR01). The research was funded through a grant provided by the South African Medical Research Council.

## **Measures**

OCB was measured using a 24-item scale developed by Podsakoff & MacKenzie (1989) and tested by several South African and international researchers. Generally, this has resulted in the OCB being recognized not only as a reliable scale but also as being suitable for various cross-cultural contexts. Workplace social support was measured using a 12-item scale split into two. The first six items measured co-worker support, and the last six items measured supervisor support. The workplace social support scale was adapted from previous studies (Hobman et al., 2009). Employee mental health was measured using the six-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) (Furukawa, Kessler, Slade & Andrews, 2003). Respondents for the K6 were asked to indicate how they had felt during the past 30 days: a) nervous; b) hopeless; c) restless or fidgety; d) so depressed that nothing could cheer you up; e) that everything was an

effort; and f) worthless. All scale items oscillated on a five-point Likert scale. Concerning reliability, the Cronbach alpha coefficients from the study all met the required threshold of 0.7, as stipulated (Nunnally, 1978).

## **Respondents**

The study was based on 289 respondents all working within the public service in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. No reliable population size existed around the total number of employees working in the public service in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. In essence, the research relied on a convenience sampling approach. A total of 100 questionnaires were sent to each of five public service organizations that cited availability in the research. From the total of 500 questionnaires distributed, a total of 289 were deemed usable for data analysis. A response rate of 58% was achieved.

## **Data analysis**

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used to perform the statistical analysis. The researchers aimed for both descriptive and inferential statistics and relied on four levels of analysis. First, descriptive analysis was conducted generally, especially against demographic information provided by the respondents. Second, Cronbach alphas were calculated to analyze issues of reliability amongst the constructs. Third, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to determine relationships amongst variables. Finally, and following suggestions from Baron and Kenny (1986), hierarchical regression utilizing a causal step approach was applied to analyze a mediating effect.

## **Results**

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables.

**Table 1. Correlations for constructs for the sample (n = 289).**

Variables & Source of Scale	Mean	Std Dev	OCB	WSS	EMH
<b>OCB</b> (Podsakoff, 1990)	3.454	0.661	<b>1</b>		
<b>WSS</b> (Hobman et al., 2009)	3.678	0.813		<b>1</b>	
<b>EMH</b> (Spooner-Lane, 2004)	3.443	0.764	<b>0.613**</b>	<b>0.521**</b>	<b>1</b>

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

Notes: n = 289; OCB – Organisational Citizenship Behaviour; WSS – Workplace Social Support; EMH – Employee Mental Health.

Table 1 reports that OCB was positively associated with employee mental health ( $r = 0.643^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, WSS was significantly and positively related to employee mental health ( $r = 0.521^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Hierarchical regression tests were conducted to verify Baron and Kenny's (1986) condition that the independent variable has to be related to the mediating variable (workplace social support). Organizational citizenship behavior was used as the predictor and employee mental health as the dependent variable. The hierarchical regression is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. The hierarchical regression of employee mental on workplace social support and organisational citizenship behaviour**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Collinearity statistics			
	Beta	Beta	Beta	T	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
<b>Independent variable</b>				5.436	.000		
Level of education	.174	.142	.234	4.553	.000	.875	1.554
Work experience	.197	-.032	-.234	-2.764	.455	.765	1.443
Ethnicity	-0.232	-.121	-.034	-.245	.754	.546	1.443
WSS		.673**	.345	5.53	.000	.656	1.356
OCB			.532**	12.464	.000	.734	1.124
<b>R</b>	.236	.556	.643				
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.098	.323	.545				
<b>Adjusted R</b>	.054	.321	.523				
<b>ΔR<sup>2</sup> change</b>	.064	.371	.345				
<b>ΔF change</b>	6.633	143.443	186.454				
<b>Sig. F change</b>	.0	.000	.000				
<b>F statistics</b>	6.535	33.545	78.453				
<b>Sig.</b>	.000	.000	.000				
<b>Durbin Watson</b>						1.453	

\*p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

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

Notes: n = 289; OCB – Organizational Citizenship Behaviour; WSS – Workplace Social Support; MH – EMH – Employee Mental Health

In the first step, WSS turned out to be a significant predictor of employee mental health ( $\beta = 0.673$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The results in step two further show that OCB is related to employee mental health ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This fits within the conditions espoused by Baron and Kenny (1986) regarding the independent and the mediating variable being related and conditions are met. The regression coefficients were then used as indicators of the observation whether or not the contribution of each variable is significant. The next step was to test the validity of the hypotheses. The overall contribution of the variables is indicated by the variance explained ( $R^2$ ) (in Table 2), which shows the predictive power of the variables. The regression results in Table 2 suggest that the variables entered in the regression explain up to an overall 55% of the variance in employee mental health ( $R^2 = .545$  of the variance explained).

## **Discussion**

The study explored the mediating effect of workplace social support on the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and employee mental health amongst public service employees in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The findings of the study show support to previous studies linked to understanding the role of individual and organizational experiences and outcomes (Alessandri et al., 2021). Uniquely this study shows the part of organizational citizenship behavior and workplace social support on mental health.

The findings become crucial as they focus and attention to the importance of workplace behaviors such as those that emphasize serving others, such as organizational citizenship behaviors coupled with workplace social support in promoting employee mental health. The promotion of factors such as organizational citizenship behaviors and workplace social support becomes useful precursors for promoting not only individual but also organizational outcomes of work (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021). This can also be a helpful platform, especially within the South African public service riddled by organizational challenges, to promote human-social interaction (West & Meier, 2020) for improved individual and organizational experiences (Alessandri et al., 2021). In essence, the findings of this study not only emphasize the importance of such interaction but extends this to include those behaviors that concern service and support (like organizational citizenship behaviors) to workplace social support as crucial in promoting ideals of mental health (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021).



Based on the findings, it can be assumed that paying attention to promoting mental health ideals amongst employees with a focus on organizational citizenship behavior and workplace social support will assist in having employees that are better equipped to provide better service delivery to the public. The findings of the study, therefore, give impetus to the importance of developing not only a knowledge and skills acumen (Brunetto et al., 2020) related to ideals of organizational citizenship behaviors but also workplace social support structures as a basis of promoting employee health outcomes such as mental health. In essence, organizational citizenship behaviors and workplace social support can potentially be framed as individual and organizational work resources in addressing the challenge of employee mental health.

One way such work resources can be improved, as argued by some (Farr-Wharton et al., 2017), is to create conducive work cultures that appeal to the development of employees. The researchers argue that the onus is not just on employees but also on employers within the public service to avoid creating a culture that may have potential ramifications for employee health. A starting point for a positive work culture could be to pay attention to work conditions, especially within the public service, noted to be at most difficult and not supportive of producing favorable outcomes (Chinyamurindi, 2019; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021).

Organizational citizenship behaviors potentially help employees strive for more excellent organizational functioning and efficiency despite the noted challenges within the public service. In essence, such behaviors can be helpful in focusing issues related to how the work is done and also to the productivity aspect (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021) and promoting the intellectual capital component (Taskiran & Iyigun, 2019), especially within the public service (Chinyamurindi, 2019). Evidence exists that when addressing these two issues, this can be a valuable precursor to having workplaces that flourish (Redelinghuys & Rothmann, 2020) for individual and organizational gain. This research extends such empirical focus by placing importance on constructs such as organizational citizenship behaviors and workplace social support for health-related outcomes such as employee mental health. This highlights ongoing calls that seek to understand the role and interaction between individual and organizational factors and their effect on employee health outcomes (Chinyamurindi, 2019; Joubert & Hay, 2019).

The findings of the study attest to the need for interventions that pay attention to the importance of workplace social support (Resh et al., 2018), especially in addressing challenges related to employee mental health (Gokda, 2021). A starting point to this could be putting in place policies and promoting a work culture that employee mental health. Such efforts are deemed a key foundational block in even addressing challenges such as those of stigma that accompany mental health issues within the confines of the workplace (Switaj et al., 2021). Secondary to these could be promoting, as found by this research as an important, workplace social support interventions. This can be in the form of not only practical help in referring at-risk employees to get counseling services from trained personnel but also financial support to help employees. Another level of support could be at an informational level. This can be through the creation of media that allows not only those going through mental health challenges but also raising attention at an organizational level to issues related to mental health.

Other interventions informed by the findings of this study could promote organizational citizenship behaviors in view not only of workplace social support but also employee mental health. Such interventions, like those concerning organizational citizenship behaviors, need the involvement of both the employee and the employer. This can include employee assistance programs dealing with the challenges that may impact mental health. Borrowing from the aspect of the importance of social connectedness within the workplace (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021), there is a need to also channel interventions to assist employees that bear this in mind. This could be in the form of mentorship interventions as these create a platform of expression, especially for employees who may be going through a hard time or having a high propensity to suffer from mental health issues. Such programs and interventions may need to address the specific problems that employees face.

Managers and leaders in the organization may also constantly need to find ways to inspire and motivate employees despite the presence of stressors. Such support systems potentially assist employees to navigate the range of challenges experienced (Sprigg et al., 2020) and continue to seek emotional, social, and physical support or help (Sias, 2008). This can assist employees to have some form of normalcy in a work context characterized by a great deal of uncertainty and pressure (Suseno et al., 2020; Mikkola et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This study showcases the necessity for more research on employee health issues, especially within the public service, noted to be dealing with challenges. This research provides a useful launch-pad to interventions that are aimed at assisting public service employees to address mental health issues. Notably, there is also a need for some latitude and form of organization-wide intervention that addresses issues that employees experience and that affect their health. This research heightens focus on the effect of organizational citizenship behaviors and workplace social support on employee mental health.

Some limitations can be flagged from the study. First, the issue of common method bias stands out in the findings. Steps can be taken to address this by employing multiple informants in the design of future studies. This can be through having different levels of employee involvement in future studies and even considering the managerial and leadership cohort within public service organizations. The second issue that can be flagged is that of causal inference primarily due to the usage of cross-sectional data. In essence, caution is necessary, especially for generalization of the findings in view of this limitation. A solution here could be for future research to focus on a single public service entity to address variations that may exist when using multi-industry data (as in this study). Finally, future research could also benefit from a qualitative inquiry into understanding not only the constructs under investigation but also the ensuing complexity that accompanies the promotion of employee health outcomes such as mental health.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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