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*Perceptions of social context and  
Organizational Behavior*

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# *Perceptions of social context and Organizational Behavior*

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction*

According to the interactionist perspective (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Schneider & Reichers, 1983), environmental aspects are emphasized, as well as individual ones, in generating behavior. Nevertheless, subsequent studies in the field of I-O psychology have mainly focused on individual characteristics (Mowday & Sutton, 1993), marginally including the environmental aspects. More recently, several authors called for attention on contextual aspects in organizational research (Ashkanasy, 2007; Griffin, 2007; Johns, 2006), by considering context as a shaper of individuals' behavior. Cappelli and Sherer (1991) and Johns (1991) were among the first authors who emphasized this relationship, considering context either as a constraint or as an enabling condition for organizational behavior. Moreover, according to them, context may portray and explain the specificity of organizational behaviors, and clarify the salience and the occurrence of certain organizational phenomena (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991). Consistent with these suggestions, several researchers have included context in their studies, by focussing on different perspectives and approaches and by providing several definitions of it (Griffin, Mathieu & Jacobs, 2001; Mathieu, Maynard, Taylor, Gilson & Ruddy, 2007; Morgeson & Campion, 2003).

Nevertheless, on the basis of the literature review on context, three main questions demand attention: 1) what is context and how to operationalize it? Since a shared definition of context is lacking or unclear, it would be necessary to theorize it as a conceptual construct and provide a shared operationalization, in order to include it in the organizational research (Griffin, 2007). Moreover, it is worth noting that the inclusion of the context in organizational research goes together with the necessity of finding measures that might preserve the contextual specificity and, at the same time, address the need for generalizability (Johns, 2001; 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001); 2) what is the effect of the context on individual and

organizations over time? Although it has been theorized that context may impact on individual and organizational behavior (Cappelli & Sherer, 2001; Johns, 2001; 2006), studies which investigate its effects on individual attitudes and behaviors over time are still limited; 3) how it may influence people's behaviors and attitudes in organizations? According to Johns (2006) context may influence behavior directly or indirectly, but processes through which the context may impact on behavior are still unclear.

With the present work, we contribute to the study of context in organizational research by presenting the concept of Perceptions of social Context (PoC; Borgogni, 2001) and its operationalization. We situate our proposal within Johns's model (2006) and we refer to discrete context, specifically privileging the social aspects of context. With social context we consider the social structure, that is the set of the most relevant constituencies internal to the organization (i.e., immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management), the way they fulfill their social roles and reciprocally interact at work (Bales, 1953; Steiner, 1972). Moreover, we focus on perceptions of the prototypical behaviors enacted by each social constituency to include the lens through which context can be viewed by individuals and the role played by the person in catching the more salient aspects of the observed phenomena. In fact, with our proposal we intend to connect the study of context with a psychological theory, that is Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). According to the "reciprocal triadic determinism" posited by Bandura (1986), person, environment and behavior are involved in an interdependent casual structure. Thus, people are both products and producers of the environment, since they are active agents who intentionally influence the events of their life. Consistent with Bandura (1997), the main self-regulatory process responsible for this dynamic transaction is perceived self-efficacy, that is the belief in one's ability to master specific domains (Bandura, 1986) which leads a person to adopt a "control over circumstances" mindset.

Efficacy beliefs can influence how people think, feel, make decisions, motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties and challenges. Furthermore, people with high self-efficacy are more able to perceive and exploit the opportunities offered by their own context, see the obstacles as avoidable and even control the events of their life. Accordingly, we intend to offer a sound rationale to the study of context by putting forward an integrated view of the individual in his/her organizational setting, and by investigating the individual agentive role in the construal process of the context, focussing on the relationship between self efficacy and Perceptions of social Context, and their concurrent role on individual behaviors and job attitudes.

From this standpoint, three studies were developed which are presented as follows.

The first study presents the construct of Perceptions of social Context and its operationalization, in order to provide a measurement proposal of context, rooted in a psychological perspective, that might preserve contextual specificity and, at the same time, allow to compare and generalize results in different contexts. Moreover, we investigated the role of the individual in the construal process of the context, examining the relationship between PoC and self-efficacy.

The second study investigated the concurrent role of individual and social factors in predicting Work engagement over time, adopting a social cognitive perspective. Particularly, through a two-wave study, we examined how and to what extent self-efficacy predicts Work engagement directly and through the improvements in the Perceptions of the social Context (namely improvements in the perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management).

Finally, the third study aimed to highlight the process through which contexts influence behavior. Thus, we focused on absence behaviors and its determinants, through the investigation of a conceptual model in which self-efficacy and Perceptions of social Context

(i.e., immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) concur to predict absences from work through the mediating role of Job satisfaction.

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## CHAPTER 2

### *Perceptions of context and self efficacy.*

#### *Studying context in the frame of reference of Social Cognitive Theory.*

### Abstract

Two studies compose this contribution which respectively aim to present and operationalize the construct of “Perceptions of social Context” (PoC; Borgogni, 2001; namely the perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and top management), as a measurement proposal aimed to take into account the specificity of each organizational context and the need for generalizability, and to propose a sound theoretical basis for studying context, namely the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), in order to emphasize the agentive role of the individual in the construal process of the environment, by exploring the relationship between self-efficacy and Perceptions of social Context.

In the first study, data collected in three independent samples from different sectors (private N = 542; public N = 407; healthcare N = 481) measured the perceptions of colleagues, immediate supervisor and top management. Findings supported the structural validity of the scales we developed for each sector and they showed the existence of common “areas of content” across settings regarding behaviors enacted by each social constituencies structurally defined. Moreover, some specific behaviors were found in each sector. This likely allows for overcoming the issue of the generalizability of context measures and the portrayal of organizational specificities.

In the second study, referring to social cognitive theory, we tested the relationship between the three PoC (i.e., colleagues, immediate supervisor and top management) and self-efficacy in three independent samples from the same sectors of the first study (private sector N = 704; public sector N = 218; healthcare sector N = 1,002). Findings lent support to the hypothesized positive relationship in each sample.



The implications of findings for practice were discussed, as well as future directions for research.

Keywords: *Perceptions of social context; Self-efficacy; Contextual specificity.*

Over the past two decades, several authors called for the attention on contextual aspects in the organizational research in order to emphasize the role of the context as a shaper of individual's behaviors (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2006). As Johns (2006) posited, context might explain the differences that emerge from one study to another, because contextual aspects change more easily than individual characteristics and personality traits across organizations and situations. For these reasons, it's crucial to focus on contextual specificity, as well as on individual characteristics, in order to provide more accurate predictions of individual behaviors across different organizations and sectors. Moreover, several authors suggested that the inclusion of the context in organizational research goes with the necessity of finding measures that might preserve the contextual specificity and, at the same time, answer to the need for generalizability of the measures (Johns, 2001; 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

As Johns posited (2006) the main questions about context are related to its nature: what is context? and how to operationalize it?

Authors converge in defining context as a broad construct that encompasses several aspects, such as interpersonal relationships, physical features, task elements and time (Griffin, 2007; Johns, 2006), and influences and shapes individual behavior (Griffin, 2007; Johns, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993). Nevertheless, although the study on organizational context has caught the increasing attention of scientists from different fields, such as psychologists, sociologists, and organizational behavior researchers (Mowday & Sutton, 1993), agreement is lacking among the authors in a shared and explicit definition that draws up the boundaries of the concept and explains what it includes.

According to interactionist perspective (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Schneider & Reichers, 1983), we define context, referring to the latin root "contexere" (making a connection, weaving, texting), as a set of conditions in which a person is deeply embedded and whose

elements are strictly interrelated with one another (Borgogni, Petitta, Mastrorilli, 2010; Griffin, 2007; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

In addition to the need for a shared definition of context, a further challenge for scholars is related to the theoretical wideness of the construct and deals with its operationalization and measure. Including context in organizational behavior research requires having validating instruments that might preserve its specificity and, at the same time, allow to compare and generalize results in different contexts.

Therefore, three main issues beg for attention: (1) the identification of a strong theoretical basis underlying the selected approach to the study of context, since it has been at times missing or unclear (Kuenzi and Schminke, 2009); (2) how to best operationalize context; and (3) how to emphasize the specificity of each organizational context and, at the same time, still compare results by providing a generalized measurement of context.

Building on a strong theoretical base, that is the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), we propose to answer to these issues about context through the following aims: 1) to present the construct of “Perceptions of social Context” (PoC) and its operationalization, in order to provide a measurement proposal aimed to take into account the specificity of each organizational context and the need for generalizability. Our focus is explicitly on the social features within organizational settings, mostly because they are structurally defined and they are able to satisfy, in the workplace, important social needs experienced; 2) to emphasize the role of the individual in the construal process of the context, by focusing on the perceptions of context and examining their relationship with self-efficacy, as an individual characteristic; 3) to investigate context’s specificity, by focusing on different organizations and sectors.

*What is context? An overview of context literature.*

Understanding the nature of context in organizational behavior has been addressed as a central issue in the last two decades. Several authors have called for more systematic research that included contextual aspects (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Johns, 1991). In order to answer to

the call for contextualization, several and different definitions of context were provided by scholars.

Among the first contributions of the study of context in organizational research, Cappelli and Sherer (1991) emphasized the notion of context as a shaper of individual behaviors. As we anticipated, they argued that context may explain the variation in individual's behaviors and the occurrence of certain organizational phenomena.

Moreover, Johns (1991; and more deeply in Johns, 2001; 2006) defined context as “a set of situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables” (Johns, 2006, p. 386). He asserted that it should be incorporate into organizational behavior research, since it might be revealed as a constraint or an enabling condition for differences in behaviours across individuals, groups and organizations. Thus, its inclusion would be crucial, in order to make more precise predictions of employees' behaviors.

In a subsequent contribution, Mowday and Sutton (1993) defined context as a set of stimuli surrounding the individual at different levels of analysis, and reviewed the reciprocal influences between the person and his/her organizational context.

The first inclusive review on this topic came from Johns (2006), who systematized its unique characteristics by offering a taxonomy of the elements comprising context. Particularly, he suggested to consider two different level of analysis for studying context, the first broader (called omnibus context) and the second one more circumscribed (called discrete context). Omnibus context is a broad concept that encompasses dimensions such as location and occupational context, or rather the framework in which phenomena may be observed. As Johns (2006) suggested, context tells us a story about organizations and may explain to us the occurrence of certain phenomena.

Discrete context refers to specific situational variables within the organization that are more directly related to individual attitudes and behaviors. Johns described discrete context as

composed of three main dimensions referring to aspects related to: 1) organizational or job characteristics (namely task context), such as autonomy, resources, and workload; 2) organizational social constituencies (namely social context), such as social support, social influence, and social structure; 3) physical elements, such as lighting, noise, temperature, etc., (namely physical context).

The latter level of analysis (discrete context) may provide a framework for understanding dimensions related to the task, social and physical contextual characteristics that can have a direct or indirect influence on behavior. John's model has been theoretically and empirically deepened by several authors through different approaches and ways to interpret it (Griffin, 2007; Kanfer, 2009; Meyer & Dalal, 2009).

The main contribution in this direction came from the special issue in *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2007, 28). Besides having marked a renewed attention toward the empirical studies in this topic, it provided a systematic overview of context, because each contribution in the special issue focused on very different aspects of context (e.g., uncertainty, multi-team coordination, time).

With his editorial in this special issue, Griffin (2007) offered a broad definition in which context is "the set of circumstances in which phenomena (e.g. events, processes or entities) are situated" (p. 860) and used Johns' taxonomy to situate each study, although it was not explicitly adopted in each single paper.

Beyond the two different level of analysis posited by Johns (2006), his review proposed to still address how context can be approached in research design. Among all these different characteristics, we provide the ones most frequently taken into account in the studies on context.

Context may be considered as a *situational strength* (Mischel, 1968). In this perspective, the main contribution came from Mischel and Shoda (1995), who find that personality traits might not explain behavior without considering the contexts that are likely to evoke

behavioral tendencies. More recently, referring to Kanfer and colleagues' studies (Kanfer, 2009; Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008), Meyer and Dalal (Meyer & Dalal, 2009) described context as a situational strength that may influence the predictive power of dispositional variables on behavior. This perspective underlines the primacy of context on individual and personal characteristics.

Moreover, context may be considered at *multiple levels of analysis* (individual, unit and organizational level), by using multiple measurement systems and multilevel analytic approaches for investigating its relationship with an individual's behavior. In fact, several authors have empirically demonstrated that higher-level situational factors affect lower-level (e.g., individual) behavior (Griffin, 2007; Mathieu, Maynard, Taylor, Gilson & Ruddy, 2007). Furthermore, it can be conceptualized as the specific *salience of external stimuli* that differs among people (Johns, 2006). The latter perspective is more coherent with the measurement generally used, that is the reference from individuals about the organizational features under examination.

Accordingly, we situate our work within Johns's model and we intend to focus on the social aspects of context, specifically on the influence that individuals may have on contexts, by offering an operationalization of the concept of Perceptions of social Context.

#### *Perceptions of context: a conceptual and measurement proposal.*

We define social context as a set of the more relevant constituencies internal to the organization (i.e., top management, as well as one's immediate supervisor and colleagues), the way they fulfill their social roles and reciprocally interact at work (Bales, 1953; Steiner, 1972). Our focus on these specific social constituencies is due to two main reasons.

The first, theoretical rationale for focusing on social constituencies is that these constituencies delineate the social world of work in which a person is engaged and, as such, they represent an important social "frame of reference" (Merton, 1968). Social references are crucial because they allow an employee to gain information, to sense-make the events, and to interpret the

experiences; thus, his/her subsequent actions will depend upon the way he or she perceives these aspects (Lawrence, 2006).

Moreover, social constituencies satisfy the “core social motives” that lead people in their interactions (Fiske, 2004). Specifically, colleagues allow the development of strong and stable relationships, ensuring belongingness and trusting; supervisors can help individuals gain control over the consequences and outcomes of their behaviors and enhance their self-concepts through positive feedback; top management ensures satisfaction of understanding through the proposition of shared meanings, guidelines, policies, and procedures.

Second, we observed that these three constituencies emerge from previous empirical studies (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, Petitta, & Rubinacci, 2003; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003). In fact, when asking people to answer a set of questions regarding their workplace, researchers found that the items loaded on factors referring to the organizational social “referents” rather than distinguishing among different “topics”. It was the case of perception of innovation or perception of communication whose items were assimilated to the perceptions of top management and the perceptions of immediate supervisor, respectively.

We focus on the *perception* of these constituencies, namely PoC, in order to emphasize the role played by the individual in catching the more salient aspects of the observed phenomena. In fact, perception as a cognitive process “refers to the overall process of apprehending objects and events in the environment – to sense them, understand them, identify and label them, and prepare to react to them” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002, p. 217). Therefore, we maintain that identifying how people represent their environment is of extreme importance in understanding their attitudes and behaviors, and should therefore be taken into account.

Specifically, by perceptions of context we mean perceptions of positive behaviors from each organizational *social* constituency that relate to both productive and socio-emotional aspects of interactions (cooperation, goal setting, supportiveness, equity, etc.; Bales, 1953). It is well-

known in social psychology that work groups carry out and pay attention simultaneously to two functions collocated along two axes: the task-related behaviors that are instrumental to goal achievement and production, and relations-care behaviors, which respond to the inner needs of individuation and belongingness (Bales, 1950). Thus, the tradition on leadership and group studies constitutes our theoretical reference for identifying behaviors of interest enacted by colleagues, and has a corresponding anchor for behaviors by leaders at different levels, namely the immediate supervisor and top management (Fleishman, 1957). The seminal studies on leadership behaviors conducted at Ohio State University (Stogdill, 1963) have, in fact, isolated two classes of behaviors, directed at structuring work activities (*“Initiating Structure”*) and at supporting employees (*“Consideration”*), respectively.

*Social cognitive theory: an agentic perspective as a frame of reference of context*

Psychological literature has traditionally been concerned with the relationship between the individual and the environment. According to the interactionism perspective (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Schneider & Reichers, 1983), Bandura (Bandura, 1986; 1997) has advanced the notion of “reciprocal triadic determinism”, that underlies the reciprocal dynamic exchange between the person, his/her behavior, and the environment, in addition to the mere co-determination of behavior on behalf of the two causes. Consistent with Bandura’s view of an agentic human being that transformatively acts toward the environment, the individual is affected by the environment and contributes to influence it both physically, through his behavior, and symbolically, through the cognitive and affective construction of it. Thus, people can have a transformative action on environment and intentionally influence the events of their life. This view entails that people may be considered as contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them (Bandura, 2006).

As we explained above, the notion of reciprocal triadic determinism may provide a conceptual model to understand the reciprocal relation between person, environment and behavior.



Despite the broad theoretical consideration received by several authors, no contributions have attempted to provide a systematic operationalization of reciprocal triadic determinism. In order to investigate these reciprocal transaction, we believe, it would be essential to move forward from the term of environment to the more circumscribed concept of context. As Kanfer suggested (2009), at the most general level, context pertains to the broad circumstances that form the environment within which people's action takes place. Nevertheless, the inner meaning of the word "context" points to something more complex than what is simply "around" the person, as indicated by the term environment, and implying the dynamics and the exchange among the different parts of context.

In this perspective, it refers to those contextual features that are salient and actively construed by individuals.

Moreover, according to the *positive psychology*, social cognitive theory posited a positive approach on the role of the individual in actively transforming their context. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggested, personality traits and individual characteristics (e.g. optimism, self-esteem) have a central role in personal interpretation of the contextual stimuli.

According to Bandura (1997), the main self-regulatory process responsible for the dynamic transactions between person, environment and organization is perceived self-efficacy, that is the belief in one's ability to master specific domains (Bandura, 1986) and leads a person to adopt a "control over circumstances" mindset.

Self efficacy beliefs can influence how people think, feel, make decisions, motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties and challenges. Indeed, individual results depend on actions of an active agent that refers to personal judgments about their capabilities to produce a certain performance. People with high self-efficacy are more able to perceive and exploit the opportunities offered by their own context, see obstacles as avoidable and even control the events of their life. Consistent with Bandura (2000a), perceived self-efficacy

influences behavior directly, and through its impact on other factors, such as affective dispositions and perceptions of obstacles and opportunities inherent in the social environment.

*A call for emphasizing on context specificity.*

The inclusion of context in organizational research goes together with the necessity to find measures that might preserve the contextual specificity and, at the same time, answer to the need for generalizability of measures and results. Since context has been conceived in different ways, it would be necessary to provide measures that permit to generalize results among different roles, organizations, and sectors.

At the same time, we posit that some behaviors would recur across contexts, and others would be more specific. Thus, we believe that studies on context have to move forward from the systematic research of generalizability, by emphasizing contextual specificity.

According to Johns (1991), each context entails an own specificity that may be considered as a set of phenomena that could often affect research outcomes. In this regard, studies on Job Demands-Resources Model (JD–R model) (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) highlighted this specificity by including physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that may be considered as demands and resources for individuals in each organizational context. Indeed, they include in each setting the prototypical contextual variables and resolve the need for comparing results among different organizations by testing the robustness of their conceptual model in different samples. Particularly, Llorens and colleagues (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli & Salanova, 2006) provided that the structure of the JD–R model is similar across organizational contexts, although measures, factor loadings and the strength of the relationships investigated in the model differ. Thus, they confirmed the structural validity of the model and, at the same time, balanced the contextual specificity, which required them to focus on different contextual aspects, with the structural generalizability of their model (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Similarly, our proposal is to investigate the replicability of the three factors structure of PoC across organizational contexts and preserve, at the same time,

the intrinsic specificity of each organizational context by considering those behaviors enacted by each social constituencies which, we believe, may be identified only in one or few settings (named “specific behaviors”).

*Overview of the two studies.*

Two studies, involving 8 independent samples (total N = 3354) have been developed in order to present the construct of Perceptions of Social Context, its measure, and to explore its relationship with self-efficacy in three independent samples from different business sectors (private, public and healthcare).

Particularly, the first study aimed to investigate the structural validity of the PoC scale. The second one had a twofold aim. At first, it provided additional support to the structural validity and the generalizability of the scale in three independent samples from different business sectors. Moreover, it offers a sound theoretical foundation to the study of context by linking it to social cognitive theory. Particularly, we explore the relationship between individual self-efficacy and PoC.

**Table 1. Summary of studies, their procedures and data/sample characteristics**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Action and Variables</b>	<b>Data/Sample</b>
Study 1	- Correlational analysis;  - CFA and reliability estimation for Perceptions of context scales.	<i>Private Sector:</i> N = 542 (Two companies: delivering and manufacturing); 72.5% men; Age ranged from 18-25 (3.9%) to over 55 years old (5.5%) with the majority aged between 26-35 (36.7%) and 36-45 years old (36.5%) and the remaining 17.4% aged between 46-55 years old; 10.1% worked in the organization from 0 to 3 years, 29.2% from 4 to 6 years, 22.9% from 7 to 10 years, 18.3% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 19.5% longer than 20 years.  <i>Public sector:</i> N = 407 (Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance); 52.5% men; 7.8% ranged in age between 26-35, 47.2% between 36- 45 years, 32.8% between 46- 55 years, and the remaining 12.2% are more than 55 years; 2.7% worked in the organization from 0 to 3 years, 5.2% from 4 to 6 years, 3.7% from 7 to 10 years, 55.8% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 32.6% longer than 20 years.  <i>Healthcare sector:</i> N = 481 (Two local health authorities); 50.7% women; 16.4% ranged in age between 26-35, 43.8% between 36-45, 32.4% between 46-55 years and 7.4% more than 55 years; 20.9% worked in the organization from 0 to 3 years, 14.7% from 4 to 6 years, 14.5% from 7 to 10 years, 27.9% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 22.0% longer than 20 years.

Study 2	<p>- Correlational analysis;</p> <p>- SEM to investigate the relationship between self efficacy and perceptions of context.</p>	<p><i>Private Sector:</i> N = 704  71.9% men;  9.3% ranged in age between 18-25, 4.6% between 26-35, 42.4% between 36- 45, and 43.7% between 46-55.  13.0% worked in the organization from 0 to 3 years, 1.7% from 4 to 6 years, 1.4% from 7 to 10 years, 13.5% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 70.4% longer than 20 years.</p> <p><i>Public sector:</i> N = 218  96.3% women;  Age ranged from 18-25 (0.9%) to over 55 years old (23.4%) with the majority aged between 36-45 years old (24.8%) and between 46-55 years old (46.3%), and the remaining 4.6% aged between 26-35 years old;  2.8% worked in the organization less than 1 year, 1.4% from 1 to 3 years, 4.0% from 4 to 6 years, 3.2% from 7 to 10 years, 32.6% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 56.0% longer than 20 years.</p> <p><i>Healthcare sector:</i> N = 1,002  68.7% women;  0.6% ranged in age between 18-25, 34.3%% between 26-35, 39.3% between 36- 45, and 19.9% between 46-55, and the remaining 5.9% was more than 56 years old;  6.8% worked in the organization less than 1 year, 20.0% from 1 to 3 years, 16.9% from 4 to 6 years, 8.1% from 7 to 10 years, 26.2% from 11 to 20 years, and the remaining 22.0% longer than 20 years.</p>
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### Study 1 - “PoC measure: Content and Structural validity”.

The aim of this study was threefold. First, we intended to lend support to the three components of PoC, namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management, in three different business sectors, as found in previous research (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Vecchione, 2010; Borgogni et al., 2010b). As previously discussed, the focus on these social constituencies is due to their ability to satisfy the most relevant social needs (Stevens & Fiske, 1995) in the workplace. Second, looking at the behaviors enacted by each constituency, we sought to support the emergence of both “generalizable” (namely prototypical behaviors enacted by each social constituency which recur across organizations) and “specific” behaviors (namely behaviors which were viewed as only in one or few settings) that referred to either to the productive or the relational aspect of interactions, consistent with literature (Bales, 1953; Stogdill, 1963). Third, we aimed to support the occurrence across contexts (therefore the “generalizability”) and the structural stability of certain behaviors that were

inductively identified from previous studies. These behaviors would constitute the basis for measuring and comparing different contexts.

By inspecting the items that were generated in previous studies (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Latham, 2009; Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni et al., 2010b) we observed that some “common areas of content” emerged. The prototypical behaviors enacted by the immediate supervisors across contexts dealt with caring for an employee’s growth, involving employees in decision making and emphasizing fairness to create a proper team spirit. The recurrent behaviors from colleagues concerned the integration of their individual competencies within the team, reciprocal help and support in accomplishing work activities, and the creation of a friendly atmosphere. Finally, the prototypical behaviors by top management included clearly structuring employees’ tasks and goals, caring for their development and providing them with the necessary resources to accomplish the tasks. As can be noted, the above-mentioned behaviors were related to common “cores” that either referred to the productive or the relational side of interactions (Bales, 1950; Fleishman, 1957). Moreover, some of these behaviors were also confirmed as main dimensions characterizing individual perceptions of the organizational context by recent research (namely “control and hierarchy”, “support, interaction, communication, and consultation”, “risk-taking orientation”, and “the atmosphere”; Rice, 2006). Although this taxonomy has been related to creative behavior and does not explicitly focus on the organizational social constituencies, some overlaps between them and the “recurrent” behaviors in PoC are evident.

Thus, considering the literature and the findings from previous research, we developed the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: A three-factored structure of PoC (namely perceptions of immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management) will emerge across business sectors.*

*Hypothesis 2: The behaviors enacted by each social constituency will refer to some common areas of content across business sectors. Specifically, the common areas of content will be:*

*(a) for the immediate supervisor: Equity, Participation, and Development; (b) for colleagues: Integration of competencies, Atmosphere, and Help; (c) for top management: Task Structuring, Development, and Support.*

*Hypothesis 3: The prototypical behaviors will load on their appropriate PoC factor similarly across business sectors.*

As mentioned above, Johns (1991) suggested that each context entails an own specificity, that may be considered as a set of phenomena affecting research outcomes. According to Johns (2006), we assert that whereas some behaviors would recur across contexts, others would be more specific, reflecting at most the uniqueness of each organizations and business sectors.

Thus we hypothesized that:

*Hypothesis 4: Some specific behaviors across business sectors will emerge and they will load on their appropriate PoC factor.*

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

The first study involved three independent sub-samples of employees who work in organizations from three different sectors: private, public and healthcare. Data were collected through the means of a self-report questionnaire that assured the participants' anonymity.

The private sub-sample comprised 542 workers, 58.3% from a small Italian manufacturing firm of bathroom fittings, and 41.7% from an Italian delivery company. Questionnaires were

administered during the normal working hours following the convenience sampling. Participation was completely voluntary.

The public sub-sample consists of employees from the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance. The research team primarily contacted Personnel Director to explain the project's aims and engage him in the survey. Of the 557 questionnaires administered through the Personnel and General Affairs Department, 407 were returned for a 73% response rate.

Finally, the healthcare sub-sample included 481 nurses and social-workers from two Italian local health authorities, in two different regions in Italy. Following the convenience sampling method, respondents were randomly selected and involved in the research until the expected sample size was reached. Questionnaires were administered during the working time and collected a few days later, ensuring normal work activities. Detailed information regarding the three sub-samples are provided in table 1.

### *Measures*

The self-report questionnaire was developed to measure the participants' perceptions of three organizational social constituencies, namely immediate supervisor, colleagues, and top management. We conducted sessions of focus groups with employees in each organization, adopting the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). The sessions were aimed at collecting the most typical behaviors enacted by each social constituency within the organization; moving from them, we worded one item for each behavior. Moreover, through content analysis, we observed that specific "areas of content" recurred in all three business sectors in relation to each of the three social constituencies considered. For this reason the items were worded in a similar manner, in order to maximize their comparability, but assuring the terminological specificity of each context (e.g., "boss" vs. "supervisor").

a) *Perceptions of the immediate supervisor.* Five items were generated to measure the perceptions of the immediate supervisor's prototypical behaviors in the private sector, three

items were generated with regard to the public sector, and four items in relation to the healthcare sector. The cross-sector behaviors that were identified referred to an immediate supervisor's treating employees with equity, fostering employees' participation and supporting their professional development. Sample items are "My immediate supervisor treats all employees fairly"; or, "My immediate supervisor takes care of employees' professional growth". Moreover, other items were distinctive in their content, as they emerged as prototypical behaviors characterizing only specific contexts where the focus groups were conducted. Some of these "unique" behaviors referred to the immediate supervisor clearly communicating to the employees the goals to strive for, providing them with the necessary information, and supporting subordinates' needs.

b) *Perceptions of colleagues*. Three items for private, four items for public and four items for the healthcare sector were developed to measure the perceptions of one's colleagues in the team. Statements used in all three sectors referred to some crucial aspects characterizing peer relationships at work, namely reciprocal support, atmosphere, collaboration and competencies' integration. Sample items are: "In my office we work in a friendly atmosphere"; or, "People in my office integrate their different competencies to achieve common goals".

c) *Perceptions of top management*. A pool of items was generated to measure the perceptions of top management in each sector: four, five, and seven for the private, public and healthcare sectors, respectively. The common items assessed the top management's behavior in clearly defining tasks, goals and activities, in encouraging the individual professional development, and in supporting employees' needs. Sample items are: "In this organization, top management provides the space and the materials employees need to work"; or, "Top management respects its commitments towards employees". Moreover, a few items, more contextualized, measured the top management's behavior in innovating work procedures, in



promoting the integration among departments, and in valuing the employees' contribution to the organizational effectiveness.

### Analyses and Results

To evaluate the dimensionality of Perceptions of Social Context (PoC) scale, we conducted three CFAs (one for each subsample) using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998) and, specifying a three-factor model, based on the assumption that the PoC facets (colleagues, immediate supervisor, and top management) are three distinctive but correlated factors. Consistent with Muthén & Kaplan's (1985) recommendations, we corrected variables' non-normality, when required, by examining the robust statistics for  $\chi^2$ . Two alternative models were performed to support the appropriateness of the posited solution in each considered sector. Particularly, we tested and compared with the "target" model: (1) a one-factor model, in which all items loading on one factor, assuming that PoC represents a unidimensional construct; (2) a three-factor model, in which the three PoC facets are uncorrelated. To evaluate the goodness of the fit of each model, we used multiple indexes, namely chi-square, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger & Lind, 1980), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996). In order to compare the competing models and verify whether the posited model was better than the two alternative ones in each sector, chi square difference tests was computed, and the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test was computed in the healthcare setting where the Robust correction was adopted.

As shown in Table 2, the target models satisfied multiple goodness-of-fit tests, with the exception of chi-square, which is generally very sensitive to sample size. All the considered indexes revealed that the target model (i.e., the three correlated factors' model) fits the data better than the alternative models in each sector. In all cases, in fact, CFI and TLI values were

greater than .90, SRMR values were all lower than .05, and RMSEA values were lower than .08, indicating a good fit. Hence, our findings supported that PoC scales are three distinct but related factors.

**Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analyses: Goodness of Fit Indices of the Alternative PoC Models**

<b>PRIVATE SECTOR</b>						
<i>Model</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>SRMR</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	
Three factors correlated	152.043	41	.951	.964	.034	.072 (.060;.084)
One factor	383.727	44	.861	.889	.065	.121 (.110;.132)
Three factors uncorrelated	761.725	44	.706	.765	.331	.176 (.165;.187)
<b>PUBLIC SECTOR</b>						
<i>Model</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>SRMR</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	
Three factors correlated	237.189	87	.954	.962	.045	.069 (.059;.080)
One factor	1281.205	90	.648	.698	.122	.191(.182 ;.200)
Three factors uncorrelated	503.263	90	.878	.895	.308	.112 (.099;.118)
<b>HEALTHCARE SECTOR</b>						
<i>Model</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>SRMR</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	
Three factors correlated	151.156	62	.918	.934	.035	.056*
One factor	554.218	65	.640	.568	.111	.128*
Three factors uncorrelated	369.117	65	.732	.776	.219	.101*

Note. For all  $\chi^2$  values,  $p < .001$ ; TLI=Tucker Lewis Index; CFI=Comparative Fit Index; SRMR= Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; RMSEA= Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

\* To correct variables' not-normality, robust modelling procedure (MLR method) was used in healthcare sector.

The standardized loadings of each item, identified through the area of content to which they refer to, are displayed in Table 3. The factor loadings were all significantly different from zero and greater than .40 in all PoC scales. These findings lend support to the appropriateness of each item related to the hypothesized latent factor within each sub-sample and, in addition, to the structural validity of the PoC scales. They suggest that “core behaviors” recurring in every organization from different sectors do exist, as well as prototypical behaviors that are more strictly related to the organizational context under investigation.

**Table 3- Summary of core and prototypical behavior and standardized loadings for each sample**

Areas of content for each item	PoC Immediate supervisor	PoC Colleagues	PoC Top Management
<b>Private Sector</b>			
Equity*	.768		
Participation*	.797		
Development (Supervisor)*	.792		
Affectivity	.855		
Clarity	.772		
Information			
Help*		.785	
Integration*		.794	
Atmosphere*		.666	
Development (Top Management)*			.799
Task structure*			.663
Support*			.794
<b>Public sector</b>			
Equity*	.846		
Participation*	.840		
Development (Supervisor)*	.884		
Competencies (Supervisor)	.810		
Support (Supervisor)	.891		
Information	.787		
Help/ Support		.879	
Integration*		.694	
Atmosphere*		.764	
Help*		.720	
Development (Top Management)*			.802
Task structure*			.836
Support (Top Management)*			.811
Innovation			.775
Competencies (Top Management)			.857
<b>Healthcare Sector</b>			
Equity (Supervisor)*	.773		
Participation*	.814		
Development (Supervisor)*	.827		
Help*		.591	
Integration (Colleagues)*		.742	
Atmosphere*		.829	
Development (Top Management)*			.774
Task structure*			.769
Support (Top Management)*			.654
Equity (Top Management)			.802
Equity (Top Management)			.768
Equity (Top Management)			.743
Integration (Top Management)			.701

Note. \*Items referring to dimensions recurring in all sub-samples and worded in the same fashion.

Finally, the zero-order correlations and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the scales are presented in Table 4 for each sample separately. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the cut-off value for sufficient reliability in all sectors (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), ranging between .935 and .797. This revealed acceptable level of internal consistency for all factors.

**Table 4. Means, standard deviations, correlations among variables, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$** 

<b>PRIVATE SECTOR</b>					
	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	3.24	1.07	(.909)		
2. Perceptions of colleagues	3.59	1.03	.656**	(.813)	
3. Perceptions of top management	3.19	1.05	.772**	.556**	(.819)
<b>PUBLIC SECTOR</b>					
	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.33	1.81	(.935)		
2. Perceptions of colleagues	4.66	1.47	.520**	(.839)	
3. Perceptions of top management	3.13	1.53	.594**	.434**	(.913)
<b>HEALTHCARE SECTOR</b>					
	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.15	1.95	(.845)		
2. Perceptions of colleagues	4.95	1.40	.566**	(.797)	
3. Perceptions of top management	2.84	2.59	.568**	.314**	(.913)

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$ . Values on the diagonal show scales' reliabilities.

## Discussion

As hypothesized, findings from confirmatory factorial analyses supported the structural validity of the scales we developed, as well as the replicability of the three factors structure across organizational contexts in three independent samples.

Moreover, we supported the occurrence across contexts (therefore the “generalizability”) and the structural stability of certain behaviors that were inductively identified from previous studies. The critical incidents collected showed several commonalities across sectors with regard to the prototypical behaviors enacted by each social constituency. The “core behaviors” concerned the areas of content that we hypothesized, and specifically Equity, Participation, and Development (immediate supervisor); Collaboration, Atmosphere, and Support (colleagues); Task Structuring, Support, and Development (top management). Thus, as we hypothesized, these behaviors (namely the prototypical behaviors

enacted by each constituencies and recurrent in different settings) would allow measurement and comparison among different contexts.

As we hypothesized, whereas some behaviors would recur across contexts, others would be more specific. Results highlighted that some peculiarities do exist across sectors. Particularly, the “specific behaviors” emerged by the critical incidents are related to the following areas of context: Affectivity and Clarity (immediate supervisor) in the private sector; Competencies, Support and Information (immediate supervisor) in the public sector; Innovation and Competencies (top management) in the public sector; and Equity and Integration in the healthcare sector. Moreover, we consider a cue of context specificity the fact that the factor loadings, even in the items emerged as common areas, are different in each sector. These differences should be deeply investigated in the future.

## **Study 2 – The relationship between PoC and Self-Efficacy**

As we broadly explained above, studying organizational context rooted in the frame of reference of the social cognitive theory (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 1997) means to include the lens through which the individual sees and construes his context, by catching the more salient aspects of it and exerting a transformative action on it and the events of his life. Accordingly, we focus on perception in order to consider the significant role played by individuals in shaping their own context. The main individual characteristic that has been connected to PoC is self-efficacy. Previous research has showed that the positive paths connecting self-efficacy to each of the PoC facets are similar in different organizations from different settings (e.g. schools, the military, service firms; Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni et al., 2010b). From this standpoint, and consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2000a), we assert that self-efficacy can shape how employees perceive social constituencies in their work context.

The theoretical rationale underlying this relationship is that self-efficacious employees are more confident about the controllability of circumstances, compared with inefficacious ones,

and, since they believe themselves to be able to enact successful behaviors, they will be more proactive and likely to act transformatively on their environment. Therefore, they approach their social environment with a different “frame of mind,” which helps them to develop constructive and positive relationships with organizational social constituencies, which would lead them to perceive these constituencies in a more positive fashion.

We posit that self-efficacious employees are more inclined to set up constructive relationships with colleagues (Bandura, 2000b) by promoting a prosocial orientation characterized by cooperativeness and sharing, and, therefore, they perceive colleagues more positively in terms of trust, cohesion, and willingness to collaborate at work. Moreover, self-efficacious employees manage the power distance with their supervisors in such a way that they are able to ask for help in case of difficulties, proactively seek strategies regarding self-presentation and opportunities for mastery experience, and capitalize on feedback. Therefore they are more likely to perceive supervisors positively with regard to their supportiveness, encouragement, and care for staff development. Finally, self-efficacious employees figure out ways of exercising their control, exploiting the opportunities present in different circumstances, even in environments with limited prospects (Bandura, 2000b). Therefore, they have a more positive impression of top management compared to their counterparts with low self-efficacy, who view impediments as obstacles they have little chance to overcome.

On the basis of these arguments, we tested the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4: In all three business sectors self-efficacy will be related to PoC facets, namely (a) the immediate supervisor, (b) the colleagues, and (c) the top management.*

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

Three different samples from the same business sectors were involved in the second study. Thus, 704 employees from the private, 218 from the public and 1,002 from the healthcare sectors were administered a questionnaire that guaranteed the respondents' anonymity.

The private sector was represented by a sample of employees from a privatized Italian service company. A total of 1,093 white collar workers received a letter from the researchers and the company explaining the project's aims and inviting them to fill-in the web-based survey. The response rate was 64%.

With regard to the public sector, a total of 300 employees, working in the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, were informed about the survey by the means of a formal communication by top management. A total of 218 employees returned the questionnaire (response rate 73%).

Finally, the healthcare sector employees worked in a big Italian general hospital. Professional nurses (N=1,759) were individually administered an anonymous questionnaire. Each participant received a presentation letter that briefly described the purpose of the project. A total of 1,002 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 57%. Detailed information about the three sub-samples is presented in table 1.

### *Measures*

*Perceptions of social Context.* Perceptions of social Context's items were developed following the same procedure described in study 1. Focus groups with crucial organizational representatives, using the Flanagan's critical incidents technique (1954), revealed in each business sector the existence of recurrent typical behaviors enacted by each social constituency that, through the content analysis, we referred to the same "areas of content" identified in study 1. Thus, items were worded similarly to study 1, although assuring the

terminological specificity of each context. Sample items are “My immediate supervisor encourages ideas and proposals from co-workers”; or, “In my office, people are willing to help each other by flexibly organizing their work”; and, “In this organization, top management clearly communicates policies and decisions”. Moreover, a few more contextualized items were developed, which referred to the supervisor providing employees with help to solve work-related problems and clearly setting goals to strive for; to the top management clearly communicating concerning roles and responsibilities, and facilitating integration among employees; to the work group members resolving conflicts and cohesively dealing with difficulties. The final scales consisted of 5 items in the private, 7 in the public and 3 in the healthcare sectors to measure the perceptions of the immediate supervisor’s prototypical behaviors; 5 items in the private, 7 in the public, and 4 in the healthcare sectors to measure the perceptions of colleagues; 5 item in the private, 4 in the public, 7 in the healthcare sectors to evaluate the perceptions of top management.

*Self-Efficacy.* Consistent with Bandura’s recommendations for construct specificity (2006), self-efficacy item were developed on the basis of interviews and focus groups with representative workers from each sample. Statements were related to the main work domains of each sample and to specific behaviors as they emerged from the critical incidents collected. Items were worded as individual beliefs regarding the ability to carry on specific behaviors on the job, such as handling interpersonal relationships with colleagues, challenging tasks and goals, emergencies and unexpected activities, and job responsibilities (e.g. “In my work I am confident I can solve all the conflicts that may occur with my colleagues”; “In my work I am confident I can overcome all frustrations related to my failures”; and, “In my work I am confident of remaining calm in very stressful situations”).



## Analyses and Results

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, correlations) for all sectors. Moreover, the respective Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales are presented in the same table; values ranged from .922 to .793, indicating an adequate internal consistency in all the scales.

**Table 5. Means, standard deviations, correlations among variables, and Cronbach's alphas in Study 2**

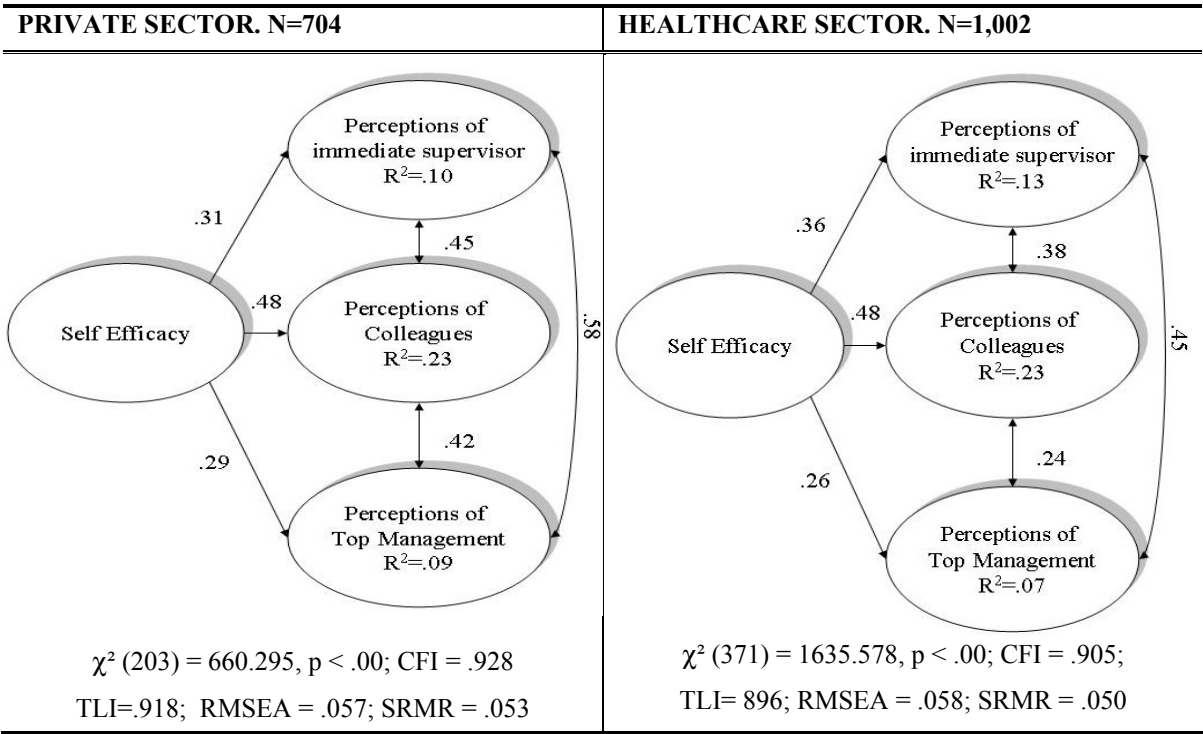
<b>PRIVATE SECTOR</b>						
	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Self-Efficacy	5.30	.73	(.805)			
2. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.65	1.35	.272**	(.914)		
3. Perceptions of colleagues	4.94	.965	.391**	.526**	(.870)	
4. Perceptions of top management	3.97	1.18	.257**	.617**	.501**	(.886)
<b>PUBLIC SECTOR</b>						
	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Self-Efficacy	6.67	1.19	(.893)			
2. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	5.35	1.94	.363**	(.922)		
3. Perceptions of colleagues	4.95	1.58	.265**	.364**	(.857)	
4. Perceptions of top management	3.71	1.99	.219**	.623**	.483**	(.882)
<b>HEALTHCARE SECTOR</b>						
	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Self-Efficacy	5.28	.933	(.897)			
2. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.02	1.82	.326**	(.835)		
3. Perceptions of colleagues	4.92	1.30	.442**	.476**	(.793)	
4. Perceptions of top management	2.55	1.34	.246**	.475**	.318**	(.905)

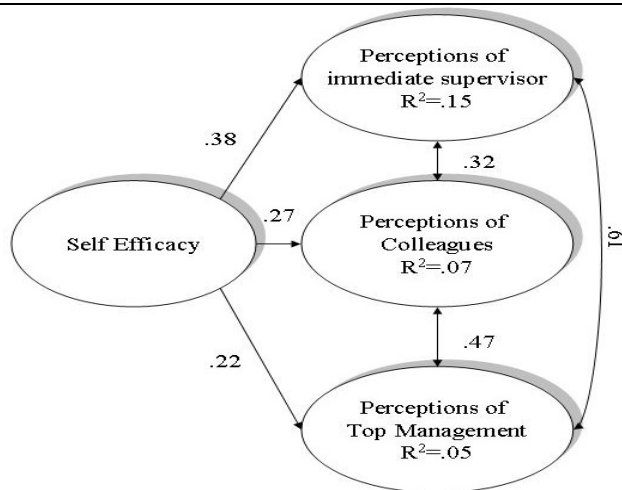
Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$ . Values on the diagonal show scales' reliabilities.

In order to evaluate the relationship between self-efficacy and the three PoC in the different contexts, we tested three structural models. The goodness of fit of each model was tested using multiple indexes, as in the previous study, namely the chi-square, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger & Lind, 1980), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996). Each model fitted the data well because all indexes fell in the cut-off range of acceptable values (Kline,

2005). The detailed goodness of fit indexes and the parameters' estimates of the three structural models are reported in figure 1. As expected, in the three sectors self-efficacy was positively related to all the three PoC. In particular, self-efficacy was more strongly related to perceptions of colleagues in the private and the healthcare sectors than in public sector, whereas the relationships were quite similar among self-efficacy and perceptions of the immediate supervisor and perceptions of top management in all the three contexts.

**Figure 1 – Structural Models in Study 2. Fit indexes and Parameter estimates**





$\chi^2 (269) = 473.242, p < .00; CFI = .928; TLI = .920; RMSEA = .063; SRMR = .069$

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## Discussion

The hypothesized positive relationship between self-efficacy and the PoC facets was largely supported in the second study. In particular, self-efficacy was more strongly related to perceptions of colleagues in the private and the healthcare sectors than in the public sector, whereas the relationships were quite similar among self-efficacy and perceptions of immediate supervisor and perceptions of top management in all three contexts. The difference regarding colleagues may be explained in the light of the low interdependence characterizing many job positions in public organizations. These differences in the strength of this relationships across sectors required to be further on deepened in the future, because they evidence the existence of a context's uniqueness.

## General Discussion

The present study aimed at contributing to the debate on context in organizational research by presenting an operationalization and measurement proposal and offering a sound rationale to the study of context by linking it to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). To

this purpose, two studies, involving over 3,000 respondents from a large variety of settings (private, public and health care sectors), have been developed.

The first one aimed to present the construct of Perceptions of social Context (PoC) and its operationalization. We overtly situate PoC within Johns's model (2006), particularly by focusing on the social aspects of discrete context. We refer to the structural social constituencies which recur in organizations, because they satisfy important social needs of employees in the workplace (Stevens & Fiske, 1995).

The second one aimed to confirm the PoC structural validity and make a connection with a psychological theory that explains how individuals perceive external features, by investigating the relationship between PoC with self-efficacy.

Overall, we add some novel and valuable elements to theorization about, and measurement of, context.

First of all, we support in both studies the structural validity of PoC measure, by confirming the stability of the tripartite structure of PoC (immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) among 8 independent samples from different sectors (private, public and health care sectors).

Second, we look at context in a psychological perspective and offer a sound rationale to the study of context by linking its to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Specifically, in the second study we investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and PoC in order to deepen the individual agentive role in the construal process of the environment. In fact, it is likely that employees with high self-efficacy approach their context with a different frame of mind, which makes them build up more positive relationship with the social constituencies in the work context.

Third, we provide a measurement proposal aimed at balancing the uniqueness of each organizational context with the need for generalizability. We defined PoC as the perceptions of prototypical behaviors enacted by each social constituency with regard to both the

productive and relational aspects of interactions. In order to capture and portray in empirical studies the specificity of real organizational contexts, we developed through the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) the PoC's sub-scales. However, we empirically and inductively highlighted that some common areas of content emerged with regard to the behaviors enacted across organizations and business sectors. As we hypothesized, the common behaviors are related to the following contents: Equity, Development and Participation for the immediate supervisor; Integration of Competencies, Help and Atmosphere for colleagues; and Task Structure, Development and Support for top management.

At the same time some "specific behaviors" differ across organizations and sectors, preserving at most the uniqueness of each context, which are Affectivity and Clarity (immediate supervisor) in the private sector; Competencies, Support and Information (immediate supervisor) in the public sector; Innovation and Competencies (top management) in public sector; Equity and Integration in healthcare sector.

Moreover, we highlight the specificity of context by investigating the structural validity of PoC and the different strength of the relationship between it and self-efficacy in several independent samples among different sectors (private, public and health care sectors). According to Llorens and colleagues (Llorens et al., 2006), we revealed that the basic structure of PoC recur in a similar way across samples, despite differences in sectors and organizational characteristics. Hence, the structural validity of PoC is demonstrated in both studies. At the same time, the fact that the sizes of most factor loadings and the strength of the relationship between PoC and self efficacy differ among samples could be consider a cue of the context's specificity, that require deeper study in the future.

### *Limitations and future perspectives*

There are some limitations in our contribution. The main is its cross-sectional design, which implies that the results need to be interpreted with caution and no causal inferences on the observed relationships should be made. Indeed, although alternative models have showed us that the reverse relationship does not seem to be a potential alternative explanation to our results, future research should investigate this relationship longitudinally.

Moreover, even though we provided a large sample involving over 3,000 participants from three different sector (private, public, and healthcare sectors), future studies should more broadly test the stability of the relationship between self-efficacy and PoC in a wide variety of settings. In this direction, a manuscript submitted for publication comes from Borgogni and colleagues (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Di Tecco, Alessandri & Vecchione, 2011), which adopted a meta-analytic procedure to support the hypothesized relationship, as well as attitudes at work, in a sample composed by over 6,000 participants from 16 very different organizations. Results corroborated the hypothesized relationship between self-efficacy and PoC through heterogeneous and independent samples employed in different business sectors and in different job positions.

Another limitation is the lack of relevant organizational behaviors that may be explored in the frame of our model (e.g. absenteeism, performance, innovation). Since we investigated the relationship between self- efficacy and PoC, we highlighted a part of the reciprocal dynamic transaction between individual, environment and behavior posited by social cognitive theory, that is how context can shape and be shaped by individuals who interact with it. In order to answer to the call of studying the role of context on the organizational behavior, future studies should consider and test this relation deeply.

A third limitation is related to the need for deepening the uniqueness of context. Some similarities among organizations have been confirmed by testing the structural validity of PoC. Anyway it would be necessary to highlight the differences in context across

organizations and sectors. Future research might investigate these differences through comparison among means and provide a profile analysis across organizations and subunits. In fact, different clusters of individuals holding different patterns of perceptions of social context and self-efficacy may emerge.

Moreover, we overtly collocate PoC within Johns model (2006) and, particularly, we focus on the social aspects of discrete context, leaving aside the other two aspects of it (task and physical context). According to Johns model (2006) we propose to deepen the construct of PoC in the future by focusing on task aspects such as workload, the degree of autonomy, etc., and physical aspects of discrete context, such as lighting, temperature, noise). Thus, future studies should provide an operationalization and measurement proposal of both of the remaining dimensions of discrete context.

As we broadly asserted, we consider the perceptual measures of context because we posit that focussing on perception means to add some value to the understanding of phenomena in the workplace and consider the significant role of individual characteristics in shaping one's perceptions of context. In any case, we know that a central issue in context research is related to the need for including objective measures of context (Johns, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993) and that the reference to "objective" characteristics is missing by now. Specifically, data concerning the situational strength characterizing each specific organization would allow for organizational-level studies that may help to understand the objective moderators of self-efficacy's influence on perceptions of context and investigate the existence of a shared context across organizations and subunits (i.e. teams, departments, and work units).

### *Practical Implications*

The primary implication of our findings is that PoC may provide a method to construe instruments in order to evaluate context in organizational diagnoses and to develop staff surveys. By mean of critical incidents, practitioners may find the prototypical behaviors that

characterized organizations and might be developed. Moreover, the focus on the main social constituencies might provide a roadmap of weaknesses and strengths of context and facilitate at most the intervention targeted to three different constituencies (i.e. immediate supervisor, colleagues or top management), since intervention will be based on their prototypical behaviors that need to be developed.

A second implication is related to the relationship investigated, that is self-efficacy and PoC. It offers a model to investigate social context and permits to incorporate into organizational analysis an individual variable that plays a crucial role in the construal process of context. According to the triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986), we endorse the measuring of an individual's perceptions, because this means including the lens through which he/she sees the context. That permits one to provide interventions that focus both on individual and organizational aspects.

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## CHAPTER 3

*What makes employees engaged with their work?*

*The role of self-efficacy and changes in perceptions of context over time.*

### Abstract

Work engagement (WE) represents a crucial dimension for individual wellbeing and organizational performance. Although several empirical studies have investigated both environmental and individual factors that can contribute to the development of work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Hobfoll, 1989; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2009), longitudinal studies in which individual and contextual factors concur to predict WE over time are still limited (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2007).

The present two wave study, framed within the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), offers a conceptual model in which self-efficacy is posited to predict work engagement directly and through the mediating role of improvements in the Perceptions of Social context (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management).

In 2007 and in 2010, participants (750 professionals; 54,4 % males), working in a large Italian company, were administered a questionnaire, measuring self-efficacy (T1), Perceptions of social Context (T1 and T2) and work engagement (T2). Findings of structural equation modelling revealed that initial self-efficacy predicts work engagement over time both directly and indirectly through the improvements in the Perceptions of social Context. On the basis of our results, employees with higher initial levels of self-efficacy are more likely to improve their perceptions of work environment, and to become more engaged with their work. Practical implications for intervention are discussed.

Keywords: *Work engagement; Self efficacy; Changes in perceptions of context.*

Over the past two decades, topics as workers' wellbeing and quality of work life begged for the attention of scholars, occupational health professionals, and practitioners (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), due to their link with employees' performance and organizational productivity. This led to an increased need for investigating more and more the personal and environmental factors related to work that can have an impact on workers' performance and, consequently, on the organizational productivity.

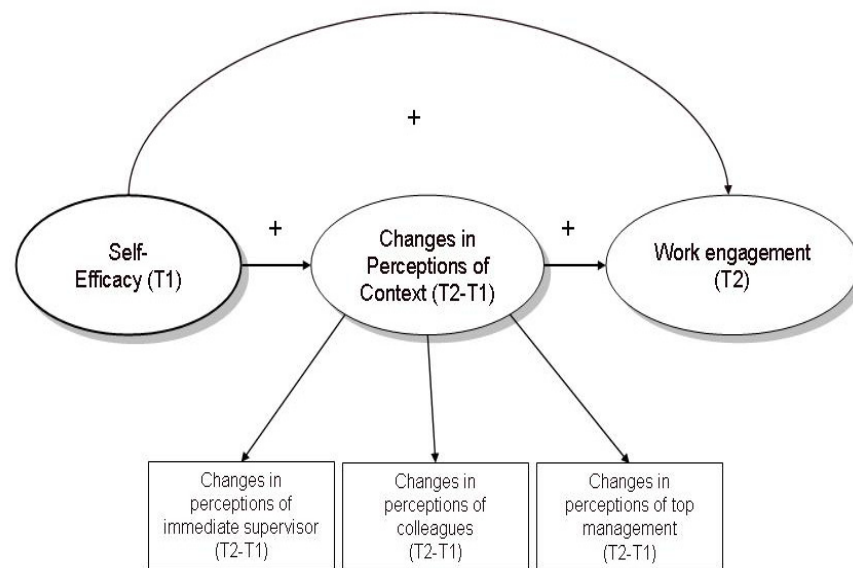
Work Engagement (WE), which is defined as a positive and persistent psychological condition which refers to a state of emotional and motivational fulfilment related to work, represents a crucial dimension for individual wellbeing and organizational performance (Schaufeli, Salanova, González- Romá & Bakker, 2002). Several empirical studies (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007; Luthans, Avolio, Norman & Avey, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) have investigated factors that can contribute to developing WE, concluding that it is determined by both environmental (e.g. task characteristics, climate aspects) and individual aspects (e.g. self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism; Hobfoll, 1989; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, despite the broad interest of researchers, there are few longitudinal studies which investigated the concurrent role of individual and contextual factors in predicting WE over time (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; 2009), calling for further investigations.

The present two-wave study presents a longitudinal exploration of the individual and contextual determinants of WE within the theoretical framework of the social cognitive theory (Wood & Bandura, 1989). We explored the role played by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and by Perceptions of the social Context (PoC; Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Vecchione, 2010; Borgogni, Petitta & Mastroilli, 2010), which are defined as the perceptions of the main social constituencies structurally defined in organizations (namely, perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management) in concurring to predict Work Engagement over time. Particularly, adopting a social cognitive perspective our aims are the

following: 1) to corroborate the positive and direct relationship between self-efficacy and work engagement. It has been well demonstrated that self-efficacy is a crucial variable for both wellbeing and performance (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovich & Luthans, 1998), because efficacy beliefs are functional in achieving goals and stimulating personal growth and satisfaction. Moreover, self-efficacy has been recently studied in relation to work engagement finding a strong link with it (Llorens et al., 2007; Salanova, Bakker & Llorens, 2006; Salanova, Schaufeli, Xanthopoulou, & Bakker, 2010); 2) to examine the relationship between changes in PoC and work engagement. Since we collected our data in two waves, we intend to look at the changes from one time to another in the three PoC (namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management; Borgogni et al., 2010a), that means to measure the change in the perceptions of the main social constituencies structurally defined in organizations over time. Furthermore, consistent with previous studies that investigated the relationship among some contextual aspects, such as task and social characteristics of work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006) and WE, we propose to investigate whether the improvements in individuals' perceptions of the more relevant social constituencies internal to the organization positively impact on work engagement; 3) to examine to what extent self-efficacy is positively related to work engagement through the mediating role of improvements in PoC. We believe that, since the individual is an agentic being (Bandura, 1986), he/she shows an active role in construing more positive relationships with social constituencies that leads to having more positive representations of them (Borgogni et al., 2010a), which in turn will influence his/her motivational and affective states, namely work engagement.

**Figure 1. The posited model.**



*The direct relationship between self-efficacy and work engagement.*

Work engagement is defined as “a persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state” (Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006, p. 702) related to work that is characterized by three dimensions, namely Vigor, Dedication and Absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), it describes a state in which individuals invest high levels of energy, commitment to their job, effort and persistence in the face of difficulties and obstacles, and resistance to stress (namely Vigor). Moreover they feel positive sensations due to work, such as inspiration and enthusiasm with their job, and consequently they do it with high passion (namely Dedication). Finally, engaged workers are totally immersed in work activities that lead them to forget the passage of time (namely Absorption).

Among psychological characteristics, self-efficacy has been recently related to work engagement (Sweetman & Luthans, 2010; Xanthopoulou, et al. 2009), also in longitudinal studies (Llorens et al., 2007).

Self efficacy is defined as the individuals’ beliefs in their own capabilities to organize and carry out the course of actions required to achieve successful results and valued attainments



(Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura (2011), self efficacy plays a crucial role on work motivation by influencing the choice of goals one pursues, and the effort and the persistence he/she invests to achieve them (Bandura, 2011). Since self efficacious people believe themselves to have the capabilities to achieve success and produce expected results, they regulate the effort and persistence to pursue their goals and are more resistant in the face of difficulties and stressful situations. Self- efficacy is considered as a self-motivating mechanism (Bandura, 2011) based on the goals and course of actions individuals choose for themselves and on the attribution they give to their successes and failures. Moreover, self-efficacy is also related to emotional processes, because it is considered as a self-regulating mechanism (Bandura, 1997) that reduces the vulnerability to stress by enhancing the resilience to adversities and obstacles and by regulating the individual's emotional states. Hence, high self- efficacy leads people to be more resilient to stress and to feel more positive emotions at work. Consistent with Bandura (1997; 2011), authors posited that efficacy beliefs have a positive relationship with high level of work engagement (Simbula, Guglielmi & Schaufeli, 2011; Xanthopoulou, et al., 2007), since self-efficacy acts on motivation at work and leads people to dedicate to their work with effort and persistence. Moreover, the self-regulating function of self-efficacy permits to individuals to regulate their emotions and feel positive sensations related to work.

Following this line of research, we assume that the affective and motivational process activated by initial self-efficacy will guide employees to feel a subsequent work-related state of fulfilment, namely work engagement. Thus, we believe that self-efficacious people will experience more enthusiasm about their work and their will pursuit their goal with higher level of energy and immersion than people with low self-efficacy.

Hence, the following hypothesis was tested:

*Hypothesis 1: T1 self-efficacy directly predicts T2 work engagement.*

*From self-efficacy to work engagement: the mediating role of Perceptions of social Context over time.*

***Self efficacy → Changes in PoC***

There is empirical evidence about the positive relationship between self-efficacy and PoC from previous studies (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni et al., 2010b; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003). Nevertheless, these studies investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and PoC in a cross sectional perspective and considered separately the connection among efficacy beliefs and the perceptions of the three Perceptions of social Context, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management. Given that there is a lack of longitudinal research which have investigated this relationship, our study focussed on the role of self-efficacy in improving the Perceptions of social Context over time. Moreover, we considered PoC as a unique construct, since we aimed to investigate the overall change in individuals' perceptions of the social context. Consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacious people relate to their environment with a different "frame of mind" which helps them to foster more positive relationships with others and, consequently, to increase their perceptions of the three social constituencies (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management). Furthermore, they have a proactive approach towards their social environment that leads them to take action to improve their relationship with the main social constituencies structurally defined and therefore to construe, with the passing of time, a more positive representation of them, such as gaining colleagues' trust and esteem, developing relationships based on collaboration and cohesiveness with workmates, reaching for professional development and actively participating in the decision processes by proposing new idea and suggestions to their own supervisors.

Therefore, we believe that efficacy beliefs influence improvements in Perceptions of social Context over time.

Thus, we hypothesized:

*Hypothesis 2: T1 self-efficacy is positively related to Changes in PoC (T2-T1), namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management.*

### ***Changes in PoC → Work Engagement***

The main contribution in studying contextual aspects as determinants of WE comes from the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R model; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) which has proposed a causal connections among job resources and level of engagement with work. Job resources, that are defined as “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that may reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, are functional in achieving work goals, and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501), are consistently and positively associated with work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

As Llorens and colleagues suggested (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli & Salanova, 2006), the JD-R model may be applied to different settings, irrespective of the particular resources offered by the organizational context. Hence, job resources may be different in each setting. Nevertheless, we summarize that they include some environmental and task characteristics (e.g. autonomy, performance feedback) and also several social aspects of the organizational context, such as social support from colleagues, support from supervisor, supervisory coaching, decision involvement, and development opportunities (Hakanen et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These contextual characteristics were associated to work engagement through a motivational process, whereby the available resources increase the

level of an individual's engagement at work (Llorens, et al., 2006). This link between job resources and work engagement was confirmed also longitudinally (Hakanen et al., 2008).

Given that some social aspects of the work environment (e.g. social support from co-workers and supervisor, supervisory coaching, inclusion in decision processes) have been consistently linked to work engagement by the JD-R model (Hakanen et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), we posit that PoC may have a role in increasing employees' engagement. Our rationale is that the positive perceptions of three constituencies lead to more positive attitudes with work, because they fully satisfy the social needs at work (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Stevens & Fiske, 1995). For instance, colleagues increase involvement and positive emotions towards the job, providing collaboration and cohesiveness and developing a positive climate, the supervisor fosters employees' motivation and effort at work, taking care of their professional development, providing positive feedback and ensuring the help and opportunities they need; while top management enhances the attachment to the work and to the organization, facilitating collaboration among units and groups and proposing shared meanings, policies and procedures. Thus, we believe that the more positive the perceptions of colleagues, of the immediate supervisor, and of top management are, the higher the level of employees' engagement with their work will be.

Moreover, a recent study attested that the increases in job resources (e.g., in social support from colleagues, supervisory coaching, development opportunities) positively predict work engagement (Schaufeli, Bakker & Van Rhenen, 2009).

From this standpoint, we argue that improvements in the perceptions of the main social constituencies internal to the organizations, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management, will be related to subsequent work engagement.

Thus, we tested the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Changes in PoC (T2-T1), namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management, will positively relate to T2 work engagement.*

### ***Self-efficacy → Changes in PoC → Work Engagement***

As anticipated, we offer an investigation of WE's determinants rooted in the frame of reference of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). As Bandura posited (1986), individual, environment, and behavior are interrelated through a reciprocal dynamic exchange, namely "reciprocal triadic determinism". In this perspective, individuals are agentic human being that transformatively act on their context. According to Bandura (1997) self-efficacy, is considered as the main self-regulating process responsible for this transaction among individual, context and behavior. It may influence behavior both directly and through its impact on other factors (Bandura, 2000).

We believe that self-efficacy may influence work engagement also indirectly, through the mediating role of changes in PoC. As we explained above, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in construing more positive relationships with the three social constituencies (namely colleagues, immediate supervisor, and top management), improving in turn their Perceptions of social Context. Through these improvements, individuals likely satisfy personal needs inherent their social context (Stevens & Fiske, 1995) that lead them to experience a motivational and affective state of fulfillment with their work. Thus, we posit that it is also through the improvements in the perceived relationships with their social context that self-efficacy influences employees' energy and dedication to their work, namely work engagement.

Previous studies (Borgogni, et al., 2010a; 2010b) have already showed that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in construing positive perceptions of their context and through them it has an indirect influence on similar/adjacent constructs of work engagement, such as

job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). Thus, we similarly hypothesized the same process with work engagement. Therefore, we posit that self-efficacy indirectly influences work engagement through the improvements in the Perceptions of social Context.

Hence, the following hypothesis was explored:

*Hypothesis 4: T1 self efficacy predicts indirectly T2 work engagement through the changes in PoC (T2-T1), namely perceptions of immediate supervisor, of colleagues and of top management.*

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

A two-wave studies was conducted in the main Italian postal service company, one of the largest organizations in Italy, with about 150,000 people among several job positions, from mail carriers to top managers, employed in the 14,000 offices throughout Italy. Employees have been involved in the longitudinal research that aimed to investigate predictors of successful performance and wellbeing, by the means of two pen and pencil questionnaires (one in 2007 and the second one in 2010).

Particularly, in 2007 (T1), 1,712 white-collar employees from staff and line of the headquarters located in Rome received the questionnaire by researchers. Of these, 1,172 filled-in the questionnaire (response rate 68%). Three years later (T2), of the total of employees involved, 857 answered the questionnaire (response rate 74%).

Overall, 741 professionals (64% of the initial sample) completed both questionnaires at time 1 and time 2 and were, therefore, considered in the present study. Of these, 54.4% are male and the remaining 45.6% are female. The mean age of the sample is 44.3 (SD=8.6), while the mean organizational tenure is 14.5 years (SD = 10.5).

During the two waves, employees received a letter presented by the company explaining the project's aims and inviting them to fill-in a questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and the research team guaranteed confidential data processing. Data of the two waves were matched using a personal encrypted code that ensured the privacy of the respondents, so that there was no connection between their answers and their names.

### *Measures*

The two self-report questionnaires were administered in order to measure all the constructs included in the two waves. Consistent with McArdle's suggestions (2009) on Change score models, each variable was measured only at the time in which it has been hypothesized by our conceptual model.

*Self-Efficacy (T1)*. 7 items by a validated work self-efficacy scale (Borgogni et al., 2010a) were included in the questionnaire at time 1, in order to measure the employees' beliefs of being able to carry on specific behaviors on their job, such as handling: 1) the stressful situations at work by keeping calm and a good mood, and by recovering their energy quickly; 2) the relationships with colleagues, particularly by dealing with all the conflicts that can emerge in the workplace, by earning the esteem of workmates, and by providing their own opinion in groups and defending their own rights; 3) the failures related to their performance, by overcoming all the frustrations and setting strategies for the future (e.g., "In my work I am confident I can solve all the conflicts that may occur with my colleagues"; and, "In my work I am confident I can overcome all frustrations related to my failures").

*Perceptions of social Context (PoC) (T1 and T2)*. Items were construed using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). In 2007, two group interviews to company representatives and experts were conducted by researchers, aimed at collecting the most typical behaviors enacted by each social constituency within the organization. Moving from them and through the content analysis, we worded 4 items for perceptions of colleagues that

refer to some crucial aspects of characterizing peer relationships at work, namely reciprocal support, trust, and collaboration and cohesiveness (e.g., “*In my office we deal with difficulties in a unified manner*”); 5 items for perceptions of the immediate supervisor that identify crucial immediate supervisor’s behaviors, such as supporting employees’ professional development, treating employees fairly, fostering employees’ participation, and communicating goals and procedures clearly (e.g., “*My immediate supervisor encourages ideas and proposals from co-workers*”); and, finally, 5 items for perceptions of top-management, assessing the top management’s behavior in clearly defining goals, strategies and policies, in supporting the individual professional development, and in taking care of employees’ needs (e.g., “*Top management’s decisions are trustworthy*”).

*Work Engagement (T2)*. The scale is composed of the 9 items of the short version of UWES (Schaufeli et al., 2006), which measures the three components of work engagement, namely vigor, dedication and absorption (e.g., “*I feel happy when I am working intensively*”). We considered work engagement as a one- factor construct, since an overall measure of work engagement has been recommended with the UWES short version (for further investigation see Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Self efficacy and Perceptions of social Context were measured with a 7-point Likert type answering scale, where 1 corresponded to “strongly disagree” and 7 to “strongly agree”, whereas work engagement was assessed with a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

### *Statistical Analyses*

The posited longitudinal model refers to the change score models (McArdle, 2009), which analyze longitudinal data focussing on the change in a variable over time and its determinants. As we anticipated, in our model we investigated the changes in Perceptions of social Context. According to Smith and Beaton (2008) and Schaufeli and colleagues (2009), we computed them by regressing T2 scores of each item of the three perceptions of social



context (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) on the corresponding T1 scores. Moreover, the differences emerged by changes in the three PoC in the two times were measured as standardized residual scores and were included in the subsequent analysis. It is important to note that positive residual scores (T2-T1) indicate an increase in Perceptions of social Context, whereas the negatives indicate a decrease in PoC.

Moreover, since we were interested in evaluating the overall improvement in PoC and in investigating how it concurred to predicting work engagement, we considered the three facets of PoC (as standardized residual scores), namely changes in perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues, and perceptions of top management, each as a part of a second order factor, labelled Changes in Perceptions of social Context. This has been supported by findings of previous studies (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Latham, 2009; Borgogni et al., 2010a; Caprara et al., 2003) in which the three dimensions are strongly interrelated with each other across different work settings.

Thus, when changes of PoC were calculated, we followed a two- step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). At first, measurement models were tested and compared with the alternative ones. Particularly the following ones were performed: 1) a second order model separately for T1 and T2 to test the factorial validity of the PoC scales; 2) a model to investigate the invariance across time in PoC; 3) a second order measurement model on Zresiduals scores loaded by three dimensions of Changes in PoC (namely colleagues, immediate supervisor and management) to support the construct validity of Changes in PoC; 4) a measurement model on Changes in PoC, self-efficacy and work engagement as a one-factor construct was also performed.

As second, a structural model was tested to explore the posited model by including all the other variables as latent factors, “Changes in PoC” as a second order factor and by adding the hypothesized structural paths.

Structural equation models were performed by the means of MPLUS, using the Maximum Likelihood estimation method (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). Multiple indexes were included to evaluate the goodness of the fit of each model, namely chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger & Lind, 1980), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). To compare the nested model with other alternative ones, which are described in the next paragraphs, the delta chi-square ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) was calculated.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, scales' reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) and correlations of all study variables. It should be noted that the mean values of the standardized residual scores are zero by nature, hence we included in the table 1 the scores for the three PoC facets at time 1 and at time 2. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranges between .936 and .812 and meets the cut-off value (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), ensuring internal consistency for all the scales. The zero-order correlations show good correlations among the variables, and indeed all the Pearson's r indexes are strongly significant ( $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliability and correlations.**

	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self EfficacyT1			(.812)							
2. PoC_immediate supervisorT1	4.89	1.27	.355**	(.904)						
3. PoC_colleaguesT1	5.12	1.02	.460**	.580**	(.884)					
4. PoC_top_managementT1	3.99	1.11	.359**	.585**	.413**	(.836)				
5. PoC_immediate supervisorT2	5.02	1.25	.204**	.445**	.286**	.343**	(.936)			
6. PoC_colleaguesT2	5.16	1.08	.212**	.296**	.470**	.197**	.567**	(.903)		
7. PoC_top_managementT2	4.04	1.18	.180**	.375**	.209**	.499**	.676**	.451**	(.896)	
8. Work EngagementT2	6.17	.082	.298**	.232**	.183**	.240**	.450**	.312**	.453**	(.874)

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$ . Values on the diagonal show scales' reliabilities

## Measurement models

### **Second order model on PoC's facets for both time1 and time2.**

As mentioned above, first of all, a second order model was tested separately for T1 and T2 and compared with three alternative models: 1) a one factor model in which all indicators loaded on a unique factor; 2) a three factor model in which each indicator loaded on the posited latent variables, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management, which were free to correlate each others; 3) an uncorrelated three factor model that had the same factor structure of the latter one, but in which to the three latent factors it was not permitted to correlate each others (see Table 2). Findings suggest that the posited model shows a good fit in both the time 1 and the time 2 (T1:  $\Delta\chi^2= 307$  df=1;  $p<.00$ ; T2:  $\Delta\chi^2= 46.851$  df=1).

**Table 2. Comparison between second order factor model and alternative ones for PoC at T1 and T2.**

Model	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90%CI	SRMR
Second Order Factor Model T1	280.926	63	.961	.952	.069	.061 -.078	.039
One Factor Model T1	1596.461	65	.729	.675	.181	.173 -.189	.107
Three Factors Model T1	280.619	62	.961	.951	.070	.062 -.078	.038
Uncorrelated Three Factors Model T1	906.070	65	.851	.821	.134	.126 -.142	.305
Second Order Factor Model T2	317.211	63	.966	.957	.076	.068 -.084	.142
One Factor Model T2	2180.353	65	.714	.657	.215	.208 -.223	.120
Three Factors Model T2	270.360	62	.972	.965	.069	.061 -.078	.034
Uncorrelated Three Factors Model T2	974.757	65	.877	.852	.141	.133-.149	.358

### **Invariance Model.**

A freely estimated model was compared with a model in which factor loadings of the 14 items at T1 and T2 were constrained to be equal, in order to test whether the factor loadings of PoC scales were invariant across time for valid time comparisons in longitudinal research (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). To test the invariance among loadings, we calculated the chi square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) between the two models under investigation. Since  $\Delta\chi^2$  was not significant (31.88, df 10,  $p<.00$ ), we argued that the factor loadings of all scales are invariant across time.

### ***Second order model on Zresidual scores.***

To support the construct validity of Changes in PoC, a measurement model on Zresiduals scores was performed, positing a second order factor loaded by three facets of Changes in PoC, namely perceptions of colleagues, perceptions of the immediate supervisor, and perceptions of top management. This model showed an acceptable fit:  $\chi^2(63) = 383.216$ ,  $p < .00$ ; CFI = .948; TLI=.936; RMSEA=.084; SRMR=.041. All factors loadings were significantly different from zero and greater than .60 in all scales, ranging from .89 to .66, making reasonable the measure of a second order model. This model was compared with three alternative models, that is: 1) a one factor model; 2) a three factor model in which the three factors were free to correlate each other's; 3) an uncorrelated three factor (see Table 3). The fit of the second-order factor model is better than alternative ones, and particularly rather than the three factor model, that assumes that each indicator loads on the respective posited facets of PoC (namely immediate supervisor, colleague, top management;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 1,181$   $df=1$ ;  $p < .00$ ).

**Table 3. Comparison between second order factor model and alternative ones for changes in PoC.**

Model	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90%CI	SRMR
Second Order Factor Model	383.216	63	.948	.936	.084	.076-.092	.041
One Factor Model	1411.256	65	.782	.739	.169	.162-.177	.087
Three Factors Model	382.035	62	.948	.935	.085	.077-.093	.036
Uncorrelated Three Factors Model	1249.226	65	.809	.770	.159	.151-.167	.348

### ***Model on changes in PoC, Self Efficacy and Work Engagement.***

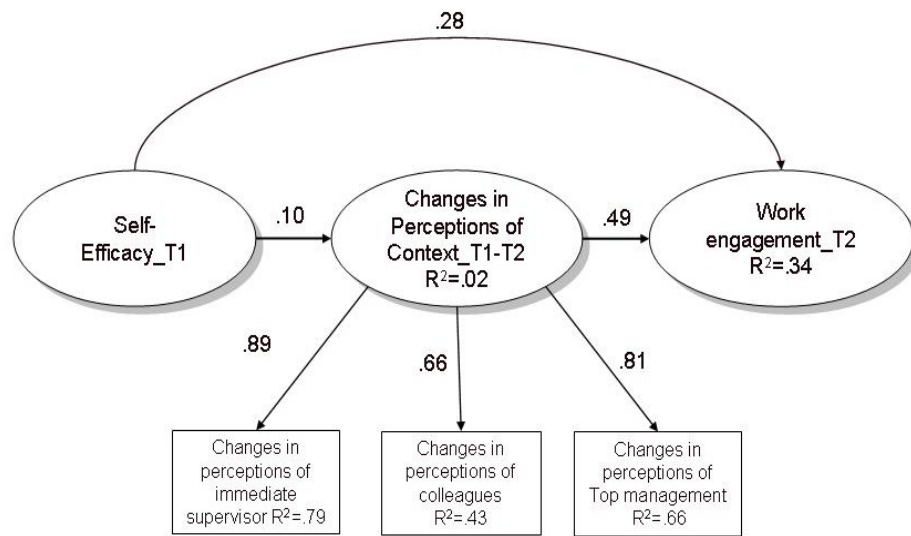
Finally, a measurement model on Changes in PoC, self-efficacy and work engagement was also performed in which each item was loaded on the posited latent factor. This model yielded an acceptable fit:  $\chi^2 (370) = 1281.334$ ,  $p < .00$ ; CFI = .925; TLI=.918; RMSEA = .060; SRMR = .059. The factor loadings were all significantly different from zero and greater than .40 in all scales, ranging from .458 to .887. Results corroborated the second order latent

factor for changes in PoC and the overall measure of work engagement as suggested by Schaufeli and colleagues (Schaufeli et al., 2006) when the UWES- short version is used.

### *Structural model*

The posited model fits well the data,  $\chi^2(370) = 1152.810$ ;  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .925; TLI = .918; RMSEA = .055; SRMR = .055, and provides support to all our hypotheses. Parameters estimates of the structural model are reported in Figure 2. As hypothesized, self efficacy at time 1 was significantly related to subsequent increases in the perceptions of the social context ( $\beta = .10$ ;  $p < .01$ ), which in turn positively predicted work engagement at time 2 ( $\beta = .49$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, the posited direct link between self-efficacy at time 1 and work engagement at time 2 was strongly significant ( $\beta = .28$ ;  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that changes in PoC would be a partial mediator of the relationship among the two variables. Overall, the model explained 2% of the variance in changes of PoC and 34% in work engagement. Additional analyses were conducted to effectively test the mediation hypothesis, by using Sobel's (1982) approximate significance test. The indirect link between self-efficacy and work engagement through the mediation role of increases in PoC was resulted as significant (total indirect effect:  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Figure 2. The posited model: parameters estimates.**



Note. All parameters estimates are standardized and significant at  $p < .01$ . The indirect effect of self efficacy on work engagement through changes in PoC is significant at  $p < .01$ , and equal in magnitude to  $\beta = .05$ .

## Discussion

Our findings fully confirmed the posited relationships among the variables.

Particularly, self-efficacy is significantly related to subsequent improvements in the Perceptions of social Context. We can argue that efficacy beliefs likely help employees to figure out ways of exercising control over their social environment, thus creating more positive relationships with the social constituencies (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) over time. It is worth noting that the link between self-efficacy and changes in PoC over time was not studied before. Thus, our contribution lends strong support to previous findings (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni et al., 2010b) that showed the positive relationship between efficacy beliefs and the perceptions of the three constituencies at work, confirming them longitudinally and highlighting the role of self-efficacy in contributing to the improvement of PoC over time.

Moreover, increases in the Perceptions of social Context strongly contribute to work engagement. More specifically, when PoC increase work engagement increases too. As anticipated above, the role of contextual aspects as determinants of WE has been extensively

studied (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, et al., 2001). Nevertheless, our contribution focused on employees' perceptions of the social context highlighting that the improvements in the perceived level of collaboration with colleagues, of support and opportunities offered by the supervisor and in the representation of top management likely lead employees to experience a positive work-related state of fulfilment, namely work engagement.

Finally, as we posited, self-efficacy represents an early predictor of work engagement, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of improvements in PoC. It is worth noting that an indirect effect between self-efficacy and work engagement through the mediating role of improvements in PoC has been found, with a time distance of three years from the first wave to the second one. This likely confirms that this effect is very stable over time, since it also emerged after a period of three years.

The strongest relationship is direct, corroborating findings from previous studies (Simbula et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007) which suggested that “self efficacy fuels work engagement” (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008 p. 386). Moreover, consistent with Bandura (2011), self efficacy activates a motivational process that leads people to approach to their job with effort and persistence in the face of obstacles and difficulties, and consequently being more engaged with their work. Moreover, self-efficacy showed an indirect relationship with work engagement through the improvements in the perceptions of social context. Since self-efficacy likely improves the perceptions of the social context, it fosters to satisfy the core social motives that lead employees in the relationship with the social constituencies internal to the organization and influences in turn their state of fulfilment with their work, namely work engagement.

#### *Limitations and future perspectives*

This study has some limitations which correspond to possible suggestions for future research perspectives.

The main potential concern is that the analyses rely on self-report data. Thus, the occurrence of common method bias cannot be excluded. It is worth noting that the constructs included in our study are by definition aspects that only the person can report, as they are referred to attitudes, perceptions, and evaluations related to the individual (Caprara & Cervone, 2000). Hence, they need to be measured by the means of a self-reported questionnaire. Nevertheless, the inclusion of some objective or external outcomes is required to deeply investigate our model. Future research should add crucial outcomes for work engagement, such as performance from the performance appraisal system rated by the immediate supervisor and/or productivity indexes, to examine how and to what extent the tested model will predict employees' performance.

A second concern is related to the fact that we did not control for the stability of self-efficacy and work engagement. In this regard, one should note that our focus was on the extent through which changes in PoC were predicted by efficacy beliefs, and in turn whether they predict work engagement. In this regard, our posited model is fully in agreement with recommendations recently made by McArdle (2009) with regard to the usefulness of latent change models to study a reliable variable's change and its possible determinants and consequences. Indeed, by the use of latent variable modelling, our study responds to the limitations identified for the change score models, particularly related to the effect of measurement error in lowering the reliability of the observed change scores (Cronbach & Furby, 1970). Clearly, future studies may consider more than two time points and other latent change models to explore more complex and reciprocal relationships between work engagement, PoC and self-efficacy. Yet, our latent change score model provides a contribution linking PoC to their antecedents and consequences. Future studies should consider some important issues to ameliorate our research, such as also investigating the changes in self-efficacy, since it is well known that also self-efficacy beliefs may change over time (Bandura, 1997).



### *Practical Implication*

Since work engagement represents a crucial dimension for individual wellbeing and organizational performance, several practical implications arise from the study of its determinants.

The role of self-efficacy as an early predictor of work engagement (both directly and indirectly through PoC) suggests the development of training programs aimed at building and enhancing self-efficacy beliefs. Increasing the employee's beliefs in their abilities to master their work context can foster a more positive perception of the main social constituencies and likely result in higher levels of work engagement. Training should focus on the main sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Bresó, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2011) by setting graduated attainments to overcome through perseverant effort and promoting learning from mistakes (namely mastery experience) by implementing via peer and team coaching to facilitate employees in sharing their experiences (namely vicarious experience), by providing feedback, support and encouragement from senior colleagues (namely verbal persuasion), by improving the ability to cope with negative emotions and enhancing positive emotional states (namely psychological and emotional states).

Given the special role of immediate supervisor in fostering employees self-efficacy (Borgogni et al. 2010a; Salanova et al. 2010), our findings suggest promoting coaching programs to immediate supervisors in order to train them in identifying individuals' characteristics and opportunities of the work context that better match them, in setting challenging goals for each employee, and in delivering constructive feedback that facilitate employees' growth. Moreover, this kind of intervention permits improving the relationship between supervisors and their employees.

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## CHAPTER 4

*Absences from work and its relationship with Self Efficacy, Perceptions of social Context and Job Satisfaction. A conceptual model rooted in the Social Cognitive Theory.*

### Abstract

The current study aimed to focus on absence behaviors and its determinants, through the investigation of a conceptual model rooted in the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) in which self- efficacy and Perceptions of social Context (i.e., immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) concur to predict absences from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction. 361 salesmen and white-collar employees from the Italian district of a multinational retail organization were administered a self- report questionnaire for measuring self-efficacy, Perceptions of social Context and job satisfaction. Then, we matched the self-report answers with objective absences measures (i.e., the total amount of days lost at work over 6 months). Structural equation modeling lent support to the hypothesized relationships among variables. We found that: 1) self- efficacy was positively related to the three Perceptions of social Context; 2) Perceptions of social Context had a positive relationship with job satisfaction; 3) job satisfaction was negatively related to absences from work; 4) job satisfaction mediated the relationship between Perceptions of social Context and absences from work. Overall, our contribution suggests the opportunity of developing interventions direct at enhancing self-efficacy and Perceptions of social Context to increase employees' job satisfaction and reduce in turn absence behaviors and the costs for organizations associated with them.

Keywords: *Absences from work; Self-efficacy; Perceptions of social Context; Job satisfaction.*

Employees' absence behaviors is a relevant concern for organizations and their employees today. Preliminary results of the Fifth European Working Conditions Survey (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010) have revealed that in Europe the number of hours worked per week continues to reduce due to absenteeism. It represents a huge cost for organizations, since absences from work are connected to sick pay and expensive practices to temporarily replace employees who are absent for a long time, and are strictly interrelated to a decrease of individual performance and companies' productivity (Cassidy & Sutherland, 2008).

Considering the pervasiveness of this topic, a substantial body of research has been devoted to absenteeism by a wide range of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, management, and occupational health medicine (Johns, 2008), to investigate which kind of factors have an impact on absence behaviors, in order to provide to organizations practical suggestions for setting up interventions to reduce or prevent it.

Several research theorized that absenteeism (but also withdrawal behaviors, such as turnover, lateness, etc.) are mostly related to the employees' attitudes towards their job or their organization, such as high dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, low work involvement and intention to quit the organization (Goldberg & Waldam, 2000; Johns, 2008; Sagie, 1998). Particularly, job satisfaction has been largely investigated, since the main reason leading people to not attend work is dissatisfaction with their job (Johns, 2008). Indeed, absenteeism could be considered the easiest way to escape from a dissatisfying work situation (Lambert, Edwards, Camp & Sailor, 2005).

Absence behaviors have also been broadly linked to several contextual aspects, such as climate, social context, task characteristics, and physical features (Martocchio & Jimeno, 2003; Johns, 2008). Several reasons led researchers to include contextual factors in the study of absenteeism's determinants. First of all, scholars have recently pointed out the need for including context in I/O studies in order to provide better predictions of individual's and

organizational behavior (Johns, 2001a; 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001), since context may affect the occurrence and meaning of the behavior (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Griffin, 2007; Johns, 1991). Second, although there are several evidences about the link between absences from work and contextual aspects, such as management style, leadership, task characteristics and interactions with colleagues (Carveley, Cummingham & MacGregor, 2007; Lokke, Eskildsen & Jensen, 2007; Steers & Rhodes, 1978), this relationship is still under-explored by empirical studies (Patton & Johns 2011). Third, processes through which the context may impact on absence behaviors are still unclear. There is evidence that context affects a variety of organizational behaviors, such as withdrawal behaviors (Johns, 2008; Sagie, 1998). Nevertheless, context may have a proximal or even a distal influence on organizational behavior (Johns, 2006), such as absenteeism. Distal influence means that it impacts behavior through different variables or time, including job satisfaction (Goldberg & Waldman, 2000; Steel, Rentsch & Van Scotter, 2007). A substantial body of research supports that employees' perceptions of environmental features have an impact on their job attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment) and, through these, on organizational behaviors (e.g., withdrawal behaviors and counterproductive behaviors; Borgogni et al., 2010a; Johns, 2008; Parker et al., 2003).

Finally, individual characteristics have been also frequently considered to predict workers' absenteeism. Among the demographic variables, gender, age and tenure were the most common characteristics reported in the absenteeism literature that have a direct association with it (Johns, 2008; Lambert et al., 2005). Differently, the role of psychological variables such as personality traits and individual characteristics has been rarely studied as direct determinants of absenteeism (Martocchio & Jimeno, 2003), but only in interaction or through the mediating role of other variables. Particularly, although self-efficacy is a variable strongly connected with individual wellbeing, and it may represent an important predictor of absenteeism as well as of other organizational behaviors (Vancouver & Day, 2005), few



studies investigated its relationship with absences from work (Avey, Patera & West, 2006; Punnett, Greenidge & Ramsey, 2007). According to a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy may have a direct or an indirect influence on behaviors, particularly through affective dispositions and perceptions of obstacles and opportunities inherent the context (Bandura, 1997).

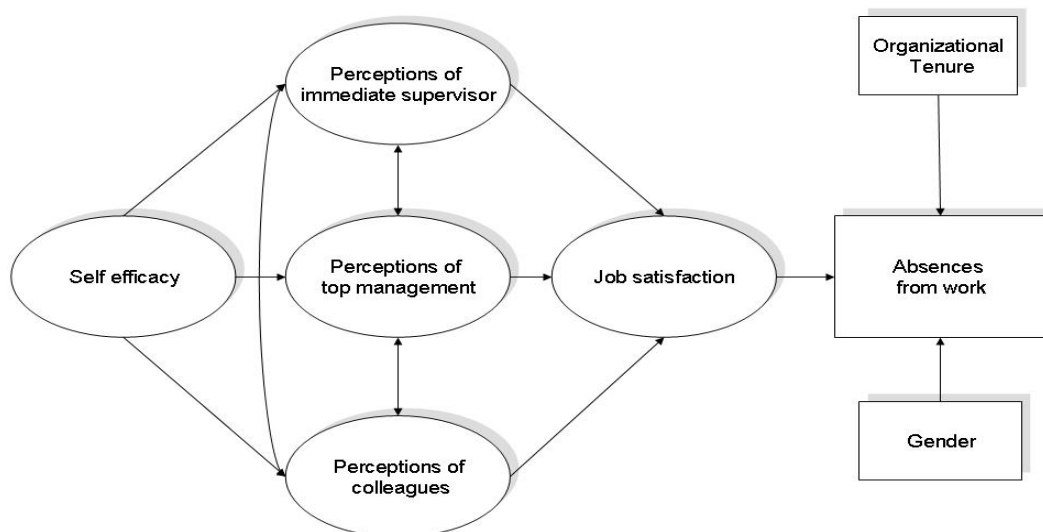
Consistent with these findings, the present study aims at investigating the determinants of absenteeism, through a conceptual model rooted in the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989), in which individual and contextual variables concur to predict absences from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction. Particularly, we hypothesize a model in which self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) plays a key role in shaping the Perceptions of social Context (PoC; Borgogni, 2001; Borgogni et al., 2010a), since self-efficacious people approach their social environment with a more positive “frame of mind” which helps them to develop better relationships in their context and construe more positive representations of the social constituencies (Borgogni et al., 2010a). Moreover, we posit that perceptions of social context may have an impact on absence behaviors through the mediating role of job satisfaction. Although there is evidence about the relationship between self-efficacy and PoC in previous studies (Borgogni, Dello Russo & Latham, 2011; Borgogni et al., 2010a), further investigations on the process through which individual and context influence absence behaviors are needed.

In light of these arguments, the main goals of the studies were: (a) to corroborate the positive relationship between self-efficacy and the three Perceptions of social Context, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management; (b) to verify the positive relationship between PoC and job satisfaction; (c) to confirm the negative relationship between job satisfaction and absences from work; (d) to explore the indirect relationship between PoC and absences from work through job satisfaction (Figure 1).

Furthermore, according to the literature (Bekker, Rutte & van Rijswijk, 2009; Goldberg & Waldman, 2000), we controlled absenteeism for two socio-demographic characteristics, namely gender and organizational tenure, to investigate the impact of individual differences in absence behaviors.

Two elements of novelty are offered with our contribution. The first is that we offer a model rooted in the theoretical framework of the social cognitive theory to investigate absenteeism determinants, in which the role of both individual and contextual factors are included. The second is that the study was based upon an objective measure of absences from work, which is generally a difficult measure to obtain from organizations. As Johns (1994) suggested, absenteeism measures are typically collected as self-reported data and they tend to be less accurate than data provided by organization, since they are related particularly to respondents' subjectivity and the tendency to under-report the number of lost working days (Poppel, De Vet, Koes, Smid & Bouter, 2002). Accordingly, our contribution relates attitudes, perceptions and evaluations provided by respondents with an objective measure of absences from work.

**Figure 1- The posited Model**



### *The Role of self-efficacy in shaping Perceptions of social context*

As we anticipated in the introduction, we propose to study context and its relationship with organizational behavior in the frame of reference of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). According to Bandura (2006), individuals are active agents in their context and are able to interact with it. Particularly, with the reciprocal triadic determinism (Bandura, 1986), Bandura moved forward to the interactionism perspective (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Schneider & Reichers, 1983) to consider the individual, the environment and the behavior as implicated in a dynamic exchange in which each element has a bidirectional relationship with others. In this exchange, individuals are both producer and product of their environment. At the same time, their role in shaping their context (Griffin, 2007) is crucial, since they assign to context a “personal” meaning by the means of their human cognitions. Finally, a person can have a transformative action on his or her context both symbolically, by construing better representation of it, and physically, through his behavior. As Bandura asserted (Bandura, 1997), the main self-regulatory process responsible for this dynamic transaction among individual, environment and behavior is self-efficacy. It is defined as “people’s beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over their lives” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 364). It has been widely demonstrated that self-efficacious people are more confident about the controllability of circumstances than inefficacious ones. Thus, they are able to exploit the opportunities inherent their context and see obstacles as avoidable, and are in turn more confident in their abilities to produce desired results and perform well. Our rationale is that a high self-efficacy allows people to construe more positive representations of their social context, as they approach their environment with a different “frame of mind” that helps to develop positive relationships with the main organizational social constituencies. This is supported by previous studies (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni, Petitta, Mastroiilli, 2010) in which self-efficacy beliefs were positively related to the perceptions of the

immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management, in several organizations and professional roles (i.e., school, air force military, white collar employees in a service organization).

Hence, we tested the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Self-efficacy will be positively related to the perceptions of the immediate supervisor, colleagues, and top management.*

*From context to behavior: the indirect effect of Perceptions of social Context on absences from work through job satisfaction.*

### **Perceptions of social Context → Job satisfaction**

There are a variety of evidences that an individual's perceptions of contextual features influence human responses, particularly job satisfaction (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003; Parker et al., 2003). Indeed, job satisfaction is an individual's evaluation of his/her own job, but is also a response to a more general job situation, such as the work environment and its features (Locke, 1976; Olsen, 1993).

Recent research (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni et al., 2010b) have investigated the role of Perceptions of social Context (PoC; Borgogni, 2001) on job attitudes (such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment). They have been defined as the perceptions of the more relevant social constituencies internal to the organization (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues, top management), as well as of the prototypical behavior and the social roles that these constituencies foster within organizations, and their reciprocal interaction at work (Borgogni et al. 2010a).

Findings suggested that the three Perceptions of social Context, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues, and perceptions of top management, are positively related to job satisfaction (Borgogni et al. 2010a).

According to these findings and consistent with the traditional leadership and group literature (Fleishman, 1957; Stogdill, 1963), we argue that a positive perception of the immediate supervisor leads people to be more satisfied in their work, because the supervisor provides support to employees, takes care of their professional growth, communicates aims and standards, and encourages employees' participation in the organizational objectives. Moreover, collaboration with colleagues provides support and cohesiveness and contributes to the creation of a positive and supportive climate in the organization (Steel & Warner, 1990). Finally, top management plays a key role in enhancing employees' satisfaction, by clearly communicating organizational vision and mission, highlighting strategies, policies and routines, and conveying effectively information among groups and individuals.

From this standpoint, we believe that positive perceptions of social context are connected to a positive evaluation of the job itself and the overall context, since positive perceptions of social context give people the opportunities to satisfy personal needs (Shaw, 1976). Thus, we believe that the more positive the perceptions of the three PoC, the more satisfied employees are with their jobs.

Hence, the following hypothesis was tested:

*Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management will be positively related to job satisfaction.*

### ***Job satisfaction → Absences from work***

Absenteeism is a relevant concern for organizations that refers to the number or frequency of absences from work and calls for deep investigations on its determinants in order

to identify interventions to reduce or prevent it (Martocchio & Jimeno, 2003). Several variables were studied in relation with absenteeism in the past and recent literature, such as demographic characteristics of individuals, job attitudes and motivation to be absent (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Johns, 1997). Among job attitudes, there is an agreement in considering job satisfaction as the variable most often associated with absenteeism (Cohen & Golan, 2007; Johns, 2001b; 2009). Job satisfaction has been defined as an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of his/her job and the overall work context with its multiple features (Judge, Thoresen, Bono & Patton, 2001).

Among the first authors which included job satisfaction in the study of absences from work, Steers and Rhodes (1978) suggested a model in which job attendance was primarily determined by motivation to attend, that is in turn related to individual's job satisfaction. Therefore, they posited a distal relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism. Differently, in a subsequent meta-analysis of the studies on absences from work, Hackett (1989) revealed the direct negative relationship between overall job satisfaction and absenteeism (Hackett & Gunion, 1985). Subsequent studies corroborated the existence of a direct relationship (Cohen & Golan 2007; Johns, 2009), since dissatisfied employees have negative evaluations of their job that lead them to be more inclined to enact withdrawal behaviors, such as absences from work (Johns, 2001b).

From this standpoint, we argue that the more satisfied individuals are the less they are absent from work.

Hence, we investigated the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Job satisfaction will be negatively related to absences from work.*

*Perceptions of social Context → Job satisfaction → Absences from work*

As anticipated above, a wide range of contextual aspects, including several aspects relevant to social context, have been associated with absenteeism (Caverley et al. 2007; Martocchio & Jimeno, 2003). Particularly, social context showed a strong relationship with absences from work, due to the social nature of the work attendance dynamics that are strongly connected to the social control (Johns, 2008). Accordingly, several aspects relevant to social context, such as social support (Nielsen, Kristensen, & Smith-Hansen, 2002; Parker & Kulik, 1995), cohesiveness, conflicts and integration in groups (Xie & Johns, 2002), and direct supervisor's behavior (i.e., communication, leader member exchange behaviors and conflict management; van Dierendonck, Le Blanc & van Breukelen, 2002) were analyzed in relationship with absenteeism. There is evidence that absenteeism is more frequent when groups and organizations are felt to be less supporting and cohesive, social integration is lacking (Xie & Johns, 2002), employees' perceptions of the managers' capacities to lead (i.e., support, feedback, information, clarity) are negative (Lokke, Eskildsen & Jensen, 2007).

Moreover, a substantial body of literature gave evidence about the connection between employees' perceptions of their work context and satisfaction for their work (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Carr et al., 2003). Given the strong link with both variables that has been found in the past and recent literature, we believe that job satisfaction can exert a mediating role in the relationship between PoC and absences from work. There is evidence from climate literature (Kopelman, Brief & Guzzo, 1990) that the impact of climate perceptions on several individual and organizational behaviors (e.g., withdrawal behavior, performance) might be mediated by cognitive and affective evaluation and states, such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. Moreover, previous studies showed that PoC have an indirect relationship with important behaviors, such as job performance (Borgogni et al., 2010a), through the mediating role of job satisfaction.

From this standpoint, we believe that PoC have a distal effect on absence behaviors through the mediating role of job satisfaction. We argue that people with positive perceptions of the three social constituencies feel more positive emotions in their job and in the work context itself that will lead them to make more positive evaluation of their job and to be more satisfied with their work. Thus, they will in turn be less absent from work.

Hence, we hypothesized the following:

*Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of the immediate supervisors, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of the top management will be indirectly and negatively related to absences from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction.*



## **Organizational Context**

The company is a multinational retail organization that operates from 1947 in 41 countries and has around 87,000 employees in the world. The Italian district, that is the focus of our study, was established in 2003 with the opening of their first store in Milan and currently holds over 77 stores. Moreover, the Italian district has some head offices that are composed by several departments (such as, Human Resources, Security, Sales Merchandiser, Public Relations, etc.) and the “Support Office”, namely the top management, that is located in Milan and is responsible for the various departments and stores. The latter has the primary function of providing support to employees and facilitating the collaboration among departments, units and stores.

The Italian district counts a total of 1,575 people including salesmen, white collar workers and managers throughout the country. Of these, 74 are employed in the head offices and 1,475 work in the stores. Women are the majority (71%). Employees’ age ranges from 18 to 53 years; more specifically, 28% ranged in age from 18 to 25, 57% between 26 and 35 years old, 13% between 35 and 45 years old and 2% were older than 46. Moreover, 57% of respondents had worked in the organization for less than one year; 25% from 2 to 3 years; 17% from 4 to 5 years, and the remaining 1% longer then 6 years. The Italian district shows a great deal of attention to employees needs, that is demonstrated by the implementation of several practices and policies aimed at supporting workers development, such as internal recruitment policies, work rotation, and new comers’ integration practices. These are crucial for talented salesmen that may become supervisors or managers and take on responsibility at an early stage of a new store’s opening. Furthermore, organization ensures that new employees will be supported by more experienced colleagues, and also by co-workers from other countries during the sales-intensive opening phase.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

We collected data from the Italian district of a multinational retail organization through an on-line self-report questionnaire. All salesmen and white-collar employees were invited to participate in the research by the means of a letter they received along with their pay check. The project aimed to investigate the quality of working life and personal wellbeing. Participation was voluntary and the questionnaire guaranteed the privacy of personal details. Employees needed a personal code assigned by the HR department to fill-in the on-line questionnaire. Through the encrypted code each questionnaire was matched with respondents' absenteeism and socio-demographic information, provided by the HR department in respect of the privacy law. We collected data from 361 employees (23% of response rate). Of these, 71.3% were female. Regarding the respondents' age, the mean age was 30,5 years (SD= 5,72). 22% respondents ranged in age between 18 and 25 years, 57% between 26 and 35 years, 20% between 36 and 45 years and 1% more than 46 years old. Mean of organizational tenure was 2 years (SD= 1,571 ). Particularly, 51% of respondents worked in the organization for less than one year; 29% from 2 to 3 years; 19% from 4 to 5 years, and the remaining 1% longer then 6 years. Although the sample size is quite limited in comparison to the company's population, it is worth noting that it is likely representative of the company in its characteristics (i.e., gender, age, organizational tenure).

### *Measures*

#### **Self reported measures**

The self-reported questionnaire consisted of 26 items to investigate (1) self-efficacy, (2) the three PoC dimensions, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management, and (3) job satisfaction. All statements were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale (from 1 = Never to 7 = Always). Items were randomized to minimize the occurrence of response set phenomena.

*Self Efficacy.* 6 items were adapted for the present study from a pool of items validated in previous research (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Consiglio, Borgogni, Alessandri, Schaufeli, 2011), changing the wording of some statements in order to maximize the contextualization of the content to the specific work domain. Sample items are “*In my work, I am confident I can to resolve successfully any kind of problem*”; or, “*In my work, I am confident I can smooth all the tension away with colleagues, even the most heated*”.

*Perceptions of social Context.* Participants’ perceptions of three organizational social constituencies (namely immediate superior, colleagues, and top management) were assessed. Two focus groups were conducted on two independent groups composed of 10 organization’s representatives (including managers, white collar workers, and salesmen) by adopting the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). Several questions were asked of the participants about certain events considered to be critical in their work. Specific situations were analyzed to identify people’s prototypical behaviors, but also particularly to catch contextual elements characterizing their organization and to collect the most typical behaviors enacted by others. (e.g., “*My immediate supervisor encourages ideas and proposals from co-workers*”; “*In my team, people trust each other*”; and, “*Top management conveys information in a clear way*”).

*Job satisfaction.* We assessed the employees’ job satisfaction by the means of the six-items scale by Judge, Locke, Durham and Kluger (1998). The total scale comprised 5 items, of which two are here reported: “*I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job*”; and, “*Most days I am enthusiastic about my work*”.

### **Objective data**

*Employees’ Absences from work.* According with traditional studies on absenteeism (Mathieu & Kohler, 1990), we decided to consider the total amount of absences from work, which included absence days scheduled (e.g., sickness absences, family obligations, vacations, and other certified reasons). Absences from work were provided by the company, which recorded all missed days over a period of 6 months during the same year of the survey.

Data were not normally distributed and they showed very high level of skewness and kurtosis (skewness =4.95, SE =.128; kurtosis = 29.81, SE = .256). Following Muthen and Kaplan (1985; but also Farrington & Loeber, 2000), we decided to transform the continuous variable into a three-category ordinal variable by calculating the percentiles. Finally, we had three equal groups, (corresponding to the 33<sup>th</sup>, 66<sup>th</sup> and 99<sup>th</sup> percentile), which were respectively labelled as 1= “low absenteeism”, 2= “medium absenteeism” and 3= “high absenteeism”.

*Control variables.* According to previous studies, we decided to control absence behavior for gender and organizational tenure. Both characteristics have been shown to be related with absence behaviors (Väänänen, Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, Mutanen, Vantera & Peiro, 2003; Johns, 2008). Organizations provide us both gender and organizational tenure of the respondents as continuous variables.

### *Statistical Analyses*

All analyses were run by the means of the statistical program Mplus Version 5.1. (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), which allowed us to perform structural equation modelling on both continuous and categorical-ordinable data, using the Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors estimator (MLR).

To evaluate the goodness of the fit of each model, we used multiple indexes. Particularly, the following indexes have been considered: the significance of the chi-square, that is likely due to the large sample size. This means that the larger the sample the lower the probability that the chi square is significant (Bollen & Long, 1993; Mulaik, James & Van Alstine 1989); the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger & Lind, 1980); the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973); the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). Finally, we considered the Weighted Root Mean Square Residual (WRMR; Yu & Muthen, 2002), which is recommended to assess the fit of models with categorical observed variables.

A two step approach was followed (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988): 1) we tested a measurement model in which all items loaded on the posited latent variable. In this model the objective data, namely absence measures, were excluded and all latent variables were allowed to correlate with each other. The fit of the posited model was confronted with a one-factor alternative model; 2) we then tested a structural model in which the posited relationships among all the variables were examined, by adding structural paths to the measurement model and including absenteeism. In this model, gender and organizational tenure were included as covariates. The final model was compared with an alternative model with a reverse relationship between self-efficacy and Perceptions of social Context to further corroborate the posited relationship among variables.

## Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of all scales are reported in table 1. The zero-order correlations revealed strong associations particularly among job satisfaction and Perceptions of social Context. Absences from work were significantly correlated with perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and particularly with job satisfaction. No significant correlations were found between absences from work and self-efficacy, or perceptions of top management.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the scales exceeded the cut-off value for sufficient reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), ranging between .903 and .756. This revealed acceptable level of internal consistency for all factors.

**Table 1 - Means, standard deviations, correlations among variables, and Cronbach's alphas**

	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self Efficacy	5.14	.77	(.756)							
2. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.92	1.55	.248**	(.903)						
3. Perceptions of colleagues	4.94	1.21	.384**	.575**	(.877)					
4. Perceptions of top management	4.93	1.24	.251**	.313**	.356**	(.884)				
5. Job satisfaction	4.95	1.07	.430**	.490**	.508*	.508*	(.839)			
6. Absences from work	-	-	-.075	-.164**	-.134**	.006	-.245**	-		
7. Gender	-	-	.016	.044	-.096	.126	-.074	.103*	-	
8. Organizational Tenure	2	1.57	-.021	.003	-.117**	.085	-.127**	-.140**	.978**	-

Note. \*\*Correlations are significant at  $p < .01$ . Values on the diagonal show scales' reliabilities. Mean and standard deviation are reported for all variables with the exception for the categorical ones (absenteeism and gender).

### *Measurement Model*

The measurement model fits the data well and confirmed the appropriateness of each item related to the hypothesized latent factor and to the content validity of the scales:  $\chi^2 (69) = 92.09$ ;  $p < .00$ ; CFI = .957; TLI=.955; RMSEA = .044; SRMR = .059; WRMR= .966. The only exception was the significance of the chi-square, likely due to the large sample size. The factor loadings were all significantly different from zero and greater than .30 in all scales, ranging from .345 to .931.

A one-factor alternative model was tested to explore the reasonable ownership of items to one latent factor and to investigate the presence of common method bias (i.e., the amount of covariance shared among variables due to the common method used in collecting data).

All goodness of fit indexes indicated that alternative model yields an unacceptable fit:  $\chi^2 (73) = 342.233$ ,  $p < .00$ ; CFI = .503; TLI=.509; RMSEA = .147; SRMR = .148. WRMR= 1.798, providing support for the factorial validity of the posited one.

### *Structural Model*

A structural model was tested in order to investigate the posited relationship among all the variables. Findings suggest that the model fits the data adequately,  $\chi^2 (54) = 73.772$ ,  $p < .00$ ;

CFI= .918; TLI=.917; RMSEA = .064; SRMR = .084; WRMR= .927 (all parameter estimates are reported in the Figure 2).

As expected, self-efficacy confirmed its positive relationship with the three PoC (Hypothesis 1), namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor ( $\beta=.35$ ,  $p<.01$ ), perceptions of colleagues ( $\beta=.41$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and perceptions of top management ( $\beta=.31$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which in turn were significantly related to job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). In particular, perceptions of management had the stronger relationship with employees job satisfaction ( $\beta=.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ) rather than perceptions of immediate supervisor ( $\beta=.28$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and perceptions of colleagues ( $\beta=.26$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Job satisfaction was in turn negatively related to absenteeism ( $\beta= -.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ; Hypothesis, 3).

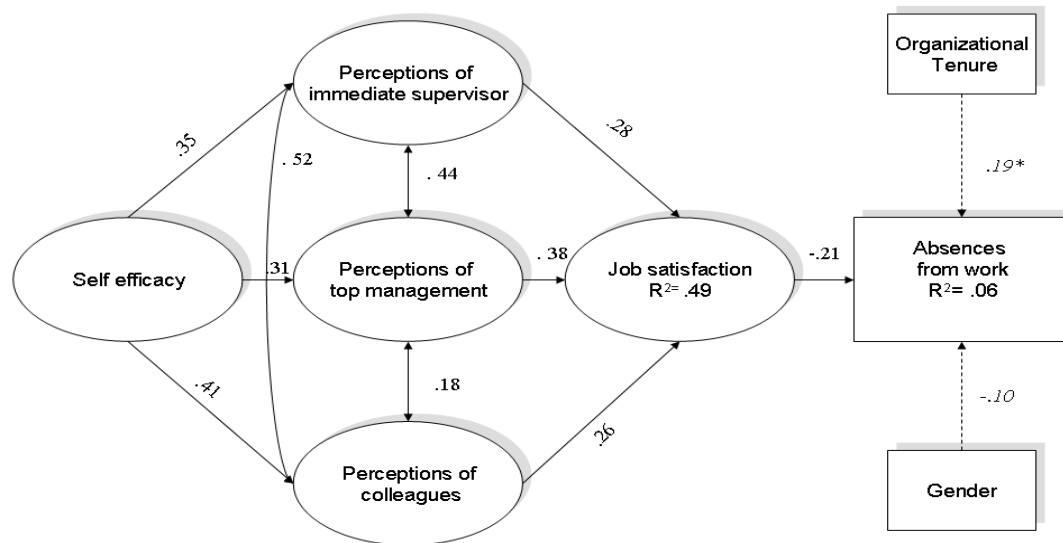
Moreover, neither control variables (gender and organizational tenure) were significantly related to absenteeism. Overall, the model explained the 49% of the variance in job satisfaction and the 6% of the variance in the absences from work.

The indirect effects of perceptions of context on absenteeism was investigated using Sobel's approximate significance test (1982). Findings revealed that all the three Perceptions of social Context contribute to the dependent variable through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Hypothesis 4). In particular, perceptions of management ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ), perceptions of the immediate supervisor and perceptions of colleagues (both  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were indirectly related to absences from work. It is worth noting that, although any significant zero-order correlation between perceptions of management and absences from work wasn't found, an indirect effect between these variables through the mediating role of job satisfaction emerged. According to MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz (2007), since both perceptions of management and absences from work had a statistically significant relationship with the mediation variable (namely job satisfaction), there is evidence of mediation and we can consider the significance of the indirect effect.

Finally, an alternative model was tested, by positing a reverse relationship between self-efficacy and Perception of social Context and specifying a direct path from the three PoC to self-efficacy. This model provided a worse fit than the posited one,  $\chi^2(54) = 94.951$ ,  $p < .00$ , CFI=.831, TLI=.828, RMSEA=.092, SRMR=.103, WRMR=1.167.



**Figure 2 – The posited Structural Model: parameters estimates**



*Note.* Dotted lines indicate not significant paths. All the parameters estimate are significant at  $p < .01$ , with the exception for gender that is not significant and organizational tenure that is closed to significant ( $p < .10$ ). The indirect effect of perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of top management and perceptions of colleagues on absenteeism through job satisfaction are significant at  $p < .01$ , and equal in magnitude respectively to  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $\beta = -.06$ .

## Discussion

The findings of the present study fully supported our hypotheses. First of all our study corroborated the significant role of self-efficacy beliefs in shaping one's perception of the social context (PoC) (Borgogni et al., 2010a; Borgogni, Dello Russo, Di Tecco, Alessandri, Vecchione, 2011), as we posited in Hypothesis 1. According to Social Cognitive Theory (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 1997), our results suggested that the more employees believe themselves able to impact their context, the more positive are their context representations. This leads them to construe more positive perceptions of the social constituencies internal to their own organization, because they believe themselves to have the capabilities to actively interact with them.

The positive relationship between PoC and job satisfaction was corroborated (Hypothesis 2), by confirming that job satisfaction, namely the cognitive and affective individual's evaluations related to his/her job and work context, is modeled by the three perceptions of social context Borgogni et al., 2010a; Carr et al., 2003; Parker et al., 2003).

In comparison with previous studies (Borgogni et al., 2010a) in this contribution, perceptions of top management showed the stronger connection with job satisfaction as compared to perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of the immediate supervisor. According to Johns' recommendations (2001a; 2006), this might be interpreted in light of the specificity of the organizational context where the study was conducted. The present study involved the Italian district of a multinational retail organization characterized by a young context, in which the top management, labeled "Support Office", tries to construe friendly and supportive relationships with employees. Considering the specific organizational context, we argue that employees' perceptions of top management play a crucial role in satisfaction with their job, because top management promotes the employees' professional growth and their participation in the decision process by supporting stores and offices to facilitate the collaboration among them and the achievement of common goals. Hence, the way in which employees perceive top management determines their affective and cognitive evaluation as related to their job.

Moreover, as we hypothesized (Hypothesis 3), a negative relationship was found between job satisfaction and absences from work (Cohen & Golan, 2007), thus confirming a strong direct impact on absenteeism (Johns, 2008).

Overall, results lend support to the posited indirect effect of PoC on absences from work, through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Hypothesis 4). Thus, the more positive the Perceptions of social Context (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) the higher job satisfaction will be, and, in turn, the less frequent absences from work will be. Particularly, perceptions of top management, which refer to the way through which top management communicate organizational strategies, norms and policies, identify the tasks and routines, and provide useful information to employees to facilitate collaboration among units, have the stronger indirect effect on absences from work. Results confirm the crucial role of the PoC in indirectly predicting employees' absences behaviors in this context. Thus, our model supports that the effect of Perceptions of social Context on behavior is

mediated by cognitive and affective evaluation related to the job, namely job satisfaction (Kopelman, Brief & Guzzo, 1990). Furthermore, we confirmed that PoC have a distal relationship with absenteeism. This is likely because those who have positive representations of their work social context, feel their context is less hostile and more supportive. Accordingly, they will have more positive evaluation of their job and the context itself that lead them to be less absent from work.

The control variables showed not significant paths with absence behaviors. Hence, the significant relationship between gender, organizational tenure and absenteeism, generally found in previous studies (Lokke, Eskildsen & Jensen, 2007; Patton & Johns, 2007), was not confirmed.

#### *Limitations and future perspectives*

The study has of course some weaknesses that open new perspectives to address in future research.

The main limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data, because self-reported data and absences from work were collected at the same time and we presently have no access to the data collected after the research. Hence, we may not affirm the presence of casual relationships among the variables, which call for further longitudinal research. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that results about the alternative model informs us that the reverse relationship between self-efficacy and PoC is not significant, leading further support to our posited model.

Another issue is related to the low explicative power of our posited model, due to the low percentage of overall explained variance in absenteeism. However, since previous studies have already showed variance percentages ranging between 5% and 10% with objective measures of absenteeism (Sagie, 1998; Sander & Nauta, 2004; Steel et al. 2007), we can highlight the value of our results, which have also been confirmed by the degree of

significance in the relationships explored. Moreover, weak relationships, and thus weak statistical effects, between explication variables and objective absence measures are not uncommon (see Farrel & Stamm, 1988, for a meta-analysis on the strength of the model with absenteeism). Moreover, it is worth noting that objective absence measures are difficult to collect in organizations, due to management's resistances to share this kind of data that are considered sensitive for workers' privacy. However, we know that absenteeism is a complex phenomenon and the low level of variance explained may also be interpreted as the need for exploring other contextual variables strictly connected to absenteeism behavior, such as further individual and contextual aspects (Steers & Rhodes, 1978) or health (Ybema, Smulders & Bongers, 2010).

Finally, a third limitation is related to the sample size that represents the 23% of the population. Whereas our sample fully represents the organization and seems to have similar socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, organizational tenure, and age) compared to the organizational population, this does not allow us to make inferences to the organizational population.

Regarding future perspective, longitudinal research is needed to investigate the role played by the variables considered in this study in predicting absenteeism over time, in order to understand the likely direction of causality among variables and moreover, to fully investigate the reciprocal dynamic exchanges between individual, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1986; 1997) that required further investigations on the reciprocal causation between person, context, and behavior. This would be possible using data collected over time.

Another issue that should be considered in future research is related to our measure of absenteeism. As we reported, we considered the records of time lost, including all type of absences (e.g., sickness absences, vacation, family obligations). Although previous contributions have included this kind of measure (Johns, 2008), in the future we would like to

use different objective measures, such as the frequency or the magnitude of absences (Rhodes & Steers, 1990) in order to deeply investigate a model on different aspects of absenteeism.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to investigate the relationship between context and absenteeism at the group level, by the means of multilevel models and cross-level interaction models, in order to explore to what extent shared perceptions of context and absence culture (Patton & Johns, 2007), characterized by established and legitimated norms on absence behaviors, may influence employees' absences from work.

### *Practical implications*

Two main practical implications follow our study.

First, the significant relationship between self-efficacy and PoC suggests the opportunity of setting up intervention to enhance individual beliefs in one's own capabilities to control and actively construe his/her social context, in order to develop more positive perceptions of it among employees that will have an impact on absence behaviors through job satisfaction. Consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) through self-regulating processes, individuals can contribute to or construe their context, developing more positive representation of it. Therefore, training aimed at increasing self-efficacy at work may develop better perceptions of the organizational constituencies. It is particularly crucial in an organizational context like that described in the present study, in which internal recruitment policies, and work rotation are used. This means that employees are frequently exposed to changes in colleagues, immediate supervisors and units, and required to often construe new relationships. Training on self- efficacy beliefs could be introduced as an integral part of newcomers' integration practices such as organizational socialization (Gruman, Saks, and Zweig 2006), but also when there are job rotation or career advancements.

Second, the differential indirect role played by PoC on absenteeism through job satisfaction, and particularly by employees' positive perceptions of top management, suggests

addressing interventions to emphasize its coordinating role, by means of practical interventions such as the implementation of information sharing practices and tools, in order to avoid withdrawal behaviors due to dissatisfied employees.

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## CHAPTER 5

### *General Conclusions*

The present work contributes to the study of context in organizational research by presenting the construct of Perceptions of social Context (PoC; Borgogni, 2001) and its operationalization, and by offering a conceptual model rooted in a psychological theory to investigate the relationship between context and individual attitudes and behaviors. Three independent studies were developed starting from the main questions about context found in literature: What is context and how to operationalize it? What is the effect of the context on individual and organizations over time? How it may influence people's behaviors and attitudes in organizations?

The main conclusions arisen from the studies are presented as follows.

First, PoC represent a validated measure to assess context in organizations which preserve context's specificity and, at the same time, allow to compare and generalize results in different contexts. In fact, as findings of the first study showed in different samples, whereas the focus on "prototypical behaviors" enacted by each social constituency structurally defined in organizations allow to identify how to generalize PoC measure and compare results in different settings, the occurrence of "specific behaviors" is meant to capture and portray in empirical studies the specificity of real organizational contexts. Thus, we provided a measurement proposal of context that assesses context-specific as well as across-context behaviors for each organizational social constituencies.

Second, we offered a sound rationale to the study of context by putting forward an integrated view of the individual in his/her organizational setting, and deepening the individual agentive role in the construal process of the environment (Bandura, 1986) through the investigation of the positive relationship between self efficacy and PoC. Specifically, in

the second study we confirmed this relationship in three independent samples from three different sectors (private, public and healthcare sector) and we argued that employees with high self-efficacy approach their context with a different frame of mind, which allows them to construe more positive relationship with the social constituencies internal to the organization and to have more positive perceptions of them. Moreover, our first study gives also a tentative answer to the call for “additional research [...] on how individual characteristics affect perceptions of organizational features” (Mowday & Sutton, 1993, p. 222). The positive relationship between self efficacy and PoC has been evidenced also longitudinally, since in the second study we found that efficacy beliefs have a relationship with subsequent improvements in the Perceptions of social Context.

Third, we provided a conceptual model, rooted in the social cognitive theory, in which individual and contextual variables concur to predict individuals’ behavior, such as absences from work, through the mediated role of job satisfaction. Our findings confirmed a substantial body of recent and past empirical findings which support that employees’ perceptions of environmental features have an impact on their job attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment) and, through these, on organizational behaviors (e.g., job performance, withdrawal and psychological well-being; Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Vecchione, 2010; Parker, Baltes, Young, Huff, Altmann, Lacost & Roberts, 2003; Johns, 2008). Nevertheless, further investigations are required in the future to investigate our conceptual model in different setting and in connection with other individual behaviors.

In conclusion, PoC represent a validated and theoretically rooted measure to investigate context in organizations. Moreover, several practical implications for organizations may be arisen from the use of PoC measure. Indeed, PoC may provide to nowadays organizations a measure to value their specificities and, at the same time, assure comparison and benchmarking.

Moreover, PoC provide operative suggestions to develop staff surveys and to facilitate the intervention in organizations, because they provides a roadmap to identify strengths and weaknesses in a given organizational setting and they allow to set up interventions targeted to each of social constituencies (that is on their very prototypical behaviors that might be developed) or to individuals, given its relationship with self efficacy, that is a individual characteristic that may be developed over time (Bandura, 1997; 2011).

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