A lack of clarity, a lack of OCB: The detrimental effects of role ambiguity, through procedural injustice, and the mitigating roles of relational resources

Abstract

If employees lack information about their job responsibilities, do they halt their voluntary work efforts, and if so, why and when? To answer these questions, this study attempts to unpack the relationship between employees' role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and proposes both a mediating role of procedural injustice and a moderating role of relational resources (i.e., social interaction and goodwill trust). Survey data collected from employees who work for a services organization in Mozambique indicate that a critical reason that unclear role descriptions diminish extra-role work activities is that employees criticize their organization for maintaining unfair decision-making processes. The informality and trustworthiness of their peer relationships mitigate this detrimental effect. For employees who feel stressed by insufficient information about job responsibilities, this study indicates a risk that their organizational standing might become compromised because they respond by refraining from work-related voluntarism. Organizations need to encourage high-quality interpersonal exchanges to help reduce this risk.

Keywords: role ambiguity; procedural injustice; organizational citizenship behavior; relational resources; Mozambique

Introduction

Employees willing to go beyond their formal job duties can generate positive outcomes for both their employer and themselves. First, a motivated workforce that engages in extra-role work behaviors increases organizational success rates and competitive advantages (Bachrach et al., 2006; Jain et al., 2011). Second, employees who display such behaviors likely enhance their reputation among colleagues and leaders (Korsgaard et al., 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2009) and experience a sense of personal accomplishment (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Lemoine et al., 2015). But there also are disadvantages associated with such organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), which tend to be time-consuming and distracting and potentially prevent employees from meeting their formal job duties (Bolino et al., 2015; Koopman et al., 2016). Taking on extra responsibilities that are not formally rewarded even can frustrate employees, who might feel as if they are the only ones stepping up to volunteer (Bergeron, 2007); colleagues also might accuse them of self-promotion (Klotz et al., 2018).

In light of these pertinent challenges, resource-draining organizational conditions might function as additional barriers to voluntary work efforts. For example, employees are less likely to undertake OCB, for which they are not compensated, when they experience workplace incivility (Liu et al., 2019), psychological contract breaches (Restubog et al., 2010), dysfunctional organizational politics (Khan et al., 2019), abusive supervision (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011), or interpersonal disagreements with colleagues (Pooja et al., 2016). A common denominator binds these adverse work circumstances: They threaten the quality of employees' day-to-day professional functioning, which hampers their motivation to be a "good soldier" for the employer (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2018). Yet another threatening source of workplace adversity is role ambiguity, or the extent to which employees receive vague or insufficient

information about their work roles (De Clercq et al., 2019; Fried & Tiegs, 1995). Extant studies indicate a negative relationship between role ambiguity and OCB (Eatough et al., 2011; Kang & Jang, 2019), though without specifying how this detrimental process unfolds. This oversight is striking. It prevents organizations from having a complete understanding of *why* or *when* resource depletion, due to confusion about job roles (Zhou et al., 2016), might backfire and dampen work-related voluntarism by their ranks. With this study, we aim to explicate pertinent factors that explain or influence the escalation of role ambiguity into diminished OCB.

First, the escalation may emerge as employees undergo a process through which they come to a realization that organizational decision-making is unfair and lacks transparency, evoking perceptions of procedural injustice (Acquaah & Padhye, 2015; Colquitt et al., 2001). Following the logic of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), their sense that their organization fails to explain its expectations may lead employees to halt voluntary work activities, because they criticize its limited decision-making openness, as a way to protect their self-esteem resources (Bowling et al., 2010; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Second, and also consistent with COR theory, we propose that employees' access to valuable relational resources embedded in peer connections—such as social interactions and goodwill trust (De Clercq, 2020)—buffer against self-damaging thoughts that stem from unclear job roles (Bowling et al., 2010), so their convictions about the presence of procedural injustice, and then the likelihood that they curtail their OCB, both diminish. Social interaction captures informal peer relationships (Pooja et al., 2016); goodwill trust reflects the extent to which employees are confident peers will not take advantage of them, even if given the opportunity (Rousseau et al., 1998).

With these considerations, we make several contributions to extant research. First, we predict and empirically show how role ambiguity, as a significant threat to professional well-

being (Bennett et al., 2016; Teh et al., 2014), diminishes the probability that employees go out of their way to contribute to their organization's success voluntarily, as explained by their beliefs about unfair decision-making policies (Schilpzand et al., 2013). When they receive inadequate information about their work roles, employees likely avoid OCB, reflecting their criticisms of the employer for its biased decisions (De Clercq et al., 2019; Eatough et al., 2011). Our focus on the mediating role of procedural injustice—instead of distributive or interactional injustice (Colquitt et al., 2001)—highlights the *process*-related uncertainty created by employees' confusion about job tasks (Schmidt et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2016). It also complements research into how depersonalization mediates the relationship between role ambiguity and OCB (Kang & Jang, 2019). The conviction that the organization is to blame for unfair decision-making is an overlooked but important conduit through which role ambiguity may prompt employees to halt their work-related voluntarism.

Second, following calls to apply contingency approaches to study the harmful outcomes of role ambiguity (e.g., Chênevert et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019), we provide expanded insights into how the diminished probability of OCB, in response to role ambiguity and corresponding beliefs about procedural injustice, might be subdued by employees' access to peer-based relational resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The negative consequences of role ambiguity do not materialize automatically, and various conditions can give employees means to deal with the associated hardships, such as collegial support (Chênevert et al., 2019) or information-seeking behavior (Showail et al., 2013). To extend this research stream, we investigate how two complementary forms of intra-organizational social capital—social interaction and goodwill trust (Prieto-Pastor et al., 2018; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998)—can mitigate the mediating role of procedural injustice in connecting role ambiguity with thwarted OCB. These aspects do not necessarily co-

exist; some employees may know one another on a formal basis but still trust others' goodwill, and low trust levels can exist in informal relationships (De Clercq, 2020). By considering both of them, we offer organizations an encompassing view of why some employees may be better positioned than others to shield themselves from the hardships of unclear role descriptions. Figure 1 contains a depiction of the proposed theoretical framework.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The empirical setting of this research is Mozambique, thereby addressing the need for more investigations of employees' engagement in specific work behaviors in African countries; such investigations are rare (Kura et al., 2019). This country context is compelling with regard to two contrasting dynamics of its cultural fabric too. On the one hand, its high uncertainty avoidance scores (Hofstede et al., 2010) imply that employees likely experience unclear job descriptions as highly upsetting, which should spur their perceived need to complain about how the organization makes decisions and reduce their desire to engage in work-related voluntarism. On the other hand, its significant collectivism and associated preoccupations with the welfare of the organizational collective (Hofstede et al., 2010) may leave employees hesitant to react to negative work conditions in ways that threaten this collective. These opposing forces create an interesting context, and the study results accordingly should have great practical relevance for any company active in risk-avoiding, collectivist cultural environments, in Africa or elsewhere.

Empirical organization studies that focus on Mozambique are particularly scarce though. In some qualitative research among Mozambican employees working for multinational corporations, one study underscores their frustration when they lack clear job titles, an issue that could reflect role ambiguity (Sartorius et al., 2011), and another cites the usefulness of social relationships for effective knowledge transfers between subsidiaries and headquarters (Martins,

2016). In addition, more recent quantitative work shows how high-quality intra-firm relationships are relevant in shaping various work behaviors of Mozambican employees, such that employees' ability to share positive and negative emotions with organizational colleagues helps them prevent family incivility from escalating into diminished voice behavior (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022a); the presence of informal peer relationships—similar to our focus on social interaction—makes it less likely that employees develop plans to leave their company in response to perceptions of organizational politics (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022c); and informal relationships allow employees to leverage their proactive personality into enhanced championing behavior (De Clercq & Pereira, 2023b). Our investigation of the roles of social interaction and goodwill trust in mitigating the indirect link between role ambiguity and OCB, through procedural injustice, provides a meaningful extension of this burgeoning research stream.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: We elaborate on the theoretical grounding of the study and develop the research hypotheses next, after which we explain the research methodology. The results of the statistical analyses inform our discussion of theoretical implications, limitations and research directions, and practical implications.

Theory and hypotheses

Conservation of resources theory

The theoretical arguments that underpin the proposed relationships—including a mediating role of procedural injustice and moderating role of relational resources in the link between role ambiguity and OCB—are grounded in COR theory. In his groundbreaking work, Hobfoll (1988, 1989) coined this theory as a useful framework to predict how people handle stressful circumstances by applying resources. In particular, "when confronted with stress, individuals are predicted … to strive to minimize net loss of resources" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517).

In later work, Hobfoll (2001) elaborated on his initial thoughts by detailing two principles that substantiate COR theory: (1) The motivation to avoid resource losses is relatively more important than the motivation to achieve resource gains, and (2) people invest resources to protect themselves against resource losses, bounce back from the losses, and obtain additional resources. These two principles, in turn, inform four corollaries: (1) People who hold more resources are less vulnerable to resource losses and better positioned to orchestrate resource gains, (2) initial resource losses can lead to future losses (i.e., produce resource loss spirals), (3) initial resource gains can lead to future gains (i.e., produce generate resource gain spirals), but loss spirals are more powerful than gain spirals, and (4) people who experience drained resources seek self-protective strategies to conserve their remaining resources (Hobfoll, 2001).

For the purposes of this study, we leverage two premises, guided by some of these corollaries and applied in recent research that also relies on COR theory. First, in line with the fourth corollary, the threat of resource depletion evoked by uncertainty-creating work circumstances should steer employees toward thoughts and activities that allow them to *cope* with such depletion (Deng et al., 2018; Hobfoll, 2001). Previous research has drawn from COR theory to illustrate how employees' sense of value incongruence (Doblhofer et al., 2019) or destructive leadership (Pandey et al., 2021) steers them toward self-defensive reactions, as a way to deal with the adversity that they experience. Second, and consistent with the first corollary, employees' access to relevant resources (including those embedded in relationships with others) *subdues* or buffers self-protective reactions to resource-depleting work conditions, by rendering it less likely that challenges deplete their resource bases (Gardner et al., 2019; Hobfoll, 2001). As prior applications of COR theory show, employees' self-protective responses to resource-

draining intra-role work conflict (Kang & Jang, 2019) or negative interference of family with work (De Clercq, 2020) are mitigated by their access to high-quality peer relationships.

Another element we leverage from COR theory is the broad definition of resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right, or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources" (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 339). In turn, we emphasize the important function of *self-esteem* resources, which employees guard forcefully, according to Hobfoll (1989, 2001). Employees' responses to difficult situations, such as despotic leadership (Haq et al., 2021) or workplace ostracism (Bedi, 2021), are informed by the threats to their sense of self-worth that these situations generate. Similarly, if they perceive their employer is depriving them of detailed information about their job roles, they may sense a threat to their self-esteem, because ambiguity limits their ability to achieve superior performance (Bowling et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2016).

In line with the first premise of COR theory, we postulate that employees who experience unclear job role descriptions may seek to cope with the threat to their positive self-image by developing convictions about procedural injustice and a subsequent reluctance to undertake extra-role work activities. That is, beliefs that organizational decision-making is unfair, and the resultant refusal to undertake extra-role work efforts, are pertinent reactions that allow employees to avoid further depletion to their sense of self-worth, if they lack information about their job responsibilities (Hobfoll, 2001). At their core, these reactions serve as coping tactics for employees to unleash their frustrations about the experienced uncertainties (De Clercq et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2021).

The second COR premise predicts that this coping dynamic is not as salient if employees can rely on relational resources that render negative reactions less necessary (Hobfoll et al.,

2018). For our study context, we propose that they likely feel less compelled to express disappointments with an employer that does not care to explain their job responsibilities to the extent that they enjoy informal or trust-based relationships with their colleagues (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). In particular, employees' social interactions and goodwill trust may safeguard them against self-depreciating ruminations about how their performance might suffer due to insufficient information in their job descriptions (Bowling et al., 2010; Graham & Messner, 1998), which then generates less pessimistic views about organizational decision-making and ultimately encourages them to maintain a certain level of work-related voluntarism. In summary, we predict that the two relational resources diminish the danger that perceptions of role ambiguity translate into reduced OCB through procedural injustice.

Mediating role of procedural injustice

Employees' perceptions of unclear job roles likely relate closely to their beliefs about procedural injustice. Consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), uncertainty due to significant job role ambiguity may compromise employees' self-esteem resources to such an extent that they seek to hold the organization responsible. That is, to overcome this unpleasant situation, employees look for a culprit: the employer that fails to provide transparency (De Clercq et al., 2019; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). If they are unsure which aspects of their jobs are most important to their employer, employees likely worry they will be unable to comply with organizational priorities (Showail et al., 2013). But rather than criticize themselves for this inability, they might call out their organization for its unfair procedures. As predicted by COR theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000), this coping mechanism helps employees release frustration and protect their self-image. They experience role ambiguity as less intrusive and upsetting in

this scenario, because they can transfer responsibility for the experienced uncertainty from themselves to their employer (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Similarly, employees who have insufficient information about what is expected may interpret this adverse work condition as evidence of a lack of appreciation for their efforts (Zhang et al., 2013). As postulated by COR theory, an organization that is willing to damage employees' self-esteem resources may appear *deserving* of accusations about a lack of openness (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll et al., 2018). The challenge of figuring out job task expectations also might look like a purposeful organizational tactic to undermine their autonomy and leave them dependent on organizational directions (Bennett et al., 2016). This type of hardship again may lead employees to criticize their employer as unfair in its operations, as a means to cope (Deng et al., 2018). Conversely, clear job descriptions should give employees more favorable impressions, namely, that the organization cares for their professional well-being (Elanain, 2013; Mukherjee & Malhotra, 2006), so they experience less need to accuse their employer of a lack of fairness in its decision-making (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Employees also are less likely to experience self-damaging thoughts about their work situation in this scenario (Bowling et al., 2010), which diminishes their beliefs about procedural injustice. We therefore hypothesize:

> **Hypothesis 1:** There is a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of role ambiguity and their beliefs about procedural injustice.

When employees hold negative beliefs about organizational decision-making, they also might reject OCB, in an attempt to cause damage to, or at least not enhance, the well-being of their employer (Jain et al., 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2009). In line with COR theory, refusing to undertake OCB helps people preserve their self-esteem resources and feel better about themselves in the presence of procedural injustice (Hobfoll et al., 2018). That is, self-depreciating convictions about procedural injustice (Schroth & Shah, 2000) may escalate into a

reduced willingness to undertake voluntary behaviors, as a means to cope and express disappointment about a lack of decision-making transparency (Schilpzand et al., 2013). In addition to shielding their self-image, a reluctance to engage in OCB may generate personal satisfaction, which constitutes a resource *gain* in COR terms (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). To the extent that the organization does not seem to make decisions fairly, employees may secretly enjoy the chance to refuse to offer OCB (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In a related sense, employees who are convinced that organizational decision-making is unfair likely have little interest in whether their organization meets its own performance goals (Kim & Mauborgne, 1996; Minibas-Poussard et al., 2017), which often requires some voluntary behaviors (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Extant research shows that negative views of organizational decision-making generate unfavorable work attitudes, such as diminished organizational commitment (Mamman et al., 2012). According to COR theory, these negative attitudes leave employees relatively less concerned about their employer and its outcomes if they perform only those activities for which they receive explicit compensation, in response to resource-draining procedural injustice (Jahanzeb et al., 2021). Conversely, COR theory predicts that employees with *favorable* beliefs about organizational decision-making are motivated to leverage them into productive work behaviors, seeking additional resource gains by demonstrating helpful, dedicated efforts (De Clercq et al., 2021). In particular, OCB can enhance employees' organizational standing (Korsgaard et al., 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2018). Finally, convictions that organizational decisions are fair should leave employees less concerned about possible reprimands if their voluntary work behaviors were to undermine their ability to meet their formal job duties (Bolino et al., 2015), so these behaviors may increase in such cases (Schilpzand et al., 2013). We predict:

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative relationship between employees' beliefs about procedural injustice and their organizational citizenship behavior.

The combination of these arguments indicates an important mediating role of beliefs about procedural injustice. Unclear role descriptions increase the probability that employees curtail their OCB, *because* they feel compelled and justified to criticize their employer for a lack of openness in its decisions (Khan et al., 2013). If they have insufficient information about their job responsibilities, employees are unlikely to expend personal energy to perform activities for which they are not formally compensated, reflecting their beliefs that their employer maintains unfair policies—which, according to COR theory, serves as a means to protect their self-worth and avoid a further depletion of their self-esteem resources (De Clercq et al., 2019). Prior studies show that limited procedural justice functions as a mediator between other threatening job situations, such as abusive supervision (Ramdeo & Singh, 2019) or job insecurity (López Bohle et al., 2021), and negative work outcomes. We add to this conversation by predicting:

Hypothesis 3: Employees' beliefs about procedural injustice mediate the relationship between their perceptions of role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behavior.

Moderating role of social interaction

The tenets of COR theory suggest that the resource-depleting effect of difficult work conditions tends to be subdued if employees can counter the resource depletion with access to relevant relational resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). For example, the risk that employees' role ambiguity translates into enhanced beliefs about procedural injustice should be subdued if they know their colleagues personally (Pooja et al., 2016). The informal character of relationships with colleagues enhances the quality of knowledge exchanges (De Clercq et al., 2015; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), so they likely receive valuable feedback about how to cope with the uncertainties created by unclear job descriptions. As COR theory suggests, employees

with close social relationships are less likely to suffer depleted self-esteem resources, even if they lack organizational guidance about their job roles (Kang & Jang, 2019), because they can turn to colleagues who may have experienced the same challenges and can offer valuable advice (Chênevert et al., 2019). Employees who can draw from insights provided by close peers also might be better placed to put their suffering into perspective—that is, they may realize that others are going through the same ordeal and that there are probably worse things in the workplace— which further diminishes self-depreciating ruminations due to role uncertainty (De Clercq et al., 2019; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Consistent with COR theory, the need to protect their self-esteem resources by criticizing their employer for adopting unfair decision-making procedures accordingly should decrease (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022c).

These arguments, in tandem with the predicted mediating role of procedural injustice, indicate a dynamic of moderated mediation (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020). Social interaction as a relational resource is a contingency factor in the negative indirect relationship between role ambiguity and OCB, through employees' beliefs that their employer lacks transparency in its decision-making. As predicted by COR theory, for employees who feel supported by close social relationships with colleagues, the conviction that their organization exhibits procedural injustice, as a means to shield their self-esteem resources (De Clercq et al., 2019), is a less powerful channel through which role ambiguity translates into a reluctance to take on voluntary work activities. Peer interactions counter the self-damaging thoughts that unclear job roles provoke (Bowling et al., 2010), which then decreases the probability that employees halt their voluntary work activities because of their critical view of how their organization makes decisions.

> **Hypothesis 4:** The indirect negative relationship between employees' perceptions of role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behavior through their beliefs about procedural injustice is moderated by their social interaction, such that this indirect relationship is weaker at higher levels of social interaction.

Mitigating role of goodwill trust

Finally, the logic of COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) predicts a diminished probability that employees accuse their organization of maintaining unfair decision-making processes, as a means to cope with self-damaging thoughts about unclear roles, if they can count on the goodwill trust of their peers (Wu & Lee, 2016). A critical manifestation of goodwill trust is that employees feel comfortable admitting their weaknesses, particularly in difficult work situations (Rousseau et al., 1998). Such vulnerability may encourage colleagues to be forthcoming about their own uncertainties, as well as recommend possible remedies (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). High levels of goodwill trust also might render employees more receptive to guidance from colleagues in terms of how to cope with information deficiencies, without fearing that these colleagues will seek to exploit them or pursue their own interests (Teirlinck, 2018; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Furthermore, in the presence of trust-based peer relationships, employees tend to hold more favorable perceptions about their employer in general, because the work situation does not feature self-centered or threatening exhibits by other members (Curado & Vieira, 2019; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In line with COR theory, these positive perceptions might counter depleted self-esteem resources in the presence of insufficient job-related information, with positive consequences for how employees judge their organization's decision-making (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000).

Similar to our predictions for social interaction, these arguments indicate a moderated mediation process (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020). Goodwill trust is another contingency of the indirect negative connection between employees' role ambiguity and OCB, through procedural injustice. Following COR theory, if employees can count on the truthfulness of their colleagues, they do not necessarily use unclear job descriptions as a reason to reject OCB, based on their

beliefs about unfair decision-making processes and as a means to protect their sense of self-worth (Hobfoll, 2001). This relational resource buffers the hardships associated with insufficient information about work roles (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017), so it diminishes the probability that employees stay away from work-related voluntarism in response to their beliefs about procedural injustice (Daly et al., 2014). But if employees cannot draw on trust-based peer relationships, their convictions about unfair organizational decision-making should provide a more prominent explanation for how their suffering from role ambiguity escalates into diminished work-related voluntarism.

> **Hypothesis 5:** The indirect negative relationship between employees' perceptions of role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behavior through their beliefs about procedural injustice is moderated by their goodwill trust, such that this indirect relationship is weaker at higher levels of goodwill trust.

Research method

Data collection and sample

We applied a deductive, quantitative approach (Burns & Burns, 2008) to test the research hypotheses, anchored in the well-recognized COR theory, empirically (Hobfoll, 1988; Hobfoll et al., 2018). For these empirical tests of the hypotheses that we derived conceptually in the preceding sections, we relied on a quantitative survey instrument, administered among employees in a Mozambican organization competing in the services sector. This reliance on quantitative survey data to assess employees' perceptions about their organizational functioning is consistent with other recent, theory-driven research that examines how employees respond to adverse work situations in African contexts, including Guinea-Bissau (De Clercq & Pereira, 2021b), Angola (De Clercq & Pereira, 2023a), and Mozambique (De Clercq & Pereira, 2024).

The organization, located in the capital city of Maputo, employs more than 300 employees and specializes in various business-to-business services, such as cleaning, security,

accountancy, and office administration. Our focus on a single organization is purposeful and informed by our goal to diminish the possible impact of pertinent but unobserved differences in the ways that organizations function internally—such as the workloads that employees encounter (Kumar et al., 2021) or the extent to which the organizational climate supports voluntary work efforts (Bolino et al., 2010)—that likely influence OCB but do not interfere with the focal results in the case of a single-organization investigation (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, examining one organization avoids the potential biases caused by unobserved differences in the competitive market dynamics an organization faces (e.g., significant market competition, shifting customer preferences, customer bankruptcies; Sharma & Christie, 2010) that affect the feasibility or desirability of employees devoting substantial time to extra-role work efforts (Hodson, 2002). Another rationale refers specifically to the organization we study: It was implementing major changes in the distribution of work across departments and the assignments of employees within departments. These changes enhanced the chances that employees experienced uncertainty about their job roles. Finally, single-organization studies of employees' OCB are not uncommon and appear in various country contexts, including Mexico (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2021a), Portugal (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022b), and Angola (De Clercq & Pereira, 2021c).

We applied a translation–back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1986) in developing the survey. The original English version was converted into Portuguese by a first translator, then back-translated into English by a second translator. After addressing some minor issues, a pilot version, in Portuguese, was pretested with a small group of five employees who did not partake in the actual data collection effort. Their feedback and suggestions led to some additional minor changes to enhance readability. The sample frame included the complete roster of the organization's employees, provided by the human resources department. From this roster, we

made a random selection of 250 employees, using a random digit generator that eliminates selection bias. The survey was distributed electronically by leveraging an institutional license of the Microsoft Forms software owned by the academic institution of a member of the research team. The employees of the participating organization were familiar with this survey tool and considered it easy to navigate. The survey tool adheres to ethical standards in terms of data confidentiality and storage.

We adopted a rigorously prepared design to avoid any bias-related challenges that might arise with survey-based data collection efforts. First, to mitigate the risk of expectancy bias—that is, a scenario in which participants figure out the theorized relationships and adjust their responses accordingly—we referred to the study's objectives in very general terms in a statement that preceded the survey, without revealing any specific research questions; we also did not mention the construct names in the survey itself (Malhotra, 2010). Second, we applied various measures to reduce the likelihood of social desirability and acquiescence biases. In particular, the opening statement underscored the voluntary nature of employees' participation and the complete confidentiality of their answers. The employees also were informed that their employer would have no knowledge about who took part in the survey or not, that any research reports coming out of the study would include only broadband patterns based on aggregate data, and that they could withdraw at any point in time (Burns & Burns, 2008). Finally, to reduce framing bias, the survey instructions indicated that there were no right or wrong answers, that it was normal that different participants would provide varying responses to particular questions, and that it was critical for the validity of the study that all participants shared their truthful opinions about their individual work situation (Burns & Burns, 2008; Malhotra, 2010).

Among the 250 employees we contacted, 188 returned complete surveys. Among these participants, 47% were women, 47% were younger than 40 years, 66% had a university degree, and 92% had worked for the organization for less than five years, reflecting pandemic-related, high turnover rates.

Measures

The measures of the focal constructs came from prior research and featured seven-point Likert anchors, ranging between 1 ("strongly disagree") and 7 ("strongly agree"). The individual measurement items—as well as the results of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) performed on a five-factor measurement model, as reported hereafter—are listed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Role ambiguity. To measure the extent to which employees suffer from information deficiencies with respect to their role descriptions, we applied a reverse-coded, six-item scale of role clarity, based on Fried and Tiegs (1995). For example, the respondents assessed whether "I know what my responsibilities are" and "Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job" (Cronbach's alpha = .82).

Procedural injustice. We assessed the extent to which employees believe that organizational decision-making processes are unfair with a reverse-coded, five-item scale of procedural justice (Masterson, 2001). Measuring procedural injustice with statements that actually reflect high levels of fairness is consistent with prior research (Khan et al., 2013; Reb et al., 2006). Two sample items were, "My organization's procedures allow for requests for clarification or additional information about a decision" and "My organization's procedures generate standards so that decisions can be made with consistency" (Cronbach's alpha = .94).

Organizational citizenship behavior. We measured employees' voluntary work activities with a four-item scale drawn from prior research (De Cremer et al., 2009). Two example items were "I undertake voluntary action to protect the company from potential problems" and "If necessary, I am prepared to work overtime"(Cronbach's alpha = .87). Our reliance on self-assessments is consistent with the logic that employees are better placed to provide precise and comprehensive evaluations of their own extra-role activities, compared with other assessors (e.g., colleagues, supervisors) who have less detailed insight into how much energy employees actually allocate to such activities (Chan, 2009). For example, employees might direct their discretionary efforts toward specific organizational members, but not others, so other people's ratings likely do not capture the entire range of their OCB (Organ et al., 2006).

Social interaction. The extent to which employees maintain informal relationships with their peers was assessed with a four-item scale of social interaction (Pooja et al., 2016). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as "My colleagues and I maintain close social relationships with one another" and "My colleagues and I know each other on a personal level" (Cronbach's alpha = .95).

Goodwill trust. To assess the extent to which employees can count on the honesty of their peers, we relied on five-item scale of goodwill trust (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). Two sample statements were "My colleagues would not take advantage of me, even if the opportunity arose," and "My colleagues are perfectly honest and truthful with me" (Cronbach's alpha = .94).

Control variables. The statistical models accounted for the effects of employees' *gender* (0 = male, 1 = female) and *organizational tenure* (1 = 5 years or less, 2 = 6–10 years, 3 = 11–15 years, 4 = 16–20 years, 5 = more than 20 years). Women tend to exhibit enhanced propensities to help others on a voluntary basis (Belansky & Boggiano, 1994), and employees who have served

their organization for a longer period may feel a certain loyalty to their employer and thus want to give back to it (Ng & Feldman, 2011).

Construct validity

We assessed the validity of the five central constructs through both exploratory factor analyses (EFA) and CFA. First, an EFA that relied on a varimax rotation produced a clean factor structure: Each measurement item loaded highly on its corresponding construct (factor loadings between .53 and .94), and none of them showed factor loadings greater than .50 on constructs that they were not designed to measure. The five extracted factors, with eigenvalues greater than 1, explained 76% of the total data variance. These results provide preliminary evidence of convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Second, a CFA undertaken on a five-factor measurement model generated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2(222) = 547.15$, confirmatory fit index = .92, incremental fit index = .92, Tucker-Lewis index = .90, and root mean square error of approximation = .08. The presence of convergent validity was affirmed by the strongly significant loadings for all items on their associated constructs ($p < .001$, Table 1; Hair et al., 2019). The average variance extracted (AVE) values also were higher than the benchmark of .50, except for role ambiguity (=.43), which is acceptable in underresearched country settings (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2021b; Kashif et al., 2017), including African contexts (De Clercq & Pereira, 2020, 2021). Finally, the presence of discriminant validity was evident, because each AVE value was higher than the squared values of the correlations between associated construct pairs, and the fit of the models that included constrained construct pairs (i.e., correlation between two constructs fixed to equal 1) was significantly worse ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} > 3.84$) than the fit of the corresponding unconstrained models (i.e., correlation between the two constructs could vary freely) for the ten possible construct pairs (Hair et al., 2019).

Statistical procedure

The research hypotheses were tested with the Process macro, developed for SPPS (Hayes et al., 2017). The benefit of this procedure—in comparison with piecemeal regression analyses—is that it allows for an evaluation of individual paths (i.e., Hypotheses 1 and 2), together with an encompassing evaluation of mediation and moderated mediation effects (i.e., Hypotheses 3–5). It has been extensively applied in previous studies that theorize and test conceptual frameworks of moderated mediation effects (e.g., Skiba & Wildman, 2019; Wang et al., 2018a). The Process macro procedure also is preferred over the traditional Sobel approach, because it does not make the assumption that the estimated indirect and conditionally indirect effects follow a normal distribution. Rather, its bootstrapping feature formally acknowledges that the sampling distributions of these effects may be skewed (Hayes, 2018).

To assess the presence of mediation, we estimated the indirect relationship between role ambiguity and OCB through procedural injustice, together with the corresponding confidence interval (CI) generated from the Model 4 template in the Process macro (Hayes, 2018). In this first stage, we also assessed the sign and significance levels of the direct paths between role ambiguity and procedural injustice and between procedural injustice and OCB. To evaluate the presence of moderated mediation, we calculated the conditional indirect effects of role ambiguity and the corresponding CIs at three distinct values of the two focal relational resources (social interaction and goodwill trust): one standard deviation (SD) below their mean, at their mean, and one SD above their mean. Consistent with the nature of the proposed theoretical framework, we relied on the Model 7 template in the Process macro (Hayes, 2018) to calculate, in separate

estimations, the moderating effects of both relational resources on the connection between role ambiguity and procedural injustice, but *not* between procedural injustice and OCB.[1]

Results

      Table 2 reports the zero-order correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics, and Table 3 reports the mediation results generated with the Process macro. Role ambiguity is positively related to procedural injustice (β = .483, *p* < .001, Hypothesis 1), which is negatively related to OCB (β = -.221, *p* < .01, Hypothesis 2). The formal evaluation for mediation, based on Process Model 4, indicates an effect size of -.107 for the indirect relationship between role ambiguity and OCB through procedural injustice; its CI does not include 0 [-.210, -.028], indicating the presence of mediation (Hypothesis 3).

<p style="text-align:center;">[Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here]</p>

      The Process Model 7 results for the moderation by social interaction in Table 4 indicate a negative, significant effect of the role ambiguity × social interaction product term (β = -.206, *p* < .001) for predicting procedural injustice. That is, the positive relationship between role ambiguity and procedural injustice becomes weaker at higher levels of social interaction (.653 at one SD below the mean, .447 at the mean, and .087 at one SD above the mean). The formal evaluation of moderated mediation compares the strength of the conditional *indirect* relationship between role ambiguity and OCB through procedural injustice at different levels of social interaction. Table 3 indicates diminishing effect sizes at increasing levels of the moderator: from -.145 at one SD below the mean, to -.099 at the mean, to -.019 at one SD above the mean. The CI does not include 0 at the two lowest values of the moderator ([-.282; -.042] and [-.199; -.028], respectively), but it spans 0 at the highest level ([-.096; .038]). Furthermore, the index of

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[1] A robustness check confirmed that the right-hand path of the theoretical framework was not significantly moderated by social interaction or goodwill trust.

moderated mediation equals .046, and its CI does not include 0 [.011, .097], in support of Hypothesis 4.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Table 5 reports the moderating effect of goodwill trust, again based on Process Model 7. We find a negative, significant effect of the role ambiguity × goodwill trust product term ($\beta = -.150$, $p < .01$) in predicting procedural injustice. The positive relationship between role ambiguity and procedural injustice is subdued at higher levels of goodwill trust (.616 at one SD below the mean, .437 at the mean, and .317 at one SD above the mean). According to the moderated mediation assessment, lower effect sizes of the indirect effect of role ambiguity occur at higher levels of the moderator: from -.136 at one SD below the mean, to -.097 at the mean, to -.070 at one SD above the mean. The CIs do not include 0 at the two lower values ([-.255; -.037] and [-.194; -.025], respectively) but do at its most elevated level [-.167; .010]). The index of moderated mediation is .033; its corresponding CI does not include 0 [.002, .075], in support of Hypothesis 5.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Discussion

Theoretical implications

With this study, we extend previous scholarship by investigating the relationship between employees' experience of role ambiguity and their propensity to undertake extra-role work activities, with specific attention to key factors that explain or affect this process. To complement research on how employees' worries about information shortages direct them away from discretionary work behaviors (Chen et al., 2013; Kang & Jang, 2019), we explicate *why* role ambiguity may reduce employees' willingness to be a "good soldier" and which relational

circumstances counteract this harmful effect. With a conceptual basis in COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we establish that the likelihood of diminished OCB, due to resource-draining role ambiguity, increases when employees criticize their organization for its unfair decision-making procedures. We also determine that the relational resources of social interaction and goodwill trust mitigate this process. The empirical findings offer support for the theoretical predictions.

As a first theoretical insight, we learn that employees' frustration, prompted when they do not know what is expected of them, leads them to decide *not* to help their organization with voluntary activities, because they hold it accountable for a lack of openness (Colquitt et al., 2001). Consistent with the logic of COR theory, employees likely respond to this resource-depleting work situation with negative thoughts and activities, in their attempt to avoid self-depreciating ruminations (Bowling et al., 2010; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). These reactions seem justified because of the hardships that the situation creates for their day-to-day work functioning (Kawai & Mohr, 2015). This study accordingly points to the possibility of a *downward* spiral for employees: Information shortages pertaining to their work roles lead to diminished work-related voluntarism, a complacent behavioral response that may produce negative impressions among organizational leaders (Podsakoff et al., 2018), so employees might experience even more hardship at work.

This negative dynamic is *less* likely in the presence of pertinent resources, embedded in peer relationships (Chênevert et al., 2019). As we predicted, beliefs about procedural injustice function as less powerful channels for the escalation of resource-draining role ambiguity into diminished OCB when employees (1) know their colleagues on a personal level and (2) are convinced their colleagues are honest and sincere (De Clercq, 2020). Consistent with the premises of COR theory, self-damaging contemplations due to unclear job specifications should

be mitigated by employees' access to relational resources that help them cope (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). The likelihood that employees suffering from role ambiguity criticize their organization for unfair procedures, and refuse to accept work tasks voluntarily, decreases if employees can draw from the guidance of like-minded peers, who might have gone through similar ordeals (Eatough et al., 2011). Informality and trustworthiness in peer interactions enable employees, upset about insufficient job information, to avoid feeling compelled to criticize organizational decision-making, because the support they receive grants them pertinent insights into how to resolve the uncertainties.

Taken together, these insights contribute to OCB research by revealing the advantages of supportive peer relationships in shielding employees against the hardships that arise from work ambiguity. Notably, the findings extend previous examinations of the *direct* beneficial effect of intra-organizational social capital on employees' extra-role work activities (Mostafa & Bottomley, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). We offer the complementary insight that the harmful effect of beliefs about procedural injustice, in response to perceived role ambiguity, can be mitigated by peer relationships marked by informality and trust. These two relational boundary conditions reduce the danger of a double whammy, in which perceived role ambiguity begets tarnished voluntarism in the workplace.

Limitations and future research directions

As with any research, this study has some limitations, which set the stage for further investigations. First, our conceptual arguments are anchored in the well-established COR framework—according to which resource-depleting work conditions spur the development of thoughts and behaviors to undo the resource losses (Hobfoll et al., 2018)—but the possibility of reverse causality remains. Employees who perform OCB may experience personal satisfaction

(Lemoine et al., 2015) that evokes positive impressions about their work setting. Measures of each focal construct, at different points in time, in longitudinal designs could provide a formal test of causality and cross-lagged effects. The COR logic also emphasizes employees' motivation to protect their sense of self-worth in the presence of unclear work roles and subsequent beliefs about how their organization is unfair in its decision-making (Hobfoll, 2001), but it would be helpful to measure the levels of and changes in employees' self-esteem resources over time.

Second, we prioritize social interaction and goodwill trust as pertinent boundary conditions, informed by prior research on the importance of high-quality peer relationships for helping people cope with difficult conditions (Frank et al., 2014). Other contextual factors may serve as buffers too, such as person–organization fit (Chen et al., 2016) or effective leadership (Abebe et al., 2020). Furthermore, resource-boosting *personal* resources may shield employees from the danger that their role ambiguity escalates into convictions about procedural injustice and then diminished OCB, such as their creative self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2018b) or emotion regulation skills (Buruck et al., 2016). It would be interesting to compare the relative potency of each factor in mitigating the hardships linked to role ambiguity, as well as test whether the effects of social interaction and goodwill trust hold, after accounting for their roles.

Third, and as mentioned in the Data collection and sample subsection, this study purposefully examines one specific organization that operates in one specific industry, to avoid the challenge of unobserved organization- or industry-related factors that are not included in the proposed conceptual framework but that might influence employees' propensities to engage in OCB. Alternative research designs could include multiple organizations and multiple industries and thereby assess the generalizability of the results across a wider set of contexts. In a related vein, the conceptual arguments we advance are country-neutral, and the empirical results should

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hold across a broad range of countries, in Africa and beyond, but the strength of the hypothesized relationships might vary somewhat. In cultural settings similar to Mozambique, characterized by high uncertainty avoidance and collectivism, employees may experience role ambiguity as especially intrusive, and thus form negative reactions, but also worry about organizational harmony, such that they reject the process by which they form beliefs about procedural injustice and diminished OCB. The empirical results imply the former dynamic might be stronger, but this interpretation is purely speculative. Cross-country studies could explicitly test the generalizability of the reported results and examine the influences of different cultural values, along with their corresponding personal versions, such as employees' own risk aversion (Loi & Ngo, 2010) or collectivistic orientation (Triandis, 2001).

Practical implications

This study offers pertinent implications for practice. Organizations should be aware that an important and unpleasant source of uncertainty for employees is their perception that their employer does not offer detailed information about their job responsibilities. These perceptions can be detrimental for both employees and their employer, because employees likely hold the organization responsible and may refuse to step up with extra-role work activities (Schilpzand et al., 2013). A key caveat here is that employees might be unwilling to admit confusion about unclear job descriptions, to avoid any appearance of incompetence (Zhang et al., 2019). Organizational decision makers accordingly need to provide specific details about job responsibilities; if they cannot, they should explain *why* and encourage employee feedback about the problem. Organizational knowledge sharing and feedback seeking can take place through company-wide discussion forums or one-on-one with human resource representatives or department heads (Wang & Noe, 2010).

Another option for organizations that cannot provide detailed information about job responsibilities—due to extreme volatility in hypercompetitive markets, for example (Fournier et al., 2013)—is to put barriers in place to ensure employees do not fall victim to a counterproductive spiral, in which self-damaging ruminations and beliefs about dysfunctional organizational decision-making escalate into reduced OCB, from which the firm otherwise could benefit. As this study points out, initiatives to stimulate informal relationship building and goodwill trust in interpersonal interactions could avoid this detrimental process (Jiang & Liu, 2015). By honing and leveraging these relational resources, organizations can enhance the chances that employees keep undertaking productive behaviors for which they are not formally rewarded, even if they feel upset by unclear work roles. Ultimately, to the extent that employees benefit from the guidance of and solidarity with colleagues, who may receive incomplete information about their job responsibilities too, they likely perceive information shortages as less upsetting, with beneficial outcomes for how they think about their organization and their motivation to keep seeking ways to enhance its success.

Conclusion

This study adds to previous research by examining the roles of procedural injustice and relational resources in the process by which role ambiguity escalates into thwarted OCB. Beliefs about unfair organizational decision-making explain how unclear role descriptions leave employees unwilling to add to their organization's success voluntarily. Yet this detrimental dynamic is attenuated among employees who can draw from supportive peer relationships. We hope these findings encourage enhanced organizational efforts to inform, help, and protect employees, as well as further research into how a lack of detailed job descriptions can be overcome with valuable resources embedded in employee ranks.

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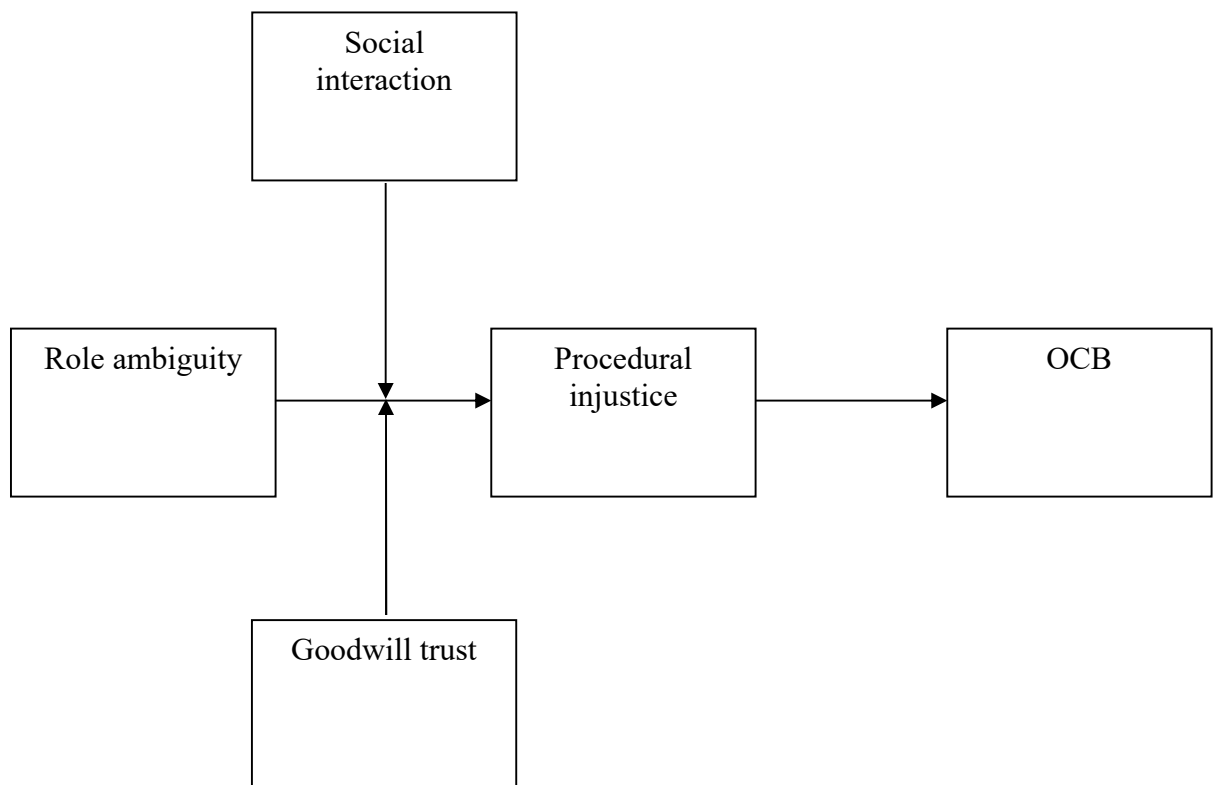
Figure 1: Conceptual model

Table 1. Constructs and measurement items

	Factor Loading	t-Value
Role ambiguity (reversed coded) (CR = .82; AVE = .43**)**		
I know what my responsibilities are.	.553	6.488***
Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job.	.645 [a]	--
I know exactly what is expected of me.	.560	6.554***
I know that I have divided my time properly.	.663	7.544***
Explanation is clear of what has to be done.	.773	8.408***
I feel certain about how much authority I have.	.729	8.016***
Procedural injustice (reverse coded) (CR = .92; AVE = .70)		
My organization's procedures allow for requests for clarification or additional information about a decision.	.766	10.377***
My organization's procedures generate standards so that decisions can be made with consistency.	.825 [a]	--
My organization's procedures provide opportunities to appeal or challenge a decision.	.825	11.233***
My organization's procedures are constructed to hear the concerns of all those who are affected by a decision.	.834	13.334***
My organization's procedures allow people to collect accurate information for making decisions.	.853	17.617***
Organizational citizenship behavior (CR = .86; AVE = .61**)**		
I undertake voluntary action to protect the organization from potential problems.	.745 [a]	--
If necessary, I am prepared to work overtime.	.760	9.625***
I have a cooperative relationship with my boss and others in the organization.	.823	13.258***
I develop the necessary skills and knowledge that are of benefit to my organization.	.796	10.028***
Social interaction (CR = .90; AVE = .68**)**		
My colleagues and I maintain close social relationships with one another.	.729	8.311***
My colleagues and I know each other on a personal level.	.843	7.160***
My colleagues and I spend significant time together in social situations.	.836 [a]	--
My relationship with colleagues is very informal.	.889	6.582***
Goodwill trust (CR = .87; AVE = .57**)**		
My colleagues would not take advantage of me, even if the opportunity arose.	.759	10.039***
My colleagues are perfectly honest and truthful with me.	.703	9.192***
My colleagues can always be trusted to do what is right for the organization.	.788 [a]	--
My colleagues always keep the promises they make.	.770	12.147***
My colleagues are truly sincere in their promises.	.758	10.024***

[a]Initial loading was fixed to 1 to set the scale of the construct.
Notes: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 2. Correlation table and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Role ambiguity							
2. Procedural injustice	.568**						
3. OCB	-.543**	-.500**					
4. Social interaction	-.017	-.215**	.075				
5. Goodwill trust	-.569**	-.493**	.604**	.267**			
6. Gender (1 = female)	-.030	-.045	.052	.132	.056		
7. Organizational tenure	.021	.055	-.017	-.211**	-.270**	-.061	
Mean	2.322	2.372	5.625	4.225	5.297	.473	1.101
Standard deviation	.699	.752	.845	1.345	.987	.501	.351

Notes: n = 188.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 3. Mediation results (Process macro Model 4)

		Procedural Injustice		OCB
Gender (1 = female)		.001		.043
Organizational tenure		-.104		.275[+]
Role ambiguity		.483***		-.213*
Social interaction		-.091**		-.046
Goodwill trust		-.157**		.388***
Procedural injustice				-.221**
	R^2	.389		.462
	Effect Size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect effect	-.107	.046	-.210	-.028

Notes: n = 188; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; UCLI = upper limit confidence interval.
[+] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Moderated mediation results: moderation by social interaction (Process macro Model 7)

	Procedural Injustice	OCB
Gender (1 = female)	.057	.043
Organizational tenure	-.165	.275[+]
Role ambiguity	.402***	-.213*
Social interaction	-.107**	-.046
Goodwill trust	-.115*	.388***
Role ambiguity × Social interaction	-.206***	
Procedural injustice		-.221**
R^2	.439	.462

Conditional *direct* relationship between role ambiguity and procedural injustice				
	Effect Size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	.653	.086	.483	.823
Mean	.447	.076	.298	.596
+1SD	087	.125	-.159	.333

Conditional *indirect* relationship between role ambiguity and OCB				
	Effect Size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-.145	.061	-.282	-.042
Mean	-.099	.044	-.199	-.028
+1SD	-.019	.033	-.096	.038
Index of moderation	.046	.022	.011	.097

Notes: n = 188; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; UCLI = upper limit confidence interval.
[+] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Moderated mediation results: moderation by goodwill trust (Process macro Model 7)

	Procedural Injustice	OCB
Gender (1 = female)	.017	.043
Organizational tenure	-.135	.275[+]
Role ambiguity	.451***	-.213*
Social interaction	-.061[+]	-.046
Goodwill trust	-.167**	.388***
Role ambiguity × Goodwill trust	-.150**	
Procedural injustice		-.221**
R^2	.413	.462

Conditional *direct* relationship between role ambiguity and procedural injustice				
	Effect Size		Bootstrap SE	
-1 SD	.616	.091	.437	.795
Mean	.437	.079	.281	.592
+1SD	.317	.098	.123	.510

Conditional *indirect* relationship between role ambiguity and OCB				
	Effect Size		Bootstrap SE	
-1 SD	-.136	.056	-.255	-.037
Mean	-.097	.044	-.194	-.025
+1SD	-.070	.041	-.167	.010
Index of moderation	.033	.019	.002	.075

Notes: n = 188; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; UCLI = upper limit confidence interval.
[+] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.