

IT'S NOT ALWAYS SUNNY IN RELATIONALLY RICH JOBS: THE INFLUENCE OF NEGATIVE BENEFICIARY CONTACT

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Contact with beneficiaries has been described as an important job characteristic for shaping perceptions about the social value of work; however, little is known about how to navigate experiences in which contact with beneficiaries is negative, which can explicitly undermine the conclusion that work is socially valuable. We draw from two tenets of social information processing theory to propose that negative contact with beneficiaries has a dual effect on employees. Whereas negative contact may make employees perceive low social worth, it may simultaneously lead employees to believe they are engaging in *self-sacrifice* for a worthy cause—a relatively positive justification of such experiences. We investigated these ideas in three studies. In Study 1, a three-wave survey of registered nurses and their supervisors supported the hypothesized dual effect. Further consistent with our theorizing, the effect of perceived self-sacrifice on job satisfaction and performance was contingent on coworker emotional support: with higher support, perceived self-sacrifice exhibited a null relationship with satisfaction and a positive relationship with performance; with lower support, these effects were negative. In Study 2, we again studied nurses using an experimental vignette method, showing that negative contact exhibits a causal effect on employee perceptions, and that negative contact is more likely to lead to perceived self-sacrifice when the contact is attributed to the nature of the work versus one's own performance. In Study 3, a two-wave survey of people from various occupations replicated the effects of negative contact on perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice. Moreover, the effect of negative contact on sacrifice was contingent on affective commitment to beneficiaries.

Beyond making a living, people also work in order to make a difference in the lives of others. Put differently, “[work] is about the search for daily meaning as well as daily bread” (Terkel, 2011: 11). Consistent with this observation, one key aspect in seeing work as meaningful is that employees believe their actions are valuable to others (Grant, 2007; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Although some jobs and occupations may be seen as particularly valuable to society (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), organizations can

make the value of any job more salient to employees by facilitating contact between employees and beneficiaries—the set of people whom employees believe their work can positively affect. This *relational* perspective on job design has identified contact with beneficiaries as “the key [job] characteristic” for helping employees perceive social value in their work (Grant, 2012: 460), which in turn promotes satisfaction and performance (Grant, Campbell, Chen, Cottone, Lapedis, & Lee, 2007; Steijn & Van der Voet, 2019).

However, whereas the relational job design literature has documented the impact of positive contact and mere contact (i.e., contact without valence) with beneficiaries (Grant, 2012; Grant et al., 2007; Grant & Gino, 2010), we know comparatively little about *negative* contact with beneficiaries. This oversight is important because negative beneficiary contact presents an important theoretical and practical

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tension. Although some jobs require an intervention to facilitate contact with beneficiaries (Grant, 2012, Study 1; Grant et al., 2007), contact is inherent in many jobs to some degree. Such inherently relational jobs are organically rich in “relational architecture” (Grant, 2007) that provides opportunities for positive beneficiary contact (e.g., expressions of gratitude from a student) and makes the value of one’s work salient. However, organizations exhibit little control over the valence of most employee–beneficiary interactions, and paying customers and clients are often free to interact however they want (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Employees are thus sometimes subjected to negative experiences of rejection or mistreatment, which may be better characterized as threatening rather than as motivating. Because help from others can coincide with beneficiaries feeling vulnerable, weak, or incompetent (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982), beneficiaries may appear “disrespectful, difficult to help, aggressive, rude, or hostile” (Grant, 2007: 402). This *negative beneficiary contact* may be detrimental to perceiving social value in one’s work. At this point, little is known about how people navigate experiences in which the key indicator of the perceived social value of work (beneficiary contact) appears to explicitly undermine the conclusion that their work is socially valuable.

The literature, in its current state, has not directly reconciled this tension. A variety of literatures have documented how negative interactions with customers and clients affect employees generally. For example, it is now well-understood that mistreatment by customers can cause perceptions of injustice, rumination, and customer-directed sabotage (Koopmann, Wang, Liu, & Song, 2015); and interacting with clients often requires emotional labor, leading to stress and burnout (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hochschild, 1983). A few studies have suggested the potential for negative beneficiary contact to affect the meaning of work. For example, beneficiary misconceptions about one’s profession have been found to signal that the profession at large is unimportant (Patil & Lebel, 2019; Vough, Cardador, Bednar, Dane, & Pratt, 2013), and conflicts between employees and beneficiaries can reach mutual resolution when third-party mediators help both sides make sense of each other’s perspective (Heaphy, 2017). Although these studies have illuminated essential aspects of how employees cope with negative beneficiary contact, additional research is needed to directly assess how negative contact affects the perceived social value of one’s work and, perhaps more importantly, how employees can derive positive meaning from negative contact. Do these negative

experiences simply undermine the perceived value of one’s work, or can employees justify such experiences in a way that helps them continue to see the value of their work? Under what conditions are employees more likely to make positive meaning from negative beneficiary contact, and what conditions allow such a justification to produce greater satisfaction and performance?

To better understand the effects of negative beneficiary contact, we draw from two distinct tenets of social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978)—one well-established (information saliency) and one relatively neglected (rationalization)—to suggest that negative beneficiary contact has a dual effect on employees. That is, negative contact provides salient information that may make employees perceive a lack of value in their work (low perceived social worth) but may simultaneously lead employees to rationalize their work as *self-sacrifice* for a worthy cause. We identify various conditions under which rationalization is more likely to occur and under which it results in beneficial outcomes. Specifically, we propose that whereas low perceived social worth generally is associated with negative outcomes (lower job satisfaction and performance), perceived self-sacrifice could motivate positive outcomes when emotional support from coworkers helps employees focus on their contributions more than on the costs they incur (Study 1). Further, we note that negative contact is most likely to be rationalized as self-sacrificial in cases where such a rationalization is credible, and we argue that this is the case when employees attribute negative contact to the nature of the work (Study 2), as well as when employees feel committed to beneficiaries (Study 3). We test these ideas in three studies: a three-wave field survey of registered nurses and their supervisors, an experimental vignette study of nurses, and a two-wave field survey of people employed in a variety of occupations.

Our research makes an important contribution to the job design literature by examining the impact of negative beneficiary contact on the perceived social value of work. Although the job design literature has recognized that negative contact occurs (Grant, 2007; Grant & Campbell, 2007; Grant & Gino, 2010), theory explaining its effects on the perceived social value of work is noticeably absent, with little, if any, research uncovering the mechanisms at play. Drawing from social information processing theory, we provide an examination of the dual effects of negative contact. In particular, our research extends our understanding of how employees cope when a core work motive (the desire for social value) appears to

be at odds with the primary cue for that motive (beneficiary contact). In addition, in examining perceived self-sacrifice as a key mechanism linking negative contact and employee outcomes, our research breaks ground regarding how and when negative contact can be processed by employees in a relatively positive way. This is significant, given that extant research on negative contact has focused mainly on the experienced costs and how they might be reduced.

Our research also contributes to the literature on meaningful work. Recent research has argued that meaningfulness is a complex, multifaceted concept. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) noted that the literature has tended to adopt a “realization” perspective that emphasizes the enrichment of jobs that have constraining work conditions. These authors called for more attention to the “justification” perspective, which emphasizes how employees develop an account of the value of their work, particularly in response to work experiences that suggest one’s work behavior is not worthy. By examining the role of perceived self-sacrifice in response to negative beneficiary contact, we highlight an important type of justification that helps employees overcome meaning-threatening experiences. We further elaborate on this type of justification by examining the conditions necessary (i.e., coworker support) for it to provide beneficial results in terms of satisfaction and performance, and by examining the conditions (i.e., attributions for contact, commitment to beneficiaries) under which the justification is likely to be developed in the first place.

NEGATIVE BENEFICIARY CONTACT AND SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING

Like positive beneficiary contact, negative beneficiary contact is conceptualized from the employee’s perspective. Our definition of negative beneficiary contact requires a consideration of all three terms. First, we define beneficiaries as the “people whom employees believe their actions at work have the potential to positively affect” (Grant, 2007: 395). This may extend to secondary beneficiaries, such as parents of students for educators, or the direct reports of executives for executive coaches. Contact refers to “opportunities for employees to interact and communicate with the people affected by their work” (Grant, 2007: 398). Contact may vary with respect to frequency, duration, physical proximity, depth, and breadth (Grant, 2007), depending on the exact nature of the job. Finally, negative contact is unpleasant from the perspective of the employee and may include disrespectful or aggressive interactions. Thus, we define

negative beneficiary contact as unpleasant interactions with people whom employees believe they have the potential to positively affect. Specific examples of negative beneficiary contact include patients being unreasonably demanding toward a nurse during their stay in a hospital, students ignoring a teacher’s classroom rules throughout the school year, various one-time customers behaving rudely to a barista, and clients aggressively questioning a consultant’s competence during engagements. Our research focuses on a generalized (chronic) pattern of negative contact, rather than a particular encounter, because the former is more relevant to perceptions about the social value of work.

Information Saliency: Negative Contact and Perceived Social Worth

The principles of relational job design that have informed past research on positive beneficiary contact largely stem from the overarching framework of social information processing theory. This perspective holds that “finding meaning in behavior and in a job environment is an information processing activity,” and that the social context is a primary driver of what and how information gets processed (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978: 225). Extant research on beneficiary contact has primarily focused on the first tenet of social information processing theory, which deals with *information saliency*. The information saliency aspect of social information processing holds that cues from one’s social environment influence the perceptions one forms about their work. This is particularly true when the information is related to the value or worth of one’s job. When beneficiaries are a major part of the work itself, beneficiaries represent a salient source of information about the value of one’s work. Moreover, to the extent that a job is defined in terms of benefiting customers or clients (as many jobs are), beneficiaries are the most direct source of information related to the worth of one’s work. When beneficiaries communicate that they have been positively affected by one’s work, it serves as a cue that one’s actions are socially valuable (Grant et al., 2007). For example, in a study involving lifeguards, Grant (2008a) found that even indirect contact via stories of “saves” positively predicted job dedication and helping behavior, mediated by perceived social worth. In contrast to the message of social worth communicated by positive contact, a likely message conveyed by rude or hostile beneficiaries is that the employee’s actions are relatively worthless, and unable to adequately address the needs of the situation. As a result, employees may be left with a relatively weak and ambiguous sense of the social value

of their actions, as reflected by low perceived social worth. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Negative beneficiary contact is negatively related to perceived social worth.

Rationalization: Negative Contact and Perceived Self-sacrifice

In addition to the information saliency tenet, the second tenet of social information processing asserts that any social context demands individuals to develop acceptable reasons for their work choices—a process called rationalization. As a result, people tend to experience continual pressure from others to rationalize their choice to continue to engage in their job. They are thus compelled to engage in a sense-making process (Weick, 1995; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003) by referring to aspects of their job that suggest their behavior is meaningful and justified.¹ The idea of rationalization is akin to what Lepisto and Pratt (2017) called the “justification” conceptualization of meaningfulness, wherein people are faced with sources of information that call into question the value of their work, and must construct an explanation that justifies their work as something worth doing. By engaging in rationalization, employees become “meaning-makers facing a world that can appear, at times, senseless and devoid of value” (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017: 108).

Whereas positive contact with beneficiaries is typically internalized without much need for rationalization, negative contact is likely to require cognitive work in order to rationalize, as it is less immediately clear to employees why such experiences are justified. Subjecting oneself willingly to repeated disrespect presumably requires a strong justification. Moreover, justifications rooted in financial compensation often prove insufficient, because many people see work as a way to make a difference in other people’s lives (Everett, 1995; Grant, 2007; Quinn, 2000). Employees who experience a substantial degree of negative contact with beneficiaries are thus left to

explain to themselves and others why they continue to work for people who do not seem to sufficiently value their help.

Although the beneficiary contact literature has not yet taken rationalization into account, other research focused on the meaning of work has found that people often reinterpret or reconstruct negative work experiences in relatively positive ways, thereby providing a rational explanation for them (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). For example, Vough and Caza (2017), suggested that people can benefit from denied promotions by working to construct growth-based stories that foster proactive career behaviors. Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate’s (2007) and Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) research on “dirty work” found that people with stigmatized occupations engaged in a number of rationalizations aimed at minimizing the aspects of their work deemed negative while maximizing the aspects of their work deemed positive. For example, personal injury lawyers framed their occupation as holding manufacturers accountable for defective products. Rationalization allows employees to change the meaning attached to their work role by infusing work ideologies with positive characteristics, or by neutralizing negative characteristics that others associate with the work role. Moreover, rationalizing is used not only to respond to stigmas but also to imbue one’s experiences with beneficiaries to be more meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). In effect, this allows employees to continue their work over time in a cognitively sustainable fashion (Petriglieri, 2011).

A social information processing perspective thus suggests that, in addition to creating lower perceptions of social worth, negative beneficiary contact may be rationalized to justify the worth of one’s work. But what is the particular justification that employees will construct? Research has shown that interpersonal relationships often entail situations in which each party’s interests conflict with one another. In such situations, each party must choose whether to act in their own self-interest, or whether to emphasize the other party’s interest. When one individual willingly incurs a cost by prioritizing the interests of the other, the conflict can be resolved (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). This is commonly referred to as *self-sacrifice*—the foregoing of one’s immediate self-interest in order to promote the well-being of the other person. Sacrifice is defined by actions that are interpreted symbolically as connecting oneself to a transcendent ideal (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2017). The connecting process inherent in sacrifice makes it a relationally loaded

¹ Although related, this process of rationalization is distinct from cognitive dissonance theory. As Salancik and Pfeffer (1978: 232) noted, “The argument that individuals seek meaning and justification for their activities does not imply that they need consistency (Singer, 1966), as dissonance theorists argue. Instead of proposing that individuals have an inherent need to make sense of their activities, one could argue that the tendency for them to do so derives from the demands and constraints of their social environment for meaningful and justifiable behavior.”

term, describing behavior that unambiguously indicates a desire for the welfare of something else—or, more precisely, someone else. In addition, behavior that is deemed to be sacrificial is generally viewed by society as a positive indication of the sacrificer's moral character (Hubert & Mauss, 1964). This is critical, because justifications are formed based on their credibility, and credible justifications are those that are “not only consistent with the facts of the situation... but are also socially acceptable” (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978: 232).

Organizational researchers have studied self-sacrifice largely in a group context (Choi & Maitland, 1998, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1994), where self-sacrificial leaders (who, for example, vacate the privileges of power) improve the functioning of groups (De Cremer, 2006; Hoogervorst, De Cremer, van Dijke, & Mayer, 2012; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). However, references to self-sacrifice have also appeared to a limited extent in the literature on meaningfulness. For example, Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) found references to self-sacrifice among Episcopalian priests, who experienced stressful identity demands simultaneously with profound meaningfulness; and Koerner (2014) found that accounts of workplace courage involved salient acts of self-sacrifice in which employees endured difficult challenges and took personal risks for the sake of coworkers and supervisors. Notably, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggested that “dirty” workers find meaning by interpreting their work in a way that is reminiscent of self-sacrifice (“somebody has to do it”), which allows them to find value in their occupation while remaining dissatisfied with certain aspects of it. Together, the acknowledgment of sacrifice as a relational function in both the meaning of work and social psychological literatures underscores its importance as a pivotal cognitive frame for making the costs incurred in a relationship sustainable.

We thus propose that self-sacrifice constitutes a crucial account of employees' generalized relationship with beneficiaries that enables employees to rationalize negative beneficiary contact. Negative expressions from beneficiaries often result when preferences for activities conflict. For example, an employee may need to ask specific, systematic questions in order to understand a beneficiary's predicament, while the beneficiary demands an immediate solution to their problem. Given that employees are highly motivated to regard their work favorably (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), interpreting negative beneficiary contact as self-sacrificial is one way that employees may justify their work in the face of

threatening social information. Justifying work experiences often depends on “viewing parts of work as unpleasant,” because such a recognition allows employees to view themselves as resilient people (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999: 414). This suggests that unpleasant beneficiary interactions are likely to be interpreted by employees as evidence that one is willing to set aside self-interests such as emotional comfort in order to promote the welfare of those they serve. Moreover, because society tends to view sacrifice as moral, elevated behavior, it is socially acceptable and thus credible (i.e., likely to be accepted by others as a sufficient explanation [Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978]). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Negative beneficiary contact is positively related to perceived self-sacrifice.

Perceived Social Worth and Employee Outcomes

Although promoting perceptions of social worth and self-sacrifice are important ends in and of themselves, these perceptions may also affect employee satisfaction and performance. The perceptions engendered by beneficiary contact reflect important aspects of an employee's work identity, or how people define themselves at work (Grant, 2007). These self-beliefs in turn shape an employee's attitudes and behavior. Previous research has found that perceived social worth is positively associated with job attitudes (Santos, Chambel, & Castanheira, 2016; Taylor, 2014). People are fundamentally motivated to have their identities valued and affirmed in interpersonal relationships such as those with beneficiaries (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Perceptions of social worth represent an explicit belief that one's work has been of value to others. This belief signals that an individual is successfully enacting their work identity, which is a satisfying realization (Burke, 1991). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. Perceived social worth is positively related to job satisfaction.

In addition, a valued work identity may influence one's work behavior, including both task performance and helping behaviors (Grant, 2007). When an employee perceives that they are valued by beneficiaries, they experience a higher level of certainty about whether beneficiaries will value and welcome future task performance (Grant & Gino, 2010). In addition, prior research has shown that people tend to behave in a manner that is consistent with their work identity (Swann, 1997), suggesting that

those whose work identities are valued by others will seek to continue to provide that value. Indeed, employees who perceive that they are of legitimate value to customers, clients, or patients should seek to engage in behaviors (i.e., fulfilling task-related responsibilities) that align with that perception (e.g., Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003). As a result, employees will be more willing to exert high effort and persistence toward their work tasks. Perceptions of the value of one's work may also catalyze employee helping behaviors, defined as voluntary actions that benefit one's coworkers (Grant, 2007). A salient recognition that one's work identity is valued may make employees less likely to constrain their behaviors to be in-role. Those for whom the value of work is especially salient are more likely to express a concern for the work itself, which transcends individual tasks and leads to intrinsic motives (deCharms, 1976; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Perceived social worth is positively related to (a) job performance and (b) helping behavior.

Perceived Self-Sacrifice and the Moderating Role of Coworker Emotional Support

Perceptions of self-sacrifice may also have implications for employee outcomes. However, in contrast to perceived social worth, the effects of self-sacrifice on satisfaction and performance are theoretically ambiguous. Rationalization makes negative contact explainable and socially acceptable; however, that explanation is constrained to "the facts of the situation" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978: 232). That is, although self-sacrifice is a relatively positive justification for negative contact, it remains rooted in the fact that a cost is being borne. Thus, perceptions of self-sacrifice are associated with both a sense of victimhood and a sense of contribution. On one hand, the recognition of a cost being incurred may make work less satisfying. The costly aspect of self-sacrifice could overwhelm a person, making it more difficult to persist in tasks and helping behaviors at a high level. On the other hand, the recognition of contribution to a cause may produce positive thoughts and emotions that make work satisfying and produce motivation to perform tasks well and help coworkers. Under what conditions, then, do perceptions of self-sacrifice lead to more satisfaction and performance rather than less?

We propose that emotional support from coworkers is a factor that will amplify the attention one gives to positive aspects of perceived self-sacrifice and

diminish the effects of the negative aspects. We have thus far argued, following the social information perspective, that employees form rationalizations that are socially acceptable. However, whether that rationalization leads to satisfaction and performance depends on an employee deeming it *personally* acceptable—that is, an account that sustains them in their job enactment over time (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). The literature on work relationships has suggested that emotional support from coworkers is one factor that is likely to facilitate this personal acceptance.

Coworker emotional support is defined by experiences in which other employees in one's organization listen to one's problems and respond in a sympathetic or encouraging way (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016). Through emotional support, coworkers can help transform negative experiences into satisfying and motivational experiences (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Indeed, research has demonstrated that when individuals facing adversity receive emotional support, it reduces negative cognitions and emotions and focuses individuals on positive cognitions and emotions (Feeney & Collins, 2015). For example, emotional support leads individuals to reduce their focus on the cost of difficult tasks (Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008), focuses individuals on approach or promotion rather than avoidance or prevention (Feeney, 2007; Shah & Higgins, 1997), and helps people maintain a positive sense of self in the midst of adverse circumstances (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

People often seek out coworkers to affirm the value of their work identity because coworkers share a large degree of common experience and knowledge about the job (Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra, 1999). Thus, coworkers are also an essential part of the relational architecture of a job. Emotional support from coworkers allows employees to experience validation of negative thoughts and feelings, which helps release tensions associated with the victim side of self-sacrifice (Colbert et al., 2016; McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013). In turn, this may allow the employee to give more focus to the contribution side of self-sacrifice, fostering a focus on the difference they are making while taking attention away from the inevitable costs that the contribution entails (Feeney & Collins, 2015). With regard to job satisfaction, a high level of emotional support is likely to help people emphasize the contribution associated with their work identity over its association with costs like mistreatment or discomfort. As a result, the effect of perceived self-sacrifice on job satisfaction may be more positive at high levels of support.

With regard to performance, emotional support is likely to lead employees to see self-sacrifice as motivating rather than discouraging because it focuses thoughts on the difference made rather than the effort applied (Gneezy, Imas, Brown, Nelson, & Norton, 2012). In contrast, at low levels of support, an employee's identity is more likely to be focused on the victim aspects of sacrifice, giving employees a sense of disillusionment that the costs outweigh the contribution. This effect is unlikely to be limited to the employee's individual task responsibilities, but may extend to extra-role behaviors as well because their motives become tied to the intrinsic value of the work itself—a value that is more readily realized in collective efforts with coworkers. Therefore, under conditions of high emotional support, perceived self-sacrifice may be positively associated with task performance and helping behavior. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5. Coworker emotional support moderates the relationship between perceived self-sacrifice and job satisfaction, such that the relationship is more positive at higher levels of support.

Hypothesis 6. Coworker emotional support moderates the relationship between perceived self-sacrifice and (a) job performance and (b) helping behavior, such that the relationship is more positive at higher levels of support.

STUDY 1: METHODS

To test the above hypotheses, we conducted a three-wave field survey with a sample of nurses and their supervisors at a large academic medical center in the Midwestern United States.

Nursing provides a good context in which to study beneficiary contact because positive and negative expressions from beneficiaries are relatively salient to nurses (Fagermoen, 1997; Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012). Nursing is also one of a group of service jobs (healthcare, education, social service, food and hospitality) that are among the highest occupational growth areas of the economy (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Nurses from various in-patient units and the emergency department were surveyed.

Procedure

A time-lagged survey design was used in order to establish general temporal precedence in the measures and to avoid common method biases such as recency effects or subject mood (Spector, 2006). We separated each employee survey by two weeks, which is likely to

have reduced those biases. The first survey included measures of positive and negative beneficiary contact; the second survey included measures of perceived social worth, perceived self-sacrifice, and coworker support; and the third survey included a measure of job satisfaction. Two weeks after the third and final employee survey, supervisors provided evaluations of employee in-role performance and helping behavior. Employees and supervisors were given gift cards as a token of appreciation for their participation. In total, 328 employees agreed to participate in the study, and 262 (80%) of these provided data that could be used to analyze our model using a full-information maximum likelihood approach. Employees were nested within 28 supervisors or units. Overall, 89% of respondents were female, the average age was 32.5 ($SD = 10.9$), and the average tenure in their current position was 6.4 years ($SD = 7.0$).

Measures

Unless indicated otherwise, all measures were rated on a scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree").²

Negative beneficiary contact. Negative beneficiary contact was measured with 18 items ($\alpha = .96$) from Wang, Liao, Zhan, and Shi (2011) capturing an array of customer-related social stressors and aggressive or unfair customer behaviors. Respondents were told that the items "describe things that patients and/or their family members may communicate in their interactions with you, either verbally (directly through words) or nonverbally (e.g., through facial expressions, body language, a message/card)." They were then asked, "To what extent do you agree with these statements? Patients and/or patients' families ____." Example items include "vent their bad mood out on me," "behave impatiently," "demand special treatment," "insist on demands that are irrelevant to my job," and "use condescending language toward me."

Perceived social worth. A respondent's perception of social worth was measured using three items ($\alpha = .84$) from Grant and Gino (2010). An example item is "I feel valued as a person by patients/patients' families."

Perceived self-sacrifice. Perceived self-sacrifice was measured using eight items validated in the leader self-sacrifice literature (Conger and Kanungo, 1994; De Cremer and van Knippenberg, 2004; Hoogervorst et al.,

² Full scales and data for all studies can be found at the following link: https://osf.io/ugc3s/?view_only=57e6c7e0553b4584be4322932074c078.

2012). Because these items referred to a leader–follower relationship, we adapted the language instead to use referents consistent with the generalized employee–beneficiary relationship. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which “I feel like...”: “I often incur high personal costs for the good of patients/patients’ families,” “I stand up for the interests of patients/patients’ families, even when it is at the expense of my own self-interest,” “I engage in activities involving considerable personal risk for the sake of patients/patients’ families,” “I engage in activities involving considerable self-sacrifice for the sake of patients/patients’ families,” “I make personal sacrifices in the interest of patients/patients’ families,” “I take on high personal risk for the sake of patients/patients’ families,” “I make personal sacrifices for the benefit of patients/patients’ families,” and “I forego my own self-interest for the good of patients/patients’ families.” The scale exhibited high reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Coworker emotional support. The level of coworker emotional support was measured using three items from Colbert et al. (2016). An example item is “My coworkers help me release tension” ($\alpha = .93$).

Job satisfaction. To measure job satisfaction, we used a 3-item measure from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979). An example item is “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” ($\alpha = .95$).

Job performance. Job performance was rated by nurse managers. Each manager rated the focal nurse on *task performance* using seven items from Williams and Anderson (1991; $\alpha = .93$) and *helping* using six items from Lee and Allen (2002; $\alpha = .93$). An exemplar task performance item is “Adequately completes assigned duties.” An exemplar helping item is “Assists others with their duties.”

Trait affect. It is likely that an individual’s affective dispositions confound the relationship between beneficiary contact and perceived social worth or perceived self-sacrifice. This idea is consistent with a large body of research that has found certain dispositions such as negative affectivity to be correlated with negative social interactions as well as job perceptions (e.g., Tepper, 2007). To account for this potential confounding effect and avoid a misspecification bias, we measured trait positive affect ($\alpha = .79$) and trait negative affect ($\alpha = .78$) in the first survey, using five items each from the short-form PANAS (Mackinnon, Jorm, Christensen, Korten, Jacomb, & Rodgers, 1999; 1 = “not at all,” 5 = “extremely”).

Positive beneficiary contact. In addition to negative contact, we measured positive beneficiary contact with two items from Grant and Gino (2010). In order to increase the reliability and domain coverage

of the scale, we included four additional items adapted from Grant and Gino (2010) and based on Grant’s definition and operationalization of beneficiary contact (Grant, 2012; Grant et al., 2007), including “show gratefulness for my actions,” “show recognition for the things I do for them,” “convey appreciation for the care I give them,” and “indicate that they value what I do for them” ($\alpha = .95$). The question stem was identical to that used for negative beneficiary contact.³

STUDY 1: RESULTS

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of the study variables are reported in Table 1. The performance measures in this study are not independent of one another, given that managers each rated about eight employees on average. Typically, nonindependence of data are addressed via multilevel modeling techniques that partition the variance between and within groups (raters). However, the estimated multilevel model was not identified due to having too few second-level units ($n = 28$) per the number of parameters to be estimated. Therefore, to account for the rater effects of the managers, we employed a “fixed effects” approach, which involves the inclusion of a dummy variable for each manager as a predictor of the performance variables (Huang, 2016). An advantage of this approach is that “group-level [i.e., rater] effects are completely accounted for using a fixed effects model, which is not done in MLM” (Huang, 2016: 182). This is appropriate for our purposes because our hypotheses are exclusively

³ To allow for alternative analyses examining the robustness of our model, we also measured *emotional exhaustion*, which is a likely alternative to perceived self-sacrifice in explaining the effects of negative beneficiary contact (e.g., Van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010), using four items from the abbreviated Maslach Burnout Inventory (McManus, Keeling, & Paice, 2004) in Survey 2. An example item is “I feel burned out from my work” ($\alpha = .89$). In addition, we obtained *initial outcome measures* so that we could statistically control for initial levels of job satisfaction and performance. Specifically, we measured job satisfaction in Survey 1, and we obtained the most recent supervisor-rated performance evaluations from the hospital. The latter measure was a single item rated from 1 (“unsatisfactory”) to 5 (“outstanding”); the evaluations had been performed one month prior to Survey 1. Although we were unable to obtain separate initial measures of task performance and helping, the annual performance evaluation does capture overall performance, which is likely related to both in-role and extra-role behaviors (Viswesvaran, Schmidt, & Ones, 2005).

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Job satisfaction	5.90	0.88	.95									
2. Task performance	6.39	0.76	.13*	.93								
3. Helping	5.71	1.07	.20*	.72*	.93							
4. Positive contact	5.17	0.94	.35*	-.09	-.13*	.95						
5. Negative contact	3.67	1.09	-.19*	.02	.07	-.40*	.96					
6. Trait PA	3.59	0.61	.43*	-.00	.05	.25*	-.21*	.79				
7. Trait NA	2.00	0.62	-.22*	-.13*	-.16*	-.12	.21*	-.19*	.78			
8. Social worth	5.43	0.84	.41*	-.05	-.07	.56*	-.38*	.29*	-.07	.84		
9. Self-sacrifice	4.10	1.29	-.14*	-.04	-.04	-.19*	.44*	-.03	.30*	-.09	.93	
10. Coworker supp.	5.61	1.11	.41*	.12	.15*	.12	-.02	.24*	-.16*	.22*	-.03	.93

Notes: *n* (employees) = 225–261; *n* (units/supervisors) = 28. Specific sample sizes for each correlation can be found at https://osf.io/ugc3s/?view_only=57e6c7e0553b4584be4322932074c078. Reliabilities reported in bolded italics along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$

related to the between-individual level and not the manager or unit level. Analyses indicated that for task performance and helping behavior, the amount of variance attributed to the rater was 27% and 24%, respectively.

We used structural equation modeling to test our hypotheses. First, we examined measurement adequacy. Due to the model identification issue described above, the supervisor-rated measures had to be analyzed in a separate model with fewer parameters in order to account for the nested structure of the data using a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis. Thus, we examined an 8-factor self-report model and a 2-factor supervisor-report model separately. Following Cortina, Chen, and Dunlap (2001), we modeled the components of the product term of the self-report model (i.e., perceived-self-sacrifice and coworker support) as single indicators. The other factors used three parcels each, with the exception of trait positive and negative affect, each of which were modeled with their five items as indicators. The self-report measurement model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 454.36$, $df = 226$, $p < .01$; CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06), and fit better than models that constrained the correlation between positive and negative contact to be one ($\Delta\chi^2 = 223.91$, $p < .01$) and that constrained the correlation between perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice to be one ($\Delta\chi^2 = 106.78$, $p < .01$).⁴

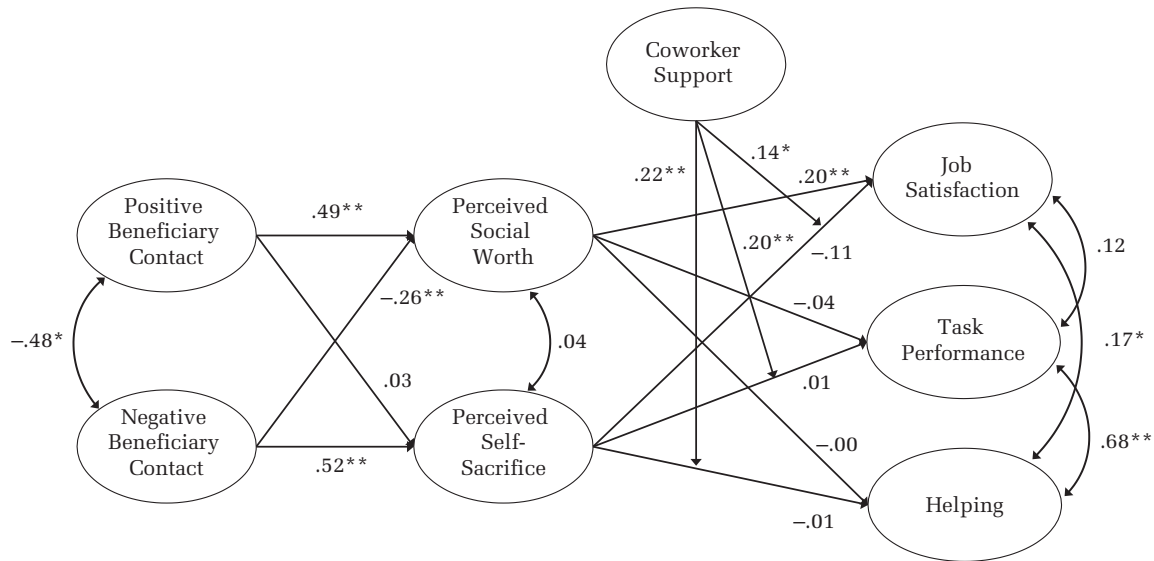
⁴ To further test the adequacy of our perceived self-sacrifice measure, we also examined a measurement model using all eight items for perceived self-sacrifice. The model exhibited adequate fit (CFI = .90, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06). Each of the sacrifice items had a significant loading, which ranged from .63 to .91 (standardized).

The supervisor measurement model also fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 21.64$, $df = 8$, $p < .01$; CFI = .98, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .05), and fit better than a one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.85$, $p < .01$).

We followed recommendations by Mathieu, Tanenbaum, and Salas (1992) in order to estimate moderation in a structural model (see Figure 1). Specifically, the mean-centered scale scores for perceived self-sacrifice and coworker emotional support were multiplied together to form the indicator of the interaction factor (Cortina et al., 2001; Rodell & Lynch, 2016). Beneficiary contact and trait affect variables were modeled as predictors of each endogenous variable. A covariance path between perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice was also estimated. An initial structural model was estimated that included no fixed effects, and fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 663.89$, $df = 386$, $p < .01$; CFI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06). Fixed effects were then added to the model to completely account for any rater effects ($\chi^2 = 1758.23$, $df = 1024$, $p < .01$; CFI = .88, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06). As would be expected, the CFI was somewhat lower in the fixed-effects model due to several of the fixed effects being nonsignificant predictors of performance ratings, suggesting that not all raters exhibited a positive or negative effect on ratings. We concluded that this model was sufficient to test hypotheses given that the initial model demonstrated good fit and fixed effects are not a substantive interest of the study.

Figure 1 reports the model results in standardized coefficients, which we use to provide a clearer interpretation of the relative effect sizes of the estimated paths. Hypothesis 1 stated that negative beneficiary contact would be negatively related to perceived social worth, whereas Hypothesis 2 stated that negative

FIGURE 1
Study 1 Standardized Structural Model Results



Notes: $n = 262$, Direct effects of positive and negative contact not shown for figure clarity; trait positive and negative affect modeled as covariates. Results were: positive contact on satisfaction (.10), task performance (-.15), and helping (-.16*); negative contact on satisfaction (.08), task performance (-.18), and helping (-.01); positive affect on social worth (.13*), self-sacrifice (.13), satisfaction (.34**), task performance (-.03), and helping (.02); negative affect on social worth (.10), self-sacrifice (.22**), satisfaction (-.05), task performance (-.05), and helping (-.16*).

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

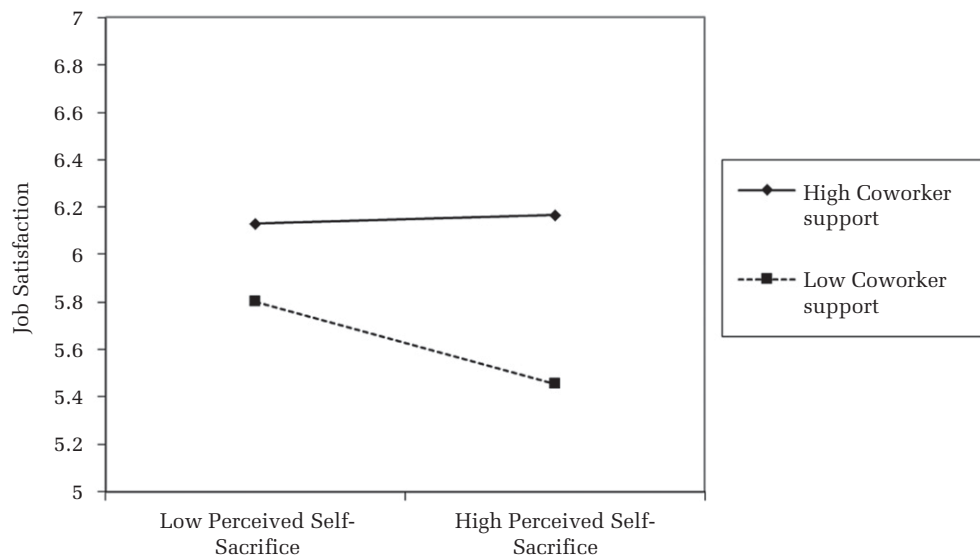
contact would be positively related to perceived self-sacrifice. The model supported both of these hypotheses, with negative beneficiary contact exhibiting a negative relationship with perceived social worth ($\beta = -.26$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$) and a positive relationship with perceived self-sacrifice ($\beta = .52$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$). Consistent with prior research, positive contact was found to positively relate to perceived social worth ($\beta = .49$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, perceptions of social worth had a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction ($\beta = .20$, $SE = .08$, $p = .02$). However, the model did not support Hypotheses 4a and 4b, as perceived social worth exhibited null effects with both task performance ($\beta = -.04$, $SE = .09$, $p = .60$) and helping behavior ($\beta = .00$, $SE = .08$, $p = .99$).

The final set of hypotheses predicted that the relationship of perceived self-sacrifice with job satisfaction and job performance would be contingent upon levels of coworker emotional support reported by the employee. Results supported both Hypothesis 5 and Hypotheses 6a and 6b. An interaction between perceived self-sacrifice and coworker emotional support significantly predicted job satisfaction ($\beta = .14$, $SE = .06$, $p = .02$) as well as task performance ($\beta = .20$, $SE =$

$.06$, $p < .01$) and helping behavior ($\beta = .22$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$), with the relationship being more positive at higher levels of support. The hypothesized moderation model fit significantly better than a model that constrained the paths from the latent interaction variable to the outcomes to zero ($\Delta\chi^2 = 17.5$, $df = 3$, $p < .01$). The hypothesized model yielded an R^2 value that was .024 higher for satisfaction ($R^2 = .423$), .035 higher for task performance ($R^2 = .366$), and .044 higher for helping behavior ($R^2 = .420$) as compared to a main effects-only model.

We examined the interaction effects further using two methods to explore the particular patterns exhibited. First, following the Aiken and West (1991) convention, we plotted the interactions and examined the simple slopes at high and low levels of coworker support. Second, we employed the Johnson–Neyman technique to precisely identify the levels of coworker support at which the effects of perceived self-sacrifice become significant. For job satisfaction (Figure 2), perceived self-sacrifice was a significant negative predictor at low levels (-1 SD) of coworker support ($b = -.13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$). At high levels ($+1$ SD) of coworker support, this relationship was attenuated ($b = .01$, $SE = .05$, $p = .80$).

FIGURE 2
Interactive Effect of Perceived Self-Sacrifice and Coworker Emotional Support on Job Satisfaction



Note: At +1 *SD* of coworker support, $b = .01$, $SE = .05$, $p > .10$. At -1 *SD* of support, $b = -.13$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$. “Low” support slope becomes significant at -0.37 *SD*.

Johnson–Neyman analyses revealed that the negative simple slope for low coworker support exhibited significance at 0.37 *SD* below the mean.

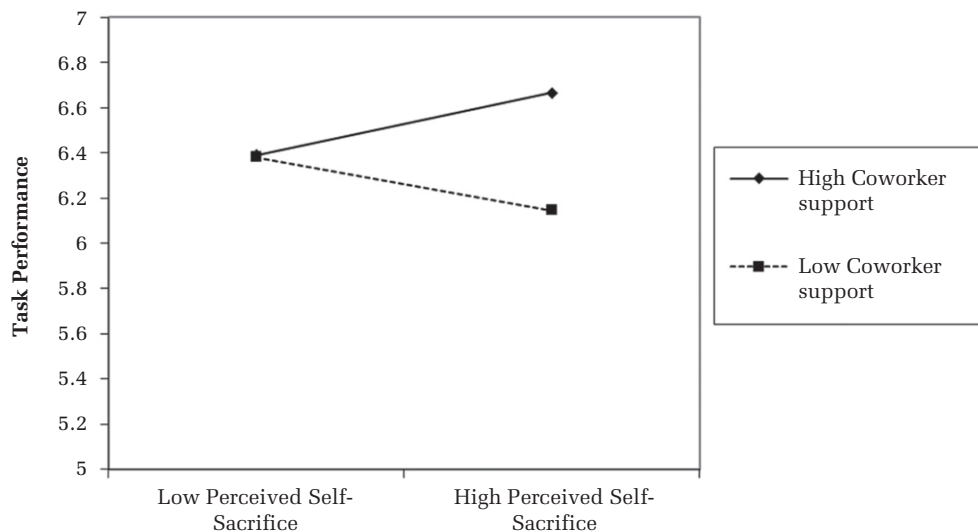
With respect to task performance (Figure 3a), perceived self-sacrifice was a marginally negative predictor at -1 *SD* of coworker support ($b = -.09$, $SE = .05$, $p = .07$), but was a significant positive predictor at +1 *SD* of coworker support ($b = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .04$). The negative simple slope exhibited significance at 1.11 *SD* below the mean. The positive simple slope exhibited significance at 0.90 *SD* above the mean. Thus, the interaction pattern for task performance followed the predicted pattern of a negative effect at low levels of support, but a positive effect at high levels of support. Similarly, for helping behavior (Figure 3b), perceived self-sacrifice was a marginally negative predictor at -1 *SD* of support ($b = -.12$, $SE = .07$, $p = .09$), while exhibiting a significant positive relationship at +1 *SD* of support ($b = .16$, $SE = .07$, $p = .03$). The negative simple slope exhibited significance at 1.22 *SD* below the mean, and the positive simple slope exhibited significance at 0.83 *SD* above the mean.

To understand our model and data more fully, we examined the indirect effects and conditional indirect effects of negative contact using bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals to determine significance. The indirect effect of negative contact on satisfaction via perceived social worth was significantly negative

($-.04$, 95% CI = $[-.10, -.01]$), whereas the indirect effect of positive contact on satisfaction via perceived social worth was significantly positive ($.10$, 95% CI = $[.02, .20]$). Next, we estimated the effects of negative contact on outcomes through perceived self-sacrifice, conditional on coworker emotional support (see Appendix A). Following Hayes (2015), we computed the index of moderated mediation (IMM). Analogous to an interaction coefficient in simple moderation, a significant IMM signifies that an indirect effect is systematically higher or lower for some values of the moderator than others. For job satisfaction, the indirect effect of negative contact was not significantly moderated ($.05$, 95% CI = $[-.01, .10]$). For task performance, the IMM was significant ($.06$, 95% CI = $[.01, .11]$), as was the IMM for helping behavior ($.09$, 95% CI = $[.02, .16]$).

To gain a clearer picture of the pattern of moderated mediation for performance outcomes, we examined the indirect effects at different values of the moderator, following Cheung and Lau (2017). At very low levels of support (-2 *SD*), the effect of negative beneficiary contact on task performance was negative but not significant ($-.13$, 95% CI = $[-.26, .01]$), whereas at very high levels (max.) the effect was positive but not significant ($.08$, 95% CI = $[-.00, .19]$). For helping, at very low levels of support, the effect of negative beneficiary contact was significantly negative ($-.20$, 95% CI = $[-.40, -.02]$),

FIGURE 3A
Interactive Effect of Perceived Self-Sacrifice and Coworker Emotional Support on Task Performance



Note: At +1 SD of coworker support, $b = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$. At -1 SD of support, $b = -.09$, $SE = .05$, $p < .10$. “High” support slope becomes significant at +0.90 SD. “Low” support slope becomes significant at -1.11 SD.

whereas at high levels the effect was positive but not significant (.12, 95% CI = [-.01, .26]).⁵

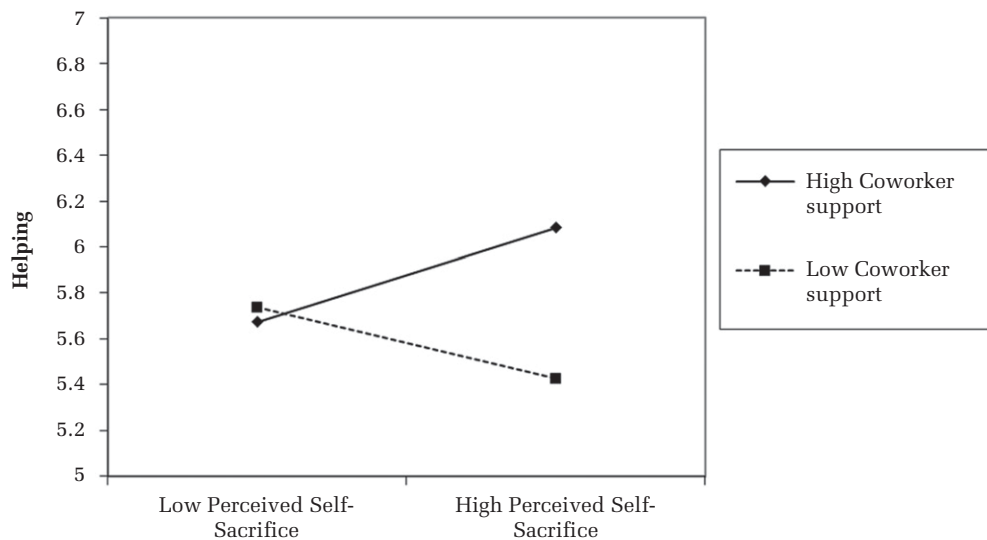
STUDY 1: DISCUSSION

The findings for Study 1 provide initial evidence that negative beneficiary contact is associated with

⁵ To examine whether perceived self-sacrifice adds value above and beyond an alternative explanatory mechanism, we analyzed a model that included emotional exhaustion in addition to perceived self-sacrifice and perceived social worth. Results were similar. Specifically, negative contact significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .28$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$), and emotional exhaustion significantly predicted job satisfaction ($\beta = -.29$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$), but not task performance ($\beta = .07$, $SE = .08$, $p > .10$) or helping ($\beta = -.02$, $SE = .08$, $p > .10$). The effects of the interaction between self-sacrifice and coworker emotional support on satisfaction and performance remained significant. The correlation between emotional exhaustion and perceived self-sacrifice was .22. After adding emotional exhaustion to the model, we also examined a model that included Time 1 job satisfaction and initial job performance as predictors of Time 3 job satisfaction and task performance and helping, respectively. Results demonstrated that the interaction between perceived self-sacrifice and coworker emotional support was still significantly related to task performance ($\beta = .19$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$) and helping ($\beta = .21$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$). However, the effect of this interaction on job satisfaction was marginal ($\beta = .08$, $SE = .05$, $p = .08$).

both lower perceived social worth and higher perceived self-sacrifice for employees. Further, Study 1 results suggest that coworker emotional support appears to enhance the motivational potential inherent in perceived self-sacrifice, and attenuates the negative relationships between perceived self-sacrifice and job satisfaction. However, Study 1 has important methodological and theoretical limitations. First, although the pattern of results held when accounting for initial levels of job satisfaction and job performance and when controlling for the potential confound of trait affect, our ability to make causal inferences is limited by the study design. Second, the study was conducted within a single type of job, which raises questions about whether our findings apply to other work contexts where the concept of sacrifice and social worth may not be as salient. Relatedly, nursing is a gendered occupation, so our study limits our ability to draw conclusions about how men are affected by negative contact. Finally, Study 1 does not address the boundary conditions surrounding the first stage of our proposed model, in particular the conditions under which self-sacrifice is a more or a less likely outcome of negative beneficiary contact. To address these limitations, after conducting Study 1 we developed two additional hypotheses. We then conducted two additional studies focused on the first stage of our model that address causality (Study 2) and generalizability to other occupations (Study 3), as well as two

FIGURE 3B
Interactive Effect of Perceived Self-Sacrifice and Coworker Emotional Support on Helping Behavior



Notes: At +1 SD of coworker support, $b = .16$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$. At -1 SD of support, $b = -.12$, $SE = .07$, $p < .10$. “High” support slope becomes significant at +0.83 SD. “Low” support slope becomes significant at -1.22 SD.

important boundary conditions for rationalizing negative beneficiary contact: the attributed reason for negative contact and the affective commitment an employee exhibits toward beneficiaries of the job.

ATTRIBUTIONS AND AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

The rationalization tenet of social information processing suggests that employees may make positive meaning from negative beneficiary contact by viewing their work as a self-sacrifice. However, social information processing theory also suggests that rationalizations of negative contact need to be consistent with “the facts of the situation” (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). According to the literature on attributions (Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, & Crook, 2014; Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011), the effect that negative beneficiary contact has on employees may be dependent on the perceived reason for the contact. If employees make attributions for negative contact that are inconsistent with a self-sacrificial interpretation, the effect on self-sacrifice will be attenuated. Thus far, our treatment of negative beneficiary contact has assumed that such contact emanates from the beneficiary and the nature of the job but not the employee. Through the lens of attribution theory, this constitutes an external attribution. However, in some instances, employees may believe that negative beneficiary contact is a result of their own actions. For example, a customer

service agent who is habitually sarcastic or impatient with customers may recognize that their approach incites a pattern of negative beneficiary contact in their job—an internal attribution.

Because attributions are formed by experiences that are particularly salient to the individual (Wong & Weiner, 1981), one’s attribution for negative beneficiary contact is likely to be meaningful only under conditions of high negative contact. We thus propose that the degree to which high levels of negative contact predict perceptions of self-sacrifice depends on the attribution for contact made by the employee. Self-sacrifice is characterized by situations where an individual foregoes self-interest for the sake of another. An external attribution that negative contact is simply an element of the work itself is consistent with that sacrificial rationalization, as employees can rationalize that they are subjecting themselves to the chronic negative interactions inherent to the job in order to serve others. In contrast, an internal attribution that the contact is the result of one’s own actions precludes a self-sacrificial rationalization because it suggests that the costs being incurred could be avoided by the employee. In effect, this divorces the costs incurred from the value being provided, which is inconsistent with the concept of sacrifice. It is important to note that self-sacrifice does inherently involve some level of internal attribution, as it is defined by voluntary action to incur costs to serve others. However, this internal attribution is relatively distal (i.e., one chose

the nursing profession) and is consistent with more proximal attributions that could be either internal (i.e., costs due to one's own performance) or external (i.e., costs due to the nature of the work). It is these more proximal attributions that are the focus of our theorizing and the more likely boundary condition for perceiving self-sacrifice. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 7. An attribution that a high level of negative contact is caused by the nature of the work will be associated with higher levels of perceived self-sacrifice than will a performance attribution.

In addition to the attributions made for negative contact, the commitment one experiences toward beneficiaries is likely to explain when self-sacrifice is developed as a rationalization. Affective commitment to beneficiaries is a psychological state that reflects a high level of concern for and dedication to the welfare of those affected by one's work (Grant, 2007), and is therefore an important reflection of one's generalized relationships with beneficiaries. High levels of commitment indicate that one depends on and needs the relationship in question; thus, commitment is long-term-oriented, looking beyond exclusive self-interest (Van Lange et al., 1997). Moreover, commitment indicates that one is psychologically attached to the relational other, and more likely to view the relationship as a whole rather than as two separate pieces. This makes it more likely that the costs associated with conflict in the relationship are experienced as palatable, or worth it (Van Lange et al., 1997).

We propose that employees are likely to struggle to rationalize negative beneficiary contact as self-sacrificial if they lack a strong emotional attachment to beneficiaries. This is because the rationalization would not be credible, as giving up one's own interests for the good of another is an indication of commitment to relevant others. At low levels of affective commitment to beneficiaries, employees are less likely to find a sacrificial interpretation of negative beneficiary contact to be rational and consistent with their attitudes toward the people they serve. As a result, employees who lack a strong commitment to beneficiaries are not likely to interpret negative beneficiary contact as a sacrifice. In contrast, a sacrificial rationalization is more likely to be a rational explanation for employees with high affective commitment to beneficiaries. Their high level of concern for the welfare of beneficiaries is consistent with giving up their own self-interest for the good of the beneficiaries. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 8. Affective commitment to beneficiaries will moderate the relationship between negative beneficiary contact and perceived self-sacrifice, such that

the relationship is more positive at high levels of affective commitment.

STUDY 2: METHODS

To address the causal inference limitation of Study 1, and to test Hypothesis 7, we conducted a second study using an experimental vignette methodology.⁶ Experimental vignette studies are particularly useful for strengthening internal validity. They complement the greater ecological validity of field surveys, and they provide a way to study topics like negative beneficiary contact that are sensitive or ethically questionable to manipulate in reality (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). To create a ready comparison with Study 1, we sampled from a group of employed registered nurses. The nurses were recruited from two sources: (a) a healthcare system near a large metropolitan area and (b) alumni from a nursing college. In total, 336 nurses participated—285 from the alumni pool and 51 from the healthcare system. Mean age was 44 years ($SD = 15$), mean professional tenure was 20 years ($SD = 14$), 95% were women, and 91% were White.

We followed recommendations by Aguinis and Bradley (2014) when designing the vignettes, seeking to create content that was realistic, familiar, and relevant to the participants. As with Study 1, the focus of the vignettes was on chronic job patterns rather than a particular encounter. Participants were given a scenario that asked them to imagine that they had just completed two years at a new job that was virtually identical to their current nursing job in terms of expectations and responsibilities. They were then randomly assigned to different vignettes that described their job experiences over the preceding two years.

The vignettes were manipulated in a way that would allow for a comparison between high and low negative contact and for a comparison between different attributions for high negative contact. Specifically, we designed a high negative contact vignette that was explicit about experiencing negative interactions,

⁶ Studies 2 and 3 were preregistered (https://osf.io/ugc3s/?view_only=57e6c7e0553b4584be4322932074c078). We note that one of the original purposes of Study 3 was to examine attributions as moderating factors. However, during the data collection process we determined that survey attribution measures would impose a certain level of negative contact onto the respondent, which would lead to uncertainty about the meaning of these measures for those who reported very low negative contact. As a result, this analysis was abandoned.

drawing language directly from scale items used in Study 1 (e.g., “complain about or get angry with you”). For the low negative contact condition, negative contact was not explicitly described because any mention of negative contact in the vignette would make negative contact inappropriately salient. In addition, we did not employ a factorial design that attempted to cross the low negative contact condition with the different attributions because including information about attributions of contact would be inconsistent with a low negative contact condition (i.e., attributions are not likely to be made for job experiences that are not salient [Wong & Weiner, 1981]). Instead, three vignettes of approximately the same length were developed: negative contact attributed to the work itself, negative contact attributed to one’s own job performance, and a “low” negative contact condition that provided basic, neutral information from O*NET (onetonline.org) describing generic tasks and skills associated with a typical nursing position (see Appendix B for vignettes).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three vignettes. They were asked to click a button confirming that they had carefully read and imagined the scenario provided. After reading the vignette, they answered manipulation checks for negative contact and attribution (if applicable). Negative contact was measured with five items taken from the same scale used in Study 1. The nature of work attribution was checked with two items (“That was just the nature of the job,” “The job naturally involved these kinds of experiences”) as was the case for the performance attribution (“I didn’t always do my job perfectly,” “I didn’t always fulfill my job responsibilities as well as I could have”). Following these manipulation checks, respondents were asked to indicate how they would feel about the job if it were their actual work situation. They then responded to the same scales of perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice used in Study 1, adapted for context (e.g., “I would feel that I was incurring high personal costs for the good of patients/patients’ families”). These measures used a 7-point scale. Finally, we included a 3-item realism check from Klotz and Bolino (2016) (“The situation described was realistic”) using a 5-point scale.

STUDY 2: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation checks via one-way ANOVA indicated that each of the manipulations functioned as intended. Those in the high negative contact conditions reported a higher mean for negative contact (mean = 5.16, $SD = 1.27$) than did those in the no

negative contact condition (mean = 1.81, $SD = 1.01$, $F[1, 385] = 599.40$, $p < .01$); those in the nature of work attribution condition reported higher levels of that attribution (mean = 5.45, $SD = 1.46$) than did those in the performance attribution condition (mean = 2.41, $SD = 1.26$, $F[1, 224] = 279.59$, $p < .01$); and those in the performance attribution condition reported higher levels of that attribution (mean = 5.51, $SD = 1.26$) than did those in the nature of work condition (mean = 2.39, $SD = 1.32$, $F[1, 224] = 328.69$, $p < .01$). In addition, we did not find significant variance in realism scores across the conditions ($F[2, 333] = 2.47$, $p = .09$; mean across conditions = 4.13, $SD = .79$).

Because a factorial design was inappropriate given the content of the vignettes, we tested hypotheses using two separate multivariate ANOVAs with perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice as dependent variables (see Table 2). First, we analyzed a model comparing the high negative contact group with the no negative contact group. The overall test was significant ($F[2, 333] = 271.62$, $p < .01$). Between-subjects effects indicated that those in the high negative contact condition reported lower levels of perceived social worth (mean = 2.63, $SD = 1.45$) than did those in the no negative contact condition (mean = 5.77, $SD = 0.93$, $F[1, 334] = 430.01$, $p < .01$), and they also reported higher levels of perceived self-sacrifice (mean = 4.31, $SD = 1.33$) than did those in the no negative contact condition (mean = 2.95, $SD = 1.17$, $F[1, 334] = 84.77$, $p < .01$). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were again supported. Next, we analyzed a model comparing the two attribution conditions, again with social worth and self-sacrifice as dependent variables. The overall test was significant ($F[2, 222] = 50.90$, $p < .01$). Between-subjects effects indicated that those in the nature of work attribution condition reported higher levels of perceived self-sacrifice (mean = 4.91, $SD = 1.01$) than did those in the performance attribution condition (mean = 3.71, $SD = 1.34$, $F[1, 223] = 58.13$, $p < .01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 7. Notably, model results indicated that those in the nature of work condition also reported higher levels of perceived social worth (mean = 3.18, $SD = 1.49$) than did those in the performance condition (mean = 2.06, $SD = 1.17$, $F[1, 223] = 38.85$, $p < .01$).

Together, these results provide stronger grounds for making causal inferences regarding the relationship of negative beneficiary contact with perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice. Moreover, they extend the findings of Study 1 by showing that the perceived reason for high levels of negative contact shapes the likelihood that it influences perceived self-

TABLE 2
Study 2 Results from Experimental Vignette Method

Comparison	Level	Perceived Social Worth	Perceived Self-Sacrifice
Negative beneficiary contact	High (<i>n</i> = 222)	2.63 (1.45)	4.31 (1.33)
	Low (<i>n</i> = 114)	5.77 (0.93)	2.95 (1.17)
Attribution for negative contact	Nature (<i>n</i> = 111)	3.18 (1.49)	4.91 (1.01)
	Performance (<i>n</i> = 111)	2.06 (1.17)	3.71 (1.34)

Notes: All four comparisons show significant difference ($p < .001$). Standard deviations reported in parentheses. “High” condition consists of both attribution groups aggregated together. “Nature” = negative beneficiary contact attributed to the nature of the work itself. “Performance” = negative beneficiary contact attributed to one’s own actions. All variables measured on a 7-point scale.

sacrifice. Relatedly, Study 2 rules out an alternative explanation for the results in Study 1: that employees may interpret negative contact as sacrificial as an excuse for poor performance. However, like Study 1, this study is limited by a focus on one type of job, and the vast majority of participants were women. Although this provides for a direct comparison with Study 1, it leaves open the question of whether the effects of negative beneficiary contact on perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice generalize to other occupational contexts or to men. This is an important consideration, because nursing is likely to exhibit range restriction and low variance on affective commitment to beneficiaries due to professional norms for nurses to be compassionate and caring. As a result, the relatively specific samples of Studies 1 and 2 prevent a rigorous test of the moderating role of affective commitment to beneficiaries (Hypothesis 8). In addition, women may be more frequent targets of negative contact than men, and women may react more strongly to negative contact than men due to greater emotional dissonance shaped by gender norms (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Scott & Barnes, 2011). A sample that is more diverse in terms of occupation and gender can provide stronger evidence that the effects of negative beneficiary contact are not specific to women or nursing.

STUDY 3: METHODS

To address the limitations of the first two studies mentioned above, we conducted a third study consisting of a two-wave survey of participants on the Prolific platform (www.prolific.co). Subjects were recruited from the United States and considered eligible for the study if they worked full-time in a “customer-facing” position. This latter criterion was broad, including a wide variety of positions with variance in the frequency, breadth, and depth of beneficiary contact (e.g., customer service representatives,

salespeople, clerks, analysts, healthcare professionals, inspectors, educators, accountants).⁷ Quality responses were ensured by including a reCAPTCHA question for bots, an attention check, and a free-response question asking the respondent to describe their job. We recruited 350 participants for the first survey, of which 324 (93%) completed the second survey, and all 350 were used in our analysis employing full information maximum likelihood procedures. Of the 350 respondents, the mean age was 34.5 ($SD = 9.7$), mean job tenure was 7.3 years ($SD = 7.0$), 47% were women, and 78% were White.

Survey 1 included beneficiary contact measures, affective commitment to beneficiaries, and trait affect. The beneficiary contact and affect measures were identical to those used in Study 1. For affective commitment to beneficiaries, we used a 3-item scale from Grant et al. (2007) (e.g., “I care deeply about customers”; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Survey 2 was administered one week after Survey 1, and included measures of perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice (identical scales from Study 1). Respondents were explicitly instructed that the term “customer” referred to “people who benefit from or are directly affected by your work. This could include customers, clients, patients, students, etc.”

STUDY 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics for Study 3 are reported in Table 3. We tested our measurement model in a CFA, using the same parceling approach as with Study 1. The data fit the model well ($\chi^2 = 510.62$, $df = 190$, $p < .01$; CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05). We

⁷ Grant’s (2008b) measures of beneficiary contact showed mean frequency = 4.36 ($SD = 0.77$), mean breadth = 4.28 ($SD = 0.84$), mean depth = 3.72 ($SD = 1.02$). Mean overall beneficiary contact = 4.40 ($SD = 0.69$). Including these variables as controls in the model did not change the results.

TABLE 3
Study 3 Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social worth	5.16	1.16	.86						
2. Self-sacrifice	3.89	1.48	.21*	.94					
3. Positive contact	5.21	1.23	.56*	.12*	.96				
4. Negative contact	4.20	1.37	-.35*	.14*	-.29*	.96			
5. Aff. commitment to beneficiaries	4.31	0.86	.58*	.24*	.48*	-.24*	.94		
6. Trait PA	3.12	0.92	.41*	.27*	.39*	-.11*	.41*	.94	
7. Trait NA	1.82	0.86	-.15*	.10	-.14*	.20*	-.09	-.08	.94

Note: $n = 324\text{--}350$. PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect.

* $p < .05$

then tested a structural model (Figure 4), which also exhibited adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 543.19$, $df = 205$, $p < .01$; CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05). Negative beneficiary contact exhibited a significant negative effect on perceived social worth ($\beta = -.22$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$) and a significant positive effect on perceived self-sacrifice ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$), supportive of Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. The interaction between negative contact and affective commitment to beneficiaries exhibited a significant positive effect on self-sacrifice ($\beta = .16$, $SE = .07$, $p = .03$), supporting Hypothesis 8. We plotted the interaction (Figure 5), which showed the hypothesized pattern of relationships; that is, at low levels (-1 SD) of commitment, negative contact had a null relationship with self-sacrifice ($b = .02$, $SE = .09$, $p = .82$); and at high levels of commitment (maximum value), the relationship was significantly positive ($b = .32$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$).

The results from Study 3 demonstrate that the effects of negative beneficiary contact on perceived social worth and perceived self-sacrifice generalize to a variety of occupations. Thus, Study 3 rules out an alternative explanation for the results in Study 1: that the effects of negative contact on social worth and self-sacrifice are specific to nursing. In addition, results suggest that only employees who experience a strong affective bond with beneficiaries are likely to interpret negative contact as self-sacrificial, suggesting that self-sacrifice as a rationalization is viable only when an employee truly cares about the people that their job is meant to benefit.

Importantly, the main effects of negative contact were shown to apply to a less gendered work context, suggesting that rationalizing negative contact as self-sacrifice is not a gender-specific process. In a *post hoc* regression analysis, there was no significant interaction between sex and negative beneficiary contact in predicting self-sacrifice. However, further

analyses showed that women in this sample reported significantly lower self-sacrifice ($F[1,322] = 6.68$, $p = .01$) and lower social worth ($F[1,322] = 6.31$, $p = .01$) compared to men. We can only speculate as to why this may be the case. Men were also significantly higher in trait positive affect ($F[1, 322] = 4.57$, $p = .03$, mean = 3.20 [$SD = 0.90$] for men and mean = 2.99 [$SD = 0.92$] for women), which was related to both social worth and self-sacrifice; yet, sex still significantly predicted both outcomes even when accounting for trait affect in a regression.

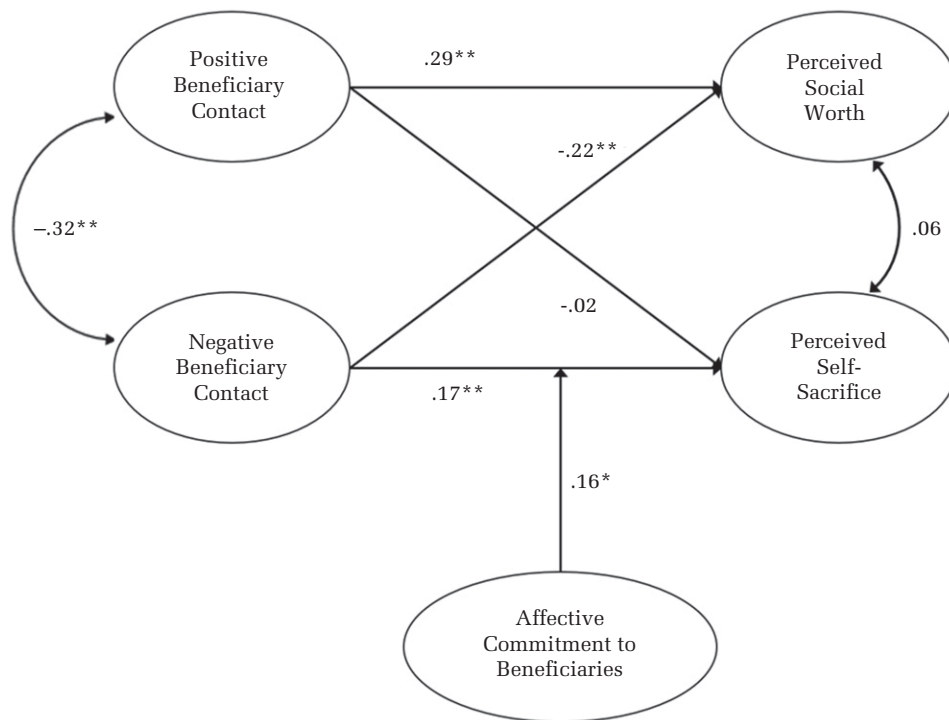
Together, findings from Study 3 help complement the methodological and theoretical limitations of the first two studies, providing greater insight into the consequences of negative contact for employees and the boundary conditions of those consequences.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We conducted three studies to examine the hypothesized dual impact of negative beneficiary contact on employees, not only helping to illuminate how employee perceptions about the value of their work are affected by negative contact, but also helping to illuminate a relatively constructive response to it. In the first study, a three-wave, multisource field survey of registered nurses showed that negative contact was associated with perceptions of social worth (negatively) and self-sacrifice (positively), with the latter having a beneficial effect on job performance contingent on emotional support from coworkers; in addition, the negative effect of self-sacrifice on job satisfaction was attenuated at high levels of emotional support. Perceived social worth predicted job satisfaction but did not predict job performance or helping behavior. In the second study of nurses, an experimental vignette methodology enabled us to draw causal inferences about the effects of high negative contact on social worth and

FIGURE 4

Interactive Effect of Negative Contact and Affective Commitment to Beneficiaries on Perceived Self-Sacrifice



Notes: $n = 350$. Standardized coefficients reported. Main effect of affective commitment and interaction effect on social worth not shown for sake of figure clarity. Trait positive and negative affect modeled as covariates. Results were: affective commitment on social worth ($.29^{**}$) and self-sacrifice ($.10$); interaction on social worth ($.02$); positive affect on social worth ($.17^{**}$) and self-sacrifice ($.10$); negative affect on social worth ($-.01$) and self-sacrifice ($.10$).

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

self-sacrifice and show that these effects were contingent upon negative contact being attributed to the work itself rather than provocation by one's own actions. Finally, in the third study, a two-wave field survey replicated the effects of negative contact on social worth and self-sacrifice in an occupationally diverse sample, and the effect of negative contact on self-sacrifice was contingent on the employee's affective commitment to beneficiaries.

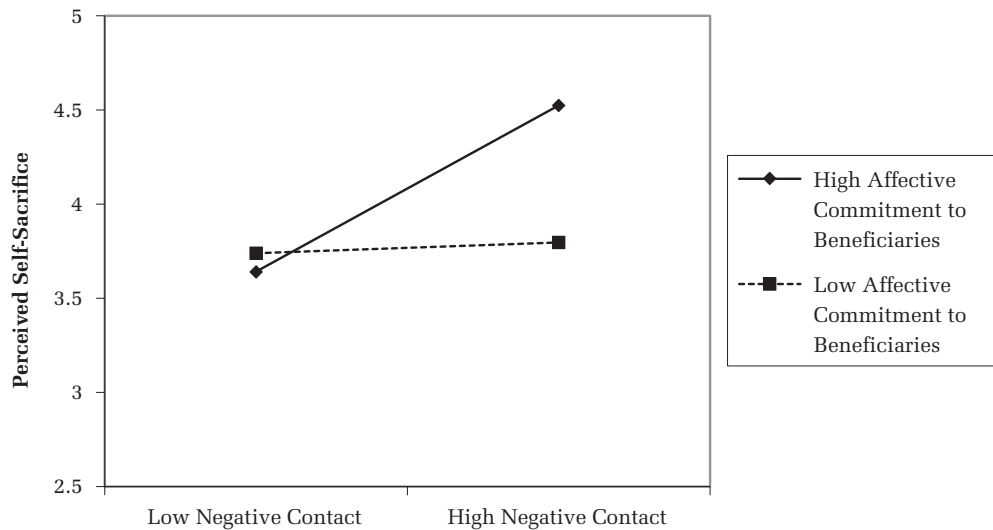
Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes important theoretical contributions to the study of job design, the social value of work, and self-sacrifice. First, our research highlights an important duality in relational job design. Maintaining a sense of the social value of one's work appears to depend on interacting with beneficiaries; yet, our findings suggest that such interactions also make one vulnerable to information that can threaten

that sense of value. Borrowing from Lepisto and Pratt (2017), we might view this duality in terms of whether a job is enriched enough to allow people to achieve "realization," or the fulfillment of important psychological needs. In the case of relational job design, the need is having close enough contact with beneficiaries to be able to know the value of one's work (Grant, 2007). Yet, we find that this contact can also lead to negative interactions that challenge employees' perceptions of the social value of their work. Thus, even when jobs are somewhat realized with respect to contact with beneficiaries, negative contact may still need to be justified through interpretations of self-sacrifice. Our research thus makes an important contribution not only to the job design literature—which has almost exclusively focused on realization rather than justification—but also speaks to an understudied yet significant aspect of meaningful work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

FIGURE 5

Interactive Effect of Negative Contact and Affective Commitment to Beneficiaries on Perceived Self-Sacrifice



Notes: At maximum value of commitment, $b = .32$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. At -1 SD of commitment, $b = .02$, $SE = .09$, $p > .10$.

In addition, this study is the first to give direct and systematic focus to how negative experiences with beneficiaries shape the social value that employees perceive in their work. It is not always “sunny” in jobs with beneficiary contact, and our findings suggest that the “cloudy” experiences affect how employees perceive the value of their work, which in turn influences their satisfaction and performance. Although we found that negative contact weakened perceptions of social worth, the affirming effect of positive contact was larger in magnitude in both of our field studies, suggesting that even when negative contact is prevalent, positive contact may be given more perceptual weight.

However, negative contact was found to influence employees beyond the expected outcome of lower perceived social worth. It also predicted perceptions of self-sacrifice, suggesting that employees strive to justify this threatening aspect of their job in relatively meaningful ways. Not only does this elucidate a theoretical gap in the job design literature, but it also provides a novel perspective on the phenomenon of negative beneficiary contact more broadly, which has focused on dysfunctional consequences such as injustice and psychological strain rather than the meaning of work (e.g., Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Wang et al., 2011). Our research suggests that, beyond suffering from stress or being tempted to sabotage customers, employees can achieve a relatively constructive

self-sacrificial view of negative contact that places that contact in a larger context, highlighting the social significance of the actions. Similar to other studies’ focus on buffering negative contact, we find that self-sacrifice can limit dissatisfaction in some circumstances. However, we also find that, rather than solely limiting “bad” outcomes like strain and sabotage, once negative contact is interpreted as self-sacrifice, those interpretations can positively affect performance.

Our research also identifies factors that make self-sacrifice a more likely rationalization. Specifically, our research suggests that some of the necessary “facts” that need to be present in one’s job are an external attribution that the contact is caused by the nature of one’s work and a strong emotional bond with beneficiaries. With regard to the latter, it seems clear that without such a bond, self-sacrifice is not a credible account for employees to develop. This is consistent with the social psychological literature on sacrifice, which strongly implies that a close (i.e., committed) romantic relationship is perhaps the most relevant context in which to study the phenomenon (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Righetti, Finkenauer, & Finkel, 2013; Van Lange et al., 1997). However, our research extends this implication to the workplace—where commitment is more generalized and less taken for granted—and provides systematic evidence that this generalized commitment is necessary

in order to view negative contact in a relatively positive light. Indeed, in the absence of commitment, employees may be more likely to characterize negative contact as exploitative rather than sacrificial (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012; Livne-Ofer, Coyle-Shapiro, & Pearce, 2019).

With regard to attribution, it appears that attributing negative contact to the nature of one's work is likely the norm, given that negative contact exhibited a positive effect on self-sacrifice both for nurses and for an occupationally diverse group of employees. This may be expected due to self-serving biases, and it suggests that most employees are unlikely to attribute negative contact to their own behavior. Thus, most attributions for negative contact may be consistent with a self-sacrificial interpretation. Importantly, these two boundary conditions described above are particularly relevant for understanding negative beneficiary contact, because they explain when rationalization is a likely coping mechanism rather than other reactions, such as voluntary turnover or the deviant behavior referenced above in the customer mistreatment literature.

Although the concept of sacrifice has been explicitly examined in the leadership literature (Choi & Maitland, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1994; De Cremer, Mayer, Van Dijke, Schouten, & Bardes, 2009; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005), our treatment of sacrifice is novel in at least two ways. First, rather than examine self-sacrifice as a collective phenomenon, we draw from the social psychology literature on relationships (Van Lange et al., 1997) to examine sacrifice from an interpersonal perspective. Second, rather than examine self-sacrifice as an objective behavior, we examine it as a cognitive frame, the result of justification (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) that interprets experiences in a relatively positive way. A related form of this latter idea has surfaced before in the callings literature, where Bunderson and Thompson (2009) illustrated how a sense of calling engenders a willingness to sacrifice nonwork time to care for animals. These sacrifices were unique in that the primary beneficiaries were not people, and thus there was no negative social information being conveyed from the beneficiaries themselves. However, callings tend to take on a narrative form that provides particularly rich justifications for one's work choices (Bloom, Colbert, & Nielsen, 2020). Our own focus on nursing in Studies 1 and 2, which is a calling-prototypic occupation, suggests that self-sacrifice may be an institutionalized narrative justification for negative beneficiary contact (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Indeed, this is consistent with our

argument that self-sacrifice is a socially acceptable justification and thus a credible one (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). However, the fact that we replicated the effect on self-sacrifice in an occupationally diverse sample (Study 3) suggests that this justification is not limited to a few occupations but may be a universal account that people can employ when they are committed to beneficiaries and believe that negative contact is natural to the work (cf. Helin & Lindström, 2003).

Although our treatment of self-sacrifice is novel in several ways, as discussed above, our research helps integrate studies on beneficiary contact with the well-established broader literature on how people reappraise challenging situations to see them as more valuable. Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) examination of dirty work, for example, directly examined the actions that employees can take to combat the identity threat of occupational stigmas, helping employees see positive value where society does not. More generally, Frankl's (1985) seminal explanation of the search for positive meaning in enormously difficult situations indicates the longstanding relevance of this literature not only for the workplace but for life generally.

A final, key theoretical implication of our research is that in order for self-sacrifice rationalizations to be effective (i.e., to be associated with increased performance), employees need to have strong support from coworkers. The significance of coworker emotional support in our study suggests that coworkers can help shape the effect of self-sacrifice by enabling employees to dedicate attentional resources to the contribution-related aspects of their work experiences. This reinforces the idea that sharing negative experiences with others can help dissipate the costs of being mistreated (Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017). However, the fact that self-sacrifice was positively associated with performance under conditions of high support departs from the coping literature because it did not merely buffer the costs of self-sacrifice (reducing the negative effect) but actually changed the direction of the relationship to be positive.

We note that both affective commitment to beneficiaries and coworker emotional support are affective mechanisms. This is intriguing, given that research on the meaning of work has largely focused on the impact of cognitions while there has been "a dearth of scholarship on the role of *affect*, either as a source or a mechanism of meaning or meaningfulness" (Rosso et al., 2010: 99). Our research suggests that affective mechanisms play a key role in how employees interpret negative contact in a meaningful fashion.

Practical Implications

A primary practical implication of our research is that managers should help frontline employees develop justifiable accounts of their work experiences (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), such as a self-sacrifice account. In a sense, we might refer to our findings as highlighting two different types of what Grant et al. (2007) referred to as “motivation maintenance.” On one hand, jobs should be designed so that they fulfill important employee needs; on the other hand, even enriched jobs require employees to continually justify their experiences so that they emphasize the positive aspects but minimize the negative aspects. Our research thus helps distinguish between the types of relationally based interventions that are likely to be effective in different job contexts. Inspiring visits from beneficiaries can effectively motivate employees (Grant et al., 2007). However, such interventions may be less effective in jobs where contact is already prevalent because it may provide less novel information. Instead, research has indicated that words from leaders are influential in attaching meaning to work (Carton, 2018), especially when paired with experiences with beneficiaries (Grant, 2012).

Organizations should be careful not to engage in malicious manipulation or exploitation, which is likely to end with resentful employees who question the moral foundations of their managers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Rather, leaders need to be perceived as genuine when sharing stories or highlighting positive social information in order to influence employees. For example, when managers attempt to help employees reframe work in terms of self-sacrifice, they can illustrate that sacrifice by example (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005), which underscores to employees that the cognitive frame of self-sacrifice is valid and applied consistently throughout the organization, thus making it a more legitimate justification by which one might approach negative contact at work.

Our research raises a practical and ethical dilemma: When is this relatively passive approach to coping with negative contact morally appropriate compared to a more active response? In some cases, organizations can do little to alter the behavior of beneficiaries to be less negative. In such cases, a focus on more passive (emotion-focused) coping strategies like reframing as self-sacrifice is appropriate. However, it may be that organizations do have the potential to influence beneficiary behavior somewhat. Rather than accepting

the status quo of being treated poorly by beneficiaries, perhaps there are actions that employees and managers—or society at large—can take to nudge beneficiaries toward more civil behavior (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Hospitals, for example, have experimented with ways to reduce noise and increase privacy for patients (Siddiqui, Zuccarelli, Durkin, Wu, & Brotman, 2015). Where resources are particularly scarce, such actions may not be possible; thus, whether an organization focuses on reframing as self-sacrifice versus a more active response may be driven by resource availability and the particular reasons for negative beneficiary contact. Relatedly, encouraging self-sacrificial interpretations may cause employees to become content with what is actually mediocre performance. That is, by encouraging self-sacrifice accounts, organizations may unwittingly cause employees to make external attributions when such attributions are inappropriate. Given this possibility, organizations should clearly define the situations in which self-sacrifice accounts are appropriate and distinguish between negative beneficiary contact caused by employees and negative beneficiary contact that is inherent to the work.

We found that perceptions of self-sacrifice were only likely when employees experienced strong affective commitment to beneficiaries. Thus, in situations where self-sacrifice is an ethically appropriate interpretation of negative contact, managers would do well to consider ways in which they can foster such commitment among their employees. Such commitment might be facilitated by opportunities to interact with beneficiaries in a positive way, or by simply conveying positive information about beneficiaries to employees (Grant, 2007).

Given our findings regarding coworker emotional support, managers should be intentional in promoting positive and supportive coworker relationships. This is particularly important because jobs with high beneficiary contact may especially constrain the amount of time and attention for coworker relationships. Managerial interventions may be necessary in order to give employees the support they need to harness the motivating potential of self-sacrifice rather than allow the costly aspects of self-sacrifice to dominate employee attitudes and behavior. Another practical implication of this study is that organizations that are considering a redesign or restructuring of jobs should consider the costs of increasing beneficiary contact in addition to whatever motivational benefits may result. This study demonstrates that high contact facilitates positive contact that inspires employees,

but also exposes employees to negative contact that is costly and trying. Redesign efforts should weigh the benefits and the costs, and provide the resources that employees will need to adequately sustain their work efforts with beneficiaries.

Limitations and Future Research

An important limitation of our research is that, although Studies 2 and 3 replicated and expanded on the first stage of our model (i.e., the effects of negative contact on social worth and self-sacrifice), they did not do so for the effects of self-sacrifice. Future research might seek to replicate these effects in another context. In Study 1, we found that the interaction between self-sacrifice and coworker emotional support was not related to a change in satisfaction, although it did still predict both task performance and helping after controlling for initial performance. It may be that the first and third surveys were too close together to capture much change in job satisfaction, producing little variance that could be predicted. Future efforts might seek out a context where a field experiment would be permitted, but this would require assurance that ethical principles would not be compromised (e.g., assigning a nurse to a division with which they are not familiar may put lives at stake). Longitudinal or laboratory designs may offer more feasible methods by which the causal effects of perceived self-sacrifice can be further tested. Longitudinal studies might also examine whether negative beneficiary contact and perceived self-sacrifice are reciprocally related—a possibility that was suggested by supplemental analysis in Study 1. Over time, it is possible that self-perceptions may shape relationships with beneficiaries in a way that influences the prevalence of positive and negative contact with beneficiaries.

The majority of frontline service jobs are performed by women, as is particularly true of nursing and evident in Studies 1 and 2 (Rho, Brown, & Fremstad, 2020). However, it is worth asking whether sex makes a difference in how a person is influenced by negative beneficiary contact. Women may tend to react more strongly to discrete episodes of negative contact on a daily basis (Scott & Barnes, 2011); however, it is not clear whether this difference would manifest in cumulative differences in the meanings one attaches to work, which develop over months and years. Indeed, a more gender-balanced sample in Study 3 showed that sex did not moderate the nature of the relationship between negative contact and either social worth or self-sacrifice. We did, however, find significant sex

differences in the amount of social worth and self-sacrifice reported. Thus, although the relationship between negative contact and these perceptions does not appear to depend on sex, future research is needed to help identify the reasons why men are reporting higher levels of social worth and self-sacrifice compared to women.

In Study 3, we found that the effects of negative beneficiary contact generalized across gender and occupation. However, there are other demographic factors that may shape these effects. For example, employees with lower occupational status or lower wages might expect to be treated poorly by beneficiaries, and this could shape the extent to which they rationalize contact as self-sacrifice as compared to higher status workers. We did not collect data on wage level and thus were unable to test this idea. However, future research might examine whether occupational status plays a significant role in employee responses to negative contact.

Our theorizing regarding attributions of negative beneficiary contact focused on job-level attributions; however, it may be that attributions are informed by the interplay of the nature of the work and the specific beneficiary. For example, the fundamental attribution error would suggest that employees tend to blame negative contact on beneficiary traits rather than on situational factors. These more specific attributions likely interact with the job-level attributions that are the focus of our study. Future research might examine a cross-level interaction between the nature of work attribution and more specific situational attributions.

Our research found that perceived social worth did not predict performance, which leads us to wonder when those perceptions make a difference for work behavior and when they do not. Some research has found perceived social worth to be a relatively distal predictor of performance (Castanheira, 2016), while others have found it to be more proximal (Grant, 2008a; cf. perceived prosocial impact in Grant, 2012). Perceived social worth is theorized to affect performance by increasing the effort one gives in one's job. Thus, one possible reason for equivocal results is that the link between effort and performance varies across contexts, or (similarly) the measurement of performance may not always consider effort as a primary contributing factor. Nurses, for example, have a highly structured and scripted job, which may leave little room for perceived worth to inspire a behavioral difference in an employee. In contrast, those working in sales, philanthropy campaigns, or government agencies may have more

“room” for increased effort to make a difference in performance measures. Future research could provide greater clarity around the types of jobs and performance metrics for which social worth exhibits a positive relationship with performance.

Future research might also examine different sources of social information, such as leaders, family members and friends, or the general public. In the present research, we examined beneficiaries but did not distinguish between primary and secondary beneficiaries. For example, many healthcare organizations explicitly group the family of patients into a larger beneficiary category using phrases like “family-centered care.” In addition, parents are often viewed as beneficiaries of the work of educators. Future research might examine whether primary and secondary beneficiaries differ in the effect their interactions have on employees, or whether they might cancel each other out if found to be in conflict (e.g., a grateful student with an upset parent). In addition, we examined coworker emotional support in our study, but future research may more specifically examine the content of the messages that employees receive from their peers, rather than the ability to vent their frustrations or release tension with their peers. We found that the latter helps employees turn self-sacrifice into a motivational mechanism, but the former may directly impact perceptions of self-sacrifice or any other possible justifications for negative contact.

Finally, in this article we have examined the “beneficiary” contact literature; however, it is important to acknowledge that this label presumes an organization- or employee-centric point of view. Consistent with prior research, we have defined beneficiaries in terms of those whom the employee believes their work can help. Indeed, our focus on the meaning of work is inherently subjective and thus our model is rooted in perceptions from the employee’s point of view. However, in some jobs, beneficiaries may not feel that they are benefitting, despite employees believing that their work could be of help to them. Thus, one potential future direction for research on beneficiary contact would be to identify an instance where such a tension is salient and then examine it more closely.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1
Conditional Indirect Effects of Negative Contact across Levels of Coworker Emotional Support

Moderator	Level	Job Satisfaction	Task Performance	Helping Behavior
		Conditional Indirect Effect	Conditional Indirect Effect	Conditional Indirect Effect
Coworker Support	–2 SD	–.15 [–.29, .03]	–.13 [–.26, .01]	–.20 [–.40, –.02]
	–1 SD	–.10 [–.20, .04]	–.06 [–.14, .04]	–.10 [–.23, .01]
	Mean	–.05 [–.13, .04]	.00 [–.06, .08]	–.01 [–.09, .08]
	+1 SD	.01 [–.08, .11]	.07 [–.01, .17]	.09 [–.02, .22]
	Max	.02 [–.08, .13]	.08 [–.00, .19]	.12 [–.01, .26]
IMM		.05 [–.01, .10]	.06 [.01, .11]	.09 [.02, .16]

Notes: $n = 262$. Confidence intervals (95%) reported in brackets. IMM = index of moderated mediation. The scale maximum was used instead of +2 SD given that +2 SD exceeds the maximum value recorded for coworker emotional support (i.e., 7.00). Bold indicates a CI that does not include 0.

APPENDIX B

Study 2 Vignettes

On the next page is a scenario that many nurses face multiple times during their career—the acceptance of a new position at a different hospital/clinic. Before beginning, take a moment to recall your current position and any other past nursing positions you have held. Please read all the following information carefully, keeping in mind that you will be asked about your feelings and thoughts regarding the pattern of job experiences described.

Imagine that you accepted a new position at a different hospital/clinic. The specific area of the hospital/clinic in which you now work is virtually identical to your last job, as is your new job description and expected responsibilities. With this in mind, please consider the scenario on the next page, which describes the pattern of job experiences you have in your first two years in this new position. Again, keep in mind what thoughts and feelings you would have if this were actually you.

—(survey page break)—

After two years in your new position, you have a very clear idea of what this job is like. The tasks you are required to perform are virtually identical to what a nurse like you would do in any medical institution. Patients and family members of patients often say “thanks” in passing and you occasionally receive a particularly sincere expression of gratitude from someone, either in person or in a note they leave.

High Negative Beneficiary Contact, Attributed to Performance

Unfortunately, over your time in this position, you have noticed that patients and their family members often treat you with disrespect. They vent bad moods out on you, complain about or get angry with you, yell at you, and argue with you frequently. Lots of patients and/or their family members seem to doubt your ability, refuse to listen to you, and use condescending language toward you. In addition, patients often demand special treatment. Many even demand to be cared for by someone else.

After two years in this job, you realize that the main reason for the negative interactions with patients and their family members is the way you’ve performed your tasks in this job. Deep down, you are confident that if you performed your tasks in a better

way, things would be different. Your manager has even spoken to you multiple times about improving your performance. For example: you’ve struggled to keep patients informed and updated on issues that affect their treatment, you haven’t been very compassionate with patients, and you have let a negative mood interfere with your treatment of patients. Although this is hard for you to admit, you have realized that these aspects of your job performance are causing patients and their family members to interact more negatively with you than they do with other nurses.

High Negative Beneficiary Contact, Attributed to the Nature of the Work

Unfortunately, over your time in this position, you have noticed that patients and their family members often treat you with disrespect. They vent bad moods out on you, complain about or get angry with you, yell at you, and argue with you frequently. Lots of patients and/or their family members seem to doubt your ability, refuse to listen to you, and use condescending language toward you. In addition, patients often demand special treatment. Many even demand to be cared for by someone else.

After two years in this job, *it’s obvious to you that this is just the nature of this job*. After all, most people don’t like to spend time in care facilities, clinics, or hospitals. When people feel ill, uncomfortable, or dependent on others, it is natural for them to treat others around them (you and other healthcare professionals) in a negative manner. In short, you believe that this kind of work naturally brings about these kinds of negative interactions. An important part of any nurse’s job is navigating these interactions, while still providing quality care. You believe that putting up with negative interactions is “all in a day’s work” in this nursing job.

Low Negative Beneficiary Contact, No Attribution

Over time in this position, you have noticed that this nursing job is pretty typical. You try to maintain accurate reports. You administer medications, and you monitor and record any changes in patients’ conditions. When necessary, you modify patient treatment plans and make tentative diagnoses. When patients need examination or treatment, you help prepare them for it and/or assist with it. You also help prepare instruments, equipment, or supplies.

You work with the rest of the healthcare team to care for patients and keep their family members informed.

After two years in this job, *you have come to believe* that your job requires you to be accurate, make decisions, and work together with your work group and care team. Like many other jobs, you frequently use your phone and e-mail to communicate

about work, and you spend most of your time indoors in an environmentally controlled workspace. You spend a good amount of time standing, but you don't have to stand all day. Many of your tasks are repeated daily or throughout the day, and you have lots of interaction with others, whether it be patients or coworkers.

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