

The person behind the mask: supervisor-subordinate relationships and well-being at work

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La persona por detrás de la máscara: las relaciones supervisor-subordinado y el bienestar en el trabajo

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A pessoa por trás da máscara: as relações supervisor-subordinado e o bem-estar no trabalho

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Abstract

Purpose – Taking the subordinates' perspective, this paper aims to explore the supervisor-subordinate relationships and how daily interactions, personal ties and connections with the supervisors contribute more significantly, positively or negatively, to the subordinates' well-being.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study is based on the thematic analysis of data collected from two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 participants in a Portuguese utility company.

Findings – The subordinates' perceptions of the nature and quality of their relationships with supervisors were found to have considerable effects on well-being. Positive effects were identified when subordinates feel emotionally supported and believe that supervisors truly care about them and are genuinely willing to listen to their concerns, but the most significant effects on the subordinates' well-being are produced when the perceived authenticity of the supervisor allows the relationship to evolve into a state of relational closeness, and the subordinates connect with the person-as-real, the human being behind the mask who is playing the supervisory role. These findings reflect features of the cultural setting where the study was conducted.

Originality/value – The study provides evidence to support the argument that a better understanding of supervisor-subordinate relationships and their effects on well-being requires an integrated approach that considers the valuable contributions of different literatures and theoretical frameworks and the multiple



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dimensions of that relationship, including personal and non-work dimensions. This approach is particularly relevant in cultural contexts where these dimensions might play a critical role in work relations.

Keywords Supervisor-subordinate relationship, Well-being at work, Emotional support, Personal connections, Perceived supervisor authenticity, Relational closeness, Mask, Cultural context

Paper type Research paper

Resumen

Propósito – Tomando la perspectiva de los subordinados, el artículo explora las relaciones supervisor-subordinado y cómo las interacciones diarias, los vínculos personales y las conexiones con los supervisores contribuyen de manera más significativa, positiva o negativamente, al bienestar de los subordinados.

Metodología – Este estudio exploratorio se basa en el análisis temático de los datos recopilados en dos rondas de entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad con veintiún participantes en una empresa de servicios públicos portuguesa.

Resultados – Se encontró que las percepciones de los subordinados sobre la naturaleza y calidad de sus relaciones con los supervisores tienen efectos considerables en el bienestar. Se identificaron efectos positivos cuando los subordinados se sienten apoyados emocionalmente por los supervisores y creen que realmente se preocupan con ellos y están genuinamente dispuestos a escuchar sus preocupaciones. Los efectos más significativos en el bienestar de los subordinados se producen cuando la autenticidad percibida de los supervisores permite que la relación evolucione hacia un estado de cercanía relacional, y los subordinados se conectan con la persona real, el ser humano detrás de la máscara, que es el supervisor.

Originalidad/valor – Este estudio proporciona evidencia que respalda la idea de que una mejor comprensión de las relaciones supervisor-subordinado y sus efectos en el bienestar requiere un enfoque integrado que tenga en cuenta las valiosas contribuciones de diferentes literaturas y marcos teóricos y las múltiples dimensiones de esa relación, incluidas las dimensiones personales y no laborales, para dar sentido a las relaciones supervisor-subordinado en contextos culturales donde podrían desempeñar un papel fundamental.

Palabras clave relación supervisor-subordinado, bienestar en el trabajo, apoyo emocional, conexiones personales, autenticidad percibida del supervisor, cercanía relacional, máscara, contexto cultural

Tipo de artículo Trabajo de investigación

Resumo

Objetivo – A partir da perspectiva dos subordinados, o artigo explora as relações supervisor-subordinado e como as interações diárias, os laços pessoais e as ligações com os supervisores contribuem de forma mais significativa, positiva ou negativamente, para o bem-estar dos subordinados.

Metodologia – Este estudo exploratório baseia-se na aplicação da análise temática aos dados recolhidos em duas rondas de entrevistas semiestructuradas e em profundidade a vinte e um participantes, em exercício de funções em empresa portuguesa de serviços públicos.

Resultados – Os dados recolhidos permitem concluir que as percepções dos subordinados sobre a natureza e a qualidade das suas relações com os supervisores têm efeitos consideráveis no bem-estar. Foram identificados efeitos positivos quando os subordinados sentem que os supervisores os apoiam emocionalmente e realmente se preocupam com os subordinados e estão genuinamente dispostos a ouvir as suas preocupações. Os efeitos mais significativos no bem-estar são obtidos quando dos subordinados percebem a autenticidade do supervisor, permitindo que o relacionamento evolua para um estado de proximidade relacional, e os subordinados se conectam com a pessoa real, o ser humano por detrás da máscara: o supervisor.

Originalidade/valor – O estudo fornece evidência que permite sustentar o argumento segundo o qual uma melhor compreensão das relações supervisor-subordinado e dos seus efeitos no bem-estar exige uma abordagem integrada que tenha em conta as contribuições valiosas de diferentes literaturas e quadros teóricos e as múltiplas dimensões da relação supervisor-subordinado, incluindo a dimensão pessoal e não profissional, particularmente relevantes em contextos culturais em que estas podem desempenhar um papel crítico.

Palavras-chave relação supervisor-subordinado, bem-estar no trabalho, apoio emocional, ligações pessoais, autenticidade percebida do supervisor, proximidade relacional, máscara, contexto cultural

Tipo de papel Trabalho de pesquisa

Introduction

From the subordinates' perspective, the supervisor-subordinate is the single most important workplace relationship with a significant impact on the subordinates' day-to-day work experiences and career prospects, and likely to have a considerable effect on their well-being. Given the involuntary nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships and the inherent resource dependency and power imbalance, these relationships "*are not only important; they are also complicated*" (Bono and Yoon, 2012, p.44), and even more so in the context of work arrangements with limited face-to-face interaction between supervisors and subordinates (Gan *et al.*, 2023; Varma *et al.*, 2022). Supervisor-subordinate relationships have been studied from different theoretical perspectives. When framed as leader-follower, high-quality relationships are defined as relationships in which social exchanges are based on reciprocity (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012) and the focus is on task-related or instrumental exchange of resources, such as job performance for social support (Ehrhardt and Sharif, 2019) with subordinates who perceive support experiencing a felt obligation to reciprocate (Vittal *et al.*, 2023). To overcome the traditional instrumental exchange of resources for support, there is a growing body of research on leadership authenticity and authentic relations with followers (Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Macamo and Klasmeier, 2024) building on the literature on authenticity in work settings, a topic that carries great appeal (Cha *et al.*, 2019; Lehman *et al.*, 2019). However, both the leader-follower exchange theory (Gottfredson *et al.*, 2020) and the authentic leadership theory (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Gardner *et al.*, 2021; Helmuth *et al.*, 2024) have been under mounting criticism in recent years and considered highly problematic. Authentic leadership is a contested terrain (Alvesson and Einola, 2019), too often romanticised (Gardner *et al.*, 2021) and criticised on multiple grounds, including its normative and functionalist approach, and disagreements can be found over what authenticity and authentic leadership really mean (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019; Ostermeier *et al.*, 2024; Sidani and Rowe, 2018). Recent contributions, such as the concept of authenticity of actions are attempting to overcome those problems challenging the dominant self-referential concept of authenticity and adopting a more relational approach arguing that "*actions are authentic, not leaders*" (Helmuth *et al.*, 2024, p. 129). Regarding the outcomes, the main concern of the leadership literature has been on leadership-performance relationships (Czakert and Berger, 2024) while failing "*to take employee well-being seriously enough*" (Inceoglu *et al.*, 2018, p. 179) treating it as a secondary outcome. The prevalent leader-centricity of leadership theories, including authentic leadership (Crawford *et al.*, 2020) has privileged the impact on leaders' own well-being rather than the followers' well-being (Rahimnia and Sharifirad, 2015), overlooking the association between the perceived authenticity of the supervisor and the subordinates' well-being (Emmerich *et al.*, 2020). When the followers' well-being is considered, it is normally focused on narrow aspects of well-being (Inceoglu *et al.*, 2018) like job satisfaction, work engagement or emotional irritation (Macamo and Klasmeier, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2022), but neglecting the multidimensional nature of the well-being construct (Das and Pattanayak, 2023), and the social dimension in particular, that reflects the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships at work, including the daily and close interactions between supervisors and subordinates (Grant *et al.*, 2007; Kazemi, 2017).

Looking at supervisor-subordinate relationships and their effects on subordinates' well-being, it is apparent that several issues need clarification. *First*, the subordinates' perspective of supervisor-subordinate relationships remains under-researched. Leadership theories, including authentic leadership models, have been criticised for having "*remained overwhelmingly centred around the leader*" (Sidani and Rowe, 2018, p. 626) focusing on experienced or self-rated authenticity – being or feeling authentic (Cha *et al.*, 2019), while

overlooking the subordinates' perceived authenticity of the leader. In recent years, calls have been made to look at the follower processes in leadership (Sidani and Rowe, 2018) changing the focus to the "*subordinate/follower experience, perception and reasoning*" (Alvesson and Einola, 2019, p. 393) and the consideration of the subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor's authenticity (Helmuth et al., 2024). Other studies of supervisor-subordinate relationships, not grounded on leadership theories take a more balanced view of the parties involved (e.g. Varma et al., 2021), like the mentoring literature that stresses the relational dimension exploring the emotional attachment, mutual care and concern and experiences of relational closeness (Ragins, 2016) but in general, the subordinates' perspective has attracted less attention and needs further examination. *Second*, the effects of supervisor-subordinate relationships on the subordinates' social well-being need clarification. As pointed out above, leadership theories have neglected the impact on followers' well-being, and even more so on the social dimension of well-being (Das and Pattanayak, 2023). A not so different pattern is found in the literature anchored in other theoretical frameworks like the studies of the positive effects of supportive supervision, mainly focused on performance (e.g. Eisenberger et al., 2023), or on the psychological or health-related well-being (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Huo et al., 2020). In most cases, the subordinates' well-being associated with their daily interactions with supervisors (Grant et al., 2007; Kazemi, 2017), the supervisor-subordinate exchanges beyond the work sphere (Gao et al., 2022), and nonwork personal ties (Heaphy et al., 2018) have been neglected and deserve further examination. *Third*, the importance of context in supervisor-subordinate relationships needs further examination. It has already been established that supervisor-subordinate relationships reflect the social and cultural contexts where they occur (Colenberg et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2021) but the influence of leadership theories in the field, mainly anchored "*in the American culture and traditions*" (Alvesson and Einola, 2019, p. 6) with their focus on work ties and task-related exchanges (Dulebohn et al., 2012) has constrained the full exploration of supervisor-subordinate relationships, overlooking the importance of personal and non-work-related ties (Zhang et al., 2015; Gao et al., 2022). This comment also applies to authentic leadership theories that reflect "*the U.S. origins of the construct*" (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019, p. 360) and the Western ideal of being authentic and true to oneself (Slabu et al., 2014) that might not be as relevant to explain supervisor-subordinate relationships elsewhere, such as in contexts where subordinates have a high personal dependency on their supervisors and informal modes of influence are more relevant (Smith et al., 2012), and "*successes are considered more as the result of collective efforts than heroic deeds by single individuals*" (Alvesson and Einola, in Gardner et al., 2021, p. 6). In sum, understanding supervisor-subordinate relationships requires "*the consideration of contextual forces, such as society and culture, that influence relational processes and outcomes*" (Heaphy et al., 2018, p. 560) and the examination of these relationships "*in each country on their own merits*" (Varma et al., 2021, p. 58). The effects of supervisor-subordinate relationships on subordinates' well-being in contexts like the Portuguese one, that do not fit into the prototypical Western cultural context need clarification.

Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews and the subordinates' accounts of their daily interactions and work relationships with supervisors in the context of a Portuguese utility group, the paper explores *what* aspects of the supervisor-subordinate relationship are more impactful on the subordinates' job-related experience, and *how* the subordinates' daily interactions and support, and the personal ties and connections with the supervisors affect positively, or negatively, the participants' well-being.

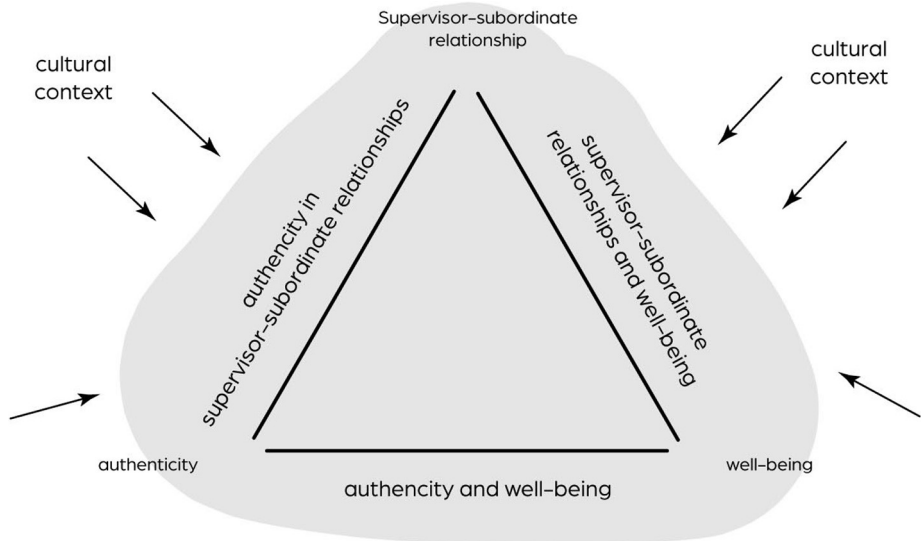
This research makes two main contributions to the literature. First, the study extends the current understanding of the importance of subordinates' perceptions of the nature and

quality of supervisor-subordinate relationships and their effects on the subordinates' well-being. It concludes that the supervisor-subordinate relationship is best described as a dynamic and developmental process with growing involvement and connectedness. As the relationship evolves from a state of instrumental support to one of *emotional* support, subordinates feel that the supervisors are no longer providing task assistance and work guidance only, but that they care about them and are active listeners of their concerns. A stronger effect on well-being is produced as the process evolves from the supportive to the *perceived authenticity* level, and the subordinates believe that supervisors are not simply caring because they are supposed to but feel that supervisors are sincere, *truly* care about them and are *genuinely* willing to listen to them and to provide them support, helping them tackle personal, and not only work-related problems. To find out whether the supervisor is being sincere requires subordinates to get to know the person-as-real, the "*person behind the supervisory mask*", i.e. the person who happens to be playing the supervisory role. By doing so, a personal connection is developed until the level of *relational closeness* is reached, with the strongest effect on subordinates' well-being. Relational closeness is only possible when subordinates are also prepared to drop their own subordinate masks and are willing to relate to the supervisors on a personal level and to take the inevitable risks and vulnerabilities following that personal exposure. By acknowledging the effects that being authentic might have on others, the paper builds on recent developments in the authenticity at work (e.g. [Cha et al., 2019](#); [Emmerich et al., 2020](#)) and relational authenticity (e.g. [Ostermeier et al., 2022b](#)) literatures, adding to the current debate on the importance of going beyond the work-related dimension and looking at supervisor-subordinate relationships as involving two individuals not limited to their job scripts and subordinate/supervisory roles to better understand the quality of these relationships and their impact on the subordinates' well-being.

A second contribution of this research is made to the literature on cultural studies, and to the debate on the overlooked Western cultural diversity. The cultural and context-sensitive nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships have been pointed out in recent studies on work relations and well-being at work (e.g. [Colenberg et al., 2021](#); [Lucia-Casademunt et al., 2018](#); [Macamo and Klasmeier, 2024](#); [Varma et al., 2021](#)) and in cross-cultural studies of authenticity (e.g. [Robinson et al., 2012](#); [Slabu et al., 2014](#); [Xia and Xu, 2023](#); [Zhang et al., 2022](#)). By uncovering the significance attributed to the subordinates' expectations and value placed upon the perceived authenticity of the supervisor, and the idealisation of the "*supervisor as a friend*" that is implicit in subordinates' testimonies reflecting relevant traits of the Portuguese cultural context that might not be as relevant elsewhere, the paper provides additional evidence of the importance of taking the local context and culture into account when trying to make sense of supervisor-subordinate relationships and their impact on well-being at work. By doing so, it adds to the critical debate on the need to revisit theoretical frameworks that fail to shed light on supervisor-subordinate relationships in cultural settings that do not fit the prototypical Western culture that is taken for granted in the mainstream literature.

Literature review

The study of *authenticity in supervisor-subordinate relationships* and their impact on the subordinates' *well-being* requires the review of the relevant literature that connects the three key concepts with each other, as illustrated in [Figure 1: supervisor-subordinate relationships and well-being; authenticity in supervisor-subordinate relationships; and authenticity and well-being at work](#). Given the influence of the cultural context on supervisor-subordinate relationships and on the value attributed to authenticity, a review of the literature on the specific features of the Portuguese cultural context that might be relevant to these issues is also included.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Relevant literature

Supervisor-subordinate relationships and well-being

Supervisors are responsible for assigning tasks to their subordinates, monitoring and evaluating their performance and engaging with them directly in daily and close interactions. The complexity of the role supervisors play is expected to grow even further in the context of significant changes in work relationships (Heaphy *et al.*, 2018), not least the additional difficulties of supervising subordinates with whom there is no direct face-to-face interaction, such as remote workers (Gan *et al.*, 2023; Varma *et al.*, 2022; Yang and Lin, 2023). In most cases, subordinates do not choose their supervisor and place more value on the relationship than supervisors do (Ehrhardt and Sharif, 2019). On the other hand, supervisors seem to like some subordinates more than others (Varma *et al.*, 2021), and lacking “the time or resources to develop equally positive relationships with all subordinates” (Bono and Yoon, 2012, p. 50), supervisors tend to develop closeness with only a few, with whom they share a good relationship (Varma *et al.*, 2021).

The identification of the characteristics of a positive or high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship, its antecedents and outcomes have benefitted from the contribution of different theoretical perspectives, mainly framing the supervisor-subordinate relationship as a leader-follower, or mentoring workplace relationship (Bono and Yoon, 2012). The leader-follower literature is centred on task-related or instrumental exchange of resources (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012), such as job performance for social support (Ehrhardt and Sharif, 2019); the mentoring literature defines a high-quality relationship as a “mutually beneficial relationship that meets members’ needs while providing experiences of relational closeness” (Ragins, 2016, p. 229). Taken both perspectives together, high-quality supervisory relationships can be described as relationships involving exchange of resources and mutual

experiences of closeness, connection, trust and a strong sense of emotional attachment, mutual care and concern, while offering safe havens where both parties feel accepted and supported (Bono and Yoon, 2012; Ragins, 2016). High-quality work relationships and supervisor support have a significant impact on subordinates' well-being (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002) and their positive effects extend beyond the work domain including the subordinates' personal growth and development (Colbert *et al.*, 2016). The literature tends to differentiate emotional support – listening to the subordinates' concerns, trying to understand their needs and encouraging them in difficult times, from instrumental support – giving subordinates task-related assistance and feedback (Mathieu *et al.*, 2019).

According to the social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), managers active in the provision of help expect subordinates to reciprocate with commitment and personal loyalty (Toegel *et al.*, 2013), and subordinates who perceive support experience positive job attitudes and a felt obligation to reciprocate (Vittal *et al.*, 2023) that they express putting in more effort and showing extra-role performance, helping the organisation achieve its goals (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, there is evidence of a contagion effect, showing that supervisors who experience support from their managers, tend to pass on that supportive treatment to subordinates (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020), and subordinates who perceive supervisor support reciprocate providing better service to their customers (Vittal *et al.*, 2023). On the negative side, studies show that unsupportive supervision is the strongest risk factor for health and well-being at work (Hämmig, 2017), and a single occurrence of unanswered support may undermine the relationship and become a major event that sparks a negative affective response with a long-lasting impact on the relationship (Ballinger and Rockmann, 2010). Even more harmful to the subordinates' well-being is not receiving supervisor support after having actively requested it (McIlroy *et al.*, 2021). Taken together, these studies suggest stronger negative effects of unsupportive supervision than the positive contributions of supervisor support. In sum, supervisor-subordinate interactions and relationships are not only complicated; they are also very sensitive, given the powerful role supervisors play in the subordinates' emotions and the “*widespread beliefs that supervisors are a key source of bad moods at work*” (Bono *et al.*, 2007, p. 1357).

The literature has identified supervisor support among the antecedents of subordinates' well-being (e.g. Huo *et al.*, 2020). There are multiple definitions and conceptualisations of well-being in the work context (Ho and Kuvaas, 2020), with *well-being at work* and *employee well-being* often used interchangeably, and broadly defined as the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work. The dominant view considers affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects and regards well-being as a multidimensional construct that encompasses the psychological, physical, and social dimensions (Grant *et al.*, 2007). Most studies are focused on specific dimensions of well-being, such as psychological well-being, defined as the individuals' subjective experience at work, with two components (Huta and Waterman, 2014): hedonic, the positive emotions, satisfaction and pleasure that come from the work experience; and eudaemonic, the feeling of fulfilment, purpose and authenticity. The physical or health well-being stems from the relationship between the work environment and the employees' well-being (Edgar *et al.*, 2017), including the detrimental effects of working conditions and work arrangements on the workers' health and well-being (e.g. Schneider and Harknett, 2019). The social dimension of well-being reflects the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships at work (Kazemi, 2017), including relationships with co-workers, and between supervisors and subordinates (Grant *et al.*, 2007). Sometimes called relational well-being (Guerci *et al.*, 2022) or relationship-related well-being (Xiao *et al.*, 2022), social well-being has been studied in terms of integration, acceptance, trust, social support, social exchange and

reciprocity (Grant *et al.*, 2007; Kazemi, 2017) and regarded as a local phenomenon strongly influenced by the social context and the local environment (Colenberg *et al.*, 2021).

Authenticity in supervisor-subordinate relationships

There is a growing body of research on authenticity in work settings (Cha *et al.*, 2019). Generally interpreted as referring to what is *real*, or *genuine*, or *true*, authenticity can take on different meanings anchored in different research traditions and theoretical frameworks (Lehman *et al.*, 2019). In the work context, most studies take an individual-level conceptualisation of authenticity (van Den Bosch and Taris, 2014). When speaking of “feeling authentic”, “being authentic” and “authentic behaviour”, they are typically referring to experienced (self-rated) authenticity (Cha *et al.*, 2019). From this perspective, authenticity “involves being true to oneself, not others” (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p. 332), reflecting the self-referential nature of the construct. Authentic individuals stay close to their core self at work, express themselves and act in accordance with their own values and beliefs, and are open in their relationships disclosing personal information and potential weaknesses (Emmerich *et al.*, 2020).

Unlike the true-self perspective, less attention has been devoted to *externally perceived* (other-rated) authenticity (Cha *et al.*, 2019) and the perceptions or attributions of authenticity (Bai *et al.*, 2020). In the context of supervisor-subordinate relationships, the supervisors’ externally perceived authenticity refers to authenticity as rated by subordinates. In other words, building authentic relationships with supervisors require subordinates to perceive the words and actions of supervisors as authentic (Hsieh and Wang, 2015). However, not much is known about “the extent to which individuals who feel authentic are also perceived by others as authentic” (Cha *et al.*, 2019, p. 643) and the factors affecting the subordinates’ interpretations of the supervisors’ authenticity and genuineness. From a critical perspective, some authors question the concept of *externally perceived authenticity*, arguing that authenticity refers to the extent to which one is true to the self that cannot be externally assessed, proposing instead the use of sincerity as “the extent to which the self is presented accurately and honestly to others” (Alvesson and Einola, 2019, p. 385), further stressing the complex nature of authenticity, a “slippery and hard to grasp phenomenon” (Gardner *et al.*, 2021, p. 19).

Authenticity has become a hot topic in the leadership literature and evolving from the focus on the authenticity of the leaders (Avolio *et al.*, 2004), a self-referential perspective based on the premise that only the leaders know who they truly are and whether their actions follow their true selves (Helmuth *et al.*, 2024) to encompass authentic relations with followers (Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Gardner *et al.*, 2011), and the authenticity of actions that takes a relational approach and the subordinates’ perceptions of their supervisor’s authenticity, or the extent to which the leader’s actions are interpreted as authentically genuine by followers (Helmuth *et al.*, 2024). While acknowledging the potential of these new insights, the authenticity of actions perspective has been considered “highly problematic” by Ostermeier *et al.* (2024) and criticised on the grounds that “it seems unlikely that most subordinates would be able to accurately perceive their supervisor’s identities or values” (p. 152). The observers might not be accurate perceivers of an actor’s experienced authenticity (Cha *et al.*, 2019), but the subordinates’ responses will reflect the way they experience and attach meanings to the supervisor’s actions and the attributions they make of the supervisor’s intentions. Briefly, despite the significant contributions in the last two decades, calls are being made urging researchers to clearly define what authenticity is before further advances can be made in the field (Ostermeier *et al.*, 2024).

Authenticity and well-being at work

Authenticity and well-being are closely linked (Sutton, 2020). There is consistent evidence of a positive relationship between experienced (self-rated) authenticity – being truly oneself and staying close to one’s inner self, and well-being (van Den Bosch and Taris, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2008), but the effects that being authentic have on others remains somewhat overlooked (Emmerich *et al.*, 2020). Some studies have found that subordinates who perceive the words and actions of their supervisors as authentic are more likely to trust them and develop close relationships with them and be more engaged in their work (Hsieh and Wang, 2015). A positive association was also identified between perceived authenticity of the leader and desirable follower responses, such as performance outcomes, organisational commitment and intention to stay (Cha *et al.*, 2019; Gill and Caza, 2018). However, the association between the relationship with a supervisor perceived to be authentic and the subordinate’s well-being is less clear and normally focused on narrow aspects of well-being (Rahimnia and Sharifirad, 2015). Ilies *et al.* (2005) propose that authentic leaders can foster followers’ well-being through the development of high-quality relationships and positive social exchanges, given that “*followers of authentic leaders are more likely to have similar values and thereby begin to behave more authentically*” (p. 387). Recent studies show that what matters most to the subordinates’ well-being is the consistency of authentic leadership behaviour (Macamo and Klasmeier, 2024), but leadership behaviours seem to affect distinct types of well-being differently (Inceoglu *et al.*, 2018). Positive relationships were reported between the subordinates’ perceptions of their supervisor’s authentic leadership and job satisfaction (Rahimnia and Sharifirad, 2015) or satisfaction with the supervisor (Peus *et al.*, 2012), but other dimensions of well-being have attracted less attention.

The cultural context

It is generally accepted that authentic behaviour is sensitive to contextual influences (Cha *et al.*, 2019). Rather than a stable personality dimension, authenticity at work depends on the specific environment in which the individual operates, the role s(he) is playing (van Den Bosch and Taris, 2014), and the cultural norms in place (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Slabu *et al.*, 2014). Most studies of authenticity were conducted in North American settings (Cha *et al.*, 2019) or involving Western participants (Slabu *et al.*, 2014). Cross-cultural studies of authenticity are rare (e.g. Robinson *et al.*, 2012) and mainly focused on the Western-Eastern comparison (Slabu *et al.*, 2014) that in most cases take the U.S. and China as prototypical examples of Western and Eastern cultures (Xia and Xu, 2023), leaving other cultural contexts under-researched.

The literature depicts authenticity as an ideal strongly embraced by Western culture (Robinson *et al.*, 2012), the experience of authenticity a by-product of Western ideals (Slabu *et al.*, 2014; Alvesson and Einola, 2019), and authentic leadership theories as reflecting their U.S. origins (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019). Western cultures value the expression of individual uniqueness encouraging individuals to discover their inner attributes, while in Eastern cultures individuals are socialised to suppress their own feelings and meet social expectations (Xia and Xu, 2023). Presenting authenticity as an aspirational virtue in cultures that value individual self-expression, autonomy, independence, meritocracy, and personal freedom (Robinson *et al.*, 2012), it is no surprise that in most studies Westerners come up as more authentic than Easterners, findings that seem to be affected by the way authenticity is defined – being true to oneself and expressing the true self – and measured, reflecting the independent view of the self and the values of individualistic cultures (Slabu *et al.*, 2014). Different findings might be found if authenticity is operationalised in a way that reflects the values of collectivist cultures, and the interdependent view of the self as connected to, related

to, or interdependent with others (Markus and Kitayama, 2010). Recent studies show that the influence of authenticity on subordinate-related outcomes is stronger when individualism is high and power distance is high (Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

The relevance of the cultural context is not limited to authenticity matters. Supervisor-subordinate relationships are influenced by the national cultural context (Cheng *et al.*, 2015; Clarke *et al.*, 2022; Lucia-Casademunt *et al.*, 2018; Varma *et al.*, 2021). In individualistic cultures, relationships are driven by the satisfaction of individual needs and goals, whereas in collectivistic cultures social roles and expectations tend to prevail (Reis *et al.*, 2000). While acknowledging the shift towards individualism in most societies, cultural differences remain sizable (Santos *et al.*, 2017). In contrast with the Western individualistic cultures, the Chinese culture is described as a collectivistic, high power-distance, and relationship-oriented culture, in which interpersonal ties and the mutual exchange of favours and benefits are particularly salient, and individuals invest a great deal on keeping and developing interpersonal relationships (Miao *et al.*, 2014). In that context, consistent evidence has been provided of the relevance of supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* – the personal relationship developed mainly from nonwork related social interactions involving strong emotional ties and exchange of favours (Guan and Frenkel, 2019), and the benefits of supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* and supervisor support on the workers' attitudinal outcomes, upward voice and well-being (Davidson *et al.*, 2017; Huo *et al.*, 2020; Huo and Boxall, 2022). Unlike the leader-member exchange framework that assumes the separation of work and personal life that is the norm in Western organisations and focus on the work exchange between supervisors and subordinates in the workplace (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), the supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* puts personal relationships in the first place, including the closeness and connections that arise from social and emotional interactions between supervisors and subordinates based on trust, mutual interest and benefits beyond the work domain (Gao *et al.*, 2022; He *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Although an indigenous Chinese phenomenon, some studies found *guanxi* to be perceived as typical in a broader range of locations (Smith *et al.*, 2012), and Jingjing *et al.* (2015) dispute the idea of *guanxi* as a purely cultural product grounded in the Confucian tradition providing evidence of *guanxi* replication and adaptation to the Portuguese context, by Chinese expatriates taking advantage of some common characteristics identified in the Portuguese business culture.

Supervisor-subordinate relationships in the Portuguese context. Not much is known about supervisor-subordinate relationships in the Portuguese context, but some inferences can be made based on the management, leadership, and HRM literatures. They describe it as an environment in which subordinates are sensitive and have an implicit “parent-child” model of their relationship with supervisors (Cunha *et al.*, 2009; Rego and Cunha, 2010) and supervisors are regarded as protectors of subordinates (Cunha and Cunha, 2004). In this context, personal relationships foster commitment to the manager rather than the organisation (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004), social ties and interpersonal connections matter in business relationships (Jingjing *et al.*, 2015), and “*personal connections or influence of a powerful friend*” (Cabral-Cardoso, 2006, p. 194) remains a safe recipe for professional success.

While acknowledging that national culture offers limited insights about individual-level behaviours (Brewer and Venaik, 2014), the comparative literature describes the Portuguese culture as “*high power-distance, mildly collectivist, feminine and strongly uncertainty avoidant*” (Nikandrou *et al.*, 2006, p. 185). Some features (e.g. high power-distance and slightly low humane orientation) would suggest a lower involvement in supervisor support and concern for the subordinates' well-being, while others (collectivist and feminine “tender” with strong affiliation needs) (Hofstede, 1991) might suggest otherwise. Moreover,

studies conducted elsewhere show that supervisor support is more critical for the subordinates' well-being in cultures high on uncertainty avoidance (Lucia-Casademunt *et al.*, 2018) like the Portuguese one, further stressing the importance of taking local context and culture into account when looking at supervisor-subordinate relationships.

Method

A qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted aiming to explore the participants' own accounts of the positive and negative aspects of their daily interactions at work and off-work, the support subordinates get from their supervisors, the personal connections, how they make sense of these relationships and what they mean for their well-being expressed in their own terms. In the context of this study, *supervisor* refers to front-line managers responsible for assigning tasks, providing feedback, managing, developing, and appraising subordinates' performance (Varma *et al.*, 2022), engaging with them "*directly, immediately and face-to-face*" (Hales, 2005, p. 473) in daily and close interactions. Sometimes used interchangeably, supervisor was adopted, rather than first-line or front-line manager to highlight the key features of the supervisory function. Subordinate was used as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of positions, including clerks, manual jobs, and engineers regardless of their employment status and contractual arrangements having in common not having anyone reporting directly to them.

Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in a State-owned utility company in Portugal. Twenty-one participants were interviewed (12 of them female) belonging to different departments (engineering; accounting; operations; maintenance; and administrative). Three participants (all of them female) had some supervisory experience, having played the supervisory role by leading teams or projects, or by overseeing some unit, but dyadic links were avoided. Although focused on the subordinates' well-being, gathering the views of participants with supervisory experience was particularly insightful, considering their double role and experience of supervising and being supervised. Most participants were in their thirties (11), and in their forties (nine). Twelve had higher education degrees. Only two participants had been working for the current employer for less than five years, and nine have spent at least ten years in the company. The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are shown in Table 1.

All participants were interviewed in their workplace and during their work scheduled. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and lasting from forty minutes to two hours, with an average of one hour and ten minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded after an informed consent was signed by each participant allowing the use of the interview contents for research purposes subject to the preservation of anonymity and confidentiality. To clarify some points or further develop issues raised in the interview, the participants were contacted again, and a Zoom meeting was arranged to resume the interview. These second-round interviews lasted from 12 to 40 minutes.

Participants were presented with a brief overview of the study and its objectives and informed that they did not have to answer all the questions and could stop the interview at any time. Direct questions about the participants' well-being were avoided. Instead, a series of open-ended questions were raised, and the interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about their work experiences (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The participants were asked to reflect on their supervisor-subordinate relationships and how these relationships evolved over time. They were also asked to share their perceptions and feelings about those relationships and provide illustrative examples of situations and events involving interactions with their supervisors that they reckoned had affected, positively or negatively, their well-being. The interview questions were developed to gather the subordinates' viewpoint. However, the

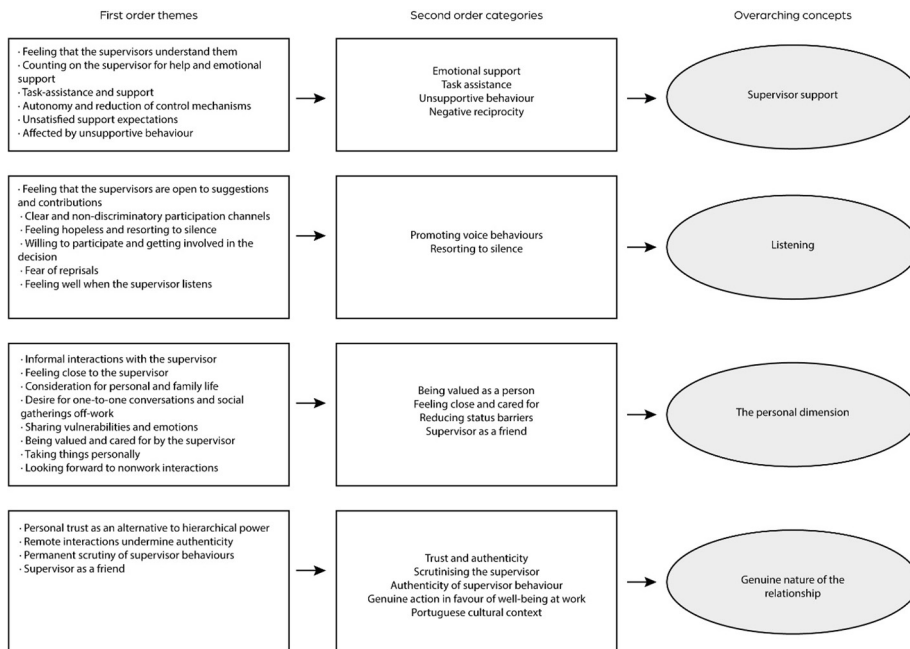
Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age group	Tenure (years)	Education	Department	Supervisory experience
P1	Male	30–39	10–14	Graduate	Engineering	No
P2	Male	30–39	5–9	Basic	Maintenance	No
P3	Female	30–39	5–9	High school	Administrative	No
P4	Female	30–39	1–5	Graduate	Operations	Yes
P5	Male	40–49	5–9	Basic	Maintenance	No
P6	Female	30–39	1–5	Graduate	Accounting	No
P7	Male	40–49	10–14	High school	Administrative	No
P8	Female	30–39	10–14	High school	Operations	No
P9	Female	30–39	10–14	Master’s degree	Operations	Yes
P10	Male	59–69	5–9	Basic	Operations	No
P11	Male	30–39	10–14	High school	Maintenance	No
P12	Female	30–39	5–9	Master’s degree	Accounting	No
P13	Female	40–49	15–19	Graduate	Legal	No
P14	Male	30–39	5–9	High school	Operations	No
P15	Female	40–49	15–19	Graduate	Purchasing	No
P16	Male	40–49	5–9	Graduate	Purchasing	No
P17	Female	40–49	1–5	High school	Administrative	No
P18	Female	40–49	10–14	Graduate	Accounting	No
P19	Male	40–49	1–5	Graduate	Engineering	No
P20	Female	30–39	10–14	Master’s degree	Quality	No
P21	Female	40–49	5–9	Graduate	Engineering	Yes

Source: Authors’ own work

participants with supervisory experience were also questioned about their dual role and their relationships and interactions with their supervisors, and with the subordinates they were supervising. The interview script is included in [Appendix](#). In line with the semi-structured format, some adjustments to the interview script were made during the interviews to clarify aspects that were not entirely clear in the participants’ responses, adding questions intended to address issues that deserved further exploration, and dropping questions that were found redundant or not applicable to that case.

The interviews were transcribed *verbatim*, and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyse, and report themes within data ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#); [Flores et al., 2023](#), [Gioia et al., 2013](#)). The analysis was carried out with continuous reference between the data and the definition of a set of categories. This method progressively increases the level of data abstraction by formulating a series of three code levels: first-order codes, second-order categories and overarching concepts (aggregate dimensions). First, excerpts from the interviews were identified as relevant to understanding the supervisor-subordinate relationship and shared by participants, including emotions, attitudes, behaviours and practices, that constituted the first-order codes. Then, these excerpts were aggregated into second-order categories according to the similarities and differences identified among them. The process was completed with the identification of four overarching concepts that resulted from the aggregation of second-order categories, according to criteria of similarity and relevance, together with themes from the applicable theory: Supervisor support, listening behaviour, the personal dimension of the relationship and the genuine nature of the relationship. [Figure 2](#) provides a graphic representation of how the analysis progressed from first-order themes to overarching concepts. The four



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. Data structure

overarching concepts that emerged from the data capture different dimensions of the supervisor-subordinate relationships providing theoretical explanations for the positive or negative effects of supervisors' behaviours on subordinates' well-being, as well as the importance of behaviours perceived as authentic and as fostering a personal link with subordinates that goes beyond their work roles.

Coding was carried out by the two researchers, individually, and situations of divergence were discussed to reach agreement. No predetermined themes were set up. Instead, a recursive process was adopted involving repeated reading of the interview transcripts, identifying, highlighting and coding interesting aspects in the text, and searching for repeated themes and patterns across the data set, and engaging in various interactions between the themes and the literature. Illustrative quotes are provided in [Table 2](#).

Research findings

When asked to describe their daily interactions with the supervisor and to identify the aspects in the supervisor-subordinate relationship they found as more significantly affecting positively, or negatively, their well-being and to elaborate on how, and why, such a relationship impacted their personal and working lives and contributed to positive, or negative job-related experiences, the overarching concepts that emerged from the transcripts as more salient were: *supervisor support*, the feeling that subordinates can rely on the supervisor for help and support, as opposed to realising the supervisor does not care or does not stand by them; *listening*, the belief that the supervisor listens when

Table 2. Overarching concepts and illustrative quotes

Overarching concepts	Illustrative quotes
Supervisor support	<i>"My ideal supervisor is someone who should be there, ready, showing leadership, and being prepared to act ... Being a good listener and trying to figure out what to do. Advising me when necessary. But for me, it's mainly about being there. Whenever we need him, we know he is there. Whatever happens, we know he is there. No matter what my problem is, I know he is there ... Being sure that he will do his best to provide support, and knowing I can count on him"</i> (P18) <i>"He is always ready to help us when we need, but then he expects us to pay him back ... I had a situation about a year ago. He realised there was something wrong with me, he called me, we talked, and he helped me to solve that personal problem. I felt really better after that. He could have said 'this is your personal problem, it's not my business'. But he cared. He perhaps realised that I was bringing that problem to the workplace, and it was affecting my work. Anyway, he helped me, and I thank him for that"</i> (P6) <i>"If the supervisors don't sort out the problem and help us, what are they doing here? That's the question I keep asking: 'If they are not doing whatever needs to be done to solve the problem, why do we need them? What are they doing here?'"</i> (P11)
Listening	<i>"I believe that anyone who wishes to share his/her views on a job-related matter or disagrees with something, either a technical issue or a management decision should have access to the appropriate channels to do it. This is how things should work, though not necessarily how things work around here. I am heard, but not always ... I work most of the time outside the premises. We are physically apart; it looks as if we do not exist; out of sight, out of mind ... I think that in the end, it depends on who is speaking and who is the listening ... What can we do? Carry on voicing our views until the supervisor finally listens"</i> (P13) <i>"The most important thing is to have a dialogue with subordinates. The tone of voice is critical. When we have a question and we go and ask the 'boss', even if he happens to be busy that day, he sends a message 'come some other time'; we know that we can meet later; he always listens to what I have to say"</i> (P19) <i>"About the way things work in the company, I rather not comment. What's the point of speaking up? My voice does not reach the higher ranks. I think that speaking up would be a waste of time. My supervisor? I would appreciate that he listens to me or, at least, appears to listen to what I have to say ... I often feel abandoned; my supervisor ... has not talked to me for months ... Weeks on end without talking to me, not even for five minutes ... he has no idea of what I am doing ... even if he does not wish to talk, he could at least listen to me ... but he does not care, I guess...; I always do my best to avoid conflicts, but I also have my limits ...; I think I had enough... But in one way or the other, sooner or later, they might get the message..."</i> (P18)
Personal dimension	<i>"I think that a good manager should always try to figure out what is on the minds of the people who work for him. And not just the work issues, but the personal ones too. For example, I now have a worker who has a serious health problem, he got cancer. I know that person has a lot in his mind now and may have difficulties concentrating on the job. What I am doing is going to his desk, I sit down with him, and we talk. Not about work, but trivial things, family, holidays ... I want him to feel he is not alone, and that I am there for him"</i> (P4) <i>"We had that night out, all of us; the supervisor joined us. We had a good time; we did all sorts of things. And talked about things, I mean personal things, family, kids, problems. And we had lots of fun. At some point I realised I was playing games with my supervisor; it's amazing, I never dreamt of doing it, but I realise, in the end, we are all human beings"</i> (P17)

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Overarching concepts	Illustrative quotes
Genuine nature of the relationship	<i>"Supervisors worry too much about their day-to-day work and forget to look around and get a feeling of what is going on. People sometimes deserve a pat on the back, or an expression of comfort, especially when they feel down. That's what we expect from supervisors. In our meetings they use nice words and beautiful slides to describe our progress and the next targets. They really know how to do that show-off. They are very good on that. But they do it as if they were talking to an empty room. It looks as if there is a wall between the managers and the workers. How could they say such things? They live in a different world, not in the real world where we live. Meeting them is like going to the movies ... The film goes on the same way, even if there is no one there watching. In my view, such fantasies are not healthy"</i> (P9) <i>"There was a time when my supervisor was removed from her position, and she came to me and another colleague opening her heart and crying. I realised that she trusted us. She was genuine. From then on, our relationship changed, I don't see her as 'the supervisor', she is more than that. My supervisor is more than a supervisor; she is a friend of mine. She is always available to help me in my job, and I try to do the same. Her door is always open ... I have heard comments like: 'he is always talking to her...'; 'she seems to like him...'; 'what is he doing with her?'. I think they are jealous of me, but they are missing the point. All I can say is that my working life would be different without her"</i> (P5) <i>"I believe that a good work environment depends first-of-all on the supervisors. Based on my own experience, I think that when the supervisors are good-natured, positive, and genuine, there is a good work environment. I may not understand everything the supervisor is saying but I trust he is telling me the truth. I need to look at him and feel that he is telling me the full story; he is doing his best to keep me well informed and is not hiding things. And I feel comfortable to do the same and tell him the good news and the bad news. Not pretending. That is what I feel is a good work environment; our work environment"</i> (P17) <i>"When we are asked to fill in a questionnaire to give our opinion, some people around here say things like: 'Why are they asking us these things? Can I really say what I think?' I sometimes feel uncomfortable wondering whether they can identify my response..."</i> (P20)

Source: Authors' own work

subordinates voice their concerns, as opposed to struggling to be heard by the supervisor; the *personal dimension*, the realisation that the subordinate and the supervisor are, first and foremost, two individuals who develop a relationship that goes beyond the work sphere, as opposed to strictly limiting their interactions to work-related matters; and the *genuine* nature of the relationship, the perception that the relationship is truthful and authentic, as opposed to a relationship between two individual actors sticking to the job script and playing the subordinate and the supervisory roles. The *personal dimension* and the *genuine* nature of the relationship were found particularly impactful on the participants' well-being. Although the coding process identified four broad overarching concepts, they are articulated in a relationship of conditionality, in which the positive effects associated with supportive and listening behaviours reinforce the subordinates' well-being when perceived within the scope of a personal and genuine relationship. Moreover, the value attributed to the personal and genuine relationship seem to reflect

relevant traits of the Portuguese cultural context, suggesting that to make sense of the supervisor-subordinate relationships' effects on the subordinates' well-being in this cultural context requires the consideration of the whole person, the *person-as-real* rather than the *person-as-actor* performing the supervisory/subordinate role. In other words, in this context, the opportunity to relate to the real individual who is playing the supervisory role – the person behind the supervisory mask, and to establish a personal and authentic relationship with him/her seems to be critical to the subordinates' well-being.

Supervisor support and listening

The interviewees stressed the importance of counting on their supervisors for help and support, having supervisors who care about them and listen to their concerns. Even more important for their well-being was feeling that support was sincere and supervisors were genuinely prepared to address the issues raised by them. When lacking the expected supervisor support, the subordinates felt vulnerable and forced to resort to their own resources, feeling that the supervisors had failed them, and leaving them on their own when they most needed help, with detrimental effects on their well-being.

"*Can I count on you?*". Counting on the supervisor for help and support was rated by nearly everyone as the number one quality in a supervisor-subordinate relationship:

My ideal supervisor is someone who should be there [...] Whenever we need him, we know he is there; whatever happens, we know he is there; no matter what my problem is, I know he is there [...] (P18).

Task assistance was appreciated but the support subordinates seemed to value most, making a difference to their well-being was placed at a different level – the human dimension of the supervisor-subordinate relationship. An engineer admitted that "*what I value more in a supervisor is the human side; caring about the workers and realising we are not merely workers but human beings with our own problems*" (P19). A clerk detailed what she considered the ideal supervisor: "*someone who is very humane and sympathetic, able to motivate and put him/herself in someone else's shoes*" (P13). Illustrating the importance of the human touch and the caring role supervisors might play, another clerk referred to an unexpected email she received from her supervisor during a challenging period in her lifetime that really made a difference to her: "*I felt better reading it; coming from my supervisor, those words really made me feel better*" (P3).

The accounts from participants with supervisory experience are particularly insightful reflecting different views of the development of emotional links with the subordinates and how close those relationships should be, but aware of the importance of understanding the subordinates' feelings and providing emotional support: "*People sometimes need a shoulder to lean or cry, I try to provide that when I realise someone is feeling down*" (P9). Another supervisor also favoured proximity, though more instrumental than emphatic, conceding that "*a good supervisor should know what's going on in the mind of the people working with him/her*" (P4). A third participant with supervisory experience (P21) had a different view valuing the advantages of keeping some distance: "*I don't think a supervisor should be friendly to subordinates, playing the 'nice guy'*". From her viewpoint, caring about the subordinates means being protective and preventing the likely harmful effects of bad news, though not necessarily being transparent: "*we have to manage very carefully the information we share downwards; I don't mean hiding the bad news but telling them the whole truth could often be counterproductive*" (P21).

Although the managers' motivations for helping employees are mainly instrumental thinking of emotional help as over and above their duties (Toegel et al., 2013), it is the

emotional support that really seems to make a difference to the interviewees' well-being. Looking at the mechanisms explaining the recipients' behaviour, Eisenberger et al. (2023) distinguish reciprocity (*felt obligation*) from *gratitude*, providing evidence that it is gratitude that fosters emotional bonding and the subordinates' desire to develop a close relationship with the supervisor. The emotional support P3 received from her supervisor, simple words that she perceived as authentic made her feel she was not alone and that there was someone out there (the supervisor) who genuinely cared about her. Gratitude is implicit in P3's words, and the emotional bonding and closeness triggered by that supportive event are apparent, as illustrated in P3's description of a coffee break with her supervisor: "*she cracks a few jokes and we all end up saying silly things, as if we were teenagers*" (P3). On her account, their close personal relationship could no longer be described as two actors playing the subordinate and the supervisory role, but as two human beings who liked each other's company knowing they could count on each other for help and support.

"*Why are you doing this to me?*". When expectations of supervisor support are very high, not getting the expected support might be very painful with detrimental effects on the subordinates' well-being. Some cases of subordinates' well-being affected by unsupportive behaviour and signs of negative reciprocity were detected in the interviews: "*I ask him for help sometimes; the following day, I am still waiting for a reply; what can I do? I feel powerless [...]*" (P20); "*I often feel abandoned; my supervisor [...] has not talked to me for months [...], he has no idea of what I am doing [...] he does not care, I guess [...]; I always do my best to avoid conflicts, but I also have my limits [...]; I think I had enough*" (P18); "*some people are losing interest in what they do [...] That's the atmosphere around here now [...] if the company doesn't care, I don't care*" (P8). Having been working with the current supervisor for almost ten years, another subordinate described the relationship as "*not very close, but without problems*", until the lack of emotional support in a highly demanding period uncovered tensions that might have otherwise remained hidden:

I honestly believe that we could still be having a rather normal work relationship [...] but I felt I was on my own [...] I cannot stand that person anymore (P15).

illustrating the damaging effects on well-being of supervisors failing to fulfil the subordinates' support expectations.

Unsupportive supervision has a negative effect on the subordinates' well-being (Hämmig, 2017), a process that starts with disappointment (like in P8 above) but that can evolve to frustration (like in P18), and anger (like in P15). As pointed out by McIlroy et al. (2021), even more harmful to the subordinate's well-being is not receiving supervisor support after having actively requested it, like in the case of P20 reported above, exposing her vulnerability and dependence. Moreover, when subordinates describe their relationships as "*the supervisor has not talked to me for months*" (P18), "*I feel abandoned*" (P20), and "*I cannot stand that person anymore*" (P15), their responses show that they were no longer regarding their relationships at the work level, as a stage where two actors – the supervisor, on the one side, and the subordinate, on the other – play their work roles; they had moved to a different level, one in which things get personal; they speak as if they had been offended and were unlikely to forget about it. Briefly, the interviewees' accounts seem to suggest that in a context where emotions run high, unsatisfied support expectations can easily lead to bitterness, as if there was a fine line between love and hate. Such reactions would possibly be interpreted as overreactions elsewhere but were described as "natural" by the participants. Although scarce, the literature seems to suggest that unsupportive behaviour is likely to be taken personally in an environment where subordinates are particularly sensitive to

interpersonal relationships with supervisors, reflecting the femininity and high power-distance dimensions of the Portuguese cultural context (Rego and Cunha, 2010).

“Are you listening to me?”. Having a supervisor who listens was highly valued by every subordinate and described as making a significant contribution to their well-being: *“I feel really well when the supervisor listens”* (P16). Other subordinates had a different experience: *“I speak up, I keep trying; I can’t keep quite when there is something that needs to be fixed; but often, nothing happens”* (P20). Feeling hopeless and close to despair, an accountant admitted *“we now have a suggestion box; I doubt anyone has ever used it; what we really need is a complaint box [...]”*, to conclude: *“my voice does not reach the higher ranks [...] I would appreciate that he listens to me or, at least, appears to listen to what I have to say”* (P18). A supervisor shared a similar experience struggling to be heard by the manager she reported to: *“Maybe they are not interested in listening to what people have to say; [...] sometimes they hear, but they don’t really listen [...]”* (P9).

Listening creates a special type of supervisor-subordinate relationship, argue Kluger and Lehmann (2018) and is a powerful means to enhance the subordinates’ well-being (Kriz et al., 2021); the benefits are extended to the listeners, as their own well-being is also likely to improve (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). When perceived as authentic, listening contributes to generate high-quality connections at work and to the creation of a state of togetherness (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022), and even more so when the supervisor listens to the personal issues of a subordinate (Mathieu et al., 2019). The supervisors’ responses depend on the type of voice – constructive or challenging –, and the extent to which voice is perceived as threatening the supervisor’s personal standing in the organisation (Burris, 2012). Based on the participants’ accounts, listening was not a general practice in this company, which was interpreted by the subordinates as a sign of indifference and contempt, perhaps reflecting the features of a high power-distance culture. As expected in such a context, subordinates “read the wind” and interpret the supervisors’ intentions and how receptive they are to the subordinates’ voice (Wilkinson et al., 2020), adopting self-protective behaviours and resorting to silence when they feel powerless to speak up (Sherf et al., 2021).

Authenticity and personal connections

The interviewees provided multiple accounts of their work experiences involving direct contact with the supervisor and the importance attributed to feeling close, the emotional bonds, the face-to-face interactions, and the perceived relational authenticity. In their own words, the supervisor-subordinate relationship involves two individuals who are not merely actors playing their work-related roles. From the subordinates’ perspective, relating to the “real” person rather than simply the actor performing the work role was highly valued. Developing this personal dimension was a major criterion in their subjective assessment of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship and a critical factor to their well-being.

“Who are you, behind the mask?”. Most subordinates regarded their daily work-related contacts with supervisors as occasions for social interaction, taking them as opportunities to foster connections on a personal level, and get closer to the supervisor. In work meetings, seating around the table and addressing each other informally allowed them to feel as equal partners, helping to reduce status differences, “we address the supervisors as if we were equal, not as “sir” or “madam”” (P14). A member of the legal department recalled her experience: *“the supervisors used to stay with us after the meeting, drinking coffee and talking about trivial things; once they invited us and we all went out for lunch”* (P13). The informal atmosphere favours more intimate one-to-one conversations:

Having a coffee with my supervisor, we may start talking about work, but then the conversation moves on, he asks me about my children, and after a while I feel like I'm having a coffee with a friend (P6)

A pleasure shared by a maintenance worker: *"My supervisor is more than a supervisor; she is a friend to me [...] my working life would not be the same without her"* (P5). Social gatherings off-work were particularly appreciated by workers at the lower ranks and seen as privileged opportunities to get to know the human beings behind the hierarchical mask and relate to them on a level playing field. *"I was playing games with my supervisor; it's amazing, I never dreamt of doing it, but I realise, in the end, we are all human beings"* (P17). In other words, having access to the supervisor, now elevated to the status of "human being", being able to interact with the real person "behind the mask", and talking to him/her as equals was a remarkable experience for most subordinates that really made a difference to their well-being.

The supervisors acknowledged the benefits of getting closer, but their views were slightly more *nuanced*. P9 shared her efforts to promote a relaxed atmosphere in work meetings, regarding them as opportunities to know the subordinates better as individuals, find common interests, and reduce status differences: *"I allow some time for small talk about nonwork matters, celebrate someone's birthday or chat informally about other issues"* (P9). Getting closer to the subordinates and taking advantage of relating to them on a personal level requires some additional investment – *"yes, I normally have lunch with them"* (P9) –, and be prepared to expose her own vulnerabilities if necessary to *"win their hearts and minds"*:

it is important for them to understand that I'm a human being taking decisions I sometimes would rather not do; I hope they see me as a person just like them (P9).

P9's efforts to be open and genuine in her relationship with her subordinates reflects her own experience with her supervisor. She describes the managers she reports to as living *"in a different world, not in the real world where we live; meeting them is like going to the movies [...]"* (P9) and she does not hesitate when asked about having to cope with their displayed inauthenticity: *"that's not healthy"*. Other supervisors, however, regarded the efforts to develop a close relationship with the subordinates as part of a script, something they *"had to do"*:

I would rather not mix in those events, but I make an effort to engage informally with the workers; it is important that they see me there and look at me as one of them (P4).

Direct face-to-face communication with the supervisor was particularly appreciated by outside maintenance workers who often felt excluded: *"we are physically apart; it looks as if we do not exist; out of sight, out of mind"* (P13). Remote work was also blamed for making upward voice more difficult:

There are things, delicate matters, you don't say in online meetings; I need to see the face of my supervisor to realise how, and when is the right moment to raise the issue (P19).

Suggesting that physical distance inevitably leads to emotional distance, affecting their sense of belonging and well-being, besides the additional challenges of online authenticity (Yang and Lin, 2023). Although managers often *"shy away from face-to-face communication because they might not be well equipped to handle such personal interactions"* (Mishra et al., 2014, p. 196), *"nothing can truly replace human interaction and face-to-face communication"* (Charalampous et al., 2022, p. 348), the nonverbal behaviour *"such as facial expression, eye contact, vocal expression, and body movement [that] is crucial to the superior-subordinate relationship"* (Teven, 2007, p. 156). The subordinates interviewed valued the informal contact and face-to-face interactions with the supervisor, regarding them as opportunities to look beyond the supervisor's displayed emotions and surface acting

(Gardner *et al.*, 2009) and hoping to feel close enough to grasp the supervisor's true self and genuine emotions. Disclosing one's inner self can facilitate the penetration of interpersonal boundaries to enter the inner relationship circle of interacting partners and helping to build a positive relationship (Tang *et al.*, 2023). In other words, what mattered most to the participants was being able to access and connect with the authentic individual, the "true human being" *behind the mask* who happens to be the supervisor. The desire to connect with the person "behind the mask", the authentic individual rather than the one who is playing the supervisory role, and the idealisation of the "supervisor as a friend" are interesting findings that seem to reflect feminine and high power-distance features of the Portuguese cultural context identified by Hofstede (1991).

Discussion

Taking the subordinates' perspective, this study explored the supervisor-subordinate relationships and daily interactions in a Portuguese utility company, how subordinates made sense of those relationships and what they meant for their well-being. The findings suggest that supervisor-subordinate relationships are dynamic processes in which the subordinates' perceptions of the nature and quality of their relationships with the supervisors have important effects, positive or negative, on their well-being. The study found that supervisor support contributes to the subordinates' well-being, particularly when it involves *emotional* support and not simply instrumental task-related support, but the main findings include the subordinates' appreciation and value placed upon the supervisors' expressions of care and concern they perceived as authentic. In other words, it is the *perceived authenticity* of the supervisor, when subordinates feel that supervisors are *sincere* and *truly* care about them and are *genuinely* willing to listen to them and to provide them support helping them tackle personal, as well as work-related problems, that really makes a significant contribution to their well-being. Supervisors perceived as authentic foster the subordinates' willingness to develop a close relationship with them, only possible when a *personal dimension* emerges in the relationship and the supervisor-subordinate relationship is no longer confined to the work sphere and work-related matters, but to reach the state of *relational closeness* subordinates have to be able to connect with the "*person behind the supervisory mask*", i.e. the person-as-real rather than the person-as-actor who is sticking to the job script and playing the supervisory role. Most studies on the use of masks and masking practices follow the pattern already identified in the authenticity literature and take the mask-wearers' viewpoint, while overlooking the observers' perspective. This study contributes to fill this gap shedding light on the observer's perspective by exploring how subordinates make sense of their supervisors' "masks", and the efforts they make to "unmask" them to getting close to the authentic supervisor. From this standpoint, what ultimately seems to matter to the subordinates' well-being is the development of a close and personal connection with the supervisor, the opportunity to take the supervisor-subordinate relationship to a different level, one in which the relationship is not confined to the work roles and both parties "drop their masks", interacting face-to-face and expressing their genuine emotions, prepared to disclose their inner selves, stripped from formal roles and job positions. Another main finding of this study is related to the importance of the cultural and social context in this process. The study suggests that the subordinates' expectations and the importance they attribute to the development of authentic relationships with the supervisors, and the idealisation of the "*supervisor as a friend*" that is implicit in several testimonies appear to reflect relevant traits of the Portuguese culture, in contrast with what has been reported in studies conducted in other Western countries. Together, these findings contribute to a better understanding of supervisor-subordinate relationships shedding additional light on the importance of the perceived authenticity of the supervisor and the development of close supervisor-subordinate

relationships to the subordinates' well-being in cultural settings other than the prototypical Western and Eastern cultures that have attracted most attention in cross-cultural studies.

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Implications for theory

This research provides additional evidence of the complexity and the dynamic and multidimensional nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships. The study of supervisor-subordinate relationships has benefitted from the valuable contributions of different literatures and theoretical perspectives and frameworks, each of which shedding light on some dimensions of the relationship, while leaving other dimensions in the dark. The supervisor-subordinate relationship involves two individuals living in a particular cultural setting and playing multiple roles besides the supervisor and subordinate ones: the human beings with their own private and family lives; the citizens with their political views and religious faiths ... It is argued that although mainly focused on work-related matters, the way the two individuals relate to each other also reflects what they are as individuals and the context in which they live. Focusing on their task-related interactions from 9-to-5, so to speak, as in the traditional leadership theories offers a limited contribution to fully understand their relationship. A better understanding of supervisor-subordinate relationships and their effects on the subordinates' well-being requires a more comprehensive and integrated approach that considers the full picture, not only task-related but also nonwork-related interactions, and other personal matters. In sum, revisiting and redefining the scope and boundaries of the supervisor-subordinate relationship is a necessary step to move this field forward.

Based on the subordinates' accounts, the supervisors' expressions of care and concern perceived as authentic make a significant contribution to the subordinates' well-being. Despite the growing body of literature on authenticity, including recent developments that relate the authenticity of the leader to the followers' well-being ([Macamo and Klasmeier, 2024](#)), the authentic leadership remains a "*deeply problematic leadership theory*" ([Alvesson and Einola, 2019](#), p. 394), in which the community of scholars are still struggling "*to establish a consensus on the definition of authentic leadership*" ([Ostermeier et al., 2024](#), p.151). New contributions attempting to overcome the traditional self-referential nature of authentic leadership, like the authenticity of actions ([Helmuth et al., 2024](#)) are already being criticised on the grounds that it "*only scratches the surface of the debate*" ([Ostermeier et al., 2024](#), p. 153). This study joins the crowd claiming that a conceptual clarification is needed for the field to move forward. Following [Alvesson and Einola's \(2019\)](#) argument, researchers might have been digging on the wrong side of this phenomenon. Rather than looking at the more fashionable but self-referential concept of authenticity, more attention should be paid to the extent to which leaders are sincere and genuine and "act authentically", pointed out Einola and Alvesson, in [Gardner et al. \(2021\)](#).

In other words, replacing "being authentic" by "acting authentically" is an inspiring move that brings about a potentially enlightening perspective on supervisor-subordinate relationships, one that changes the language used for a start: supervisors, subordinates, playing the supervisory role, and supervisor authenticity give way to "actors", "acting", "wearing the supervisory mask", and "unmasking the supervisor". From this perspective, what really counts for the subordinates' well-being is the perception that supervisors are not surface actors faking their concerns with the subordinates' needs, or wearing the mask of the caring supervisor who comes to rescue the subordinates who are "crying for help". Bearing in mind that "*the backstage in unseen by and inaccessible to audiences*" ([Lehman et al., 2019](#), p. 21), subordinates are obviously unable to find out for sure whether the supervisors' actions and displayed emotions truly reflect what they feel inside, and whether their expressed willingness to support and listen to subordinates is genuine. From this viewpoint,

subordinates can only guess whether supervisors are engaging in deep acting – the genuine emotional display, or in surface acting – the fake emotional display (Groth *et al.*, 2009) showing care and concern for the subordinates' difficulties. Surface actors are likely to be perceived by observers as inauthentic and surface acting equated to *wearing a mask* (Brodsky, 2021). Inspired by Goffman, Inglis and Almila (2020) admit that by performing their social identities and exposing their emotional states, individuals are *putting on a mask*. Few words were so often used in daily conversations in the early years of this decade as “mask” and “wearing a mask”. The use of facemasks as protection against infection during the COVID-19 brought masking practices to the centre of the scholarly debate (Inglis and Almila, 2020; Shim, 2023), though the role played by masks as facial ornaments in social life, and the symbolic use of masks and masking rituals has long been a relevant research topic in anthropological and ethnographic studies (e.g. Pollock, 1995). Metaphorically speaking, every individual lives *behind a mask* and *practices the mask* in different manners (Shim, 2023). From a semiotic perspective, Pollock (1995) regards masking as a means through which personal and social identities are displayed, revealed, or disguised. By covering the face and concealing the eyes, masks hide one's true character and intentions (Inglis and Almila, 2020) hindering the face engagement and eye-to-eye contact that is necessary to initiate an encounter and other communication practices (Goffman, 1963). In that sense, the mask becomes an instrument of isolation and dehumanisation (Kelley, 2020), a device to re-engineer spatial relations and promote social distancing (Inglis and Almila, 2020). Briefly, masks hide as much as they reveal, reflecting the different meanings and the paradoxical aspects of the mask-wearing experience and individuals can be seen as social performers who reveal themselves as mask-wearers (Shim, 2023). Like in leadership studies, the literature on mask and masking has privileged the perspective of the self, but new theoretical developments are needed to uncover and provide explanations of the mechanisms by which subordinates unmask their supervisors and make sense of their discourse and behaviours in this process.

It has long been established that the cultural context may encourage, or discourage, close relationships between subordinates and supervisors (Boyd and Taylor, 1998). The Portuguese cultural context provides a unique combination of ambivalent and contradictory influences on relational closeness in supervisor-subordinate relationships. On the one hand, feminine and strongly uncertainty avoidant traits are expected to foster close relationships between supervisors and subordinates, more opportunities for mutual help and social contacts, supervisors seeking consensus and solving conflicts by compromise and negotiation, and subordinates seeking protection and answers to their problems from supervisors (Hofstede, 1991). On the other, high power-distance is expected to be a deterrent to informal social interactions between supervisors and subordinates, a context in which the individuals' acceptance of traditional power relationships in society and obedience to authority is promoted (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020), subordinates tend to “*accept their place in the hierarchical order*” (Robinson *et al.*, 2012, p. 723), and supervisors are ideally seen as wearing the mask of benevolent autocrats or “good fathers” (Hofstede, 1991). Such a context is likely to foster defensive behaviours among subordinates and inhibit relational closeness in supervisor-subordinate relationships, undermining any attempt to nurture the idealisation of the “supervisor as equal” that might have emerged from the protective and caring feminine context. Yet, in collectivist cultures, interpersonal influences and relationships tend to prevail (Reis *et al.*, 2000), individuals tend to suppress their own feelings to meet social expectations (Xia and Xu, 2023), and work relations resemble family relationships with mutual obligations of protection in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 1991). Furthermore, in cultural contexts that combine collectivism and high power-distance, as typically found in Western

nations with a Catholic religious tradition (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020) like Portugal, developing a personal relationship and feeling emotionally close to the supervisor is no trivial achievement. The findings suggest that when that stage is reached, the positive impact on the parties involved is significant. Collectivist cultures have also been described as placing less value upon authenticity (Cha *et al.*, 2019), an ideal strongly embraced by Western cultures (Ostermeier *et al.*, 2022a; Slabu *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, studies of Western cultures, for which the U.S. is normally presented as the prototypical example (Xia and Xu, 2023), found that authenticity at work might not significantly relate to well-being (Robinson *et al.*, 2012, p. 732). The findings of this study seem to suggest otherwise – the perceived supervisor authenticity does matter to the subordinates' well-being. Such differences can be attributed to the cultural differences between Portugal and other Western cultures. Although politically and economically a Western country, the Portuguese culture is perhaps best described as combining features of the Western and Eastern cultures. In fact, the importance attributed to social interactions and relationships seems closer to what is found in the so-called Eastern cultures (Slabu *et al.*, 2014), and some studies even depict the Portuguese working environment and culture as “*antipodal to the American culture*” (Rego and Cunha, 2010, p. 409). Briefly, the Portuguese cultural context does not seem the easiest environment for theoretical frameworks like leadership, and authentic leadership, strongly anchored in the American culture and traditions (Alvesson and Einola, in Gardner *et al.*, 2021) to flourish. The findings of this study contribute to this debate and stress the need to further examine supervisor-subordinate relationships in contexts that do not fit into the typical Western context that is implicit in the literature that tends to overlook the diversity of Western cultural and social realities, perhaps ignoring the Hofstede's (2009) remark “*there is no such thing as 'the West'*” (p. 571). There is “the West”, but the findings suggest it is a more diverse one than it is often assumed in the literature. In sum, the need is apparent to revisit theoretical frameworks used in supervisor-subordinate relationships studies and incorporate the cultural dimension, to raise their explanatory power in contexts that do not fit the prototypical Western (or Eastern) ones.

Implications for practice

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations can be made to supervisors, such as the importance of acting as genuine providers of emotional support and as active listeners of the subordinates' concerns and being able to relate to the subordinates as human beings – considering the whole person, not simply the individual employee. By doing so, a positive effect on the subordinates' well-being can be expected. According to the findings, subordinates feel better as they become closer to their supervisors, close enough to allow them to catch each other's eyes and see the authentic person behind the supervisory mask. Different initiatives can be taken by the organisation to promote a relaxed atmosphere and an informal environment where nonwork-related personal interactions and close encounters beyond the work sphere are likely to happen. However, despite the positive effects of *relational closeness* pointed out in this paper, questions can also be raised about the risks involved in excessive closeness. When things get personal, an angry outburst can easily spark a negative response and reach the point of no return. Reactions from subordinates experiencing what appears to be a case of regret for getting too close and not keeping a distance from their supervisors were mentioned in the Findings section. Both supervisors and subordinates should be aware of these risks and do what is necessary to prevent the side effects of personal connections “taken too far”, that might be perceived as intrusive or leading to favouritism. How far can the relational closeness go? It should not be assumed that every subordinate aspires to reach a high level of closeness, or dreams of relating to supervisors as close friends. Although the idealisation of the “supervisor as

a friend” was shared by some participants, others were more cautious showing reservations about the prospect of becoming friends with their supervisors. In other words, developing “*the right level of closeness*” is likely to be a challenging assignment for both supervisors and subordinates.

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations that are normally associated with qualitative studies based on data collected in a single organisation. Although reflecting features of the national cultural context, the utility company where the study was conducted is a unique setting, one in which retention rates are high and “job for life” expectations are not uncommon among employees. A replication of the study in more competitive sectors and with lower retention rates might provide additional insights on the importance of close supervisor-subordinate relationships. The list of participants was limited to individuals broadly categorised as subordinates or with supervisory experience, though not necessarily part of a dyadic relationship; contrasting the views of both sides in the relationship could shed additional light on their connection. The study was conducted at a time when participants were still recovering from the pandemic restrictions on social interactions, which might have inflated the importance attributed to physical proximity and to emotionally close supervisor-subordinate relationships and the subordinates’ urge to meet “*the person behind the mask*”. In a context of growing adoption of remote and hybrid work and in which direct face-to-face interactions no longer happen daily, it is worth looking at the effects of this “new normal” on supervisor-subordinate relationships, particularly in cultures where close contacts seem to be so highly valued.

Future research on supervisor-subordinate relationships and their impact on well-being should consider the personal and non-work dimensions of those relationships when designing studies in cultural contexts where these dimensions might be particularly relevant. In such cultural contexts, studies confined to what goes on in work settings and focused on work-related constructs might provide a limited picture of the supervisor-subordinate relationships leaving aside critical aspects to fully understand the nature of the relationships and what they mean for the participants’ well-being. On the other hand, and as pointed above, the supervisor-subordinate relationships are better described as dynamic step-by-step developmental processes that cannot easily be captured by one-shot data collection methods. A contribution to better understanding of these relationship and how they evolve over time and affect the subordinates’ well-being would be made with longitudinal studies.

The masking metaphor that has been used in this study to help making sense of the intricacies of supervisor-subordinate relationships also deserve further research. Applying the masking lens to supervisor-subordinate relationships is particularly challenging. In contrast with the actors in the theatre that drop their masks after work interacting with their peers as “human beings”, supervisors seldom stop wearing the supervisory mask and subordinates must make inferences about their messages struggling to find out whether the person they are interacting with is the person-as-real or the person wearing the supervisory mask. Further research is needed on the subordinates’ interpretation of these signals and building on [Brodsky’s \(2021\)](#) work, new theoretical developments are welcome to frame and explain the process by which subordinates become good readers of the supervisors’ body language, facial displays, and tone of voice.

Conclusion

The study takes the subordinates’ viewpoint to look at supervisor-subordinate relationships and what they mean for the subordinates’ well-being, the conditions that foster supervisor-subordinate relational closeness, and the impact of the perceived authenticity of the supervisor on the subordinates’ well-being, aspects that have been somewhat overlooked in

the supervisor-subordinate literature. The findings show that the subordinates' perceptions of the nature and quality of their relationships with the supervisors have potentially significant effects on their well-being, reflecting the dynamic and step-by-step developmental process of that relationship. The evidence suggests that the effects on the subordinates' well-being grow as the relationship moves up to a more advanced level, from the supervisor providing *emotional support* to the *perceived authenticity* of that support; the potential effects on well-being grow even further when the relationship evolves from the perceived authenticity of the supervisor to a state of *relational closeness*, in which the subordinates succeed to "unmask" the supervisor and relate to the person-as-real, the *human being behind the mask* who is playing the supervisory role. From the subordinates' viewpoint, reaching that stage means connecting to the supervisors on a personal level, being able to engage in one-to-one conversations and relate to the supervisors on a level playing field. The analysis shows that *closeness* and *authenticity* are critical to the subordinates' subjective assessment of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship and seem particularly valued by the participants, reflecting features of the Portuguese cultural context that might not be as relevant elsewhere. The discussion explores the ways in which the blending of Western and Eastern features that make up the Portuguese cultural context provides a unique combination of ambivalent and contradictory influences on relational closeness in supervisor-subordinate relationships challenging the attempted idealisation of the "supervisor as a friend" that appears to be shared by some subordinates. When the curtain falls and the actors drop their masks, the subordinates get real and realise that, after all, the person behind the mask ... is the supervisor!

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Appendix. Interview script

- Please describe a typical day at work.
- Are your work activities mainly carried out on your own or as part of a team?
- How often do you meet, or talk to your supervisor? Who takes the initiative in most cases?
- Does that interaction happen always face-to-face? Does it make a difference to you having the conversation face-to-face or by other means?
- When you experience difficulties performing the tasks assigned to you, who do you first contact asking for help? Your supervisor? A co-worker?
- In general, how supportive is the supervisor and your co-workers? How do you feel when you get that support from one and from the other?
- Is the support from your supervisor normally focused on the task? In emotional terms, do you also feel supported? Can you provide examples of situations in which you consider that your supervisor was very supportive, and situations in which you feel you did not get the required support?

- Do you feel you have to pay them back? If yes, what do you do to reciprocate? Does it make a difference in your 'feeling obliged to pay back' whether the target is your supervisor or a co-worker?
- How do you feel when you don't get the support you asked from the supervisor or from a co-worker? What impact does it have on you? How do you react to that?
- If you have reasons to believe that work activities are not being run as they should, do you feel comfortable sharing your views with the supervisor? How receptive is the supervisor to your suggestions?
- Do you feel that the supervisor always tells you what he/she really thinks about the issues being discussed?
- Are issues related to your private life or other nonwork-related matters (e.g. sports, politics...) ever talked about with your supervisor? If yes, on what occasions (e.g. breaks, off work meetings, special occasions...)? Who takes the initiative? How do you feel about chatting about personal issues with your supervisor?
- How often do you go out (for a drink, for a meal, or a social gathering) with co-workers? What about the supervisors, do they also join you in those events? If yes, do you feel comfortable with that? What difference does it make, in terms of what is talked about, and the language used when the supervisor is part of the conversation?
- What differences do you notice in the supervisor's behaviour when the interaction takes place off work?
- Can you provide examples of interactions with your supervisor that you consider that were particularly impactful (positively or negatively) on you?
- What negative experiences can you recall in the interaction with your supervisor? What made you feel so bad about it? How did you recover and overcome that situation? Did your relationship with the supervisor ever be the same again?
- How close do you consider yourself to be to your supervisor? How do envisage the possibility of being friends with your supervisor?
- What are your fulfilled and unmet expectations regarding your relationship with the supervisor?
- What changes in the way you currently relate and interact with your supervisor you believe would contribute to improve your work experience?

Source: The aforementioned script is prepared by the author

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