

# **Does Social Support Source and Type Differently Affect Workplace Stress in a Manufacturing Sample?**

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*Effect of Social Support Source and Type on Workplace Strain*]**

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*We examined the moderating effects of social support on the stress-strain relation in the work context in terms of the type of support perceived and the source of the support. Social support did not moderate this relationship, with the exception of organizational support and turnover intentions.*

In a survey of the US workforce, one third of respondents indicated that their jobs were “often” or “always” stressful (Murphy & Sauter, 2003). Research has indicated that consistent exposure to stress is associated with negative physical and psychological reactions such as insomnia, depression, (Conti, Angelis, Cooper, Faragher, & Gill, 2006) and high blood pressure (Caplan, Cobb, & French, 1975). Job characteristics and organizational practices, such as lean management (Bendell, 2006), have been implicated as contributors to employee work stress (Conti et al., 2006).

Work stress negatively affects both the health and productivity of the individual and the organization. As illustrative of these detrimental effects, Cox, Griffiths, and Rial-Gonzales (2000) reported that 50 to 60 percent of all lost working days are stress related. One means available to counteract employee strain is to harness the power of social support in the workplace. Although initial research on social support in the organizational context has been very promising (Ganster, Fusilier & Mayes, 1986), a more detailed understanding of the social support

process is necessary for social support to be used effectively in the workplace.

## *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was twofold: First, to determine whether perceived social support serves as a moderator in the stress-strain relationship and second, to investigate whether the source of the support and type of social support impact its effectiveness. Next, we will provide a description of each of the major constructs of interest for this study.

## *Stress*

Stress, strain, and social support have been operationalized in various ways over the course of the many research studies. To ensure clarity for the context of this study, each of these constructs will be defined here. *Stress* is defined by Caplan et al. (1975) as any characteristic of the job environment that poses a threat to the individual’s well being. Stress occurs when there are demands that cannot be met by the individual or the resources available are insufficient to meet the demand or complete the task. In the organizational context, a stressor is defined as a

work related cause of or input to stress. *Role stress will be measured using three separate, but related variables. Role conflict* arises when the expectations of various parties are inconsistent or incongruent with role demands, values, or personal needs (Leigh, Lucas, & Woodman, 1988). This conflict creates tension within the individual, leading to the experience of strain. *Role ambiguity* is defined by a lack of necessary information about the expectations of one's given role in the organization (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). When job responsibilities and tasks are not clearly defined, the individual may experience uncertainty about what behaviors fulfill his or her role obligations. *Role overload* occurs when there is inadequate time and resources available to meet the expectations and obligations of one's role. These stresses lead to several undesirable outcomes within the work setting, including strain, burnout, lessened organizational commitment, and intentions to leave.

#### *Outcomes of Work Stress*

*Strain* is an outcome of chronic stress that results in a deviation from an individual's normal responses (Caplan et al., 1975). The detrimental effects of strain can manifest both physically and psychologically (Caplan et al., 1975). Although many measures of strain exist, current research has identified burnout, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions as particularly relevant indicators of employee strain (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006). *Burnout* occurs when job demands are high and resources are perceived to be limited. Role demands exhaust the individual's mental and physical resources which may decrease motivation and lead to a state of exhaustion (Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005).

*Organizational commitment* represents the strength of an individual's identification with the organization and his or her involvement in the organization. Reduced organizational commitment is an important strain outcome for organizations because organizational commitment is related to turnover intentions (Meyer, Stanley, & Herscovitch, 2002; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). *Turnover*

*intentions* are defined as an individual's intention to withdraw from the job (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006) and can include thoughts of leaving one's position at one end of the continuum to searching for alternative job opportunities at the other (Ngo, Foley, & Loi, 2005).

The negative effects for the individual and the organization have led researchers to investigate factors that may mitigate the effects of stress on employees. These factors can be those that come from the organization, coworkers, friends, family, or within the individual him or herself. Here, we will focus on social support from the organization and supervisor.

#### *Social Support*

Social support is the degree of consideration, information, and task assistance available to an individual from his or her personal network (Iverson, Olekalns, & Erwin, 1998). Social support can further be categorized into two types: emotional and instrumental. *Emotional* support involves receiving affection, acceptance, or respect from others in times of stress (Lindorff, 2005). Emotional support provides understanding and acceptance to the individual in times of stress, which may subsequently reduce strain. The second type of social support is *instrumental* support, which involves receiving information, advice, materials, and assistance from others (Lindorff, 2005). The distinction between the types of support, however, is not as clear as past research might suggest (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994). Many social support scales include items that assess both forms of social support. Consequently, much of the prior research on work stress does not explicitly distinguish emotional from instrumental support.

Additionally, the type of social support may impact employees differently due to gender differences. Though not consistent across all studies, social support has often been found to be more beneficial for women than for men. Social support may interact with gender roles (Barbee, et al., 1993). Accepting emotional support may conflict with the male gender role (Bem 1974) and may lead to increased stress (Lindorff,

2005), constituting a reverse buffering effect (Lindorff, 2005). Instrumental social support is not likely to conflict with the male gender role, and should be beneficial in reducing strain. In contrast, the female gender role does not conflict with receiving emotional or instrumental support. Consideration of the type of social support provided may help explain why the reverse buffering effect occurs with men but not with women (Lindorff, 2005).

Social support in the organizational context can stem from coworkers, one's supervisor, or the organization itself. Although support from co-workers and significant others outside of the organization is important, previous studies have shown that a supportive relationship with one's supervisor is more closely related to lower levels of reported work strain than support from other sources (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; Lim, 1996). Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is the extent to which employees believe aid is available from the organization to perform their jobs and to deal with stressful events (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Based on Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), many researchers assume the supervisor is a representative of the organization. The supervisor's support is construed by the employee as a message of caring from the organization, a characterization that may not be accurate. The support individuals perceive as stemming from the supervisor is distinguishable from organizational support (Stinglhamber, de Cremer & Mercken, 2006); further we argue that an employee may experience social support from his or her supervisor without attributing it to the organization.

### *Hypotheses*

Based on previous studies of social support and strain, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 1) that perceived social support would serve as a moderator in the relationship between role stress and strain. When the perceived level of social support is high, the relationship between role stress and measures of strain would be weaker than when perceived social support is low.

We further hypothesized (Hypothesis 2) that employees would differentiate supervisor and organizational social support and that each form of support would impact strain outcomes differently. Specifically, perceived support from one's organization has been shown to lead to greater organizational commitment (Stinglhamber et al., 2006); therefore, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 2a) perceived organizational support would be more strongly related to the employees' experience of organizational commitment than to perceived supervisor support. Social support from one's supervisor has been related to trust in the supervisor (Stinglhamber et al., 2006); therefore, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 2b) supervisor support would be more strongly related to measures of burnout than organizational support.

The type of social support, either instrumental or emotional, may impact the effectiveness of social support by gender. We hypothesized (Hypothesis 3a) men would report lower levels of strain when they perceived the support available as instrumental rather than emotional. We hypothesized (Hypothesis 3b) the predictability of strain for women would not vary by type of support perceived.

## Method

### *Sample*

Participants for this study were drawn from employees of an aerospace component manufacturing company and a zirconium production plant located in the Western United States. A total of 234 surveys were completed, 145 from the zirconium manufacturing plant and 89 from the aerospace manufacturer. No differences were detected in study variables by plant. Tenure with the organization ranged from 3 months to 353 months (29.4 years) with an average of 190 months (15.8 years) with the company. The amount of time employees worked for their current supervisor ranged from .5 months to 300 months (25 years) with an average time of 38.87 months (about 3 years). Of the respondents, 173 were male (73.9%) and 33 were female (14.1%); 28 individuals declined to state (12%).

### Measures

*Role stress.* Role stress was measured using the role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload scales developed by Peterson and colleagues (1995). Participants indicated their level of agreement with items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). No differences were hypothesized by type of role stress; therefore, a composite score was calculated by summing scores on all three scales. (Role ambiguity scores were first reverse coded so that higher scores on each scale indicated greater stress). Higher composite scores indicated greater role stress, with a possible range of 14 to 70.

*Social support.* A workplace social support scale that actively distinguished between instrumental and emotional support was not found in a literature search; therefore, a scale was created for this study. Existing items were drawn from the Perceived Organizational Support scale (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and Abbey, Abramis, and Caplan's (1985) social support scale. Nine emotional support items and eight instrumental support items were written by the authors. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement about their current supervisor [Supervisor Support Perceptions (SSP) scale] and their organization [Organizational Support Perceptions (OSP) scale] using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more perceived support.

*Burnout.* The level of burnout experienced by employees was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which assesses exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores represent more signals of burnout.

*Organizational commitment.* Organizational commitment was measured by Cook and Wall's (1980) nine-item scale that assesses the employee's overall commitment to the organization in terms of organizational

identification, involvement, and loyalty.

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores denoting greater commitment.

*Turnover Intentions.* Intentions to leave the organization were measured using Cohen's (1998) three-item scale. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High scores mark an increased intention to leave.

### Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, alpha reliabilities, and the intercorrelations of all study variables.

#### *Moderating Effects (Hypothesis 1)*

Sequential regression analyses were used to determine if perceived social support weakened the relationship between role stress and strain. The role stress composite score and the social support measures of SSP and OSP were used as independent variables. The dependent variable was one of the three strain measures: turnover intentions, burnout, and organizational commitment. Regression analysis was conducted on each strain outcome using first OSP and then SSP. In the first step of the analysis, the role stress and social support variables were entered. The interaction between role stress and social support was added in the second step. See Table 2.

While role stress and organizational support significantly predicted each form of strain, the only significant interaction of these two variables was in predicting turnover intentions. Role stress and OSP accounted for 32.5% of the variance in turnover intentions (Multiple  $R = .57$ , Multiple  $R^2 = .33$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .32$ ). The prediction of turnover intentions was significantly improved by adding the interaction of role stress and OSP to the model,  $F$  change<sub>(1,198)</sub> = 14.67,  $p < .05$ . An additional 4.7% of the variance in turnover intentions was accounted for by adding the interaction of role stress and OSP to a model that

already contained role stress and OSP,  $R^2$  change = .05. As role stress increases, those with the lowest perceptions of organizational support report the highest turnover intentions. See Figure 1.

#### *Source Difference (Hypothesis 2)*

In hypothesis 2a, we predicted that organizational support would be more strongly related to organizational commitment than supervisor support. To compare the strength of the correlations, Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation was used. The correlation between OSP and organizational commitment (.56) was not significantly greater than the correlation (.45) between SSP and organizational commitment ( $z = 1.45, p > .05$ ). Hypothesis 2a was not supported in that social support had a similar effect on the commitment an employee felt to the organization, regardless of the source. Hypothesis 2b predicted that supervisor support would be more strongly related to measures of employee burnout than organizational support. Hypothesis 2b was not supported. The correlation between burnout and SSP (-.36) was not significantly stronger than the correlation (-.51) between burnout and OSP ( $z=1.78, p > .05$ ).

#### *Gender Differences in Support Type (Hypothesis 3)*

We had hypothesized that for men, reported strain would be lower when they perceived instrumental support than when they perceived emotional support. No difference was predicted for women in the reporting of strain as a function of whether emotional or instrumental support was perceived. The emotional and instrumental items in the OSP and SSP scales were separately summed to create an emotional support index and an instrumental support index for each scale. Separate regressions were run by gender. Role stress and social support (instrumental or emotional) served as independent variables and the three strain outcomes served as the dependent variable.

Partial support was found for hypothesis 3a. For men, turnover intentions were significantly predicted from instrumental support,  $\beta = -.33, t_{(154)} = -2.14, p < .05$ , but not from emotional

support,  $\beta = -.23, t_{(154)} = -1.49, p > .05$ .

Organizational commitment was also significantly predicted from instrumental support,  $\beta = .41, t_{(154)} = 2.70, p < .05$ , but not from emotional support,  $\beta = .16, t_{(154)} = 1.03, p > .05$ . Men reported fewer turnover intentions and more organizational commitment when they perceived instrumental support rather than emotional support. Emotional and instrumental support was not predictive of burnout for men.

No support was found for hypothesis 3b. For women, emotional and instrumental support was not predictive of turnover intentions or burnout. For organizational commitment, instrumental support proved to be a better predictor,  $\beta = .81, t_{(28)} = 2.43, p < .05$ , than emotional support,  $\beta = -.32, t_{(28)} = -.96, p > .05$ , contrary to the stated hypothesis.

## Discussion

Previous research findings have been mixed regarding whether social support weakens the relationship between stress and strain. With hypothesis one we had predicted that both supervisor and organizational support would buffer employees against strain when stressors were present in the work environment. Minimal support was found for this hypothesis. Organizational support demonstrated a buffering effect only on turnover intentions. No buffering effects were found for supervisor support on any of the strain measures. While minimal buffering effects were found in the current study, role stress and social support were individually predictive of strain outcomes in all analyses, suggesting that stress and support may have direct but separate effects on strain. The findings imply that stressors can affect individuals regardless of the social support available and social support can affect strain regardless of the stressors present in the environment.

The exception for buffering may be in the case of organizational support and turnover intentions. Expressing intentions to leave the organization is a more dramatic response to stress than having less commitment to the organization and feeling burnt out or strained. Because this response is somewhat more

extreme, a greater level of stress is likely needed to increase turnover intentions. The organization providing the employee support during times of stress may signal that the organization cares about the individual and therefore, the decision to leave the organization may not be necessary.

The second goal of this study was to determine if employees distinguish social support provided by their supervisor from support provided by the organization. In hypothesis 2a we had predicted support perceived as stemming from the organization would be more strongly related to organizational commitment than support stemming from one's supervisor. The difference in the correlation between organizational support and commitment and the correlation between supervisor support and commitment was not statistically significant although the observed difference was in the predicted direction. We had expected that organizational support would boost employees' feelings of commitment to the organization more so than supervisor support. Some supervisors may be viewed as the exception to the personification of the organization that individuals tend to create when perceiving social support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). If the supervisor is viewed as qualitatively different from the organizational persona, then any support from the supervisor is likely to build commitment to one's supervisor rather than organizational commitment. Hypothesis 2b predicted that supervisor support would be more strongly related to burnout than organizational support. A difference in the strength of the correlations was again observed in the predicted direction; however, the difference failed to reach significance. Because of the frequent interactions between supervisors and subordinates we thought that supervisors would be able to provide more emotional support. This level of emotional support would likely impact the emotional exhaustion that individuals experience, which is a key factor in burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional support from supervisors may be viewed as sincere by employees because of daily interactions and supervisors' knowledge of the individuals' role demands and work history. Upper management,

on the other hand, is likely to have minimal contact with or knowledge of individual employees, which may make emotional support attempts appear shallow or insincere.

Discrepant findings for the role of social support in reducing strain suggest that men may perceive and utilize social support differently than women (González-Morales, Peiro, & Rodriguez, 2006). Prior research has implicated gender roles (Beehr, Framer, Glazer, Gudanowski & Nair, 2003) as the basis for the differential findings on social support. The instrumental form of social support, which includes information, resources, and advice, may be more consistent with the male gender role (Bem, 1974). The reverse buffering effect occurs when men receive emotional support that conflicts with their gender role, which in turn generates increased tension (Beehr et al., 2003). We predicted in hypothesis 3a that men would experience less strain when they perceived support as instrumental rather than emotional. Partial support for this hypothesis was found in these analyses. For the strain outcomes of organizational commitment and turnover intentions, men experienced less strain with instrumental support than with emotional support. Although emotional support did not appear to be particularly beneficial to men for any of the strain outcomes, it also was not detrimental, which would have been implied if a reverse buffering effect had been found.

Emotional support is more consistent with the female gender role, which is nurturing and caring (Bem, 1974). The instrumental form of support does not conflict with women's gender role, as emotional support conflicts with men's gender role. Therefore, it was predicted that women would use both forms of support and neither form would be more predictive of strain. No support was found for this hypothesis. Neither emotional nor instrumental support was predictive of turnover intentions and burnout, for women. The only statistically significant finding was that instrumental support predicted greater organizational commitment.

### Limitations

There were several limitations in this study that should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample for this study was drawn from only two organizations in the Western United States. We do not know how the findings would generalize to other industries. The sample also was predominately men, which makes the findings for the gender hypotheses difficult to interpret and generalize.

Finally, the correlational nature of this study prevents casually based inferences from being drawn. The data were gathered concurrently, which does not allow directionality to be established.

### Future Directions for Research

In future studies, researchers should seek to gather more diversified and gender balanced samples to improve the interpretability and generalizability of findings. Other non-manufacturing industries could be sampled as well to determine if the results of this study are specific to manufacturing organizations or can be generalized to other industries and occupations.

Although we found no differential effects, additional research should be conducted to determine the strength and importance of the distinction between supervisor and organizational support. If each form of support impacts strain outcomes differently, then this would suggest that there might be different antecedents for supervisor and organizational support.

### Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the experience of strain can be predicted by both the stressors present in the environment and the social support that is perceived to be available. Social support, however, does not appear to buffer individuals from strain. The type of support perceived and its source did not differentially predict the experience of strain. Individuals experienced less strain when social support was available from either the supervisor or the organization. Instrumental support seemed

to be slightly more beneficial to men and women than emotional support.

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Table 1. Measurement Scale Cronbach's Alpha Reliabilities and the Correlations between Measurement Scale Scores

|                           | Role Conflict | Role Amb | Role Over | OSP   | OSP Emotional | OSP Instrumental | SSP   | SSP Emotional | SSP Instrumental | Burnout | Org Commit | Turnover Intentions |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------|-----------|-------|---------------|------------------|-------|---------------|------------------|---------|------------|---------------------|
| Role Conflict             | .68           |          |           |       |               |                  |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| Role Ambiguity            | .22*          | .87      |           |       |               |                  |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| Role Overload             | .46*          | .10      | .89       |       |               |                  |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| OSP                       | -.31*         | -.30*    | -.23*     | .97   |               |                  |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| <i>OSP Emotional</i>      | -.31*         | -.26*    | -.25*     | **    | .94           |                  |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| <i>OSP Instrumental</i>   | -.29*         | -.33*    | -.20*     | **    | .91*          | .95              |       |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| SSP                       | -.30*         | -.34*    | -.19*     | .54*  | .59*          | .59*             | .95   |               |                  |         |            |                     |
| <i>SSP Emotional</i>      | -.27*         | -.29*    | -.20*     | .50*  | .47*          | .51*             | **    | .90           |                  |         |            |                     |
| <i>SSP Instrumental</i>   | -.32*         | -.38*    | -.19*     | .54*  | .49*          | .56*             | **    | .84*          | .94              |         |            |                     |
| Burnout                   | .32*          | .20*     | .40*      | -.51* | -.48*         | -.51*            | -.36* | -.36*         | -.34*            | .81     |            |                     |
| Organizational Commitment | -.17*         | -.21*    | -.25*     | .56*  | -.52*         | .57*             | .45*  | .43*          | .44*             | -.62*   | .79        |                     |
| Turnover Intentions       | .26*          | .23*     | .48*      | -.45* | -.44*         | -.44*            | -.38* | -.36*         | -.38*            | .49*    | -.64*      | .89                 |
| Scale Mean                | 10.23         | 12.62    | 17.70     | 43.60 | 17.67         | 25.94            | 45.50 | 28.16         | 17.34            | 34.12   | 44.47      | 6.54                |
| Standard Deviation        | 2.64          | 4.66     | 5.668     | 14.79 | 6.76          | 8.40             | 11.69 | 7.14          | 5.02             | 15.60   | 8.73       | 3.41                |
| Minimum Score             | 3             | 4        | 5         | 16    | 7             | 9                | 13    | 8             | 5                | 0       | 16         | 3                   |
| Maximum Score             | 15            | 25       | 30        | 80    | 35            | 45               | 65    | 40            | 25               | 81      | 63         | 15                  |

Notes. Values in diagonal are alpha coefficients.

\* $p < .05$

\*\*correlations of part scale with whole scale

Table 2. Regression Data of Perceived Organizational and Supervisor Support on Turnover Intentions, Organizational Commitment, and Burnout

| Perceived Organizational Support |                            |       |      |         |       |      |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------|------|---------|-------|------|
| Dependent Variable               | Predictor                  | B     | SE B | $\beta$ | t     | p    |
| Turnover Intentions              | Role Stress                | 1.23  | 0.22 | 0.35    | 5.70  | <.01 |
|                                  | Organizational Support     | -1.26 | 0.22 | -0.36   | -5.88 | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Org Support    | -0.70 | 0.18 | -0.22   | -3.83 | <.01 |
| Organizational Commitment        | Role Stress                | -1.04 | 0.57 | -0.11   | -1.82 | .07  |
|                                  | Organizational Support     | 4.62  | 0.56 | 0.52    | 8.20  | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Org Support    | -0.00 | 0.48 | -0.00   | -0.01 | .99  |
| Burnout                          | Role Stress                | 4.42  | 1.03 | 0.27    | 4.27  | <.01 |
|                                  | Organizational Support     | -6.56 | 1.02 | -0.41   | -6.45 | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Org Support    | -1.21 | 0.86 | -0.08   | -1.40 | .16  |
| Perceived Supervisory Support    |                            |       |      |         |       |      |
| Turnover Intentions              | Role Stress                | 1.39  | 0.23 | 0.39    | 5.93  | <.01 |
|                                  | Supervisor Support         | -0.79 | 0.23 | -0.23   | -3.50 | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Superv Support | -0.34 | 0.21 | -0.10   | -1.61 | .11  |
| Organizational Commitment        | Role Stress                | -1.42 | 0.62 | -0.16   | -2.31 | .02  |
|                                  | Supervisor Support         | 3.41  | 0.59 | 0.39    | 5.75  | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Superv Support | 0.15  | 0.57 | 0.017   | 0.27  | .78  |
| Burnout                          | Role Stress                | 5.54  | 1.12 | 0.34    | 4.96  | <.01 |
|                                  | Supervisor Support         | -3.53 | 1.08 | -0.23   | -3.28 | <.01 |
|                                  | Role Stress*Superv Support | -1.72 | 1.01 | -0.11   | -1.70 | .09  |

Figure 1. *Interaction of Role Stress and Social Support on Turnover Intentions*

