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TRADE UNION SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WORK STRESS: THE EXPERIENCE OF BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Industrial Social Work by course work.

December 1998

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted in ;artial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Work in Industrial Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any university.

SHULAMITE B CHIKANE

22nd Day of December 1998

ABSTRACT

This study explored the effects of perceived trade union social support on the work stress of blue collar workers. It was hypothesised that blue collar workers who obtain social support from their trade union would experience the least stress.

This study is a comparative qualitative study. The sample involved 60 blue collar workers in a Telkom workshop. The role orientation questionnaire was used to test their stress levels and thereafter the trade union social support scale was used to test their levels of perceived trade union social support

The study revealed that blue collar workers are indeed exposed to stress, however, those that perceived the trade union as giving them social support, experienced the least stress.

On the basis of the findings it is recommended that occupational social workers intervene on micro, meso and macro levels in order to help in alleviating the stress levels of blue collar workers.

To my parents, Selpati Dinah and Martin Ramolisiwa Molobi, this research report is dedicated to you.

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CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

South Africa is presently undergoing major political and social changes. However, the social structure from the past still exists. Black blue collar workers are the ones that are mostly affected by the injustices from the past. They were also disadvantaged because the social system from the past also deprived them of obtaining social support through apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act, where some of them were not allowed to live with their families in the cities.

Social support is defined as a process whereby there is a "flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, and/or appraisal between people" (House , 1981:26). Social support has been identified as a major component in a person's well being because of its potential to buffer the impact of stress on health (House, 1981). The harmful effect of stress is mitigated and even removed as social support increases, and social support would therefore benefit people who are exposed to stress(House 1981).

Work life has also been identified as stressful (Mclean, 1979). Work occupies most of our adult lives and is essential for an individual to meet his or her basic needs. However, work can adversely affect both mental and physical health. Black blue collar workers are the ones who are mostly affected by stress in the workplace because of being lowly paid and often having to work under unsatisfactory work conditions. This is one of the reasons why they join trade unions. However, unions in addition to their traditional function of promoting worker well being by striving for improved working conditions and improved remuneration, also contribute to the development of worker identity, solidarity and comradeship, thereby providing social support to workers. The trade union potential to offer social support as a buffer to stress has not yet been fully acknowledged as a resource that could be mobilised in intervention with blue collar work stress.

During the writer's employment at Telkom as an occupational social worker, trade unions have often been viewed as negative by management and the possibility of establishing links with trade unions to deliberately provide the psychological well being of blue collar workers has never been looked at.

1.2 AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to explore the relationship between the effects of perceived social support offered by the trade unions, and the extent of work stress of blue collar workers who are members of that particular trade union. It is hypothesised that blue collar workers who perceive themselves to obtain social support from their trade union, will experience the least work stress.

1.3 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Black blue collar workers in South Africa have been systematically deprived of obtaining social support through apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act that did not allow them to stay with their families as well as through circumstances at the workplace attached to occupying a low position in the hierarchy such as having less jurisdiction over their work duties. Even trade unions . . . such workers have only been permitted in the last fifteen years. Social support has been described in the literature as an external resource capable of reducing the negative impact of stress and /or improving the health and well-being of a person (Cohen and Syme, 1985). Research indicates that stress can lead to ill health (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1987; Cox 1978; Mclean,1979). A person under stress is likely to show strain (Mclean,1979; House, 1981).

This study hypothesises that black blue collar workers who perceive themselves to obtain social support from their trade union, will experience the least work stress. Should the hypothesis be supported this study will be valuable because it will contribute to the body of knowledge that can be used in enhancing the well-being of blue collar workers in the workplace by mobilising trade union social support for them. Developing and enhancing social support offered by the trade union would therefore be important for black blue collar workers who occupy the lowest occupational rungs with their particular stressors.

1.4 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE STUDY

The following are assumptions that underlie this study :

(a) Work is essential for an individual to meet his or her basic needs, yet it can be very stressful to and individual. The work environment may create demands on a worker with which he/she is unable to cope, thus causing stress.

(b) Black blue collar workers experience more stress because of the nature or their jobs. Historically, black blue collar workers in South Africa have been disadvantaged because their social situations were greatly complicated by the country's system of racial domination, this system affected those with little or no education the most. Black blue collar workers are seen as occupying the bottom

rung of society's occupational ladder and the nature of their work, health and safety hazards and their work setting can be very stressful to them.

(c) Social support offered by the trade union has the potential to buffer the impact of work stress on health. The flow of positive emotional concern, practical aid and/or non-critical feedback support between union representatives and union members has the potential to alleviate the impact of work stress on their physical and mental health.

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Terms used in this study include:

(a) Social support: The flow of positive emotional concern, practical aid and / or non-critical feedback support between people (House, 1981). It can also be defined as the perception that there are a sufficient number of people available upon whom one can rely on in times of need. Social support has also been defined by Thoits (1982b) as the "degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others" (p.147). This interaction can take the form of instrumental aid or socio-emotional aid, at a functional level. Some individuals may turn to only one person to obtain social support, while others may turn to a large number of available people like fellow trade union members.

(b) Stress: The imbalance between environmental demands placed upon a person and the resources of that particular person. This also involves the individual's matching of the demand with the individual's capability to deal with it and finding that he/she does not have the ability to cope (House 1981) This definition is referred to by Hobfoll (1989) as the transactional model because it explains stress according to a balance hypothesis. Stress arises when perceived demands exert a pressure which exceeds the individual's perceived capabilities (Cox, 1985). Continued stressors can lead to a reaction of anxiety, changes in cardiovascular functions as well as mental ill health. Thus stress causes strain (Mclean, 1979).

(c)Work stress: The characteristics of the work environment which may create demands on a worker with which he/she is unable to cope, given their resources (Mclean, 1979). Black blue collar workers are more likely to react to work stress helplessly and pathogenically due to their socio-economic position in the workplace (Shostak,1980).

(d)Trade Union: An organisation whose members are employees who seek to organise and represent their interest through the process of collective bargaining(Bendix,1989). This includes organisations such as the Post and Telecommunications Workers Association .

(e)Blue collar workers: Workers who occupy the bottom most rung of a workplace's occupational status (Shostak, 1980). Within Telkom, these workers are categorised in the A and lower B bands in terms of the Paterson Job evaluation system as used by Telkom. These workers include technical assistants, senior technical assistant, cleaners, general workers and telephone buffers.

1.6 OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

An attempt was made in this chapter to explain the importance of this study, the aim of the study and assumptions underlying the study. Chapter 2 will focus on the literature that contextualizes the study. Chapter 3 will describe the research methodology. Chapter 4 will focus on presentation and discussion of the results and lastly Chapter 5 will draw conclusions and recommendations will be made.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WORK STRESS : AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 SOCIAL SUPPORT

The concept of social support has been defined differently by various authors. For example, Lin (1986) defines social support by separating the two components, that is, social and support. According to him, the social component should reflect the individual's linkage to the social environment and this can be represented at three levels: the community, the social network, and intimate and confiding relationships. The support component, Lin (1986) believes, should reflect activities that are expressed by the social environment and involves two aspects, that is, instrumental and expressive support. Instrumental support involves practical assistance. The expressive dimension involves the use of the relationship in activities such as sharing, ventilating feelings and affirming one's role as well as others' worth and dignity.

Some researchers approach the definition rather differently. For example, Cobb (1979) defines social support as information leading the individual to believe that he is loved, esteemed and valued, and that he/she belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation. He believes that social support provides protection from physical illness and accelera ecovery. This definition, however, does not clearly distinguish the types of social support .

Sarason, Sarason and Pierce (1990) define social support as social interactions that make an individual have a feeling of belonging to a person or group that she/he perceives as loving or caring. This helps individuals to have the ability to provide feedback, to validate themselves and to have a sense of belonging to the social environment. Their definition would be more in line with the definition of social support as a "set of interconnected relationships among a group of people that provides enduring patterns of nurturance and provides reinforcement for efforts to cope with life on a day to day basis" (Garbarino and Wittakers, 1983:5). Cobb (1979) further suggests that social support grows out of groups; for example, co-workers become a social resource for each other. This definition can be linked to social exchange theory which suggests that rational self interest drives people's

social interactions. Individuals can be described as perceiving themselves to be in some form of social exchange with groups or organisations of which they are part, and they therefore evaluate the benefits of remaining in that particular group or organisation. Tyler and Lind (1992) state that "people enter and leave relationships depending on their judgement concerning the benefits and costs of remaining a member of an organisation" (p120).

House (1981) offers one of the most comprehensive definitions of social support. He suggests that social support be defined in terms of "who gives what to whom regarding which problems". He defines social support as a "flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, and/or appraisal between people" (p26). This definition is further broken into four components of support - that is, emotional support, informational support, instrumental support and appraisal support.

According to House (1981), emotional support involves the provision of trust, empathy, love and care. Informational support means giving advice or information which would be helpful to another individual in coping with personal as well as environmental problems. Instrumental support involves a practical act of helping an individual in need. Thoits (1982) suggests that

social support can be operationalised in terms of its structure or what it really does. Support measures typically assess either the individual's network structure or the function of social support (Cohen and Wills ,1985). Earlier studies (Caplan ,1974) divide social support into two global types: emotional and instrumental support. Some researchers (La Rocco et al, 1980) have concentrated on the emotional type of support, apparently assuming that it is the most important. Bowly (1969) points out that an individual becomes happy when he/she is sure he/she can count on someone or some people in times of need. This also enhances the individual's overall interaction with the social environment. Finally, appraisal support involves providing a person with information that is relevant for self evaluation. The definition by House (1981) views all the types of support as being equally important and clearly distinguishes them from each other.

While different authors define social support differently, what comes out in most definitions is the perception by an individual that there is a sufficient number of available others on whom she/he can rely in times of need (Procidano and Heller, 1979). Two dimensions that have been constantly identified are sources of support, for example, spouse or supervisor, and type of support, for example, instrumental or emotional (Cohen and Wills , 1985).

This would therefore be in line with the definition of social support by House (1981) that the right kind of support from the right kind of people increases one's well - being during difficult life events.

It is important to understand how the flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information support and appraisal support between people affects stress and health as well as the relationship between the two (House, 1981).

2.1.1 Main, Moderating and buffering effects of social support

Social support can directly enhance the well-being of a person because it meets important human needs for belonging, love and affection. This means that the positive effects of social support can counteract the negative effects of stress (House, 1981). A number of authors have indicated that social support reduces stress in one or more of three ways (Beehr, 1985 and House, 1981). Firstly, social support can act directly on lessening strains, and this is normally referred to as a main effect. Gottlieb (1980) adds to this by pointing out that social support is the key to coping capacity. This explains the frequent observation that many individuals undergo stressful life events but suffer no adverse consequences. Secondly, social support can act directly on stressors, and this as well is normally referred to as a main effect. For

example, social support from co-workers can minimise feelings of alienation or tension at work. Cohen and Wills (1985) identify the theoretical mechanism through which these effects of social support are thought to occur. They propose that the perception of main effects of stressors results from the relationship of social support to appraisal. An individual who has internalised a sense of being valued (having a great deal of social support) is less likely than others to view a situation as threatening. Direct effects of social support on well being occur because self - esteem is enhanced by social support, and this would therefore have a positive impact on health. Thirdly social support can interact with stressors so that the relationship between stress and strain is stronger for persons with low levels of support than those with high levels of support, while the deleterious impact of stress on health is mitigated or even eliminated as social support increases (House, 1981). This is normally referred to as the buffering effect because it has the potential to buffer or moderate the impact of stress on health. The relationship between social support and stress in this regard does not mean that social support has direct effects on either stress or health, but rather that it modifies or moderates the relationship between the two (House, 1981).

Many authors have shown interest in the concept of the buffering effects of social support (House, 1981; Wells, 1982), since this "type of support may be especially important in understanding when social support buffers the pathogenic effects of stress. Hence, buffering effects may occur only when the kind of available support matches the needs elicited by the stress a person is experiencing" (Cohen and Syme, 1985 : 13). Social support would therefore benefit those people who are exposed to stress and may have little or no benefit for people not under stress (House, 1981).

2.2 STRESS THEORY

It is not easy to fi.. a widely accepted · .. of stress, as there is no single agreed definition of this concep .n, 1979; Fontana 1990). The one reason for no single clear defim.. s that the word stress is used in at least three different disciplines: physiology; sociology and psychology (Cox, 1978; Fontana, 1990). Another issue hampering the formulation of an accurate definition of stress is the disagreement regarding whether stress is a stimulus, a response or an interaction between individual and environmental factors (Cox, 1978).

On the one hand the stimulus-based approach views stress as a "force or stimulus acting upon the individual that results in a response of strain" (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1980:6). A difficulty associated with the stimulus-based approach to stress is the fact that there are often individual differences in the same stress situation (Cox, 1978). The response - based approach, on the other hand regards stress as "the physiological or psychological response an individual makes to an environmental stressor" (Matteson and Ivancevich,1980:7).

Between these two uni-polar approaches, several person-environment interaction models have been developed. For example, Matteson and Ivancevich (1980:9) define the person-environment interaction of stress as "an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external action situation or event that places special physical and/or psychological demands upon a person". Cox (1978) conceptualises stress as the imbalance between perceived individual capability and environmental demands facing that particular individual. Matteson and Ivancevich (1980) argue that a person's perception of a demand and his/her ability to mobilise resources may differ from individual to individual and from situation to situation. The person-

environment interaction model of stress is the approach emphasised in the present study.

2.3 WORK STRESS

Work stress has been defined as any characteristics of the work environment which pose a threat to an individual (Mclean, 1979). Stress at work is such a common phenomenon that people tend to accept it as part and parcel of day to day living (Mclean 1979). Individual vulnerability to specific stressors varies widely and is even more significant than context in determining reactions to factors in a work environment (Mclean, 1979; Matteson and Ivancevich, 1980). Vulnerability also changes according to day-to-day events, moods and individual experiences. Stress at work has been classified by Yates (1979) as having different sources, namely: factors intrinsic to the job, career development, relationships at work, and one's role in the organisation.

Factors intrinsic to the job: These include boredom, poor physical working conditions, work demands and job design and technical problems. Although boredom is not normally viewed as a serious cause of stress, research

conducted by University of Michigan's institute of occupational safety and health found that boredom may produce stress as fast as, or even faster than working long hours and heavy workload (Yates, 1979). Since repetitive work becomes increasingly common towards the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, it is possible that blue collar workers may be especially prone to boredom.

Career development: Advancement at work is often extremely important to employees and problems in this regard may create high levels of stress. In South Africa during the apartheid years, most jobs were reserved for certain race groups, thus people of colour were often not utilised according to their potential or what they were qualified for. Hence promotion suffered, creating potential stress for those experiencing this situation.

Relationships at work: Difficult or poor relationships at work can also bring on symptoms associated with stress. Difficult relationships involve low trust, low interest by others in listening to and dealing with problems. Poor relationships can also lead to role ambiguity and role conflict (Yates 1979). In South African workplaces, there has been a racial and cultural division between supervisors and workers: most of the former have been whites and most of the latter blacks. This

situation does not promote effective supervisor-worker relationships, so that it can be suspected that when black- blue collar workers experience problems they may be less likely to approach their supervisors, and more likely to approach their shop stewards or union officials. They may believe that shop stewards are on their side and would understand them better or refer them to the right person who would offer them help. In support of this, during the writer's employment as an occupational social worker most black blue collar workers were referred to the Employee Assistance Program by shop stewards or union officials rather than supervisors.

Role in the organisation: A primary source of stress in an organisation that has widely been studied is role conflict and role ambiguity which can increase anxiety and decrease productivity (Yates, 1979).

Role ambiguity may arise when an individual has inadequate information about his or her role at work (Kahn, 1973; House and Rizzo, 1972). There are three factors that contribute to role ambiguity: the complexity of the organisation, poor managerial philosophies about communication and rapid change within the organisation (Kahn et al, 1973; House and Rizzo, 1972).

Role conflict may arise when an individual does at work what he or she does not want to do or what he or she thinks is not part of the job specification (Cooper, 1983). The most common manifestation of role conflict occurs when an individual is caught between two groups of people who demand different kinds of behaviour (Cooper and Smith, 1985), for example supervisors and workmates. Role conflict causes job dissatisfaction; job tension and job related anxiety (House and Rizzo, 1972). Some role conflict may be termed "objective". This may come about when two or more people send contradictory demands to the employee; that is, the one person asks the employee to do something that is not allowed by the other person to whom the individual is responsible. However conflict may be more subjective in nature. Subjective role conflict may come about when there are contradictions between the formal requirements of the role and what the individual desires in terms of goals, values and interests (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1980).

Much role conflict, particularly objective role conflict, results from dysfunctional organisation practices and the consequences tend to affect the achievement of organisational goals in a negative way. When this happens, the individual also becomes affected in a negative way (Matteson and

Ivancevich, 1980; Cooper and Smith, 1985). Conflict can also be partly caused by specialisation and routine work and partly by the worker's lack of control over his work or over his destiny in the organisation (Tannenbaum, 1966).

2.4 SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE WORKPLACE

Work contains the potential for many forms of satisfaction and challenge as well as the potential for harming individuals. It occupies a major part of most of an adult's life (Mclean, 1979). Individuals need to work in order to meet their basic needs and yet work can adversely affect both mental and physical health (Mclean, 1979). Work support has been identified as having either a direct or a stress-buffering effect on the negative impact of job-related stress (Wilcox, 1981; Barrera, 1981). Both of these effects constitute mechanisms through which support maintains or improves health.

Work and the workplace play a major role in respect of support; firstly, they can directly enhance employee responses on the job because they meet important human basic needs, that is, the need to belong and the need for security. In this way, the positive effects of social support from the

workplace can counteract the negative effects of stress (House, 1981). Secondly, social support from the workplace has the potential to buffer the impact of stress on employee responses. This is usually referred to as the moderating role where social support modifies the relationship between stressors on the job and employee responses (House, 1981). Supervisors and co-workers represent the main source of social support in the workplace (Wells, 1982). As noted earlier in section 2.1, the definition of social support by House (1981) identifies four types of social support, namely emotional support, appraisal support, informational support and instrumental support. Using this definition, social support in the workplace could be viewed in the following way:

Emotional Support

Emotional and instrumental support are the types of support that have been most widely studied in relation to stress in the workplace. Emotional support from supervisors has been discovered to buffer the impact of the effects of role conflict and role ambiguity (Cobb, 1976). Supervisors are alleged to have a greater effect on job stress than other sources. Consequently, supervisor support is expected to have the strongest effect on reducing

psychological strain while co - worker support is expected to have the next strongest effect (Beehr and Fenlason , 1992). The argument for this is that co-workers are able to render social support to stressed fellow employees, but because they are less influential at work, they are expected to influence strains less than the supervisor. The writer disagrees with this when the issue is contextualized in the South African situation. Because of the history of racial injustice, the South African workplace situation is very different from the studies conducted abroad. Supervisors, often from a different racial and cultural group to workers may be perceived as not having as great an effect on work stress as fellow workers. Stress in the workplace may therefore be alleviated by getting emotional support in the form of encouragement from co-workers, who are less likely to create interpersonal pressures.

However, supervisors who are supportive and empathic are valuable assets in terms of increasing or enhancing workers' self-esteem (Mclean, 1979). According to Mclean (1979) when the well-established emotional climate of an organisation reflects genuine concern for the legitimate needs of its people, and when there is esteem and regard for employees, individual values then blend successfully with the purpose of the organisation. The goal of the

organisational context in this scheme is to build a system in which people perceive themselves as genuinely valued.

Appraisal support

Appraisal support involves the provision of information that is relevant for self evaluation. Work supervisors may be a source of this kind of information - for example, they may be able to tell the workers if they are performing well or badly and advise them where they can improve (House, 1981). However, according to Mclean (1979) co-workers are in a better position to provide appraisal support because workers identify with each other and feedback from co-workers is viewed as honest and seen as positive.

Information support

Informational support involves the giving of information which might help an individual cope with problems (House, 1981). For example teaching workers how to apply for better positions within the company is regarded as informational support (House, 1981). Surely Trade Unions and workmates often give informational support too.

Instrumental support

Instrumental support means directly helping a person in need. Co-workers may give each other instrumental support when they help others to do their work, take care of them or help them by loaning them money. Instrumental support also has psychological consequences when it is perceived as a sign of caring (House, 1981). Blue collar workers have been found to offer this kind of support to one another because of the nature of their jobs (Cooper and Smith 1985). Workplace issues such as wage negotiations, working conditions and fair treatment by the employer can be seen as instrumental support by the trade union.

2.5 BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

Blue collar workers are seen as occupying the bottom rung of society's occupational ladder (Shostak, 1980). The general public thinks very little of manual work and blue collar workers generally are aware of that (Shostak, 1980). They are often intimidated by rigid rules about how they should dress as well as their comings and goings at work. They are often told what to do

and what not to. These regulations are resented by blue collar workers who view them as a sign of the company's mistrust in their integrity (Cooper and Smith, 1985). Internationally, the four main stressors associated withblue collar workers are: compensation levels, health and safety hazards, work settings and threat of work loss (Cooper and Smith 1985; Shostak 1980).

Compensation: Blue collar workers are amongst the lowest paid class of workers. This may become their greatest source of stress as "along with a sense of losing ground on an income treadmill, many blue collarites harbour considerable envy of the salaries, stock options, bonuses and perks they think the good fortune of many in the front office and executive suite" (Cooper and Smith, 1980:9). This is exacerbated by blue collar workers rarely measuring their income situation against significant others in their own ranks (Shostak, 1980). Male blue collar workers want to maintain themselves as providers, for their own self-esteem. However, they sometimes fail to see themselves as adequate providers because their 'take home pay" is often insufficient (Shostak, 1980).

Health and Safety hazards: According to Shostak (1980), blue collar workers' second major source of stress is health and safety hazards. They worry with

reason about becoming a statistic among workers who are killed or who become permanently disabled because of accidents or industry-related diseases (Cooper and Smith, 1980). Their worries, whether imaginary or real, increase their level of stress. Shostak's view ties in with that of Yates (1979) who argues that poor and dangerous working conditions can be seen a source of stress.

Work settings: Blue collar work settings are in many cases not pleasant. Although situations differ from place to place, some workers resent poor working conditions which are perceived as part of the job. They often envy white collar workers who are placed in comfortable offices whilst they have to do the dirty job which is more often the core business of the company (Shostak 1980; Cooper and Smith, 1980). They often feel that nobody cares about their physical working conditions (Shostak, 1980).

Work loss: Mclean (1979:55) states that "unemployment and the threat of job loss are exquisitely threatening to many, seriously disrupting to others". Blue collar workers fear the possibility of being unemployed one day and not earning income. Many know that working for a new employer, if they are lucky to find another job, means starting at the bottom once more (Shostak,

1980). This is true especially in the South African situation where the economy is very unstable and jobs cannot be fully guaranteed.

A further major stress in the lives of blue collar workers is supervision. The blue collar work setting is often characterised by strict regulations (Shostak, 1980). These regulations are resented by workers who view them as "insulting, infantilizing expression of company mistrust in their adulthood and maturity" (Cooper and Smith, 1985:11). Blue collar workers on the whole do not have control of how their time is spent at work because they have to stick to a strict schedule of working duties and have to carry out those activities specified by the employer (Cooper and Smith, 1985). There is less chance to influence the conditions of the task itself. There is usually also less chance to avoid unpleasant conditions and the only option that they have is to put up with the unpleasant situation or leave the job (Cooper and Smith, 1985; Shostak, 1980 and Fisher, 1984). The world of blue collar workers also includes expectations of greater production. Blue collar workers have learned over the years that the reward for more production is the renewed demand for more production (Shostak, 1980).

According to Karl Marx, the evolution of industrial capitalism provided the pre-condition for collective organisation by bringing workers together in large numbers (Webster, 1985). Blue collar workers find themselves investing in work-group affiliations as a form of showing resistance to the harshness of their experience of the workplace.

2.5.1 Trade Unions

A trade union is referred to as a group of workers designed to perform functions to help the workers obtain collectively, better terms of employment and service, than they would have expected to achieve if they were bargaining individually (Hauck, 1982).

2.5.2 Blue collar workers and trade-unions

Blue collar workers are uniquely deprived and strategically positioned to organise themselves to overcome their frustrations through trade unions (Valery, 1982). Furthermore this is reinforced by the circumstance that a "person's objective position in the economic process imposes upon him certain attitudes, values and interests which give rise to consciousness of

class seen as a sense of membership with others who share these interests and values" (Valery, 1982:14). The fundamental relation between an individual and a trade union is based on a different economic exchange relation than that between an individual and employer (Tetrick, 1992: 2). Individuals are paid by the employer for the work that they do while union members pay dues to reap the benefits of membership, and indeed "trade unions provide another potential focus for efforts to enhance social support" (House, 1981:101). Trade union members may experience good relationships with each other because of joint experiences. Shop stewards and union officials are usually there when workers need them and are often more concerned with the welfare of workers than supervisors and employers (House, 1981).

While workers may join trade unions for practical benefits, many of the outcomes attached to belonging to a union are in the form of social support itself (Freeman, 1976). Sitas (1984) suggests that blue collar workers, especially migrant workers, invest their trust in trade unions because they see the trade union as a source of security and support. Trade union members listen to each other's problems and care about one another. This, according to Freeman (1976) can be seen as form of emotional support as identified by

House (1981). Support by a group occurs in several forms, when members face a frustrating or threatening environment. The group may afford some sense of comfort or consolation to members, help or protect members by acting against the source of threat or frustration and strengthen the individual member in his own opposition to the source of adversity (Tannenbaum, 1966:59). Freeman (1976) also suggests that trade unions are in a unique position to offer informational support to members because they feed back to managers information about workers' grievances. Similarly, a trade union keeps workers informed of management's position. The trade union collects information from workers and presents it to management in a form of collective bargaining. The shop steward's role is to represent the interest of the trade union members in his section, to protect the rights of the workers against management as well as to challenge management decisions when necessary (Webster 1985). The collective bargaining process should be positive "information swopping" which will benefit the union membership (House, 1981). Shop stewards also convey policy decisions of the unions to its members (Webster, 1985). According to Kochan (1980), trade unions increase awareness of health and safety hazards at work and although there are no differences between injury rates for trade union members and non-

members, union members are generally more aware of health and safety hazards in the workplace.

Unions can also be instrumental in gaining support in the form of higher earnings as well as fringe benefits for members (Gallagher, 1983). They have a positive impact on benefits and blue collar workers in unionised settings tend to enjoy higher wages/salaries and benefits than workers in a non-unionised setting (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Allen & Keaveny (1981) point out that unions increase the level of fringe benefits provided by employers. These fringe benefits are in the form of pensions, vacation, accident cover as well as medical aid. This kind of support can be viewed as instrumental support of the sort identified by House (1981). Shop stewards have been viewed as being in a better position to provide appraisal support because workers view them as being on their side and having the workers' interest at heart (Mclean, 1979). Trade union members view feedback from shop stewards as honest feedback. In a study by Webster (1985) concerning trade unionism in the foundries, appraisal support was found to be occurring successfully where shop stewards were responsible for appraising work performance.

Trade unions in many countries have played an important role in the struggle for democracy (Henley, 1989). Anstey (1990) points out that South African labour relations are the product of unique historical, social, political and economic forces and Kochan (1980) suggests that unions have a primary effect in the areas of wages, benefits, working conditions and job security. Unions can therefore be considered, along with supervisor and co-worker support, as a possible moderator of the relationship between stress in the workplace and strain in the life of blue collar workers (House, 1981; Barling, Fullagar and Kelloway, 1992).

2.6 THE OCCUPATIONAL SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

Social workers do not have a monopoly on employee well being in the workplace. The definition of generic social work by Pincus and Minahan (1973:9) states that "Social Work is concerned with the interactions between people and their social environment which affects the ability of people to accomplish their life tasks, alleviate distress and realise their aspirations and values". The purpose of social work will therefore be to enhance the problem solving and coping capacities of people, to link them with resources, to promote effective and humane operation of these resources and

to contribute to the development and improvement of social policy (Pincus and Minahan, 1973).

Social work in the workplace is not different from similar activities in other settings (Googins and Godfrey, 1987). Occupational social work is therefore defined as a "field of practice in which social workers attend to the human and social needs of the work community by designing and executing appropriate interventions to ensure healthier individuals and environment" (Googins and Godfrey, 1987:5). Social workers in the workplace are strategically positioned to enhance levels of social support by coming up with special programs for dealing with problems of occupational mental health. Occupational social workers can also facilitate the giving and receiving of social support as part and parcel of the ongoing process of work organisations. If social support is to be effective in reducing stress, people must be able to obtain support from the people with whom they work. Occupational social workers should therefore mobilise all the resources in the workplace that would be able to provide social support. Trade unions have been identified by House (1981) as a potential source of social support especially for the uniquely deprived, like black blue collar workers. Further exploring this concept is the main purpose of the study.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 METHODOLOGY

3.1.1 Sample

The first step of sampling was to identify a workphase (workshop) in Telkom that has a large number of black blue collar workers that belong to the Post and Telecommunications Workers Association (POTWA). Permission was obtained from Telkom and from the trade union for the study to be undertaken.

The Post and Telecommunications Workers Association is the biggest trade union in Telkom in terms of membership and support from non-members. This trade union has since merged with the South African Post and Telecommunication Association (SAPTEA) which was predominantly Indian and the Post Office Employees Association of South Africa (PEASA) which was predominantly coloured to form the Communications Workers Union

(CWU). This union enjoys 45% membership amongst the Telkom workforce. Potwa will hereafter be referred to as CWU.

A list of 327 CWU members in this workshop was drawn from the computer. The next step was to randomly select 60 black blue collar workers classified from A1 to B1 bands of the Paterson job evaluation system. Male workers were chosen to exclude the extra variable of sex that could influence the result of the research, and moreover female workers were few in this particular workshop and this would have affected the sample size. A simple random sample was used. The names of the 327 workers were each written on a piece of paper, placed in a jar after being folded, and thereafter 60 pieces of paper were withdrawn from the jar, to constitute the 60 random sample. A random sample was used so that each name should have an equal chance of being selected.

3.1.2 RESEARCH TOOLS

Two instruments were used. The one instrument measured work stress as reflected by role conflict and role ambiguity and the other one measured

perceived social support offered by the trade union. The instruments are explained below. The instruments are included as Appendix A to this report.

3.1.2.1 THE ROLE ORIENTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

This instrument was used to measure work stress of the participants. A slightly modified version of the questionnaire developed by Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970) was used. In its original form, the questionnaire consisted of 30 items, fifteen of which dealt with role ambiguity and fifteen with role conflict. The questionnaire is a Likert type scale from very true on a seven point scale to very false.

Role conflict is defined operationally in terms of "congruency - incongruency" or "compatibility - incompatibility" between:

(a) The respondent's standards or values and defined role behaviour.

(b) The time or resources available, and defined role behaviour.

(c) Several roles the respondent must fill.

(d) Inputs from the organisation, for example, rules and regulations (House, Rizzo and Lirtzman, 1972).

Role ambiguity is defined operationally in terms of: -

(a) The non-existence of clarity of behavioural requirements serving to define role behaviour,

(b) The lack of predictability of the outcome of one's behaviour (House, Rizzo and Lirtzman, 1972).

For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire were translated into Tswana, N. Sotho and Zulu. This were done by an independent expert in African translation and to ensure that the meaning was retained, they were given to another expert in African translation to translate back into English. In this study it was decided to cut the seven point scale from very true to very false to simply true or false. The rationale behind this is that identified by Coldwell (1977), namely that a Likert - type r··ting scale is not really suitable when using it for semi - illiterate respondents with no previous experience in answering questionnaires. Reliability for this scale has been judged acceptable (0.78 and above) (House, Rizzo and Lirtzman 1970). See appendix A1.

Scores for this questionnaire were summed for each respondent and divided by the number of items that were responded to, responses of true were reflected as 1 and false as 2.

3.1.5.2 THE TRADE UNION SOCIAL SUPPORT SCALE

This instrument was developed locally by D.A Howse (1986) specifically for use in the South African situation. It consists of twenty-five items measuring worker perception of four types of social support identified by House (1981); emotional support, informational support, instrumental support and appraisal support. The Trade Union Social Support scale has been shown to be both valid and reliable with a reliability co-efficient of 0.91. (Howse, 1987). (See Appendix A2)Scoring for this scale ranged from –1 to 1 for false, maybe and yes respectively.

3.2. COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

3.2.1 ADMINISTRATION OF INSTRUMENTS

The instruments were administered in the following order.

(i) The Role Orientation Questionnaire

(ii) The Trade Union Social Support Scale

These tools were administered to respondents in groups of 6 over a period of 10 days in April 1996 and May 1996. They were administered during working hours at the workshop's conference room.

3.2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Data obtained from the two research instruments was processed by means of the Pearson Correlation Co-efficient to establish the continuous probability distribution of the two measurements.

3.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has the following limitations:

(a) Since this is a study of limited scope, the sample includes only male black blue collar workers from only one trade union, namely the Communication

other members in Pretoria and throughout the whole of Gauteng and the rest of South Africa.

(b) Only one method of data collection was used, that is the questionnaire method of data collection. Anastassi (1982) argues that a questionnaire method of data collection is vulnerable to inaccuracies because not all participants will answer the questions accurately. Secondly, this study relies on self-reports in assessing stress. Other methods of assessing stress were not employed, e.g. heart-rate, blood pressures as well as in-depth interviews. Therefore the study relies heavily on the subjective reports of the participants and it is be difficult to check the objectivity of these reports. Thirdly, the instruments used to measure work stress focused on only one type of work stress, namely stress arising from role conflict and/or role ambiguity. As noted in section 2.3 of the previous chapter, while stress from these sources has been widely investigated, work stress can arise from other sources too – for example factors intrinsic to the job, frustrated career development, and relationships at work.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, results will be presented and findings will be discussed. The results will be sub-divided into identifying data, work stress, social support and the interaction of work stress and social support.

4.2 IDENTIFYING DATA OF THE RESPONDENTS

The respondents' ages ranged from 23 to 40 years, the mean age being 34,2 years. They were all males and had been members of a trade union for more than three years. They were all classified in the A and B bands of to the Patterson job grading system as employed by Telkom SA Limited. The kinds of jobs they did differed from each other as they came from different sections within the workshop, but included general assistants, technical assistants, telephone buffers and cleaners.

4.3 WORK STRESS

The stress variable was divided into high, average and low stress levels. High stress was a measure of 20 to 29 in answer to the role orientation questionnaire, average stress was 14 to 20 and low was 3 to 13.

4.3.1 High work stress

Twenty eight percent of the group recorded high work stress levels, a small percentage within the group that was tested. As was discussed in chapter 2, work life may be very stressful especially for blue collar workers who occupy society's bottom rung of the occupational status. The workplace can be a very harsh place because it brings demands that sometimes cannot be met by an individual. Despite this, less than a third of employees had high work stress levels, which suggests that even if the workplace was highly stressful, most workers have a means of dealing with and reducing stress.

4.3.2 Low work stress

Fifty three percent of the group recorded low levels of work stress. Possible factors that contributed to this finding are explored in the following chapter.

4.3.3 Average work stress

Eighteen percent of the group recorded average levels of stress.

The chart below shows percentages of stress for the whole group.

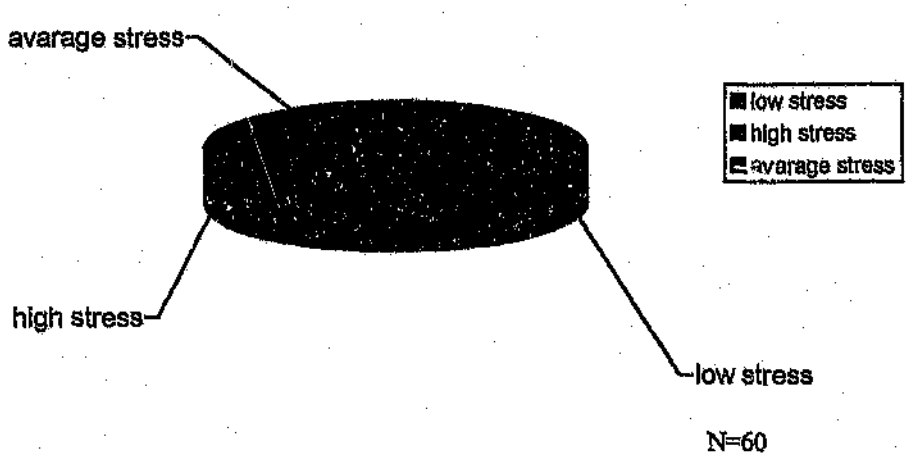


Figure 1: Work Stress Scores

4.4 TRADE UNION SOCIAL SUPPORT

Perceived trade union social support is sub divided into low and high levels . A "low" support level includes scores 14 to -10 on the Trade Union Social Support Scale, while a "high" support level is reflected by scores 25 to 15.

4.4.1 High trade union social support

Seventy one percent of the group recorded high levels of trade union social support. It is clear that social support is perceived to be offered by the trade union.

4.4.2 Low trade union social support

Twenty nine percent of the group recorded low levels of trade union social support.

The chart below shows percentages of trade union social support as perceived by the group

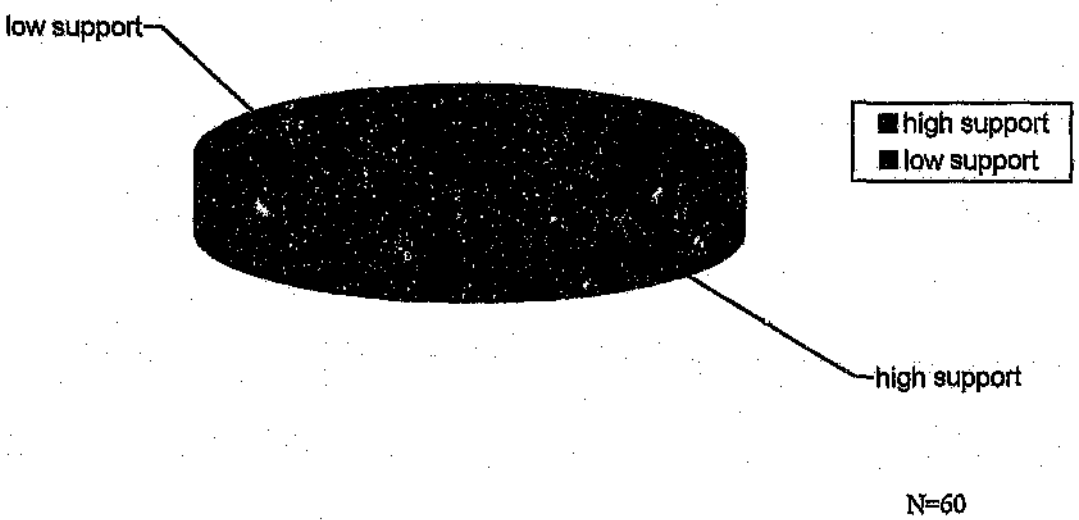


Figure 2: Trade Union Social Support Scores

It is therefore evident that the bulk of the group showed high levels of social support from the trade union.

4.5 TRADE UNION SOCIAL SUPPORT VS. WORK STRESS

4.5.1 High stress vs. social support

From the group that showed high levels of stress only 5,5 percent showed high levels of trade union social support and 94,5 percent showed low levels of trade union social support. When stress is looked at in relation to social support it becomes clear that a large percentage of the group that recorded high levels of stress did not view the trade union as offering them social support. This suggests a relationship between the two variables.

4.5.2 Average stress vs. social support

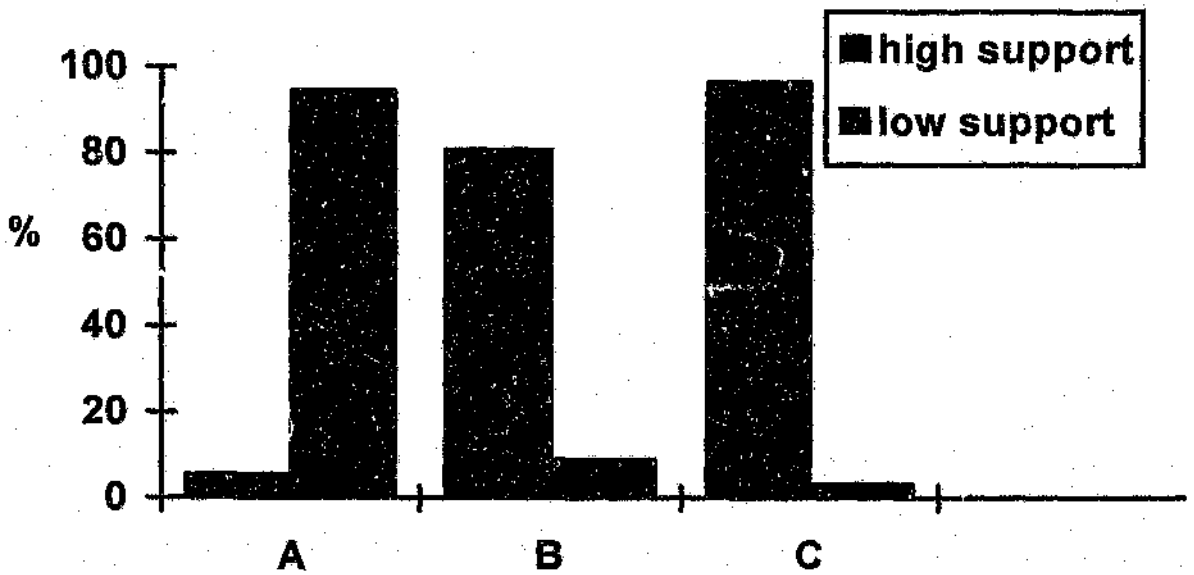
From the group that showed average levels of stress only 9 percent showed low levels of trade union social support and 81 percent showed high levels of trade union social support. This again suggests that there exists a relationship between work stress as experienced by a blue collar worker and perceived social support offered by the trade union.

4.5.3 Low stress vs. social support

From the group that showed low levels of work stress, 96.7 showed high levels of trade union social support and 3.3 showed low levels of trade

union social support. Once again there is a strong suggestion that trade union social support has a role to play in mitigating the harmful effects of blue collar work stress. The South African situation has been unique in terms of the possible sources of stress experienced by blue collar workers, but trade union support appears to be a powerful factor in mitigating work stress arising from this and other circumstances.

The chart below shows work stress in relation to trade union social support as perceived by the union members.



N = 60

A = high stress

B = average stress

C = low stress

Figure 3: Work Stress and Perceived Trade Union Social Support

4.6 Statistical analysis

The Pearsons correlation coefficient was used to determine continuous correlation between the two variables. It should be remembered that the correlation coefficient should best be seen as an expression of the ability to

predict a value of one variable from the knowledge of the other variable. In no way is causation implied (Weiback and Grinnell Jnr , 1987) .

The Pearsons correlation coefficient, which indicates the strength of the relationship between the two variables, was r = - 0.81. This correlation coefficient indicates that a high value of the one variable is associated with a low value of the second variable (Ghiselli et al, 1981). _

This strongly suggests that a high value of stress is associated with a low value of social support, and vice versa, and that is there is a continuous correlation between the two.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarises the main findings of the study. The aim of the study was to evaluate black blue collar workers' perceived trade union social support in relation to work stress. A literature review revealed that work has positive and adverse effects on one's well being and that blue collar workers are likely to experience stress which, it was hypothesised, could potentially be alleviated by social support. However no past attempt had been made to empirically investigate if perceived support from a trade union can really buffer the impact of work stress on blue collar workers. Conclusions are offered in relation to the relationship suggested in this study between work stress and trade union social support.

5.2 WORK STRESS AND PERCEIVED TRADE UNION SUPPORT

The Role Orientation Questionnaire tested the work stress levels of the blue collar workers. The results in this present study indicated relatively low levels of stress. However, literature on blue collar workers indicates that blue collar workers normally experience high stress levels because of the nature of their work, that the blue collar workplace is characterised by do's and don'ts, and that blue collar workers literally does not have control of his time because of the rigid rules that govern them (Shostak, 1980). A question that should be asked is what makes the blue collar workers in the present study very different from the others?

It has been argued in chapter 2 that South African blue collar workers are unusually deprived and therefore may invest in work group association to overcome this deprivation (Valery, 1982). The South African labour relations history is unique as compared to the rest of the world. While a distinct conflict of interest and goals prevailed between management and employees (Bendix 1989) as it did elsewhere in the world, blue collar workers in South Africa have been mainly people of colour, until recently restricted in upward mobility by legislation. The trade union became not only a vehicle through which workers could address imbalances at work, it also had a great potential through which

other issues relating to needs and wants could be addressed. Moreover, members of a union usually have co-operative relationships with each other, and the shop stewards and union officials are alleged to be more concerned with the welfare of workers than supervisors (House, 1981).

The results of this study show that there appears to be a mechanism moderating blue collar workers' levels of stress. Firstly, 71% of the workers studied showed low or average work stress. Secondly, a similar proportion of the workers (i.e. 71%) perceived trade union social support to be high. Thirdly, there is a continuous correlation between the two variables measured: the higher the perceived trade union social support, the lower the work stress, and vice versa. Together these three findings support the hypothesis identified in section 1.2 of chapter 1.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKPLACE INTERVENTIONS

It has been argued that happy, satisfied, psychologically well people will make the most productive and effective employees. " The availability of social support is a critical feature of any individual's social environment and a potentially effective lever for making social environments less stressful, more healthful, or more conducive to effective adaptation to stress " (House, 1981: 20). From a

work perspective social support has a great potential in reducing occupational stress. Occupational social workers therefore need to realise that a great deal of occupational stress and the harmful effects thereof can be addressed by social support.

5.4 OCCUPATIONAL SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS

The relationship between perceived trade union social support and work stress identified by this study suggests that enhancing trade union support for workers by various activities is a valid occupational social work concern. This can be achieved in a number of ways, of which some of the main ones are:

1. Attempting to get the union "on board" in assessing and developing the knowledge base needed to understand the causes of stress experienced by black blue collar worker.

2. Supervisors as well as shop stewards should be trained in consciously providing an essential resource in workers' mental well being, that is social support. These persons are more accessible, more familiar and similar in their experience and orientations, and more attuned to the unique problems of their work situation that any mental health professional could be (House,

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1981). Hence it is desirable to provide Employee Assistance Programme training for supervisors, shop stewards and union officials to identify and refer troubled employees.

3. A tenet of occupational social work is "community building", where common objectives of union and management are emphasized. One means of community building is to enhance employees and union participation in decision making. The union should be made to feel part and parcel of the work community, and the occupational social worker – working together with the employee relations department – should promote and encourage this "sense of belonging" in the company through the involvement of the union in decision making on issues involving blue collar worker. The union's buy-in on policy formulation should be sought, even if it involves policies that may seem unimportant to some, such as smoking for example. The occupational social worker can use a wealth of skills that he/she has in informing and educating management about the stresses of blue collar workers and how the trade union can play a major role in the alleviation of such stresses. The goal of the occupational social worker should therefore be to influence organizations to start moving towards involving union officials or shop stewards in making workplace an enjoyable place. This is in the interest of all workplace stakeholders – organizations in South Africa are moving

towards global competition, and blue collar workers are an important resource that has to be mobilised and sensitised about the potential gains of unions, so that fears and concerns are addressed and possible stressors and ways of offering social support to affected members are spelled out and action steps are formulated.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the effects of perceived trade union social support on the work stress of black blue collar workers. The results showed that black blue collar workers who perceived the trade union as giving them social support experienced the least work stress. Black blue collar workers need to be acknowledged for the unique situation to which they are exposed. Interventions involving unions are long overdue in this country, occupational social workers should form a partnership with trade unions to enhance interventions designed to increase the well being of black blue collar workers.

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Appendix (A1)

Role orientation questionnaire

STATEMENT	YES	NO
1. I have enough time to complete my work		
2. I feel certain about how much authority I have		
3. I perform tasks that are too easy and boring		
4. Clear, planned goals and objectives for my job		
5. I have to do things that should be done differently		
6. Lack of policies and guidelines to help me		
7. I'm able to act the same regardless of the group I am with		
8. I am corrected and rewarded when I really don't expect it		
9. I work under incompatible policies and guidelines		
10. I know that I have divided my time properly		
11. I receive an assignment without the manpower to complete it		
12. I know what my responsibilities are		
13. I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment		
14. I have to "feel my way" in performing my duties		
15. I receive assignments that are within my training and capabilities		
16. I feel certain how I will be evaluated for a raise or promotion		
17. I have just the right amount of work to do		
18. I work with two or more groups who operate differently		
19. I know exactly what is expected of me		
20. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people		
21. I am uncertain as to how my job is linked		
22. I do thing that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others		
23. I am told how well I am doing my job		
24. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials		
25. Explanation is clear of what has to be done		
26. I work on unnecessary things		
27. I have to work under vague directives and orders		
28. I perform work that suit my values		
29. I do not know if my work will be acceptable to my boss		

Here are some statements which refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another who belong to trade unions. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each statement by ticking the appropriate box. If you agree with the statment place a tick in the 'yes' column, and if you disagree place a tick in the 'no' column. If you are unsure or only agree/disagree sometimes, then place a tick in the 'sometimes/maybe' column.

Appendix (A2)

		YES	SOMETIMES / MAYBE	NO
1.	My shop steward helps me when I have done something wrong at work.			
2.	There are enough trade union officials at union meetings to help me with my problems.			
3.	I feel a sense of solidarity with fellow union workers.			
4.	My union is effective in taking steps to protect me against unfair labour practises.			
5.	My trade union keeps me well informed on all financial and legal aid that it offers to its members.			
6.	If I were to appeal against my dismissal there would be a trade union official there to give me the support I need.			
7.	My trade union officials are effective in solving my problems.			
8.	My trade union is effective in taking up issues with management on my behalf.			
9.	My trade union would take up an unfair labour practice for me.			
10.	My trade union is effective in improving work conditions for me.			
11.	My trade union provides me with educational aid (eg bursaries).			
12.	My trade union helps me find a job when I am unemployed.			
13.	My trade union protects me against any form of victimisation at the workplace.			

		YES	SOMETIMES / MAYBE	NO
14.	My trade union would give me financial support if I went on a union organised strike.			
15.	There is someone at the union offices who will help me to deal with my personal and family problems.			
16.	I have confidence and trust in most of my union officials.			
17.	My trade union officials are available to help me solve my problems.			
18.	My shop steward is always there to give me the support I need.			
19.	I feel free to discuss my problems with my shop steward.			
20.	My fellow trade union members help me solve my family problems.			
21.	My trade union helps me with my personal needs.			
22.	I think that my trade union has a good record for solving my work related problems.			
23.	I have made a lot of good friends whom I can rely on since joining my union.			
24.	The people at the trade union offices listen to me and are effective in solving my problems.			
25.	My fellow union members give me emotional support when I am upset.			

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