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The role of the social support offered by trade unions as a moderator of the stress-strain relationship

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Independent Variables: Stressors

It has been claimed that work stress leads to strain (House, 1981; Wells, 1982). Work stress has been studied in relation to job satisfaction, motivation, performance and job withdrawal behaviour (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). However, employee health has in the past been neglected. Beehr and Newman (1978) put forward two reasons for this. First, there has been this belief in the past that employee health is not as important as other work-related events (e.g., job performance). Second, psychologists have paid little attention to employee health in the past because it has been felt that employee health/illness is caused primarily by physical rather than social or psychological events.

Work stress can be de[illegible] as any characteristics of the work environment which poses a threat to the [illegible]idual (Caplan, 1975). Two types of work stress may threaten the person: either demands which he/she may not be able to meet or insufficient supplies to meet his/her needs (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). Work stress, then, is conceptualised as a misfit of either of these relationships between the employee and job environment (House, 1981).

There are different sources of job stress, namely; negative IR-events (Bluen, 1986), role conflict and role ambiguity (French & Caplan, 1983; Rizzo et al., 1982). These sources of job stress will be examined as they have been chosen to measure job related stress in the stress-strain relationship.

Negative IR-events

Psychological strain resulting from involvement in the IR process is worthy of research from ideological, theoretical and pragmatic perspectives (Bluen & Barling, 1986). Sources of stressful IR practices can include strikes and labour disputes (MacBride, Lancee & Freeman, 1981). Research has shown that breakdowns in the labour-management relationship represent a further source of IR stress

(Bluen & Barling, 1986). For example, MacBride, Lancee and Freeman (1981) researched the psycho-social impact of a labour dispute and found that the dispute took the form of increased levels of psychological distress and a deterioration in perceived general functioning, physical health and psychological well-being. MacBride et al. (1981) explain that the strong psycho-social impact of this labour dispute can best be explained by variables relating specifically to workers involvement in, and attitudes towards the dispute and the collective bargaining process.

In South Africa the situation in IR is worsened because of the violence and state repression that is so widespread (Bluen & Barling, 1986). The rapid pace of change in IR in South Africa is a further source of stress, for example, trade union membership has more than doubled in the past years and IR legislation has also been a source of change (Bluen & Barling, 1986). South Africa has also experienced an upward trend in industrial action, namely, strikes, lockouts and work stoppages (National Manpower Commission, 1984). The number of strikes have increased from 342 in 1981 to 469 in 1984 (National Manpower Commission, 1985). This can be explained by the tendency amongst many employees to strike first, then to negotiate, instead of using the collective bargaining machinery (Lemmer, 1983). Thus survival within IR requires social adjustment which may represent a source of stress (Bluen, 1986).

Role Ambiguity

Another major source of occupational stress is role ambiguity and role conflict (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). Role ambiguity exists when an individual has inadequate information about his/her work role, that is, where there is lack of clarity about the work objectives associated with their role and about the scope of responsibilities of the job (French & Caplan, 1973). Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek and Rosenthal (1964) have suggested that three organisational conditions contribute to role ambiguity: organisational complexity, managerial philosophies

about communication, and rapid organisational change. Role ambiguity can be stressful for blue-collar workers where ambiguity arises from an inadequate job description. For example, an employee may be asked to complete work that is not within his job description and this results in role ambiguity which can be seen as an industrial relations stressor.

Kahn et al. (1964) found that men who suffered from role ambiguity experienced lower job satisfaction, higher job related tension and lower self-confidence. French and Caplan (1972), in a sample of 205 volunteer engineers, found that role ambiguity was significantly related to low job satisfaction and also to feelings of job related threat to one's mental and physical well-being. Margolis (1974) also found a number of significant relationships between symptoms of physical and mental ill health with role ambiguity in a representative national sample (n= 1496). The stress indicators related to role ambiguity were depressed moods, life dissatisfaction, job dissatisfaction and intention to leave the job (Margolis, 1974). These above relationships were found to be indicators of job stress, but on its own, role ambiguity may not be substantial (Cooper & Marshall, 1976).

Role conflict

Role conflict exists when an individual in a particular work role experiences conflicting job demands (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). The most frequent manifestation is when a person is caught between two groups of people (e.g., the trade union and company where one works). These groups demand different kinds of behaviour or expect that the job should entail different functions. For example, the experience of role conflict can be stressful in industrial relations because the union will expect loyalty from its members that is in conflict with the loyalty that the organisation expects, thus presenting a stressful situation for the worker (McLean, 1979).

Kahn et al. (1964) found that men who suffered more role conflict had lower job satisfaction and higher job related tension. They also found that the greater the power or authority of the people 'sending' the conflicting role messages, the more job dissatisfaction produced by role conflict. Bluen and Barling (1986) suggest that role conflict is apparent for workers who find different demands are placed on them from the union and the company for which they work.

Moderators

Among the kinds of variables that have been empirically identified as potentially important moderators on the effects of life stress, two have received considerable attention: social support and personality characteristics (Johnson & Sarason, 1978; 1979).

Social Support

Social support offered by trade unions can operate in two different ways. First, it can directly enhance employee responses on the job because it meets important human needs (e.g., security, and social contact). That is, positive effects of social support from trade unions on employee responses under conditions of stress can offset or counterbalance negative effects of stress (House, 1981). This is reflected in the main effects of social support as represented by the simple additive relationships, in which case, employee responses are enhanced as social support from trade unions increases regardless of stress level.

Second, social support from trade unions has the potential to buffer the impact of stress on employee responses. In this moderating role, social support may act to modify the relation between job stressors and employee responses. This is reflected in the interaction effects between social support and stress in predicting employee responses on the job (House, 1981).

Cobb (1976) has suggested that social support helps to buffer persons against stress primarily by facilitating efforts at coping and defence. Accordingly, the deleterious impact of stress on employee responses is moderated as social support increases. That is, social support from trade unions will have its strongest beneficial effects on job responses among trade union members under stress and may have little or no effect for members not under stress. According to Kaplan, Cassel and Gore (1977) social support is likely to be protective only in the presence of stressful circumstances, and Abdel-Halim (1982) suggests that social support will have a positive effect on the stress-strain relationship.

Empirical research examining the moderating role of social support at work indicates that the findings are somewhat mixed (Abdel-Halim, 1982). Caplan (1974) found that perceived support from supervisors, subordinates and co-workers was negatively related to many, but not all, perceived work stressors, and indicators of both physical and mental health. Caplan (1974) also reported moderating effects of support on relationships between perceived stress and physiological strains. Caplan's results are consistent with a two-year longitudinal study by Cobb and Kasl (1977) and Gore (1978) who found that social support buffered industrial workers against the deleterious effects of job loss on health. House and Wells (1977) found that the negative effects of work stress was buffered by social support offered by supervisors but not by co-workers.

On the other hand, evidence contrary to prediction has been reported by La Rocco and Jones (1978) and Pinneau (1976). La Rocco and Jones (1978) results suggest that the effects of social support are positive and additive rather than interactive or buffering. La Rocco, House and French (1980) replicated the above studies of House and Wells (1977) and Pinneau (1976). Results indicate that job related stress and strain are primarily affected by job-related sources of social support, and that the effects are largely main effects rather than buffering. In contrast, more general health outcomes are affected by a wider range of sources

of social support, and the effects are more likely to be buffering effects than main effects. Finally, House and Wells (1978) found supervisor support to be more consequential than co-worker support, whereas La Rocco, House and French (1980) found co-worker support to be more important. Thus, the present study will attempt to address this problem of the main and moderator effects of trade union social support on the stress-strain relationship.

Hardiness

Personality dispositions have been cited as a resource which helps buffer the stress/strain relationship (Ganellen & Blaney, 1984). Personality dispositions have both cognitive appraisal and action aspects where stimuli are interpreted as having a particular meaning, and activities are experienced as being appropriate (Kobasa, 1980). Some investigators (e.g., Lazarus, 1966) considers cognitive appraisal and related actions, which are often called coping, to be exclusively determined by the specifics of the events to be dealt with. Kobasa (1979) states that personality dispositions can also influence coping processes and that this may be the mechanism whereby personality exercises a buffering effect on stressful events.

The question may be raised to what particular personality dispositions mitigate the otherwise debilitating effects of stressful life events? Kobasa (1980) suggests that the cognitive appraisal effect of rendering the events as not so meaningful, overwhelming, and undesirable for the individual. Some personality dispositions may transform an event into a less stressful one for a person, rather than have the person avoiding them (Lazarus, 1966), thus these persons possess a valuable asset in avoiding illness-provoking biological states such as adaptational exhaustion. These persons should be able to remain healthy while experiencing events that would otherwise be debilitating for others without these assets in personality dispositions (Kobasa, 1980). Kobasa (1979) proposed the hardiness concept as a constellation of three personality characteristics,

namely, commitment, control and challenge that function as a stress resistance resource. Commitment is expressed as a tendency to involve oneself in (rather than experience alienation from) whatever one is doing or encounters. Committed persons have a generalised sense of purpose that allows them to identify with and find meaningful the events, things and persons in their environment (Kobasa, 1982). Committed persons invest enough in themselves and their relationship to the social context that they cannot easily give up under pressure. Therefore, committed persons' relationships to themselves and the environment involve activeness and approach rather than passivity and avoidance (Kobasa, 1979).

Control is expressed as a tendency to feel and act as if one is influential (rather than helpless) in the face of the varied contingencies of life (Averill, 1973). This does not imply the naive expectation of complete determination of events and outcomes but rather implies the perception of oneself as having a definitive influence through the exercise of imaginative knowledge, skill and choice. Control enhances stress resistance perceptually by increasing the likelihood that events will be experienced as a natural outgrowth of one's actions and therefore, not as foreign unexpected, and overwhelming experiences. In terms of coping, a sense of control leads to actions aimed at transforming events into something consistent with an ongoing life plan and is thus, less jarring (Kobasa, 1982).

The challenge disposition is expressed as the belief that change rather than stability is normal in life and that the anticipation of changes are interesting incentives to growth rather than threats to security (Berlyne, 1964). Challenge mitigates stressfulness of events on the perceptual side by colouring events as stimulating rather than threatening, specifically because there are changes requiring readjustment (Kobasa, 1979). In coping behaviours, challenge will lead to attempts to transform oneself and thereby grow, rather than conserve and protect, what one can of the former existence. By fostering openness and

flexibility, challenge should also allow the integration and effective appraisal of even exceedingly incongruent events (Korbasa, 1979).

Trade Union Social Support and Hardiness as Moderators

Most research to this point has considered the stress-reducing effects of support and personality independently (Kobasa, 1982). However, it seems likely that personality characteristics have an effect on interactions in one's social environment and, conversely, that the responses one gets from others may have an effect on personality. Coyne (1982) has argued that sole consideration of internal processes, such as cognitions, or personality, leads to a distorted view of the complex interrelationships between internal processes, behaviour, and the consequences of behaviour. Ganellen and Blaney (1984) suggests that this viewpoint of social support and personality characteristics should not be studied independently, but that researchers should study their interrelations.

In substantiating this view that social support and hardiness can be treated as moderators in this study is that Cobb (1976) suggests that social support improves one's self esteem, feelings of being cared for, and a sense of belonging to a community. From this perspective, it can be suggested that one's social experience has an influence on one's attitudes towards oneself and social institutions. Thus people with high levels of support may have a greater sense of meaning and commitment than those with low levels of support (Ganellen & Blaney, 1984). Alternatively, Maddi et al. (1982) suggest that the hardy type may be more active in seeking out support, particularly under stressful conditions.

Ganellen and Blaney (1984) have examined hardiness and social support as buffers of life stress and the possibility that support and hardiness may interact. Their results indicate that persons scoring low in life events, high in social support, and low in the alienation from self are least likely to be depressed. Both

commitment and challe ge dimensions of hardiness were represented in these main effects, whereas control was not. The analyses that addressed the buffering effects of support and hardiness showed that the interaction of life stress and social support was non-significant, and in no instance was the interaction of hardiness and social support significant (Ganellen & Blaney, 1984).

Though Ganellen and Blaney's (1984) results were that hardiness did not interact with social support, Kobasa and Puccetti (1983) found that a composite measure of hardiness is related to support received from one's work supervisors but not to support from one's family. Sandler and Lakey (1982) have also reported a significant association between social support and internality (a dimension of hardiness).

Research has rendered differing results on the buffering effect of social support and hardiness on life stress (Ganellen & Blaney, 1984), and in the present study social support and hardiness will be examined as moderators in the industrial relations stress-strain relationship.

Dependent Variables: Strains

Strumpfer (1980) states that when an individual experiences job stress, he/she usually begins to show emotional and cognitive strain, in the form of restlessness, difficulty in concentration, and then depression. On the physical side, the person is constantly aware of exhaustion and fatigue. Strain may also become manifest in symptoms such as, low back pain and high blood pressure (Strumpfer, 1980). Strain consequences may not be limited just to mental or physical ill health but there may also be behavioural signs (e.g., mood changes) (Seers McGee, Serey & Graen, 1983).

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is the degree to which a person reports satisfaction with intrinsic and extrinsic features of the job (Warr et al., 1978). One of the most obvious psychological influences of job stressors is job dissatisfaction (Beehr & Newman, 1978). Many job stress researchers have included job dissatisfaction as one of the consequences of stress (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Ganellen & Blaney, 1984; House & Rizzo, 1972). Job dissatisfaction as a consequence of occupational stressors has been related to role conflict, role overload and role ambiguity (Cooper & Marshall, 1976).

Kasl (1973) found that low job satisfaction was related to non-participation in decision making, inability to provide feedback to supervisors and lack of recognition for good performance, and that poor mental health was linked to close supervision and no autonomy at work (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). Beehr and Newman (1978) found that perceived job stressors are positively related to dissatisfaction with one's job. French and Caplan (1970) found that people who reported greater participation in decision making processes reported significantly greater job satisfaction and higher feelings of self esteem. French and Caplan (1973) have also reported that a high degree of job satisfaction is related to higher productivity and lower staff turnover. La Rocco and Jones (1978) found that leader support was more relevant in achieving job satisfaction, whereas work group support was more relevant to overall Navy satisfaction amongst Navy enlisted personnel (n=3725). Thus job satisfaction as a consequence of the industrial relations stress-strain relationship will be studied in the present study.

Life Satisfaction

In the past life satisfaction has been studied as an independent and dependent variable in stress-strain research. It has been cited that there are a number of extra organisational sources of stress which influence the physical and mental

well being of an individual at work, for example, family problems (Beehr & Newman, 1978), life satisfaction and crises (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974), and financial difficulties (McLean, 198). However, life satisfaction has been more widely studied as a dependent variable (Warr et al., 1979). Life satisfaction can be referred to as the degree to which a person reports satisfaction with salient features of his life and life space (Warr, Cook & Wall, 1979).

Some research on life satisfaction has given emphasis to the inter-relationships between life satisfaction and other features of psychological well-being and mental health (e.g., Warr, 1978); and other studies have looked at both life satisfaction and job satisfaction. For example, Hall (1976) reported an inter-correlation of 0.42 between single job satisfaction items and an overall life satisfaction measure. Hall also observed that job satisfaction contributed more to life satisfaction for men than for women.

Ganster, Fulisier and Mayes (1986) suggest that jobs with high levels of role conflict, ambiguity and underload are associated with life dissatisfaction and depression. Further, Ganster et al. (1986) found that underutilization interacts with social support from supervisors in affecting life dissatisfaction. Evidence was found where skill underutilization leads to more life dissatisfaction for workers with high support from the supervisor than for workers with less support.

Propensity to leave

Propensity to leave the organisation may at times be an attempt to cope with job stress, but it is mainly considered as a consequence of strain (Beehr & Newman, 1978). Types of propensity to leave the organisation include absenteeism, labour turnover and psychological withdrawal (e.g., low job involvement). Absenteeism and turnover have costs for the organisation, and are therefore, negative organisational consequences. Psychological withdrawal may also be linked to undesirable organisational consequences (Beehr & Newman, 1978). Brief and Aldag

(1976) studied labour turnover by assessing self-reports of subjects' propensity to leave the organisation. Lyons (1971) has shown that perceived role ambiguity among registered nurses is related to voluntary turnover.

Bedeian, Mossholder and Armenakis (1983) suggest that role ambiguity and conflict increase the probability that the individual will experience job-induced stress which is likely to result in the individual leaving the organisation. Bedeian et al. (1983) found that role occupants who experience higher levels of person-role conflict and increased uncertainty concerning the outcomes or responses to their behaviour may be expected to exhibit a greater propensity to leave the organisation. French and Caplan (1972), in a study of 205 research scientists, engineers and administrators, suggested that social support in the form of good relations with one's peer group is one of the most effective means for diminishing the negative effects of role stress, specifically job satisfaction and propensity to leave the organisation.

Psychological Well-being

Coronary heart disease is not the only reported physical consequence of job stress. Other consequences include deteriorations in psychological well-being (Goldberg, 1972), infectious diseases, depression and even cancer (House, 1981). However, psychological well-being can include factors such as depression, unhappiness, sleeplessness and anxiety (Goldberg, 1972). Many studies link organisational stress to psychological symptoms of depression (French & Caplan, 1973), and anxiety (French et al., 1982). La Rocco, House and Jones (1980) suggest that certain job strains and health outcomes would be seen by most people as reasons for seeking social support. Specifically, neurotic symptoms and effects (e.g., depression and anxiety) are commonly thought to be caused or increased by psycho-social stress and is potentially responsive to social support, especially emotional support.

Empirical research has found that social support from supervisors and co-workers was negatively correlated with job stressors, with psychological and behavioural strains, and with several health problems (Winnbubst, Marcelissen and Kleber, 1982). Winnbubst et al. (1982) also found relevant buffering effects, although the correlations were lower, thus Winnbubst et al. (1982) conclude that social support can buffer the effects of stressors on strains, and the effects of the strains on health variables. Turner (1981) reports that social support has significant main effects on the stress-psychological well-being relationship, and that social support is most important in stressful circumstances, and that these relationships vary across social class groupings.

Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to assess the main and interaction effects of trade union social support on the industrial relations stress-strain relationship. The stress variables include negative IR-events, role ambiguity and role conflict. The resultant strains include life satisfaction, job satisfaction, propensity to leave the organisation and psychological well-being. The role of hardiness as a moderator variable will also be assessed.

Thus the following hypotheses are;

Main Effects

Hypothesis 1: social support and hardiness have a direct effect on strains (namely, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, propensity to leave and psychological well-being).

Interaction effects

Hypothesis 2: social support and hardiness buffers the relationship between stressors (namely, role ambiguity role conflict and negative IR-events) and

psychological and behavioural strains (namely, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, propensity to leave the organisation and psychological well-being).

METHOD

Subjects

The 258 subjects of Study 2 were the same as for Study 1, that is, all subjects were blue-collar workers or clerks and were members of the Motor Industry Combined Workers Union (MICWU) (see Table 1 for biographical details of sample).

Procedure

The battery of scales measuring IR stressors, strains and moderators were randomly distributed at union meetings, or at factories once managerial permission had been granted. Attached to each set of scales was a covering letter explaining the nature of the research project and a biographical questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The questionnaires were returned via union officials who attended the meetings, and by myself or union officials who visited factories. The questionnaires which were completed at factories were done during normal working hours.

Measuring Instruments

Eight scales were administered in Study 2 to assess empirically whether social support offered by the trade union moderates the stress-strain relationship (see Appendix 1). Three of these scales were administered to measure job stressors, namely,

the Industrial Relations Event Scale (IRES) (Bluen, 1986),

the Role Ambiguity scale (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970), and

the Role Conflict scale (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Two scales were used to evaluate the moderator variable, that is, the Trade Union Social Support scale which was developed in Study 1 and the Hardiness scale (Kobasa, 1979).

Four scales were used to measure job related strains, namely

the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972),

the Overall Job Satisfaction Scale (Warr, Cook & Wall, 1979),

the Overall Life Satisfaction Scale (Warr et al., 1979), and

the Propensity to Leave the organisation scale (Lyons, 1971).

Independent Variables: Organisational stressors

The Industrial Relations Event (IRES) scale used is a 20-item short form of the 63-item IRES (Bluen, 1986b). The IRES measures the stressors associated with involvement in the practice of industrial relations. The IRES contains three separate sub-scales. The occurrence index is the sum of all stressful IR events experienced in the past year. A sum of the negative impact ratings of events experienced (-3 through to -1) yields the negative change score and the positive change score represents the sum of impact ratings of positively experienced events (+1 through to +3) (Bluen, 1986b).

The IRES has good psychometric properties (Bluen, 1986b). The psychometric adequacy of the IRES-short (20-items) was evaluated using the same population and criteria as for the 63-item IRES scale. Highly satisfactory reliability and validity results were obtained for the IRES-short form as with the 63-item IRES scale (Bluen, 1986b).

Both internal and split half reliability were found to be highly satisfactory for the IRES-short form. Cronbach's alpha for the occurrence scale was 0.92, and split-half reliability was 0.88. Significant test re-test reliability

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