AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL AND SUPERVISORY SUPPORT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLE CONFLICT AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

In this paper we venture into the ongoing tempest about the relationship between stressors, stress, and social support in the workplace (Beehr, 1995; Beehr & Glazer 2001; Cohen & Wills 1985; Helgeson 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). The primary controversy within this literature is the conditions under which social support has direct effects—the main effect hypothesis—and the conditions under which it has moderating effects—the buffering hypothesis. We collected data from a group of supervisors and managers at two different points in time to examine the relationship among these key variables and test the competing social support hypotheses. In the first wave of data collection, we investigated the effect of perceived organizational support on the relation between role conflict and emotional exhaustion. In the second wave, we examined the differential impact of perceived support provided by different sources, namely, the organization and the supervisor.

Researchers investigating burnout point to the supervisor as a particularly important source of social support but researchers have tended to use generalized measures of social support. In order to differentiate between sources of support, we examined perceived organizational support and perceived supervisory support. Perceived organizational support refers to the extent to which employees believe that their organization cares about them and values their work (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002). This global evaluation relies on employees’ perception of their employer’s reaction to the illnesses, mistakes, policy opinions, past performance ratings, and need for praise and approval (Shore & Wayne, 1993). Perceived support should reduce strain because the person perceives that the resources needed when facing stress at work are available (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Rhodes & Eisenberger 2002). Researchers have generally assumed a buffering effect but many have found main effects (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 1997; Lee & Ashforth, 1994). Interestingly, Lee and Ashforth (1994) used measures of both supervisory and organizational support, but they combined the two measures into a single score in their model. In the second wave of our research we included measures for both supervisory and organizational support.

Results of this study serve to refine the competing main effect vs. buffering hypothesis explanations. Specifically, in a first wave of data collection, we found support for the main effect model. However, a clearer picture emerged in a second wave of data collection, when we teased apart perceived supervisory support from perceived organizational support. Specifically, we found that perceived organizational support moderated the relationship between role conflict and emotional exhaustion, whereas perceived support from the supervisor acted as a mediator of this relationship. In other words, a greater amount of role conflict led to the perception that the supervisor was less supportive, and subsequently, to experiencing a greater degree of emotional exhaustion. The results of our research also suggest that increased support by the organization improves the support from the supervisor. This suggests that if the supervisor is perceived as being supportive but the organization is not, it reduces the effect from the supervisor.