Leadership consensus as a cross-level contextual moderator of the emotional exhaustion–work commitment relationship[☆]

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Abstract

Consensus constructs are a common topic in level-of-analysis research and, yet, leadership researchers have failed to consider their theoretical appeal as a contextual factor in the explanation of work-related attitudes and behaviors. Drawing on a sample of 27 naturally occurring occupational groups composed of 828 U.S. Air Force personnel, we examined the degree to which consensus in group members' perceptions of various leadership-climate constructs moderated the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work commitment. Results showed that group members' consensus regarding transformational leadership and laissez-faire leadership were both cross-level contextual moderators that interacted with individual member's emotional exhaustion to explain individual-level work commitment, even after controlling for mean group-level ratings of leadership climate.
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As the basic stress component of employee burnout, emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of an individual's capacity to maintain the coping resources necessary to fulfill performance expectations. Emotional exhaustion is generally characterized by physical fatigue and mental weariness, created when supporting resources are insufficient to meet job demands (Shirom, 2003). Given its etiology, it is not surprising that emotional exhaustion has been linked to a range of physiological and mental-health outcomes, as well as an array of work-related attitudes and behavior (Cordes & Doughtery, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Wright & Bonett, 1997).

Germane to the present study is emotional exhaustion's inverse relationship to work commitment (e.g., Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Leiter, 1991). As traditionally defined, commitment within a workplace setting encompasses an individual's emotional attachment to a particular organization. It is characterized by a tendency to internalize work-related problems and a willingness to "go the extra distance" (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). To

date, the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work commitment has been principally viewed from an individual-level perspective. We move beyond this single-level focus to view the association between emotional exhaustion and work commitment from a cross-level vantage. In doing so, we explore the possibility that differences in group members' consensus about the quality of their shared social environment will reveal themselves in the direction and strength of the relationship between individuals' emotional exhaustion and work commitment. Our reasoning draws on Maslach & Leiter's (1997) conclusion that "emotions are not just private and personal but rather *social* experiences, both in their origin and effect" (p. 30). Thus, whereas emotions have been viewed as a function of the immediate stimulus (i.e., the event, object, person, behavior) that confronts an individual, we explore the extent to which they are also a function of the social context in which the stimulus occurs.

Viewing the "social context of emotions" as critical in driving important work behaviors, we hypothesize that the quality of a work group's shared social environment will moderate the relationship between its members' emotional exhaustion and work commitment. Such a subject X phenomenon interaction would indicate the presence of a heretofore unidentified boundary condition (i.e., contextual factor) influencing the impact of emotional exhaustion on work commitment. In that higher levels of work commitment have been shown to enhance an organization's per-formance by eliciting increased work-group effectiveness and lower absenteeism and turnover (e.g., Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004), identification of such an interaction would not only facilitate theory development vis-à-vis occupational stress research, in general, and employee burnout, in particular, but also aid in understanding how contextual factors influence work-related attitudes and behavior.

1. Conservation of resources theory

We draw on Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources (COR) theory as an underlying framework for understanding emotional exhaustion (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). COR theory holds that individuals strive to obtain and protect that which they value (their "resources"). A key COR corollary is that resource loss triggers stress in the form of emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, COR theory contends (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993), and research confirms, individuals will attempt to minimize the loss of valued resources and, to the degree they are unsuccessful in doing so, will likely engage in defensive or withdrawal mechanisms to protect their self-efficacy (Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Leiter, 1991). From an organization's perspective, one of the more costly employee withdrawal-related mechanisms is the withholding of work commitment (Cooper & Viswesvaran, 2005; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). As suggested by the preceding discussion, in circumstances where employees are emotionally exhausted and, in turn, disengage by being less committed to their work, an organization's performance will suffer.

In their review of the extant literature, Halbesleben & Buckley (2004) concluded that an important direction for future research was investigating the role played by social support in influencing experiences normally associated with burnout. As broadly defined, social support refers to the "availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationships" (Leavy, 1983, p. 5). Within the COR theory framework, social support is viewed as a potential means for acquiring resources beyond those directly possessed by an individual (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Consistent with other theories that have been advanced to explain social support's role in the occupational stressor–strain relationship (for reviews, see Beehr, 1995; Cohen & Wills, 1985), COR theory hypothesizes that workplace social support limits the detrimental impact of emotional exhaustion associated with stressful work-related situations. Previous research has investigated the effect of supportive leader behaviors (as a form of social support) on coping with emotional exhaustion (for a review, see Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). We go one step further by examining the effect of group members' perceptions of the *quality* of their shared social environment as reflected in group-level leadership consensus scores. Evidence suggests that group-level climate perceptions are differentially related to a leader's supervisory behavior under high-versus low-leadership quality (Zohar & Luria, 2004). Viewing leadership as a transactional process, we speculate that, as a contextual factor, consensus in group members' leadership climate perceptions functions as a boundary condition influencing the impact of emotional exhaustion on work commitment.

2. Contextual factors

In commenting on contextualization in organizational behavior research, Rousseau & Fried (2001) argue that the explicit addressing of contextual factors is necessary for enhancing the comprehensiveness and creativity of research findings. Similarly, Bliese & Jex (2002) suggest that individual-level models are too simplistic to accurately reflect