

An Examination of the Roles of Career Uncertainty, Flexibility, and Control in Predicting Emotional Exhaustion

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The present study employs an uncertainty framework to develop a career stress model in which career control mediates the effects of career stressors on emotional exhaustion. This model is tested through the use of structural equation modeling with data obtained from 204 government workers. Results indicate that a model which includes career control as a mediator of the effects of career flexibility and dependence on emotional exhaustion demonstrates a better fit with the data than a nested model in which job context factors, the traditional predictors of emotional exhaustion, solely predict emotional exhaustion. © 2001 Academic Press

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Stress research has addressed many facets of organizational life using diverse, but related, conceptualizations of the stress process and stress (e.g., Kahn & Byosiére, 1992). McGrath (1976, p. 1352) conceptualized stress as being experienced “when an environmental situation is perceived as presenting a demand which threatens to exceed the person’s capabilities and resources for meeting it.” In developing a conceptual framework to classify stress research, Kahn and Byosiére used a general model in which stressors (such as role ambiguity) cause stress which, in turn, is manifest in strain (physiological and psychological outcomes, including emotional exhaustion).

The stress associated with career uncertainties, including career transitions and job insecurity, has received increasing attention (e.g., Brockner, 1992; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Latack, 1984, 1989; Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995). This topic is becoming more salient given widespread organizational change, the decline of employment security, and the emergence of more calculative relationships between employees and employers (e.g., Brockner, 1992). The body of knowledge of how individuals cope with career uncertainties is primarily conceptual in nature, largely based on extending work stress research to career issues (e.g., Latack, 1989; Latack et al., 1995). Latack (1984) developed and tested a model in which coping strategies mediated the relationship between job-related stress and the role ambiguity and role overload caused by career transitions (mainly promotions). This mediational role was not supported, nor was any relationship found between

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stress and the magnitude of career transitions or types of coping strategies. Latack proposed that competencies may moderate the relationships between transitions and role overload and, by extension, between transitions and stress. Thus, developing generalizable knowledge and skills may be an effective coping strategy in anticipation of career transitions, including demotions and potential job loss (Latack, 1989). Latack et al. (1995) developed a model relating job loss to coping strategies, proposing that situationally specific coping strategies would be more appropriate than generic ones. However, our literature review found little empirical research concerned with how career strategies may enable people to cope with the prospect of transitions, provide a sense of control over their careers, and, therefore, indirectly influence stress and strain at work.

The present study addresses this apparent gap through both theoretical and empirical contributions. This article provides a cohesive and parsimonious means of understanding the important contribution of career factors in the experience of stress in the workplace. By incorporating job context stressors the study addresses the question of whether career variables explain variation in emotional exhaustion over and above the variance associated with traditional predictors of stress and strain. By providing evidence of the relative importance of selected career factors, this research directs attention to a set of heretofore neglected variables which explain workplace stress levels. Understanding these predictors of workplace stress is particularly important given its pernicious effects on workers' psychological and physiological health (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Cherniss, 1992; Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Leiter, Clark, & Durup, 1994; Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and organizational outcomes such as job performance, turnover, and work attitudes (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

The present study draws upon existing research to develop a model which links career stressors, career coping, career control, and strain. Strain is measured by emotional exhaustion, the core component of burnout and a chronic form of stress (Maslach, 1982; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Emotional exhaustion reflects "feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. It is manifested by both physical fatigue and a sense of feeling psychologically and emotionally 'drained'" (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998, p. 486). Emotional exhaustion serves as the antecedent to the remaining two dimensions of burnout—depersonalization of others and reduced personal accomplishment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach, 1982). Although originally validated in samples of workers in the helping professions, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) has been used to measure strain in diverse occupations, including computer company employees (Evans & Fischer, 1993), salespeople (Klein & Verbeke, 1999), Canadian government employees (Fitzgerald, 1991), and police personnel (Stearns, 1992). The use of emotional exhaustion as an indicator of work strain is appropriate given that the career variables and contextual factors incorporated in this study also reflect long-term processes.

This model is evaluated using survey responses obtained from a sample of 204 employees of a Canadian government department. Following Anderson and

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