



## Extending the challenge-hindrance model of occupational stress: The role of appraisal

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### ABSTRACT

Interest regarding the challenge-hindrance occupational stress model has increased in recent years, however its theoretical foundation has not been tested. Drawing from the transactional theory of stress, this study tests the assumptions made in past research (1) that workload and responsibility are appraised as challenges and role ambiguity and role conflict are appraised as hindrances, and (2) that these appraisals mediate the relationship between these stressors and outcomes (i.e., strains, job dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions). For a sample of 479 employees, we found that although workload, role ambiguity, and role conflict could be appraised primarily as challenges or hindrances, they could also simultaneously be perceived as being both to varying degrees. Support was also found for a model in which primary appraisal partially mediated the stressor-outcome relationship.

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Research has generally supported the proposition that unfavorable working conditions (stressors) negatively influence psychological and physical health (strains; e.g., reviews by Jex & Yankelevich, 2008; Semmer, McGrath, & Beehr, 2005), employee attitudes, and work behaviors (e.g., Boyd, Lewin, & Sager, 2009; Simona, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). However, there are some studies that have not shown this result (e.g., Beehr, Glaser, Canali, & Wallwey, 2001; Dwyer & Ganster, 1991). Because of these inconsistent findings, research on occupational stress has begun to acknowledge that work stressors can be both 'good' and 'bad' with regard to their effects on performance (e.g., LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005), work attitudes (e.g., Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & LePine, 2004) and withdrawal behaviors (e.g., Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). Similar distinctions between different types of stressors has long been recognized (i.e., eustress and distress; Selye, 1974) but not often studied in the work stress literature. In recent work this distinction is most clearly recognized in the *challenge-hindrance* occupational stressor model (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). In this model, stressors that are thought to have a favorable relationship to some outcomes are considered challenge stressors, and those that are thought to have an unfavorable relationship to outcomes are considered hindrance stressors. A number of empirical studies have supported the major propositions in the model (e.g., Pearsall, Ellis, & Stein, 2009) and it is growing in prominence in the research literature (e.g., Webster, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2010).

The challenge-hindrance occupational stress model draws heavily from the transactional theory of stress found in the more general (non-work) stress literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this cognitive theory of stress, a person's evaluation of the environment, or *primary appraisal*, plays a critical role in the stress process. Primary appraisal is thought to determine if an event or aspect of the environment is perceived as a challenge or a hindrance, and it is considered to be one of the main psychological

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mechanisms linking stressors to outcomes. Although primary appraisal is implicit in the challenge-hindrance model, none of the empirical research using the model has directly measured it. Rather, it has been assumed, *a priori*, that certain stressors would be experienced as either challenges or hindrances (e.g., LePine et al., 2005), but no study has directly examined employees' primary appraisal as the underlying theoretical mechanism linking stressors to outcomes. The purpose of the present study is to extend the challenge-hindrance occupational stress model by examining the role of appraisal in the stressor-outcome process. We begin by testing the operational assumption made in past research that certain stressors (role conflict, role ambiguity, workload, and responsibility) are uniformly and exclusively appraised as either challenges or hindrances. Then we test whether these primary appraisals mediate the relationship between stressors and the outcomes of emotional exhaustion, physical symptoms, job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions as proposed in transactional stress theory.

## 1. Challenge and hindrance stressors

In the challenge-hindrance occupational stress model, common workplace stressors were allocated into two categories. Challenge stressors included demands that, while strain-provoking, may also create especially high performance opportunities and therefore, a strong sense of accomplishment if one is able to overcome the difficult situations they present. Hindrance stressors, on the other hand, consisted of demands that are more likely to interfere with and thwart the attainment of personal goals and development (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). At best, overcoming these hindrances only results in adequate performance, and therefore the sense of accomplishment accompanying high performance is missing.

This two-way categorization was accomplished by Cavanaugh et al. (2000) who had a sample of students classify 11 items from three separate stress measures (i.e., the *Job Demands and Worker Health Study*, Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975; the *Stress Diagnostic Survey*, Ivancevich & Matteson, 1983; and the *Job Stress Index*, Sandman, 1992) as either a challenge stressor or a hindrance stressor. Subsequent factor analyses were conducted on the participants' ratings of how stressful they thought each of the items to be. This factor analysis supported the two-factor structure (Cavanaugh et al.). The challenge stressor factor that emerged consisted of items reflecting time demands, workload, and responsibility. The second factor, hindrance stressors, included items measuring political barriers, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Having a sample of students rate stressor items as challenges or hindrances is no more in line with the transactional theory of stress than simply having researchers assess (appraise) the stressors, however. Instead, in order to test the theory, the challenge and hindrance appraisals of research participants themselves must be examined.

The few studies using Cavanaugh et al.'s categorization of stressors have found differential relationships between them and various outcomes, such that challenge stressors tended to be related favorably to non-strain outcomes such as job satisfaction (Podsakoff et al., 2007), loyalty (Boswell et al., 2004), performance (Pearsall et al., 2009), and retention (Podsakoff et al., 2007), whereas hindrance stressors related unfavorably to these outcomes. Although these studies have classified stressors *a priori*, assuming on average most people appraise stressors in the same way, it is implied that the underlying mechanism for the differential relationships between challenges and hindrances and work-related outcomes was employees' appraisals (LePine et al., 2005).

## 2. Transactional theory of stress

One well-known appraisal approach from the more general stress literature is the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which argues that environmental conditions (stressors) are not the direct precipitating cause of a stress reaction, but rather it is the person's appraisal of challenge or hindrance (i.e., threat) that determines the response (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Storch, Gaab, Kuttel, Stussi, & Fend, 2007). This theory places primary appraisal at the center of the stress process, and it is one of the main ways by which a person evaluates the meaning and significance of a situation. Situations perceived as having the potential for rewards (e.g., recognition and praise), mastery, and growth are referred to as *challenge appraisals*, whereas those that are perceived as having only the potential to threaten one's well-being by thwarting the attainment of goals and development are referred to as *hindrance appraisals* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner & Brewer, 2002).

The justification used for the challenge-hindrance occupational stress model's framework rests on the transactional theory of stress (e.g., Webster et al., 2010). However, research on the theory in workplace settings thus far has only assumed that the interpretation of a stressor as either a challenge or hindrance is the same for everyone and has not accounted for employees' appraisals of them. It is also important to note challenge and hindrance appraisals are not necessarily mutually exclusive; thus, an individual can appraise a situation as being both a challenge and a hindrance simultaneously (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For instance, changing careers is a stressful event that has the potential for mastery and gains in professional development and financial rewards, but there is also potential for increased role complexity and unclear job demands. Based on this logic, when assessing one's appraisal of a situation it is important to measure the extent to which the situation is appraised both as a challenge and/or a hindrance. The assumption that all people make the same appraisal under the same circumstances and that appraisal can only lead to one of two distinctions (challenge *and/or* hindrance), are not consistent with the basic tenets of the appraisal theories of stress. Yet research up to this point on the challenge-hindrance model of occupational stress has operationalized challenge and hindrance stressors as the same for all employees. The present study takes the next logical step, testing the theory more directly by actually measuring each employee's challenge and hindrance appraisal of workplace stressors.

In addition to determining the extent to which an individual appraises a situation as being a challenge and a hindrance, the transactional theory of stress also argues that primary appraisal affects the type of outcomes a person will experience, such as his

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