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The relationships between job and organizational characteristics and role and job stress among Chinese community correctional workers

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ABSTRACT

Although the past two decades have witnessed a fast growth in studies on occupational attitudes and experiences among correctional officers, such research is rare in China despite the country's strong push for community corrections since 2003. Drawing on interview survey data collected from a province in China, the study assessed the relationships between job and organizational characteristics and job and role stress among Chinese community corrections workers. The results indicated that agency formalization, supervisory support, and coworker integration reduced role ambiguity and/or conflict, whereas job dangerousness, role ambiguity, and role conflict increased job stress among Chinese correctional staff. Workers with stronger punishment orientations also reported higher levels of job stress. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Job stress, which is generally defined as a worker's feeling of job-related hardness, tension, anxiety, frustration and worry arising from his or her job (Cullen et al., 1985; Parker and DeCotiis, 1983), has been widely identified as a common occupational hazard among criminal justice practitioners. A closely related concept is role stress, which refers to the stress that an individual experienced due to his or her occupational role in a workplace (Rizzo et al., 1970). In the arena of corrections, recent studies have shown a consistent linkage between high levels of job stress and problematic behavioral and health issues, such as higher levels of burnout, absenteeism, turnover intention and actual turnover, and premature deaths, and lower degrees of job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction among correctional personnel (Armstrong et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2010; Hogan et al., 2009; Lambert et al., 2005).

Given the detrimental impact of job stress on correctional staff, a large number of studies have been conducted over the past several decades to uncover the determinants of correctional job stress. This broad line of inquiry has focused on the influences of job and organizational characteristics, such as supervisor and coworker support (Armstrong et al., 2015; Atkin-

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Plunk and Armstrong, 2013; Garland et al., 2013; Liou, 1995; Misis et al., 2013; Paoline et al., 2006), instrumental communication (Garland et al., 2013; Lambert and Paoline, 2008), job dangerousness (Lambert et al., 2007; Lambert and Hogan, 2010; Lambert and Paoline, 2005, 2008; Misis et al., 2013), role conflict and ambiguity (Lambert and Paoline, 2005, 2008; Misis et al., 2013), and organizational satisfaction and commitment (Wells et al., 2009) on job stress. A few other studies investigated the effects of attitudinal orientations toward treatment and punishment on job stress (Atkin-Plunk and Armstrong, 2013; Liou, 1995). Almost all empirical studies also considered or controlled background characteristics, such as race, gender, age, education, supervisor status, and tenure, but their impacts were inconsistent and less than impressive (see, Dowden and Tellier, 2004 for a review).

This study analyzed the effects of job and organizational characteristics on job stress among community corrections (CC) workers in China. Several reasons justified this project. First, a large number of studies have been conducted to assess occupational attitudes among correctional staff who work in traditional institutions, but very few have examined similar issues among community corrections staff. Given that evidence accumulated from studying primarily institutional staff may not be necessarily transferrable to community correction workers, the latter thus deserves more research attention.

Second, the rise of China as a global powerhouse has made the country strategically important in assessing the generalizability of Western-based theories and evidence. A study of correctional job stress and its antecedents in China would not only advance our understanding of vital occupational attitudes and experiences associated with Chinese correctional workers but also promote the internationalization of sociological and criminological knowledge (Sampson, 2006). Findings of this study would also provide useful implications for policy makers and correctional administrators in designing and implementing policies and programs aimed at reducing job stress among correctional workers.

Third, the official adoption of CC by the Chinese government in 2003 has sparked a substantial number of studies on important developments in policy, legislation, and administration in China (Tang, 2013). This broad vein of inquiry has nonetheless paid little attention to individual correctional workers' beliefs, attitudes, skills, and work habits, the micro-level phenomena that could shed light on the possibility of successful correctional reforms. A few recent studies have examined Chinese CC workers' role orientations toward rehabilitation and punishment (Jiang et al., 2016a,b), attitudes toward semi-formal crime control between correctional staff and volunteers (Jiang et al., 2015) and attitudes toward job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Jiang et al., 2016a,b). Given the potential importance of culture, state control, and performance and outcome measures in Chinese corrections, the issue of correctional job and role stress among CC staff and its influencing factors warrants more investigation.

Finally, although past research has consistently identified role stress as one of the major determinants of job stress (e.g., Armstrong and Griffin, 2004; Cullen et al., 1985; Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Parker and DeCotiis, 1983; Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006), only a handful of studies have examined the relationships between role stress and other antecedents of job stress, such as personal, work and organizational characteristics (Garland et al., 2013; Lambert et al., 2009; Lambert et al., 2007; Liou, 1995; Regoli and Poole, 1980). Furthermore, what is missing from the existing literature is an analysis of the potential mediating effect played by role stress. That is, it is possible that a low level of role stress may serve a buffer that lessens the potential impact of negative work environment factors on job stress. In other words, unfavorable job and organizational characteristics could cause a higher degree of role ambiguity and conflict, which, in turn, lead to greater correctional job stress. This study would fill this knowledge gap in the current literature by testing the mediating effect of role stress on the relationships between job and organizational features and job stress.

Drawing on data collected from about 200 CC workers from a Chinese province, this study assessed the relationships between job and organizational characteristics and job stress. Three research questions guided this study:

- (1) Do job and organizational characteristics, such as job autonomy, procedural justice, job dangerousness, agency formalization, supervisory support, and coworker integration affect job stress among Chinese correctional workers?
- (2) Do role stressors, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, influence job stress among Chinese correctional workers?
- (3) Do job and organizational characteristics have a direct effect on job stress or mainly an indirect effect on job stress through role stress?

2. Community correction in China

Although community correction has become the dominant theme of corrections in Western societies over the past several decades, China did not officially launch its experimentation on CC until 2003. An increase in prison population and incarceration costs and the need for effective offender rehabilitation and reentry have contributed to the adoption of CC in the country (Jiang et al., 2014; Li, 2014). In less than a decade between 2003 and 2011, CC has been exponentially expanded from six experimental provinces and direct municipalities to 94% of counties and 89% of townships in China (Jiang et al., 2014).

CC is defined as the execution of non-imprisonment punishments that enabled government agencies, with the assistance from social groups, civic leagues, and volunteer organizations, to place committed offenders in communities for the purpose of correcting their criminal psychology and bad habits and facilitating their smooth return to society (Li, 2015). In line with community corrections in Western societies, Chinese version of CC furnishes alternative sanctions to convicted offenders that can substantially mitigate negative effects of incarceration and wholly utilize community resources to reeducate offenders (Feng, 2003).

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