Work overload and intimidation: The moderating role of resilience

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ABSTRACT

Work overload is a critical but understudied stressor at work, particularly for boundary-spanning positions. Recent studies have highlighted the need for more research on the identification of different predictors of the use of intimidation, a type of assertive impression management tactic. Relying on Lazarus’s transactional theory, this study hypothesized and investigated a mediated moderation model that includes resilience, work overload, and its outcomes.

This paper contributes to the organizational literature by examining the use of intimidation by salespeople as a reaction to stressful circumstances and the association between this tactic and salespeople’s performance. The information provided by 248 employee-supervisor dyads confirmed the proposed model. Work overload has a positive association with intimidation, and the direct effect of work overload on intimidation depends on the level of an employee’s resilience. Finally, the use of intimidation has a negative association with supervisor-rated performance.

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1. Introduction

The literature on impression management has long recognized that intimidation is a typical form of impression management behavior (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Intimidation is an assertive impression management (IM) tactic characterized by the strategic use of interpersonal force to indicate one’s power and obtain behavioral acquiescence to create desired images in the minds of others (Bolino & Turnley, 1999, 2003; Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Empirical studies have shown the negative effects of intimidation, suggesting its seriousness as a workplace deviant behavior. For example, Falbe and Yukl (1992) revealed that intimidation has negative influences on coworkers’ work attitudes (Falbe & Yukl, 1992). Anecdotal evidence also suggests the seriousness of the negative effects of intimidation. According to Asian Women at Work Action Group (2008), in some cases, intimidation takes the form of assigning an excessive amount of work, and in other cases, it causes work overload. For example, some managers intimidate their subordinates by forcing them to complete a large amount of work with few members or assigning work of great physical difficulty. In addition, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that workplace violence including intimidation causes musculoskeletal disorders in the targets—which is the focus of considerable attention in recent occupational safety and health practices (ILO 2016). A recent empirical study revealed that this process is mediated by psychological strain (Vignoli, Guglielmi, Baldacci, & Bonfiglioli, 2015).

While anecdotal evidence and empirical findings suggest that intimidation is a work-related stressor for targets, other streams of research revealed that individuals’ work stress induces their intimidation (Samnani & Singh, 2012, for a review). These findings indicate that work stressors and intimidation can bring about a vicious cycle where work stressors can induce the use of intimidation, and then the intimidation becomes a stressor for the targets.

Among the various work stressors, work overload has attracted considerable research attention in the management field (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Work overload occurs when workload and time pressures exceed employees’ abilities to perform their jobs (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). A meta-analysis by Gilboa and colleagues showed that work overload is significantly associated with job performance (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). Their analysis also showed that in studies published in the first-tier journals, work overload predicts job performance more
strongly than role ambiguity—another major stressor in workplaces. From a practical viewpoint, also, work overload is a notable issue. For example, ILO refers to work overload as a major work stressor and a major cause of impaired mental health (ILO, 2016). Thus, it is important to investigate the association between work overload and the use of intimidation.

If the association between work overload and intimidation is significant, the investigation of the moderating factors that can attenuate the impact of work overload is also important. According to Lazarus’s transactional theory (Lazarus, 1991), individuals’ self-rated personal resources moderate the negative effect of work overload. As Bakker and Demerouti (2014) noted, while empirical studies have paid much attention to the moderating effects of job resources, evidence for the interaction between personal resources and job demands is limited. Personal resources include individuals’ sense of their ability to successfully control and impact their environment, especially during challenging circumstances (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003).

Although we recognize that a variety of personal resources can attenuate the negative effects of work overload, in this study, we focus on resilience. Resilience, which is understood as the ability to rebound strengthened with more resources, protects individuals from the psychological damage associated with adversity and increases the likelihood that they will resolve challenging situations adequately (Block & Kremen, 1996). Researchers in developmental and educational psychology emphasized that resilience contains self-regulatory functions that serve to buffer the negative effects of an undesirable environment and prevent one from engaging in deviant behaviors (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Gardner, Dishion, & Connell, 2008). Self-regulation is an internal and/or transactional process that enables an individual to guide his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances (Karoly, 1993). Gardner et al. (2008) regarded resilience as position adaptation in the face of heightened risk for maladaptation and argued that such adaptation requires the actor’s self-regulation. The self-regulatory aspect of resilience can also be assumed in business settings, but few studies in the management field have dealt with it. Thus, it is meaningful to propose and examine the moderating effect of resilience on the effect of an undesirable environment (work overload) on intimidation (deviant behavior).

In addition, we propose and test the influence of work overload and intimidation on sales performance. Specifically, we examine the direct effect of work overload and its indirect effect through intimidation. For the direct effect, we rely on Lazarus’s transactional theory and assume that work overload substantially lowers the level of performance. We also assume that this negative effect of work overload is moderated by resilience. Regarding the indirect effect, relying on empirical evidence in the field of impression management, we surmise that an employee who engages in intimidation is likely to be evaluated low by his/her supervisors because of his/her unfavorable image generated by their use of intimidation (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). To test these ideas, we propose the model depicted in Fig. 1.

This study makes several contributions to the theory and research. First, we explore the antecedents and consequences of intimidation, which is an under-researched tactic (Bolino et al., 2008). Whereas there is a great deal of research about ingratiation or supervisor-focused tactics and self-promotion or job-focused tactics (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984), intimidation has been addressed far less frequently and is not as well understood (Harris, Gallagher, & Rossi, 2013), especially its predictors and consequences (e.g., Harris et al., 2013; Whitaker & Dahling, 2013). For example, it has been noted that the association of intimidation—performance evaluation is poorly understood, and the findings are inconsistent (Bolino et al., 2008). Second, this study attends to calls for research on the factors that mitigate the influence of work stressors on outcomes (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006) by examining the moderating effect of individuals’ resilience on the association between work overload and the use of intimidation. Finally, as Coleman Gallagher, Harris, and Valle (2008) note, little is known about how intimidation is used or how it is received in various countries and cultures. We conducted our research in Spain, a country with cultural dimensions that differ substantially from those of the United States, which is the context that has been considered in most published studies.

2. Theoretical foundations and hypothesis development

2.1. Transactional theory

The transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1991) proposes that the individual’s reaction to stress comprises two steps: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal is one’s perceptive assessment of the degree to which a particular stressor poses a threat to self, and secondary appraisal is one’s assessment of the controllability of the stressor and his/her coping resources. The basic assumption of this theory is that a stressor leads to strain only when the perceived threat to the self exceeds one’s perceived level of coping resources.

The theory suggests that when individuals perceive that they have sufficient personal resources, they do not feel a strain. On the other hand, when individuals perceive that their personal resources for coping are insufficient, they experience a strain and thus engage in a coping strategy. One of the components of coping is dealing with the problem that causes the stress (problem-focused coping). Intimidation would be an example of these coping strategies, where the employee confronts sources of stress with active attempts to alter the situation and solve the problem. According to the classification of job strains suggested by Jex and Beehr (1991), intimidation can be regarded as a type of behavioral strain, which is a means for individuals to cope with stressors either by eliminating the stressor or by reducing the negative emotions elicited by it (Penney & Spector, 2005). Bolino and Turnley (2003: 238) describe intimidation as an individual’s strategy to “let others know that they can make things difficult for them if they are pushed too far, deal aggressively with individuals who get in their way, or use forceful behavior to get colleagues to behave appropriately.” They further argued that individuals who use intimidation may also generate aversion or dislike in the process (Bolino & Turnley, 2003, p. 238).

2.2. Work overload and intimidation

Scholars in the field of work stress have regarded work overload as one of the major stressors in workplaces (e.g., Frone, 2008; Jex & Bliwe, 1999). Work overload appears when employees feel that there are too many responsibilities or activities expected of them considering the time available, their abilities, and other constraints (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). In Ortqvist and Wincent’s (2006) meta-analysis, overload was associated with reduced organizational commitment and job satisfaction and increased depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. In addition, work overload has been identified as a critical predictor of turnover intentions and job performance (Babakus, Yavas, & Ashill, 2009; Mulki, Lassk, & Jaramillo, 2008).

As we noted earlier, transactional theory suggests that when a perceived threat to the self exceeds one’s perceived level of coping resources, a stressor generates stress reactions including behavioral strain. Mayes and Ganster (1988) argued that stress causes negative
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