EFFECT OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ON THE STRESS-BURNOUT RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT: Business organizations have become interested in recent years in the role of social support in reducing the negative effect of stress. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of two types of social support (i.e., job and life support) on the relationships between job and life stress and burnout. Participants consisted of 270 males and 254 females. For both males and females job stress and life stress correlate positively with burnout, while job and life support were negatively correlated with burnout. The hypothesis that social support would moderate stress-burnout relationships was not supported. Neither job support nor life support moderated job stress or life stress-burnout relationships. Females exhibited significantly higher levels of burnout, job stress, and life stress than males; however, there was no difference between males and females in the amount of social support received.

Social support has been suggested as a buffer against strain (Cassel, 1976; Etzion, 1984; LaRocco, House & French, 1980), yet few studies have found significant moderating effects for social support on stress-strain relationships (Cleary & Kessler, 1982; Etzion, 1984). Cassel (1976), has argued that social support’s buffering effects have been adequately demonstrated. Other researchers, however, have found little support for the buffering relationship (LaRocco & Jones, 1978).

Burnout is a type of strain or stress reaction which may be defined as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism toward one’s work as a response to chronic stressors (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Jackson, 1982). Burnout is important for business organizations since it has been linked to decreased productivity, fiscal or production loss, absenteeism, turnover, job dissatisfaction, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental and physical disorders (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach & Jackson,
Burnout has been conceptualized as a sequential process (Gaines & Jermier, 1983) which consists of three stages: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of clients, and devaluation of one's accomplishments and one's self (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The dimension of burnout used in this study was emotional exhaustion which involves feelings of fatigue, irritability, frustration, loss of concern, trust, and interests (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Social support involves interpersonal transactions such as showing emotional concern, providing instrumental aid, information, and appraisal (House, 1981). A great deal of the recent literature has suggested that development of social support systems in the job setting should reduce stress and burnout (House, 1981; LaRocco, et al., 1980). However, some evidence suggests that male-female sex roles influence the type of and extent that social support is used. Etzion (1984) has suggested that social support in the work environment might be helpful for men but not for most women. Etzion's research with a sample of Israeli men and women indicated that work support moderated the stress-burnout relationship for men but not for women. However, the stress-burnout relationship for women was moderated by life support (e.g., family and friends).

Based on the research literature, it would appear that stress increases burnout while social support tends to reduce burnout (LaRocco, House, & French, 1980; LaRocco & Jones, 1978). Also, this research suggests that support from the same source that created stress (i.e., the job or life environment) should be highly correlated and more likely to moderate the stress-burnout relationship than if support is from a different source (LaRocco, House, & French, 1980). For example, job support would be more likely to moderate job stress-burnout than would life support. Also, life support would more likely moderate the life stress-burnout relationship than would job support. This proposition was supported by LaRocco, et al. (1980) who found that job related stress and strain was affected more by job-related sources of support; however, the effects were primarily direct (main) effects rather than buffering effects.

The present study examines the moderating effect of social support (on the job and in life) on the job stress-burnout, and life stress-burnout relationships. It is hypothesized that: (a) Job and life stress will be correlated positively with burnout. (b) Job and life support will be correlated negatively with burnout. (c) Job and life stress will be correlated negatively with job and life support; with the job stress-job support and life stress-life support relationships being more strongly correlated than the job-stress life support and life stress-job support relationships. (d) Job support will moderate the job stress-burnout relationship and life support will moderate the life stress-burnout relationship. (e) There will