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EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS TO WORK OVERLOAD: SELF-EFFICACY AS A MODERATOR

Olugbenga Jelil. Ladebo
Joseph Mubo. Awotunde
University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study examined the main and interactive effects of work overload and self-efficacy on emotional exhaustion and job performance of extension personnel in Southwest Nigeria (N = 156). Results of moderated multiple regression analyses indicate positive relation between work overload and emotional exhaustion and not with job performance; and efficacy beliefs is positively associated with job performance. The interaction term between efficacy beliefs and work overload is unrelated to emotional exhaustion and job performance as hypothesized. The implications of findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on occupational stress and emotional exhaustion indicates that stress is a constituent of modern organizations and it would remain a constant phenomenon in the workplace (Sikora, Beaty, & Forward, 2004; Vigoda, 2000). Sikora et al. (2004) suggest that daily demands in the workplace are a constant challenge to the assimilative and adaptive capabilities of employees. Thus, an employee, who is overtaxed and unable to cope with environmental demands, would develop stress reactions or emotional exhaustion, which in turn, will adversely affect the employee's job performance. To promote an understanding of employee and organizational wellbeing, recent research trend focuses on emotional exhaustion and job performance as separate responses to environmental demands (Bluen, Barling, & Burns, 1990; Chambel & Curral, 2005). Other studies examined the effect of emotional exhaustion on employee performance indicating that emotionally exhausted employees perform poorly on the job (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Shirom, Nirel, & Vinokur, 2006; Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004). Further, empirical evidence indicates that emotional exhaustion could be a causal mechanism effecting performance decrement in employees (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004). Therefore, there is need for continuing research to understand the processes underlying the development of emotional exhaustion and decrement in employees' performance.

Emotional exhaustion being a core constituent of burnout refers to a chronic state of feeling that a person's emotional resources are overtaxed or depleted in attempts to meet job demands. It is internally consistent, stable overtime, and is responsive to work stress (Shirom, 2003). Emotional exhaustion may be considered as an immediate response gap between environmental pressures and available resources (Leiter, 1991). The construct exhibits stronger relations to important outcomes and is important in mediating the effects of other burnout components of cynicism and personal accomplishment (professional efficacy) (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Empirical evidence provides support that an emotionally exhausted employee is weakly committed to supervisor and organization, considers quitting, performs poorly on the job, and is unwilling to engage in organization citizenship behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2003). For the organization, the consequences of emotional exhaustion are significant, as it leads to increased withdrawal behaviors, and reduced job performance (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Shirom, 2003).

However, job performance refers to the duties and responsibilities that are executed as part of an individual's job assignments (Vigoda, 2000). Past studies have conceptualized job performance as comprising quality and quantity of tasks accomplished. Individuals suffering from emotional exhaustion may experience impaired coping ability that may lead to less motivation to achieve desirable quality and quantity of performance. There is empirical support for the link between emotional exhaustion and both quality and quantity components of performance (see Shirom et al., 2006; Witt et al., 2004).

Recently, research attention focuses on both individual differences and work context variables to explain the impact of emotional exhaustion experiences and employees' levels of performance (Bandura, 2000; Brown, Ganesan, & Challagalla, 2001; Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, & Moyle, 2006; Pillai & Williams, 2004; Witt et al., 2004). Therefore, the present study conceived both emotional exhaustion and job performance as a state-like individual difference that is largely determined by work context (work overload) and individual difference ability (self-

efficacy). Various occupational stress models have firmly established the stress-strain relation and it is believed that beliefs of efficacy play an important role in employees' stress reactions.

Studies on the role of efficacy beliefs in moderating employees' stress reactions indicate that the moderating influence of efficacy depends on specific stress-outcomes linkage under investigation (Grau, Salanova, & Peiro, 2001; Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001). Most empirical research on the moderating influence of self-efficacy (SE) on stress-strain relations has focused on samples from occupations such as education, sales, manufacturing, military, and human services with scant attention to agricultural extension. Therefore, this study attempted to provide data on the extent to which SE moderates stressor-strain relations (overload-emotional exhaustion and overload-job performance) in a sample of agricultural extension personnel.

Theoretical Framework

Work Overload

Generally, overload refers to a situation where multiple demands exceed available resources and may be either qualitative or quantitative. Quantitative overload refers to employees' perceptions that they have too many tasks to perform within a specified time (Greenglass, Burke, & Moore, 2003). In contrast, qualitative overload describes the difficulty of a given task. The focus of the present paper was on quantitative overload because it is a malaise in modern organizations as they struggle to maintain competitive advantage in the market economy. Employees are often required to perform many tasks within limited time frame to sustain the productivity drive of the organization using a streamlined workforce. Empirical evidence has linked employees' participation in goal setting, the existence of difficult goals, and presence of performance ratings to feelings of perceived overload, whereas trust in the supervisor reduces feelings of overload (Brown & Benson, 2005). In effect overload reduces the amount of energy available to an employee to expend on multi-task behaviors or to work for longer hours leading to emotional exhaustion and decrement in performance.

Research evidence indicates that overload could have favorable consequences. Perceived overload that is not excessive is believed to promote work engagement (Mauno, Kinnunen, Ruokolainen, 2007). Brown and Benson (2005) demonstrate that high workload is positively related to higher performance ratings. However, most studies reportedly linked overload to a variety of deleterious individual outcomes including lower job performance and emotional exhaustion or psychological strain in different samples of employees (Demerouti et al., 2001; Elit et al., 2004; Jex et al., 2001; Leiter, 1991; Salanova, Peiro, & Schaufeli, 2002; Shirom, 2003; Shirom et al.,2006). Therefore, we proposed that overload would overtax the emotional resources of employees resulting in emotional exhaustion and decrement in performance.

Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed: Hypothesis 1a: Overload is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 1b: Overload is negatively related to job performance.

Self-efficacy Beliefs

Self-efficacy (SE) refers to an individual's belief to exercise control and manage courses of action required to attain desired results (Bandura, 2000). SE arises from the gradual acquisition of complex cognitive, social, linguistic, and/or physical skills through experience. Efficacious beliefs contribute to effective performance and promote personal wellbeing by encouraging goal setting and commitment, persistent effort, perseverance, resilience, reduction in stress, and depression (Bandura, 2000; Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Research indicates that raising SE could contribute to employees' performance and reduction of emotional exhaustion. Efficacious individuals effectively seek, integrate, and use information to increase role clarity and performance (Brown, Ganesan, & Challagalla, 2001), contribute to unit performance (Pillai & Williams, 2004), have higher cognitive engagement and performance (Lent, Schmidt, & Schmidt, 2006; Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006), and are less prone to emotional exhaustion (Grau et al., 2001). Studies based on the socio-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2000; Bandura & Locke, 2003) indicate that SE leads to higher self-set goals and higher individual performance (Phillips & Gully, 1997). McDonald and Siegall (1992) demonstrate that efficacious employees are more job focused and produced work of a higher quality and quantity. In the academia, Vrugt & Koenis (2002) report that efficacious individuals set challenging goals, which were accomplished later. In contrast, less efficacious individuals are more prone to burnout (Perrewe et al., 2002), psychological strain (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001), and engage in self-limiting behaviors (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). Similarly, it is proposed in this study that SE will be positively related to job performance and inversely associated with emotional exhaustion.

Self-efficacy is believed to be a personal resource capable of having buffering effect on the stressor-strain relations. The buffering role of SE is hinged on the consideration that congruence between efficacy beliefs and work environment characteristics leads to positive outcomes, whereas, a mismatch will cause strains. Despite the belief that SE could play a buffering role in stress reactions, little research has been carried out to document the role of SE in the stressor-strain process (Jex et al., 2001; Salanova et al., 2002). Few studies that examined the moderating role of SE reported mixed results. Some studies found no support for the moderating role of SE in stressor-strain relations (Jex & Gudanowski, 1992; Salanova et al., 2002); and other studies demonstrate that SE moderated some (but not all) stressor-strain relations (Grau et al., 2001; Jex et al., 2001).

Recent studies adduced the moderating role of SE on the stressor-strain linkage to presence of the coping mechanism or amount of job control available to an employee (Jex et al., 2001; Salanova et al., 2002). However, this study attempted to contribute to previous research on the buffering effect of SE on stressor-strain linkage in a sample of extension agent different from which earlier studies have been conducted. In this study, we expect efficacious employees to be less affected by overload than low-efficacious employees. Because efficacious employees have control over work (Salanova et al., 2002), and set higher goals, they are likely to view higher workload as a challenge within their capability to achieve higher performance. Efficacious individuals are usually eager to engage on current tasks to surpass earlier performance level as accomplishments that surpass earlier ones bring on a continued sense of self-satisfaction.

Efficacious individuals are found to use different and more effective coping strategies than low-efficacious persons (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Higher workload will motivate efficacious individuals to mobilize resources and strive to attain desired results. Efficacious individuals, who are facing challenges and difficult goals, exert greater effort to achieve set target (Bandura, 2000; Bandura & Locke, 2003). The commitment to assigned goals may compel an efficacious person to generate and use resources in their work environment to deal with the overload. For example, Bandura (2000) suggested that efficacious persons are better able to solve threatening and difficult situations than low-efficacious persons. Therefore, we expect efficacious individuals to suffer less emotional exhaustion and increase performance as they attempt to accomplish work goals compared with low-efficacious persons.

The following hypotheses are proposed: Hypothesis 2a: SE is negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 2b: SE is positively related to job performance.

Hypothesis 2c: SE moderates the overload-emotional exhaustion linkage. Specifically, there would be inverse relation between overload and emotional exhaustion for efficacious individuals and the overload-emotional exhaustion linkage will be positive for low-efficacious persons.

Hypothesis 2d: SE moderates the overload-job performance linkage. Specifically, there would be positive relation between overload and job performance for efficacious individuals and the overload-job performance relation will be negative for low-efficacious persons.

METHOD

Sample

The data set employed in this study forms part of a large data based on a wide range of organizational experiences obtained from extension personnel, who were employees of an Agricultural Development Program (ADP) in Southwest Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered to 167 extension personnel and participation in the survey was voluntary after assurances of confidentiality of responses from the author. Respondents completed the surveys during the fortnightly training meetings in the ADP's four zones. Excessive missing data were contained in 11 surveys that prevented their inclusion in the analysis, thereby leaving 156 (i.e. 93.41%) useable responses. The response rate achieved is well above the limit of 80.0% and non-response error is not a likely threat to the external validity of the study findings (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002). This sample of extension personnel had an average age of 41.21 years (sd = 4.61 years), was predominantly men (86.5%), and had mean tenure of 12.08 years (sd = 4.45 years).

Measures

Criterions

Job Performance was measured using four items (Williams & Anderson, 1991). A sample item is: "I sometimes neglect aspects of the job I am obligated to perform". The scale of responses ranged from strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (5). Higher scores indicate respondents' perceptions of meeting the responsibilities and requirements of their job. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was (Cronbach alpha = 0.76).

Emotional Exhaustion was indexed using an initial five items from the Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter's (1996) emotional exhaustion scale. Through item deletion procedure when computing internal consistency reliability, the five items were reduced to three items to obtain a more reliable scale. A sample item is: "I feel emotional drained by my work". Scale responses were ordered on a five-point format of strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (5). Higher scale scores on the scale indicates perceptions of emotional exhaustion, (Cronbach alpha = 0.88).

Predictors

Work overload: Respondents rated four items that assessed quantitative workload (Spector & Jex, 1998). An example of the scale items is: "How often do you have to do more work than you can do well". Responses were ordered on a five-point format as: Never (1) to Several times per day (5). High scores on this scale reflect employees' perceptions of having too much work to accomplish in a limited time, (Cronbach alpha = 0.78).

Self-efficacy: The general self-efficacy was assessed using a 10-item measure (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). An example of the scale items is: "I am certain that I can accomplish my goals". Item ratings ranged from strongly disagreed (1) to agreed (5), (Cronbach alpha = 0.81). Higher scores indicated increasing levels of SE, and lower scores reflected low efficacious belief.

Biographics/Controls

We included three biographical factors (age, sex, and tenure) in the analyses to act as controls (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Cunningham & MacGregor, 2000; Salanova et al., 2002). Age and tenure were measured as continuous variables. Sex was dichotomized as male = 1, and female = 2.

In addition, we controlled for trust climate as it may relate to job performance and emotional exhaustion. Literature indicates that trust is essential to the social capital of an organization. An organization that lacks trust from, or among employees, needs more formal mechanism and explicit contracts to direct the behaviors of employees. Trust in the supervisor reduces feelings of overload (Brown & Benson, 2005) and a workplace characterized by mutual trust among members, fosters individual performance and mitigates emotional exhaustion (Cunningham & MacGregor, 2000; Dirks & Skarlicki, 2004; Goris, Vaught, & Pettit, 2003). Trust climate was assessed using a four-item measure developed by Poon (2003) (e.g. "There is a very high level of trust throughout this organization"). Ratings of items ranged from strongly disagreed (1) to

strongly agreed (5), (Cronbach alpha = 0.72).). We computed scale scores for all the multiple items by summing across responses to items in a scale. Thereafter, scale means were calculated and employed for further analyses. Items for all the scales appear in Appendix A.

Analysis

Initial descriptive analyses indicated that job performance, trust climate, and self-efficacy scores were negatively skewed. We employed a reflect and square-root transformation to normalize the scores. Results of the moderated multiple regression (MMR) (discussed below) using both transformed and untransformed data produced similar results. Thus, the results of the untransformed data are presented. Further, we employed MMR equations to test the study hypotheses. The effect of the main predictors (SE and overload) was ascertained independently of the interaction term (SE x overload) on the criterions (job performance and emotional exhaustion). To mitigate the problem of multicollinearity related to interaction terms and the predictors from which they were formed, the means of predictors were centered on zero before forming the multiplicative terms. Further, significant interaction was plotted graphically by employing the procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991).

RESULTS

Intercorrelations of study variables, descriptive statistics, and scale reliabilities are presented in Appendix B. All the scale reliabilities exceeded 0.70, which is considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Job performance was unrelated to emotional exhaustion ($r = .03$, ns), overload ($r = -.04$, ns) but positively related to SE ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). Emotional exhaustion was positively related to overload ($r = .56$, $p < .0001$) and unrelated to SE ($r = .12$, ns).

Test of Hypotheses

The extent to which emotional exhaustion is positively related to overload (H1a) and negatively related to SE (H2a) is examined. In Table 1, the block of control variables (age, sex, tenure, and trust climate) entered the model on first step. The controls did not explain significant variance in exhaustion (change in R square = .03, ns) indicating demographic variables and trust climate are not predictive of respondents' levels of exhaustion. In second step, the entry of both SE and overload in the equation explained significant variance (change in R square = .32, $p < .0001$) in exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was positively related to overload (beta = .55, $p < .0001$) and unrelated to SE (beta = .08, ns). The positive relation between the criterion and overload is consistent with H1a, and independence between exhaustion and SE failed to support H2a. The interaction term between overload and SE did not contribute significant variance to exhaustion (change in R square = .00, ns) on step 3 failing to support H2c. The overall model was significant ($F(7, 148) = 11.26$, $p < .0001$).

Table 1: Regression Results for Emotional Exhaustion and Job performance (N = 156)

Variables	Exhaustion Beta	Change in R square	F of change in R square	Performance Beta	Change in R square	F of change in R square
Step 1: Controls		.03	1.15		.06	2.59*
1. Age	-.02			.06		
2. Sex	-.01			-.04		
3. Tenure	.14			-.01		
4. Trust climate	-.11			.23**		
Step 2: Predictors		.32	36.29***		.04	3.45*
5. Overload (O)	.55***			-.06		
6. Efficacy (SE)	.08			.20*		
Step 3: Term		.00	0.01		.00	.00
7. SE x O	.01			.01		
Full model statistics						
R square	.35			.11		
Adj. R square	.32			.06		
R	.59			.33		
F	11.26***			2.50*		
SES	2.36			2.40		
df	7/148			7/148		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .0001$

Hypotheses 1b and 2b examined the relations between job performance and overload and SE, respectively. In step 1, the controls (age, sex, tenure, and trust climate) contributed 6.0 per cent variance (change in R square, $p < .05$) in job performance and only trust climate was related to the criterion (beta = .23, $p < .01$), Table 1. This indicates that a healthy trust climate in the work environment is likely to enhance individual performance. In Table 1, the main predictors (overload and SE) increased the explained variance in performance by 4.0 per cent (change in R square, $p < .05$) on step 2. Job performance was positively related to SE (beta = .20, $p < .05$) and unrelated to overload (beta = -.06, ns).

The inclusion of the cross-product term between overload and SE on step 3 did not account for additional variance (change in R square = .00, ns) in performance beyond that explained by the main predictors. Thus, H2d was not supported. However, the full model was significant at $F(7, 148) = 2.50$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The study results provide support for relation between overload and exhaustion and not the hypothesized overload-job performance linkage. The positive relation between overload and exhaustion is in consonance with literature (Demerouti et al., 2001; Elit et al., 2004; Jex et al., 2001; Leiter, 1991; Salanova et al., 2002; Shirom, 2003; Shirom et al., 2006). This implies that overload overtaxes the energy of employees; and when employees find it impossible to meet the resource needs of job demands, this leads to emotional exhaustion. The independence between overload and performance is contrary to extant literature indicating that moderate workload could lead to performance gains and overload is inversely related to performance. We can only speculate on the independence between the constructs. It is possible for the respondents to have responded to perceived overload by concentrating on and accomplishing more of perceived less difficult and challenging tasks at the expense of more demanding tasks that require substantial investment of time and effort.

The hypothesized relations between SE and job performance received support in this study and is in agreement with extant literature. Studies supported the relation between personal SE and performance in different spheres of functioning (see Bandura, 2000; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Brown et al., 2001; Lent et al., 2006; McDonald & Siegall, 1992; Phillips & Gully, 1997; Pillai & Williams, 2004; Walker et al., 2006). Thus, efficacious individuals are higher performers than low-efficacious persons. In contrast to existing literature, individual differences in SE are unrelated to emotional exhaustion in our sample of extension personnel.

The hypothesized interaction effect between overload and SE was not supported in this study that is in line with past studies (Jex & Gudanowski, 1992; Jex et al., 2001; Salanova et al., 2002). The non significant moderating effect of SE on overload-job performance and overload-exhaustion linkages could be due to the absence of a third variable such as a coping mechanism (Jex et al., 2001) or job control (Salanova et al., 2002). Another reason is that the generalized efficacy was assessed in this study. The results could have been different if the specific SE related to extension work had been used. The non moderating influence of SE may be also partly due to the highly educated and homogenous sample of respondents employed in the study. Sampling exclusively extension personnel, who mostly are college graduates, may have resulted in range restrictions on study variables towards the positive end. This can lead to Type II errors in the test of the moderation hypotheses. In addition, the relative small sample size together with the conservative MMR procedure that was applied might have contributed to the underestimation of an interaction effect.

This study has some limitations that should be noted. All the variables were measured simultaneously implying that causal inferences cannot be made from the results. Future research employing longitudinal and experimental designs is needed to better establish causal relations between variables. Furthermore, self-report measures were employed to obtain data from respondents thereby raising concerns about percept-percept bias affecting the magnitudes of bivariate correlations between variables. To test for presence of method variance, we performed Harman one-factor test on the data and results revealed a multifactor solution in line with expected theoretical independence of constructs employed in this study (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Therefore, explanation of response bias cannot be made about the bivariate correlations

between the variables. In addition, because data were elicited from a sample employed in a single agricultural extension organization, it may not be appropriate to generalize results to universal occupations and jobs. However, it is our contention that the results are of utility because our findings confirmed the results of earlier studies and hypotheses that are firmly grounded in theory.

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APPENDIX A: SCALE ITEMS EMPLOYED FOR THE STUDY

Job Performance

1. I sometimes neglect aspects of the job I am obligated to perform.
2. I engage in activities that will directly affect my job.
3. I try to achieve work targets /goals set for extension agents on schedule.
4. I achieved all the work targets/goals set for extension agents last year.

Emotional Exhaustion

1. I am usually exhausted at the end of the workday.
2. I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. I often feel drained after working with farmers all day.

Work Overload

1. How often do you have to do more work than you can do well?
2. How often is there a great deal to b done?
3. How often does your job require you to work very fast?
4. How often does your job require you to work very hard?

Self-Efficacy

1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
2. If someone opposes me, I can find the ways and means to get what I want.
3. I am certain that I can accomplish my goals.
4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
5. Because of my resourcefulness, I can handle unforeseen situations.
6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping ability.
8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can find several solutions.
9. If I am in trouble, I can think of a good solution.
10. I can handle whatever comes my way.

Trust Climate

1. In this organization, extension personnel have a great deal of trust for their superiors.
2. Employees in my workplace are often suspicious of each other.
3. There is a very high level of trust throughout this organization.
4. If someone in this organization makes a promise, others within the organization will almost always trust that the person will do his/her best to keep the promise.

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, ALPHA RELIABILITES, AND INTERCORRELATIONS OF VARIABLES (N = 156)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	-							
2. Sex	-.24**	-						
3. Tenure	.63***	-.08	-					
4. Trust climate	.14	-.06	.06	(.72)				
5. Work overload	-.03	-.01	.04	.01	(.78)			
6. Self-efficacy	.14	-.03	.13	.18*	.09	(.81)		
7. Emotional exhaustion	.05	-.01	.12	-.10	.56***	.12	(.88)	
8. Job performance	.04	-.06	-.04	.23**	-.04	.22**	.03	(.76)
Mean	41.21	-	12.08	3.79	2.81	4.00	3.22	3.98
Sd	4.61	-	4.45	0.67	0.79	0.45	0.95	0.62

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .0001$. Note: Cronbach alpha reliabilities in parenthesis in diagonal.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Ladebo, Olugbenga. J is at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria, Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development. He received his Ph.D in Agricultural Extension and Rural Development from University Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. His main research interests are organizational commitment, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, stress, and institutional performance. He has published in many journals, including Applied Psychology: An International Review, Educational Management and Leadership, Acta Academica, and Journal of Business and Psychology. E-mail is: lolugbenga@yahoo.com.

Awotunde, Joseph. Mubo is a lecturer at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. He has a Ph.D in rural sociology. His research interests include livelihoods and rural production systems, workers' attitudes, and stress.
E-mail is: moriremubo@yahoo.com.