

# Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Politics and Perceived Organizational Support in the Stress-Burnout Relationship

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## Abstract

The study investigated the relationship between job stress and burnout and examined the moderating role of contextual factors such as perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support in the stress-burnout relationship. The results of the study suggested that stress has a significant relationship with burnout and high perceived organizational politics strengthened the stress-burnout relationship.

**Key words:** Job Stress, Burnout, Perceived Organizational Politics, Perceived Organizational Support

## Introduction

Job stress and burnout have received considerable theoretical and empirical attention in the psychology and organizational behavior literature in the last two decades. The reason for an abundance of research on these two concepts is their tendency to have a negative relationship with workplace attitudes and behaviors that are essential for an organizational existence.

However, despite the fact that job stress and burnout have received a lot of researcher's attention but still there are a number of gaps in the literature which can be explored further. Although a considerable amount of research has examined the stress-burnout relationship (Baba, Jamal and Tourigny, 1998; Jamal, 1999; Jamal and Baba, 1997; Jamal and Badawi, 1993; Jamal and Preena, 1998; Raja, Butt, & Bilgrami, 2008) but still there has been comparatively less research which has investigated the role of contextual variables in the stress-burnout relationship. Although theory suggests that perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support are important contextual variable, but there is no study till-date which has examined the role of perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support as a moderator in the stress-burnout relationship. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining

perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support as a moderator in the stress and burnout relationship.

Moreover, although numerous studies have acknowledged the influence of job stress on health and well-being of employees in developed countries, but still there are very few studies which have examined this construct as a factor influencing employees' well-being in developing countries (Jamal and Preena, 1998; Jamal, 1999). Therefore, another purpose of this study is to investigate the generalizability of a model that has been mainly derived from theories which have been developed and tested in North America and Europe, in a developing country like Pakistan.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### **Job Stress**

Although researchers have defined job stress in several ways, the most popular approach to define job stress is in terms of fit or match between the person abilities and the work environment, referred by French, Rogers & Cobb (1974) as the person-environment fit model of job stress. This model states that job stress is a psychological reaction which arises as a result of poor or lack of fit between the person's capabilities and work environment, where unnecessary demands are frequently placed upon the person or the person does not feel that he or she is able to cope up with a particular situation (Jamal, 1984; McGrath, 1976). This feeling of job stress often creates a sense of tension and anxiety which is exhibited as nervousness and worry about their work, ill health as well as by physical symptoms (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg and Jacobs, 1983).

This research study is based on the person-environment fit model of job stress because it is considered very popular in the behavioral sciences, incorporates both chronic and acute job stress and has received a strong empirical support (Jamal and Baba, 1992; Jamal, 1999).

### **Job Burnout: An Outcome of Prolonged Stress**

Although job stress is defined by researchers as work demands which exceed the individual abilities to cope (McGrath, 1976), burnout is, in fact believed as one of the undesired outcomes of prolonged stress at work, is defined as an individuals' affective reactions to work stressors, which can cause a weakening or exhaustion of cognitive and emotional resources over time (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout is basically a syndrome with symptoms such as emotional and physical exhaustion, depersonalization reflecting employees' development of negative self concept and reduced personal accomplishment reflecting employees' increased disbelief about their self competence on the job (Cordes & Dougherty 1993; Maslach, 1993).

Exhaustion is the essential feature of burnout, since people most often refer to the experience of exhaustion when they describe themselves or others as experiencing burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). This research study is based on the definition of work burnout by Kristensen, Tager S., Borritz, Marianne, Villadsen, Ebbe and Christensen, Karl B.(2005) as 'The degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that is perceived by the person as related to his/her work'(page no. 197).

### **Job Stress-Job Burnout Relationship**

The majority of the research on job stress has linked stress with adverse, costly and devastating consequences which can have an effect on the employees as well as the organization. Several studies have provided the evidence that job stress has a significant positive relationship with overall burnout and its three dimensions (Jamal, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Raja et al., 2008). Therefore in line with findings of past studies, we hypothesize that stress will have a positive relationship with burnout.

*Hypothesis 1: Job stress will be positively related to job burnout.*

### **Perceived Organizational Politics as a Moderator in the Stress-Burnout Relationship**

According to Kacmar and Ferris (1991) perceptions of organizational politics consist of an individual's perceptions of others' political activities (not one's own), such as favoritism, suppression of competing entities, and the manipulation of organizational policies. This study is based on the individual's perception of organizational politics as compared to the actual presence of organizational politics and the reason for this is individuals react to what they perceive, not necessarily to what is objectively real and perceptions of politics are more easily measured than actual political behavior (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar and Howard, 1994; Ferris et al., 1993).

A significant body of literature examining politics in organizations has adopted the view that workplace politicking is an inherently disruptive phenomenon that leads to a host of adverse outcomes for both individuals and organizations (e.g., Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002; Kacmar, Bozeman, Carlson, & Anthony, 1999). Numerous studies have suggested that individuals perceiving high organizational politics are reported to experience psychological states such as high job anxiety, high job stress, general fatigue, burnout, and indicate strong intentions to leave the organization (e.g., Ferris et al., 1993; Ferris et al., 1994; Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, Toth, 1997; Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann and Birjulin, 1999).

Although perceived organizational politics has been studied as an antecedent to job stress and burnout, we propose that perceived organizational politics will also play a very important role in the transformation of stress into burnout. In particular, we expect that when employees' perceptions of organizational politics are high, it will strengthen the positive relationship between stress and burnout.

Research has shown that political organizations are less concerned with the personal needs of the employees and may even threaten these needs (Cropanzano et al., 1997). When perceived organizational politics is high there will be no clarity regarding performance standards and reward structures (Ferris et al., 1989; Randall et al., 1999), employees tend to become uncertain that they will be rewarded for their efforts as their trust in the leader is low (Poon, 2006) and as a result employees tend to minimize their interaction with co-workers by involving themselves in their required tasks (Witt, Kacmar, Carlson, and Zivnuska, 2002). As research has shown that social support in terms of interpersonal relationships at work is an important factor which reduces negative consequences of stress, it can be argued that when employees are deprived of these interactions their chances of stress converting into burnout increases.

In addition, when perceived organizational politics are high, lower will be the perceptions of fairness and equal treatment in the eyes of the followers because people with more power are in a better position to satisfy their interests and needs at the expense of others who have fewer political resources and influence (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992). High perceived organizational politics consumes time, restricts information sharing, and creates communication barriers (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988). A workplace that is rife with politics is stressful to work in and is not conducive for promoting positive job attitudes. Therefore, we hypothesize that perceived organizational politics will strengthen the positive relationship of stress with burnout.

***Hypothesis 2.** Perceived organizational politics will moderate the stress-burnout relationship such that the relationship will be stronger for individuals having high perceptions of politics.*

### **Perceived Organizational Support as a Moderator in the Stress-Burnout Relationship**

In recent years, the concept of perceived organizational support has received a lot of attention from organizational scholars as well as practitioners and has become a comprehensive construct in the organizational behavior literature (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The research on perceived organizational support has its origins from economic and social exchange theory, which is founded on the norm of reciprocity (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa, 1986). Perceived organizational support is usually defined as employee's general beliefs which they form concerning the degree to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997; Eisenberger et al., 1986).

When employees perceive the organization as supportive they may feel obligated to respond to such behavior with a variety of positive work attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement, job performance and organization citizenship behavior (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Ferris *et al.*, 1993; Randall et al., 1999; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Shore & Tetrick, 1991; Wayne, Shore and Liden, 1993).

Moreover, perceived organizational support is also found to be negatively correlated with work stress, anxiety, job tension, somatic tension, general fatigue and burnout, absenteeism, psychological withdrawal behaviors, antagonistic work behaviors and intentions to leave (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Ferris *et al.*, 1993; Jamal, 1984; Randall et al., 1999; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Wayne et al., 1993). In addition studies have reported that perceived organizational support is related to but distinct from supervisor support (Shore & Tetrick, 1991) and perceived organizational politics (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Randall et al., 1999).

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) reported that POS has a moderate negative relationships with strains suggesting that perceived organizational support fulfills the socio-emotional needs of employees and as a result employees generally find their job more pleasurable, are in a better mood at work, and suffer fewer strain symptoms such as fatigue, burnout, anxiety, and headaches.

Leather, Lawrence, Beale, & Cox (1998) reported that perceived organizational support decreased the negative relationship between employees' receipt of threats and violence and the well-being experienced by these employees. Therefore perceived organizational support may play a very important role in reducing the terrible consequences of stressors at work (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Therefore we purpose that when employee's perception of organizational support is high, their stress is less likely to transform into burnout because perceived organizational support can help in fulfilling important socio-emotional needs of employees such as need for affiliation, emotional support, esteem and approval (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Motowidlo, Packard & Manning (1986) argued that stress can be effectively managed by handling employees with kindness, respect and support and by fostering an organizational culture where there is more personal affection in administration and supervision. Cropanzano et al. (1997) argued that a supportive organization helps in reducing stress by creating a more predictable environment and also by providing employees with helpful co-workers to whom they can turn for assistance. Thomas and Ganster (1995) reported that organizational supportive practices particularly supportive supervisors and flexible scheduling increases employees' perception of control over their lives which in turn was related with lowers levels of psychological and somatic measures of stress.

Perceived organizational support is assumed to decrease harmful psychological and emotional reactions (e.g. strains) to job stressors by suggesting the availability of emotional support as well as material assistance when needed to face high demands at work (George, Reed, Ballard, Colin and Fielding, 1993). Therefore, we purpose that perceived organizational support will act as a buffer in the stress-burnout relationship such that perceived organizational support will tend to weaken the positive relationship between stress and burnout.

***Hypothesis 3.** Perceived organizational support will moderate the stress-burnout relationship such that the relationship will be weaker for individuals having high perceptions of support.*

## **Research Methodology**

### **Sample and Data Collection**

Data was collected through field survey across various public and private sector organizations located in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. The survey was administered personally by the author and was distributed to employees working in entry, middle and higher level positions. Participation in the study was voluntary and a cover letter guaranteed respondents of strict secrecy by explaining the purpose and scope of the study.

We distributed a total of 250 questionnaires and received 184 useable responses which represent a response rate of 74 percent. The sample represented a wide variety of occupations ranging from information technology, telecom, accountants, finance, human resource, sales, customer service, marketing and general administration professionals. Majority of the respondents (72%) belonged to entry level and middle level managerial and professional positions. 68% of the respondents were male and mean age was 32.34 ( $SD = 7.28$ ) years. Almost 37% of the respondents had a

bachelor's degree and 58% had master's degrees. Mean tenure of the respondents with current organization was 4.59 ( $SD = 3.22$ ) years and mean total experience was 8.49 ( $SD = 6.78$ ) years.

### **Measures**

All measures were acquired from a "self-report" questionnaire because self reporting is considered to be more appropriate for these measures. Until mentioned, all measures were anchored on a five-point Likert scale which ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) to indicate agreement with each statement and high variable scores indicate high levels of the construct in question. Following questionnaires were used for the collection of data.

### **Job Stress**

A 13-Item scale developed by Parker and Decotiis (1983) will be used to assess Job Stress. This scale has good psychometric properties and is often used to measure overall job stress (Jamal and Badawi, 1993; Baba, Jamal and Tourigny, 1998). A sample item states "I feel like I never have a day off". The alpha reliability coefficient obtained for this scale is 0.76.

### **Job Burnout**

A 7-Item scale developed by Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen and Christensen (2005) was used to assess work burnout. A sample item states "Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?". These 7 items were assessed on a seven-point likert scale (1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = always) which measured the extent to which respondent evaluated his or her burnout situation. The alpha reliability coefficient of 0.74 was obtained for this scale after removing one item from the scale.

### **Perceived Organizational Support**

Perceptions of organizational support was measured using a 8-item short-form of the original 36-item Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1986). Numerous studies have provided the validation evidence for this scale (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Shore and Tetrick, 1991). A sample item states 'The organization values my contribution to its well-being'. The alpha reliability coefficient of 0.77 was obtained for this scale after removing two items from the scale.

### **Perceived Organizational Politics**

A perception of organizational politics was measured using the 12-item Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS) developed by Kacmar and Ferris (1991). Numerous studies have provided the validation evidence for this scale (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992). A sample item states 'There is a group of people in my department who always get things their way because no one wants to challenge them'. The alpha reliability coefficient of 0.61 was obtained for this scale after removing four items from the scale.

### **Control Variables**

Information about demographic variables e.g. age, gender, marital status, educational qualification and experience was collected through self-reports. The results of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there are significant differences across total experience in the reported burnout and hence total experience was included in the study as control variable.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for the main variables of interest in this study. The mean for stress and burnout was 3.13 ( $SD = 0.58$ ) and 2.95 ( $SD = 0.64$ ) respectively. The mean for perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support was 2.85 ( $SD = 0.78$ ) and 2.94 ( $SD = 0.65$ ) respectively. The job stress had a negative correlation with perceived organizational politics ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ) and a positive correlation with burnout ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ).

### Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analyses were used to test the main effect hypotheses. Controls were entered in the first step followed by the stress in the second step. The result of the regression analyses presented in table 2 show that stress was significantly related to job burnout ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ) supporting hypothesis 1.

We used moderated multiple regression (MMR) analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) to test the moderator hypotheses. Control was entered in the first step followed by independent and the moderator variables in the second step. In the third step, the product term of the independent and moderator variable was entered, which if significant confirmed moderation. Results for the moderated regression effect of perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support in the relationship between stress and burnout presented in Table 2 show that for burnout only the Stress x POP interaction term ( $\beta = .97, p < .01$ ) was significant and Stress x POS interaction term ( $\beta = .002, p > .05$ ) was found to be insignificant rejecting hypothesis 3. We plotted the significant interaction for high (Mean +  $SD$ ) and low (Mean –  $SD$ ) values of the moderator. Figure 1 show that the stress–burnout relationship is stronger when perceived organizational politics is high, which provides clear support for hypothesis 2.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test the moderating role of contextual variables e.g. perceived organizational politics and perceived organizational support in the stress-burnout relationship in an under-developed country Pakistan. The results of the study suggested that job stress had a positive relationship with burnout. Moreover, the results also suggested that when employees have high perceptions of organizational politics, the relationship of stress with burnout was found be stronger. However this study did not find support for the moderating role of perceived organizational support in the stress-burnout relationship.

This study makes important contributions in the existing stress and burnout literature. The findings of this study suggested that contextual factors play a very important role by influencing the stress-burnout relationship. Another important aspect of our study is, this is among those few studies which have examined the constructs of stress and burnout in an under-developed country like Pakistan.

The findings of this study have important implications for the mangers and practitioners because they need to pay extraordinary consideration to the problem of job stress not only because it leads to negative organizational outcomes but also due to its ability to convert into burnout,

which has much more harmful effects on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. To prevent stress translating into burnout, managers need to pay special attention to contextual factors. Managers need to make sure that the work environment is less political because a supportive and less political environment acts as a buffer in the conversion of stress into burnout. Future research should also study the role of contextual factors such as organizational trust, perceived organizational justice and psychological contract breach as a moderator in the stress-burnout relationship.

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**Table 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>1. Age</b>	32.34	7.28	--					
<b>2. Total Experience</b>	8.49	6.78	.87**	--				
<b>3. Stress</b>	3.13	.58	-.03	-.06	<b>(.76)</b>			
<b>4. POS</b>	2.85	.78	-.18*	-.09	-.05	<b>(.77)</b>		
<b>5. POP</b>	2.94	.65	-.16*	-.13	-.16*	.03	<b>(.61)</b>	
<b>6. Job Burnout</b>	2.95	.64	.04	.04	.47**	-.09	-.08	<b>(.74)</b>

N = 184; Cronbach's alphas presented in parenthesis.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Results of Regression Analyses for Main and Moderated Effects**

Dependent Variable → Predictor ↓	<i>Burnout</i>	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Model 1</b>		
Step 1		
Controls		.001
Step 2		
Stress	.50***	
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	-.04	
Perceived Organizational Politics (POP)	.03	.25***
Step 3		
Stress× POS	.003	
Stress× POP	.97**	.03*

Note: Variable Controlled is Total Experience of the Respondents.

$N = 184$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Figure 1**  
**Interactive Effects of Stress and Perceived Organizational Politics on Burnout**

