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Does job control buffer work demands' detrimental impact on public child welfare case managers' affective well-being? Extending the nonlinear demand-linear control model

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ABSTRACT

Public child welfare agencies are legally responsible for the safety, permanency, and well-being of millions of vulnerable children and youth. Fulfilling this critical societal function occurs in an occupational environment consisting of large caseloads and immense time pressures. Research demonstrates that exposure to high work demands can negatively impact employees' affective well-being. Despite this well-documented finding, no known published quantitative research study has investigated if workplace resources, such as job control, can help buffer work demands' adverse effects on the affective well-being of public child welfare case managers. This study addressed this issue by testing a recently introduced nonlinear demand by linear control model on a sample of 349 county-based public child welfare case managers from the state of New York. As expected, the moderated nonlinear model was statistically and significantly associated with job-related affective well-being in the expected direction. This finding is the first-of-its-kind and, therefore, adds to both the child welfare and DC model literatures.

1. Introduction

Public child welfare agencies in the United States are legally responsible for the safety, permanency, and well-being of millions of vulnerable children and youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Child Welfare League of America, 2010). Fulfilling this critical societal function occurs in an occupational environment consisting of large caseloads and immense time pressures (United States General Accounting Office, 2003, 2006). Research indicates that exposure to highly demanding work can have a detrimental effect on the well-being of public child welfare case managers (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Preston, 2015). Conceptually, employee well-being is portrayed as a multidimensional construct with job affect identified as a core facet (Warr, 1990; Taris, Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2004). Affective well-being at work is typically defined as frequent experiences of pleasurable and infrequent experiences of displeasurable emotions while performing one's job (Daniels, Glover, & Mellor, 2014). Social science studies, across various research literatures, report positive relations between job-related affective well-being and employee-related outcomes such as job performance (Shockley, Ispas, Rossi, & Levine, 2012), proactive behaviors (Fay & Sonnentag, 2012), organizational commitment (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003) and organizational citizenship behaviors (Barsade & Gibson, 2007); as well as negative relations for ill-health (Chipperfield, Perry, & Stewart, 2012), absenteeism (Pelled & Xin, 1999), and turnover intentions (Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000).

Whereas research on the subjective well-being of public child welfare case managers has been conducted (e.g., Graham, Bradshaw, Surood, & Kline, 2014), the same cannot be said for job-related affective well-being. Indeed, no known published quantitative research study has explored the affective well-being of public child welfare case managers.[1,2] This circumstance is problematic for several reasons. First, unlike subjective well-being, affective well-being at work is confined to only emotional states that arise on the job. For this reason, the construct is more susceptible to the injurious effects of strenuous work demands (and more amenable to workplace resources) than public child welfare case managers' subjective well-being. Second, job-related affective well-being is causally related to burnout (Sonnentag, 2015); an emotional

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[1] Lizano and Mor Barak's (2015) article conceptualized affective well-being as job satisfaction and used four items from a job satisfaction measure developed by Quinn and Staines (1979). This measure operationalized job satisfaction as attitudes toward specific facets of employees' work environment (e.g., pay, resource, relations with co-workers) rather than affective states or discrete emotions.

[2] Although some theoretical models include job satisfaction as a subcomponent of employee well-being (e.g., Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009), all leading well-being models view the construct as separate and distinct from affective well-being (Taris & Schaufeli, 2015).

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exhaustion syndrome that is prevalent in the field of child welfare (Smith & Clark, 2011; Lizano, 2015). Hence, empirical studies that illuminate ways to strengthen affective well-being at work, concurrently identify potential strategies for preventing case manager burnout in public child welfare agencies. Third, along with job satisfaction, affective well-being at work constitutes what occupational health psychologist call workplace well-being (Warr, 2013). As such, building a comprehensive understanding of public child welfare case managers' overall well-being at work requires amassing a robust body of research evidence that incorporates emotional aspects of their well-being. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the dearth of child welfare studies that have investigated this research topic impedes the development of organizational interventions, human resource management policies, and workplace practices capable of improving public child welfare case managers' affective well-being under conditions of high work demands.

Research from both the occupational health psychology (van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Fila, Purl, & Griffeth, 2017) and child welfare (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012) literatures have consistently found that workplace resources help attenuate, or buffer, high work demands' detrimental effect on employee well-being. One workplace resource discussed extensively in the field of occupational health psychology, but sparingly in the extent child welfare literature, is control over one's job (Preston, 2015). Prominent theoretical models that populate the occupational health psychology literature identify job control (or job autonomy) as central to elevating affective well-being at work (e.g., de Jonge & Dormann, 2003; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Warr, 2013). For example, Karasek's (1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) seminal demand-control (DC) model, states that high-control jobs promote employee well-being when workload and time pressure demands are challenging, whereas low-control jobs diminish it in the same occupational circumstance. However, nearly four decades of cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies testing his multiplicative model has yielded uneven results (van de Doef & Maes, 1999; Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010). Further, numerous DC model studies have reported that high-control jobs can *impair*, rather than improve, well-being at work (e.g., de Jonge, Dollard, Dormann, Le Blanc, & Houtman, 2000; van Vegchel, de Jonge, Söderfeldt, Dormann, & Schaufeli, 2004).

In an effort to clarifying both inconclusive and contradictory multiplicative model findings, Preston (2017a, 2017b) recently introduced and successfully tested a nonlinear demand-linear control model on job strain in two different cross-sectional field surveys. The first study was comprised of public sector human service case managers, while the second study contained a broad range of not-for-profit human service employees. To date, no published study has extended this research finding to other well-being outcomes. Thus, the objective of the present study was twofold. Using a sample of public child welfare case managers, this study investigated whether job-control buffers work demands' detrimental impact on job-related affective well-being. Next, this study sought to extend the generalizability of Preston's (2017a) nonlinear demand-linear control finding by using a criterion variable other than job strain.

2. Linear demand-control model

Karasek's (1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) classic DC model integrates two well-established streams of occupational health research, job redesign (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) and epidemiology studies concerning organizational stressors (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975). The model puts forth a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding how and why two core psychosocial job characteristics, work demands and job control, impact employee (health and) well-being. Work demands refer primarily to quantitative workload and time pressures. Job control refers to decision-making authority over job duties and discretion over the use of job skills (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). This multiplicative model predicts that higher levels of work demands and lower levels of job control reduce job-related affective well-being, whereas higher levels of job control buffer work demands' adverse effects (Karasek, 1979).

When work demands are high, liberal levels of control allows public child welfare case managers to invest cognitive resources toward job-related learning which helps eliminate the perceived gap between actual and desired job performance (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Superior job performance enhances affective well-being at work by reducing work anxiety (Holman & Wall, 2002) and increasing case managers' self-belief in the masterability of key case plan tasks and activities (Pomaki, Karoly, & Maes, 2009). Conversely, insufficient control, under the same occupational conditions, hinders job performance. Impaired performance on required job duties and responsibilities transforms cognitive resources into work anxiety (Holman & Wall, 2002). Work anxiety, in turn, obstructs the efficient processing of information which hampers the learning of new ideas and job skills, as well as the development and testing of novel problem-solving strategies (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007). Decrements to these key aspects of active learning reduce the affective well-being of public child welfare case managers by diminishing their self-confidence that critical case plan objectives and goals are achievable (Preston, 2015).

In addition to its multiplicative model, the DC model (Karasek, 1979) also identifies four distinct job types that either elevate or deteriorate affective well-being during the work day. Active jobs (i.e., high demands and high control) facilitate learning which is predicted to enhance job-related affective well-being. High strain jobs (i.e., high demands and low control), on the other hand, impede learning; and, as such, are expected to decrease affective well-being at work. Passive jobs (i.e., low demands and low control) instill feelings of boredom and atrophy job-related skills; both of which reduce job-related affective well-being. Lastly, low strain jobs (i.e., low demands and high control) heighten job-related affective well-being. This is due to the fact that low caseloads and limited time pressures present comfortable work-related challenges that public child welfare case managers can easily master and/or quickly overcome (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

Comprehensive literature reviews, however, report weak associations between Karasek's (1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) DC model and various facets of employee well-being (van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Häusser et al., 2010). One explanation for inconsistent empirical findings that has gone unnoticed in the extant DC model literature is the fact that Karasek's (1979) four job-types and multiplicative model yield contradictory trajectories for employee well-being. Specifically, the multiplicative model advances a *linear* interactive pattern, whereas the interactive pattern that undergirds his four jobs-types is *nonlinear*. Warr (1990) points out that nonlinearity is also present in secondary data sets used by Karasek (1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) to validate his linear multiplicative model. For example, three-dimensional figures based on subgroup data from a longitudinal national random sample of 1,896 Swedish working males produced an “unbalanced U-shaped relationship[*s*]” on depression and life dissatisfaction (Karasek, 1979; p. 297).

Poor multiplicative model findings have also been ascribed to Karasek's (1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) primary causal mechanism: active learning (Preston, 2017a). Major theories of self-regulated learning note that learning is not possible without information from one's immediate social environment (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Bandura, 1997). Consistent with theory, Wielenga-Meijer, Taris, Kompier, and Wigboldus's (2010) systematic review of task characteristics literature found that learning outcomes were more strongly related to feedback frequency than job control. Further, Preston's (2015) cross-sectional field survey revealed that instrumental (i.e., goal-related) feedback fully mediated job control's relationships with job strain in a sample of public child welfare case managers. Hence, theory and data suggest that feedback, opposed to control, is the psychosocial job characteristic most responsible for promoting active learning.

As an alternative to active learning, a small group of occupational health researchers have begun to incorporate Karasek's (1979, 1998)