

Eldercare demands, strain, and work engagement: The moderating role of perceived organizational support

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ABSTRACT

Demographic changes give rise to an increasing number of middle-aged employees providing home-based care to an elderly family member. However, the potentially important role of employees' perceptions of organizational support for eldercare has so far not been investigated. The goal of this study was to examine a stressor–strain–outcome model (Koeske & Koeske, 1993) of eldercare strain as a mediator of the relationship between eldercare demands and caregivers' work engagement. Perceived organizational eldercare support was expected to attenuate the positive relationship between eldercare demands and eldercare strain and to buffer the negative relationship between eldercare strain and work engagement. Results of mediation and moderated mediation analyses with data collected from 147 employees providing eldercare supported the hypotheses. The findings suggest that perceived organizational eldercare support is especially beneficial for employees' work engagement when eldercare demands and strain are high.

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The populations in most developed and some developing countries will age dramatically over the next decades (Cohen, 2003). The fastest growing age group in these countries includes those most likely to need care by others: people aged 80 and older (United Nations, 2002). For example, it is estimated that the group of persons aged 85 and older will grow sharply from 5.8 million in 2010 to more than 18 million in 2050 in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and from 1.9 million in 2010 to about 6 million in 2050 in Germany (German Federal Statistical Office, 2009). At the same time, an increasing number of women, who traditionally represent the majority of family caregivers (Aronson, 1992), are entering the workforce. Due to these demographic changes, the provision of home-based care to an elderly family member has become a significant work–family issue in the 21st century (Smith, 2004).

Researchers have acknowledged for some time the potentially important role of employees' perceptions of organizational support for eldercare (Dellmann-Jenkins & Bennett, 1994; Shoptaugh, Phelps, & Visio, 2004; Tennstedt & Gonyea, 1994; Winter, 2009). However, so far no empirical evidence for the beneficial effects of this form of perceived support from the organization exists. Based on the literature on perceived organizational support (POS)—the extent to which employees believe that “the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986, p. 501)—we define *perceived organizational eldercare support* (POES) in this study as the extent to which employees believe that their organization is concerned about and supports them with regard to their eldercare responsibilities. POES is also related to, but conceptually distinct from, the more general construct of perceived organizational family support (POFS), which describes employees' perceptions of the extent to which the organization supports their work-life balance (Jahn, Thompson, & Kopelman, 2003; Kopelman, Protas, Thompson, & Jahn, 2006; Thompson, Jahn, Kopelman, & Protas, 2004).

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Studying the effects of POES has potentially important implications for both employees and organizations. POES might help reduce employees' eldercare-related strain and increase their engagement at work. Organizations could profit from increasing employees' POES because it may help them retain and motivate their employees with eldercare responsibilities. The goals of this study, therefore, are to examine the potentially beneficial role of POES for reducing eldercare strain (especially when employees' eldercare demands are high), and for maintaining high levels of work engagement (especially when employees experience high levels of eldercare strain). To this end, we hypothesized a stressor–strain–outcome model (Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Um & Harrison, 1998) with POES as a moderator variable, which is depicted in Fig. 1.

Within their stressor–strain–outcome framework, Koeske and Koeske (1993) defined stressors as objective events in the environment that are perceived as difficult and challenging by employees. We conceptualized employees' eldercare demands as the focal stressor in this study and measured it with an index that is assigned to eldercare recipients by the German health insurances' medical services. Further, strain is thought of as employees' psychological reaction to the stressor, and involves the depletion of affective and physiological resources (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). We conceived of eldercare strain as employees' psychological reaction to their eldercare demands and measured it with a fatigue scale. Koeske and Koeske (1993) described the outcomes in their framework as “enduring behavioral or psychological consequences of prolonged stress and strain” (p. 111). We focus in this study on employees' work engagement as the outcome variable. Work engagement has been defined as a positive and fulfilling work-related condition characterized by vigorous effort, dedication to one's job, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Consistent with research on the beneficial main effects of POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), we expected that POES will reduce employees' eldercare strain and increase their work engagement.

Koeske and Koeske (1993) further suggested in their stressor–strain–outcome framework that moderator variables such as social support may influence the process leading from stressors over experienced strain to work-related outcomes at two points. Specifically, they argued that (a) moderators may attenuate the stressor–strain relationship by reducing the strain induced by the stressor, and that (b) moderators may buffer the strain–outcome relationship by reducing the likelihood that strain will lead to negative work-related outcomes. Consistent with this framework, we investigated the moderating effects of POES at two points in the process leading from eldercare demands over eldercare strain to work engagement. First, we expected that eldercare strain would arise as a function of eldercare demands when employees' level of POES is low, but not when POES is high. Second, we expected that employees' work engagement is reduced by high levels of eldercare strain when POES is low, but not when POES is high. Finally, considering our moderated mediation model (Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) depicted in Fig. 1 as a whole, we expected that the negative and indirect effect of eldercare demands on work engagement via eldercare strain is smaller (and non-significant) when employees' level of POES is high than when their level of POES is low.

Development of hypotheses

Eldercare strain mediates the negative relationship between eldercare demands and work engagement

Consistent with the positive stressor–strain link in Koeske and Koeske's (1993) model, we propose that the more eldercare demands employees face, the higher will be their level of eldercare strain. There are two main reasons for assuming a generally positive relationship between eldercare demands and strain. First, caring for a dependent elderly relative with multiple disabilities is a more burdensome activity than caring for an elderly relative who can still take care of many activities of daily living him- or herself. Thus, high eldercare demands will deplete the psychological resources of employees more easily and should lead to higher levels of caregiver strain (Pinguat & Sörsensen, 2003). Second, high levels of eldercare demands are more likely to be in conflict with the responsibilities of other life roles, such as employment, than low levels of eldercare demands. Previous research showed that conflict between the caregiver role and other life roles leads to strain (Barling, MacEwen, Kelloway, & Higginbottom, 1994; Gottlieb, Kelloway, & Fraboni, 1994; Kossek, Colquitt, & Noe, 2001; Stephens, Townsend, Martire, & Druley, 2001). For example,

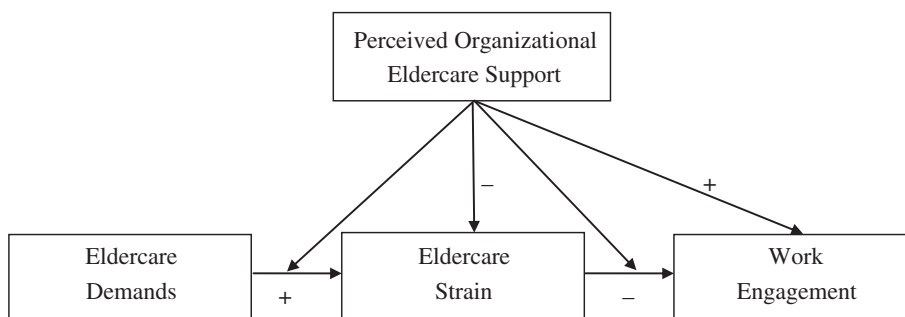


Fig. 1. The proposed moderated mediation model.

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