



Job-related resources and the pressures of working life

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ABSTRACT

Data from a 2011 representative sample of Canadian workers are used to test the resource versus the stress of higher status hypotheses. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R), the resource hypothesis predicts that job-related resources reduce job pressure. The stress of higher status hypothesis predicts that job-related resources increase job pressure. Findings tend to favor the resource hypothesis for job autonomy and schedule control, while supporting the stress of higher status for job authority and challenging work. These findings help elaborate on the “resource” concept in the JD-R model and identify unique ways that such resources might contribute to the pressures of working life.

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1. Introduction

Are job-related resources associated with more or less job pressure? One view is that people with better pay and greater job control or more resources *should* enjoy an easier life—one filled with more personal and social rewards. In accordance with the Stress Process Model, many scholars in the sociological study of stress have articulated the ways that status inequality contributes to disparities in well-being (McLeod and Nonnemaker, 1999; Mirowsky and Ross, 2003; Pearlin, 1999). A lower level of exposure to stressors among individuals with higher status is offered as one explanation for these patterns. At the same time, however, there is increasing attention to the ‘downsides’ of higher status that go against the grain of these more favorable predictions, especially in the workplace context. An emerging theoretical perspective—the *stress of higher status*—has been advanced in an effort to elaborate on these processes and their implications for personal and role functioning (Schieman et al., 2006; Schieman and Glavin 2008, 2011; Schieman et al., 2009). One of its main predictions is that individuals in higher status positions in the workplace—as experienced in the nature of activities, expectations, and responsibilities—are exposed to more job demands. While this seems plausible, little is known about the interrelationships among specific features of job resources and demands (e.g., job pressure) that are central for stress of higher status processes.

In an effort to further develop and test components of the stress of higher status thesis, I draw upon ideas from the Job Demands-Control model (JD-C) (Karasek, 1979) and its more recent iteration—the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001). Both models are heuristic frameworks for describing the effects of job conditions on personal, social, and organizational outcomes. In the JD-R model, scholars have identified the centrality of two characteristics of work across all types of occupations: *demands* and *resources* (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Demands are “structural or psychological claims associated with role requirements, expectations, and norms to which individuals must respond or adapt by exerting physical or mental effort” (Voydanoff, 2005:491). In research on work and stress, *job pressure* represents a quintessential demand (Diestel and Schmidt, 2009; Kristensen et al., 2004; Tausig and Fenwick, 2011). By

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contrast, job resources are physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects of work that should help workers manage job pressure (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). This view of “resources” in the JD-R model originates, in part, from the JD-C model’s concept of *job control*—that is, the “working individual’s potential control over his tasks and his conduct during the working day” (Karasek, 1979: 289). Job resources involve the nature of, and rewards from, the work itself (e.g., autonomy, schedule control, authority, and challenge)—although, as I will elaborate on in detail below, the conceptual connections between job control and resources may be much more evident among some work characteristics compared to others.

In this study, I position the earlier conceptualization of “job control” alongside the more recent characterization of “job resources” and investigate the following puzzle: What if some forms of job resources are associated with *greater exposure* to job pressure? These observations would elaborate upon the core ideas and predictions of the JD-R model and encourage greater conceptual reflection about the job conditions that have typically been referred to as “resources.” To address these questions, I analyze data from a nationally representative survey that includes workers from a broad spectrum of job sectors, occupations, social statuses, and job conditions: the 2011 *Canadian Work, Stress, and Health* study (CAN-WSH).

1.1. The conceptualization and importance of job pressure

As part of Karasek’s (1979) classic JD-C model, early conceptualizations of job demands focused on requirements for fast-paced performance, the intensity of effort, and time constraints (Karasek, 1985; Karasek and Theorell, 1990), including items like “my job requires working very fast,” “my job requires working very hard,” and “I have enough time to get the job done” (the latter being reverse-coded). These indicators directly implicate the stress associated with the divergence between the quantity of work and the time allotted for it. While debates about the conceptualization and measurement of job demands persist, a basic theme involves the amount of work to be done and the subjective sense of the associated pressure (Diestel and Schmidt, 2009). Some research has expanded the concept of “quantitative demands at work” with a more specific focus on time pressure (Duxbury et al., 2008; Kristensen et al., 2004; Tausig and Fenwick, 2011). In such high-pressure contexts, workers report feeling an imbalance between the amount of work required and the time that they have to complete it.

The conceptualization of job pressure fits the JD-R model’s characterization of demands as features of the work role that generate strain—especially if they “exceed the employee’s adaptive capability” (Bakker et al., 2007). As operationalized in the present study, workers who report high levels of job pressure experience being overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do; they have to work on too many tasks at the same time; the demands of their job exceed the time they have to do the work. Research consistently demonstrates that job pressure increases time and energy commitments and is associated with exhaustion, burnout, and distress (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hakanen et al., 2008; Kristensen et al., 2004; Schieman and Glavin, 2011).¹ In the 1997 NSCW (National Study of the Changing Workforce), for example, Voydanoff (2005) observes that job pressure is associated with more work-to-family conflict—a key stressor that is associated with greater distress (Bellavia and Frone, 2005; Glavin et al., 2011). Similarly, in analyses of the 2002 NSCW, Schieman and Glavin (2011) link job pressure with elevated levels of distress.

Given the well-established empirical connection between job pressure and negative outcomes, my study focuses specific attention on the job conditions that influence levels of pressure—especially its distribution across occupational groups and income levels, as well as its association with job resources. Different types of jobs—with their varying requirements and expectations, probably generate different amounts of pressure. In this context, I therefore seek to answer a key question that remains unaddressed in the literature: Are the so-called “resource” attributes of these jobs associated with more or less exposure to job pressure?

1.2. The link between job resources and job pressure

In the JD-R model, job demands are clearly identified as potentially problematic for workers, especially in the “health impairment process” (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). However, the JD-R model also proposes that job resources should help workers manage the demands of work (Bakker and Geurts, 2004; Demerouti et al., 2001). A fundamental tenet predicts both a *negative direct association* and an *interaction effect* between job resources and demands. For example, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) assert: “Job resources reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs” (p. 312).² Testing the first part of this basic proposition, I propose the *resource hypothesis*: If job resources actually “reduce” job demands, then my analyses should demonstrate that each resource is associated with less job pressure. By contrast, an alternative hypothesis—the

¹ Bakker et al., (2007: 275) assert: “Although job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into job stressors when meeting those demands requires high effort from which the employee does not adequately recover. . . .” In my view, this claim is problematic because it suggests that job pressure is not an actual ‘stressor’ unless a worker is required to exert effort and then fails to ‘recover.’ Moreover, Bakker et al.’s definition embeds the outcome variable (“failure to recover”) with the predictor variable (“demands”). I argue that being *overwhelmed* by work, having *too many* tasks, or facing demands that *exceed* time allowances are unambiguously representative of a stressor. On balance, job pressures like these do require “high effort” and are typically negative. Whether or not (a) the worker “recovers” from the high degree of effort or (b) subsequently experiences negative outcomes like greater psychological distress or poor health outcomes are two separate empirical questions.

² A reviewer suggested that the proposition that “resources reduce demands” might not actually be a hypothesis but “part of the basic definition of the JD-R model.” While I acknowledge that possibility, the original statement (as quoted) makes a direct claim of a *negative association* between resources and demands—and the word “reduces” implies a causal direction. In any case, irrespective of whether or not the authors’ original intention was to advance a specific hypothesis, my objective involves a closer investigation of this statement in an effort to articulate a more nuanced set of interrelationships among resources and demands.

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