

The Relationships Between Felt Stress, Individual Initiative, Burnout, and Organizational Commitment: A Two-Step Longitudinal Study at a Small Liberal Arts College in the Northeast

Karel J. Raska

*Business Major and Photography Minor, Drew University,
Madison, New Jersey, USA*

Introduction

Using a longitudinal design, this study will explore the relationships between felt stress, individual initiative, burnout, and organizational commitment, with the ultimate goal of improving working conditions for Drew Aramark food-service workers. The four constructs mentioned above have been studied extensively in existing research, but never in this unique combination, and largely relying on a cross-sectional design.

Recently, burnout has been investigated through the lens of work engagement, burnout's 'positive antipode,' and the J-DR model, which "proposes that working conditions can be categorized into 2 broad categories, job demands and job resources" (Demerouti et al., 2001: 499). Demerouti's research found that "high or unfavorable job demands are primarily and positively related to exhaustion, whereas job resources are primarily and negatively related to disengagement from work" (508). Ultimately, the state where "both exhaustion and disengagement are simultaneously present, represents the burnout syndrome" (508).

Expanding on Demerouti's conclusions, the results of Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) multi-sample study indicate that "burnout is mainly predicted by job demands but also by lack of job resources, whereas engagement is exclusively predicted by available job resources" (310). Although both studies provide critical practical implications, neither study considers individual initiative or organizational commitment as constructs, which seem invariably linked to the burnout-engagement continuum. There are many other studies that discuss individual initiative, organizational commitment, and stress, albeit with their own limitations.

Bolino and Turnley's (2005) findings "indicate that higher levels of individual initiative... are related to higher levels of role overload, job stress, and work-family conflict" (744). However, because of the study's cross-sectional design, it remains unclear if higher levels of individual initiative lead to higher levels of job stress, or vice versa. Hunter and Thatcher's (2007) study of felt stress (feelings of pressure and worry associated with job tasks) in relation to organizational commitment, job experience, and performance found that "employees with higher levels of affective commitment and... job experience channeled felt stress more effectively into...

performance” (953). In spite of these findings, it remains unclear how burnout fits into the equation.

On the topic of stress, many studies use Cavanaugh’s two factor measure of stress, labeled challenge stressors and hindrance stressors. Through meta-analytic structural modeling, Crawford et al. (2010) showed that “job demands typically appraised as challenges are consistently positively related to [employee] engagement, whereas job demands typically appraised as hindrances are consistently negatively related to engagement” (842). Nevertheless, Crawford’s cross-sectional design begs the question of what the direction and nature of the relationship between challenges, hindrances, and organizational commitment is. Boswell et al. (2002) did find that “hindrance-related stress associated with undesirable work outcomes (i.e., less loyalty; increased job search and intent to quit), while challenge-related stress associated with desirable work outcomes (i.e., enhanced loyalty; less withdrawal, job search, and intent to quit” (177), but, yet again, a cross-sectional design is a limiting factor in identifying the nature of the connections between constructs.

From this brief literature review, it is apparent that the direction and nature of the relationships between felt stress, individual initiative, burnout, and organizational commitment should be examined using a longitudinal design.

Methods

The participants of this study include Aramark food-service workers at Drew University. Food-service workers represent a diverse population in terms of age, race, primary role, and number of years employed by Aramark.

The present study will consist of five surveys, each of which apply specifically to one of the four constructs to be examined (felt stress has two surveys). In line with a two-step longitudinal study framework, participants will take each survey twice, eight months apart. Dividing the surveys by construct over the span of several months ensures that responses to questions about different constructs do not influence each other, thereby decreasing common method variance.

The first survey about felt stress contains ten questions adapted from Motowidlo et al.’s (1986) study about the causes and consequences of occupational stress for nurses. Nurses participating in the study were asked to write down descriptions of stressful events at work. These descriptions were narrowed down to 45 questions as part of a questionnaire which asked “How often do these things generally happen to you in your job?”

Ten questions were chosen from this list that could apply to events food-service workers at Drew experience on a day-to-day basis. Questions that apply specifically to the field of nursing, such as “A patient under your care refuses to stay in bed,” were immediately discluded. More generic questions such as “A doctor publicly criticizes your nursing care” were adapted for a food-service context, to “A supervisor publicly criticizes your work performance.” Very generic questions such as “You have so much to do that you have to work overtime” were not reworded at all. Motowidlo’s original 5-point Likert scale, where “1: never” and “5: fairly often,” was modified to “1: never” and “5: very often.”

The second survey about felt stress contains eight stress items from Cavanaugh et al.’s (2000) study of self-reported work stress among US managers. Cavanaugh tested her two-factor structure of stress, with regression results indicating that “challenge-related... stress is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to job search... [while] hindrance-related... stress is negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to job search and turnover” (65).

Of the eight stress items chosen for the survey, five items fall under challenge stressors and three fall under hindrance stressors. No changes were made to the wording of the stress items; however, items with more colloquial terms or complex words, such as “the amount of red tape I need to go through to get my job done” or “the scope of responsibility my position entails,” were avoided since the first language of many food-service workers at Drew is not English. Cavanaugh’s 5-point Likert scale, where “1: produces no stress” and “5: produces a great deal of stress.” remained unchanged due to its simple wording.

The survey about individual initiative, which will be taken both by Drew Aramark food-service workers and their supervisors, has four items from Bolino and Turnley’s (2005) study about the relationship between individual initiative, role overload, job stress, and work-family conflict. Items in the version of the individual initiative survey taken by supervisors will be adjusted to the third-person, beginning with “Workers under my supervision...” Gathering supervisors’ responses for individual initiative items further minimizes common method variance.

Although Bolino and Turnley’s study used fifteen individual initiative items, most items were relevant only for white-collar workers, such as “checks his/her email or voice mail at home” or “travels whenever the company asks him/her, even though technically he/she doesn’t have to.” However, the four items chosen for this study, such as “you stay at work after your normal shift,” also apply to blue-collar work. Since Bolino and Turnley did not specify a scale for their individual initiative items, the same 5-point Likert scale, where “1: never” and “5: very often,” will be used from the first survey about felt stress.

The survey about burnout uses eleven items from Maslach's Burnout Inventory (1981). Leiter and Maslach (1988) identified three unique aspects of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. "Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by one's contact with other people... Depersonalization refers to an unfeeling and callous response toward these people, who are usually the recipients of one's service or care... [and, lastly], reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one's feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people" (297).

Of the eleven burnout items chosen for the survey, five items fall under emotional exhaustion, three items fall under personal accomplishment, and the remaining three items fall under depersonalization. As in Cavanaugh's stress items, burnout items with colloquial terms, such as "I feel like I'm at the end of the rope," were avoided. Depersonalization items, such as "I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal 'objects'," were adapted for a food-service context, to "I feel I treat some dining students as if they were impersonal 'objects'." Maslach originally rated each item on two dimensions, frequency and intensity, with two distinct scales for each. However, to simplify things, the same 5-point Likert scale, where "1: never" and "5: very often," will be used from the first survey about felt stress.

Finally, the survey about organizational commitment uses eleven items from Allen and Meyer's (1990) study based on the three-component model of commitment. The affective component "refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in, the organization... [the continuance component] refers to commitment based on the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization... [and, lastly, the normative component] refers to employees' feelings of obligation to remain with the organization" (1).

Of the eleven items chosen for the survey, five items fall under affective commitment, three items fall under continuance commitment, and the remaining three items fall under normative commitment. Only eleven items out of the original 24 are included because many items are nuanced and repetitive. However, there is at least one reverse-keyed item for every component. Allen and Meyer's original 7-point Likert scale was condensed to 5 points, where "1: strongly disagree" and "5: strongly agree."

One limitation of this method is that the constructs of job demands and job resources have not been included in the survey design. As discussed in the introduction, these two components of the J-DR model have been strongly linked to burnout. However, since burnout is being investigated through the lens of Maslach's Burnout Inventory in this study rather than the burnout engagement-continuum, it seemed more appropriate not to include job demands and resources. Furthermore, a longitudinal study using the J-DR model has already been conducted

(referred to in the discussion section), which would have lessened the value of this study's contribution to the field of organizational psychology.

Practical Process

Study participants will be recruited face to face during a Drew Aramark food-service department meeting in September 2020. Recruiting face-to-face during a meeting where all potential participants are present will maximize response rate. There are no specific selection criteria- the goal is to have as many participants as possible. There are well over 100 food-service workers at Drew University and I hope to gather at least 75 participants.

After the scheduled proceedings of the department meeting are complete, I will give a brief presentation about the study and ask those who are interested to stay a few minutes after and fill out a consent form and information card. The consent form highlights the main points from the presentation and will be signed by all participants. The information card asks for a participant's email and phone number, and contains basic questions about age, gender, primary role and food-service location, and number of years employed by Aramark at Drew.

To keep the identities of individual participants confidential, every information card will have a unique ID number associated with that participant, rather than their name. This ID number will be used to link survey responses of individual participants between step 1 and step 2 of the study. Participants will be compensated \$35 for their time, based on a rate of \$7/hour and the estimation that it will take the average participant five hours to complete all required components of this research.

After assembling a list of the emails of all of the participants, I will contact participants with the survey schedule for step 1 and step 2 of the study. The five surveys about individual constructs, which take 5-10 minutes to fill out, will be completed at the end of subsequent monthly department meetings over the course of the next year. Step 1 of the study will last from October 2020 to February 2021 while step 2 of the study will last from June 2021 to October 2021.

The survey about stressful events at work will be completed in October 2020 and June 2021. The survey about challenge and hindrance stressors will be completed in November 2020 and July 2021. The survey about individual initiative will be completed by both food-service workers and their supervisors in December 2020 and August 2021. The survey about burnout will be completed in January 2021 and September 2021. Lastly, the survey about organizational commitment will be completed in February 2021 and October 2021.

Ensuring Drew Aramark food service workers participate for the entire duration of the year-long longitudinal study is the most significant concern. The pool of potential participants is already quite small, so achieving at least a 75% participation rate and 0% dropout rate is ambitious. Thankfully, there are several steps that will be taken to mitigate this concern.

During the initial presentation and in follow-up emails to participants after every survey, I will stress that the completion of this study is pivotal for improving working conditions for Drew Aramark food-service workers- they themselves are the main beneficiaries of this research. Individual surveys are short, with no more than eleven questions, and completing the surveys after department meetings is very convenient for participants. Lastly, the payment structure dictates that participants receive \$35 in compensation only after finishing step 2 of the study.

Discussion

A cross-sectional design has been a weakness of research associated with the four constructs of felt stress, individual initiative, burnout, and organizational commitment. However, the handful of longitudinal studies that employ these topics have yielded numerous practical and managerial implications, and are a strong indicator of the value this research could bring to the field of organizational psychology.

Using a longitudinal design, Maslach and Leiter (2008) studied the early predictors of job burnout and engagement based on a survey containing measures of the six areas of worklife, including workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Participants were the staff of a business and administrative services division at a major North American university. The survey was “fully supported by top administrators who... pledged that the aggregated responses would be made public and would be used to help design interventions that would improve working conditions” (503).

Maslach and Leiter’s results demonstrated that “people who showed an inconsistent pattern [in scores in the six areas of worklife] at Time 1 were more likely to change over the year than were those who did not. Among this group, those who also displayed a workplace incongruity in the area of fairness moved to burnout at Time 2, while those without this incongruity moved toward engagement” (498).

The most noteworthy implication of Maslach and Leiter’s research is that with the ability to “identify in advance those people who are at greater risk for problems, organizations can be in a better position to develop targeted interventions” (509). Applying these findings to those of the present study, once the relationships between the constructs used in this research are understood, giving Drew Aramark food-service workers repeated assessments similar to the study surveys

“functions like an organizational ‘checkup’” (Maslach & Leiter, 510). Thus, signs of burnout could be spotted and mitigated sooner while measures could be taken to boost organizational commitment and lower felt stress.

One potential limitation that arose in Maslach and Leiter’s study was the question of whether the worklife area of fairness would always serve as the critical incongruity in the workplace, or whether “the nature of the tipping point may depend on current conditions in the work environment... For example, in an organization that is experiencing recurring problems of staff conflict and absenteeism, the area of community might be the source of a major incongruity” (508).

The theoretical limitation of whether the nature of a relationship between constructs depends on current conditions in the work environment may occur in the present study as well. For example, if analysis revealed that higher levels of stress from challenge stressors amongst Drew Aramark food-service workers leads to more frequent feelings of personal accomplishment, one could argue that the nature of food-service work is not as stressful as investment banking (for example), where challenge stressors may lead to less frequent feelings of personal accomplishment. This constraint can be addressed by restricting the generalizability of the results, a theoretical limitation discussed further in the context of Schaufeli et. al’s (2009) longitudinal study.

In their research, Schaufeli et al. (2009) examine how changes in job demands and resources predict burnout, work engagement, and sickness absenteeism. Participants in the study were managers and executives at a Dutch telecom company invited to fill out recurring employee health and well-being surveys by the company’s occupational health and safety service. Schaufeli’s study “established a longitudinal link between increasing demands and the development of burnout, thereby corroborating the strain process as assumed by the JD-R model” (908). Results reveal that “(1) increases in job demands and decreases in job resources predict burnout, (2) increases in job resources predict work engagement, and (3) burnout (positively) and engagement (negatively) predict registered sickness duration and frequency” (893).

A major implication that arises from Schaufeli’s research is that “in order to increase engagement reducing the exposure to job demands is not the best option; instead, the motivating potential of job resources should be exploited” (911) by managers and employers. However, Schaufeli acknowledges that the homogenous nature of the sample he studied “limits the generalization of [the] findings to other occupational groups” (911). 89% of the individuals in Schaufeli’s sample were male and 54% completed a college degree, with a mean age of 44.3 years. Demographically speaking, this is an extremely narrow sample consisting of “predominantly highly educated, experienced, middle-aged, and married men” (901).

The theoretical limitation of generalizability will also arise in the present study since a sample of food-service workers at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast is narrow in scope. Could the findings of this study be generalized to all blue-collar workers in human services, or are they restricted to just food-service workers? Although these questions cannot be answered at this time, the participants in the present study will be diverse in terms of gender, race, and age, unlike those in Schaufeli's sample.

Ultimately, the results of longitudinal studies are more applicable to the real world as they reveal causal relationships. Implications from Maslach and Leiter's (2008) and Schaufeli et al.'s (2009) longitudinal studies have changed the way organizations deal with interventions to mitigate burnout and utilize job resources to increase engagement. In similar fashion, the present study could prove invaluable to understanding the causes of increased burnout and decreased organizational commitment with regards to felt stress and individual initiative, and provide solutions for how to foster a healthier workplace for Drew Aramark food-service workers.

References

- Allen, N., Meyer, J., (1990), The measurement and antecedents of affective, continuance, and normative commitment to the organization, *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 63, 1-18
- Bolino, M., Turnley, W., (2005), The Personal Costs of Citizenship Behavior: The Relationship Between Individual Initiative and Role Overload, Job Stress, and Work–Family Conflict, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(4), 740-748
- Boswell, W., Olson-Buchanan, J., LePine, M., (2004), Relations between stress and work outcomes: The role of felt challenge, job control, and psychological strain, 64, 165-181
- Cavanaugh, M., Boswell, W., Roehling, M., Boudreau, J., (2000), An Empirical Examination of Self-Reported Work Stress Among US Managers, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(1), 65-74
- Crawford, E., LePine, J., Rich, B., (2010), Linking Job Demands and Resources to Employee Engagement and Burnout: A Theoretical Extension and Meta-Analytic Test, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(5), 834-848
- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A., Nachreiner, F., Schaufeli, W., (2001), The Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 499-512
- Hunter, L., Thatcher, S., (2007), Feeling the Heat: Effects of Stress, Commitment, and Job Experience on Job Performance, *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(4), 953-968
- Maslach, C., Leiter, M., (2008), Early Predictors of Job Burnout and Engagement, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(3), 498-512
- Maslach, C., Susan, J., (1981), The measurement of experienced burnout, *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 2, 99-113
- Motowidlo, S., Packard, J., Manning, M., (1986), Occupational Stress: Its Causes and Consequences for Job Performance, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(4), 618-629
- Leiter, M., Maslach, C., (1988), The impact of interpersonal environment on burnout and organizational commitment, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 9, 297-308
- Schaufeli, W., Bakker, A., (2004), Jobs demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, 293-315

Schaufeli, W., Bakker, A., Van Rhenen, W., (2009), How changes in job demands and resources predict burnout, work engagement, and sickness absenteeism, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30, 893-917

Appendix: Survey Questions

Basic Information

- Age Range (circle one)
 - 20-29
 - 30-39
 - 40-49
 - 50-59
 - 60-69
 - 70-79
- Gender (circle one)
 - Male
 - Female
- Primary Role (circle one)
 - Manager
 - Chef
 - Cook
 - Dishwasher
 - Food Server
 - Swipe Attendant
- Primary Food Service Location (circle one)
 - The Commons
 - EC
 - Peet's
 - C-Store
- Number of Year Employed by Aramark: ____

Stressful Events at Work

- Adapted From: Motowidlo, S., Packard, J., Manning, M., (1986), Occupational Stress: Its Causes and Consequences for Job Performance, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(4), 618-629
- Scale: 5-point Likert Scale, 1 = never, 5 = often
- Questions
 - You fall behind in your regular duties because you have extra work that is not part of your daily routine.
 - A supervisor is verbally abusive toward you.
 - You perform work that should have been done by a co-worker.
 - Your supervisor becomes angry at you for something that is not your fault.
 - You have so much to do that you have to leave some things undone.
 - Your food-service court is short-staffed because someone called in sick.

- A student becomes verbally abusive with you.
- You see a co-worker relaxing and taking it easy while you are very busy.
- You have so much to do that you have to work overtime.
- A supervisor publicly criticizes your work performance.

Individual Initiative

- Adapted From: Bolino, M., Turnley, W., (2005), The Personal Costs of Citizenship Behavior: The Relationship Between Individual Initiative and Role Overload, Job Stress, and Work–Family Conflict, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(4), 740-748
- Scale: 5-point Likert Scale, 1 = never, 5 = often
- Questions
 - You work on your days off.
 - You stay at work after your normal shift.
 - You go into work before your normal shift.
 - You rearrange or alter your personal plans because of work.

Burnout

- Adapted From: Maslach, C., Susan, J., (1981), The measurement of experienced burnout, *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 2, 99-113
- Scale: 5-point Likert Scale, 1 = never, 5 = often
- Questions
 - Emotional Exhaustion
 - I feel emotionally drained from my work.
 - I feel used up at the end of the workday.
 - I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
 - I feel burned out from my work.
 - I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
 - Personal Accomplishment
 - I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.
 - I feel very energetic.
 - I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
 - Depersonalization
 - I feel I treat some dining students as if they were impersonal 'objects.'
 - I've become more cold toward dining students and coworkers since I took this job.
 - I don't really care what happens to some dining students.

Challenge versus Hindrance Stressors

- Adapted From: Cavanaugh, M., Boswell, W., Roehling, M., Boudreau, J., (2000), An Empirical Examination of Self-Reported Work Stress Among US Managers, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(1), 65-74
- Scale: 5-point Likert Scale, 1 = produces no stress, 5 = produces a great deal of stress
- Questions
 - Challenge Stressors
 - The number of job duties I have.
 - The amount of time I spend at work.
 - The volume of work that must be accomplished in the allotted time.
 - Time pressures I experience.
 - The amount of responsibility I have.
 - Hindrance Stressors
 - The inability to clearly understand what is expected of me on the job.
 - The lack of job security I have.
 - The degree to which my career seems 'stalled.'

Organizational Commitment

- Adapted From: Allen, N., Meyer, J., (1990), The measurement and antecedents of affective, continuance, and normative commitment to the organization, *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 63, 1-18
- Scale: 5-point Likert Scale, 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree
- Questions
 - Affective Commitment
 - I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
 - I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.
 - I do not feel 'emotionally attached' to this organization.
 - This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.
 - I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization.
 - Continuance Commitment
 - It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.
 - It wouldn't be too costly for me to leave my organization now.
 - Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.
 - Normative Commitment
 - I do not believe that a person must always be loyal to his or her organization.

- One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that I believe that loyalty is important and therefore feel a sense of moral obligation to remain.
- If I got another offer for a better job elsewhere I would not feel it was right to leave my organization.