

# Job Characteristics and Role Stress: Mental Health in the Workplace



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## Background and Hypotheses

This study is a reassessment of a process model proposed by Barling and Kelloway (1991), based largely on Warr's (1987) review of employment and mental health in order to link job and role characteristics to individual mental health. The study is also a replication and extension of Barling and Kelloway's proposed model of mental health using a different sample and an altered procedure. This model also serves to distinguish between context-specific and context-free mental health.

- I hypothesized that job-related mental health would be the process through which the experience of employment affects context-free mental health. In other words, the main assumption of my study was that an individual's positive and negative experiences of employment explain the relationship between work/organizational characteristics and context-free mental health. Further, these context-specific reactions were hypothesized to predict context-free mental health. Jamal and Mitchell (1980) suggested that mental health is affected by factors from both work and non-work environments and that their interaction establishes an individual's psychological well-being. For the purposes of this study, there was a focus on one specific aspect of job satisfaction, that is, contentment with work itself. The reason for this focus, in keeping with Barling and Kelloway, is that job characteristics reflect attributes inherent with the work itself, rather than factors secondary to work. Therefore, it can be argued that job characteristics are more likely to influence essential rather than incidental (e.g. pay, fringe benefits, and promotions) job satisfaction.
- Finally, role stressors were also hypothesized to predict job satisfaction. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are conceptually related to role stress. Consistent with Barling and Kelloway's framework, the study included measures of both context-free and job-related mental health. In the study, job-related affective well-being was represented by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and while-job-related subjective competence was represented by the personal accomplishments at work component of burnout.

## Method

### Participants

Questionnaire packages were administered to approximately 42 Belk store employees. Part time and full time employees were asked to participate. The ages of these employees ranged from 18-63. White, black and Hispanic employees of male and female gender were included in participation.

### Design

The current study used a survey-research design and regression analyses. For each of the three models described, I calculated the path coefficients for the mediational model through hierarchical regression model analysis. Operationally, the mediational model is calculated by regressing each variable on every variable preceding it in the model. I also calculated path coefficients for the mediational model. I did not engage in a post hoc model modification to improve the fit of the model tested here.

### Materials

The questionnaire package that each employee was given contained an informed consent form which was read to them before actually beginning the study.

The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (Banks, et al., 1980) was used to supply a measure of context-free affective well-being (Warr, 1987). Operationally, context-specific mental health refers explicitly to job-related mental health, i.e. those indices which reflect affective well-being and subjective competence in the workplace. In contrast, context-free mental health is a more global construct that is not tied to a particular setting or context. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) comprehensively measures affective well-being (Warr, 1987) and is comprised by a symptom checklist useful for detecting sub-clinical disturbances of individual mental health.

Dimensions of job-related mental health was measured with The Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The Personal Accomplishment subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory was used to provide a measure of subjective, job-related competence (Warr, 1987).

A demographics questionnaire was also attached to the questionnaire package that asked participants to respond to five questions/items. The questionnaire asked for the participants to respond to sex, age, and race/ethnicity. Participants were also asked to include whether they are full time or part time employees at Belk.

### Procedure

I contacted each employee at Belk Department Store in Nacogdoches, Texas and asked them if they would like to volunteer to participate in the study. Special posters were posted in the break room to make employees aware of the participation opportunity. Every employee of Belk received a questionnaire package including an informed consent form. The informed consent form was read to each participating employee individually. I was present in the break room when he/she was given the questionnaire package. The participants completed questionnaires and returned them to me when they had been completed. After completion of the questionnaires, the participant was thanked for their participation and no debriefing was necessary. The participants did receive anything in return for participating. The procedure took each participant 10-15 minutes. He/she was given an opportunity to ask questions. At that time they were free to go.

## Results

A positive correlation between GHQ Score and Emotional Exhaustion ( $r=.61, p<.001$ ) shows that as emotional exhaustion increases sub-clinical disturbances of individual mental health, detected by GHQ score, also increases. A positive correlation between GHQ score and Depersonalization ( $r=.53, p<.001$ ) shows that as depersonalization increases so does detection of sub-clinical disturbances of individual mental health. A negative correlation between GHQ score and Personal Accomplishment ( $r=-.41, p<.001$ ) shows that as personal accomplishment increases there is a decrease in GHQ score, which indicates decreased detection of sub-clinical disturbances of individual mental health. A positive correlation between Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization ( $r=.709, p<.001$ ) shows that as emotional exhaustion increases, depersonalization increases. A positive correlation between Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment shows that as emotional exhaustion increases, personal accomplishment increases. The final significant correlation was a negative relationship between Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment ( $r=-.374, p<.001$ ), showing that as depersonalization increases, personal accomplishment decreases. Age did not report significant correlations with any of the four dependent variables.

A hierarchical regression model analysis was conducted on GHQ scores which were regressed first onto age and gender. Age and gender were not significant ( $p >.05$ ). When Personal Accomplishment was included it also made a significant prediction ( $t=-2.63, p=0.012$ ). When Depersonalization was added in it made a significant prediction ( $t=3.086, p=0.004$ ) but Personal Accomplishment was no longer significant. In the final model, Emotional Exhaustion was included which made a significant prediction ( $t=2.524, p=0.016$ ) but Depersonalization was no longer important.

As hypothesized, context-free mental health was significantly predicted by job-related affective well-being (i.e. emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization) and subjective competence (i.e. personal accomplishment at work). Personal Accomplishment is important initially by itself as a predictor of context-free mental health ( $r=-.41$ ), but when Depersonalization ( $r=.53$ ) is added Personal Accomplishment is no longer important. This shows that Depersonalization is a full mediator (see Fig. 1) Depersonalization is important initially by itself as a predictor of context-free mental health ( $r=.53$ ), but when Emotional Exhaustion is added Depersonalization is no longer important. This shows that Emotional Exhaustion is a full mediator (see Fig. 2).

## Discussion

Results suggest context-free mental health is an outcome of job characteristics and gives empirical weight to calls for job redesign as a means of improving mental health. The effect of characteristics on context-free mental health being indirect is of importance for future research. Focusing on both processes and outcomes is the most appropriate strategy for research than to focus solely on outcomes. Future research that considers alternate models would further understanding of the consequences of job characteristics on individual well-being. Additional future research on the mental health effects of job designed is encouraged by the growing importance of mental health as an occupational health and safety issue.

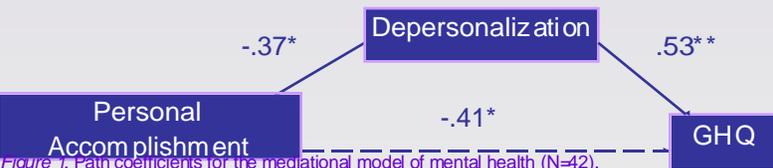


Figure 1. Path coefficients for the mediational model of mental health (N=42).

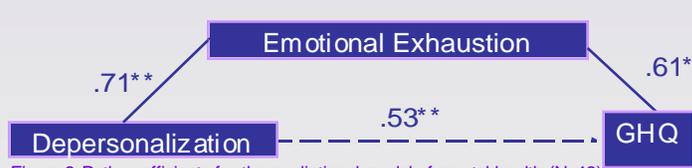


Figure 2. Path coefficients for the mediational model of mental health (N=42).