

The Alleviating Effect of Perceived Supervisor Support on Workload, Work-Family Conflict & Learned Helplessness

Tayfur, Ö.
Arslan, M.

Department of Business Administration, Hacettepe University, Ankara-Turkey
E-mail: otayfur@hacettepe.edu.tr; marslan@hacettepe.edu.tr

Abstract The main purpose of this study is to examine the effects of perceived-workload and work-family conflict (WFC) on learned helplessness. While examining the role of the aforementioned variables, the effect of supervisor support was taken into account because support given by supervisors is believed to alleviate the adverse impact of workload and WFC. A total of 155 people working in a private bank in Turkey filled out the questionnaire. Participants rated the items that measure perceived workload, WFC, supervisor support and helplessness. Moderated mediation analysis was conducted to reveal the direct and moderating effects. In general, the results were found to be as expected. As employees experience high workload and WFC, their propensity to feel helplessness seems to increase. However, as perceived supervisor support increases, the adverse effect of WFC and workload on helplessness seems to diminish. However, it is noteworthy to say that the alleviating effect of support is effective up to some point. At high levels of workload and WFC, helplessness felt by employees increases substantially.

Key Words: Learned helplessness, supervisor support, work-family conflict, workload

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest for understanding employees' reactions to adverse work conditions probably because these reactions manifest themselves as decreased employee productivity, job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions. Learned helplessness, which is one of the most cited reactions to prolonged stress, could affect organizational performance and employee well-being. Given the importance of enhancing quality of work-life, it seems necessary to address the issue of learned helplessness in organizational context by pinpointing its possible antecedents and correlates.

Learned helplessness could be defined as the notion of becoming passive after confronting with stressors like repeated punishment, failure, adverse conditions and remaining passive even after environmental changes that makes success possible (Güler, 2006). Believing that responding is futile and things cannot be controlled is considered to be the characteristics of learned helplessness and this belief could make people indifferent and passive. Applied to organizational context, employees being exposed to work stressors and aversive conditions for a long time are believed to become apathetic and passive even though they could change these adverse conditions. So far, scant number of studies has been conducted to investigate the antecedents and consequences of helplessness in organizational context; of those studies none of them has examined the joint effects of workload, WFC and lack of supervisor support that are argued to be prominent stressors in work life. The aim of this study is to address the gap in the literature by testing the main and moderating effects of work-family conflict, workload and supervisor support on learned helplessness.

2. The Effect of Workload, WFC and Supervisor Support on Learned Helplessness

Work family conflict has been defined as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible so that participation in one role is made more difficult by the participation in another role" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p.77). Although WFC is double-sided, many researchers have focused on the negative impact of work on family life (i.e., work to family interference), given the higher frequency of observing work-to-family interference as opposed to family to work interference (see Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992) and the strong impact of work to family interference on work outcomes (e.g., Innstrand et al, 2008; Kinnunen et al, 2006; Netemeyer, McMurrian & Boles, 1996) While acknowledging the fact that family life could influence work life and two spheres of life could have positive effects on each other, this study preferred to focus on the negative effects of work on family life. It is assumed that the responsibilities at work may interfere with the responsibilities at home, which could increase stress and conflict felt by individuals.

Previous research found work family conflict (WFC) associated with various individual and organizational outcomes such as absenteeism (e.g., Barling, MacEwen, Kelloway, & Higginbottom, 1994; Goff, Mount & Jamison, 1990; Hepburn & Barling, 1996; Kossek & Nichol, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1994; Thomas & Ganster, 1995), turnover intention (e.g., Burke, 1988) and work-life dissatisfaction (e.g., Bedian et al., 1988; Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Higgins, Duxbury, & Irving, 1992; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). "Scarcity Hypothesis" and "Conservation of Resources Theory" could be used to explain the effect of WFC on these aforementioned organizational and individual-level outcomes.

Scarcity hypothesis, as its name implies, rests on the assumption that resources like time, energy and attention are limited (Goode, 1960). People might feel stress and helplessness if these scarce resources are depleted because of the responsibilities assumed at work or family life. Responsibilities at work could make time, energy and attention scarce, which in turn could increase the prevalence of stress and stress-related reactions (i.e., burnout, turnover etc). According to Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), people strive to protect the resources and means necessary for achieving desired outcomes (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). People become stressed when these resources are (1) threatened, (2) lost or (3) when individuals invest in these resources, yet could not get anticipated return (Hobfoll, 1989 cited in Innstrand et al, 2008). According to COR theory, time and energy are two prominent resources that are needed to fulfill responsibilities at work and home. If work reduces time and energy that would be devoted to family life, this creates "**feeling of loss**", which could result in stress and conflict between work and family lives. Though not directly, previous studies supported the claims of Scarcity hypothesis and Conservation of Resources Theory by showing the effects of WFC on burnout and other stress-related symptoms (e.g., Ádám, Györffy, & Susánszky, 2008; Linzer et al, 2001). To our knowledge, there is no study that assesses the linkages between helplessness and WFC. Yet considering the association of helplessness with other stress-related outcomes such as burnout (e.g., McMullen & Krantz, 1988; Lee & Ashforth, 1993) and depression, one would expect WFC to play a role in the development of helplessness.

Hypothesis 1: Work family conflict is expected to increase learned helplessness felt by employees.

In addition to the effect of WFC, the effect of workload on helplessness is examined in this study. Workload could be conceptualized either quantitatively (i.e., the number of hours worked) or qualitatively (i.e., the perceptions of employees regarding the difficulty and volume of the tasks). Since perceptions are thought to affect employee's wellbeing and reactions to adverse conditions, the workload is conceptualized qualitatively in this study. Workload is assumed to be high when an individual feels that the tasks are difficult and more than s/he can accomplish. Considerable number of studies has been conducted to understand the effects of perceived workload on employees. In those studies, workload was found to increase emotional exhaustion, cynicism (e.g., Leiter & Maslach; 2009, Leiter, Gascón & Jarreta, 2010), depression and anxiety (e.g., Jex, Beehr & Roberts, 1992). Being responsible for the tasks that are difficult or more than that could be handled could increase uncertainty regarding the completion of the tasks or possibility of failure. Uncertainties and fear of failure could create pressure on employees and result in helplessness. In this study, workload is assumed to affect helplessness both directly and indirectly. Firstly, high workload is expected to lessen the time that could be devoted to family life thereby result in higher work-family conflict. In addition to affecting helplessness through its effects on WFC, workload is expected to increase helplessness by creating uncertainty and fear of failure, thereby putting more pressure on employees.

Hypothesis 2: Workload is expected to increase learned helplessness.

Hypothesis 3: Workload is expected to increase work family conflict felt by participants.

Apart from workload and WFC, this study investigates the impact of supervisor support on learned helplessness. Like workload, supervisor support could be defined differently. In one definition (Burke, Borucki & Hurley, 1992), perceptions regarding the concern shown by the supervisors or managers constitute supervisory support. According to another definition (Sarason & Duck, 2001; cited in Marin & Garcia-Ramirez, 2005), which could be adapted for supervisor support, support is "a mesh of social relationships and transactions whose function is to provide resources to allow adaptive coping to people in need of help". As seen from these definitions, supervisor support could include both functional (i.e., providing necessary resources, backing up the subordinates if necessary; listening and solving work-related problems) and emotional support (i.e., showing concern and listening non-work related problems). In this study, physicians are asked to evaluate their supervisors in terms of the functional support (i.e., support given about work-related matters) they provided.

Considerable number of studies has been conducted to determine the impact of supervisor support on well-being of employees. In those studies, supervisor support was found to decrease perceived stress, depression (Marin & Ramirez, 2005) and emotional exhaustion (Steinhardt, Dolbier, Gottlieb & McCalister, 2003). Apart from its direct effect, supervisor

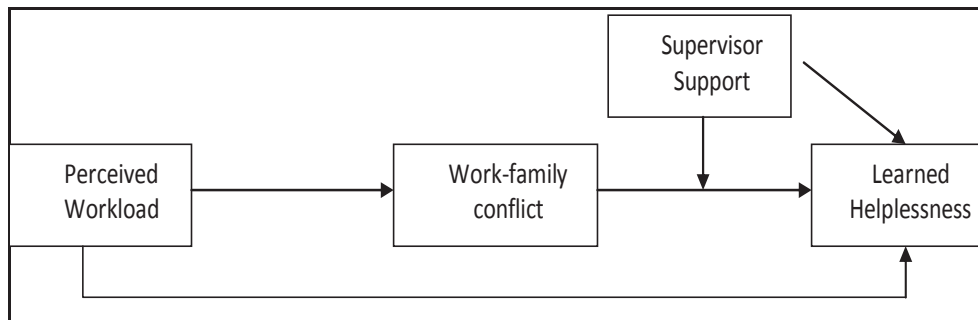
support was found to affect employee's wellbeing by alleviating the effects of work stressors on employees. In a number of studies, supervisor support was found to alleviate the affect of job stressors (i.e. workload and role conflict) on cynicism and emotional strain (e.g., Himle, Jayaratne & Thyness, 1989, Koeske & Koeske, 1989). The impact of supervisor support could be explained using the propositions of "Need Theories". According to these theories (i.e., Maslow's Need Hierarchy and Alderfer's ERG Theories), every people has a need to be loved, to be respected, to be appreciated and to be a member of a group. This need makes the support of supervisors invaluable for employees. Though not being studied before, considering the premises of need theories, one can expect supervisor support to decrease helplessness and alleviate the adverse effects of WFC on employees.

Hypothesis 4: Supervisor support is expected to decrease helplessness.

Hypothesis 5: Supervisor support alleviates the effect of WFC on helplessness

In sum, this study examines the main and moderating effects of workload, WFC and supervisor support on helplessness. Depicted in Figure 1, perceived workload is assumed to increase WFC, which in turn increases helplessness felt by employees. However, this mediation is expected to be moderated by supervisor support such that support reduces the negative impact of WFC. In addition to moderated mediation, both supervisor support and workload is expected to influence helplessness directly.

Figure 1: Proposed Model of Learned Helplessness.



3. Method

3.1. Research Design

Cross-sectional survey design was used in this study. After taking the permission of human resource manager and informed consent of participants, data were collected over a three-month period from May, 2011 to July 2011. In the data collection process, convenience sampling was utilized, meaning that only employees being at the branch during data collection joined the study. Before collecting data, informed consent was taken and participants were ensured about the confidentiality of their responses.

3.1.1. Participants

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed to white-collar employees working at a small size private bank operating in Turkey. One hundred fifty five questionnaires were returned by the respondents, constituting a 62 % response rate. Of the participants, 56 % were female. The average age of the participants was 32.28 years with a standard deviation of 6.49 years. The participants were highly educated such that approximately 72% of them had a university degree. The average tenure of the employees at the present company was 6.56 years, with a standard deviation of 5.96 years.

3.1.2. Instrumentation & Scoring Procedure

The questionnaire package used in this study had three sections. The first section included questions about demographic measures such as sex, age and education, and questions about employment status, namely, position tenure at the position and the total tenure. The second section composed of items that measure three work-related factors: supervisor

support, workload and work-family conflict. The last section included items related to learned helplessness. All the items were scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”.

Supervisor support was assessed with four items written for this study. The items measured participant’s perceptions regarding the support given by their supervisors about work-related matters (e.g., *When making job-related decision, I cannot get necessary support from my supervisor*). Participants having higher scores in this scale were assumed to be satisfied with the support provided by their immediate supervisors. The reliability of the support items was found to be satisfactory with alpha of .76.

Workload was measured with five items selected from the scale developed by Peterson et al (1993). Participants having higher scores were assumed to perceive their roles and responsibilities more than they could handle (e.g., *I feel overburdened in my role*). The scale has already been translated into Turkish by Derya (2008), so no changes were made. Internal consistency of items was found to be satisfactory (Cronbach Alpha = .85).

Work-family conflict was measured with five-items developed by Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian (1996). Items were intended to assess whether participants felt the responsibilities in their work lives interfere with the responsibilities of their family lives (e.g., *Demands of my family life interfere with my family life*). The higher scores in this scale indicated the higher degree of work-family interference and conflict. The reliability of the scale turned out to be high with alpha of 0.93.

Learned helplessness was assessed with twenty-four items written for this study. Participants having higher scores in this scale were assumed to feel that responding is futile, thereby show apathy and passive behavior in response to work-related matters (e.g., *I do not show extra effort to correct my mistakes because I know that I cannot do that*). Before used in this study, the validity and reliability of the scale was assessed with two pilot studies conducted with bank employees and a study conducted with medical doctors. With these studies, convergent and divergent validity was established. In this study, reliability of the scale was found to be satisfactory ($\alpha = .85$).

3.1.3. Analysis

Different analyses were used to test the hypotheses. Yet, before that, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to determine whether items measured the variables as intended. Based on the findings of CFA, factor scores were obtained and these scores were used to test the hypotheses. Moderated mediation analysis was carried out for testing the hypotheses. Significance of direct and interaction effects were assessed by looking at t values. After that, results were summarized in a graph.

4. Results

Before testing the hypotheses cited above, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to see whether the items were able to measure the constructs, as intended. Measurement model included all the items in the questionnaire package and assumed that each item was related to only one construct (namely workload, WFC, supervisor support). AMOS 17 (Arbuckle, 2008) was used to carry out CFA. The fit indices of the measurement model indicated that the existence of acceptable fit, which means the item and construct relations turned out to be as expected. In addition to that, all items loaded satisfactorily on their respective factors. Based on the results of CFA, workload, WFC and supervisor support were judged to be different factors, each of which could be measured with items in the questionnaire package. After CFA, mean scores of the items were calculated for workload, WFC, supervisor support, and helplessness and these scores were used for further analysis. The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are provided in Table 1. As seen from Table 1, workload and WFC are positively, while supervisor support is negatively related to helplessness. Except for support-marital status relations, the correlations between demographic and main variables of interest (i.e., workload, WFC, support & helplessness) on turned out to be insignificant.

Table 1: Correlations, Standard Deviations and Means

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Workload	2.94	.78	1								
2. WFC	3.13	1.09	.52**	1							
3. S. Support	4.10	.83	-.10	-.22**	1						
4. LH	2.68	.53	.50**	.29**	-.43**	1					
5. Gender	--	--	.14*	.08	-.09	-.06	--				

6. Age			-.08	.01	-.04	.02	.10	--			
7. M. Status	--	--	.07	.09	.18*	.01	-.32**	-.28**	--		
8. O.Tenure	6.56	5.96	.04	-.01	.09	.11	.02	.79**	-.24**	--	
9.T. Tenure	9.09	6.56	.14	-.02	.01	.02	.06	.91**	-.28**	.79**	---

Note: M: Mean; SD = Std. Deviation. Gender: 1 = Female; 2= Male; M.Status: 1= Married; 2 = Single; Tenure & Age measured in years.

As indicated before, WFC is assumed to mediate the relationship between workload and helplessness and perceived supervisor support is assumed to moderate the relationship between WFC and helplessness in this study. The moderated mediation model offered in this study fits the third model detailed by Preacher, Rucker and Hayes (2007). Therefore moderated mediation analysis was conducted following the algorithm written by these researchers. According to the results of this analysis (see Table 1), WFC predicted learned helplessness positively; meaning that employees experiencing conflict between their work and family lives tend to feel themselves more helpless ($B = .34$; $t(155) = 2.05$; $p < .05$). This finding supported Hypothesis 1. Like WFC, the effect of perceived workload on helplessness was found to be small but significant ($B = .14$; $t(155) = 2.59$; $p < .05$). Employees perceiving their workload more than they could handle regarded themselves more helpless; rendering hypothesis 2 supported.

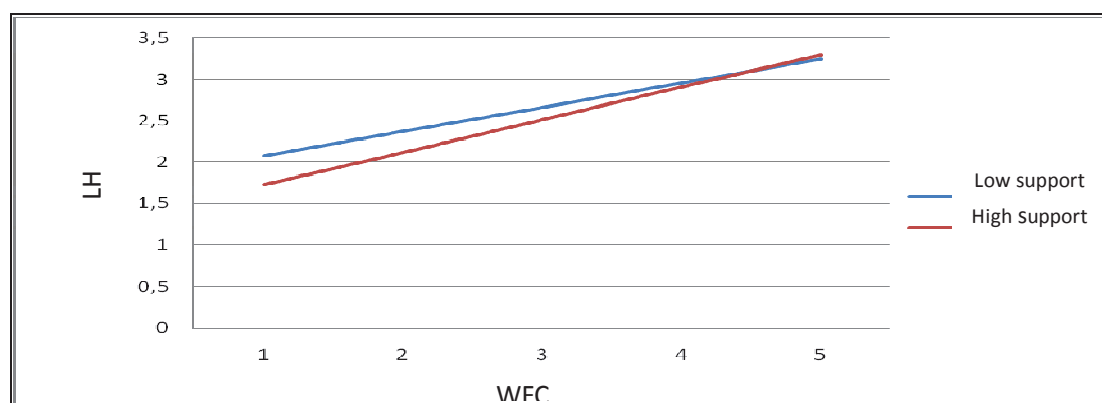
Table 2: Results of Moderated Mediation Analyses

	B	SE	t	Sig.
Workload	.14	.05	2.59	.01*
WFC	.34	.17	2.05	.04*
S. Support	-.54	.15	-3.69	.001**
WFC* S.Support	.13	.04	2.97	.003**

Besides predicting the level of helplessness, workload predicted WFC as well. High workload substantially increased the conflict between work and family lives ($B = .72$; $t(155) = 7.40$; $p < .01$). Looking at these results, workload perceptions seem to affect the perceptions about WFC, which in turn affect learned helplessness felt by employees. Since perceived workload affects helplessness both directly and indirectly, mediation through WFC is said to be partial.

According to the results, while workload and WFC were found to increase learned helplessness; supervisor support decreased helplessness felt by participants ($B = -.54$; $t(155) = -3.68$; $p < .01$). Since the interaction between WFC and supervisor support turned out to be significant, *supervisor support is judged to alleviate the effect of WFC on helplessness in line with hypothesis 5*. Overall, the results indicate that the effect of work-load on learned helplessness is partially mediated by WFC, yet this mediation is moderated by perceived supervisor support. When this moderation is graphed, the relationship among WFC, support and helplessness become more explanatory. As seen from figure 1, employees receiving support from their supervisors feel themselves less helpless, despite increasing level of WFC. Yet buffering effect of supervisor support seems to be effective up to certain level of WFC. Even though employees receive support from their supervisors, they tend to feel themselves helpless if they experience high level of work-family conflict.

Figure 2: Effect of WFC and supervisor support on learned helplessness



Discussion

This study shows that employees feel themselves helpless if they perceive their workload high and experience conflict between work and family lives. The effect of workload on helplessness was found to be quite strong because workload affected helplessness both directly and indirectly. Participants have a tendency to experience work-family conflict if they perceive their workload more than they could handle. This conflict seems to increase helplessness by changing their perceptions regarding the controllability of work outcomes. Participants start to feel that responding is futile and show apathy in response to adverse work conditions like high work-family conflict and workload.

The effect of workload on WFC and helplessness could be explained with Scarcity Hypothesis. If participants believe that their workload is high, they start to feel time pressure. The time allocated at work lessens the time that could be spent with family and this time pressure seems to increase helplessness. Considering the strong effect of workload on helplessness and WFC, it is reasonable to conclude that workload is one of the most important stressors in work life.

In addition to workload and work-family conflict, this study revealed the impact of supervisor support on learned helplessness. Participants believing that their supervisors do not give adequate support in work matters tend to feel more helplessness. Besides its direct effect, supervisor support seems to shape the perceptions regarding workload and WFC. Participants perceiving their supervisors unsupportive tend to experience more conflict between work and family lives. By solving work-related problems or at least by acknowledging their complaints, supervisors seem to alleviate the pressure on employees arising from adverse work conditions (i.e., workload and WFC). The direct and indirect effect of supervisor support on learned helplessness once again demonstrates the importance of interpersonal relations in work place. Yet one should remember that even the existence of high supervisory support cannot eliminate the adverse effects of job stressors. Conflict between work and family life, uncertainties and fear of failure resulting from workload seem to be detrimental to employee's wellbeing.

5.1. Limitations

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged while interpreting the findings and setting direction for future research. The limitations are related to the measurement of the variables, which may affect the generalizability and applicability of the results. The first limitation is about the way the data was obtained. The data of this research relied on self reports of the employees. This method was chosen because no other source could provide the detailed information about perceived workload, WFC and helplessness. However, the use of purely self-report methodology to obtain information is questionable because the ability of participants to evaluate their feelings and current situation in the work place can be biased by variety of factors such as social desirability and optimism. Therefore it is suggested to compare the results of this study with the results of studies collecting data from other sources such as supervisor or peers.

This study revealed the mediating effect of WFC on workload and learned helplessness relationships. Yet, there are other factors that may affect helplessness but not considered in this study. For example, negative affectivity or neuroticism may change the magnitude of relationship between work conditions helplessness by making people sensitive to adverse conditions. In fact, previous studies (e.g., Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) clearly demonstrated the confounding effect of neuroticism and negative affectivity such that these two variables increased the vulnerability of people to feel themselves burned-out and stressed in response to adverse work conditions. Therefore researchers are suggested to take into account individual characteristics and other job stressors that could affect employee's wellbeing.

5.2. Conclusions and recommendations.

This study revealed the adverse effect of workload and WFC on employee well-being. However it also revealed importance of good supervisor-subordinate relations for reducing the negative effect of job stressors. The findings of this study suggest interesting implications for research and practice. This study hopefully filled the gap in the literature by addressing seemingly under explored area, which is "learned helplessness in organizational context". By examining the direct and indirect effect of workload, WFC and supervisor support, it provides an idea about the possible antecedents of helplessness. Yet, we acknowledge the fact that there could be other work stressors, which could induce helplessness. We suggest researchers to investigate the impact of bureaucracy, lack of autonomy and perceived injustice on helplessness given the fact these factors have been shown to affect employees' well-being both directly and indirectly. Besides theory, the findings of this study suggest interesting implications for practice. Given the progressive nature of learned helplessness and its effects on absenteeism, turnover, and job dissatisfaction, planned interventions should be designed for the long term. Given the bureaucratic nature of banking industry, taking precautions to eliminate red tape

and paper work could reduce perceived workload substantially. Supervisors could redefine the work- responsibilities or implement rotation system to prevent employees from doing same repetitive and boring paper work. Besides, they could provide child care facilities and flexible work arrangements considering their responsibilities at home or at least permit employees to have a say in their work schedule in order to reduce work-family conflict. Moreover, being more considerate toward employees and providing them necessary resources, supervisors could lessen the impact of job stressors, if not eliminate.

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