Examining the Relationship between Teacher Role Stress and Turnover

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Abstract. This study examined the hypothesized linkages among teachers’ perceptions of the role stresses of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload and commitment, satisfaction, and intentions to leave their employing school. One hundred and seventy-eight teachers in four high schools in U.S. responded to survey questions designed to capture the above constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess whether the role stress items fit hypothesized constructs. Structural equation modeling results indicated that satisfaction and commitment are two mediators in the role stresses-intentions to leave relationship.

Keywords: Job satisfaction, Role stress, Turnover.

1. Introduction

The study of role stress has been directed toward enhancing understanding of the effects of the work environment on the well-being of individuals, particularly their physical and mental health [1]. In Schuler, Aldag, and Brief’s [2] evaluation of role conflict and role ambiguity research, they indicated that these two role stresses were usually associated with a number of negative work outcomes for individuals including “tension, absenteeism, low satisfaction, low job involvement, low expectancies and task characteristics with a low motivating potential” (p. 125).

2. Role Stress and Turnover

2.1. Role Stress

In discussing role stress research in the general organization literature, Beehr [3] suggested that the negative outcomes examined in such research often focus on those valued by the individual as opposed to the employing organization. For example, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload are viewed as highly consequential to aspects of individual well-being such as reduced self esteem and increased anxiety, tension, and dissatisfaction. Although role stress research has been helpful in identifying areas of incompatibility between the individual and the organization, it may hold limited implications for organizational managers. As Beehr [3] noted, a critical issue is “whether the organization or its agents care as much about the individual’s health as the individual does—and whether this health is as crucial to the well-being of the organization as it is to the individual” (p. 133). An implication of this argument is that outcomes of role stress that are valued by the organization become more often the focus of research.

2.2. Intent to Leave

One organizationally-valued outcome is the intention of an employee to leave an organization. Employee turnover appears logically related to the experience of role stress “given the simple idea that stressful occupations are painful and there will be a tendency to want to get away from them” [3]. Although turnover may be viewed as neutral or even positive from the organization’s perspective, as when an organization provides incentives for early retirement or seeks to terminate an employee, it is usually viewed as negative [3]. School organizations, for example, must bear the costs of recruiting and training new personnel [4]. Most

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studies have not examined actual turnover but have instead focused on intentions to leave the organization. Intentions to leave may not materialize in actual quitting behavior. However, the examination of antecedents of employees’ intentions to leave is considered important to improving understanding of the psychological process of employee withdrawal [5]. In Jackson and Schuler’s [6] meta-analysis, the role stress dimensions of role ambiguity and role conflict were weakly but positively associated with turnover intentions.

Research on the relationship between teacher role stresses and turnover intentions appears worthy of examination in schools for several reasons. First, as Reyes and Imber [7] pointed out, effective maximization of human resources is a goal of educational administrators. Unreasonable time demands, unclear expectations, and conflicting goals appear to adversely affect teachers’ work attitudes and their intentions to stay in their organizations [7]. Research on which role stresses affect turnover intentions may thus provide guidance for administrators to reduce particular stresses that contribute to turnover intentions. Second, the study of role stresses appears important in the context of the current school accountability movement. Observers [8] suggested that there exist both increased demands and a rapidly changing working environment in education contributing to a decrease in the ability “of teachers to adapt to these changes” (p. 135). In particular, demands stemming from student standardized testing appear to be placing teachers into a turbulent work environment where they are unsure whether they have set the correct priorities in their work [8]. Third, as Beehr [3] suggested, to the extent that role stresses contribute to the organizationally-valued outcome of turnover intentions, the topic appears critical important in the context of current reported teacher shortages in the U.S.

2.3. Research Questions

Four hypotheses associated with the three structural models were tested: the higher the perceptions of role stresses (role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload), the lower the perceived satisfaction and commitment (H1); satisfaction will mediate the relationship between role stresses and commitment (H2); commitment will mediate the relationship between role stresses and intentions to leave (H3); and the greater the commitment and satisfaction, the lower the intentions to leave the school organization (H4).

3. Method

3.1. Sample

Data were collected from 178 teachers employed in four moderately-sized comprehensive high schools (grades 9 through 12) in two neighboring counties in a southern coastal region of California. Table 1 depicts the numbers of students, percent of students receiving free and/or reduced-priced lunches, percent of English language learners, numbers of teachers, and percent of certified teachers from the four schools. The high schools were selected in order to obtain a set of schools that was as similar as possible on school demographic characteristics including size (number of students), suburban location, and socioeconomic status indicators.

3.2. Procedure

Data collection occurred during the 2003-04 academic year. After obtaining permission to survey teachers, we attended school faculty meetings to describe the study and distribute packets including a cover letter, assurance of teacher confidentiality, and survey questionnaires along with directions for returning the survey (usually to the school building union representative).

As noted, one hundred and seventy-eight teachers (52% of the 343 teachers) returned usable questionnaires. Response rates ranged from a high of 61 percent (School 3) to a low of about 31 percent (School 4). The relatively low percentage of responses in School 4 owed to the collection of surveys at the final faculty meeting of the year, attended by about two-thirds of the faculty. However, of those present, approximately one-half completed questionnaires. The fairly high proportion of older, experienced teachers is not unusual. A large increase in teacher hiring in California in the 1970s produced a large current contingent of older teachers.
4. Result

Based on the results of the assessment of the hypothesized structural relationships among variables using SEM, we can answer the research questions posed by hypotheses 1-4 as follows. For H1, we found that the higher the perceptions of two role stresses, the lower the perceived satisfaction and commitment. Specifically, the more teachers perceive role ambiguity and role conflict, the lower their perceived satisfaction and their perceived commitment. However, this hypothesis is not supported for role overload. Role overload does not exert influence over teachers’ perceived satisfaction and commitment. For H2, satisfaction mediates the relationship between role stresses and commitment. Specifically, satisfaction only mediates the effect of role ambiguity and role conflict on commitment. For H3, commitment mediates the relationship between role stresses and intentions to leave. For H4, the results showed that the greater the commitment and satisfaction, the lower the intentions to leave the school organization. H 3 and 4 were supported through the path from role ambiguity and role conflict $\rightarrow$ satisfaction $\rightarrow$ commitment $\rightarrow$ intentions to leave.

5. Conclusion

In sum, the study’s findings suggested that alleviating the role stress dimensions of role ambiguity and conflicting demands, rather than high and burdensome time demands, appeared most critical for increasing teacher satisfaction and commitment, and intentions to remain at one’s school. Further efforts directed toward examining the effects of different types of role stresses at different educational levels may prove beneficial toward furthering understanding of how the most important aspects of role stress can be reduced for teachers as well as their employing organizations.

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7. References


