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Do the Factors That Make You Stressed at Work Depend on How Old You Are?

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Synopsis

In this study, we examined how different job resources – skill variety, a good relationship with the supervisor, and fair treatment – affect employee stress, and how these may be especially important for older workers. We used a sample of 243 U.S. construction workers over a 12-month period to examine these questions. We found that the absence of specific resources – a job that allows the worker to apply a wide variety of skills, having a good relationship with their boss, and being treated fairly – had an especially detrimental effect on the stress levels of older workers compared to their younger colleagues. Our findings extend and integrate theories of workplace stress and aging and point to what organizations can do to support workers of all ages.

Introduction and Background

The workforce is aging across industrialized countries, and people are working longer than ever before. This is due to a number of factors, from financial need to improvements in healthcare and extended lifespans (Bloom, 2011; Hertel & Zacher, 2015.). In addition, some people may choose to work longer for increased stimulation and social interaction. At the same time, many societies are encouraging people to work longer for the financial health of retirement systems. This “greying” of the workforce has led

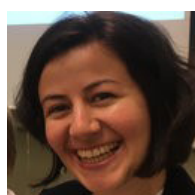
organizational researchers to examine the needs of workers at different life stages. This includes the development of workplace interventions for older workers (Truxillo, 2015) and examining how to redesign jobs to improve older worker health and wellbeing (e.g., Truxillo, 2012).

Although there is extensive research and theory regarding how different resources at work can help support employees (Halbesleben et al., 2014), it has not been thoroughly integrated with the literature on how people age in their jobs (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Carstensen et al., 1999). The present study examines three established job resources – the opportunity to apply a variety of skills at work, having a good relationship with your leader, and being treated fairly by an employer – might be especially beneficial to older workers in terms of reduced stress.

Issues and Questions Considered

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory describes how different resources within the individual or from the context (e.g., the job, the organization) can affect a person’s stress. Research generally finds that providing more resources to workers decreases their stress. In other words, the theory is well-supported. However, researchers have noted that COR theory does not take into account that different people, including people in different age groups and life stages, may need different

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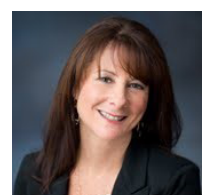
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resources at work. Therefore, in this study we integrated COR theory with two well-established theories of aging.

First, socioemotional selectivity theory emphasizes that people focus on their time remaining in life. Younger people see their time as open-ended, whereas older people see their time as limited, causing them to focus on positive social interactions. Second, selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) theory emphasizes that adaptive aging involves people selecting to perform different tasks and utilize different skills to compensate for age-related losses.

In the present study, we integrated COR theory with lifespan development theory to propose three research questions. First, we argued that because older workers have accumulated a wide range of skills over their careers, they will benefit from the opportunity to apply those skills. Second, we believed that social interaction and support from the supervisor would especially benefit older workers in terms of reduced stress because it would give them the support and social interaction they desire. Third, we proposed that fair treatment from the organization would especially support the needs of older workers to build positive and socially meaningful relationships at work.

We used a sample of construction workers to examine these issues. This is important because construction workers are an under-studied population in this literature. Moreover, older construction workers are considered a vulnerable group, such that understanding the factors that employers can use to reduce their stress is particularly important.

Methodology

We used a sample of 243 construction workers in the Pacific Northwestern US. The data were collected as part of a larger intervention study funded by the U.S. National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH; grant number U19OH010154). The focus of the intervention was to improve the safety, health, and wellbeing of construction workers. The sample was 90% male, and the age range was 24-64 (mean age 43.53, SD=9.56.) We measured the three resources of skill variety (discretion), relationship with the supervisor (leader-

member-exchange, or "LMX"), and perceived fairness at Time 1 via a survey. We also measured demographic variables at Time 1. We measured employees' overall stress one year later via a survey at Time 2.

Outcomes and Findings

We used moderated regression to examine our research questions. As expected, we found that for all of these construction workers – regardless of their age – increased skill variety was associated with lower stress. We also found that a good relationship with the boss and fair treatment by the employer were associated with reduced stress. What was novel was the examination of how these three factors were more important for the stress of the older construction workers. Specifically, lower skill variety, poorer supervisor relationships, and lower fairness were especially detrimental to the stress levels of the older workers.

These findings have implications for research on workplace stress. Specifically, this study expands the stress literature by illustrating the importance one factor, chronological age, that may explain why some people experience more stress than others, even within the same work environment. In doing so, this study integrates theories of stress with theories of human aging. It also uses a robust study design to examine these issues over time. The findings have practical implications in terms of highlighting the factors that may be especially detrimental to older workers, who make up an increasing share of today's workforce. These findings may also provide guidance for supervisor training and workplace interventions developed to support an aging workforce. However, it is important to note that regardless of their age, all workers should be treated equally and provided with the same opportunities.

This study should be replicated in different countries and among different employee types. In addition, other stress measures, such as physical health, should be measured in future studies. Still, the present findings expand our understanding of the factors that affect the experience of work stress among different age groups and ways to support workers across the lifespan such as through reduced hours.

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