

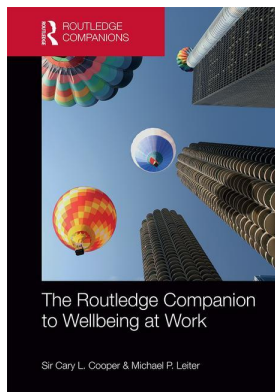
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### **Differentiating challenge, hindrance, and threat in the stress process**

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# Differentiating challenge, hindrance, and threat in the stress process

*Ben J. Searle and Michelle R. Tuckey*

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## Introduction

Chris, Harper, and Taylor are all sales staff at a software company. They all work long hours in order to reach their monthly sales targets. Today, their new boss, Sam, announces that they need to prepare for a formal performance review. This announcement has a big impact on all three salespeople, but each one is affected in a different way.

Taylor's reaction is to worry. The company has been struggling recently due to a new competitor in their market, and there's some risk that staff will be laid off to improve financial performance. As Sam is new to the company, Taylor is concerned that past employee achievements may be ignored. Having recently lost a big client, Taylor fears this may become the focus of the review. As a result, Taylor finds it more and more difficult to concentrate as the day of the review approaches, making it harder and harder to perform well.

Chris's reaction is very different. The company's recent difficulties have contributed to some staff departures, which have in turn created some new opportunities for promotion. Chris sees this performance review as an opportunity to highlight personal strengths that can help the company achieve its goals, and to then discuss how to achieve a promotion. Reflecting on recent sales performance, Chris focuses on successes and this contributes to a sense of confidence that the performance review will go well. This confidence motivates Chris to perform well in the days leading up to the review.

Chris's and Taylor's different reactions to the same situation reflect two sides to the stress process. Taylor's reaction is characterized by an interpretation (or "appraisal") of the situation as a *threat*, the perceived risk of personal harm and loss. Threat appraisals influence Taylor's emotion (largely negative), cognition (preoccupation with risks, negative events and potential negative outcomes) and behavior. Chris's reaction, by contrast, is characterized by *challenge* appraisal, the perception of opportunities for personal gain or personal growth. This focus on the situation's opportunities has implications for Chris's emotion (largely positive), cognition (focus on positive events and outcomes), and behavior.

Although threat and challenge are two important ways that the situation can be appraised, they are not the only ways that people can interpret a high-stakes situation. Harper's response to news of the performance review is different again: frustration. "What a stupid waste of time!" thinks

Harper, “A performance review, right when we’re trying to maximize our sales to keep this company in business. This is such a nuisance.” Harper delays preparation for the review until the last minute, and goes into the review feeling annoyed.

Harper has interpreted the situation in a qualitatively different way from the responses of Chris or Taylor. Unlike Taylor, Harper is not concerned about the personal risks of being reviewed, although these employees are alike in that their perception of the event (the review) is quite negative. Unlike Chris, Harper does not consider personal opportunities presented by the performance review, although Chris and Harper are both concerned with supporting the company’s goals. Harper has appraised the review as a *hindrance*, perceiving it to be an obstruction to the accomplishment of personally relevant goals.

In this chapter, we outline the conceptual basis for differentiating the stress process into the three components of challenge, hindrance, and threat. We identify the distinguishing characteristics of these three components, identify typical job demands associated with each, and present research that identifies different consequences of challenges, hindrances, and threats.

### **Multidimensional models of work stressors**

The key proposition underpinning job characteristics models of occupational stress is that two core aspects of the job – known as job demands and job resources – are the primary determinants of employee psychological (i.e., cognitive and emotional) health and wellbeing. Broadly speaking, job demands are aspects of the work and work environment that require sustained effort, while job resources help workers to reduce job demands, attain goals, and/or promote learning and skill development (see de Jonge & Dormann, 2003).

The most well-known model of this type is Karasek’s (1979) Job Strain model, also known as the Job Demands–Control (JD–C) model, which outlines the main and additive effects of two psychosocial job attributes: psychological job demands (i.e., aspects of the work that present potential sources of psychological stress) and job decision latitude (i.e., autonomy to make decisions and discretion to utilize skills in order to manage job demands). Working in a job where psychological demands are high but decision latitude is low is considered to be “high strain” because there is limited possibility for workers to take decisive actions and/or utilize their skills to manage the stressors they face. Jobs that are high on both dimensions are classified as “active,” considered to be challenging and motivating and support employees to learn new behavior patterns, whereas those that are low on both are classified as “passive” as they lack stimulation and possibilities for control. Finally, “low strain” jobs are those low on psychological demands in combination with high decision latitude. Later, lack of social support was included as an additional risk factor, exacerbating the negative effects of high strain jobs (Karasek, Triantis, & Chaudhry, 1982).

Another influential theory has been Siegrist’s Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996, 1998). Rather than the task profile, this model considers the reciprocity between work-related efforts and rewards. According to the theory, the degree to which the efforts injected into work are rewarded by valued, socially defined rewards (such as money, esteem, job security, and career prospects) influences health and wellbeing. Jobs wherein workers experience a lack of reciprocity between costs (i.e., efforts) and gains (i.e., rewards) create strain, which is exacerbated for “overcommitted” employees (i.e., those who feel excessive work-related commitment together with a high need for approval).

Both of these theories have proved valuable, being easy to understand while also highlighting key working conditions that influence work-related health and wellbeing, with clear implications for workplace interventions. However, simplifying job characteristics into either demands or

effort on the one hand, and either control or rewards on the other hand, fails to capture the complexity of occupational stress or the variety of potential stress prevention and intervention points. For many years, in the absence of an explicit theoretical model, research into other types of job demands and job resources was somewhat neglected. The more recent Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) builds on the JDC and ERI models to address this concern.

The JD-R model predicts that in terms of employee wellbeing, job demands are harmful and job resources are helpful. By highlighting job demands and job resources as core factors in the stress process, and by encompassing generic processes linking demand and resources to health and wellbeing, the JD-R model recognizes that occupations have unique risk and protective factors representing the two broader categories (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to the model, in a process of *health impairment*, energy is depleted over time in response to excessive or prolonged demands, leading to a range of psychological and physiological costs (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). By contrast, job resources are the core ingredients of the *motivational* process that fosters work engagement, wherein resources stimulate personal growth, learning, and development both intrinsically, by meeting basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, relatedness, and competence; see Ryan & Deci, 2000), and extrinsically, by enabling the completion of work goals (Bakker, Demerouti, Taris, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001).

Importantly, the JD-R model elaborated on former job design models by incorporating a much wider variety of potentially motivating work resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007): in addition to autonomy, skill utilization, and rewards, the model also embraced such job characteristics as social support and coworker support (which were later additions to the JDC model; Karasek et al., 1982) as well as performance feedback, task identity, and task significance (which were part of the Job Characteristics model, a theory of task-based motivation by Hackman & Oldham, 1975). It should also be recognized that compared to earlier models, it also incorporated a wider range of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), as shown in Figure 3.1. These extended from the earlier focus on workload (Karasek, 1979) to a concept of demands that also included broader conceptualizations of task demands (e.g., task complexity and change), as well as social and emotional demands (e.g., bullying/harassment), and even organizational and environmental factors (e.g., noise and other distractions).

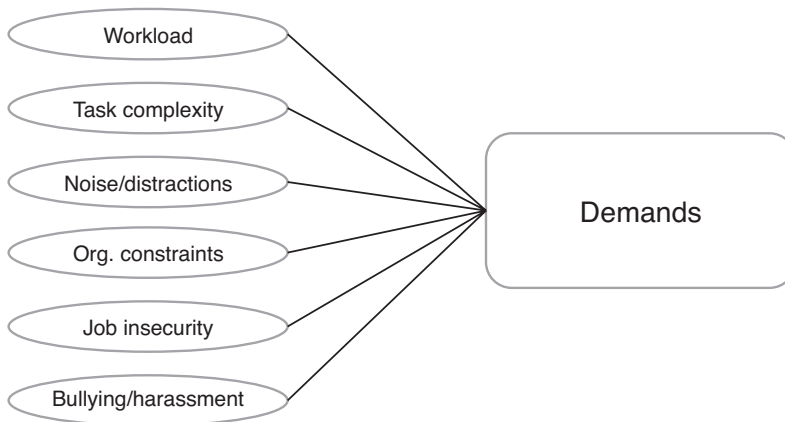


Figure 3.1 Three models categorizing job demands: the JD-R model

### Different types of job demands: challenges and hindrances

Although distinctive risk and resilience factors are recognized with the JD-R model, the original model did not distinguish among qualitatively different types of job demands. Rather, all demands were considered potentially harmful, with the potential to deplete energy and incur psychological costs with ongoing exposure (Demerouti et al., 2001). Yet job demands can have positive effects, for instance when they allow workers to utilize and develop their abilities (de Jonge & Dormann, 2003). Recognizing the idea that not all job demands have the same types of effects, Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, and Boudreau (2000) identified two distinct types of stress in organizational settings: challenge stress and hindrance stress. Challenge stress involves “work-related demands or circumstances that, although potentially stressful, have associated potential gains for individuals,” whereas hindrance stress arises from “work-related demands or circumstances that tend to constrain or interfere with an individual’s work achievement” (Cavanaugh et al., 2000, p. 68). Cavanaugh and colleagues used this approach to categorize job demands as either challenges or hindrances, as shown in Figure 3.2.

While Cavanaugh’s initial approach considered the stress caused by challenging demands compared to the stress caused by hindrance demands (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), the Challenge-Hindrance framework quickly became a popular way to aggregate measures of perceived job demands into two clusters. Meta-analytic evidence supports this approach. While challenge job demands are positively associated with exhaustion, they are also positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007), and performance (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005), and negatively related to turnover intentions and behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2007). The meta-analyses show the opposite pattern of relationships for hindrance demands, except that hindrances have a greater negative effect on exhaustion than do challenges.

Recognizing the inconsistent results concerning the relationship between job demands and work engagement, Crawford, LePine, and Rich (2010) integrated the Challenge-Hindrance distinction to advance the JD-R model. They proposed that hindrance demands would be negatively related to engagement, because the frustration experienced when trying to overcome blockages should lead to withdrawal of energy and active coping efforts. Conversely, they expected challenge demands to have a positive relationship with work engagement because the associated positive emotions and active coping behaviors should stimulate greater investment of

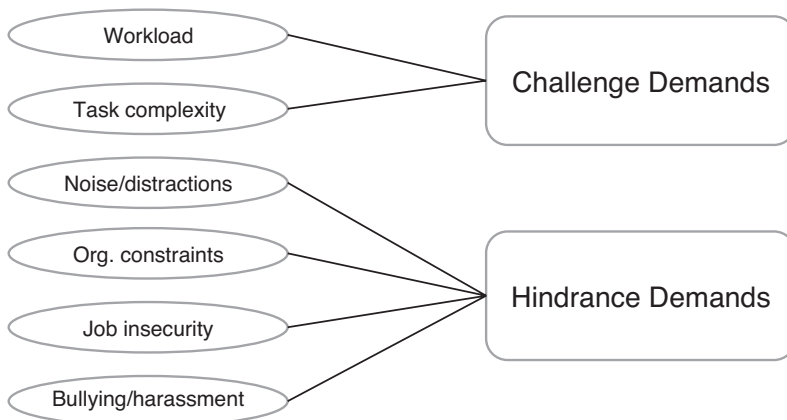


Figure 3.2 Three models categorizing job demands: the Challenge-Hindrance framework

the self and increased job-related effort in response to such demands. The results of their meta-analysis supported these predictions, showing in addition that both types of demands had a positive relationship with burnout. Challenge job demands had a net positive effect, however, when their positive influence on work engagement was considered. On the whole, the meta-analysis showed that differentiating between challenge demands and hindrance demands improved the overall model fit and consistency of the model, compared to the simpler differentiation of job characteristics into demands versus resources. This finding supported the notion that even if demands and resources influence different psychological systems (as indicated by the JD-R model), different types of demands may also have their impacts via different systems.

Yet if lots of job characteristics can collectively be described as demands because they require sustained effort (Demerouti et al., 2001), and if these job demands typically lead to exhaustion, then why should we see differences in their effects? To answer this question, we need to look at the stress process more closely, and consider the role of appraisal.

### Appraisal and the stress process

The evolutionary advantages of the stress process were best popularized by Selye (1950). His model, the General Adaptation Syndrome, describes stress in terms of a system whereby an animal facing a threat is more likely to survive if the threat stimulus triggers an adaptive response: adrenaline released into the bloodstream causing the reallocation of physiological resources to facilitate survival behaviors (commonly known as the “fight or flight response”). Selye commented on how this process survives in modern humans, and is experienced in the presence of stimuli that are not actually life threatening, precisely because the process provides an animal with a better chance of survival if it can be initiated in response to a broad range of possible threats.

For many years, Selye’s central message was on the downside of the stress response in humans (Szabo, Tache, & Somogyi, 2012). Much of Selye’s research preceding and following the description of the General Adaptation Syndrome model demonstrated that long-term exposure to threats, provoking repeated or continuous activation of (what became known as) the sympathetic nervous system, can cause significant harm. However, many years after his seminal works on stress and its negative consequences, Selye was influenced by emerging work by other scholars such as Levi (1971) who had identified that even though the experience of stress is often negative, it was also true in some cases that the experience of stress is positive. This led Selye (1974) to differentiate the physiological stress response into two subjective experiences: “distress” (negative) versus “eustress” (positive).

But what determines whether a situation will provoke eustress or distress? This was not something that could be explained with Selye’s original model, which focused on physiological phenomena; more psychological explanations were required. The most influential of these was Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) Transactional model. According to this model, we constantly process stimuli in our environment, with particular attention to how situations and events are likely to affect us personally. If the personal stakes seem high, there is a great deal of difference between expecting the situation to result in harm or loss (threat appraisal), and expecting it to result in growth or gain (challenge appraisal). This initial judgment of whether the situation contains something bad (or good), known as primary appraisal, can happen so fast it can be considered preconscious (e.g., Bradley, Mogg, & Lee, 1997) and can defy conscious awareness. Even though the appraisal process can be quick, it can have profound implications.

As predicted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and as demonstrated in empirical studies, whether a situation is appraised positively or negatively can influence emotions, cognitions, and behaviors, especially those cognitions and behaviors associated with coping (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1985;

McCrae, 1984; Searle & Auton, 2015). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that different appraisals stimulated different emotional states, whereas Lazarus (1991) argued that appraisals affected the goals of coping efforts (e.g., making the most of an opportunity versus minimizing risk of harm). This means that two people exposed to the same situation can both experience an intense stress response, but their feelings, thoughts, and actions may differ substantially if they have appraised the situation differently.

## The Challenge-Hindrane-Threat model

Despite challenge and threat being the two core types of primary stress appraisal in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional model, theory, and methods within the field of occupational stress research have not captured threat when differentiating job demands, instead applying the categories of challenge and hindrance (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Some researchers have mapped these two categories onto the primary appraisals from the Transactional model, explicitly equating hindrance with threat (e.g., Lepine et al., 2005, pp. 765, 767; van den Broeck, de Cuyper, de Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010, pp. 738, 741; Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011, p. 506). However, although the notion of hindrances captures some of the "negative" aspects of work-related demands, there is a strong case for treating threats as a distinct from hindrances.

To begin with, threat and hindrance are defined differently. Threats are defined in terms of anticipated personal harm or loss (i.e., expecting something bad to happen; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hindrances are defined in terms of obstacles to achievement (i.e., expecting something good *not* to happen, or at least to be delayed or made more difficult to obtain; Cavanaugh et al., 2000). We do not believe that these concepts are equivalent.

Although hindrances were not mentioned in the original work on the Transactional model, Lazarus later reconsidered this position, stating "Frustration is often treated as an emotion, but like challenge and threat, I regard it as an appraisal" (1991, p. 827). Reflecting on this view of frustration as a third form of primary appraisal (distinct from challenge or threat), and considering how frustration (defined in the Oxford Dictionaries as "the prevention of the progress, success, or fulfilment of something,") has long been linked to obstacles to self-relevant goals (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), we came to equate frustration with hindrance appraisal (Tuckey, Searle, Boyd, Winefield, & Winefield, 2015).

This distinction can be applied within models that categorize job demands. We have argued that the existing construct of *hindrance demands*, those that are commonly appraised as interfering with the achievement of personal or professional goals (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), can be differentiated from *threat demands*, "work-related demands or circumstances that tend to be directly associated with personal harm or loss" (Tuckey et al., 2015, p. 133), as shown in Figure 3.3. Threat demands, such as workplace bullying or job insecurity, can involve undermining basic psychological needs or thwarting professional self-identity. Threat demands may have more serious consequences than hindrance demands, because anticipated negative personal impact is more closely aligned with the evolutionary bases for stress than is anticipated delays to goal accomplishment.

To capture the potential for anticipated harm or loss to the self (threats) that can arise from certain types of job demands, as distinct from obstacles to (hindrance) and opportunities for (challenges) goal attainment, we recently proposed the Challenge-Hindrane-Threat model of occupational stress (Tuckey et al., 2015). Our conceptual framing and empirical work demonstrated that threat job demands and threat appraisal can be distinguished from challenge and hindrance job demands and appraisals, and that each type of demand and appraisal plays a unique role in predicting employee psychological health and wellbeing.

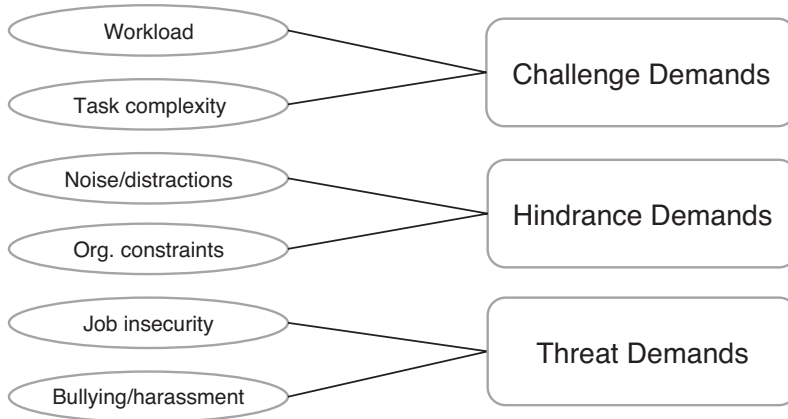


Figure 3.3 Three models categorizing job demands: the Challenge-Hindrance-Threat model

### A study of stressors

The first study we conducted (Tuckey et al., 2015, Study 1) explored job demands in the retail industry considered threatening, hindering, or challenging by way of their commonly held meanings. We hypothesized that threat job demands would be positively associated with psychological distress given the inherent negative expectations for future outcomes, the associated spectrum of negative emotions (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and the threat to maintaining a positive self-image and feeling positively regarded by others (see Semmer, McGrath, & Beehr, 2005). Exhaustion should also arise, as workers invest more and more energy to avoid the initial threat and manage the negative emotions that follow (i.e., a positive relationship between threat demands and exhaustion). Finally, we expected threat job demands to lead to disengagement from work, evidenced by a negative association with dedication to work, as workers attempt to manage the negative emotions and consequences rather than the demand itself. Based on findings and reasoning similar to that discussed earlier, we expected hindrance job demands to be associated with greater levels of exhaustion and distress, and lower levels of work dedication. Finally, we anticipated challenge job demands to be negatively related to psychological distress, positively related to exhaustion, and positively related to work dedication.

We tested the hypotheses using a two-wave survey design, with data from 609 retail workers, 220 of whom responded six months later. Drawing on pilot interview data, we operationalized threat job demands as extreme customer-related social stressors, emotional demands, and role conflict; hindrance job demands as role ambiguity; and challenge job demands in terms of task complexity and pressure. A confirmatory factor analysis provided support for the proposed three-dimensional Challenge-Hindrance-Threat representation of job demands, as compared with a series of alternative models (e.g., where the covariance of hindrances and threats was constrained to equal 1). Results of the structural equation modelling were consistent with our hypotheses, which predicted threat job demands to be both distressing and exhausting, as well as having the potential to undermine dedication to work. We also found that even though challenge demands are mildly exhausting, when considered simultaneously with threats and hindrances they may have the potential to reduce distress and are associated with increased dedication. There were mixed results regarding hindrances, indicating that they may not be associated with exhaustion



and distress when the effect of threat job demands is accounted for. This does not mean that hindrance demands are without negative consequences; rather, it shows that for the outcomes we examined, such consequences were negligible relative to the powerful effects of threat stressors. Overall, this study indicates that threat job demands are conceptually and empirically distinct from challenges and hindrances, and suggests that they have a unique influence on employee health and wellbeing outcomes.

### *A study of appraisals*

Another study we conducted (Tuckey et al., 2015, Study 2) explored threats, hindrances, and challenges by way of individual appraisals of daily work experiences. This approach differed from the stressor study described in the last section by addressing a number of problems with stressor-categorization research, including:

- 1 Placing demands into categories (i.e., challenges, hindrances, or threats), even if done following consultation with representatives of an identifiable occupational group, assumes that everyone within that group appraises a given demand in the same way. Yet a key feature of the Transactional model is that different people can and do appraise the same situation differently. By measuring appraisals directly, we allow for a demand to be associated with different appraisals by different people.
- 2 Placing demands into categories, while intuitive, assumes that each demand can fit into only one category. Yet following Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) approach to appraisal, it would be possible for an event or situation to be appraised simultaneously as both challenging and threatening. By measuring appraisals directly, we allow for a demand to be associated with multiple appraisals (or none).
- 3 Placing demands into categories, and then looking at the effects of demand categories on wellbeing, assumes that differential effects on wellbeing are due to the appraisals underlying each category. Yet there may be other factors driving effects of stressor categories on wellbeing, such as physical impacts or associated resource availability, that do not have their effects via an appraisal mechanism. By measuring appraisals directly, we can determine the extent to which effects of demands on wellbeing are mediated by appraisals.

Some demands, such as workload or time pressure, can be appraised in a variety of ways: as challenging, as hindering, or as both challenging and hindering (e.g., Searle & Auton, 2015; Webster et al., 2011). Searle and Auton (2015) showed that time pressure (typically considered a prototypical challenge demand; Widmer, Semmer, Kaelin, Jacobshagen, & Meier, 2012) influences mood and coping behavior differently depending on whether it is appraised as a challenge (which led to enthusiasm and problem-focused coping) or a hindrance (which led to anger and venting). This pattern indicates that stress appraisal plays a critical role where there is scope for multiple interpretations of a demand's potential impact.

However, other demands are predominantly appraised in only one way (e.g., responsibility as a challenge, not a hindrance; Webster et al., 2011). Does this mean that in such situations, individual appraisals are less important? Possibly not, since there is still room for individuals to vary in the extent to which they see the demand as challenging, hindering or threatening.

In Study 2 reported by Tuckey et al. (2015), we chose to investigate employees' appraisals of some prototypical challenge, hindrance, and threat demands, to determine the role of appraisal in the effects of those demands on wellbeing states. We hypothesized that skill demands would be primarily appraised as a challenge, since the pressure to apply multiple skills at work not only

helps to maintain those skills, it can also enhance them, leading to a sense of achievement and growth. We expected organizational constraints (e.g., bureaucratic requirements or procedural barriers; Peters & O'Connor, 1980) to be primarily appraised as a hindrance, since they are typically expressed as obstacles to tasks and goals. We also expected role conflict (e.g., managing different expectations from different stakeholders) to be primarily appraised as a threat, since it can impact one's sense of personal identity, it can involve higher levels of personal evaluation and criticism, and it is commonly associated with high levels of anxiety (Hamner & Tosi, 1974).

Regarding appraisals, we sought to demonstrate that appraisals of hindrance and threat, as well as challenge, could be differentiated empirically. We also expected that challenge appraisals would be associated with more positive wellbeing states, whereas hindrance and threat appraisals would be associated with more negative wellbeing states.

We tested the hypotheses using an experiential survey, also known as a diary study, a multilevel approach that allowed us to examine the changeable aspects of work demands, stress appraisals, and wellbeing states within-participants rather than just between-participants. This involved 207 student-sourced employees (of 268 who completed the first survey) completing an online survey daily for three days. Instead of assessing how each stressor was appraised (although we have done that in other research, e.g., Searle & Auton, 2015), this study simply asked participants to evaluate each day's overall experiences in terms of challenge, hindrance, and threat. In this way, we could see how day-to-day levels of perceived demands were associated with day-to-day levels of each appraisal type. Appraisals were measured using the scales of challenge and hindrance appraisal developed by Searle and Auton (2015), while threat appraisals were measured using a scale described by Feldman, Cohen, Hamrick, and Lepore (2004).

Multilevel confirmatory factor analysis not only demonstrated that appraisals of challenge, hindrance, and threat could be differentiated from one another, but also showed that this three-factor model of appraisal measurement was superior to a two-factor model that combined hindrances with threats. This showed that our appraisal measure was capable of differentiating between seeing one's daily work experiences as threatening and seeing those experiences as hindering one's achievements.

Analyzing the multilevel data via structural equation modeling revealed that although there was variation both between- and within-participants, each of the three demands studied was associated with only one form of stress appraisal: skill demands with challenge appraisal, organizational constraints with hindrance appraisal, and role conflict with threat appraisal, just as predicted. This pattern suggests that some demands are consistently associated with a particular form of stress appraisal, but nevertheless there are some differences in how demands impact on appraisal of the day's work experiences, both between people and within people from one day to the next.

Moving on, our results showed that our participants experienced different wellbeing states depending on how they appraised the day's work experiences. Those with greater challenge appraisal reported higher levels of activated positive affect (high-intensity positive moods such as enthusiasm and excitement). Those with greater hindrance appraisal reported higher levels of fatigue. Those with greater threat appraisal reported higher levels of anger and anxiety. In this way, the results showed that wellbeing outcomes can also be differentiated on the basis of daily stress appraisals.

Finally, results showed that the effect of skill demands on activated positive affect was largely mediated by challenge appraisal, and that the effect of role conflict on anger was partially mediated by threat appraisal. These results highlight why stress appraisals are a sound basis for categorizing demands, but they also demonstrate that categorization alone may be insufficient to capture the mechanisms underlying effects of demands on wellbeing. Much seems to depend on the way that individuals appraise their situations. However, there are many practical advantages

of relatively simple models of job design; in the absence of evidence on individual appraisals, we believe that there is great merit in differentiating work demands into challenges, hindrances, and threats.

### *Practical implications*

It is clear from the body of work on challenges, hindrances, and more recently threats, that differentiating types of job demands can have important implications for our collective understanding of the occupational stress process in terms of why, how, and which stressors and appraisals contribute to positive and negative health and wellbeing outcomes. In practice, understanding the nature and effects of different types of job demands and stress appraisals is crucial to ensure that organizational prevention efforts are grounded in evidence and focused in the right direction, and to reveal intervention strategies wherein employees can be active agents in maintaining their wellbeing.

Clearly, not all demands are equal. Challenge demands appear to have a positive impact on employees, and it is tempting to approach morale problems by increasing challenges through stretch goals and challenging assignments. However, there are some suggestions that the benefits of challenge demands may be limited at very high levels of challenge, or when experienced alongside high levels of hindrance demands. This means that managers need to be careful, as it cannot be assumed that increasing challenge demands will automatically improve employee wellbeing.

Rather, based on our research, we recommend that threats should be the focal point for managing risks associated occupational health and wellbeing. In saying this, we do not mean to suggest that hindrances should be ignored. In an ideal world, managers should seek to eliminate, substantially reduce, or otherwise find ways to mitigate both threat demands and hindrance demands, to provide employees with the best environment for tackling challenges. However, our evidence to date suggests that of the three types of demands, threats may be the most serious in terms of their effects, and should therefore be considered the highest priority for investigation and action.

There are many ways that action could be taken towards management of threat demands. The provision of adequate staffing and appropriate training could go a long way towards minimizing customer-related social stressors and emotional demands, for example. Training would also be useful to prevent or minimize role conflict, as would the implantation of effective work systems and team structures to support the clear and smooth flow of information. Recognition should be given to the costs of “flexible” approaches to workforce planning, as these can involve lower levels of job security.

Not all of the steps towards effective stress management need to be top-down. Employees could also be empowered to become active agents in the management of their threats, hindrances, and challenges. Job crafting is increasingly recognized as a powerful technique that employees can and do use to change the way their work is performed (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). It involves employees enacting their job role in unique ways, modifying which tasks they perform, which relationships they maintain, and which interpretation they place on their purpose, to achieve a more satisfying, and meaningful experience at work. Attention has recently been given to differentiating job crafting activities that increase challenges from those that reduce hindrances (e.g., Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). It may also be possible for employees to adapt their jobs, or themselves, to reduce anticipated threats, as may be the case where employees in more precarious roles take on additional responsibilities that affect the long-term sustainability of their organization.

However, another reason for organizations to be particularly proactive in managing threat demands is that threats tend to provoke avoidance behaviors (e.g., King & Gardner, 2006). This means that employees may be less willing or able to craft their own roles in the face of threats. Besides, many of the threat demands we have identified (e.g., job insecurity or workplace bullying) may involve forces outside an employee's control. We believe that organizations have a responsibility (in many countries, this is actually a *legal* responsibility) to anticipate threats to employees' physical or psychological wellbeing, and to take appropriate action to eliminate or otherwise manage those threats.

## Conclusion

We have emphasized the key differences between hindrances and threats, in terms of their defining qualities, the types of demands that would typically yield threat appraisals as distinct from demands that would typically yield hindrance appraisals, and the more powerful wellbeing consequences of threats as opposed to hindrances. However, we recognize that some demands may be seen as both threats and hindrances (and even as challenges too!), and that many of our recommendations around threats and hindrances would be similar. This does not, in our view, render the distinction meaningless, just as the similarities between anxiety and anger (both intense states of negative affect) do not mean that these are functionally equivalent emotions. Research on the distinction between hindrances and threats is at a very early stage, but is already showing intriguing insights in terms of wellbeing, motivation, and behavior. We encourage researchers and practitioners to give due consideration to this as they investigate and take action in the field of occupational stress.

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