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JOB DEMANDS AND COPING BEHAVIOUR: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SELF-EFFICACY

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Coping behaviour is mainly considered in the stress research as a moderator variable between job demands and negative or positive outcomes (e.g., anxiety, satisfaction). However, according to Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy plays a moderating role between stressors or job demands and coping behaviour. Thus, in stressful job contexts people with high self-efficacy will behave in a more proactive way using problem-centred coping than people with low self-efficacy. This study examines the moderating role of self-efficacy between job demands (quantitative overload and role conflict) and coping behaviour (information-seeking, problem-centred and 'wait and see' coping strategies). Hierarchical regression analysis in a sample of 625 Spanish workers from different occupational fields provides strong evidence for the main assumption of this study, i.e., the moderating role of self-efficacy between job demands and problem-centred coping. A three-way interaction effect between overload, role conflict and self-efficacy was found, whereby people with high levels of self-efficacy when job demands are high show more problem-centred coping than people with low self-efficacy. Thus, it could be said that problem-centred coping is used more when job demands and self-efficacy are high. In this sense, these results provide empirical evidence for the active axis of Karasek's Job Demands-Control Model, when 'control' is substituted by 'self-efficacy'.

La conducta de afrontamiento es considerada, en el ámbito de la investigación del estrés, como una variable moduladora entre las demandas del trabajo y sus efectos negativos o positivos (ansiedad, satisfacción, etc.).Sin embargo, desde la teoría social cognitiva, las creencias de eficacia juegan un papel modulador entre los estresores o demandas del trabajo y la conducta de afrontamiento. De manera que, en contextos de estrés, las personas con elevado nivel de autoeficacia utilizarán más conductas de afrontamiento activo centradas en la solución del problema que las personas con niveles menores de autoeficacia. Mediante análisis de regresión múltiple y sobre una muestra de 625 trabajadores españoles de diferentes ocupaciones, en este trabajo se examina el papel que la autoeficacia profesional juega en esta relación, considerando su efecto modulador entre las demandas del trabajo (sobrecarga laboral cuantitativa y conflicto de rol) y conducta de afrontamiento (activa y pasiva). También se ha estudiado el efecto de interacción entre dos demandas laborales (sobrecarga laboral cuantitativa y conflicto de rol) y la eficacia profesional, en donde se muestra que las personas con elevadas creencias de autoeficacia, ante ambas demandas laborales ,muestran más conductas de afrontamiento activo o centrado en el problema que las personas con niveles menores de autoeficacia. Las conductas de afrontamiento centradas en el problema se manifiestan cuando existen altas demandas y alto nivel de autoeficacia. Los resultados son discutidos también en el marco del modelo demandas-control de Karasek, cuando el control se sustituye por la autoeficacia.

The study of stress has been given considerable importance in recent years, due in large part to its negative consequences, both physical and mental. In the area of work, the latest European surveys (Paolie & Merllié, 2001) and the 3rd and 4th Spanish Surveys on Working Conditions of the National Institute for Safety and Hygiene at Work (2004) highlight the fact that stress is one of the main causes of work-related complaints. In Europe, the primary cause is back pain (30% in 1995, rising to 35% in 2000), followed by stress (28% both in 1995 and 2000) and fatigue (rising from 20% in 1995 to 23% in 2000). In Spain, the main cause is also back pain (which has increased from 20% to 39%), while the second is stress (though unlike in Europe, here it has risen from 15.5% to 28%, putting it on a level with the European mean), with the third cause being muscular-skeletal problems, now particularly in upper and lower limbs (an increase from 5.4% to 26%) (Salanova, 2003).

According to the definition offered by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is considered a negative emotional state (fundamentally anxiety, depression and hostility), accompanied by physiological changes and produced by subjects' perception that they are overloaded or threatened by the demands of their environment (in this case work) and lack the skills or resources to cope

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with them (sense of uncontrollability). In work contexts job demands can be of various types, and research regarding their possible effects is abundant, since it addresses not only how the person is affected (cardiovascular diseases, eating or sleeping disorders, depression, etc.), but also the effects on the organization (reduced levels of performance, absenteeism, lack of commitment, etc.) (Salanova, 2003; Salanova, Llorens, Cifre, Martínez & Schaufeli, 2003). Some of the most commonly found stressors are lack of job security and control, overload and competitiveness at work (Stege & Lochmann, 2001) and role conflict and ambiguity (Martínez, Cifre & Salanova, 1999).

STRESS AND COPING

Over the last three decades, the proliferation of research focused on stress has been complemented by the study of strategies used for coping with possible stressors to reduce their effects. These strategies employed to deal with the demands of the environment are called "coping behaviours" and can be considered from the point of view of the individual, the group or the organization, depending on the origin of the resources used.

"Coping" is a combination of responses made in a stressful situation to in some way reduce the adverse qualities of that situation. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) considered coping to be a response in cognitive or behavioural terms to the stressful demands of a given situation. "Coping", then, is used to refer to the aspects of the stress process which include the individual's attempts to deal with the stressors. It is a response brought about by the stressful situation and implemented in order to deal with or neutralize it. This assumes the existence of excessive demands and attempts by the individual to restore the balance (Rodríguez-Marín, 1995).

Obviously, just as stressors affect each person differently in each situation, each person will likewise try to cope with stressors in a different way, in accordance with individual variables and with their resources. If we consider the type of response employed to deal with stressors, coping strategies can be of the "approach" or "avoidance" type, depending on whether the subject opts for fight or flight. One could also add, according to Perrez and Reicherts (1992), "passive" coping, where no action is taken, involving strategies often referred to as "wait and see". Furthermore, with regard to the focus of the person's coping responses, they can emotion-oriented, aimed at regulating the emotions aroused by the stressful situation, or they can be problem-oriented, in an attempt to deal with the stressors themselves. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) showed the two forms to be equally useful.

Although coping strategies have chiefly been considered as defensive, from another angle, closer to positive psychology, they are seen as being related to well-being and health (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower & Gruenewald, 2000). Coping need not only be reactive, but can also take active forms to prevent situations from becoming stressful. These forms of proactive coping are proposed from a perspective of the promotion of health and quality of life.

STRESS AND SELF-EFFICACY

Social Cognitive Theory defines self-efficacy as "*beliefs in one's own capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce certain achievements or results"* (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), and considers it to be of crucial importance in controlling elements of the environment. People with high levels of self-efficacy are more confident of their abilities to respond to environmental stimuli. Their level of self-efficacy influences the way they perceive and process environmental demands and threats. If people in stressful conditions or situations believe that they can deal effectively with environmental stressors, they do not become a problem for them. As long as subjects control the stressors, these will not have adverse effects for them. But if they believe they cannot control them, such events or situations will create anxiety and reduce their level of performance. Thus, people with high levels of self-efficacy tend to interpret demands and problems more as challenges than as threats or subjectively uncontrollable events (Bandura 1999, 2001). It is postulated that self-efficacy may act as a damper on stressors, since the higher the levels of self-efficacy, the lower the levels of psychological strain (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell & Primeau, 2001). Stressors such as long working hours or quantitative overload (Jex & Bliese, 1999), role conflict (Jimmieson, 2000), routine (Grau, Salanova & Peiró, 2000) or time pressure (Salanova et al., 2003) are dampened by self-efficacy. Furthermore, it can allow environmental demands to provide positive outcomes, generating well-being through appropriate response to the demands (Salanova, Grau, Llorens & Schaufeli, 2001). Self-efficacy has been associated with persistence, dedication and satisfaction in our activity (Garrido, 2000; Martínez, Marques-Pinto, Salanova & López da Silva, 2002; Salanova, Grau, Cifre & Llorens, 2000; Salanova et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, the power of the moderating effect attributed to self-efficacy is determined by the level of specificity it has. Theoretically speaking, a person may feel more or less effective depending on the specific activity in which they are engaged (Bandura, 1997, 1999). The closer beliefs of efficacy fit the specific area or domain, the more effective they will be. Previous research supports the need to use specific measures of self-efficacy in relation to specific domains (Bandura, 1997; Brouwers, 1999; Salanova, Peiró & Schaufeli, 2002), given that this produces much more robust results. According once more to theory, this is the case because efficacy beliefs are domain-specific, so that a person's efficacy beliefs will vary depending on the activity or domain to which they refer (Bandura, 1997, 1999). The consideration of self-efficacy specificity has led researchers to develop different measures of self-efficacy adapted to specific fields that provide evidence of their suitability (Bandura, 1997; Brouwers, 1999; Salanova et al., 2002). It follows that self-efficacy at work will be more suitable for analyzing work contexts than general self-efficacy.

Finally, as well as acting directly on the stress-consequences relationship, self-efficacy can also affect this relationship through the adoption of suitable coping behaviours (Leiter, 1991). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to use problem-oriented coping behaviours and act on the stressors, while those with low levels of self-efficacy employ more strategies centred on their emotions, and therefore on themselves. According to Jex, Bliese, Buzzell & Primeau (2001), it is fundamental to consider this relationship because the impact of stressors on the individual depends to a large extent on the coping strategies adopted, and this would explain the inconsistent results found in previous studies.

In this context, the objective of the present study is to analyze the moderating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between job demands and coping behaviours. An interaction effect is postulated between job demands and professional self-efficacy on the one hand, and passive and active coping behaviours on the other. More specifically, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1: *A positive link will be found between professional self-efficacy and active coping strategies. That is, the higher the levels of professional self-efficacy, the higher the level of active coping strategies at work.*

H2: *Professional self-efficacy will behave as a moderating variable between job demands and coping strategies. The combination of high job demands and high levels of professional self-efficacy will be associated with active coping, while high demands and low levels of professional self-efficacy will be associated with passive coping.*

METHOD

Sample and procedure

A heterogeneous sample was used, comprising 625 employees from a variety of companies and from different socio-economic sectors and occupations. Office workers make up 29.4% of the sample, 20.6% are secondary and higher education teachers, 10.8% are service personnel, 9.6% are technical professionals from different sectors, 9.3% are laboratory staff, 8.8% are in sales occupations, 8% are production workers and 3.6% are managers and supervisors. A total of 51% are males and 49% females, with an average age of 35 years and 8 months (SD= 7.05)

Data collection was carried out in the workplace by means of a self-report questionnaire, distributed to employees by a member of the research team and, once completed, returned to the team in a sealed envelope.

Variables

Three groups of variables were taken into account. First of all, job demands, which include quantitative overload and role conflict. Secondly, the level of professional self-efficacy. Finally, coping behaviour was considered in two senses: active coping on the one hand and passive coping on the other.

Quantitative work overload was measured using a scale designed by Beehr, Walsh and Taber for their questionnaire *Role Overload* (1976) and composed of three items (example item: *I have too much work to do it really well*). Role conflict was measured using a three-item scale included in the 'Conflict and role ambiguity' questionnaire by Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970) and previously validated by Martínez, Cifre and Salanova (1999) (example item: *I receive requests or information from two or more people that are incompatible with one another)*. Both scales are five-point Likert-type, ranging from 1 (I totally disagree) to 5 (I totally agree).

Professional self-efficacy was measured using a scale from the Spanish version of the MBI-GS (Schaufeli, Maslach, Leiter & Jackson, 1996) with six items (example item *I can resolve problems that arise in my job effectively*). Responses are made on seven-point Likert-type scales measuring frequency, from "Never/Not once" to "Always/Every day".

Coping behaviours were measured by means of a self-constructed scale comprising 5 items, three of which

refer to active coping behaviour (example item: *When things get difficult I work on them until I find a solution*) and two to passive behaviour (example item: *When things don't work as they should, I prefer to wait until they sort themselves out*). The response range measures frequency from 1 (never) to 5 (always) and refers to the person's behaviour in response to events at work. The alpha coefficient of this scale is 0.71.

Data analysis

In order to achieve the proposed objective, descriptive statistical analysis was first carried out using SPSS 11.0, to obtain the internal consistencies (Cronbach's alpha) of the variables considered in the study and their correlations.

Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were then performed, one for each dependent variable, as recommended for measuring the interaction effect (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Landsbergis, Schnall, Warren, Pickering & Schwartz, 1994; Zedeck, 1971).

The independent variables were introduced into the regression equation in four successive steps (Jaccard, Turrisi & Wan, 1990). The first included sex and age, to control their possible effects. In the general literature on work-related stress and also on coping, both gender and age influence the stress process (Grau et al., 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Salanova et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 1996). In the second step we entered role conflict, quantitative work overload and professional self-efficacy as a moderator variable. The third step included two-way interactions of the three independent variables (overload x role conflict, overload x professional self-efficacy, and role conflict x professional self-efficacy). The fourth and final stage of the equation included the three variables in a three-way interaction (overload x role conflict x professional self-efficacy). This treatment was carried out for the two dependent variables: active and passive coping behaviour.

Table 1
Descriptive data, reliability of scales and correlations among variables

				Correlations			
Variables	**M**	**TD**	**α**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1. Overload	2.72	1.16	.89				
2. Role conflict	2.97	1.08	.73	n.s.			
3. Professional self-efficacy	4.32	.87	.72	-13***	-.14***		
4. Active coping	3.73	.72	.71	n.s.	-.17***	.49***	
5. Passive coping	2.43	.80	r=.27***	.23***	.10*	-.33***	-.12**

Note: In the "passive coping" scale, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used instead of the alpha coefficient since the scale comprises just two items.

Table 2
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Dependent variable: passive coping

	Beta	**Change R2**
1. Gender	.13***	.04***
Age	.12***	
2. Overload	.03	.16***
Role conflict	-.19	
Prof. self-effic. (moderator)	-.75**	
3. Overload x Role conflict	.27	.01
Overload x Prof. self-effic.	.14	
Role conflict x Prof. self-effic.	.13	
4. Overload x Role conflict x Prof. self-effic.	-.03	.01
Multiple *R*	.46	
R^2	.21	
F	16.09***	

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive analyses and internal consistencies of the variables used in the study. As can be seen, the α coefficients in all scales are above the .70 criterion recommended by Nunnaly and Bernstein (1994). Furthermore, it can be observed that professional self-efficacy correlates significantly and positively with active coping behaviour, and significantly but negatively with passive coping behaviour.

As regards the results of the multiple regression analysis, taking passive coping behaviour into account as a dependent variable, we can observe that this behaviour is more frequent among women and that it increases with age. In addition, there is a main negative effect of professional self-efficacy on passive coping behaviours, supporting Hypothesis 1. Nevertheless, no interaction effects between variables were found (Table 2).

Results of the regression analysis with active coping as the dependent variable show that coping behaviour is less frequent among women, and also that active coping increases with age. These data further show that role conflict has a main negative effect on active coping behaviours, and that professional self-efficacy has a main positive effect (Table 3). The results again support Hypothesis 1. Interaction effects were also found among the three independent variables. To facilitate the interpretation of these results, this significant interaction effect has been represented graphically. In order to determine the values of the variables, we took +/- 1 SD with respect to the mean. A high value in a variable corresponds to scores one standard deviation higher than the mean, while a low value corresponds to scores one standard deviation below the mean (Figure 1). These

results show that active coping behaviour increases in the case of high overload with high self-efficacy, irrespective of whether role conflict is high or low. The worst scenario is when high role conflict exists alongside low self-efficacy, since when quantitative overload increases, active coping behaviours decrease. These results confirm Hypothesis 2.

To summarize, this study clearly shows that lowest levels of active coping are found when professional self-efficacy is low. On the other hand, it can be seen that active coping behaviours are related to high overload and high professional self-efficacy, independently of high or low role conflict.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyze the moderating role of professional self-efficacy in the relationship between job demands and coping behaviour. In general terms, the results obtained support the hypothesis that self-efficacy moderates the relationship between the demands perceived by employees and the type of coping behaviours they use. Furthermore, these results show that men display more active coping behaviours than women, and that both active and passive strategies increase with age. Age may be a factor associated with greater experience and learning, resulting in a broadening of the repertoire of coping behaviours.

Results obtained also indicate that professional self-efficacy influences coping behaviours, raising active coping and reducing passive coping. These results support Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1999, 2001), and are in line with the assertion that people with high levels of self-efficacy have confidence in their abilities to respond to stimuli arising in their environment and can control them. Furthermore, an interaction effect between demands and professional self-efficacy is postulated, whereby employees with high levels of self-efficacy increase their active coping behaviours in situations of work overload and role conflict. In these cases we can consider whether such types of work-related demand might be interpreted as "challenges" when levels of self-efficacy are high. Similar results have been found in other studies in this area (Jex & Bliese, 1999; Jex, Bliese, Buzzell & Primeau, 2001).

Limitations of the study

First of all, the data in this study have been obtained by means of self-report measures, and the results may be contaminated by the variance of the common method. It would be appropriate to complement these measurements with others obtained from directly observable results.

Furthermore, it is possible that some other antecedent or moderating variables may have affected the results in this process.

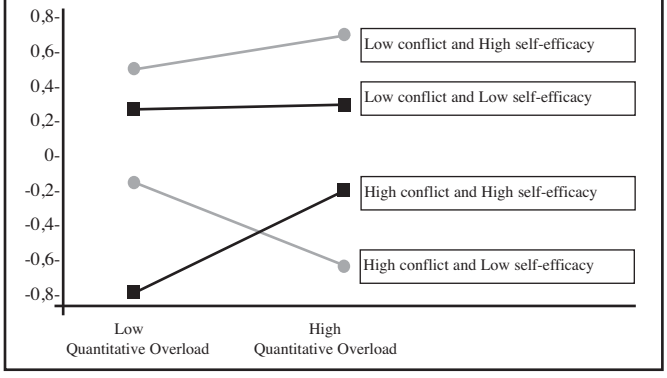
Implications

Several implications emerge from the present analysis. The first is related to the fact that overload and role conflict at work are present in the organizations analyzed, and often appear to be inevitable. A suitable prevention strategy to apply when it becomes difficult for organizations to control stressful situations could be to raise the professional self-efficacy of employees, for example through training programmes aimed at enhancing their capacity for control. Bandura (1997) indicated some strategies for raising self-efficacy: mastery experiences,

Table 3
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis.
Dependent variable: active coping

	Beta	Change R2
1. Gender	-.10**	.02***
Age	.13***	
2. Overload	.02	.24***
Role conflict	-.10**	
Prof. self-effic. (moderator)	.49***	
3. Overload x Role conflict	.06	.00
Overload x Prof. self-effic.	.02	
Role conflict x Prof. self-effic.	-.02	
4. Overload x Role conflict x Prof. self-effic.	**-.11*** **	**.01*** **
Multiple *R*	.53	
R^2	.29	
F	23.80***	

Figure 1
Three-way interaction: quantitative overload x role conflict x professional self-efficacy (dependent variable on the vertical axis: active coping)



verbal persuasion and vicarious learning. Our study suggests that high levels of self-efficacy can help employees to cope more effectively with stressors (even when they are not perceived as such). Raising self-efficacy in the workplace emerges as a challenge to be met.

Finally, the fact that professional self-efficacy moderates the relationship between stressors such as overload and role conflict on the one hand and active coping behaviours on the other provides us with valuable information for the prevention of psychosocial risks within the wider framework of risk prevention in the workplace. Encouragement of the development of professional self-efficacy is accompanied by more active strategies that cushion the negative effects of stressors.

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