

Work role stressors and turnover intentions: a study of professional clergy in Hong Kong

Ngo Hang-yue, Sharon Foley and Raymond Loi

Abstract Work and occupational stress have long been concerns for employees and human resource managers as they cause many negative outcomes. Most of the previous studies on work stress were conducted in Western countries, while limited research has addressed this important topic in the Asian context. In this study, we examine the effects of several work role stressors (i.e. role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work–family conflict) on emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction and intentions to leave. Additionally, we test the mediating effects of emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction between the relationship of role stressors and intentions to leave. Data were collected from a sample of 887 professional clergy in Hong Kong. The results of regression analysis show that role stressors have a significant impact on both emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, which in turn affect respondents' intentions to leave their organization.

Keywords Role stressors; emotional exhaustion; job satisfaction; intentions to leave; professional clergy; Hong Kong.

Introduction

Over the last two decades a huge body of literature on work and occupational stress has accumulated. Across a range of organizational contexts, research has consistently shown that experienced stress has deleterious effects on employees' mental and physical health, as well as on organizational outcomes such as job performance and employee turnover (Kahn and Byosier, 1992; O'Driscoll and Beehr, 1994; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 1989; Viator, 2001). The alleviation of work stress for employees has been a great challenge in human resource management.

It is worth noting that current theoretical understanding on the nature, antecedents, and consequences of work stress is based largely on studies conducted in Western countries. Cultural factors may affect an individual's perception and experience of work stress as well as his or her response to it. For example, in societies that are characterized by low uncertainty avoidance, people are more tolerant of uncertainty and unpredictability. They may thus perceive less stress at work, or develop some psychological mechanisms to deal with stressful situations. Given such cultural

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differences, the findings on work stress obtained from studies in one country may not be readily generalized to another country. In the current literature, however, not much research has been conducted in the Asian context (e.g. Perrewe *et al.*, 1995; Siu, 2002).

To fill the above knowledge gap, in this study we examine the consequences of work role stressors among a group of professional workers in Hong Kong, a society that is characterized by low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980). First, we evaluate the effects of several role stressors, including role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work–family conflict, on emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction and intentions to leave. Additionally, we examine the mediating role of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion between the relationship of role stressors and intentions to leave. By incorporating emotional exhaustion in our conceptual framework, we contribute to the existing literature on the linkages between work stress and employee turnover.

We select professional clergy as our sample mainly because we expect the effects of work role stressors would be especially pronounced in the church setting. First of all, ambiguity is embedded in the structure of clergy work since there are no clear standards as to what constitutes excellent pastoral work (Chang, 2000). Clergy often face the challenges of multiple, conflicting and ambiguous roles at work (Kay, 2000), and with the expanding role of lay people, there may be a further increase in role ambiguity among them (Monahan, 1999). Performance expectations and job descriptions tend to be vague and unspecified, and performance measurement and evaluation is problematic due to little direct and consistent oversight (Chang, 2000). Within the clergy labour market, wages are generally low. There is no significant investment made by employers, turnover is expected, and there is little job security or potential for promotion within a particular church (McDuff and Mueller, 2000). Moreover, church workers have an irregular work schedule that often includes time away from home visiting the sick and elderly. As a result, church workers are likely to experience high levels of work–family conflict, particularly those who are married or have dependants. They are emotionally involved in dealing with the personal problems of congregation members, and providing emotional support, advice and counselling. Clergy work is ‘people intensive’, emotionally demanding, and may leave the individual worker feeling drained and exhausted. Church workers must interact with different kinds of people when they perform their priestly, administrative, teaching and preaching duties (Kuhne and Donaldson, 1995). In sum, clergy work is characterized by a stressful and heavy workload, unpaid overtime, social isolation, role ambiguity and role conflict inherent in the occupation. We know little, however, about how role stressors affect church workers’ psychological well-being and job outcomes.

Literature review

Since the pioneering work of Kahn *et al.* (1964) on organizational role dynamics, extensive research has investigated the relationships between work role stressors and a variety of consequences such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance and turnover. In the present study, we focus on four types of role stressors, namely role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work–family conflict, that are identified as common sources of work stress in the literature (Boyar *et al.*, 2003; Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Tubre and Collins, 2000).

Role ambiguity occurs when an individual does not have clear information about the expectations of his or her role in the job or organization (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). As shown by previous studies, higher levels of role ambiguity are related to lower job

satisfaction, more job-related tension and anxiety, lower work commitment and involvement, lower job performance, and a greater propensity to leave the organization (Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). Clergy are likely to experience role ambiguity when their work role is not clearly defined and they need to perform diverse tasks and duties (Kuhne and Donaldson, 1995). As they work independently, clergy may not receive clear and sufficient information about their work role requirements and expected performance from the organization. Monahan (1999) examined the antecedents of role ambiguity for protestant clergy, and she suggested that unclear boundaries between clergy and lay people, and among clergy employed in different churches, were the main sources of role ambiguity in the church setting. She further found that the clergy task load, job description and background characteristics, such as specialized training and tenure, were associated with role ambiguity.

Role conflict refers to the incompatibility in communicated expectations that impinge on perceived role performance (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). It exists when an employee faces incompatible expectations such that compliance with one expectation would make it difficult or impossible to effectively comply with the other expectations (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). Similar to role ambiguity, role conflict was found to be associated with numerous undesirable consequences, including lower job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and higher turnover intentions (Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). Role conflict is a problem for clergy because they need to interact with different groups of people, including congregation members with diverse backgrounds, members of the church council¹ and clergy of other churches and denominations who make different expectations and demands on their time. They also need to perform a multiplicity of roles (Kay, 2000). When these role expectations are incongruent and conflicting, and clergy do not have sufficient time and resources to fulfil these role expectations, they are likely to experience role conflict.

Role overload refers to the sheer amount of work required and the time frame in which work must be completed (Cooper *et al.*, 2001). It occurs when work roles require more time and effort than an individual has for them so that the roles cannot be performed adequately and comfortably (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Markham and Bonjean, 1996). Previous research has shown that role overload is related to higher levels of strain, anxiety and depression, as well as poor job performance (Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Kushmir and Melamed, 1991). Role overload is an issue for clergy since they work an irregular schedule that involves unpaid overtime. They are expected to have high involvement in multiple work roles (Beck, 1998) and, thus, they are likely to suffer from role overload.

Work–family conflict is generally defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible or incongruous in some respect, whereby participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Work–family conflict has been neglected in previous stress research because work and family are often viewed as separate life domains. However, recent studies suggest that the interface of work and family produces stresses and strains for employees (Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Frone *et al.*, 1992a). Evidence also indicated that work–family conflict is associated with a lower level of job satisfaction and a higher propensity to leave the organization (Burke, 1988; Frone *et al.*, 1992b; Wiley, 1987). Some job-related factors such as work involvement, hours of work, and job flexibility were found to affect the level of work-family conflict (Ngo and Lau, 1998). Because of heavy job involvement, as well as long and inflexible working hours, it seems that clergy experience a higher level of work–family conflict than other workers.

Hypotheses development

In this study, we examine the relationships among four role stressors (i.e. role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work–family conflict) and three outcome variables (i.e. emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction and intentions to leave the organization) among clergy in Hong Kong. Drawing on the theoretical literature and available empirical evidence, we depict these relationships in Figure 1. Several hypotheses have been derived from this conceptual framework.

Emotional exhaustion refers to a feeling of being emotionally depleted and exhausted by one’s work (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). It has been viewed as an extreme result of chronic emotional stress (Maslach and Jackson, 1986), and it plays a salient role in the burnout process (Burke and Greenglass, 1995; Jackson *et al.*, 1986). According to Lee and Ashforth (1993), emotional exhaustion is one dimension of burnout.² Human service workers are particularly vulnerable to burnout in general and emotional exhaustion in particular (Freudenberger, 1974), probably because their work is characterized by frequent and intensive interpersonal contact. Previous research showed that emotional exhaustion was negatively related to job satisfaction, job performance and positively related to turnover intentions (Firth and Britton, 1989; Jackson *et al.*, 1986; Wright and Bonett, 1997). The major antecedents of emotional exhaustion include role overload with a high level of work demands (Burke and Richardsen, 1996; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993) and role conflict (Brewer and Clippard, 2002; Singh *et al.*, 1994). We expect work–family conflict and other role stressors are positively related to emotional exhaustion for clergy, and propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Role stressors (including role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, and work–family conflict) are positively related to emotional exhaustion.

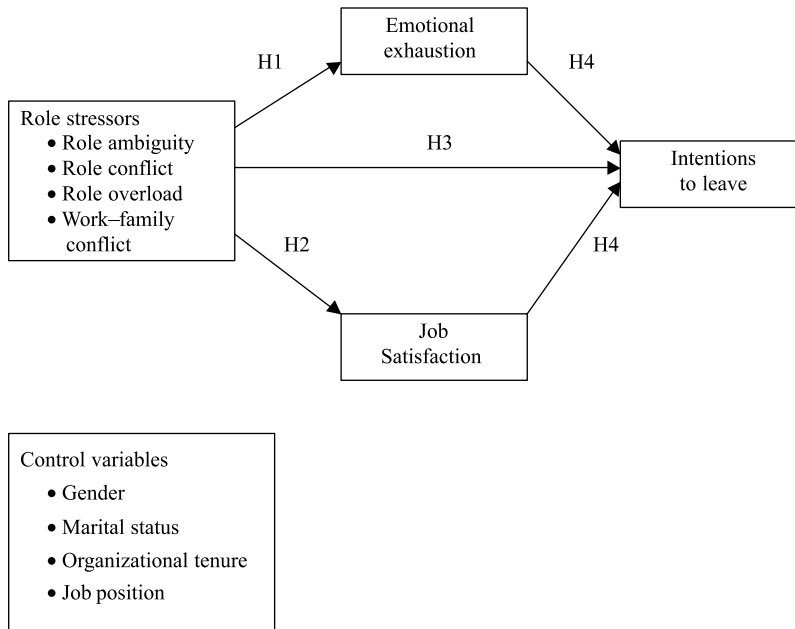


Figure 1 *Conceptual model and hypotheses*

Job satisfaction is probably the most widely studied variable in the area of organizational behaviour. It is generally defined as the extent to which a worker feels positively or negatively about his or her job (Locke, 1976). The negative relationship between role stressors (particularly role conflict and role ambiguity) and job satisfaction has been well documented in existing literature (Bedeian and Armenakis, 1981; Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Sullivan and Bhagat, 1992). Additionally, work–family conflict has been found to be associated with a lower level of job satisfaction (Burke, 1988; Ngo and Lui, 1999). In line with the existing literature, we hypothesize that:

H2: Role stressors are negatively related to job satisfaction.

Working in a stressful environment leads to depression, a sense of futility, lower job involvement and psychological withdrawal from the work group (Brief and Aldag, 1976), and hence increases intentions to leave the organization. According to Tett and Meyer (1993), intentions to leave may be regarded as the last stage in a sequence of withdrawal cognitions, ranging from thinking of leaving to intending to search for alternative employment. Griffeth and Hom (1995) pointed out that job stress is an important antecedent of withdrawal cognitions and turnover behaviour. According to theories of role stress, ambiguous or conflicting role demands evoke role strain (Kahn *et al.*, 1964; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1990), which in turn, fosters dissatisfaction and resignations (Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Lyons, 1971). The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Role stressors are positively related to intentions to leave.

Previous studies have demonstrated that job satisfaction is an important antecedent of turnover intentions (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997; Tett and Meyer, 1993). Individuals who experience a high level of work stress are less satisfied with their job, and hence they have a high tendency to leave their organization. As such, job satisfaction can be viewed as a mediator between role stressors and intentions to leave. Empirical evidence has supported such a mediating effect (Klenke-Hamel and Mathieu, 1990; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1990; O’Driscoll and Beehr, 1994). We also expect a similar mediating role of emotional exhaustion, as research has shown a negative relationship between job burnout and the desire to leave one’s job (Firth and Britton, 1989; Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Maslach and Jackson, 1986). We argue that for clergy a high level of stress leads to emotional exhaustion, which in turn increases intentions to leave. In view of the above arguments, we develop the following hypothesis:

H4: Emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction mediate the effects of role stressors on intentions to leave.

Data and Methodology

Data were obtained from a survey mailed to 2,600 Protestant clergy on a mailing list provided by a Christian association in Hong Kong during the summer of 2001. A self-administered questionnaire in Chinese was sent to the target respondents, together with a covering letter explaining the purpose of the survey and inviting them to participate voluntarily. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and were asked to mail back the completed questionnaire to a research centre affiliated with a local university. To increase the response rate, a follow-up phone call was made three to four weeks after

the initial mailing to remind the respondents to complete the questionnaire. A total of 877 surveys were finally returned, representing a response rate of 33.7 per cent.

The questionnaires were administered in Chinese with some well-established scales developed in the West. Items for these scales were originally developed in English and then translated into Chinese. A back-translation was also done to ensure the quality of the translation (Brislin, 1970).

Of the total sample, 52.5 per cent were male and 67.6 per cent were married. The average work experience and organizational tenure were 9.5 years and 5.6 years respectively. In regard to their job positions, 21.7 per cent were pastors and 64.0 per cent were preachers. 27.1 per cent of them (mostly senior pastors) reported that they were in charge of their church.

Measurement of variables

Respondents used six-point Likert-type scales (1 = 'strongly disagree', 6 = 'strongly agree') to respond to the items in the following measures, except for the control variables.

Role ambiguity. Six items, adopted from Rizzo *et al.* (1970), were used to measure role ambiguity. This scale has been widely used in previous studies, with coefficient alpha values ranging from 0.71 to 0.95 (Fields, 2002). A sample item is 'I know what my responsibilities are'. In this study, the coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.90.

Role conflict. We used the eight-item Rizzo *et al.*'s (1970) scale to measure role conflict. As reported by Fields (2002), the coefficient alpha values for this scale ranged from 0.71 to 0.87 in previous research. A sample item is 'I have to do things that should be done differently'. The scale's coefficient alpha was 0.83 in this study.

Role overload. This variable was measured with a three-item scale developed by Beehr *et al.* (1976). A previous study found coefficient alpha of this scale to be 0.67 (Almer and Kaplan, 2002). The three items include: 'I am given enough time to do what is expected of me on my job' (reverse scoring), 'It often seems like I have too much work for one person to do', and 'The performance standard on my job is too high'. The coefficient alpha for the present sample was 0.67.

Work–family conflict. A four-item scale, modified from Frone *et al.* (1992b) was adopted to measure work–family conflict. The scale was used to tap the interference of the two life domains with respect to role performance and time allocation. Previous research conducted locally in Hong Kong has proven its validity and reliability, with coefficient alpha values ranging from 0.79 to 0.82 (Ngo and Lau, 1998; Ngo and Lui, 1999). The four items are: 'My family life frequently interferes with my job duties', 'My family life frequently affects the time I spend on my job', 'My job frequently interferes with my family responsibility', and 'My job frequently affects the time I spend with my family'. In this study, the coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.81.

Emotional exhaustion. A three-item scale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) was adopted to measure emotional exhaustion. This abbreviated scale has been used by Iverson *et al.* (1998), and produced an alpha value of 0.86. The three items are: 'I feel emotionally drained from my work', 'I feel burned out from my work', and 'I feel used up at the end of the workday'. This scale had a coefficient alpha of 0.87 in this study.

Job satisfaction. This variable was measured by a three-item scale developed by Price and Mueller (1981). Previous studies produced coefficient alpha values of 0.87 and 0.85

for this scale (Broke and Price, 1989; Iverson *et al.*, 1998). The items are: 'I find real enjoyment in my work', 'Most days I am enthusiastic about my job', and 'I feel well satisfied with my job'. In this study, the coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.86.

Intentions to leave. A three-item scale developed by Cohen (1998) that was based on Mobley *et al.*'s (1979) definition was used to measure intentions to leave. In Cohen's (1998) study, the scale's coefficient alpha was found to be 0.82. The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following three items: 'I think a lot about quitting my job', 'I am actively searching for an alternative to my present job', and 'As soon as possible, I will leave the church'. In this study, the coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.86.

Control variables. Several individual and work-related variables were included in this study as control variables as they were found to exert some effects on the work role stressors and/or the outcome variables (Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Frone *et al.*, 1992b; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). *Gender* was coded 1 if the respondent is female and coded 0 if the respondent is male. *Marital status* was a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent is married or not. *Organizational tenure* was the number of years employed by the church. *Job position* was measured by a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent is the person-in-charge in the church or not.

Analytical strategy

We start with descriptive statistical analysis, and follow with multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Separate analyses were conducted for each of three dependent variables, namely, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intentions. The predictors include the control variables and the four role stressor variables. To test for the mediating effects, we follow the procedure of Baron and Kenny (1986). We first demonstrate the significant effects of role stressors on job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion, the two potential mediators in this study. We then compare the results of two different regression models for intentions to leave – one with job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion as predictors and one without. The existence of mediating effects can be indicated by (1) significant effects of the mediators in the full model and (2) a substantial reduction of the effects of role stressors in the full model as compared to the model without the mediating variables.

Empirical findings

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the study variables. The role stressors variables are positively correlated with each other, with a correlation coefficient range from 0.15 to 0.39. In addition, all the role stressors have a significant negative correlation with job satisfaction and a positive correlation with emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave. Finally, intention to leave is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$) and negatively correlated with job satisfaction ($r = -0.46, p < 0.01$).

Table 2 displays the results of regression analyses. In Model 1, we regress emotional exhaustion on the control variables and the role stressors. This model explains 48 per cent of the total variance of the outcome variable. All the role stressors are found to have significant positive effects on emotional exhaustion. Among them, role overload has the strongest effect. This is consistent with current literature (e.g. Burke and Richardson, 1996; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach and Pines, 1977). In view of the above findings, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables*

Variables	\bar{x}	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Gender (female = 1)	0.47	0.50	—									
2 Marital status (married = 1)	0.27	0.44	-0.50**	—								
3 Organizational tenure	5.57	4.99	-0.11**	0.14**	—							
4 Job position (in-charge = 1)	0.68	0.47	-0.34**	0.23**	0.28**	—						
5 Role ambiguity	2.10	0.68	0.09**	-0.06	-0.25**	-0.26**	—					
6 Role conflict	3.82	0.77	-0.07	0.01	-0.06	-0.07*	0.24**	—				
7 Role overload	3.67	0.89	0.02	-0.02	0.00	0.03	0.15**	0.39**	—			
8 Work-family conflict	3.01	0.96	-0.04	0.10**	-0.08*	-0.07	0.28**	0.32**	0.34**	—		
9 Emotional exhaustion	3.46	1.10	0.06	-0.06	-0.02	-0.05	0.23**	0.47**	0.63**	0.39**	—	
10 Job satisfaction	4.75	0.80	-0.05	0.05	0.16**	0.18**	-0.59**	-0.22**	-0.17**	-0.26**	-0.29**	—
11 Intentions to leave	2.18	1.09	0.07*	-0.02	-0.11**	-0.16**	0.34**	0.31**	0.23**	0.25**	0.36**	-0.46**

Notes

N ranges from 833 to 876. * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

Table 2 Results of regression analyses

Variables	Model 1: emotional exhaustion	Model 2: job satisfaction	Model 3: intentions to leave	Model 4: intentions to leave
Gender (female = 1)	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.06
Marital status (married = 1)	-0.05	0.03	0.03	0.04
Organizational tenure	0.03	0.00	-0.00	-0.01
Job position (in-charge = 1)	-0.01	0.03	-0.08*	-0.07*
Role ambiguity	0.08**	-0.54**	0.23**	0.04
Role conflict	0.23**	-0.06	0.20**	0.15**
Role overload	0.48**	-0.05	0.09*	-0.00
Work-family conflict	0.15**	-0.07*	0.08*	0.03
Emotional exhaustion				0.16**
Job satisfaction				-0.34**
Adjusted R ²	0.48	0.36	0.19	0.28
F statistic	97.85**	58.82**	25.66**	33.82**
N	834	830	829	829

Notes

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Hypothesis 2 states that the role stressors will have negative effects on job satisfaction. Model 2 shows the results. The model itself has good explanatory power as indicated by an adjusted R-square of 0.36. Among the role stressors, only role ambiguity ($\beta = -0.54$, $p < 0.01$) and work-family conflict ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.05$) have significant effects, but not for role conflict and role overload. The results agree with O’Driscoll and Beehr (1994) who found that role ambiguity had a direct effect on job satisfaction, but not for role conflict. Thus, hypothesis 2 is only partially supported.

Models 3 and 4 report the results on intentions to leave. In Model 3, all the role stressors are found to exert significant positive effects on this outcome variable. Specifically, role ambiguity ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$) and role conflict ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$) have stronger effects than role overload ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$) and work-family conflict ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 3 is thus confirmed. Emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction are then added in Model 4 to test for their mediating effects between role stressors and intentions to leave. Both are found to be highly significant, with a beta coefficient of 0.16 ($p < 0.01$) and -0.34 ($p < 0.01$) respectively. It is worth noting that, in the model, the previous positive effects of role stressors on intentions to leave have been substantially reduced. In particular, the coefficients for role ambiguity, role overload, and work-family conflict have become insignificant. This provides evidence that emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction mediate their effects on intentions to leave. The coefficient for role conflict, however, remains significant in Model 4 ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that this variable has a direct and positive effect on the outcome variable. In view of these results, hypothesis 4 is partially supported.

Discussion

In the present study, we investigated the effects of work stress on the job attitudes and psychological well being of professional clergy in Hong Kong, a non-Western society. By and large, we found that role stressors were significantly related to greater

emotional exhaustion and stronger intentions to leave the organization. In addition, role ambiguity and work–family conflict had negative impacts on job satisfaction. In contrast to our expectation, however, we did not find a significant relationship between role conflict, role overload and job satisfaction. For clergy in Hong Kong, their job satisfaction was not affected when their work roles conflicted or were overloaded. Furthermore, we illustrated the mediating effects of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion between the relationships of role stressors and intentions to leave. One exception is role conflict, which was found to have a direct and positive effect on intentions to leave, but not through job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion.

In Hong Kong, staff turnover has been a concern in Christian churches. As we found that the turnover intentions of clergy were strongly related to work stress, some measures can be proposed to cope with the problem. First of all, attempts should be made to reduce role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload by means of better organizational and job design, clear job descriptions and work guidelines. Providing training on stress management and time management will also be helpful in this regard. With a lower level of work stress, clergy will have greater job satisfaction and less emotional exhaustion, and hence lower intentions to leave. Furthermore, more support and intervention from the organization such as employee assistance programmes, counselling, and child-care arrangements can also be provided to alleviate the problems of role overload and work–family conflict among them. All in all, the present study informs church administrators to the adverse relationship between role stressors, job attitudes and psychological well-being, and hence the necessity to combat work stress in order to increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover among clergy.

The practical implications of our study, however, are tempered to some extent by its limitations. First, the relationships among the role stressors and outcome variables included common method variance because our data were obtained from a self-administered questionnaire. Second, our study utilized a cross-sectional design and thus it cannot confirm the direction of causality as implied in our conceptual model. Third, the reliability of our measure of role overload was lower than desired. Lastly, we have not considered the possible impact of some organization-level variables such as church denominations, organizational structure and climate, and work arrangements that may affect an individual's perception of stress and its consequences. Questions about the generalizability of our findings include whether the findings (a) are generalizable to religious bodies other than Protestant denominations in Hong Kong, (b) are generalizable to other helping professions, and (c) can be applied to non-professionals as well as professional occupations. Even though our data came from a relatively restrictive population of professionals, we are confident that the general model would also apply to other groups of professionals and non-professionals. The relationships between role stressors and individual work outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction and intentions to leave) have been found in other occupational settings (Firth *et al.*, 2004; Fogarty *et al.*, 2000; Hemingway and Smith, 1999; Moore, 2000).

Future studies should explore how work-related stressors subtly affect the work behaviours and work–family balance of professional workers. In addition, some factors may affect the subjective perception of stress in the workplace, such as individual personality variables (e.g. locus of control, affectivity and introversion versus extroversion), organizational variables (e.g. organizational structure and climate, work arrangement, and availability of organizational and coworker support), and cultural variables (e.g. individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance) are worth exploring. Future research should examine not only their direct effects on stress, but also

their moderating effects on the relationship between stressors and work outcomes (Cooper *et al.*, 2001). A longitudinal research design might capture the dynamic nature of the stress process and consequences more fully than the cross-sectional design that we used. Our study would be enriched by comparisons over time and across denominations, including (a) studies that make comparisons with culturally diverse religious organizations, (b) a cross-cultural replication of this study to confirm or refute our findings, and (c) cross-validation by using samples from other helping professionals such as social workers and mental health professionals.

Conclusions

Our study represents a first attempt to evaluate the impact of role stressors on various individual outcomes in the church setting. Although the adverse effects of job stress in secular society have been well documented (Perrewe *et al.*, 1995; Siu, 2002; Viator, 2001), we provide evidence that these relationships may spill over into relationships in the church as well. This study thus fills a research gap and enhances our understanding of the process and outcomes of work stress for helping professionals in general, and clergy in particular, who are highly vulnerable to the stress inherent in their occupations. Moreover, it contributes to the literature by including the construct of emotional exhaustion in our conceptual framework as a potential mediator in the relationship between role stressors and intentions to leave. This mediating effect has not been fully explored in previous research and our study confirmed it empirically.

Furthermore, in this study we attempt to evaluate the impact of role stressors on various individual work outcomes in a non-Western setting. In a US study of the linkage between work stress and turnover intentions, Boyar *et al.* (2003) found that role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload increased work–family conflict, which in turn led to high turnover intentions. Similar to their study, we found positive effects of role stressors on intentions to leave in Hong Kong, although these effects were mediated by job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. It is plausible that some of the relationships among the study variables also hold in different parts of the world. The negative impacts of work stress on job satisfaction and psychological well-being have been confirmed in the current literature, including studies that used Western and Asian samples (Almer and Kaphan, 2002; Firth *et al.*, 2004; Siu *et al.*, 2002). Perrewe *et al.* (2002) also found that the consequences of role stressors on burnout were consistent across nine regions. To be sure, more cross-cultural research on this topic should be conducted in the future. We hope that our study will be the impetus for researchers to conduct research in non-Western settings using samples often neglected in the literature.

Notes

- 1 In each church in Hong Kong, there is a council which is an executive body comprising senior church members. Its main functions are to oversee the key administrative issues and decide on major personnel matters (such as hiring, compensation, training and development of staff) in the church. The council has the highest authority and all church workers report to the council.
- 2 Burnout describes the state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources and leading to physical and mental exhaustion (Freudenberger, 1974). As suggested by Maslach and Jackson (1981), the three dimensions of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. In the present study, we focus on emotional exhaustion.

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