Poster

TITLE

Learning opportunities as a buffer against unmet expectations.

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to clarify the potential buffering role of learning opportunities against unmet expectations, within the framework of the job demands-resources model. Through moderated mediation analyses it was found that learning opportunities can weaken the relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion.

PRESS PARAGRAPH

In the fast evolving society of today, unmet expectations or the discrepancy between what was expected and what is encountered in the job, are becoming an increasing problem. Previous studies have shown negative outcomes of unmet expectations in terms of decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment and increased levels of distress. However, it remains unclear how employees can cope with these unmet expectations and prevent them from resulting in feeling emotionally exhausted and willing to leave. This study documents the importance of offering learning opportunities in order to help employees to handle demands in the job that were not expected.
The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker, Demerouti, De Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2000, 2001) is a comprehensive, empirically well-supported stress model that may be applied to various occupational settings and has profoundly increased our understanding of the relationship between job specific characteristics (i.e., job demands and job resources) and employee health and well-being. Ample evidence exists for additive effects of job demands and job resources on respectively strain and motivation (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007 for an overview). The JD-R model further assumes that job resources can buffer for the negative influence of job demands on job strain. In contrast to the amount of research on additive effects within the JD-R model, however, the buffering role of job resources has received considerably less research attention and when investigated, was often not supported by the data (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The aim of the present study is to investigate the buffering role of one specific job resource (i.e., learning opportunities) with respect to an understudied job demand (i.e., unmet expectations). Numerous studies have shown the negative influence of unmet expectations (i.e., the discrepancy between what is encountered and what was expected in the job) on a number of outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion (Cherniss, 1980; Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986) and turnover intentions (Houkes, Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 2003; Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 1999; Major, Kozlowski, Chao & Gardner, 1995; Pearson, 1995; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Research on the JD-R model and more specifically the health impairment process, however, has largely neglected unmet expectations (see Houkes et al., 2003 for an exception) as a job demand.

The current study will investigate the influence of unmet expectations on turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion, and will focus on the buffering role of learning opportunities. The JD-R model considered numerous job resources (see Bakker & Demerouti,
2007, for a review), but up to now underestimated the potential role of learning opportunities as a powerful job resource. We will argue that learning opportunities provide a well-matched buffer for unmet expectations and as such will affect the mediated relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions, through emotional exhaustion. As such, we suggest a moderated mediation model, representing a direct and relevant test of the JD-R model.

This focus on job-related learning aligns well with current research on competence development (Coetzer, 2007; Mayer & Solga, 2008) and lifelong learning (Paulsson, Ivergård, & Hunt, 2005) as well as with the full-employment agenda of the Lisbon Strategy which focuses on growth and jobs and stresses the importance of knowledge as the EU’s most valuable assets.

Unmet expectations in the JD-R model

Porter and Steers (1973) defined the discrepancy between what employees actually encounter in the job and what they expected to encounter as “unmet expectations”. This discrepancy has received different labels in the literature (e.g., organizational-professional conflict, see Lait & Wallace, 2002; reality shock, see Hughes, 1958) and has been given an important place in various types of theories (i.e., newcomers’ socialization, see Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992 for a review; realistic job previews, see for example Buckley et al., 2002; psychological contract theory, see Turnley & Feldman, 2000). The underlying basic assumption in these models is that the degree to which employees’ expectations are unmet results in negative work outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction (Major et al., 1995; Nelson & Sutton, 1991; Turnley & Feldman, 2000), reduced levels of work adjustment (Ashforth & Saks, 2000) and organizational commitment (Major et al., 1995) and higher levels of distress (Nelson & Sutton, 1991).

Particularly relevant to the present research is that unmet expectations have also been related to emotional exhaustion (e.g., Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986), and to turnover
intentions (e.g., Houkes, et al., 2003; Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 1999; Major et al., 1995; Pearson, 1995; Taris, Feij, Capel, 2006; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). In line with the JD-R model, these relationships suggest that unmet expectations are an important job-related stressor that individuals must cope with. As such, they clearly fit the definition of job demands as put forward in the JD-R model: “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p.312). Specifically, unmet expectations can be considered psychological aspects of the job that require sustained psychological effort, leading to psychological costs. Based on this reasoning we suggest a significant positive relationship between unmet expectations and emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions (hypothesis 1).

In line with the health impairment process of the JD-R model, suggesting an indirect relationship between job demands and organizational outcomes through strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and with empirical evidence showing an indirect relationship between job demands and turnover intentions through emotional exhaustion (Ducharme, Knudsen, & Roman, 2008; Huang, Chuang, & Lin, 2003; Kalliath & Beck, 2001; Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990), we further suggest that the relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions is mediated by emotional exhaustion (hypothesis 2).

Learning as a way of coping with unmet expectations

According to the JD-R model, job demands evoke strain when they exceed the employee’s adaptive capability. Aspects of the work situation that make these demands controllable, however, can function as job resource and as such buffer for the demands (Kahn & Byosserie, 1992). However, this buffering role of job resources has received only limited support and an underlying psychological mechanism of how specific job resources should buffer for specific job demands is often lacking. However, de Jonge and Dormann (2003)
argued in their DISC model that for resources to work, they must match the environmental demands. Only when both the demand and the resource stem from qualitatively identical domains, be it with opposite signs, optimal buffering can take place.

In the current study, we argue that learning opportunities can provide adequate resources in order to prevent unmet expectations to result in emotional exhaustion. Since both stem from the cognitive domain, it is suggested that they might optimally match to prevent emotional exhaustion. Specifically, being confronted with unmet expectations might cause skill gaps and reduce feelings of self-efficacy (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1991), which, in turn has been shown to lead to burnout (Leiter, 1991) and more specifically, emotional exhaustion (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). One way to reduce the negative effects of unmet expectations then is to close this skill gap and to enhance feelings of self-efficacy, for which learning is essential (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Canny, 2004). Facilitating learning does not mean organizing training and courses but rather creating the conditions to learn from its own actions (Bergmann, 2000). The presence of such learning opportunities has been shown to increase the feeling of being in control over uncertain and unexpected demands in the job and consequently, to preserve health (e.g., Levine & Ursin, 1991). On the basis of this literature, we suggest that learning opportunities offered in the job can buffer for the positive relationship between unmet expectations and emotional exhaustion (hypothesis 3).

This hypothesis further suggests that unmet expectations will lead to turnover intentions through the experience of emotional exhaustion, mainly when learning opportunities are low. Conversely, when learning opportunities are high, they can function as a buffer for emotional exhaustion and consequently, turnover intentions become less likely (hypothesis 4). Figure 1 graphically depicts our predictions.

Method
Participants and procedure

Data were collected from 420 Flemish teachers in elementary education through an online survey, announced in a popular Flemish education magazine. This magazine can be consulted online and all teachers monthly receive a printed version in their regular mail. Data collection was part of a larger survey to investigate antecedents of turnover intentions with teachers in their first years. As such, the mean age ($M = 27.56, SD = 5.27$) was relatively young. With respect to other demographic variables, 94% of the respondents were women, 33% worked in special education and 62% had less than 50 months of work experience.

Measures

Data were collected in Belgium and all items were formulated in Dutch.

Unmet expectations. Based on the measure designed by Schwab, Jackson and Schuler (1986), we formulated six items, capturing the discrepancy between teachers’ pre-entry career expectations and current perceptions. The items were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = absolutely not; 3 = absolutely). A sample item is “During education, I had different beliefs about contact with students than I currently experience.” Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .82.

Learning opportunities. Learning opportunities was measured with the VBBA (van Veldhoven, Meijman, Broersen, & Fortuin, 2002) which was itself based conceptually on Karasek’s Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek et al., 1998). Four items were answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = never; 3 = always). A sample item is “Does your job offer opportunities for personal growth and development?” Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .86.

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured with the UBOS-L (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000). Eight items were answered on a Likert-type scale (0 = never; 6 = always). A sample item is “At the end of a weekday, I feel exhausted.” Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .88.
Turnover intentions. Turnover intentions were measured with three items from the TNO Arbeidssituatie Survey (TAS, Smulders, Andries, & Otten, 2002). Answers were given on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = never; 3 = always). Items were framed as “In the past year, have you actually looked for another job?”, “In the past year, have you thought about looking for another job than the job with your current employer?”, and “If it would be up to you, would you still work for this organization within five years?” (reverse coded). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .76.

Control variables. Workload and emotional demands were measured with items from the VBBA (van Veldhoven et al., 2002), respectively 11 items and 7 items and answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 0 (= never) to 3 (= always). A sample item for workload is “Do you have a high workload?” and a sample item for emotional demands is “Does it happen that you end up in an emotional situation in your job?” Cronbach’s alphas for these scales are respectively .80 and .79. Work-family conflict was measured with 4 items of the SWING (Geurts et al., 2005; Wagena & Geurts, 2000). Items were answered on the same 4-point Likert-type scale. A sample item is “How often does it happen that you find it difficult to fulfil your domestic obligations because you are constantly thinking about your work?” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .86.

Analyses

We testes our hypotheses with hierarchical regression analyses and subsequent indirect effects analyses. Previous research has often assessed (moderated) mediation using the approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). This approach, however, suffers from shortcomings such as low statistical power and lack of a direct test of the indirect effect. In this study, we used a bootstrap procedure advocated by Edwards and Lambert (2007) and Preacher, Rucker and Hayes (2007) to directly test the significance of the mediated effect as well as to overcome problems with non-normally distributed coefficients. In order to test
whether the indirect effect depends on learning opportunities, analyses were conducted at several levels of the moderator (indirect effects at 1 SD below and above the mean).

In all the analyses, we controlled for workload, emotional demands and work-family conflict since these variables have been shown to be highly relevant job demands with respect to the dependent variables under study (see Boyar, Maertz, Pearson, & Keough, 2003; Janssen, De Jonge, & Bakker, 1999; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

Results

Preliminary results. Means, standard deviations and correlations between the scales are presented in Table 1. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to test for the construct validity of the measures that were used in this study. Acceptable fit indices were obtained for the hypothesized 7-factor model, $\chi^2(839) = 3289.81$, $RMSEA = .078 [.075-.080]$, $SRMR = .08$, $CFI = .93$.

Hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that unmet expectations have a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Results of the regression analyses (see Table 2) supported this hypothesis. A significant relationship was found between unmet expectations and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) as well as between unmet expectations and turnover intentions ($\beta = .20, p < .01$), even after controlling for workload, emotional demands, and work-family conflict. Unmet expectations additionally explained 3% of the variance in emotional exhaustion and 6% of the variance in turnover intentions at step 2.

In line with Hypothesis 3, suggesting that learning opportunities can buffer for the negative effect of unmet expectations on emotional exhaustion, a significant interaction was found between unmet expectations and learning opportunities on emotional exhaustion (see Table 2). Simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) further supported hypothesis 3 (see Figure 2). When learning opportunities were high, unmet expectations were significantly
positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .10$, $t = 2.40$, $p < .05$). However, when learning opportunities were low, this relationship was stronger ($\beta = .29$, $t = 5.72$, $p < .01$).

Hypothesis 2 stated that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions. Results showed that the indirect effect of unmet expectations on turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion was significant at all levels of the moderator. However, in line with Hypothesis 4, the bootstrap moderated mediation analysis showed that the indirect effect of unmet expectations on turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion, was significantly stronger when learning opportunities were low (one $SD$ below the mean; indirect $b = .04$, 95% confidence interval .01-.08), rather than high (one $SD$ above the mean; indirect $b = .11$, 95% confidence interval .06-.18).

Discussion

This study considered the buffering role of learning opportunities in the process leading from unmet expectations to turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion. The JD-R model was used as the theoretical framework. In the following sections, we will discuss these results, highlight some relevant theoretical and practical implications as well as some limitations of the current study.

Main Results

The results of this study showed a significant relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions, via emotional exhaustion. Learning opportunities were found to buffer for the positive relationship between unmet expectation and emotional exhaustion in the sense that this relationship was weaker when learning opportunities were high. Further, the mediated relationship between unmet expectations and turnover intentions via emotional exhaustion was weaker when learning opportunities were high. This suggests that learning opportunities can prevent from feeling emotionally exhausted and consequently from turnover intentions to occur.
Theoretical Implications

Our findings are in line with the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2003; Demerouti et al., 2000, 2001), by showing that job demands increase job strain, and subsequently lead to negative organizational outcomes. The JD-R model also proposes a buffering role of job resources in the relationship between job demands and job strain. As such, various job resources have, with limited support, been studied as moderators (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However the compensatory value of a specific resource with respect to a specific job demand (see de Jonge & Dormann, 2003), has received far less attention. An important asset of the current study is that we specifically investigated the moderating role of learning opportunities with respect to unmet expectations, which both stem from the cognitive domain, and found support for a buffering role of learning opportunities.

Our results also have clear implications for the literature on unmet expectations. This study supported the suggestion that unmet expectations are an important job demand. Even after controlling for well-supported job demands within the JD-R model and with respect to the dependent variables in this study (i.e., workload, emotional demands, and work-family conflict; see Janssen, De Jonge, & Bakker, 1999; Lee & Ashforth, 1996), the relationship between unmet expectations and both emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions remained significant. In the literature on unmet expectations, numerous ways have been suggested to lower expectations (i.e., through offering realistic job information, see Buckley et al., 2002; or through optimizing socialization processes, see Wanous et al., 1992). However, the importance of offering learning opportunities in order to cope with unmet expectations, as was evidenced in the current study, has never been investigated so far.

Limitations and suggestions for future research.

A possible threat to the validity of our conclusions is that we measured all our concepts by means of self-report measures using a cross-sectional design. Such a design
cannot support claims of causality. However, it should be noted that our theorizing and emerging hypotheses have followed as closely as possible the existing literature on unmet expectations (see Wanous et al., 1992 for a review), and the JD-R model (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007 for an overview). Using self-report measures with all variables measured at the same time may also have introduced the possibility that main effects actually result from common-method variance. However, common method variance may not be a significant problem in organizational research (Crampton & Wagner, 1994) and it cannot account for direct or indirect interactive effects (Evans, 1985; McClelland & Judd, 1993). In sum, we are rather confident that our argument accurately reflects how our constructs relate to one another.

The sample in this study was mainly composed of female teachers (94%). Although this suggest a clear overrepresentation of women, this figure is in line with the general population of teachers. Specifically, statistics report on 83% of female teachers in elementary education (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007-2008). Further, results with respect to gender and the JD-R model do not reveal any clear differences between men and women. For example, mixed results have been found regarding the relationship between gender and burnout (Bekker, Croon, & Bressers, 2005) and no relationship has been found between gender and turnover rates (see Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000, for a meta-analyses). As such, we believe that our results are not biased by the large representation of women in our sample.

Practical Recommendations.

A first important practical implication is that the negative effects of unmet expectations on health related (i.e., emotional exhaustion) and more behavioural (i.e., turnover intentions) outcomes can be avoided by promoting organization members to engage in learning opportunities. By offering learning opportunities in the job, employees can cope with
unmet expectations, preventing them to result in turnover intentions, through emotional
exhaustion. As such, this study provides handles to solve a widespread problem of high
turnover rates among teachers as a result of unmet expectations (Ingersoll, 2001). In order to
meet this problem, schools might consider some form of socialization needs analysis to
identify newcomers’ needs and expectations and ensure that their experiences during entry are
designed in a manner that addresses them. It would appear that merely informing newcomers
of potentially negative experiences – as do realistic job previews – is not likely to eliminate
their needs or improve unpleasant work experiences (Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Further,
schools could pay more attention to offering teachers opportunities to learn. In today’s
complex society, teachers are asked to educate a most heterogeneous group of students to the
highest academic standards ever. This requires substantial efforts from teachers not only to
understand their subject matter deeply and flexibly, but also to keep up with constantly
changing and evolving demands, which can only be achieved through lifelong learning
(Darling-Hammond, 2008).

In conclusion, this study considered the moderating role of learning opportunities in
the process through which unmet expectations relate to turnover intentions, via emotional
exhaustion. It was found that learning opportunities are a good buffer for unmet expectations,
in the sense that it weakens the relationship between unmet expectations and emotional
exhaustion, and consequently turnover intentions.

References


Evans, M.G. (1985). A Monte Carlo study of the effects of correlated method variance in


Table 1. Descriptives and intercorrelations between the variables in this study.

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Table 2. Results of a moderated hierarchical regression analyses for emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions.

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All entries are standardised regression coefficients.
* p < .05; ** p < .01
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Graphic presentation of the interrelationships between the central variables in this study.

*Figure 2.* The relationship between unmet expectations and emotional exhaustion as a function of learning opportunities.
Figure 1

Unmet Expectations → Emotional Exhaustion → Turnover Intentions

Learning Opportunities
Figure 2

- Emotional Exhaustion
- Low learning opportunities
- High learning opportunities

Emotional Exhaustion vs. Low and High Unmet Expectations