Exploring the Impact of Context-Specific Job Stressors on Employee Work Outcomes

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ABSTRACT
A path model was developed to examine the impact of context-specific job stressors on the work outcomes of 132 customer service employees. Respondents who reported a moderate and high level of context-specific stressors report a higher level of job demand and work family conflict. Respondents who reported a higher level of job control tend to receive more work-related support and are more satisfied with their job. Surprisingly, respondents who experienced a higher level of work family conflict tend to receive less work-related support. We found that respondents who obtained more work-related support tend to report a higher level of job satisfaction. There was also a positive relationship between positive job satisfaction and a lower level of intention to quit.

Keywords: Stress and stress management, Work performance, Personnel psychology, Work environment

A considerable body of literature has investigated the potential negative impact of work stressors on employee attitudes, behaviour, and health. Indeed, researchers have developed a great many models and theories in an attempt to understand the complex interaction between the person and the environment in the general, and occupational, stress process. One such model, the Job Demand Control Support model (see Karasek 1979; Karasek & Theorell 1990) brings together demands (stressors), job control, and support in an attempt to explain the impact of stressors on strain/adjustment. Other dispositional and contextual variables have additionally been investigated in this model such as self efficacy and subjective fit (Jimmieson 2000; Newton & Jimmieson 2008). One particular variable that has received less detailed investigation is the role of work family conflict, as examined in the current paper. Indeed, current work norms and trends indicate employees are working for longer than ever before with work commitments reducing time spent with family as a result. This is particularly the case for service related professions. This study explores the role of work family conflict in the occupational stress process in a sample of workers from client service contexts. This study also examines the influence of context-specific job stressors experienced by these service workers in order to better understand how work and personal context influence employee performance outcomes.

Work Stressors and Employee Outcomes

The occupational stress literature has investigated the potential negative impact of work stressors on employee outcomes. Sources of strain related to the role performed and work situation have attracted a great deal of attention. There are a considerable number of empirical studies that have
investigated role stressors and employee outcomes, along with several meta-analytic reviews (e.g., Abramis 1994; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal 1964). Most recently, Ortqvist and Wincent (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 295 studies that involved role ambiguity (uncertainty about what is required to perform a role), role conflict (conflicting information about the same role or job), and role overload (too much work to complete) and their effects on employee outcomes. Generally consistent with conclusions in existing occupational stress research, role ambiguity was related to increased tension and indicators of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment) and less favourable levels of job-related attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and propensity to quit). Role conflict also was related to higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower job-related attitudes. Lastly, role overload was related to higher tension, exhaustion, depersonalisation, and propensity to quit, as well as reduced commitment to the organisation.

The Job Demand Control Model (JDCM)

Many researchers have embarked on the study of potential moderators of the negative effects of role stressors on employee outcomes. The notion of control has been extensively studied as a moderator of the stressor-strain relationship and is depicted by Karasek’s (1979) Job Demand Control Model (JDCM). The JDCM specifies two constructs (namely demands’, and ‘job decision latitude’ or ‘job control’) that can vary in a workplace setting. In this model, job demand refers to psychological stressors in the workplace, whereas job decision latitude refers to the extent that employees can control their tasks and conduct each working day. Essentially, the JDCM highlights an interactive effect such that control over daily tasks and conduct ameliorates the negative impact of high job demands on levels of employee adjustment. That is, the negative impact of the stressor on employee adjustment is buffered by high decision latitude.

Literature investigating the moderating effects of job control or decision latitude has reported mixed results. Overall, a number of reviews, meta-analyses, and independent studies have been conducted to examine the large number of findings in relation to the moderating role of job control (e.g., van der Doef & Maes 1999). Generally, these research efforts have provided limited support for the stress-buffering role of control in the workplace. For instance, van der Doef and Maes (1999)
reviewed 86 studies from 63 samples published between 1979 and 1997 that investigated hypotheses relating to control as a moderator. Of the studies reviewed in this instance, 26 supported the buffering role of job control on the stressor-adjustment process. Overall, the results are not entirely consistent in the demonstration of proposed buffering effects of job control in the experience of employee strain. More recently, Karasek and Theorell (1990) reconceptualised the JDCM to incorporate the additional role of social support as a moderator of the work stressor-adjustment process. The revised model predicts that employee adjustment should be lowest in conditions of high work demands combined with low levels of both decision latitude and social support (Johnson 1986). Similarly, the model suggests that employee adjustment will be highest when high job demands are combined with high control and high social support.

Research has identified several types of social support (emotional, instrumental, structural, and functional) with varying moderating capacities associated with each. Viswesvaran, Sanchez, and Fisher (1999) and Beehr (1994) conducted meta-analyses of research that investigated the moderating role of social support on the work stressor-adjustment relationship. Generally, the researchers found that the interaction of work stressors and social support explained significant additional variance, with the presence of social support (in its various forms) reducing the negative effects of work stressors on employee strain. Furthermore, a considerable body of literature has provided some support for Karasek and Theorell’s (1990) theorised strain- and buffer- hypotheses relating to the demand, decision latitude, and social support interactions (see de Lange et al. 2003). Interestingly, however, some studies have found a reverse-buffering effect for social support such that it can accentuate the impact of a work stressor on strain. To this extent, Beehr and Glazer (2001) suggest that these results might be a function of cultural context, and that different cultures and cultural characteristics (ethnic, in this case) might be related to perceptions of social support. Indeed, this statement applies also to the concept of organisational culture as many typologies of organisational culture incorporate aspects of support in the workplace as a defining characteristic (e.g., Cooke & Lafferty 1989).

In addition to the general research on social support, a number of studies have investigated the ability of instrumental social support (work support) to buffer the impact of job-related stress on physical and mental health. Instrumental work support refers to assistance from one’s work colleagues
and/or supervisor. There is evidence that instrumental work support has positive effects on employee health and wellbeing, including reducing perceived stress (Viswesvaran, Sanchez & Fisher 1999). However, there is also evidence that receiving instrumental work support may represent a threat to some individuals' self-esteem, and has the potential to evoke feelings of incompetence and inferiority (Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Alagna 1982).

**Work-Family Conflict**

Another important area in the occupational stress research field is work-family conflict, as employees increasingly struggle to manage the competing demands of work and family commitments (Byron 2005; Kossek and Ozeki 1998). Work-family conflict (also called work-family interference), is defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 77) as, “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect”. Specifically, work-family conflict exists when the time, strain and behaviours required by one role make it difficult to fulfil the requirements of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). Recent meta-analyses highlight the potential negative consequences of work-family conflict, including the impact of work-family conflict on job and life satisfaction, and burnout and absenteeism (Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton 2000).

Role strain hypothesis suggests that individuals have a limited amount of psychological resources, time, and energy, and that strain occurs when the demands of multiple roles exceed these resources (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley (2003) state that the antecedents of work-family conflict include work domain variables (e.g., job stress), non-work domain variables (e.g., family demands, marital conflict), and individual and demographic variables (e.g., personality, age, gender, coping style). Research has generated evidence that greater work-family conflict is associated with conflict, pressure, stress at work, unpredictability in work routines (including working weekends, rotating shifts, and long hours) (Fox & Dwyer 1999), perceived inequity in rewards (Greenhaus, Bedeian & Mossholder 1987), abusive supervision (Tepper 2000), a profit-driven focus (Wallace 1997), and being self-employed (Parasurman & Simmers 2001). Conversely, research suggests that a supportive organisational culture and/or supervisor can reduce work-family conflict (Greenhaus et al. 1987). Carlson and Perrew (1999) also found evidence that
social support may reduce perceived role stressors (conflict and ambiguity) and time demands, and thus, indirectly decrease work-family conflict.

There is a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical evidence supporting the notion that the work stressor-adjustment relationship can be moderated by a host of environmental and individual variables. Moreover, some of this research has further identified the impact of elements of an organisational context that may potentially moderate the work stressor-adjustment process.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The present study sought to extend the Job Demand Control Support model to incorporate the effect of work family conflict. To investigate this research direction, Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis was employed to explore whether our theoretical model could be explained by demand (work stressors and job demand), job control, support, work family conflict, and employee adjustment (such as psychological wellbeing, job satisfaction, and intention to quit).

It is hypothesised that work-specific stressors will result in more job demand and less job control. We expect as a result of an increase in the level of job demand employees will report a higher level of work-family conflict. We also expect increasing level of job demand, reducing level of job control will result in an increasing level of work-family conflict. Support from work and non-work are expected to have negative relationships with job demand, positive relationships with job control, and negative relationships with work-family conflict, respectively. It is expected that work-family conflict and job demand will have positive relationships with psychological wellbeing while job control is expected to have a negative relationship with psychological wellbeing. Finally, we expect all variables in the JDCS model to have an impact on job satisfaction, which ultimately leads to intention to quit.

METHOD

Sample

Data collection was done through the distribution of approximately 210 questionnaires (130 completed questionnaires were used in the data analysis). These questionnaires were distributed to small and medium sized profit and not-for-profit organisations. In addition to this, a group of graduate students from an Australian university were also encouraged to take part in the research. In each of these groups, three focus groups were conducted separately in which a total of fifteen employees
working in a high customer and/or client contact role participated in the sessions. They were conducted to validate the job stressors developed by Noblet et al. (2005).

**Measures and Model Estimation**

To test our proposed model, shown in Figure 1, we utilized *SmartPLS* v.2 (Ringle, Wende & Will 2005), a form of structural equation modelling, to analyse our model. *SmartPLS*, a latent path model, is a technique used for estimating path coefficients in causal models and the software allows for the simultaneous testing of hypotheses. Survey data were input to SPSS v.17 to calculate z scores and descriptive statistics.

In PLS, the path coefficients are standardized regression coefficients; the loadings are similar to factor loadings. The significance of each variable to another is then determined according to the bootstrap procedure (note: bootstrap was undertaken with 500 samples). PLS differs from LISREL, as it is suitable for the analysis of small samples while the latter requires substantially larger samples. Another advantage of using PLS over LISREL is that PLS does not require multivariate normal data. Furthermore, PLS is considered to be appropriate in building causal modelling for future testing purposes. Given the number of variables in the proposed model, the sample size is within the range considered to be suitable for PLS analysis (Chin & Newstead 1999: 314).

Following Ringle et al. (2005), we assessed the significance of PLS parameter estimates by using the Bootstrap option incorporated within the *SmartPLS* software. The bootstrapping procedure is carried out to provide extra confidence that the results are not sample-specific by using repeated random samples drawn from the data. In this instance, the bootstrap procedure was repeated until it reached 500 bootstrap samples. Composite reliability coefficients of the constructs range from 0.84 to 0.93. Most of the average variance extracted (AVE) computed are greater than 0.5, with the exception of job demand, which is 0.46. Furthermore, comparison of these reliabilities with inter-construct correlations display adequate discriminant validity as the square root of the AVE for each construct is much larger than its correlation with any other construct (Venaik, Midgley & Devinney 2005). Hence, the validity and reliability of the job demand construct is not considered to be of any major methodological concern.
Harman’s ex post one factor test was used to ensure that the current study did not suffer from common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ 1986). All the variables used in the study were entered into an un-rotated factor analysis to determine the number of factors. If a single factor emerges from the factor analysis, this would indicate that the data suffered from a common method variance problem. The analysis showed that there were 17 factors (with eigenvalues greater than 1.0) which explained 73.5 percent of the variance. This finding provided support that common method variance is not an issue in the current study.

**Job Satisfaction (Formative scale).** Job satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale developed by Warr and Payne (1983). The items asked participants to indicate their level of satisfaction regarding various aspects in their current work environment (e.g., ‘What is your level of enjoyment, satisfaction, and happiness with your current job?’). The items were anchored by ‘1’ (I am not at all satisfied) to ‘5’ (I am extremely satisfied with my job and couldn’t be more satisfied). Higher scores on the scale are indicative of higher levels of job satisfaction.

**Intention to Quit (Reflective scale).** Intention to quit was measured using a four-item scale, developed by Bluedorn (1982). Each of the questions measured respondents’ intention to quit, in which higher scores represented greater intention of respondents to leave the organisation. An example item is: ‘How would you rate your chances of quitting the company in the next three months?’. Each of the items was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘1’ (terrible) to ‘7’ (excellent). The scale had a composite reliability coefficient of 0.91.

**Job Stressors (Formative scale).** Respondents were asked to respond to a 33-item situation-specific stressors scale that required them to indicate the extent that each of the factors listed was a source of stress in their job on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (major source of stress). This list of stressors was adopted from Noblet et al. (2005) and is reproduced in Appendix 1. Stressors that were rated by at least 70 percent of respondents as being a moderate, large or major source of stress (that is, a score of three, four or five on the five-point scale) were retained for further analysis. The aim was to identify those stressors which were most common to customer contact service workers. We identified six situation-specific job stressors which were retained for the PLS analysis (indicated in italics in the appendix). These were incorporated into the path model as a
formative scale as we argued that all six context-specific stressors are necessary in inducing stress at work.

**Job Demand (Reflective scale).** Job demand was measured by adopting a six-item scale adopted from Caplan et al. (1980). An example item is ‘How much workload do you have?’. The questions were divided into two sections; in the first section participants were asked to respond to a statement and give a rating ranging from ‘1’ (rarely) to ‘5’ (very often). The second set of statements required respondents to apply each statement to their jobs and respond on a five-point scale ranging from ‘1’ (hardly any) to ‘5’ (a great deal). The composite reliability coefficient was 0.85.

**Work Family Conflict (Reflective scale).** Work family conflict was measured using a four-item scale developed by Choi and Chen (2006). An example item is ‘My family or friends dislike how often I am preoccupied with my work while I am at home’ with items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), so that a high value signifies more work family conflict. The composite reliability coefficient was 0.84.

**Job Control (Reflective scale).** Job control was measured using a seven-item scale developed by Karasek (1979). An example item is ‘my job requires that I learn new things’ and respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Job control has a composite reliability coefficient of 0.85.

**Social Support (Formative scale).** Social support from within the organisation was measured separately using a nine-item scale developed by Etzion (1984). Participants were asked to respond to a statement and indicate the level of support presence in their work and non-work environment. An example item of work-related support is ‘To what extent do you get appreciation and recognition for what you do, in your work life and life outside of work?’. Each of these statements was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘1’ (very little) to ‘7’ (very much). Non-work related support had a composite reliability coefficient of 0.91.

**Psychological Wellbeing (Formative scale).** Psychological health was measured by adopting items from the General Health Questionnaire 12 (Goldberg & Williams 1988). Respondents rated their health on a four-point scale ranging from 3 (much less than usual) to 0 (more so than usual). An example item is ‘Have you recently been able to concentrate on whatever you’re doing?’. A higher
value implies higher level of psychological strain (or less psychological wellbeing). This is a formative construct as we argued that all 12 items are required as an additive index to measure psychological wellbeing.

RESULTS

A total of 58.2 percent of the customer service employees have equal or more than 50 percent internal and/or external customers/clients contact in their job. Among the 132 participants, 53 percent were male and 36 percent were aged between 31 and 40 years. Respondents were predominantly (85 percent) full-time employees. Table 1 reports the results of the PLS analysis. The path model explained 40.16 percent of the dependent variable, Intention to Quit.

As reported in Table 1, there was a statistically significant path from context-specific job stressors to job demand (path coefficient=0.44, t-statistic=4.32, p<.001) and work-family conflict (path coefficient=0.46, t-statistic=3.45, p<.001). Surprisingly, context-specific job stressors do not have any negative relationship with job control. We found a negative and partially statistically significant path from job control to psychological wellbeing (path coefficient=-0.31, t-statistic=1.69, p<.10). There was a positive and statistically significant path from job control to work-related support (path coefficient=0.55, t-statistic=3.94, p<.001) and job satisfaction (path coefficient=0.36, t-statistic=3.55, p<.001). There was also a positive and partially statistically significant path from job demand to psychological wellbeing (path coefficient=0.32, t-statistic=1.72, p<.10). Work-family conflict was found to have a negative path leading to work-related support (path coefficient=-0.26, t-statistic=2.08, p<.05) and job satisfaction (path coefficient=-0.24, t-statistic=2.06, p<.05). There is a negative and statistically significant path leading from job satisfaction intention to quit (path coefficient=-0.63, t-statistic=9.48, p<.001).
DISCUSSION

The present study sought to investigate the role of job context specific stressors and work family conflict in the context of the Job Demand Control Social Support model of occupational stress of service employees. Using data from a sample of customer service employees, a path model was developed indicating the vital role of job context specific stressors and work family conflict in the occupational stress process.

Overall, the model reveals significant paths, as reported in Table 2. Our results highlight the importance of context-specific job stressors and how these have an impact on the workload (job demand) of service employees. These respondents also report a higher level of work-family conflict. Service employees who experienced a higher level of job demand tend to report a lower level of psychological wellbeing. This result suggests that job demand in the service context, together with a set of context job stressors, have a significant impact on the work-family conflict as individuals have less time to devote to their family and these resulted in a higher level of psychological strain.

The set of context-specific stressors experienced by service employees tends to relate to insufficient staffing level, unrealistic performance target and expectations, and fast pace in the service environment. While context-specific job stressors do not have any significant impact on the level of job control, individuals who report a higher level of job control tend to obtain more support from work, which ultimately led to a higher level of job satisfaction and higher psychological wellbeing. This finding suggests that work support could be used as a mediator to higher level of psychological wellbeing.

Those reporting higher levels of work-based support in meeting client demand reported higher levels of job satisfaction and lower level of intention to quit. This result makes sense and can be potentially explained by the notion that instrumental support reduces potential ambiguity and demand on the job and also affords an individual further informational and possibly human resources to meet the demand. As such, managers should ensure that team-based cultures are facilitated and promoted to ensure employees value and behave in ways related to helping others and working together to get the work completed.
Consistent with the literature on work-family conflict and employee outcomes (e.g., Choi & Chen 2006; Kossek & Ozeki 1998), we found a negative path between work-family conflict and job satisfaction. This finding suggests that work family conflict results in a lower level of job satisfaction in the service environment.

Job control has been acknowledged as a variable in the JDCM that has a positive effect on wellbeing (Ganster 1989; Parkes 1989; Terry & Jimmieson 1999). The current study showed that employees who are given more control over their work (i.e. job control-decision authority) have a lower level of stress in spite of the level of job demands. Therefore, employers should use work redesign to improve more job control authority as well as greater skill utilisation to lower work-related stress.

These results are important in understanding the nature of the work stress process in terms of the JDCS Model and extending understanding of the operation and role of work family conflict in the context of this model. This research represents the first time that investigators have explored these inter-relationships as a full model using PLS analysis. Further, the extension of Karasek’s model by including context-specific job stressors, social support at work, and work-family conflict were incorporated into the current study and the result showed that social support from work is critical in enhancing psychological wellbeing, increasing job satisfaction, and lowering intention to quit.

Overall, several limitations and therefore future research directions can be noted with respect to this study. In particular, it would be beneficial for future researchers to explore the present model in a broader and larger sample of employees (e.g., from different work context ranging from service to professional job roles). Future researchers can also further unpack the impact of different types of stressors examined in this model with particular focus on role stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity. Our findings should also be interpreted with care as the results could be affected by common method bias. Future study should collect the dependent variable from different time period in order to minimise the effect of common method biasness.

A managerial implication of the current study is that a reduction in job demand may possibly lower the level of stress experienced, which eventually also reduces any harmful effects of context-specific job stressors. In today’s market-driven economy, reducing job demand may appear
incompatible especially when there is a requirement for high productivity. Keeley and Harcourt (2001, pp. 109) state, “Excessively bureaucratic rules, multiple chains of command, and poorly organized work systems may require employees to work harder and faster just to cope with the confusion and chaos generated by a relatively unproductive work environment. Simplification of these rules, structures, and systems may offer the possibility in many cases of both higher productivity and lower stress”.

This study showed that high job demand placed exceptional pressures on employees and negatively impacted their wellbeing. The ever-increasing challenges and competition for organisations in the global market have forced employers to increase work capacity in order to maximise efficiency and productivity. In summary, the current study builds upon Karasek’s JDCS Model to evaluate the level of context-specific job stressors on employee outcomes. Occupational stress resulting from emotional demands does affect customer service employees as they experience low job control and high work demand.
REFERENCES


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Appendix 1 Sources of Stressors (Formative scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Lack of human resources to accomplish tasks</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having enough say in what happens in your organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment/system breakdowns or faults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Unclear expectations</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having your work closely monitored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff appraisal program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing the competing demands of management and clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not receiving enough training and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of advice and guidance from more senior staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Unrealistic performance targets</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heavy workloads</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not having enough time to do job as well as you would like</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Other staff not pulling their weight</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Insufficient staff to complete work on time and to standard expected</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of opportunity to take on more senior roles or challenging tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with abusive or difficult clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long working hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty balancing work and non-work commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair treatment from more senior staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements/conflict with senior management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements/conflict with other employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The prospect of doing the same job for the next 5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourcing/off-shoring job functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company placing unequal importance between profit and performance and employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Italicised items denote significant context-specific stressors included in the formative scale**
Table 1 Results of Path Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paths</th>
<th>Path coefficients</th>
<th>t-statistics</th>
<th>Level of Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stressors → Job Demand</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressors → Work Family Conflict</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Control → Psychological Wellbeing</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Control → Work-related Support</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Control → Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Demand → Psychological Wellbeing</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict → Work-related Support</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict → Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction → Intention to Quit</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: +p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001