Combating the Impact of Managerialism on Public Sector Employees

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Abstract
With the widespread and continuing adoption of managerialism in the public sector, ignoring the impact of change on employees could prevent managerialism from achieving its' goals. This study investigates the efficacy of an augmented demand-control-support (D-C-S) model in predicting three of the key employee outcomes associated with organisational change - psychological health, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Analyses of a survey of 207 employees in an Australian public sector organisation found that the augmented D-C-S model explained a significant proportion of the employee outcomes. The most important variables were work-based social support and job control. The results indicate that the augmented D-C-S model provides a useful tool for managers considering or implementing organisational change in the public sector.

Key words
Managerialism, occupational stress, employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organisational commitment.
Combating the Impact of Managerialism on Public Sector Employees

Public sector agencies around the world have been undergoing large-scale reforms since the 1980's. A defining feature of these reforms has been an attempt to apply private sector management philosophies that are more results-oriented and place a heightened emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and accountability [Cope, 1997 #645]. The shift towards private sector management practices is sometimes referred to as ‘managerialism’ and typically involves radical structural, procedural and cultural changes (Dixon et al. 1998). Although reform in the public sector has been primarily designed to lower costs while maintaining standards of accountability and service (McKenna 1996), the shift towards managerialism has been fraught with many difficulties, not least of which are the effects on employee performance and wellbeing.

There are indications that the capacity of public sector employees to effectively perform their roles has been increasingly compromised by reforms involved in propagating managerialism. Managerialism has been shown to impact on employee performance through a variety of means, including increased levels of employee stress (Korunga et al. 2003), dissatisfaction (Mikkelsen et al. 2000) and through declining levels of organisational commitment (Young et al. 1998). These employee outcomes result in substantial costs for organisation and ultimately affect the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the agency (McHugh & Brennan 1994). Indeed, ignoring the impact of managerialism on employees could prevent the organisation from achieving the very goals it sets out to achieve.

The human and economic costs of managerialism, especially in terms of job stress, require that steps be taken to build healthier and more conducive working environments (McHugh & Brennan 1994). However, further research is needed to test the mechanisms through which managerialism impacts on employees (Korunga et al. 2003; Mikkelsen et al. 2000). There are a number of models that can be used to examine the situations and conditions that contribute to employee outcomes such as wellbeing. This study will employ one of the most widely used theoretical models underpinning occupational research on employee outcomes - the Demand-Control-Support (D-C-S) model - to explore the issues that impact on employees (Fox et al. 1993).

The Demand-Control-Support Model

The D-C-S proposes that the risk of psychological and physical illness (referred to as strain) increases when the demands of a situation exceed the levels of job control and social support available to the individual (Karasek et al. 1981). High strain jobs therefore represent those situations where the demands are not matched by adequate levels of decision-making authority and/or support from supervisors and colleagues. The D-C-S has been found to offer key insights into the impact of the work environment on the employee, yet this and other generic models have been criticized for focusing too heavily on a narrow range of generalised work characteristics and ignoring more situation-specific variables (e.g., Sparks & Cooper 1999). Models that combine generic and situation-specific variables often predict larger proportions of outcome variables such as strain than if the generic model had been used alone (e.g., Beehr et al. 2000). Based on these results, the present study will investigate both the generic variables contained within the D-C-S model and stressors that are specific to the organisation participating in this study. Identifying and measuring these two sets of variables will help researchers and managers to ascertain the work characteristics that are particularly influential in the wellbeing or strain experienced by employees.

Descriptions of the stress process indicate that employee-level outcomes (including wellbeing and job satisfaction) are influenced by both environmental and individual variables, not just environmental characteristics such as job control, social support and organisational sources of stress (Ivancevich & Matteson 1980). A person-related variable that is frequently included in descriptions of the stress process is coping.

Coping Resources

Transactional models of stress posit that when faced with adverse or stressful conditions, individuals draw on coping resources to either reduce or ameliorate the impact of these noxious stimuli (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Typically, these models focus on individual coping capacities when describing the onset of stress, whilst ignoring the role of contextual issues. However, other models, such as the conservation of resources theory, conceptualise coping resources as both internal and external characteristics or energies that can help people cope with threatening conditions or events and restore stability in their lives (Dollard et al. 2003). In the work stress context, internal coping resources refer to cognitive or behavioural strategies adopted by the individual that are directed towards modifying or avoiding stressful conditions (Parkes 1990). Conversely, external resources include conditions, objects or energies available in the surrounding environment that can help the individual reduce or manage sources of stress. Consistent with the D-C-S model, control/autonomy and social support are regarded as the most important work conditions (i.e. external resources) in addressing work stress (Dollard et al. 2003). Internal coping resources can be broken down further into problem and emotion-focused coping (Nowack 1996). Attempts to modify, or manage the source of the stress, are referred to as problem-based coping. In contrast, efforts to regulate the heightened emotions that result from exposure to threatening stimuli, whilst also avoiding direct confrontation with these threats, are referred to as emotion-focused coping.

Although the coping literature typically conceptualizes coping resources as consisting of individual capacities, there is evidence that these internal resources are heavily influenced by external resources. For example, efforts to deal with excessive job demands have been found to be more effective when the problem-based coping style was matched by a high level of job control (de Rijk et al. 1998). However other aspects of the relationship between internal and external resources (such as the interaction coping styles and work-based support) are underdeveloped theoretically and empirically and further research is needed.
is required to better understand the interactions between internal and external coping resources (de Rijk et al. 1998). Another aim of the present study is therefore to examine the interaction between coping variables (i.e., problem and emotion-based coping) and important resource conditions (i.e., job control and social support).

**Employee outcomes: Employee attitudes and wellbeing**

Two outcome variables that are frequently used to measure the job strain experienced by working populations are psychological health and job satisfaction (e.g., Leong et al. 1996; Sparks & Cooper 1999). To enable comparisons to be made with these studies, the present study will examine the capacity of the JSM and job-specific stressors to predict the psychological health and job satisfaction experienced by participants. A third outcome variable to be examined in this study is organisational commitment. Organisational commitment is generally defined as an attachment to the organisation (Testa 2001) and has consistently been found to be related job satisfaction and work stress (e.g., Thoreson et al. 2003). Studies of organisational change have found that these three outcomes are important employee-centred variables in the context of organisational change (Yousef 2000), particularly in the public sector context (Mikkelsen et al. 2000).

With the widespread and continuing adoption of managerialism in the public sector, research is needed to investigate the impacts of those changes on employees. Subsequently, this study represents one of a few analyses of the full D-C-S model in the public sector context. This project goes further by augmenting the D-C-S model with occupation-specific (i.e. public sector) stressors and, in addition, provides an examination of the interactions between internal and external coping resources. By assessing the human impact of managerialism, this study seeks to highlight the issues that management should focus on in order to build healthier and more effective public sector organisations.

**Method**

**Sample**

In Australia there has been substantial organisational change toward managerialism within the public sector (Dixon et al. 1998). The study sample consisted of staff from a department within a medium-sized Australian public sector organisation. The department was located in an Australian capital city and employed 346 staff. A range of occupational groups were represented in the department including: human resource management practitioners, psychologists, accountants, designers, engineers and clerical personnel. The department was situated in the organisation’s Head Office and all employees were invited to take part in the present study. A copy of the questionnaire, along with a letter from the CEO encouraging members to participate in the survey, was sent to employees’ home addresses. Staff were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it in a reply-paid envelope.

A total of 207 (59%) staff members completed and returned their survey questionnaires. To summarise the demographic characteristics of the sample, 60% of the respondents were male and the vast majority (86%) were aged 30 years and over. Almost all (97%) were permanent employees and 72% had been employed with the organisation for more than 10 years.

**Measures**

The questionnaire used in this study measured the following dependent and independent variables.

**Psychological Health.** The GHQ-12 consists of two sets of six items that are designed to measure self-perceived psychological health (Goldberg & Williams 1988). The first set of items deals with healthy functioning (e.g., been able to concentrate) and the second set deals with abnormal functioning (e.g., losing self-confidence). Participants completed a four-point scale ranging from “not at all” (scored as zero) to “much more than usual” (scored as three). Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived health. The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87.

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured using a 15-item scale developed by Warr (1979). This scale was designed to measure the satisfaction-dissatisfaction felt by participants in relation to various aspects of work (e.g., physical conditions, management, salary and job security). Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied” (i.e., the higher the score, the higher the dissatisfaction). The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.92.

**Organisational Commitment.** This variable was measured using Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian’s (1974) well-known six item scale. An example item is, “I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this university be successful.” Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87.

**Control.** Participant perceptions of the amount of control they experienced at work were measured using the nine-item decision latitude scale developed by Karasek (1985). The scale consists of two theoretically distinct sub-dimensions, skill discretion and decision authority (Karasek et al. 1998). Participants were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (i.e., the higher the score, the higher the level of agreement). The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83.

**Job demand.** The Quantitative Workload scale (Caplan et al. 1980) was used to measure job demands. This is an 11-item scale that encompassed both psychological and physical job demands. Participants were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from “rarely” to “very often”. The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91.
Social support. Support from work-sources was measured using the 9-item scale developed by Ezioni (1984). Participants were asked to indicate the extent that various support features are present in their workplace. Participants recorded their responses on a five-point scale ranging from 'always present' to 'never present'. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.84.

Coping (Internal). Problem and emotion-focused coping was measured using Nowack’s (1990) 10-item measure. Five of these items assessed problem-based coping responses (e.g., ‘ask others to modify or change their behaviour to make things better for me’), and the remaining five measured negative, emotion-focused responses (e.g., ‘blame, criticize and put myself down for somehow creating or causing the problem’). Participants were asked to record their responses on a five-point scale ranging from “never” (=1) to “always” (=5). The Cronbach's alpha for the problem and emotion-focused coping responses were 0.60 and 0.72 respectively.

Organisation-specific stressors. Participants were asked to respond to a 27-item organisation-specific stressors scale that required them to indicate the extent that each of the factors listed was a source of stress in their job. A five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “major source of stress” was used. The organisation-specific stressors scale was based on the results of a qualitative study involving a cross-section of staff members. In this study, a semi-structured focus group was undertaken to identify the sources of stress experienced by participants. Eleven staff, who represented a cross-section of the department, took part in this focus group. The results revealed 27 separate stressors that were experienced by participants. Examples of the sources of stress included, lack of human resources to accomplish tasks, unclear expectations, and balancing competing demands of management and customers. Member validation checks and comparisons with the occupational stress literature (e.g., Cox & Cox 1993) indicated that the overall analysis had satisfactory levels of internal and external validity.

Results
Prior to undertaking the analysis, the data was screened and assumptions tested using the checklist developed by Tabachnick and Fidell (1996). The missing data was randomly dispersed among variables and this data was treated using listwise deletion (Roth 1994). The evaluation of assumptions, particularly when investigating collinearity and multicollinearity, indicated that the data were robust to the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity of residuals inherent to the multiple regression analyses. All statistical analyses were undertaken using SPSS 11.5 for Windows (SPSS Inc. 1998).

The descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1. The correlations were conducted to highlight the pattern of relationships between the generic conditions represented in the D-C-S model (i.e., job demand, job control and work-based support), the coping measures and six organisation-specific stressors. The six organisation-specific stressors used in the bivariate correlations were selected by taking those stressors that were rated by at least 50 percent of respondents as being a moderate, large or major source of stress (i.e., a score of three, four or five on the five-point scale). There was a clear gap between the top six organisation-specific stressors and the next most common source of stress. The purpose of identifying the most common moderate-major stressors was to ensure that the selected sources of stress were relevant to as many of the respondents as possible.

Whilst the large number of significant correlations between the target measures and the predictor variables (Table 1) suggests that all independent variables have a close association with the outcome measures, they do not provide an accurate insight into the relative contribution of these variables. Moreover, the bivariate correlations do not allow for the interaction terms (e.g., demand x control x problem-based coping) to be tested. Multiple regression was therefore used to clarify the predictive capacity of the D-C-S, coping and the organisation-specific stressors and to identify possible interactions between variables.

(Add Table 1 here)

A three-step hierarchical regression was performed for each of the target variables: psychological health, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. The D-C-S variables - job demand, job control and social support - were entered into the first step so as to identify each of those variable’s unique contribution to the dependent variables. Step two in the regression consisted of the two coping variables (positive and emotion-focused coping), whilst the third step contained the organisation-specific stressors.

Two sets of interactive terms were also tested in the original regression analyses. The first set consisted of the D-C-S interactive terms, demand x control and demand x control x support. These terms made negligible contributions to the amount of variance in psychological health, job satisfaction or organisational commitment (as measured by the adjusted R2). Similarly, the interactive terms involving the coping and D-C-S variables (the second set of interactive terms), added little to the predictive capacity of the model. The interaction terms were subsequently omitted from the regression equations, leaving the main effects for D-C-S, coping and organisation-specific stressors in the final analyses.

(Add Table 2 here)

The overall equation shown in Table 2 significantly explains the variance in psychological health, $R^2_{adj} = 0.473$, $F_{(11, 149)} = 13.066, p < 0.001$. The overall equation was also significant for the outcome measures of job satisfaction, $R^2_{adj} = 0.481$, $F_{(11, 145)} = 13.148, p < 0.001$, and organisational commitment, $R^2_{adj} = 0.226$, $F_{(11, 153)} = 5.015, p < 0.001$.

Discussion
The detailed results of the multiple regression analyses in Table 2 indicate that support from work sources was the only independent variable that was predictive of all three outcome measures. While job control was strongly associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment, it was not predictive of psychological health. Conversely, both the problem and emotion-focused coping variables were predictive of psychological health, but not job satisfaction and commitment. The salary-related stressor, ‘pay not as good as people doing similar work’ was the only organisation-specific stressor that was closely linked to more than one outcome variable (job satisfaction and organisation commitment). Overall, the results show that the work characteristics described by the augmented D-C-S explained a significant proportion of the explained variance in psychological health, job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Social support from work sources was found to have a particularly strong effect on all three outcome measures. The strong predictive capacity of work-based support is consistent with numerous other studies (e.g., Karasek & Theorell 1990; Landsbergis et al. 1992) and adds weight to the view that work-based support offers important opportunities for building healthier and more satisfying work environments.

Despite the lack of support for interactions between the internal and external coping resources, the results of this and previous research suggests that both sets of resources still need to be considered when developing strategies to protect and enhance employee wellbeing. The close relationship between the two forms of internal coping styles (i.e., problem and emotion-focused coping) indicates that cognitive and behavioural resources can have a powerful influence on people’s ability to cope with the pressures associated with everyday life. Where employees have been found to rely heavily on emotion-focused strategies, training needs to be provided to encourage workers to adopt cognitive and behavioural approaches that are focused more on the source of the problem. Of course, work conditions (i.e., social support) were also predictive of respondents’ psychological wellbeing and actions aimed at boosting employee health should address both internal and external coping resources.

The failure of internal coping resources to capture a significant proportion of the variance in job satisfaction or commitment does not mean that employee-centred coping resources should be overlooked when developing strategies to improve these outcomes. Psychological health, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are highly correlated and fluctuations in one variable are likely to lead to changes in the other (as found in Fogarty et al. 1999). Further, other studies in the public sector context have found that coping can impact on these outcomes, such as commitment (Mikkelsen et al. 2000), possibly highlighting a context difference that researchers need to be aware of. Therefore, enhancing individual coping capacities are likely to have an indirect effect on job satisfaction and commitment via improvements in psychological wellbeing.

The success of the augmented D-C-S model in predicting the three key employee outcomes examined in this study highlights the value of adapting a parsimonious generic model, such as the D-C-S model, to the public sector context. The core D-C-S model accounted for the majority of the explained variance for both job satisfaction and organisational commitment and accounted for the largest share of explained variance for psychological health. The strength of the core D-C-S model confirms the value of this model in analysing organisational behaviour. The augmentation of this model with occupation-specific issues further improved the efficacy of the model.

The more specific variables accounted for a notable percentage of the explained variance for psychological health and job satisfaction. The inclusion of these organisation-specific issues provides an adaptability to the core model that allows diagnoses and interventions to be tailored to the situation. For example, the strongest of the supplementary issues, the perception that pay was not as good as other people doing similar work, provides a specific avenue for exploration by managers and interventions addressing this issue would have a direct impact on job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Job satisfaction, organisational commitment and work stress are important employee outcomes in the context of organisational change (e.g., Mikkelsen et al. 2000). The finding that the augmented D-C-S model is powerful at predicting job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job strain in the public sector, provides a useful, proven tool for managers considering or implementing organisational change in the public sector.

There are two limitations that need to be kept in mind when assessing the results of the present study. The study employed a cross-sectional design and therefore the results are limited to the period that the participants were surveyed. The ability to develop firm conclusions regarding the predictive capacity of the D-C-S and organisation-specific stressors would be strengthened by a longitudinal study. The second limitation relates to the reliance on the subjective views of the participants and the subsequent concern this raises about common method variance. This concern applies more to the dependent, rather than the independent variables. In terms of perceptions of working conditions, studies have shown a high correlation between expert ratings of job conditions and subjective assessments (e.g., Spector 1992). However additional objective measures of the outcome variables would have enhanced the validity of the findings.

**Conclusion**

The organisational changes inherent to managerialism have an impact on the public sector employee that is often overlooked. With the widespread and continuing adoption of managerialism in the public sector, this research has sought to investigate the issues that predict employee outcomes in the public sector. The impact of these changes on employees can be ameliorated by managers applying the augmented D-C-S model, or by incorporating the key issues highlighted above, such as increased social support at work, increased job control and training in problem-focused coping, into the change
program. Conversely, specific programs could be critiqued, relative to the augmented D-C-S model to assess whether they incorporate activities that could lessen the impact of the change on the employee and increase the chance of success of the program.
References


Sparks, K. & Cooper, C. (1999), Occupational differences in the work-strain relationship: towards the use of situation-specific models. *Journal of...


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Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01
Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Psychological Health, Job Satisfaction and Organisational Commitment

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<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ not as good</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.06 0.11***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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