Dealing with Work Stress and Strain: Is the Perception of Support More Important than Its Use?

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The authors conducted a study of the relationship between the perception and use of support in one's work environment and their effects on perceived stress and strain. The analytic sample consisted of 480 social workers drawn from a national directory, who answered a 10-page questionnaire with items addressing burnout and social support. The resulting data indicate that those who used existing support systems within their organizations generally reported benefiting from this, although the use of support does not necessarily result in positive outcomes. The study also indicated that one is more likely to use support if one perceives the work environment to be supportive. Implications for organizations and individuals are presented.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on the stress and strain associated with work strongly argues that social support has positive effects. Evidence resulting from research has overwhelmingly indicated that the presence of social support is inversely related to reports of stress and strain (cf. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Gottleib, 1983; House, 1981). Researchers have documented this inverse relationship for a wide array of work contexts and occupations, including the mental health professions (cf. Cherniss, 1980; Etzioni, 1984; Jayaratne, Tripodi, & Chess, 1983; Maslach, 1982; Pines, 1983; Shinn, Rosario, March, & Chestnut, 1984).

In this article we address another important —and related—issue noted in the research

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literature on conceptualizing social support. This issue is not definition, as most researchers agree that social support is a multidimensional construct. Rather, the issue is whether one conceptualizes and measures social support as a set of discrete events that have occurred (i.e., the receipt or use of support) or as a perception that support exists.

The former concept resembles Cohen & Wills' description of functional measures of social support, "which are measures that describe the existence of a relationship" (1985, p. 315) and what Barrera (1986) calls "enacted support." These are measures of actual behaviors associated with social support, such as the frequency of interactions with friends or the degree of participation in social groups. According to Gottlieb (1983), research following this philosophy is conducted by community psychologists and epidemiologists. Behavioral psychologists adopt a similar perspective. Indeed, Carstensen goes as far as to say that "behaviorists do not study social support per se. Rather, they allude to the importance of social support as justification for intervention efforts aimed at increasing rates of social interactions" (1986, p. 113).

In contrast to the "support-used" perspective, the prevailing conception held by those studying occupational stress has focused on the perceived availability of social support. Such researchers have emphasized the degree to which workers consider their work environment to be supportive, not whether these workers have actually received or used that which is considered supportive. This conception employs what Cohen and Wills call structural measures, which "directly assess the extent to which these relationships may provide particular functions" (1985, p. 315). According to this conception, if a worker considers a work environment supportive, this helps the individual deal with work-related stress and strain (Cobb, 1976), and therefore organizations should "attempt to capture individuals' confidence that adequate support would be available if it was needed . . ." (Barrera, 1986, p. 417). That is, the cognitive representation of a set of potential events is as powerful—perhaps more so—than the events themselves for managing work stress and strain.

The literature on work stress has rarely examined the relationship between perceived support and used support (Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Examining both models simultaneously will help us better understand the role of perception as it relates to use. Wethington and Kessler have argued that (a) if one perceives support to be available, a crisis may result in the mobilization of the sources of this support, and/or (b) if one perceives one's environment as supportive, one may cognitively reframe a potential crisis situation as not representing a crisis at all, unlike those lacking such a perception. In addition, many argue that the perception of available support can be distorted by various intrapersonal factors, which may thus enhance or negate the potential positive effects of social support (cf. Gore, 1981; Henderson, Byrne, & Duncan-Jones, 1981; Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

Because of the lack of research on the possible differential effects of perceived support and used support, we conducted a study to address the following important questions.

- What is the relationship between the use of support and feelings of stress and strain?
- What is the relationship between the use of support and satisfaction with one's professional practice?
- What is the relationship between perception of support and use of support?
- What are the relationships among perception of support and use of support with self-reported instances of stress and strain?
- Do perceptions of support and use of support have similar or different effects on stress and strain?

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THE STUDY

Sample

The study sample consisted of 772 social workers randomly selected from the *1985 NASW Membership Directory.* A total of 1,159 individuals listed in this directory were each mailed a 10-page questionnaire, a postage-paid envelope for returning the questionnaire, and a postage-paid postcard for confirming they had returned the completed questinnaire. If we did not receive respondents' return confirmation within three weeks, we sent them the questionnaire a second time. This procedure resulted in a 66.6% response rate (N = 772).

The analyses reported herein were restricted to those social workers working full time (i.e., 40 hours or more per week). This restriction eliminated all but 480 respondents, representing the analytic sample for this study. We decided to use a homogeneous group with respect to number of hours employed based on the reasoning that the effects of stress could vary depending on the level of one's exposure. In general, the demographic characteristics of the sample are similar to those reported previously for the members of the National Association of Social Workers. The majority were married (65.9%), women (57.9%), and white (89%). The mean age of the respondents was 47.5 years (SD = 9.83), the modal income from their social work jobs was between $25,000 and $35,000 per year, and they had been practicing as social workers in their current positions for an average of 7.6 years (SD = 5.76).

Variables

The study addressed many variables involving various dimensions and characteristics of the job situation. Most of the measures used in this study had been used in prior research, with reasonable reliability and validity, and the resulting data can be found in the sources cited below. The reliability figures presented are coefficient alphas computed on the current data set.

Stress

Three areas of work-related stress were measured. *Role ambiguity* was measured using a four-item index developed by Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, and Pinneau (1975) and has a reliability coefficient of r = .90. *Role conflict* was measured using a four-item index developed by Quinn and Staines (1977) and has a reliability coefficient of r = .70. *Work load* was measured using a four-item index developed by Caplan et al. (1975) and has a reliability coefficient of r = .89.

Strain

Four areas of psychological strain were measured. *Anxiety* was measured using a four-item index (r = .84), *depression* using a six-item index (r = .93), and *irritability* using two items. All three measures had been used extensively in prior research (cf. Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, & Pinneau, 1976; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Quinn & Staines, 1977). We also used a measure of *somatic complaints,* which was a slightly modified version of the index employed by Caplan et al. (1976) (r = .76).

Burnout

We employed a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). *Depersonalization* was measured using a five-item index (r = .83), and *personal accomplishment* using an eight-item index (r = .93). We measured *emotional exhaustion* with a single item: "I feel burned out from my work." In all cases, we employed only the intensity dimension (see Stevens & O'Neill, 1983). Earlier, two of us (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984) had used these same measures in a national study of work stress and strain among social workers.

Social support

Perceived support was measured using a four-item index developed by Caplan et al. (1976). To determine whether one's coworkers or supervisor was the *source of support,* respondents

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were directed by the question stem to identify one or the other as the source. The coworker support index has a reliability coefficient of $r = .93$, and the supervisor support index a reliability coefficient of $r = .94$.

To determine *use of support,* respondents were asked, "In the past month, how often were you able to talk with a coworker/supervisor when you were troubled about something?" This question immediately followed the questionnaire questions about perceived support. Thus, we measured support used by asking two direct questions, one about supervisors and the other about coworkers, with responses ranging from "very often" (1) to "never" (5). Because responses to these questions were based on retrospective evaluations, some have termed this method "perceived-received support."

The model

The conceptual model incorporating these variables simply argues that work-related stress causes various forms of strain. These forms—whether they are psychological or related to health—in turn affect job performance. The presence of social support within the work place can help mitigate this relationship between stress and strain. This widely articulated model provides the basis for the analyses presented in this article (cf. House, 1981). Because we distinguished between perceived support and support used, we tested the mediational value of perceived and used support.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Readers must note that the study reported herein was cross-sectional, and our data do not allow us to infer causation. Therefore, we have difficulty arguing, for example, that using support reduces the stress and strain one feels. We can, however, make statements about the strength of relationships among variables and the directions of these relationships—the so-called "level of associational knowledge" (Tripodi, 1981).

We first examined the relationship between the "use of support" and "perceptions of available support." A strong, positive correlation exists between perception and use, and those who perceive higher levels of support are also more likely to report support used than those who perceive lower levels of support. The zero-order correlation between the use of co-worker support and the perception of co-worker support is .66, and between the use of supervisor support and the perception of support is .73.

Our results are consistent with Heller and Swindle's (1983) hypothetical model, which argues that the perceived availability of support is related to an individual's decision to seek support. Although perception is obviously idiosyncratic, one could probably argue that some behaviors are universally judged supportive. Although collegial support probably exists on an ad hoc basis within organizations, this need not—indeed, should not—be so in the case of supervisory support. Supervisors should be sensitized to and trained in such behaviors as paying attention to workers' problems and concerns, listening actively, encouraging discussion, and employing other formal or informal tactics leading workers to perceive their supervisors to be supportive individuals (cf. Fahs-Beck, 1987). The issue thus becomes one of creating an environment considered supportive by those who could benefit from this. Indeed, Gottleib (1983) notes that this is an area needing much research.

The relatively high correlations obtained in our study, however, contrast with the nominal correlations obtained previously (Barrera, 1986; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Each of the previous studies used different measures, so that developing a systematic rationale for the findings is difficult. In general, however, the consensus appears to be that the different measures lack convergent validity and measure essentially different and independent dimensions of social support. Therefore, the high correlations we obtained may possibly represent an artifact of the measures employed (as do the lower cor-

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relations of the other researchers). All of the evidence gathered to date, however, suggests that one must differentiate between perception and use rather than combine them to create an undifferentiated measure.

Implications of the use of support

When faced with potentially stressful events, would those who use the support available in their environments be less likely to consider these events stressful than those not using support? Furthermore, would they be less likely to suffer from the negative consequences of any stress experienced than those not using support? Table 1 presents the results of our analyses of the use of support from co-workers, and Table 2 presents our analyses of the use of support from supervisors.

For our analyses, we "trichotomized" the responses for support used into "high use" (1–2), "medium use" (3), and "low use" (4–5). The data in Tables 1 and 2 clearly indicate the association between a work-based supportive system and stress and strain. A consistent negative relationship occurs between support use and stress and strain. That is, persons whose behaviors indicate high use of support are more likely to report that they feel lower levels of stress and strain. Furthermore, whether the source of this support is a supervisor or a coworker makes no difference. In effect, the *use* of support from coworkers and/or supervisors apparently has a positive effect.

A logical follow-up question emerged from our analysis: Does the use of support also contribute to better job performance and greater fulfillment of job expectations? Specifically, we asked respondents the following two questions: (a) Thinking about your work this past year, how would you rate the *effectiveness* of your professional practice? (b) Thinking about your work this past year, how would you rate the *fulfillment* of your expectations for your professional practice? For both questions a response scale ranged from low (1) to high (5). Table 3 presents the results.

From the data in Table 3, one can clearly determine a positive association between the use of support and professional practice. In effect, one could argue that having the opportunity to talk with a colleague or supervisor may enable a person to make a more realistic appraisal of the problems and solutions that all of the persons in that situation encounter—and to learn that one is not in a lonely struggle against unique problems, but in a common struggle against common problems. This communication among colleagues and supervisors should thus encourage greater consistency between work experience and work expectations.

We did, however, find little difference between the perceptions of professional effectiveness held by those with high levels of support use ($\overline{X}$ = 4.22 and 4.13) and those with low levels of support use ($\overline{X}$ = 4.13 and 4.15). Those workers using little support were just as likely to report success as were those using much support. To some extent, this observation was confirmed by the lack of a significant difference for personal accomplishment as reported in Tables 1 and 2. To the extent our interpretation is correct, one may not wish to promote support use as a strategy for improving performance. Theoretically, however, one could argue that those experiencing higher levels of stress and strain who do not use the support available from colleagues and supervisors should be *less effective* in their professional practice. Clearly, the relationship between support use and performance requires further research.

To clarify this further, we examined the relationship between the amount of support used and perceptions of clients. Specifically, we asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: (a) "Many clients cannot be helped no matter what" and (b) "I find it difficult to get useful feedback from my clients." The response scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7); the higher one's score, the more negative one's perception of clients.

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Table 1
Mean Scores for Measures of Stress and Strain by High, Medium, and Low Use of Support From Co-Workers (ANOVA)*

	Mean	*S.D.*	*F-ratio*	*Significance*
Stress				
Role ambiguity			11.070	.0001
High use	7.64	2.54		
Medium use	8.25	2.50		
Low use	9.54	3.22		
Role conflict			3.745	.05
High use	10.99	2.68		
Medium use	10.78	2.66		
Low use	12.07	2.89		
Work load			0.667	n.s.
High use	15.06	2.93		
Medium use	14.74	3.20		
Low use	14.62	3.88		
Strain				
Anxiety			4.722	.01
High use	6.40	1.97		
Medium use	6.50	1.82		
Low use	7.39	2.28		
Depression			15.367	.0001
High use	10.19	3.13		
Medium use	11.42	3.32		
Low use	12.80	3.23		
Irritability			2.946	.05
High use	3.66	1.05		
Medium use	3.73	1.14		
Low use	4.09	1.29		
Somatics			5.030	.01
High use	39.43	5.21		
Medium use	37.91	5.951		
Low use	37.14	5.87		
Personal accomplishment			1.169	n.s.
High use	44.16	5.58		
Medium use	43.19	6.47		
Low use	42.66	6.39		
Depersonalization			13.791	.0001
High use	11.09	5.30		
Medium use	12.06	5.86		
Low use	17.07	7.03		
Emotional exhaustion			4.466	.01
High use	3.33	1.78		
Medium use	3.92	1.98		
Low use	4.24	1.94		

*In all instances, the higher the score, the more a particular attribute was reported, with the exception of somatics, for which the reverse is true.

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Table 2
Mean Scores for Stress and Strain by High, Medium, and Low Use of Support From Supervisors (ANOVA)*

	Mean	*S.D.*	*F-ratio*	*Significance*
Stress				
Role ambiguity			10.617	.0001
High use	7.44	2.35		
Medium use	8.34	2.68		
Low use	8.91	2.98		
Role conflict			2.981	.05
High use	10.87	2.60		
Medium use	11.06	2.67		
Low use	11.71	8.65		
Work load			0.154	n.s.
High use	14.98	2.82		
Medium use	14.84	2.89		
Low use	15.07	3.28		
Strain				
Anxiety			7.206	.001
High use	6.15	1.79		
Medium use	6.92	1.91		
Low use	6.89	2.18		
Depression			16.314	.0001
High use	9.92	2.30		
Medium use	11.17	3.20		
Low use	12.18	3.43		
Irritability			7.178	.001
High use	3.57	1.04		
Medium use	3.64	1.00		
Low use	4.08	1.18		
Somatics			10.270	.0001
High use	40.17	5.48		
Medium use	37.72	5.55		
Low use	37.62	6.16		
Personal accomplishment			0.033	n.s.
High use	43.73	5.93		
Medium use	43.53	6.19		
Low use	43.79	6.34		
Depersonalization			2.813	n.s.
High use	11.12	5.58		
Medium use	12.50	5.33		
Low use	13.25	6.27		
Emotional exhaustion			9.667	.0001
High use	3.09	1.77		
Medium use	3.77	1.90		
Low use	4.37	1.83		

*In all instances, the higher the score, the more a particular attribute was reported, with the exception of somatics, for which the reverse is true.

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Table 3
Mean Scores for Ratings of Professional Effectiveness and Client Relations by High, Medium and Low Users of Support (ANOVA)*

	Mean	*S.D.*	*F-ratio*	*Significance*
Co-Workers				
Professional effectiveness			4.383	.01
High use	4.22	0.75		
Medium use	3.96	0.71		
Low use	4.13	0.69		
Professional expectations			10.081	.0001
High use	3.81	0.94		
Medium use	3.45	0.93		
Low use	3.24	1.11		
Clients cannot be helped			6.816	.001
High use	3.61	1.96		
Medium use	4.19	1.99		
Low use	4.97	1.82		
Feedback difficult			5.777	.005
High use	2.64	1.45		
Medium use	3.11	1.80		
Low use	3.59	1.80		
Supervisor				
Professional effectiveness			0.094	n.s.
High use	4.13	0.79		
Medium use	4.11	0.63		
Low use	4.15	0.71		
Prefessional expectations			9.257	.0001
High use	3.84	0.90		
Medium use	3.63	0.90		
Low use	3.33	1.05		
Clients cannot be helped			2.911	n.s.
High use	3.55	2.05		
Medium use	3.96	1.91		
Low use	4.32	2.01		
Feedback difficult			3.299	.05
High use	2.65	1.49		
Medium use	3.06	1.56		
Low use	3.26	1.73		

*In all cases, the higher the score, the more often a particular attribute was reported.

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As indicated in Table 3, those workers making low use of support were significantly more likely to report that clients cannot be helped and that they had difficulty getting useful feedback from clients than were those making high use of support. The implications are severe if these workers believe they are doing a good job when they actually are not. Perhaps they obtain needed support from those outside the work place, such as friends and family members (cf. Davis-Sacks, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1985; House, 1981; Quick & Quick, 1984). This, however, may have deleterious effects on their family life and friendships (cf. Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Jackson, Zedeck, & Summers, 1985; Jayaratne & Chess, 1986). Individuals experiencing stress and strain may also be less likely to use available support; the behavior of seeking support may itself provoke strain. The absence of an objective measure of effectiveness posed a problem for our study, and suggests the importance of future research on developing such a measure.

Implications of perceived support

Recently, Wethington and Kessler (1986) presented evidence that the influence of received support (support used) may be mediated by perceived support. Indeed, they argue that "perceptions of support availability are more important than actual support transactions" and that "the latter promote psychological adjustment through the former" (p. 85). Within the context of our data analyses, this statement leads us to wonder about the relationship between the use of support and perceptions of support availability. To test this proposition further, we conducted a series of regression analyses, using age, gender, marital status, and income as control variables. Prior research has shown that these factors may partially explain some of the findings among the dependent variables (cf. Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Jayaratne, Tripodi, & Chess, 1983).

Because of previous reports that perceived support and used support have different patterns of relationships with stress and strain (see Barrera, 1986), we conducted a series of correlational analyses. The attained zero-order correlations of the measures for used and perceived support with the measures for stress and strain are similar, and no definable patterns emerged that distinguish between used and perceived support. Although these data contradict some of the previous findings, a partial explanation may be that different measures were used and that none of the earlier research examined the work situation per se. Because the mediational hypothesis presents a relative explanatory proposition, we should expect the partial correlations to differ when entered into the same regression equation.

In all of our analyses, we included the measures for perceived and used support in that order. This is because our conceptual framework argues that an individual must perceive an environment as supportive before using support available within it. For example, for the regression equation for role ambiguity (a dependent variable), the control variables (age, gender, marital status, income) were entered first, followed by the measures for perceived and used support.[1] These analyses were conducted separately for supervisors and coworkers. Table 4 presents those instances in which the predictor variables emerged significant ($p < .05$) or approached significance ($p < .10$). These analyses clearly support a cognitive mediational hypothesis. Of the 18 cases in which perceived and used support were significant or approached significance, 15 were within the context of perception. In effect, the perception of support appears to mediate the use of support, as suggested by Wethington and Kessler (1986).

A closer examination of the data in Table 4 reveals that the only factor for which support used is positively significant (i.e., a negative relationship with support used exists) is work load. We employed an index measuring quantitative work load, which taps a relatively tangible set of events, such as amount of work to be

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Table 4
Regression of Perceived and Used Support on Work Stress and Strain: Partial Correlations[a]

	Supervisor		*Co-workers*	
	Perceived Support	*Used Support*	*Perceived Support*	*Used Support*
Predictor variables				
Role ambiguity	—	.14**	−.25*****	—
Role conflict	—	—	−.13**	—
Work load	—	—	—	−.14**
Anxiety	−.10*	—	−.17**	—
Depression	−.17**	—	−.24*****	—
Irritability	−.22****	—	−.16**	—
Somatics	.22****	—	.24*****	—
Personal accomplishment	—	—	.12*	—
Depersonalization	−.13*	—	−.18***	.12*
Emotional exhaustion	−.15**	—	−.27*****	—

[a]Only partial correlations that are significant or approach significance are presented in this table.

*p < .10
**p < .05
***p < .01
****p < .005
*****p < .001

done and time available to do work. One could argue that individuals may find they can more easily seek support when their problems are tangible and thus possibly more obvious to others. For example, asking a supervisor for more time to complete a set of forms or requesting help from a coworker on an emergency case may seem relatively "safe," as the supervisor and coworker are likely to understand what is involved. In contrast, workers may less often seek support when the problems are more ambiguous. For example, a worker may refrain from talking with a supervisor about feeling depressed or anxious, fearing the consequences of presenting oneself in a negative manner. This issue may be particularly sensitive in the field of mental health, which fosters the assumption that the workers can handle their own emotions. Thus, such self-disclosure may be tantamount to confessing to incompetence.

The other two cases for which support use was significant are essentially negative. Support use was positively correlated with role ambiguity and depersonalization, suggesting that using support in the event of these conditions may be iatrogenic. Some other authors have also questioned the potential negative consequences of informal support networks (Davis-Sacks, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1985; Shannon & Saleeby, 1980). This raises some intriguing concerns for the quality and nature of the support provided.

One question remains: Did workers *not use support* because a supportive environment did not exist, or did they misread cues indicating support or the lack of it, and therefore fail to pursue available avenues for obtaining it (cf. Eckenrode, 1983)? Conversely, they may also have perceived the environment as supportive, but lacked the skills to engage in positive interactions with supportive persons. To some extent, this demonstrates again that one's perceptions of the external world matter more than "objective reality" in determining one's

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actions. Our findings concur with the observations of Seligman (1975) and others that clinical problems such as depression often occur when a discrepancy exists between a person's perceptions and reality. In a recent article, Fahs-Beck (1987) suggested "cognitive reframing" as a desirable coping strategy for managing burnout among workers and administrators. The failure of front-line workers to recognize and use existing support systems could have direct implications concerning their abilities to support others effectively.

In summary, our data suggest that individuals who use support will likely benefit from it. The probability of one's using available support, however, appears to be a function of one's perceptions. Organizations therefore may need to make concerted efforts toward getting workers to perceive the work environment as supportive. At the same time, workers may need to work on their own abilities to recognize cues indicating support and to engage in support-seeking behaviors. Clearly, the absence of a supportive environment and the failure to use existing support systems bodes ill for the worker and the client.

NOTE

1. Given the relatively high correlations between the measures for perceived and used support, we repeated all the analyses, reversing the order of entry. That is, we entered support used first, followed by support perceived. The significant findings remained the same. Thus, if any problems of multicollinearity and resulting problems with the partial correlations existed, they did not emerge in our analyses.

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