Law Enforcement Officers’ Stress and Intent to Quit the Organization: The Roles of Perceived Community Support, Perceived Local Government Support, and Perceived City Manager Support

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ABSTRACT

This purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of three variables of perceived support: perceived community support, perceived local government support, and perceived city manager support on stress level and intent to quit the organization in a law enforcement setting. The results show that perceived local government support is significantly negatively related to stress, and that stress fully mediates the relationship between perceived local government support and intent to quit the organization.

INTRODUCTION

This study of law enforcement officers examines the degree to which they are affected by three support variables: perceived community support, perceived local government support, and perceived city manager support, and how those variables affect stress and subsequently, their intent to quit the organization.

Most professionals are salaried workers who are employed by a professional organization (Wallace, 1995). Law enforcement officers are part of a bureaucratic professional organization. There are multiple subunits within the department that officers may belong to such as patrolman, detective, or vice squad. Regardless of the subunit, officers’ intent to quit the organization is important, as
turnover has been recognized as having high importance in professional organizations including law enforcement (Doerner, 1995; Harris & Baldwin, 1999; Blau, Tatum, & Ward-Cook, 2003). Intention to quit the organization is related to actually leaving the organization. This is based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975) which links attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavioral action. In this case, the intention to quit a law enforcement organization is a mediating factor between attitudes affecting the intent to quit and actually leaving the law enforcement organization.

The attitudes affecting intent to quit can necessarily be either internal (e.g. job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, perceived organizational support) or external (e.g. environment, working conditions). I will be evaluating three internal attitudes that indirectly affect intention to quit the organization. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the three previously mentioned perceived support variables, their affect on self-reported stress levels, and how stress level is an antecedent of intention to quit the organization.

**Perceived Community Support**

Eisenberger, et al. (1986) defined perceived organizational support (POS) and developed an instrument designed to measure that support. For the purposes of this paper, we have taken the POS construct and applied it to our three support variables of interest.

In the context of a law enforcement organization, community support is important. This is implicit in the motto of many law enforcement organizations: “to protect and to serve”. This motto implies that the beneficiaries of the protection and service are members of the community the officers work in. This in effect can create a form of social exchange theory, where when one person or entity does a favor for another person or entity, there is a feeling of reciprocal obligation (Blau, 1964). This holds true only to the extent that the receiving person perceives a favor being granted as opposed to an individual “doing their job”. It may help a law enforcement organization to enhance its reputation for service to the community to allow it to take advantage of social exchange theory.

Support can be defined in many ways; Stendard (1992) claimed that support of an organization should be monetary in nature, to enhance profitability and sustainability. While this may be true of for profit organizations, the impact of monetary support on not-for-profit law enforcement organizations needs to be studied further. Numerous studies show the importance of seeking perceptions, values, and interests from community members in making decisions that affect the community (Vincent & Thompson, 2002). Many law enforcement organizations have developed anonymous crime-tip phone lines, supported neighborhood watch programs, and implemented other programs in response to community needs.

To the extent that a law enforcement organization leverages its concern for its constituents, either through social exchange theory, or through community involvement in decision making, it can generate support. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will define perceived community support as the support of the community in pecuniary and non-pecuniary actions related to the law enforcement organization as perceived by the individual officers within that organization.

**Perceived Local Government Support**

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This construct is similar to perceived community support in that we have applied Eisneberger, et al.’s (1996) POS to the local government in charge of the law enforcement organization. This local government could be the city, in the case of the police department, the county, in the case of the sheriff’s department, or even the state, in the case of the state police. There are different city, county, and state officials to whom the law enforcement organization reports to. These individuals could include the mayor, vice-mayor, city council, county commissioner, governor, and/or the offices of these officials. For this paper, the local government includes all government officials, as a group, whom govern the law enforcement agency.

We again have a case where social exchange theory may have an impact on how the individual officers’ perceive the support of the local government. If the mayor of a city directs funds to assist the local law enforcement agencies, it may enhance the perception of local government support in the eyes of the officers. If on the other hand, a government official does not follow up on a commitment to the law enforcement organization, the perception of local government may suffer in the eyes of the officers.

**Perceived City Manager Support**

The construct of perceived city manager support is differentiated from that of perceived local government support by the unit of analysis. Here the unit of analysis is the individual city leader who has an influence on the law enforcement organization versus government as a whole. The role of city manager in this sense is determined by the individual officers who respond to the survey, not necessarily by the occupational title (Rivera, Streib, & Willoughby, 2000). If a respondent asked who the survey items in this construct referred to, they were asked to think of the one individual within the government hierarchy the top ranking officer in their organization reported to. This could be a different person for different departments depending on how the local government was structured.

**Stress**

A review of literature generally categorizes work stress into ones of three different categories: psychological, behavioral, or physiological (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Schuler, 1980; Fogarty, et al. 2000). Organizational scientists tend to focus their work in the former two categories, considering variables such as job satisfaction (or job dissatisfaction), turnover, absenteeism, and role conflict as symptomatic of stress (Fried, Rowland, & Ferris, 1984). The literature also suggests two perspectives on stress, physiological and psychological. Selye (1976) authors the work on the physiological perspective. Selye’s idea is that stress is the result of a bodily response to environmental stimuli, and impacts an individual’s response without a subjective assessment of the stimuli. There has been empirical work supporting this concept of stress (Caplan & Jones, 1975; Eden, 1982). A second perspective of stress is the psychological perspective anchored by Lazarus (1966) and McGrath (1976). This perspective claims that stress is the result of the interaction between the person and the environment, and may be associated with psychological, behavioral, or physiological outcomes. Our definition of stress for the purpose of this paper will be: Stress occurs when the environment creates demands which are perceived as being outside of a person’s capabilities.
Intent to Quit The Organization

Empirical studies have linked job satisfaction and performance to an individual’s intent to quit the organization (Clegg, 1983; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997; Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000). With the high cost of turnover, many organizations are interested in reducing the number of employees who leave the organization voluntarily (Firth, et al., 2004). Many researchers (Saks, 1986; Kramer, et al., 1995; Kallith & Beck, 2001) have attempted to answer the question of what determines an employee’s intention to quit. To date, there has been little consistency in the findings of the researchers. Firth, et al. (2004) suggest that it may be due to the diversity of the constructs and consistency (or lack thereof) of the measurements.

HYPOTHESES

Stress occurs when demands are placed on an individual (in our case a law enforcement officer) which are perceived as being outside the individual’s capabilities. We have also established that perceived community support can be in the form of assisting law enforcement officers through intervention programs (crime-tip, neighborhood watch, etc…). These two factors in conjunction with the law enforcement motto “To protect and to serve” serve as a foundation for our first hypothesis,

Hypothesis 1: Perceived Community Support is negatively related to Stress.

Similarly, when law enforcement officers perceive the positive support of their local government, they should have a reduced amount of stress. Hence,

Hypothesis 2: Perceived Local Government Support is negatively related to Stress.

The city manager (or the person to whom the top officer in the law enforcement organization reports to within the government) has the responsibility to ensure that the law enforcement officers perceive “fit” between the words and actions of the government. As long an individual enforcement officer has a positive perception of the fit, just as in the two preceding support variables, stress should be reduced. Therefore, hypothesis 3 claims that,

Hypothesis 3: Perceived City Manager Support is a negatively related to Stress.

In other studies, (Coverman, 2001; Stamper & Johlke, 2003; Firth, et al., 2004) researchers have found there is a relation between stress and intention to quit. However, none of these studies have evaluated this relationship in a law enforcement context, thus,

Hypothesis 4: Stress is positively related to intention to quit the organization.

As we believe the first three support variables are antecedents to stress (H:1-3), and stress is an antecedent to intention to quit the organization, this leads to the following hypotheses,

Hypothesis 5a: The indirect effect between perceived community support and intention to quit the organization through stress will be significant.

Hypothesis 5b: The indirect effect between perceived local government support and intention to quit the organization through stress will be significant.

Hypothesis 5c: The indirect effect between perceived city manager support and intention to quit the organization through stress will be significant.

METHODS AND MEASURES
This study was conducted in 3 law enforcement organizations within two cities in the southwestern U.S. A total of n = 114 police officers took part in the study. The officers responded to all items in the instrument. Participation in the survey was voluntary, but no officer declined to complete it. It was necessary to throw out two surveys, however, due to an unusual pattern of responses. This left us a sample size of n = 112. The surveys were administered over the course of three days to ensure all time shifts and personnel were administered the survey. The respondents were guaranteed confidentiality of responses, and were briefed on the ethical and professional standards demanded of us as researchers, as well as legal requirements.

Some of the demographic information of the sample is as follows: 83 % male (n = 93) 17% female (n = 19). The age range is as follows: < 30, 25% (n = 28); 30-40, 45.6% (n = 51); 40-50, 19.6% (n = 22); >50, 9.8% (n = 11). The ranks of the respondents’ were varied however, most were of the “officer” rank (this would be either “officers” in the police departments’, or “deputies” in the sheriff’s departments’).

Measures

Four seven-point likert scales were used to measure the law enforcement officer’s variables. The answers ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7), except for the stress scale which was rated on a scale of one to ten. The items to which the officers responded are included in the following table.

Table 1

Items for law enforcement survey

*Intention to quit the organization items*
1. As soon as I can find a better job, I’ll leave the organization.
2. I am actively looking for a job outside the organization.
3. I am seriously thinking of quitting my job.

*Job related stress item*
1. On a scale of 1-10, indicate the amount of stress you experience on the job.

*Perceived Community Support Items*
1. The [town name] community strongly supports law enforcement goals.
2. The [town name] community strongly cares about law enforcement personnel.
3. The [town name] community would forgive an honest mistake on my part.
4. [Town name] values law enforcement’s contribution to the community.

*Perceived Local Government Support Items*
1. The local government strongly supports law enforcement goals.
2. The local government strongly cares about law enforcement personnel.
3. The local government would forgive an honest mistake on my part.
4. The local government values law enforcement’s contribution to the community.

*Perceived City Manager Support Items*
1. The city manager strongly supports law enforcement goals.
2. The city manager strongly cares about law enforcement personnel.
3. The city manager would forgive an honest mistake on my part.
4. The city manager values law enforcement’s contribution to the community.
**Perceived community support, perceived local government support, and perceived city manager support.**

scale that would make the most sense when read by respondents in regard to the three perceived support variables. Coefficient alpha for the three variables are: perceived community support, ($\alpha = .896$), perceived local government support, ($\alpha = .945$), perceived city manager support, ($\alpha = .966$).

**Stress**

All three variables were measured using the four items from the Eisenberger et al. (1986) The amount of stress experienced on the job is measured on a self-reported ten point scale, with one (1) being the lowest and ten (10) being the highest amount of stress on the job.

**Intention to quit the organization**

This construct was measured with a three item scale as reported by Wayne, Shore, & Liden (1997) with ($\alpha = .919$).

The hypothesized model shown in figure 1 was tested against the fully saturated model to test for partial versus full mediation of the three support variables.

**Figure 1 – Hypothesized Model**

![Hypothesized Model Diagram]

**RESULTS**

Prior to testing the model shown in figure 1, we analyzed the 16 items the officers responded to, to an exploratory factor analysis. We used an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) because our sample size may not be large enough for a confirmatory factor analysis in comparison to the number of parameters we need to estimate. The EFA returned three factors with all items for both local government support and city manager support loading on the same factor. This is possibly due to the respondent’s inability to separate the role of local government from the city manager due to lack of
clarification from the researchers. Therefore, we eliminated perceived city manager support from the model, as the city manager is part of the local government, and re-ran the analysis. Figure 2 shows the new model being tested.

![Figure 2 – New Model](image)

The items loaded strongly on each remaining factor with no cross-loadings.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iq1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iq2</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iq3</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cs1</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cs3</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cs4</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cs5</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgs1</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgs3</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgs4</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgs5</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iq = Intent to Quit the Organization, cs = Perceived Community Support, lgs = Perceived Local Government Support

We then used LISREL 8.71 (Jöreskog & Sörbom) with a covariance matrix to analyze the fit of the model. Our model fit the data as indicated by the fit indices Gerbing & Anderson, 1992; Rigdon, 1996; Medsker, Williams, & Holahan, 1994), $\chi^2 = 37.46$ (df = 6), RMSEA = .05, CFI = .98.

The final model shows some interesting results:

![Figure 3](image)
Hypothesis 1 stated that perceived community support is negatively related to stress. The path was negative, but not significant ($b = .06, p > .05$), indicating hypothesis 1 is not supported. Hypothesis 2 stated that perceived local government support is negatively related to stress. The path was negative and significant ($b = -.27, p < .01$), indicating support for hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 stated that perceived city manager support was negatively related to stress. As we found earlier in the EFA, perceived city manager support was indistinguishable from perceived local government support, and we therefore eliminated it from the model. Hypothesis 4 stated that stress was positively related to intent to quit the organization. The path was positive and significant ($\gamma = .23, p < .01$) indicating support for hypothesis 4. Hypotheses 5a, 5b, and 5c stated the indirect effects of each of the three perceived support variables to intent to quit the organization through stress would be significant. Hypotheses 5a and 5c were not supported, while hypothesis 5b was significant and showed that stress was a full mediator between perceived local government support and intent to quit the organization when compared to the fully saturated model, i.e. the direct effect of perceived local government support to intent to quit the organization was not significant ($b = -.11, p > .05$).

**DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS**

[Included in the edited version of the paper, excluded here due to space limitations]

**REFERENCES**


