Coping, Personality and the Workplace

Responding to Psychological Crisis and Critical Events

Edited by

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Joint Moderating Effects of Self-Efficacy and Coping on Social Stressor–Psychological Strain Relationships in Greater China: Evidence from Three Subregions

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Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between two focal social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and psychological strains (job satisfaction and psychological symptoms). We also examine an unexplored mechanism of how self-efficacy and active coping might protect employees from negative effects of social stressors.

We reported a survey which was conducted among 1,032 Chinese employees in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taipei, representing the three subregions in Greater China. Interpersonal conflict and organizational politics were the two focal social stressors, self-efficacy and active coping were examined as individual difference factors, and job satisfaction and psychological symptoms were outcomes of psychological strains. Results from two-way moderated regression analyses consistently revealed that high self-efficacy exacerbated the relationship between social stressors and psychological strains. Furthermore, three-way moderated regression analyses showed that self-efficacy and active coping displayed a joint moderating effect in reducing the impact of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics on psychological symptoms when both were high. We also found high self-efficacy acted as an exacerbator which amplified the impact of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics on employees’ psychological symptoms, when active coping was low.
With the globalization of the world economy, and the rapid development of Southeast Asia economies, the problem of work stress has become relevant particularly for Greater China, encompassing Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. These three regions are undergoing fundamental transformations of industrial structures from labor-intensive to high-tech, as well as rapid social modernization in both work and nonwork life (e.g., Lu et al. 2011a; Siu et al. 2002). There is more free competition, and urban employees in Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan are becoming more exposed to stressful industrialized work situations similar to the West.

Many occupational stress models have suggested that stressors at work lead to psychological strain (e.g., Kahn and Byosiere 1992). Dormann and Zapf (2002) distinguished task stressors from social stressors. Task stressors are related to the task structure and the organization of work, for example, time pressure, work overload, role conflict and role ambiguity, whereas social stressors are related to negative social interactions with colleagues, supervisors and clients, such as social animosities, conflicts with co-workers and supervisors, unfair treatment, and a negative interpersonal climate. As summarized by Spector and Bruk-Lee (2008), occupational stress research has experienced a recent shift in focus from task stressors to social stressors (e.g., interpersonal conflict). However, social stressors have been understudied by occupational stress researchers (Dormann and Zapf 2002; Semmer 2003; Spector and Bruk-Lee 2008).

As Chinese societies place strong emphasis on group harmony, “forbearance” and Guanxi (good relationships) (Farh et al. 1998; Hwang 1997), Chinese employees may be more prone to social stressors such as interpersonal conflicts and organizational politics. In a meta-analysis, Chang et al. (2009) reported the negative impacts of organizational politics on employees' well-being and work-related behaviors. They argued that organizational politics is a relatively less explored stressor, and should be given more attention in future stress research. As expressed by Harris and Kacmar (2005), although a good deal is known about organizational politics in the United States, little is known about the role of organizational politics as a social stressor in Eastern cultures. Furthermore, it is argued that culture is related to interpersonal conflict (e.g., Liu et al. 2008; Triandis et al. 1988) and culture could affect how employees express conflict behaviors (Liu et al. 2007). Yet, relatively, little has been done on social stressors in Greater China.

We therefore investigated the relationship between two focal social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and psychological strains (job satisfaction and psychological symptoms). We also examined an unexplored mechanism of how self-efficacy and active coping might protect employees from negative effects of social stressors.

Interpersonal Conflict, Organizational Politics and Psychological Strains

Interpersonal conflict has been found to be one of the most common social stressors in the workplace in a series of Western (e.g., Keenan and Newton 1985) and cross-cultural (e.g., Liu 2002; Liu et al. 2007, 2008; Lu et al. 2011a) studies. In general, interpersonal conflict at work implies stressful incidents which were caused by social interactions with supervisors, subordinates or colleagues. Thomas's (1992) Process Model of Conflict depicts interpersonal conflict as a process that includes cognitive, affective, motivational and behavioral stages. Interpersonal conflict has been shown to positively correlate with strains and other outcomes, including job dissatisfaction, anxiety/tension, poor job performance and counterproductive work behaviors (Bruk-Lee and Spector 2006; Lu et al. 2011a; Spector and Jex 1998).
Another potential common social stressor in Western societies is organizational politics. It is defined as any activity that “involves actions by individuals which are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organization” (Kacmar and Baron 1999, p. 4). Organizational politics has recently attracted research attention showing that it relates to job anxiety, strains (such as low job satisfaction and job distress) and aggressive behavior (e.g., Ferris et al. 1996; Harris and Kacmar 2005). Thus organizational politics is operationalized as a stressor in the current study. As advocated by Harris and Kacmar (2005), there is a need to continue to investigate and gain additional insights into the antecedents, moderators and consequences of organizational politics. They further proposed to examine organizational politics more in a cross-cultural context.

There is reason to expect that study of social stressors is particularly relevant in China. People in collectivist cultures, such as China, tend to be more concerned with group harmony and they pay more attention to interpersonal relationships (Chinese Culture Connection 1987). Furthermore, people in Chinese societies demonstrate a strong preference for uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1980) and harmony maintenance (Lu and Yang 2006). Nevertheless, the existence of interpersonal conflict or even covert political behavior can lead to strains. Organizational politics as a stressor is conceptually distinct from interpersonal conflict. The former is frequently used as an upward influence strategy to promote self-interests, such as salary rise or promotion (Porter, Allen and Angle 1981), while the latter mainly refers to conflicts among people involved at work. We examined the impact of these two social stressors on psychological strains in a heterogeneous sample of Chinese employees from all three subregions in Greater China. Psychological strains in this study are conceptualized as job (dis)satisfaction and psychological symptoms. We hypothesized that:

H1: Social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) will be negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to psychological symptoms.

Role of Self-Efficacy on the Stress–Strain Relationship

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as the extent to which people believe they can perform a behavior to produce a particular desired outcome. According to the cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), stressors lead to strains only when employees evaluate the stressors as threatening to their well-being, thus self-efficacy can protect people against stressors and reduce strains. For instance, it has been found that self-efficacy is related to job satisfaction and psychological strains in both Western and Chinese societies (e.g., Judge and Bono 2001; Lu et al. 2005; Lu et al. 2011a).

As concluded by Xie and Schaumbroeck (2001) in their discussion of organizational research on stress and well-being, individual differences such as self-efficacy might influence the direction and strength of the relationship between job stressors and strains. Some studies have found that self-efficacy exerts a moderating effect on the stressor–strain relationship in both Western and Chinese societies (Jex et al. 2001; Lu et al. 2005; Lu et al. 2011a; Siu et al. 2007). For instance, the results of Siu et al.'s study (2007) verified that self-efficacy plays an important role in employees’ well-being in collectivist societies such as China. Recent findings in Taiwan (Lu et al. 2011a) corroborated that self-efficacy not only had direct effect on strains, but also buffered the negative impact of a task stressor (lack of autonomy) on job performance. Therefore self-efficacy is also relevant to collectivistic cultures. As social stressors such as interpersonal conflict may be beyond individuals’ control, it is theoretically likely that self-efficacy would have direct and moderating effects on psychological strains. We therefore hypothesized that:
H2: Self-efficacy will be positively related to employees' job satisfaction, but negatively with psychological symptoms.

H3: Self-efficacy beliefs would moderate the relationship between job stressors and job strains such that the negative relationship between job stressors and job satisfaction will be mitigated when the level of self-efficacy is high; and the positive relationships between job stressors and psychological symptoms will also be mitigated when the level of self-efficacy is high.

Role of Active Coping on the Stress–Strain Relationship

Coping has been considered an important element in the stress process because coping strategies can help buffer the effects of stressors on strains (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). According to the transactional stress theory, coping consists of "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the internal or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman 1984, p. 843). Semmer (2003) advocated that "people differ in the probability of encountering stressors, depending on the social environment but also on their own behavior" (p. 82). Semmer also argued that people differ in their appraisal of stressors thus people differ in their way of coping with them; and there are cultural differences in stress appraisal and coping. He noted that optimistic individuals with more problem-focused coping strategies (a form of active coping) report fewer psychological strains (Semmer 2003). It has been argued that active or problem-focused coping methods are advantageous to employees in Western and Chinese societies (e.g., Carver et al. 1989; Siu et al. 2006). Furthermore, when examining the relationship of coping resources to occupational stress and strain, it was proposed that coping moderated the stress–strain relationship (Osipow and Davis 1988; Osipow and Spokane 1984). Empirically, among a group of senior police officers in Great Britain, coping was found to moderate the relationship between job stress and job satisfaction (Kirkcaldy et al. 1995). A recent study found that coping resources moderated stress–strain and stress–satisfaction relationships in American educational administrators (Thomas et al. 2012). Taking previous theoretical arguments together and combining empirical findings in Western and Chinese societies, we expect Chinese employees who adopt more active coping would tackle social stressors better and would report lower levels of psychological strains. In turn, coping would further influence the stress–strain relationship. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H4: Use of active coping will be positively related to employees’ job satisfaction and negatively with psychological symptoms, and active coping will moderate the relationships between job stressors and strains, such that under high levels of coping the effect of stressors on strains will be reduced.

Joint Role of Self-Efficacy and Active Coping on the Stress–Strain Relationship

As self-efficacy refers to a sense of competence to have control over one's own environment, it is logical to infer that self-efficacy impacts stressor–strain relationships jointly with active coping in the workplace (Jex et al. 2001; Leiter 1992). For instance, Jex et al. (2001) tested three-way interactions and demonstrated that self-efficacy mitigated the effects of low role clarity on strain when active coping was high; but strain levels were lower for participants with high self-efficacy than for participants with lower self-efficacy when workload was low but avoidance coping was high. One earlier study found that Chinese people who adhered to internal locus of control
beliefs, a concept closely related to self-efficacy, favored planning (a form of active coping) but not suppression strategies to cope with stress (Lu and Chen 1996). We therefore hypothesized that:

H5: There will be a three-way interaction between stressors, self-efficacy and active coping in predicting psychological strains. Specifically, the relationship between stressors and strains will be greater under high self-efficacy and high active coping than any of the other three combinations of self-efficacy and active coping (high self-efficacy, low active coping, or low self-efficacy and either high or low active coping). In other words, high self-efficacy and more frequent use of active coping would mitigate the effects of social stressors on psychological strains.

Method

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

For the Hong Kong sample, a multistage cluster random sampling method was used to recruit employees. A sample of 2% (every 50th company on the list) of the 34,619 available companies in the service sector were randomly drawn from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong government. For each company that agreed to participate, approximately 25% of the employees were invited to participate in the survey. The first author was responsible for distributing the questionnaires and collecting the completed questionnaires in person. A total of 324 employees (132 males, 192 females) were successfully surveyed, the return rate was 100%. The mean age was 32.1 years (SD = 9.4 years) and the mean of current job tenure was 6.3 years (SD = 6.1). For the sample recruited in the PRC, a total of 540 questionnaires were distributed to employees in various service industries in several cities in the PRC, and 402 questionnaires were returned, making a response rate of 74.4%. The PRC sample consisted of 209 males and 182 females (11 unidentified), with a mean age of 31.9 years (SD = 7.4 years). The mean of current job tenure was 4.3 years (SD = 5.2). For the sample recruited in Taiwan, a total of 520 questionnaires were distributed to employees in various service industry settings, and 306 questionnaires were returned, making a response rate of 60%. The Taiwan sample consisted of 134 males and 172 females, with a mean age of 32.9 years (SD = 6.7 years) and mean current job tenure of 6.3 years (SD = 6.3). The third and the fourth authors were responsible for data collection in the PRC and Taiwan respectively. A designated person was invited to distribute and collect the questionnaires. The participants in the three regions were informed about the purpose of the study and participation was on a voluntary basis.

INSTRUMENTS

Social Stressors. Interpersonal conflict was assessed with the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS) (four items) (Spector and Jex 1998) (e.g., “How often are people rude to you at work?”), and organizational politics was assessed with three items (one item from Cooper et al. (1988), and two items from Kacmar and Carlson (1997) (e.g., “There has always been an influential group in your department that no one ever crosses”)). These two scales were translated into Chinese, used in a previous study using Chinese samples and were found reliable (Siu et al. 2005). The ICAWS was also used in Lu et al. (2011a) and proved reliable (α = 0.74) among Taiwan Chinese workers. Each item was given a frequency rating using the response choices “Less than once per month or never” (1), “Once or twice per month” (2)...
“Once or twice per week” (3), “2–3 times per week” (4), “Once or twice per day” (5) to “Several times per day” (6).

Psychological Strains. Two scales were used to measure psychological strains: Job (dis)satisfaction scale (three items) (Cammann et al. 1979) (e.g., “All in all, I am satisfied with my job”), and Psychological Well-being scale of ASSET (An Organizational Stress Screening Tool) (Cartwright and Cooper 2002) to measure psychological symptoms (10 items). The items are symptoms of stress-induced mental ill-health such as constant tiredness. Each item was scored on a six-point scale with respective high score denoting higher job satisfaction and worse well-being. These scales have been used in Chinese samples and found reliable with respective alpha value as 0.79 and 0.82 (Siu et al. 2006). The job satisfaction scale was also used in Lu et al. (2011a) and proved reliable (α = 0.86) among Taiwan Chinese workers.

Self-Efficacy. The Chinese version of the 10-item General Self-efficacy Scale (Schwarzer et al. 1997) was adopted to measure self-efficacy (Siu et al. 2005, 2007). However, the scoring procedure was modified, instead of the original four-point Likert Scale, each item was scored from “Not at all True” (1) to “Exactly True” (6). This version was also used in Lu et al. (2011a) and proved reliable (α = 0.93) among Taiwan Chinese workers.

Active Coping. Six items of the Occupational Stress Indicator (Cooper et al. 1988) measuring control coping were used to measure active coping. This scale has been used in Chinese societies and demonstrated acceptable reliability (e.g., Siu et al. 2002). Each item was scored on a six-point scale with a high score indicating high frequency of using an active coping strategy.

A confirmatory factor analysis on the seven items measuring the two social stressors confirmed that they are two distinct stressors ($\chi^2 = 111.20$, $df = 13$, $\chi^2/df = 8.554$, SRMR = 0.031, CFI = 0.97, NFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.08). We used LISREL 8.70 to conduct a series of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the items from the interpersonal conflict, organizational politics, self-efficacy, active coping, job satisfaction, and psychological symptoms scales to verify that the items fit their intended scales both within each of the three regions analyzed separately (analysis 1) and the three regions combined (analysis 3). For analysis 1, we conducted three six-factor CFAs, one for each region, placing the items for each of the six scales into a separate factor. We allowed the factors to intercorrelate. In all three regions the fit indices were within the usually accepted values for good fit (see Table 5.1). To verify measurement equivalence of the six scales across the three regions before combining the samples, we conducted multi-group CFA. Table 5.1 shows that the fit index is still acceptable when constraining the factor loading, factor covariance and error terms of corresponding latent variables to be equal across the three regions (Model 4). Given the high degree of measurement equivalence, we combined the data from the three regions and conducted a CFA for the entire sample, finding evidence for good fit ($\chi^2 = 2547.42$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 579$, $\chi^2/df = 4.40$; CFI = 0.96; NNFI = 0.96; SRMR = 0.056; RMSEA = 0.065). All of the above results showed that our measurements were equivalent across the three regions.
Table 5.1  Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results of the study variables (N=1032)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing (n = 402)</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>1,376.69**</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong (n = 324)</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>1,433.51**</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan (n = 306)</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>1,214.22**</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-group (n = 1032)</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>5,239.79**</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.079</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Model 4 means multi-group CFA when constraining the factor loading, factor covariance and error terms of corresponding latent variables to be equal across the three regions. ***, p < .001.

Results

Table 5.2 presents the means, standard deviations, Cronbach’s alphas of the variables, and intercorrelations among variables for the overall sample. The scales showed acceptable alphas ranging from 0.75 to 0.93. A series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4). As there have been discussions on misuse of statistical control variables (e.g., Spector and Brannick 2011), we ran the regressions without the controls (actually we reran the regressions and found there was not much difference in the results). All predictor variables were centered to minimize multicollinearity among them (Cohen et al. 2003). For testing the hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, interpersonal conflict or organizational politics was entered in the first step, self-efficacy and the interaction term were entered in the second and third step respectively (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4). We found that social stressors positively correlated with psychological symptoms, but negatively with job satisfaction. Therefore Hypothesis 1 was fully supported. We also found that SE positively correlated with job satisfaction and negatively with psychological symptoms. Hence Hypothesis 2 can be fully supported. We find these results are consistent with the correlations depicted in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2  Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities for variables for overall sample (N=1032)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Tenure (in years)</th>
<th>Job level</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Psychological symptoms</th>
<th>Interpersonal conflict</th>
<th>Organizational politics</th>
<th>Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Active coping</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.08* - .10**</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. Marital status: 1 = married, 2 = single; job level: 1 = non-manager, 2 = first-line supervisor, 3 = junior manager, 4 = middle manager, 5 = senior manager, 6 = top manager.; * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .00.
Table 5.3  Moderated regressions for overall sample with interpersonal conflict as independent variable (N=1032)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Psychological Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Δ R²</strong></td>
<td><strong>b</strong></td>
<td><strong>Δ R²</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
<td>-.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict * Self-efficacy</td>
<td>-.08**</td>
<td>.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active coping</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict * Active coping</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy * Active coping</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Table 5.4  Moderated regressions for overall sample with organizational politics as independent variable (N=1032)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Psychological Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Δ R²</strong></td>
<td><strong>b</strong></td>
<td><strong>Δ R²</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.129</td>
<td>.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational politics</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational politics * Self-efficacy</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active coping</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational politics * Active coping</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy * Active coping</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
The results presented in Tables 5.3 and 5.4 show that self-efficacy significantly moderated the relationship between interpersonal conflict and psychological strains (job satisfaction and psychological symptoms), and between organizational politics and psychological strains. Separate plots were drawn for individuals whose scores on the moderator (self-efficacy) were one standard deviation below and above the mean (Aiken and West 1991). When the stressor is interpersonal conflict, the simple slopes for both groups were negative and significant for job satisfaction. The simple slope was larger for the high self-efficacy group (b = -0.24, p < 0.001) and smaller for the low self-efficacy group (b = -0.11, p < 0.05). In other words, the impact of interpersonal conflict is more serious to employees with high self-efficacy than those with low self-efficacy. Moreover, for the high self-efficacy group, the simple slope for psychological symptoms was significantly positive (b = 0.93, p < 0.001); for the low self-efficacy group, the simple slope for psychological symptoms was smaller but still significantly positive (b = 0.53, p < 0.001). Self-efficacy had the same moderating pattern on the relationship between organizational politics and psychological strains. When the stressor was organizational politics, the simple slopes for both groups were negative and significant for job satisfaction. The simple slope was larger for the high self-efficacy group (b = -0.38, p < 0.001) and smaller for the low self-efficacy group (b = -0.25, p < 0.05). For the high self-efficacy group, the simple slope for psychological symptoms was significantly positive (b = 1.21, p < 0.001). For the low self-efficacy group, the simple slope for psychological symptoms was smaller but still significantly positive (b = 0.69, p < 0.001). Hence Hypothesis 3 was only partially supported.

In order to test the joint moderating effects of self-efficacy and active coping (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4), active coping was entered in the fourth step, the two-way interaction term of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics and active coping, self-efficacy and active coping were entered in the fifth step. The three-way interaction term (interpersonal conflict or organizational politics, active coping and self-efficacy) was entered in the sixth step (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4). We found that active coping was only marginally positively correlated with job satisfaction but not related to psychological strains, and did not moderate any of relationships between social stressors and strains. Therefore Hypothesis 4 was only partially supported. We also found the joint moderating effect of self-efficacy and active coping was significant on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and psychological symptoms (see Table 5.3). We calculated the simple slopes based on Aiken and West’s (1991) procedures to show the exact effects of interpersonal conflict on psychological symptoms. Figure 5.1 shows that, for employees with high self-efficacy, the impact of interpersonal conflict on psychological symptoms was reduced when their active coping increased. The simple slopes were (b = 4.42, p < 0.001) when the active coping level was low, and (b = 3.76, p < 0.001) when the active coping level was high. On the contrary, for employees with low self-efficacy, the impact of interpersonal conflict on psychological symptoms was reduced when their active coping decreased. The simple slopes were (b = 2.07, p < 0.001) when the active coping level was low, and (b = 3.33, p < 0.001) when the active coping level was high. Similar results were obtained with organizational politics as the stressor. Figure 5.2 also shows the same pattern as Figure 5.1. For employees with high self-efficacy, the impact of organizational politics on psychological symptoms was reduced when their active coping increased. We also found high self-efficacy acted as an exacerbator which amplified the impact of organizational politics on employees’ psychological symptoms, when active coping was low. Therefore Hypothesis 5 was partially supported.
Figure 5.1 Joint moderating effect of self-efficacy and active coping on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and psychological symptoms

Figure 5.2 Joint moderating effect of self-efficacy and active coping on the relationship between organizational politics and psychological symptoms
Discussion

This chapter aims to examine the relationship between social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and psychological strains (job dissatisfaction and psychological symptoms), and investigate how self-efficacy moderates the relationship between social stressors and psychological strains together with the use of active coping. Based on a study conducted in Greater China, we found direct relationships of self-efficacy with job satisfaction and psychological symptoms, as high self-efficacy was generally associated with better outcomes (lower psychological symptoms and/or higher job satisfaction) than low self-efficacy. These results corroborate previous studies (e.g., Lu et al. 2005; Lu et al. 2011a; Siu et al. 2007). Concerning active coping, we found significant direct relationship with outcomes, with a more frequent use of active coping being associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and fewer psychological symptoms. These results corroborate previous findings (e.g., Siu et al. 2006). The results of the present study also revealed the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the social stressor–strain relationships. These results build onto previous studies in Western and Chinese societies (e.g., Lu et al. 2005; Lu et al. 2011a; Siu et al. 2007) to a certain extent that overall the results suggested an exacerbator effect, but a closer examination showed the exacerbator effect cannot be always found. That is, the impact of interpersonal conflict/organizational politics was more serious to employees with high self-efficacy than those with low self-efficacy. In other words, these social stressors were a greater risk factors for Chinese employees with high than low self-efficacy. It can be explained that employees with high self-efficacy find that social stressors are beyond their control and thus those stressors are more intolerable.

The young Chinese generation in the PRC grew up when China reopened her doors, exposing them to Western influences during a period of rapid globalization (Egri and Ralston 2004). It was concluded from studies on managerial values in Greater China that, due to different political and economic backgrounds, there are both similarities and differences between Hong Kong and the PRC (Cheung and Chow 1999; Chia et al. 2007). However, they also concluded that there are more similarities than differences, particularly among young managers. As the average age of the three current samples ranged 31–32 years, we believe the young employees in Greater China are quite similar and they tend to have increasingly similar values. Maxwell and Siu (2008) also concluded that, due to the fact that we live in a globalized world, there is more convergence in individual behaviors, attitudes and beliefs among Chinese in Hong Kong and outside Hong Kong (including the PRC and Taiwan). Further, because the multiple group analysis shows the fitness of the constrained model is acceptable, hence we combined all three samples in the analyses.

As aforementioned, Chinese societies place strong emphasis on group harmony, “forbearance” and Guanxi (e.g., Farh et al. 1998), so the experience of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics is quite atypical or unfamiliar and that might lead to distress. This kind of distress experience could have more damaging effects for those employees with high self-efficacy because it was out of their expected control. Siu et al. (2007) reported the buffering role of self-efficacy between broadly defined job stressors and mental well-being among Chinese employees; Nauta et al. (2010) found the importance of looking at a particular type of stressor in the stress process because they demonstrated that when the stressor is low autonomy, high self-efficacy may not protect against psychological strains. Indeed, Lu et al. (2011a) found that self-efficacy may be a double-edged sword: it buffered the negative impact of lack of autonomy on job performance (a behavioral outcome), but exacerbated the negative impact of lack of autonomy on job satisfaction (a psychological outcome). Thus, it may also be important to look at a particular indicator of strain in the stress process, and the exact nature of self-efficacy as a moderator for the Chinese needs more fine-grained examination in the future.
We also found support for the beneficial or exacerbating role of self-efficacy depending on the use of coping styles, as initially suggested by Jex et al. (2001). We found a joint moderating effect of self-efficacy and coping on the relationship between interpersonal conflict or organizational politics and psychological symptoms. We found high self-efficacy and high active coping reduced the impact of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics on psychological symptoms. Furthermore, we found self-efficacy might well be an exacerbator which amplifies the impact of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics on employees’ psychological symptoms in a context when they refrained from using active coping strategies (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). This again points to the importance of attending to culture in examinations of stressor–strain relations (Nauta et al. 2010). Inferring from our findings, self-efficacy may have an added value for those who favor the use of active coping among Chinese employees, thus reducing their psychological symptoms regardless of the level of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics; conversely, among those who either did not have the adequate skills of active coping or were unwilling to resort to active coping, self-efficacy beliefs became a vulnerability when the level of interpersonal conflict or organizational politics increased.

As reviewed by Cheng et al. (2010), Chinese are characterized by a greater tendency to use avoidant or emotion-focused coping, not active coping. Hence Chinese employees should be reminded of the potential impact of self-efficacy and/or the use of active coping in the stress processes. Specifically, our results suggested that the disparity between one’s general beliefs (e.g., self-efficacy) and inability or unwillingness to take action (e.g., active coping) may be prerequisite for psychological symptoms. Since beliefs and behaviors are seldom examined together in existing occupational stress research, the intricate interplay between personal beliefs, coping skills, and perhaps autonomy (e.g., Nauta et al. 2010) should receive more attention particularly in a cross-cultural context.

Limitations and Future Research

It should be kept in mind that these data came from a cross-sectional study, so we cannot draw causal conclusions about the effects of stressors on strains. The three-way moderating effects were modest. Even though according to Aguinis et al.’s (2005) meta-analysis, the median effect size in published papers for moderated regression analyses indexed by the change in $R^2$ when the moderator term is added is 0.002, and the effect size of our study is higher ($R^2 = 0.004$), interpretation of findings should be cautious. Furthermore, the single-source nature of the data raises possibilities of shared biases that may have affected observed relationships. Another limitation is that we did not recruit representative samples in all three cities due to limited time and resources. One cannot conclude that the results obtained are representative of the entire workforce in Greater China. In future research, it would be better to replicate the study adopting a longitudinal design with larger and more representative samples in other Chinese and Western societies. Further, a measure of culture or cultural value should be added.

To conclude, we found the joint moderating effect of self-efficacy and active coping in collectivist societies of Hong Kong, Taipei and Mainland China. Our proposed model was supported specifically with the social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics. Our discussion in this chapter has provided evidence that bridges the gaps in knowledge about the stress processes. In brief, high self-efficacy is not always a benefit, as some might believe, but it can contribute to increased strains for employees who experience social stressors.
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