Role Ambiguity and Disengagement Among Academics: The Moderating Role of Social Support

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how role ambiguity affects academic disengagement as a result of role ambiguity. *Moreover, this study examines the impact of social support in relation to role ambiguity as well as burnout in relation to role ambiguity as well.* Two hundred and thirty-one academicians were asked to complete a self-assessment questionnaire.Role ambiguity is linked to disengagement, showing that unclear job roles decrease engagement. There is also evidence to suggest that social support plays an important role in influencing this relationship, potentially leading to a reduction in disengagement when roles are unclear. It also makes recommendations for future research for higher education leaders and scholars.

Keywords: Disengagement; Role Ambiguity, Social Support; Moderaton; Academicians;

Introduction

Modern academics have greater responsibilities in teaching, research, and administration. Scholars face heavy workloads, publication pressures, and unclear job expectations(Khan, Rasli, & Zahra, 2020; Khan., Rasli, Khan, Yasir, & Malik, 2014). Role ambiguity-the lack of clarity regarding job responsibilities and expectations-has been identified as a significant stressor. Disengagement, characterized by a withdrawal of emotion and a reduction in commitment (Khan, Asif, Hussain, Bashir, & Gul, 2021), negatively impacts employees' job satisfaction and productivity. Role ambiguity is a psychological condition that occurs when job expectations and responsibilities are unclear. Organizational psychology has extensively studied role ambiguity as a significant workplace stressor (Kulik & Liberman, 2019). Disengagement, burnout, and diminished job satisfaction result. In academia, where roles are complex and multifaceted, a lack of clarity regarding performance expectations, promotion criteria, and workload distribution can exacerbate stress. Psychologists describe burnout as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of accomplishment. Individuals who are involved in some form of work with other people can experience this syndrome(Velando-Soriano et al., 2020). An emotional exhaustion is a state of feeling of overwhelm, overextension, and depletion of resources that occur as a result of being overextended emotionally. The term depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached approach to other people. A person's reduced personal accomplishment(Lee & Ashforth, 1996) is a negative self-evaluation of their job performance(Khan, Ahmad, & Ali, 2023). Nonetheless, social support, whether it comes from colleagues, supervisors, or institutional structures, may be able to buffer (Cohen & Ashby, 1985)these negative effects. Stress can be mitigated and resilience enhanced by strong support systems(Cheng, Zhao, Wang, & Sun, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to examine how the relationship between role ambiguity and the degree of disengagement among academicians can be moderated by social support. Therefore, social

support reduces the negative impact of role ambiguity on academic disengagement. In Pakistan's universities, role ambiguity and disengagement (Khan, Begum, Saeed, Hussain, & Naz, 2023)are high, according to existing studies. Research indicates that workplace stress rises because of heavy workloads, tight deadlines, lack of colleague support, insufficient recognition, and unfair pay structures(Maphalala, 2014). As a moderator, role ambiguity affects workplace disengagement and social support. There is potential for this study to serve as a guide in the future. This would make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge about how to make the working environment safer, happier, and more clear. The study variables negatively affect individuals and organizations, so further understanding is important. The study will also examine individual and organizational influences, including the ability of employees to manage stress and workplace support systems. Based on this, the following hypotheses were developed:

   H1: Role ambiguity is positively linked to higher levels of disengagement.

   H2: Social support weakens the effect of role ambiguity on disengagement.

Methodology

This quantitative study investigates whether social support buffers the negative effects of role ambiguity on work disengagement among university faculty members.As part of the research, a cross-sectional survey approach was adopted(Creswell, 2015), allowing for the efficient collection of data from a diverse sample of academicians across multiple institutions through the use of a cross-sectional survey(Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). We chose a quantitative methodology to objectively measure and statistically analyze the key variables and their interrelationships, particularly the interaction effect between role ambiguity and social support. furthermore, using the adapted questionnaire, the data was collected from a sample of respondents in the selected area by using a sampling procedure(Chiang Ku & Chen-Liang, 2007). The population of the current study is composed of academicians from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan(Bhatti, Hashmi, Raza, Shaikh, & shafiq, 2011). To select the academics who would participate in the study, simple random sampling was used. Respondents who demonstrated both willingness and capability to contribute meaningful insights to the research domain were prioritized for inclusion. In order to collect data, adapted questionnaires with standardized scales were used to collect data. An instrument that has been validated for assessing job expectations and responsibilities was used to assess role ambiguity using a validated instrument. Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) subscales (daSilva Schuster & daVeiga Dias, 2018), assess emotional withdrawal and reduced commitment., An 8-item scale was used to evaluate social support (Khan., Khan, Kanwal, & Bukhair, 2018)from colleagues, supervisors, and institutional structures. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70 for all scales in this study(Khan, Yusoff, & Khan, 2014).

Data Analysis

Researchers have found that social support moderates role ambiguity and disengagement among academicians, contributing both to theoretical understanding and practical application. regression modeling was used to examine role ambiguity's direct impact on disengagement and social support's potential buffering effect(Gellert et al., 2018; Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1991). However, social support serves as an important mitigating factor, which alters the strength of the relationship between role ambiguity and academic engagement. Among the main findings of this study is that role ambiguity and disengagement have long been well established relationships in educational settings, and this study confirms that relationship. In terms of role ambiguity as shown in table 1, there was a strong correlation between disengagement and role ambiguity. The presence of unclear job expectations correlates significantly with higher levels of emotional withdrawal and reduced levels of engagement at work. In organizational psychology, role ambiguity has consistently been identified as a key predictor of burnout especially disengagement. This relationship underscores the particular vulnerability of faculty members to unclear role definitions, because academic work

encompasses teaching, research, and service, it is complex and multifaceted. The analysis revealed significant negative relationship between social support, role ambiguity and disengagement.

Table 1: The reliability coefficients and correlation matrix for variables.

Variables	Role Ambiguity	Social Support	Disengagement
Role Ambiguity	**0.71**		
Social Support	-.49*	**0.73**	
Disengagement	.42*	-.51*	0.79

Hayes model for moderation analysis was used to determine the moderation effect. In order to enter the data, SPSS was used to do so. Disengagement was entered first, followed by role ambiguity and moderator social support. In addition, model one from the template was used as a basis for the study. Based on Table 2, it can be seen that social support can moderate the relationship between the role ambiguity and disengagement in a positive way (β=0.243. P>0.01). The impact of social support on relationships is, therefore, significant. The significance level has been identified using LLCI and ULCI. When both signs are the same, the relationship is significant(Hayes, 2012).

Table 2: Moderated Regression Analysis

	β	Role Ambiguity	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-.155	.176	-.199	.201
Role Ambiguity	0.165	.196	.8623	1.233
Social Support	-.199	.102	-.3795	.345
Int_RASS	.243	.134	.0000	.212

Result and Discussion

The study examines how social support mitigates the impact of role ambiguity on burnout among Pakistani university faculty, utilizing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model as its theoretical foundation(Bakker. & Demerouti, 2016). Have shown that, following the work of Bakker and Demerouti, it is possible to use the JD-R model as a theory in light of the work (Demerouti., Mostert., & Bakker., 2010). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory posits two parallel processes: first, demanding work conditions may deplete energy and increase negative outcomes like burnout, while secand, available resources can buffer these effects and enhance positive outcomes. Our findings align with this theoretical framework, demonstrating how social support serves as a protective resource against role ambiguity's detrimental effects. (A. B. Bakker & E. Demerouti, 2014). Burnout emerges from a persistent mismatch between job demands and available resources, with workplace stress serving as a key predictor of this outcome.As Maphalala (2014) notes, burnout is particularly likely when job demands exceed the resources needed to cope with them. In academic settings, faculty members encounter various stressors that contribute to this imbalance, including conflicting role expectations, unclear job responsibilities, and excessive workloads (Karatepe, Beirami, Bouzari, & Safavi, 2014; Khan., Rasli, Yasir, & Khan, 2019). It was found that role ambiguity had differential effects on disengagement across dimensions depending on the dimension. (Khan. et al., 2021), found that the most potent predictor of disengagement in the workplace was ambiguity surrounding performance evaluation criteria, followed by uncertainty regarding task priorities, and then by unclear roles boundaries in the workplace. In terms of how their work will be evaluated, academicians seem to be particularly sensitive to ambiguity. Promotion and tenure decisions are high stakes. This study identifies specific aspects of role ambiguity that negatively impact academicians' engagement for targeted interventions. In this study, we demonstrate how social support can modify the relationship between role ambiguity and

disengagement. Despite the fact that role ambiguity predicted disengagement regardless of the level of social support, the strength of the relationship varied significantly depending on the level of social support. Academicians reporting high levels of social support had a significantly weaker association between role ambiguity and disengagement. It is because of this pattern that we support the buffering hypothesis, which holds that social support can protect individuals from the negative consequences of stress by buffering the negative effects of stress Social support served as a key moderator in this investigation. The analysis revealed significant associations between social support and both disengagement and role ambiguity. Specifically, findings indicate that Insufficient social support(Khan, Habib, Khan, Ullah, & Naz, 2023; Sherman, Cheng, Fingerman, & Schnyer, 2016) exacerbates role ambiguity and disengagement and Strong social support systems (Khan. et al., 2019) mitigate these negative outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides compelling evidence that social support moderates the effects of role ambiguity on academic engagement. When faculty members have strong social support systems, role ambiguity consistently predicts lower levels of disengagement(Khan, Gul, Gul, & Naz, 2022). In addition to contributing to theoretical understanding and practical interventions in academic work environments, these results demonstrate how supportive interpersonal and institutional structures can mitigate negative consequences of unclear role expectations. There are three main theoretical implications that can be drawn from these findings. Social support functions not only as a direct resource, but also as a contextual factor that influences how job demands affect outcomes, extending the Job Demands-Resources model (A. Bakker & E. Demerouti, 2014). In addition, the results provide empirical validation for the buffering hypothesis in higher education, demonstrating that support systems can indeed mitigate role ambiguity-induced stress. Different types (emotional, instrumental, informational) and sources (colleagues, supervisors) of support offer nuanced insights that refine our understanding of how support functions in professional settings. Future research will explore how different forms of support influence engagement through these theoretical advances. It is recommended that future implications of the study be considered after it has been completed. For the purposes of generalizability, the researcher recommended the use of a small sample size in the current study, which increased the generalizability. As a result, a more representative sample was obtained and statistical power was increased as a result. Maslach and Jackson (1981) introduces the MBIwhich is widely used and validated as a measure of disengagement by researchers around the world. It was recommended that in order to determine whether role ambiguity and disengagement at work are causally related, the researchers should use a longitudinal design. Unlike cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies offer stronger evidence for causal relationships due to their temporal dimension. The current research further identifies job control (Kundi, Khan, Qureshi, Akhtar, & Khan, 2014)and other organizational resources as potential moderators that may buffer the detrimental effects of role ambiguity.

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