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Covid-19 Resource Stressors And Career Satisfaction: A Moderated Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract

Due to its unpredictability and uncontrollability, Covid-19 provides a unique context while its effects are and will likely impact health and career-related outcomes. This study focuses on career-related outcomes. This study aims to capture the initial impact of stressors, fear of failure following Covid-19 towards career satisfaction. This study also explores the complex interaction between career stages and Covid-19 affects on the mediating effect of fear of failyure towards career satisfaction. By using two samples (1) N=642 employees and (2) N=389 managers, the moderated moderated mediation model is tested. The findings suggest that indeed both career stages and covid-19 effect significantly impact the indirect relationship between covid-resource stressors and career satisfaction via fear of failing but less negatively impactful for those in latter career stages.

Keywords: *Career stages, career satisfaction, covid-19 affected, fear of failing, moderated moderated mediation.*

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Introduction

Because both the exposure to the aspects of the pandemic personally and the causes of pandemic-inducing stressfulness at work are likely crucial determinants of long-term health-related (Zheng et al., 2021) and career-related (Mahmud et al., 2021) outcomes, it is essential to capture these elements and, ideally, empirically test their relationship to key outcomes. This study focuses on career-related outcomes. Career outcomes are an indicator of an individual's happiness with their career (Strauss et al., 2012) and willingness to stay within the organisation (August & Waltman, 2004).

With the Covid-19 pandemic as a major event that will have long-lasting impacts on individual outcomes, an event-specific approach is used which requires measuring individual appraisals of stressfulness, the perception of the degree to which individuals were exposed to the stressful event can be useful beyond simple counts of events and their influences on outcomes. This approach has proven reliable predictors of outcomes such as mental health (Cohen et al., 1983; Epel et al., 2018). This introductory empirical study centres Covid-19 pandemic as the manifestation of disruptions that are experienced by an individual in terms of resources-stressors and fear of failure associated with disruptions. Moreover, this study aims to account for where individuals are placed in terms of their career stages and how the functional status post-Covid-19 can have an impact on one's career satisfaction.

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the lingering effects of Covid-19 that still persist in the uncontrollable and unpredictable disruptions of modern workplaces today and how it interacts with different career stages. The study also aims to test these complex relationships through two samples of managers and employees.

Literature Review

Career Satisfaction

Career satisfaction refers to "the satisfaction that stems from intrinsic and extrinsic parts of their careers" (Judge et al., 1995, p. 487). Overall, it represents an individual's internal (e.g., promotion and income) and external (e.g., training and development) aspects of experiences at work (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). Career satisfaction is driven by an individual's psychological consequences at work (Judge et al., 1995; Kang et al., 2015), and dictates outcomes related to wellbeing and career commitment (Ha & Lee, 2022).

The present study focuses on subjective career satisfaction abstracted as an individual's evaluation of the level of their success that is attained through progress on their job (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007). Additionally, career satisfaction for employees is a reflection of their feeling about work, its environment and their achievements attached to this work which allows employees to extend their careers (Van Der Weijden et al., 2016). In the context of the present study, we focus on career satisfaction which may likely have shifted due to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of Covid-19's disruptions. Furthermore, this can be similar for both employees and managers as the impact of disruption has affected everyone, albeit to different degrees.

From managerial perspective, investigating career satisfaction as an outcome can aid in diverse and effective HR practices (Hee et al., 2016). Accurately, employees' and employers' self-evaluation of career satisfaction can be more effective in representing the level of satisfaction achieved (Spurk et al., 2015; Nie et al., 2018) and in establishing best practices. Moreover, managing career satisfaction for both employees and managers especially when it is emphasized by negative impact (Loi & Ngo, 2010), is essential to draw fruitful policies and practices for the current and future workforce.

Fear of Failure

Fear of failing or the motive to avoid failure refers to avoiding shame and humiliation and events that can consequently instil fear (Atkinson, 1966, Conroy, 2001). According to Lazarus (1991), emotions determine individuals' experiences when there is a change that causes their relationship with the environment to shift or alter which impacts their ability to accomplish their goals. These perceived changes can be imagined or real though individuals must consciously or unconsciously appraise how these changes can alter their ability to achieve their goals. This involves assessing (a) if the change is relevant to their goals, (b) if the changes help or hinder the change to achieve goals, and (c) the nature of the specific goals (Lazarus, 1991) which in this study is career satisfaction.

Covid-19 resource stressors and fear of failure and careers

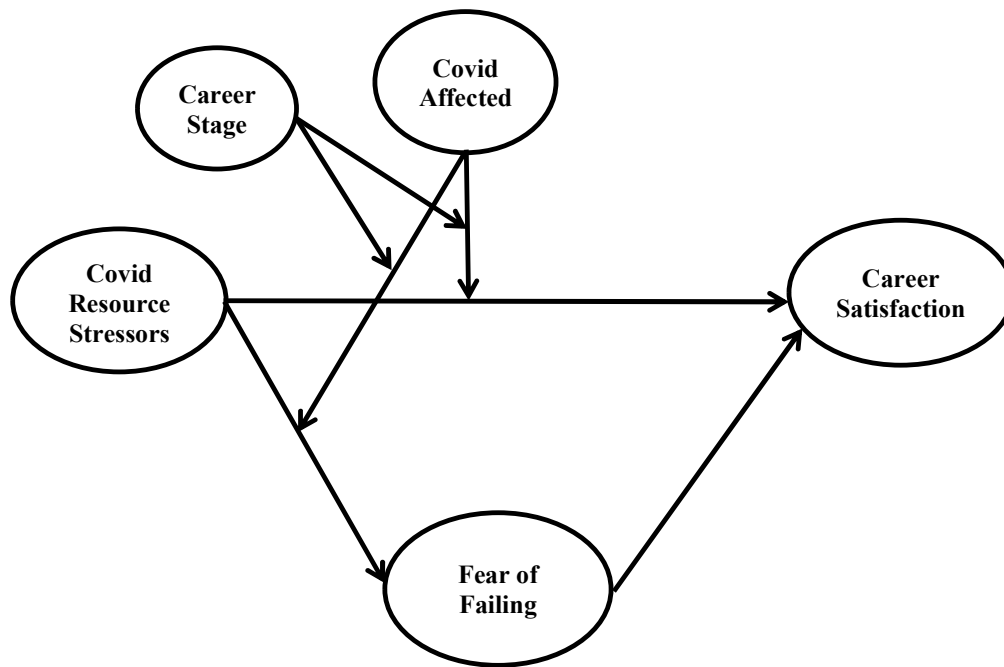
Due to Covid-19, there is a lack of a variety of resources (Tambling et al., 2021). On one hand, employees who are still enjoying their jobs have fewer resources to work with but are expected to perform as they usually did. On the other hand, the steep decline in resources and the organisational crisis are inducing the fear that employees who are currently employed may not be able to fulfil their roles as they initially anticipated. Employees are struggling to work hard and put in extra effort, albeit using limited resources and face constant fear of failing which can lead to career dissatisfaction.

Career Stages and Post-Covid-Functional Status

The discussed fear of failure may be higher for some compared to others. One distinction can be clear in terms of individual career stages. Those with decades of experience are more likely to have a better grasp of resources and how to access these resources. This ability can allow these individuals better placed in dealing with the crisis. Comparatively, those in their early career stage may feel more pressure attached to the fear of failure and lack of knowledge and capacity to access resources. These individuals who have just started their careers during highly disruptive times and had certain goals may have a rough start and feel lower satisfaction towards their career compared to middle- to late careers who may have achieved their career goals (to some degree). How will these individuals respond to the resources-related crisis? Theoretically, as stated earlier, these individuals may have more resources such as connection, opportunities, daily life resources and information and experience that is of more value and also financial stability being employed for longer than early-career individuals.

As Covid-19 and its various variant are still active in the community, employees and employers are both being affected by it. Those who got Covid-19 have physical and emotional stress. These individuals have suffered from the residual effects of Covid-19 which can have significant limitations on day-to-day life and work (Klok et al., 2020). Overall, have been surviving in times of disruption, have a significant strain on satisfaction. However, these wellbeing related impacts can significantly affect individual career outcomes. Since Covid-19 is the manifestation of disruption in the present study, it is crucial to determine its impact given different career stages towards fear of failing as well as career satisfaction. Thus, the present study explores the dynamics of this major disruption and its effects through Conservation of Resource Theory which focuses (a) on stress and its responses and (b) on how various factors work in combination towards a goal (Hobfoll et al., 2018) which in this study is career satisfaction.

Figure 1. Study Model (Employee + Manager Samples)



Research Design

We answered our research questions with two quantitative samples from New Zealand: (1) N=642 employees and (2) N=389 managers. We conduct two samples to examine the links between Covid-19 resource stressors and career satisfaction, including fear of failing as a mediator, and two moderators: career stage and Covid-19 affected. Ultimately, we test a moderated moderated mediation model. Having two samples (employees and managers) allows for comparisons and additional tests of generalisability. We conducted a metric invariance test, and this showed the two samples were not significantly different. We conducted separate analyses for the two samples. All measures are established and had good psychometric properties. Regression analysis was conducted using the PROCESS (4.2 version) macro by Hayes (2018) (model 12). This model had Covid-19 resource stressors as the predictor, fear of failing as the mediator, and career satisfaction as the dependent variable. Career stage (early, middle, and late) and Covid-19 affected (range from never had Covid-19, up to being severely affected) as dual moderators. We controlled age, gender, tenure, and education.

Findings

Overall, comparing the two samples, we find similar direct effects with Covid-19 resource stressors being significant and negatively related to career satisfaction for both samples. Similarly, Covid-19 resource stressors are significant and positively related to fear of failure for both employees and managers, and fear of failing is significant and negatively related to career satisfaction (for both). In both samples, fear of failing only partially mediates the influence of Covid-19 resource stressors on career satisfaction. The direct and mediation effects support our hypotheses, albeit partial mediation only. There were no significant two-way interaction effects, but significant three-way interaction effects with Covid-19 resource stressors interacting with career stage and Covid-19 affected towards fear of failing for both employees and managers.

The interaction shows that those with the highest levels of fear of failing are employees with a high career stage and being personally affected by Covid-19, with the lowest being a high career stage but not affected by Covid-19. For managers, the interaction is slightly different. The highest levels of fear of failing are among managers with a low career stage and being personally affected by Covid-19, with the lowest being a high career stage but not affected by Covid-19. Further, another three-way significant interaction was found for managers toward career satisfaction, those with low Covid-19 resource stressors reported lower fear of failing and those with higher Covid-19 resource stressors reported higher fear of failing. However, the highest levels of fear of failing are among employees with a high career stage and being personally affected by Covid-19, with the lowest being a high career stage but not affected by Covid-19.

Finally, a significant index of moderated moderated mediation was found in the employee sample only. This showed the indirect effect of Covid-19 resource stressors on career satisfaction through fear of failing differed by career stage and whether the employee had been affected by Covid-19. For early-career and middle-career employees, the indirect effect of Covid-19 resource stressors is significant and has a small effect, which reduces as the Covid-19 affect increases (i.e., employees are more affected). However, for late-career employees, the indirect effect of Covid-19 resource stressors is significant and has a small effect, which increases as the Covid-19 affect increases (i.e., employees become more affected). Hence, the moderated moderated mediation effect shows that the indirect effect of Covid-19 resource stressors differs across Covid-19 affected employees, with late-career employees suffering less if they are personally affected.

Discussion

The effects of Covid-19 on employee outcomes are only starting to be understood. While the effects on employee well-being have received attention, the effects on career satisfaction has received little attention. The present study explored not only the job stressors relating to Covid-19, but the potential effect that being physically affected by Covid-19 might play on career satisfaction. Due to that focus, we included the career stage to understand whether effects differed by career stage as well and our findings of significant moderated moderated mediation effects show that late-career stage employees are better able to manage the Covid-19 stressors even as they are physically affected. This indicates the beneficial nature of being at the late-career stage while highlighting the need for practical implications focused on those in their early careers.

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