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**General job performance of first-line supervisors:  
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effects on subordinate exhaustion**



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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# General Job Performance of First-Line Supervisors: the Role of Conscientiousness in Determining its Effects on Subordinate Exhaustion

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## Abstract

In an integrated test of the job demands–resources model and trait activation theory, we predicted that the general job performance of employees who also hold supervisory roles may act as a demand to subordinates, depending on levels of subordinate conscientiousness. In a sample of 313 customer service call centre employees, we found that high-conscientiousness individuals were more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, and low-conscientiousness individuals were less likely as the general job performance of their supervisor improved. The results were curvilinear, such that high-conscientiousness individuals' exhaustion levelled off with very high supervisor performance (two standard deviations above the mean), and low-conscientiousness individuals' exhaustion levelled off as supervisor performance improved from moderate to high. These findings suggest high-conscientiousness employees may efficiently handle demands presented by a low-performing coworker who is their boss, but when performance expectations are high (i.e. high-performing boss), these achievement-oriented employees may direct their resources (i.e. energy and time) towards performance-related efforts at the expense of their well-being. Conversely, low-conscientiousness employees suffer when paired with a low-performing boss, but benefit from a supervisor who demonstrates at least moderate job performance. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## Keywords

emotional exhaustion; supervisor job performance; conscientiousness

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## Introduction

As workers experience increased stress at work from rising workplace demands, researchers have increased their focus on strain, the consequence of occupational stress (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2002). Emotional exhaustion, one type of strain, is particularly important because it is associated with crucial psychological and behavioural outcomes, including productivity, withdrawal, job attitudes and overall employee well-being

(Friesen & Sarros, 1989; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Thus, understanding how workplace factors impact emotional exhaustion has implications for both employees and organizations.

Researchers have found that a wide array of situational factors are associated with emotional exhaustion (e.g. perceived organizational support, constraints, role ambiguity and workload; Chen & Spector, 1991; Escribá-Agüir & Pérez-Hoyos, 2007; Jawahar, Stone, & Kisamore, 2007; Zohar, 1997). Although scholars have

explored the influence of supervisor behaviours on employee well-being, to our knowledge this has not been explored in a stressor–strain framework (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Many supervisors work closely with their subordinates, guiding subordinate behaviour and influencing almost all elements of the job. Therefore, following calls for the study of additional situational antecedents of strain (Den Hartog & Koopman, 2002; Maslach et al., 2001), we examined the influence of the general job performance of customer service employees who also hold supervisory roles on subordinate exhaustion.

Despite the wealth of support for the impact of common stressors on strain, not all people react to their environment in the same way. Personality, as a highly valid predictor of work-related behaviour, has become an increasingly important inclusion in stressor–strain models because of its impact on individual responses to stress, including perception of situational factors and coping strategies (Bakker, van der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Perrewé & Spector, 2002; Zellars, Perrewé, Hochwarter, & Anderson, 2006). Accordingly, we aimed to address these gaps in the literature by positioning supervisor job performance as a situational factor and personality as a moderating personal factor, leveraging trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and the job demands–resources (JD–R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) to predict patterns of subordinate emotional exhaustion. In doing so, this study may shed light on the interactive role of supervisor and subordinate characteristics in the development of subordinate emotional exhaustion. Also, this study may lend insight to stress researchers in extending extant stressor–strain theoretical models.

### **Supervisor job performance and emotional exhaustion**

The JD–R model suggests that demands and resources determine how much strain is experienced by employees (Demerouti et al., 2001). Employees experience greater amounts of strain as job demands (i.e. stressors) increase. Resources, in contrast, buffer against the negative impact of job demands (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). According to the JD–R model, job resources are physical, psychological, social or organizational characteristics of the job that may help individuals to: (a) achieve work goals; (b) reduce physiological and

psychological job demands; and (c) stimulate professional growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Research shows that when individuals are overwhelmed by job demands and/or lack sufficient resources, they are highly susceptible to strain (Maslach et al., 2001).

Several aspects of a supervisor's role may influence strain. For instance, the quality of the relationship between a supervisor and subordinate predicts psychological strain (Harris & Kacmar, 2006; Park & Wilson, 2003). Also, poor personality or goal congruence between a subordinate and supervisor is thought to lead to subordinate burnout, but empirical tests of this relationship are rare (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). A third line of research suggests that supervisor support acts as a job resource that buffers against the deleterious effects of job demands (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Escribá-Agüir & Pérez-Hoyos, 2007; Halbesleben, 2006; de Jonge & Kompier, 1997; Sargent & Terry, 2000). Finally, recent studies have shown that when supervisors place interpersonal job demands on subordinates (e.g. emotional labour), the subordinates are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion (Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt, & Meenks, 2006; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). These streams of research provide evidence for the impact of the supervisor on a subordinate's work environment and, more specifically, for the role of supervisor behaviour in employee well-being. We propose that general job performance of a supervisor also influences strain of a subordinate. To our knowledge, however, researchers have not investigated general supervisor job performance as an antecedent of subordinate well-being.

We adopted a broad conceptualization of job performance that reflects how well an individual performs their job overall, including completing required tasks and addressing non-task requirements of the job (e.g. stress management and interaction with coworkers; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). This conceptualization of performance may apply to any employee, whether they have supervisory responsibilities or not. When an individual is also a supervisor, however, we posit that their general job performance may not only affect how they approach their own work, but also how they facilitate and otherwise affect subordinates' work experiences, including the level of exhaustion experienced. Therefore, we investigated the effect of this type of performance in a call centre where the supervisors

performed the same job as their subordinates, in addition to their supervisory responsibilities. As we refer to general job performance of the supervisor (or 'supervisor job performance' for short), however, we are referring only to their performance in executing the same duties that their subordinates perform, not their explicit performance as a leader or their leadership style.

Both high and low supervisor job performance may place demands on subordinates, which the JD-R model predicts will increase subordinate emotional exhaustion (Demerouti et al., 2001). First, high performers may act as a role model, setting a high-performance standard. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that all employees engage in performance comparison processes, which leads them to adjust their behaviour and personal standards according to relevant others in their social environment. When employees compare themselves to higher-performing individuals than themselves (i.e. upward comparison), they are likely to exert energy in an effort to match the higher-performance levels (Brown, Ferris, Heller, & Keeping, 2007; Hertel, Niemeyer, & Clauss, 2008; Van Yperen, Brenninkmeijer, & Buunk, 2006). When those comparisons involve one's supervisor, they are especially likely to result in increased exertion, so as to receive general favour and higher-performance ratings. Therefore, among subordinates with high-performing supervisors, increased effort resulting from upward social comparison processes may act as a demand and, as a result, increase emotional exhaustion.

In contrast, low-performing individuals may act as a different kind of role model, setting a low-performance standard, and likely do not elicit effort from others making performance comparisons to them. When low performers also happen to have supervisory roles, however, they may impose other demands on subordinates. For instance, they may fail to set a clear example for how the job should be performed. Further, supervisors who are low performers may be generally unenthusiastic, slow to learn new technologies in their job, unhelpful and easily stressed. As a result, these supervisors may fail to facilitate subordinates' work and may even impede it. For example, they may not act as advocates for the department or individuals, acquiring fewer resources or avenues to resources than high-performing supervisors might secure. They may also make errors and/or fail to complete their own tasks, leaving more work for their subordinates. As a result, subordinates may exert more personal energy and

deplete their own resources (i.e. energy), resulting in emotional exhaustion.

Therefore, we expected that subordinates with supervisors who exhibit either low or high general job performance experience high demands that lead to emotional exhaustion. In contrast, moderately performing supervisors may not only hold modest performance expectations, but also may perform effectively enough in their own jobs to avoid introducing additional demands for subordinates. Therefore, individuals with moderately performing supervisors may experience the lowest levels of emotional exhaustion in comparison to other subordinates, resulting in a negative curvilinear relationship.

*Hypothesis 1:* The relationship between the general job performance of employees who have supervisory roles and subordinate emotional exhaustion is negative curvilinear, such that low and high levels of supervisor job performance are associated with high subordinate emotional exhaustion.

### **The moderating role of subordinate conscientiousness**

In addition to these general trends, the job performance of employees who also hold supervisory roles likely differentially impacts subordinates, depending on individual differences in subordinate personality. Personality affects how people perceive and appraise situational factors. Some empirical studies have positioned it as a personal resource that equips individuals to manage workplace demands in specific ways (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Perrewé & Spector, 2002; Spector, 2003). Personal resources are distinct from job resources because they are brought to the job by the individual, rather than offered to the individual by the job (Bakker, 2008). Predominant theories suggest that personal resources are primarily used to invest, manage and direct other resources, such as time and energy (Hobfoll, 2001). Therefore, the effect of supervisor job performance on subordinate exhaustion may be contingent upon the personal resources possessed by each subordinate, as determined by personality.

Extant theoretical models of stress have not yet identified which personality characteristics are resources and under what circumstances these characteristics

influence strain. Trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) sheds light on how and when personality may affect strain. This theory posits that when situations allow for variance in behaviour, the situation triggers activation of specific personality characteristics. If cued traits are present, they are likely activated, but when an individual does not possess cued traits, they are less likely to react in the desired way.

Of the big five personality traits, conscientiousness is the best predictor of a spectrum of work-related outcomes, including job performance (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Costa & McCrae, 1988). Individuals high in conscientiousness tend to be achievement, detail and planning-oriented (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Empirical research shows that these tendencies predispose individuals to direct their abilities, energy and other resources towards achieving work-related goals, notice inconsistencies in their environment and act to resolve them, and proactively create plans to efficiently complete tasks (Perry, Hunter, Witt, & Harris, *in press*; Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002). Conscientiousness has also been operationalized as a motivation-based trait. It affects performance through other motivational constructs, including expectancy, goal setting and self-efficacy (Judge & Ilies, 2002; Schmidt & Hunter, 1992). In addition, conscientiousness has been conceptualized as the 'getting ahead' aspect of political skill, representing a dispositional willingness to exert energy towards accomplishment in the workplace (Blickle et al., 2008; Witt & Ferris, 2003). Together, these findings and conceptualizations suggest a positive relationship between conscientiousness and the tendency to act on relevant environmental cues at work, including both implicitly and explicitly set performance expectations.

Recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that conscientiousness acts as a personal resource by determining the efficiency of resource expenditure (Halbesleben et al., 2009). Namely, it may determine the degree to which an individual appropriately directs attentional resources towards tasks and problems. Therefore, it also affects the propensity to avoid strain (Bakker, 2008; Connor-Smith & Flachsbar, 2007; O'Connor & O'Connor, 2004; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Zellars et al., 2006). According to a recent meta-analysis, high-conscientiousness individuals primarily use problem-focused coping strategies (Connor-Smith & Flachsbar, 2007), which are thought to buffer the negative effects of job demands or lacking resources (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007). Moreover, theoretical

development and empirical research on each dimension of conscientiousness (i.e. achievement, detail and planning orientations) suggest these specific traits may allow individuals to avoid extensive rework, thereby conserving resources (Hobfoll, 2001; Zellars et al., 2006). Namely, the achievement orientation of a high-conscientiousness individual may allow them to focus on tasks and invest resources wisely to accomplish goals. Detail orientation may predispose individuals to carefully check for errors as they work, avoiding the need to redo work tasks. Finally, planning orientation may predispose individuals to proactively anticipate and address issues by thinking ahead, thereby completing the task correctly without unnecessary effort. Low-conscientiousness individuals, in contrast, tend to be careless, lackadaisical and disorganized, expending more energy than necessary (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae & Costa, 1985), making them more susceptible to emotional exhaustion. We expected conscientiousness to moderate the curvilinear relationship between the general job performance of employees who also hold supervisory roles and subordinate emotional exhaustion.

### High conscientiousness

A high-conscientiousness individual may not be prone to expending additional resources to improve their own performance to higher than normal levels when their supervisor is not a high-performing role model. However, even when a low-performing supervisor fails to facilitate subordinate work or introduces additional obstacles, a high-conscientiousness subordinate may be well-equipped to handle these demands (Connor-Smith & Flachsbar, 2007; Halbesleben et al., 2009). For instance, if a supervisor fails to accurately answer questions, a high-conscientiousness subordinate is likely to independently seek out required information (i.e. high achievement orientation), notice inaccuracies (i.e. high detail orientation) and proactively assess information requirements (i.e. high planning orientation). In line with trait activation theory, these characteristics may be cued in the presence of a low-performing supervisor because s/he likely fails to exhibit behaviours that provide clear direction. Even in performing these additional behaviours, a high-conscientiousness subordinate may do so efficiently, conserving resources and energy and avoiding high levels of emotional exhaustion.

In contrast, when a supervisor exhibits high levels of general job performance, s/he may introduce different demands, namely high performance expectations. A high-conscientiousness subordinate is likely to notice, care about and act on these performance cues (Perry et al., in press; Witt et al., 2002). In line with trait activation theory, the level of conscientiousness likely determines whether the subordinate notices and responds to congruent with his/her achievement, detail and planning orientation (Barrick & Mount, 1991). These tendencies may predispose an individual to go beyond the call of duty to respond to a high-performing supervisor's implicit and explicit performance cues, making them susceptible to emotional exhaustion.

### Low conscientiousness

Low-conscientiousness subordinates may not efficiently address most workplace stressors, including those placed on them by a low-performing supervisor (Halbesleben et al., 2009). For instance, when a supervisor fails to accurately answer questions, a low-conscientiousness individual may fail to independently seek correct information (i.e. low achievement orientation), notice inaccuracies (i.e. low detail orientation) or plan ahead to assess information requirements (i.e. low planning orientation). As a result, low-conscientiousness individuals may be particularly susceptible to emotional exhaustion when paired with a low-performing supervisor.

Low-conscientiousness subordinates with high-performing supervisors, in contrast, may enjoy the benefits of having a supervisor who not only effectively completes his/her own core tasks, but also helps others. These behaviours may help a low-conscientiousness subordinate conserve his/her own resources. Even though high-performing supervisors may expect higher levels of performance from subordinates, low-conscientiousness individuals may fail to notice or act on these performance cues. According to trait activation theory, situational cues only activate traits that are present, which suggests that low-conscientiousness individuals are not likely to respond to supervisor performance cues (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Low-conscientiousness individuals, for instance, may not feel compelled to increase their own efforts (i.e. low achievement orientation), notice others' performance levels (i.e. low detail orientation) or make plans for completing tasks (i.e. low planning orientation). There-

fore, these individuals may avoid increased energy expenditure associated with high expectations of a supervisor who is a high performer, while enjoying the benefits of having a supervisor who is a capable employee in general.

### Summary of joint effects

For both levels of conscientiousness, we expected a curvilinear effect for the interaction of supervisor job performance and conscientiousness on emotional exhaustion. We expected a negative curvilinear relationship among low-conscientiousness subordinates, such that emotional exhaustion lowers then levels off as supervisor performance improves. In contrast, we expected a positive curvilinear relationship among high-conscientiousness subordinates, such that exhaustion increases as supervisor job performance increases.

*Hypothesis 2:* Conscientiousness moderates the curvilinear supervisor job performance–subordinate emotional exhaustion relationship, such that a positive curvilinear relationship exists for high-conscientiousness subordinates and a negative curvilinear relationship exists for low-conscientiousness subordinates.

## Method

### Procedure and participants

Employees and supervisors from an inbound customer service centre within a financial services institution participated in this study. Upper-level call centre management first invited all employees to participate in a voluntary survey. If interested, employees were to go to a specific training room during work hours. There, human resources personnel distributed paper-and-pencil surveys to subordinates.

A total of 313 employees completed a survey providing their personality and emotional exhaustion scores (response rate: 77 per cent; age:  $M = 33.96$  years, standard deviation (SD) = 10.09; tenure:  $M = 5.00$  years, SD = 4.50; 87 per cent were women; 35 per cent were minorities). Supervisor job performance was rated by the supervisor's manager at about the same time. After matching subordinates to assigned supervisors, ratings for 39 supervisors were retained (age:  $M = 39.54$  years, SD = 7.70; tenure:  $M = 10.73$  years, SD = 6.91; 75 per cent were women; 32 per cent were minorities),

averaging eight employees per supervisor. The demographics of all participants mirrored that of the target population, suggesting good representativeness of the sample.

## Measures

### Emotional exhaustion

We assessed emotional exhaustion using the four-item Witt, Andrews, and Carlson (2004) emotional exhaustion scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ; e.g. 'I feel drained after dealing with customers'). The items in this measure were adapted from the items in the commonly used Maslach burnout inventory by adding customer-related issues in the items (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Participants used a five-point response scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree').

### Conscientiousness

We assessed conscientiousness using the 30-item personal characteristics inventory (PCI) ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ; Mount & Barrick, 1995). The items used a three-point response scale (1 = 'disagree' to 3 = 'agree').

### Supervisor job performance

We assessed supervisory performance using seven items that, according to a job analysis conducted by the present researchers prior to the study, broadly reflected core requirements of the supervisor job ( $\alpha = .73$ ): (1) '[name] effectively copes with stress caused by work load or customer demands'; (2) '[name] genuinely enjoys interacting with coworkers and customers'; (3) '[name] is eager to learn new systems or procedures'; (4) '[name] takes the initiative to help coworkers'; (5) '[name] keeps working even when others are standing around and talking'; (6) '[name] does not knowingly repeat mistakes'; and (7) '[name] was quick to reach the necessary standard of performance'. The manager to whom the supervisor reported provided the ratings using the following scale: (1) 'weak or bottom 10 per cent'; (2) 'fair or next 20 per cent'; (3) 'good or next 40 per cent'; (4) 'very good or next 20 per cent'; or (5) 'best or top 10 per cent'. An exploratory factor analysis indicated that all items loaded on one general job performance factor.

### Control variable

We also controlled for subordinate emotional stability because it is highly predictive of emotional exhaus-

tion (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). We assessed it using the 30-item ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) emotional stability scale from Mount and Barrick's (1995) PCI. The items used a three-point response scale (1 = 'disagree' to 3 = 'agree').

## Statistical analyses

To assess whether grouping by supervisor had any effect on the results, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and calculated the intraclass correlation (ICC[1]). The ANOVA model was not significant ( $F = 0.90$ , ns) and the ICC(1) was very low (0.003), indicating grouping did not have a significant effect on the results (Bliese, 2000). Therefore, we conducted our analyses using ordinary least squares regression.

## Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table I. In the bivariate associations, supervisor performance was not significantly related to emotional exhaustion, but the relationship between conscientiousness and exhaustion was significant ( $r = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Prior to conducting our analyses, we centred all predictors (i.e. emotional stability, conscientiousness and supervisor performance) and created interaction terms using the centred variables. We employed hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis in three steps to test our hypotheses (see Table II; Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2002). We first entered the main effects of emotional stability (a control variable), conscientiousness, supervisor job performance and the supervisor job performance quadratic term ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Conscientiousness contributed significant variance ( $b = -0.64$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), as did emotional stability ( $b = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The supervisor performance quadratic term did not reach significance at

**Table I.** Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations ( $n = 313$ )

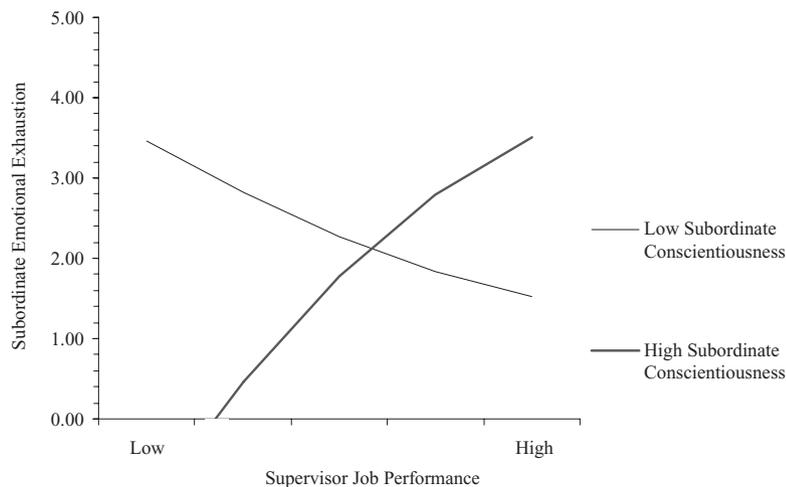
	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional exhaustion	(0.86)			
2. Emotional stability	-0.30**	(0.84)		
3. Supervisor performance	-0.07	0.13*	(0.73)	
4. Conscientiousness	-0.28**	0.42**	0.03	(0.83)
Mean	2.02	2.32	3.36	2.71
Standard Deviation	0.65	0.39	0.78	0.19

Coefficient alphas are presented in the diagonal. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table II.** Hierarchical regression statistics predicting subordinate emotional exhaustion

Model	Predictor	<i>b</i>	Standard error	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
1 ( $R^2 = 0.13$ )	(Constant)	2.86**	0.24		12.16**
	Emotional stability	-0.36**	0.10	-0.21	-3.62**
	Supervisor performance	0.45	0.25	0.54	1.83
	Supervisor performance squared	-0.08*	0.04	-0.59	-1.99*
	Conscientiousness	-0.64**	0.20	-0.19	-3.18**
2 ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ; $\Delta R^2 = 0.00$ )	(Constant)	2.86**	0.24		12.13**
	Emotional stability	-0.36**	0.10	-0.21	-3.60**
	Supervisor performance	0.44	0.25	0.53	1.77
	Supervisor performance squared	-0.08*	0.04	-0.58	-1.93*
	Conscientiousness	-0.63**	0.20	-0.18	-3.13**
3 ( $R^2 = 0.14$ ; $\Delta R^2 = 0.01^*$ )	(Constant)	2.87**	0.24		12.23**
	Emotional stability	-0.36**	0.10	-0.21	-3.64**
	Supervisor performance	0.43	0.25	0.52	1.75
	Supervisor performance squared	-0.08*	0.04	-0.58	-1.96*
	Conscientiousness	-0.65**	0.20	-0.19	-3.25**
	Supervisor performance $\times$ conscientiousness	2.80*	1.30	0.63	2.15*
	Supervisor performance squared $\times$ conscientiousness	-0.44*	0.21	-0.62	-2.10*

\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 1** Plot of curvilinear interaction predicting subordinate emotional exhaustion

$p < 0.05$  ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), failing to provide support for hypothesis 1. We entered the conscientiousness  $\times$  supervisor performance cross-product term at the second step ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.00$ , ns) and the cross-product term of conscientiousness  $\times$  supervisor performance quadratic at the third step ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the full model, the interaction between conscientiousness and the supervisor performance quadratic term was significant, supporting hypothesis 2 ( $b = -0.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Based on the significant variance accounted for by the quadratic interaction term, we proceeded to analyse its form. We plotted slopes at high and low levels of conscientiousness ( $\pm 2.0$  SDs from the mean; Stone & Hollenbeck, 1989), which revealed a curvilinear relationship between supervisor job performance and subordinate emotional exhaustion among both low- and high-conscientiousness employees (see Figure 1). High-conscientiousness employees with high-performing

supervisors reported the highest levels of emotional exhaustion compared to all other groups. Among workers with low-performing supervisors, the low-conscientiousness employees reported greater emotional exhaustion than the high-conscientiousness employees. The supervisor performance–emotional exhaustion link was positive among the high-conscientiousness employees. In contrast, among the low-conscientiousness employees, emotional exhaustion decreased as supervisor job performance increased from very low levels to about the average level, after which increases in supervisor job performance appeared unrelated to emotional exhaustion. These results fully supported hypothesis 2.

## Discussion

We examined the interactive curvilinear effects of general job performance of employees who also hold supervisory responsibilities and subordinate conscientiousness on subordinate emotional exhaustion. In doing so, we built on previous research linking supervisor behaviour to subordinate outcomes (e.g. Castaneda & Nahavandi, 1991). Unlike previous research on other supervisor factors, however, the main effect of general job performance of the supervisory employees was not significant. Instead, we found that this effect depends on subordinate standing on trait of conscientiousness. In line with the JD–R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), unique demands introduced by low- and high-performing supervisors may induce exhaustion when they overwhelm a subordinate's personal resource reserves. In line with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we theorized that subordinate conscientiousness is a significant determinant of motivational tendencies and the extent of one's personal resources, determining subordinate reactions to behaviours exhibited by supervisors (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Perry et al., in press; Witt et al., 2002). High-conscientiousness individuals may more readily respond to implicit and explicit performance cues than low-conscientiousness individuals, expending high levels of energy when a supervisor sets high standards by exhibiting high performance in his/her own job. High-conscientiousness individuals, however, are also more capable than low-conscientiousness individuals of handling demands introduced by a low-performing supervisor. This is at least partly because of the personal resources they possess, which allow them to efficiently and effectively

complete their own work and address demands as needed (Halbesleben et al., 2009).

## Theoretical implications

These findings may expand stressor–strain theory by considering general job performance of supervisors as an antecedent to subordinate emotional exhaustion. Given the central role of the supervisor in a subordinate's work environment and the impact that general job performance of supervisors had on high-conscientiousness and low-conscientiousness employees in this study, we suggest that scholars include this construct in future studies to more comprehensively delineate the development process of emotional exhaustion.

Additionally, this study may contribute to the growing body of literature on person–situation interaction. We found that the effect of supervisor job performance depends on conscientiousness, but had we not proposed this hypothesis, we might have concluded that supervisor job performance had no effect on subordinate exhaustion. Indeed, as other recent studies have shown (e.g. Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006), individual differences often affect the relationship between situational stressors and strain, and therefore, increase the utility of stressor–strain models.

Our results showing that supervisor job performance influenced primarily those subordinates high in conscientiousness may also add to the empirical evidence for the utility and validity of trait activation theory and the JD–R model in predicting exhaustion. Consistent with trait activation theory, not all individuals react to situational cues the same manner. Thus, highly conscientious subordinates were more affected by situational performance cues provided by their supervisor than low-conscientiousness subordinates. In line with the JD–R model, this led to the depletion of resources among high-conscientiousness subordinates, resulting in emotional exhaustion. Therefore, basing our hypotheses on these two theories provided a comprehensive view of the development of subordinate exhaustion. Although trait activation theory has been used primarily to predict performance and (to our knowledge) has not been used in conjunction with exhaustion, the results of this study suggest that it may be useful in this area of research and may be applied by other scholars as they continue to study the development of employee well-being.

## Practical implications

Our findings may also have implications for managers, particularly in terms of how subordinates react to leader behaviours in call centre settings. We suggest that managers remain cognizant of which subordinates are susceptible to exhaustion. Managers may rely on high-conscientiousness subordinates because they naturally manage themselves and respond to performance cues. To preserve the well-being of these valued employees, however, managers might offer additional resources, such as coping training and support for work–life balance (Halbesleben et al., 2009). These efforts may increase the likelihood that their contribution to the organization remains high over the long term. In contrast, managers with low-conscientiousness subordinates may have to work harder to motivate these individuals. For instance, clear instructions and frequent monitoring may ensure that these subordinates direct the appropriate amount of energy towards task completion. Perhaps most importantly, however, our findings suggest that environmental cues that trigger subordinate behaviour are not the same for all. Managers may have to adjust their leadership style to fully engage all workers while fostering healthy well-being.

Furthermore, in jobs where supervisors perform the same work as subordinates, as in this study, upper-level management might monitor general job performance of those supervisors. If supervisors are not performing at acceptable levels in their basic responsibilities, this may not only affect the supervisors, but it may affect subordinates as well. If management wishes to engender a workplace that cares about employee well-being, addressing low levels of supervisor job performance may be an important focus point.

## Limitations and future directions

Although our sample and our multisource methodology may increase the credibility of the study findings and address previous calls for research (e.g. Michielsen, Croon, Willemsen, De Vries, & Van Heck, 2007), we note some limitations. First, our study did not measure specific leadership behaviour, only general job performance of first-line supervisors who performed the same jobs as their subordinates (in addition to their supervisory responsibilities). Therefore, these individuals likely related to their subordinates in several ways—as a coworker, leader and role model. The leadership literature suggests that leader behaviours have differential

effects on subordinates (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Thus, to gain a better understanding of how general behaviour and leader behaviour impacts emotional exhaustion, a more comprehensive analysis of leader performance is needed, including the effect of relationship- and task-oriented leadership behaviours (Chemers, 2000).

Second, we did not measure expectations of the subordinates in terms of supervisor behaviours. It may be that in certain contexts where subordinates expect high-performing supervisors, this condition does not induce emotional exhaustion. Examples include high-risk environments (e.g. emergency response or medicine), environments that attract high-performing individuals (e.g. research-centric academic settings) or situations where supervisors must be high performers to retain employment (e.g. consulting). Because the context of our study was in a call centre, perhaps expectations of subordinates regarding their supervisors' performance were lower than in other contexts. Therefore, context and more specifically, expectations may influence this relationship and should be measured in future studies.

In conclusion, we encourage researchers to continue to examine the role of supervisor behaviours in conjunction with other job stressors in order to corroborate our findings. With rising stress levels in the workplace, efforts such as this represent an important direction for stress and personality researchers.

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