

**Subjective fit with organisational culture:  
Implications for the buffering role of participative control in the stress-strain  
relationship**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Considerable research has produced mixed results relating to the stress-buffering effects of participative control on employee adjustment. This study proposed that stress-buffering effects of participative control would be more pronounced for those perceiving high, as opposed to low, subjective fit. Three significant interactions were found in a sample of 119 employees. The results revealed a three-way interaction between role conflict, participative control, and subjective fit on intentions to leave. Further analyses found a significant three-way interaction between role overload, participative control, and subjective fit on physiological symptoms and psychological health. In all interactions, participative control buffered the negative effects of the stressors on levels of employee adjustment only when employees' subjective fit with the organisational culture was high. The theoretical importance of the results is discussed.

*Key words: work stressors, participative control, subjective fit, stress-buffering*

## INTRODUCTION

A considerable body of literature has investigated the potential negative impact of work stressors on employee attitudes, behaviour, and health. Sources of strain related to the role performed at work have in particular attracted a great deal of attention. Meta-analytic reviews (see Abramis, 1994; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964) and empirical studies have found both role ambiguity (uncertainty about what is required to perform a role) and role conflict (performing two or more mutually exclusive tasks simultaneously) to be negatively related to employee health (e.g., Cooper & Marshall, 1978; Kahn et al., 1964) and job satisfaction (Blegen, 1993; Kahn et al., 1964), and positively related to intentions to leave (Kahn et al., 1964; Singh, 1998). In addition, role overload occurs when an individual feels pressured by excessive workloads, difficult deadlines, and a general inability to fulfil organisational expectations in the time available (Peterson, Smith, Akande, & Ayestaran, 1995). Research has also found quantitative role overload to be negatively related to employee health indicators and job satisfaction (Abraham & Hansson, 1996; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991), and positively related to intentions to leave.

### *The Job Demand Control Model (JDCM)*

Many researchers have embarked on the study of potential moderators of the negative effects of role stressors on employee outcomes. The notion of control has been extensively studied as a moderator of the stressor-strain relationship and is depicted by Karasek's (1979) Job Demand Control Model (JDCM). The JDCM specifies two constructs (i.e., job demands and job decision latitude or control) that can vary in a workplace setting. In this model, job demands refer to psychological stressors in the workplace, whereas job decision latitude refers to the extent that employees can control their tasks and conduct each working day. Essentially, the JDCM highlights an interactive effect such that control over daily tasks and conduct ameliorates the negative impact of high job demands on levels of employee adjustment. That is, the negative impact of the stressor on employee adjustment is buffered by high decision latitude.

Literature investigating the moderating effects of job control or decision latitude has reported mixed results. Overall, a number of reviews, meta-analyses, and independent studies have been conducted to examine the large number of findings in relation to the moderating role of job control (e.g., Theorell & Karasek, 1996; van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Generally, these research efforts have provided limited support for the stress-buffering role of control in the workplace. For instance, van der Doef and Maes (1999) reviewed 86 studies from 63 samples published between 1979 and 1997 that investigated hypotheses relating to control as a moderator. Of the studies reviewed in this instance, 26 supported the buffering role of job control on the stressor-adjustment process. Overall, the results are not entirely consistent in the demonstration of proposed buffering effects of job control in the experience of employee strain.

This situation has led for a call to investigate additional factors that might influence the JDCM (e.g., Kasl, 1996). Subsequent research has therefore sought to determine variables that might act as secondary moderators to control in the stressors-strain relationship. As such, these studies are investigating whether the negative effects of stressors on strain are mitigated under high control conditions and high (or low) conditions of the second moderator variable. Recently, research has found secondary moderating effects for a variety of different job characteristics (such as social support) and dispositional characteristics (such as self efficacy and locus of control). To date, however, the buffering potential of more macro-oriented variables has not been investigated.

### ***Subjective Fit***

A macro-oriented variable that could potentially influence the stress-buffering properties of job control is an employee's subjective fit with organisational culture and values. Subjective fit directly measures how well employees believe their own values match those of the organization (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Indeed, there is a considerable body of research finding positive effects of perceptions of subjective fit on employee adjustment. For instance, subjective fit has positively predicted work environment satisfaction (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Jansen, & Colbert, 2002), job satisfaction (Cable & Judge, 1996; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003), and organizational commitment (Verquer et al., 2003). Similarly, low subjective fit has been associated with higher turnover intentions

(e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002; Cable & Judge, 1996; Luttrick & Moriarty, 2002). Attesting to the potential impact of perceptions of a perceived match with the organization, subjective fit has also been found to positively predict employee ratings of perceived organizational support, citizenship behaviors, and organizational identification (Cable & DeRue, 2002).

### ***Subjective Fit as a Moderator of the Work Stressor-Strain Process***

Whilst a considerable number of main effects of fit on a variety of employee outcomes have been found, researchers have only recently investigated its role in the work stressor-employee adjustment process. Several sources of literature assist in the development of hypotheses. First, the indirect value congruence (i.e., fit) literature provides some support for stress-buffering properties of more direct assessments of subjective fit. Indirect value congruence compares employee perceptions of value importance as a function of the person (the employee) and also the organisation. A number of studies employing polynomial regression analyses have found value incongruence to be associated with lower job-related attitudes, and high-endorsement value congruence to be related to higher job-related attitudes (e.g., Kalliath, Bluedorn, & Strube, 1999; Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005). These results imply that some values might represent potential stressors where organisation values are rated higher than person endorsement of the same values, leading to lower employee outcomes. Conversely, these results imply that values are more acceptable for high-endorsement value congruence, essentially manifesting as a buffering effect against poor employee outcomes.

From another perspective, the sense of belonging literature provides some insight into potential buffering effects of subjective fit on the work stressor-employee adjustment relationship. This research is relevant to the current study as components of the definition of a 'sense of belonging' include a valued involvement (or feeling of being valued), and 'a fit or the person's perception that their characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment' (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). This definition has similar characteristics to subjective fit in that it is partially about values and a match of the person to the environment.

For instance, Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, and Hoyle (2002) investigated the potential stress buffering effect of 'a sense of belonging' in 443 navy recruits. The authors investigated

the buffering potential of a sense of belonging on the work stressor-depression relationship. In this study, the stressor was the new environment for the navy recruits, adjusting to the military life and culture. Recruits were divided into depressed and non-depressed (control) groups based on preliminary assessment for depressive symptoms and information was also collected relating to historic family psychiatric illness and childhood physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. The hypothesis that officers with a stronger sense of belonging would report fewer depressive symptoms despite exposure to risk factors (i.e., stressors) was not significantly supported. However, a sense of belonging did have a significant buffering effect on the negative effects of 'new recruit stress' on depressive symptoms for both depressed and non-depressed recruits with a family history of alcohol abuse. These results are informative in terms of the current research question. For instance, the variable similar to subjective fit (a sense of belonging) was found to buffer the negative effects of stress on strain in an extremely homogenous and clinical, yet organizational sample. This result provides another perspective from which to draw expectations relating to a potential influence of subjective fit on the work stressor-control-employee adjustment relationship.

### ***Hypotheses and Research Questions***

In light of the research suggesting a potential buffering effect relating to fit, this study sought to investigate the moderating potential of subjective fit in the context of the JDCM--that subjective fit will moderate the effects of control on employee outcomes, irrespective of levels of stressors. That is, we were expecting that there would be a two-way interaction between participatory control and subjective fit (which is assumed under the three-way interaction). Given previous research, it was first predicted that role stressors would exert a negative main effect on employee adjustment (H1). Second, it was predicted that participative control (H2) and subjective fit (H3) would be positively related to employee adjustment. Based on research suggesting a moderating role of subjective fit in the stressor-strain relationship, it was expected that the potential stress-buffering effects of participative control would be more marked by higher perceptions of subjective fit. As such, it was expected that the negative effects of stressors would be buffered for high control and high subjective fit conditions

(H4a). Additionally, it was predicted that this buffering effect would not be present for those perceiving low subjective fit. (H4b).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

One hundred and eighty surveys were distributed across an Australian Local Government Council with 119 responses (response rate = 66%). Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were male, and 43% were female, and 83% were employed on a permanent full-time basis. Twenty-eight percent reported completing high school and a further 21% were degree qualified. Tenure ranged from 1 month to 35 years ( $M = 7.32$  years,  $SD = 6.50$  years).

### *Procedure*

Employees were informed that a survey of employees was taking place one month prior to distribution. The researcher visited and spoke directly to supervisors and employees about the survey within the month preceding its distribution. Email reminders were sent to all employees encouraging participation in the survey prior to distribution, and one week into the 2-week survey period. Employees received their questionnaire in an unmarked envelope containing the survey, an information sheet, and a reply-paid envelope. Upon completion, and to ensure confidentiality, employees returned the survey in the reply paid envelope directly to the researcher.

### *Measures*

**Role conflict.** Perceptions of role conflict were measured using Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, and Pinneau's (1980) 3-item scale (e.g., 'People in equal rank and authority over you ask you to do things which conflict'). Responses were rated from 1 (*very little*) to 7 (*a great deal*).

**Role ambiguity.** Perceptions of role ambiguity were measured using Caplan et al.'s (1980) 4-item scale (e.g., 'I am often clear about what my job responsibilities are'). Responses were rated from 1 (*very little*) to 7 (*a great deal*).

**Role overload.** Perceptions of role overload were measured by using a slightly modified version of Caplan et al.'s (1980) 4-item scale that included 'my job requires me to work very fast'. Responses were rated from 1 (*very little*) to 7 (*a great deal*).

**Participatory control.** Perceptions of participatory control were assessed using a 4-item scale that taps into participation in decision-making in the workplace. The scale was adapted from previously-established job control scales (Ganster, 1989). Responses were rated from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*very much*) and items included ‘To what extent do you have the opportunity to take part in job-related decisions’?

**Subjective fit.** Perceptions of subjective fit were assessed using Cable and DeRue’s (2002) 3-item subjective fit scale. Items in this scale include ‘the things I value in life are very similar to the things that (my organisation) values’. Respondents rated items from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

**Job Satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured with three items adapted from Caplan et al., (1980); e.g., ‘overall, I am satisfied with my job’. Responses end-points ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

**Intentions to Leave.** Intentions to leave were assessed using a 3-item scale (e.g., ‘I seriously intend to transfer to another job in the near future’). Responses were rated from 1 (*Definitely not*) to 5 (*Definitely yes*).

**Psychological health.** Perceptions of psychological well-being were assessed using the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12, Goldberg, 1972). Respondents rated their health over the last few weeks on a 4-point scale (e.g., have you been able to enjoy your day-to-day activities?) rated as 1 (*much less than usual*), 2 (*same as usual*), 3 (*slightly more than usual*), or 4 (*much more than usual*). Using Goldberg and Williams’ (1988) scoring technique, items receiving a rating of 1 and 2 were recoded to 0, and ratings of 3 and 4 were recoded to 1. Six negatively worded items were recoded (0 to 1, and 1 to 0). The global score was subsequently obtained by summing all items, resulting in a continuous scale with a potential range of 0 to 12.

**Physiological symptoms.** Self-reports of physiological illness were assessed using a scale developed by Caplan et al.’s (1980). The ten-item scale asked respondents to indicate physiological symptoms in the last month (e.g., ‘you had trouble sleeping at night’). Respondents rated items on a 3-point scale including 1 (*never*), 2 (*once or twice*), and 3 (*more than three times*).



**Negative affectivity.** Watson and Pennebaker (1989) reported that negative affectivity can potentially act as a ‘nuisance’ variable, especially in cross-sectional research (see also Williams, Cote & Buckley, 1989). Negative affectivity was assessed using an 11-item scale developed by Agho, Price & Mueller (1992) with items including ‘I am too sensitive for my own good’. Items were rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*all the time*).

**Age.** Age was assessed continuously and controlled for in all analyses to minimize effects on outcomes resulting from demographic differences.

## RESULTS

### *Preliminary data analysis*

Descriptive data (means and standard deviations), inter-correlations, and Cronbach (1951) alpha coefficients for the focal variables are displayed in Table 1. Overall, most correlations were low to moderate, indicating that multicollinearity was not a serious threat to the analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients are all above the accepted threshold of .70. As age significantly correlated with some focal variables, it was included as a covariate in the subsequent analyses. One way ANOVA revealed no difference among the focal variables as a function of gender.

*Table 1.* Correlations, means and standard deviations between the study variables

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Role conflict	3.11 (1.60)	(.90)									
2 Role ambiguity	2.82 (1.33)	.41**	(.90)								
3 Role overload	5.09 (1.07)	.36**	-.14*	(.78)							
4 Participatory control	3.08 (1.16)	-.38**	-.17*	.09	(.93)						
5 Subjective fit	2.75 (.94)	-.40**	-.32**	.04	.40**	(.91)					
6 Job satisfaction	3.22 (1.03)	-.30*	-.30*	.23*	.50**	.52**	(.83)				
7 Intentions to leave	2.11 (1.20)	.34**	.20*	.01	-.26*	-.36**	-.51**	(.86)			
8 Psychological health	9.24 (1.90)	-.13	.05	-.20*	.13	-.01	.01	-.11	(.77)		
9 Physiological symptoms	1.35 (.36)	.29*	.23*	.16	-.28*	-.14	-.21*	.40**	-.41**	(.87)	
10 Negative affectivity	2.30 (.75)	.18*	.17**	-.03	-.35**	-.06	-.26*	.24*	-.45**	.53**	(.89)
11 Age	38.37 (12.01)	-.13	-.17	-.12	.22*	.12	.13	-.28*	.04	-.18	-.15

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

### ***Regression analyses***

To test hypotheses relating to the stress-buffering effects of subjective fit, a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed on the data. Predictor variables were mean-centered in order to circumvent problems relating to multicollinearity between the main effects and two-way interactions (see Aiken & West, 1991). For all analyses, the control variables were entered on Step 1.

**Main effects.** Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the main effects hypotheses (H1 – H3). In all analyses, negative affectivity and age were entered on Step 1.

Role stressors (i.e., role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload) were entered on Step 2. Supporting H1, role stressors accounted for further explained variance on job satisfaction, intentions to leave, and physiological symptoms,  $R\ ch. = .18$ ,  $F(3,110) = 8.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R\ ch. = .09$ ,  $F(3,112) = 4.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R\ ch. = .06$ ,  $F(3,111) = 3.55$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively. Entry of role stressors as a set neared significance in the prediction of psychological health,  $R\ ch. = .05$ ,  $F(3,111) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .08$ . Role conflict was negatively related to job satisfaction,  $\beta = -.23$ ,  $p < .05$ , and positively related to intentions to leave,  $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ . Role overload was positively related to job satisfaction,  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negatively related to psychological health,  $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Participative control was entered on Step 2. Providing only partial support for H2, participative control significantly accounted for further explained variance on job satisfaction,  $R\ ch. = .19$ ,  $F(1,112) = 27.96$ ,  $p < .001$ , with control positively related to job satisfaction,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participative control did not significantly predict intentions to leave, or employee health indicators.

Partially supporting H3, entry of subjective fit on Step 2 accounted for a significant increment on variance on job satisfaction and intentions to leave,  $R\ ch. = .25$ ,  $F(1,110) = 41.48$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $R\ ch. = .11$ ,  $F(1,112) = 15.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively. Subjective fit positively predict job satisfaction,  $\beta = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negatively predicted intentions to leave,  $\beta = -.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . Subjective fit did not significantly predict employee health after controlling for age and negative affectivity.

**Two-way interactive effects.** For analyses involving role conflict, entry of the two-way interaction terms at Step 3 revealed significant two-way interactions between subjective fit and control on job

satisfaction,  $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ , subjective fit and role conflict on psychological health,  $\beta = -.36, p < .01$ ;  $R ch. = .05, F(3,105) = 3.41, p < .05$ , and  $R ch. = .10, F(3,106) = 5.03, p < .01$ , respectively. Plotting of the interactions at  $\pm 1$  SD from the median (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that high fit buffered the negative effects of low control on job satisfaction,  $\beta = .10, ns$ , whereas those perceiving low fit were less satisfied with their jobs when perceiving low control,  $\beta = .40, p < .001$  (see Figure 1a). Figure 1b revealed that the negative effects of role conflict were adverse to psychological health for those perceiving high fit,  $\beta = -.52, p < .01$ , whereas higher role conflict did not significantly impact psychological health for those perceiving low fit,  $\beta = .19, ns$ .

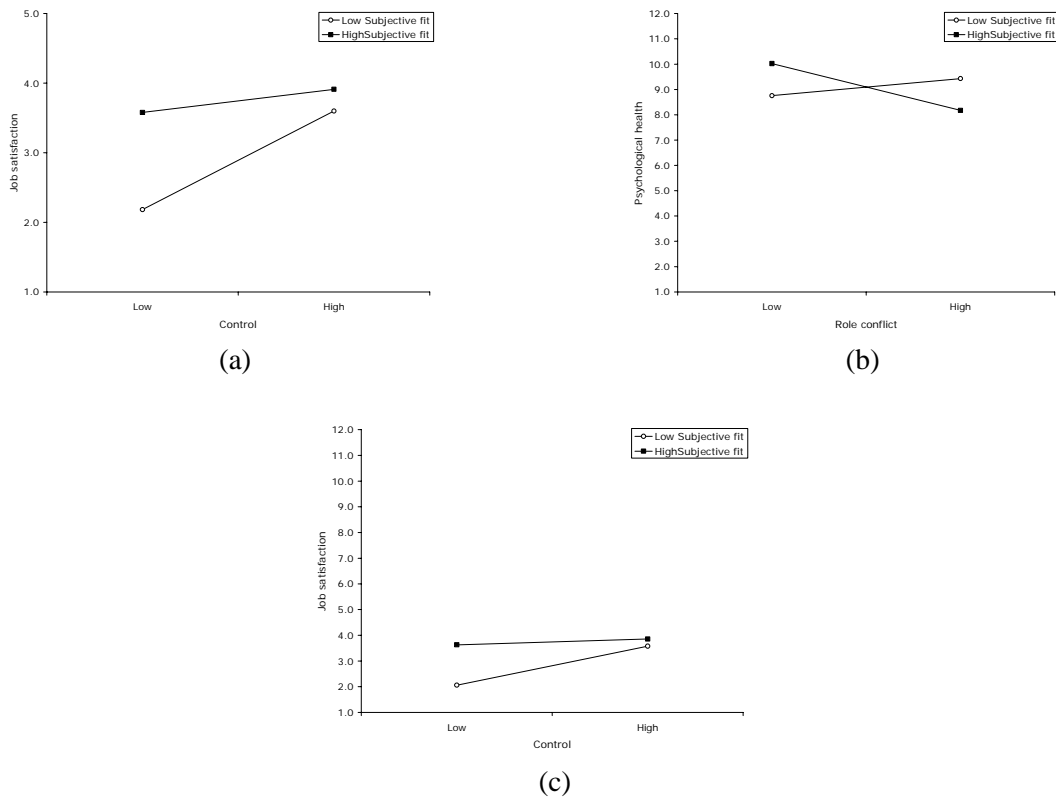


Figure 1. Graphical plots of significant two-way interactions.

For analyses involving role ambiguity entry of two-way interactions was significant for subjective fit and control on job satisfaction,  $\beta = -.18, p < .05$ ;  $R ch. = .05, F(3,105) = 3.32, p < .05$ . As per Figure 1c high fit buffered the potential negative effects of low control on job satisfaction,  $\beta = .06, ns$ , whereas those perceiving low fit and low control reported lower job satisfaction,  $\beta = .43, p < .001$ .

**Three-way interactive effects.** Analyses revealed three significant three-way interactions where subjective fit moderated the effect of the stressor X control interaction on employee adjustment. The results revealed a three-way interaction between role conflict, control, and subjective fit on intentions to leave,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1,106) = 4.48$ ,  $p < .05$ . The results also revealed a significant three-way interaction between role overload, control and subjective fit on psychological health,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(1,105) = 6.42$ ,  $p < .05$ , and physiological symptoms,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1,105) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .05$ .

These interactions were further investigated and graphed at one standard deviation above and below the median of subjective fit (see Aiken & West (1991) and are presented in Figure 2. The graphs show a similar pattern of results for those perceiving high subjective fit. Partially supporting H4a, simple slopes analyses revealed that when participants perceived high subjective fit the benefits of high control were significantly further strengthened -- high control and high subjective fit mitigated the potential negative effects of role conflict on intentions to leave,  $\beta = .01$ ,  $ns$ , and role demands on both psychological health,  $\beta = -.29$ ,  $ns$ , and physiological symptoms,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $ns$  (see Figures 2a, b, and c).

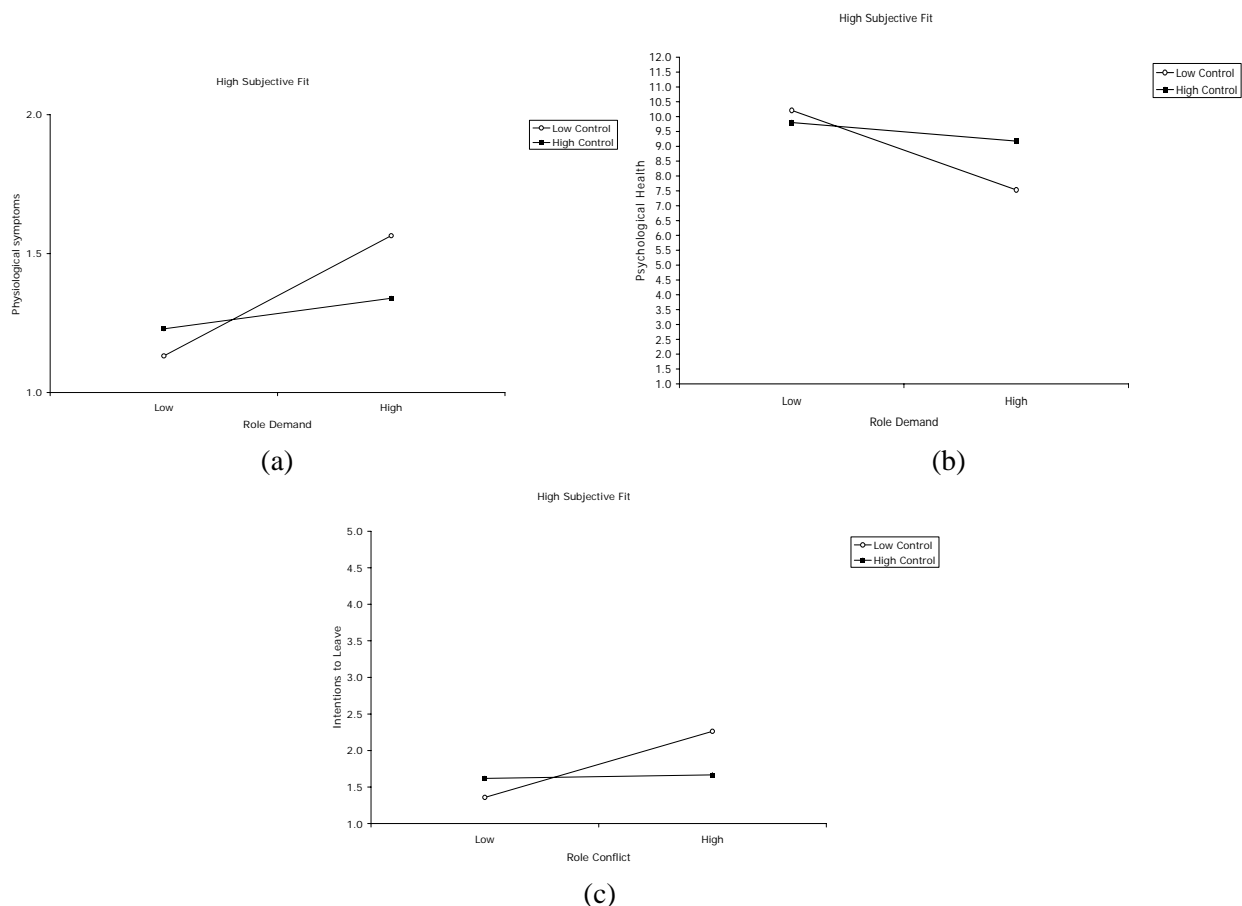


Figure 2. *Graphical plots of significant three-way interactions.*

H4b was partially supported. At low subjective fit, the slopes for high control were not significant for role overload on physiological symptoms,  $\beta = .10$ , *ns*, and psychological health,  $\beta = -.41$ , *ns*. Interestingly, the slope of low control (when low subjective fit was perceived) was significant,  $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that intentions to leave increased as role conflict increased.

## DISCUSSION

Partially supporting H1, higher perceptions of role stressors were significantly related to lower job satisfaction. Whilst role overload was negatively related to psychological health, this was the only significant relationship of role stressors on psychological or physiological assessments of employee health. Interestingly, role overload for this sample was significantly positively related to job satisfaction. A potential explanation for this result is offered by Lepine, Podsakoff, & Lepine (2005). These authors describe hindrance stressors (e.g., constraints and resource inadequacy) and challenge stressors (e.g., role demands, pressure, and urgency) and found that challenge stressors were negatively associated with employee strain and positively related to motivation. Partially supporting H2, participatory control was positively related to job satisfaction; however, the main effects on intentions to leave and employee health were not significant. Also partially supporting H3, subjective fit was related to more favourable job satisfaction and intentions to leave, although main effects were not present on employee health. The results for H2 and H3 indicate that main effects of participatory control and subjective fit are more influential for job-related attitudes than employee health.

Inspection of two-way interactions revealed that stressor X control interactions were not significant; however some interesting interactions were evident. For role conflict and role ambiguity, two significant control X subjective fit interactions on job satisfaction were found such that high subjective fit mitigated the potential negative effects of low control. This result was not expected but provides support for the notion that subjective fit can act as a buffer of the negative effects of stressors on employee adjustment. Also unexpectedly, low subjective fit was found to buffer the negative effects of role conflict on psychological health. In light of this result it should be noted that some identity theorists have reported that the impact of stressors on psychological health can be exacerbated

when it threatens identities that are important to an individual's self-definition (see Chang, 2003; Marcussen, Ritter, & Safron, 2002). That a stressor had a negative impact on those reporting high subjective fit suggests that these employees had to expend more mental energy in dealing with this threat to both themselves and the organization. Conversely, this finding also implies that those reporting low subjective fit were unaffected by role conflict and therefore did not expend mental effort in attending to the threat--it is possible that these employees may have experienced no threat to their identity as within the organization their identity (consisting of values) was not highly valued.

Of the twelve analyses conducted, three significant three-way interactions were found providing considerable support for H4a and H4b. In line with H4a, the interaction of high control and high subjective fit buffered the negative effects of role overload on physiological symptoms and psychological health, and role conflict on intentions to leave. The results also revealed some support for the prediction that the negative effects of role stressors would not be effected by those perceiving high control but low subjective fit. In two of the three instances, low subjective fit and high control did not significantly impact levels of physiological symptoms and psychological health as role demand increased. However, those perceiving high control (and low fit) were significantly more likely to report higher intentions to leave as role conflict increased. Overall, these interactions provide a relatively consistent pattern of results suggesting that subjective fit with organisational values has an additional moderating role to play in the interaction of work stressors and control in the prediction of employee adjustment.

### ***Limitations and future research***

A number of limitations and future research directions are provided by this study. Methodologically, this study was cross-sectional, and it is important to note that unstable occasion factors (e.g., mood states and dispositional variables) can make the results of cross-sectional studies in the area of occupational stress difficult to interpret (see Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). A longitudinal design should be employed in future research to enable reduction of common method variance and investigate the relationships over time. Further, this study investigated research questions based on individual perceptions of fit with the overall organisational culture. Future research should investigate individual-, workgroup-, and organizational-level analyses, affording the opportunity to compare the

meaning of the results from multiple perspectives. A multi-level approach also enables assessment of cultural fit with subcultures within organizations.

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, this study provides evidence for the role of subjective fit with organisational culture and values in the work stressor-employee adjustment relationship. At the two-way level of analysis the results revealed a role of subjective fit in buffering the negative effects of low control on job satisfaction. Adding complexity to the role of subjective fit, low fit was also found to act as a buffer of stress on psychological health. At the three-way level of analysis the significant results found subjective fit to be a vital secondary moderator with control in the buffering of the negative effects of role stressors on employee adjustment. From a theoretical perspective, this study highlights the importance of considering the role of conjunctive moderators that incorporate more macro-perceptions of the organisation overall.

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