Direct and indirect relationship between social stressors and job performance in Greater China: The role of strain and social support

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This study examined the direct relationship between two social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and supervisor-rated job performance among employees in three Chinese societies in Greater China. The potential moderating effects of social support on the relation between social stressors and job performance were also investigated. Further, the potential mediating role of strain between stressors and job performance was tested. Data were collected from 1032 employees in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taipei. The results showed that both types of social stressors were positively correlated with strain, and negatively related with job performance. There was evidence supporting that social support was a significant moderator of the social stressor–performance relationship. Further, results were consistent with the hypothesis that strain could be a mediator between social stressors and job performance.

Keywords: Job performance; Mediator; Moderator; Social stressor; Social support; Strain.

In a global economy, most organizations face challenges such as an uncertain economy, globalization of markets and ever-changing technology. To meet these challenges, it is important for an organization to strive for both health and productivity, through enhancement of well-being and job performance of their employees. Studies have demonstrated that exposure to a stressor can have deleterious effects on employees’ job performance (e.g., Jex, 1998). Even though research on the relationship between stress and job performance has been explored for nearly a century, the empirical findings on the relations between stress and performance have been inconsistent (Jex, Adams, Bachrach, & Sorensen, 2003) and relatively rare (Cooper, Dewe, & O’Driscoll, 2001) in the last two decades. As commented by Jex (1998), most occupational stress researchers have made very general predictions about relations between stressors and job performance; as a result, relations between stressors and performance have been weak and inconsistent. As summarized by Muse, Harris, and Field (2003), the stress–performance relation can be negative linear (i.e., stress has an adverse effect on job performance) (e.g., Jamal, 1985, 2007; Westman & Eden, 1996), positive linear (i.e., stress could be a challenge that improves performance) (e.g., Arsenault & Dolan, 1983; LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005), or an inverted-U (i.e., a moderate level of stress is needed for optimum level of performance and stress levels below or above this optimum level are detrimental to performance) (e.g., Jamal, 2007; Robbins, 2005). Further, Fried and Tieg (1995) argued that the literature on stress and performance would benefit greatly if researchers concentrated on developing and evaluating specific stressors and outcomes. In addition, Jex (1998) recommended researchers should focus on relationship between specific stressors and specific...
performance dimensions, and further suggested that the relationship between stressors and performance may be indirect.

Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, and Boudreau (2000) distinguished between two classes of stressors: challenge- and hindrance-related. Challenge-related stressors stem from situations at work that are demanding but have the potential of positive gain for the individual (e.g., high workload, time pressure), whereas hindrance-related stressors stem from circumstances that interfere with the employee’s ability to get tasks done and do not have the potential for personal gain (e.g., role stressors, interpersonal conflict, organizational politics). Collectively, using an aggregated approach, stressors were combined as a single challenge- or hindrance-related stressors and were found related divergently with psychological strain (e.g., Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & LePine, 2004) and job performance (e.g., LePine et al., 2005). In an updated review on occupational stressors and job performance, Rosen, Chang, Diurдjiev, and Eatough (2010) summarized relationships between eight categories of stressors and job performance since Jex (1998). They concluded that some stressors showed stronger and more consistent impact on performance (e.g., role ambiguity and situational constraints), while the effects of others (e.g., workload, interpersonal demands, and job insecurity) fluctuated depending on the characteristics of the situation and individual differences.

Chang, Rosen, and Levy (2009) showed that perceived organizational politics, role ambiguity, and role conflict were differentially related to performance. Hence, Chang et al. advocated that research using an aggregation approach (such as challenge-/hindrance-stressors) should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, in their conclusion, Rosen et al. also recommended the need to shift the focus from theory development to testing existing theories more precisely, and to focus on moderators and mediators. Specifically, they recognized that increased research attention has been directed towards effects of interpersonal demands on performance, yet little is known about the underlying psychological processes.

The eight categories of stressors reviewed by Rosen et al. (2010) can be conceptualized as two major types of stressors: task versus social stressors. Dormann and Zapf (2002) distinguished task stressors (which are related to the task structure and the organization of work focusing on unclear or contradictory task goals) from social stressors (which are related to negative social interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and clients). Social stressors have been less studied in occupational stress studies (Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Semmer, 2003; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). In response to Jex’s (1998) original recommendation, in the current study, we study two separate focal social stressors: interpersonal conflict and organizational politics. Taking the classification by Dormann and Zapf, interpersonal conflict and organizational politics can be categorized as social stressors. In general, interpersonal conflict at work implies stressful incidents that are caused by social interactions with supervisors, subordinates, or colleagues (Liu, Spector, & Shi, 2007). In a recent meta-analytic study, Chang et al. (2009) distinguished legitimate political activities that are beneficial to work groups and organizations (e.g., managers may develop strong social networks that help them to increase the resources for their subordinates) from illegitimate political activities (e.g., coalition building, favouritism) that are designed to benefit, protect, or enhance self-interests. Yet many theorists suggested that organizational politics is perceived as a threat because political activities interfere with employees’ ability to attain personal outcomes and desired career goals (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; LePine et al., 2005; Vigoda, 2000). For instance, LePine et al. (2005) argued that interpersonal conflict and organizational politics distract employees from devoting effort to performance and impede employees from achieving goals. In the current study, organizational politics is operationalized as a negative phenomenon, a stressor. It is defined as any activity that “involves actions by individuals which are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organization” (Kaemar & Baron, 1999, p. 4). The recent meta-analytic study by Chang et al. (2009) showed that organizational politics was positively related to strain, and negatively related to job performance. The purposes of the present study are twofold: first, to examine the mechanisms by which two separate social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) relate to strain and job performance. We treat each of the social stressors individually rather than combining them into overall measures of social stressors, as they each represent distinct constructs. Second, we investigated the moderating role of social support on the relationship between social stressors and job performance.

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY**

One of the very few studies which demonstrated the negative relation between interpersonal conflict and contextual performance (getting along with others) in Greater China was conducted by Lu, Kao, Siu, and Lu (2010). However, in the Lu et al. study, a self-reported measure of job performance was used and they did not examine the social stressor of organizational politics. Further, the sample size in this study was rather small. In a meta-analysis, Chang et al.
(2009) reported the relationship between organizational politics and employee strain and behaviour. Yet meta-analysis cannot account for more complex indirect effects and most studies reviewed by Chang et al. were conducted in Western societies. Another contribution of the study is that we used a supervisory-rated job performance measure to reduce possible shared biases among variables in the study. As Xie (2004) argued, globalization has led to the emergence of a number of “social stressors”, which have significantly affected Chinese employees’ well-being. With the globalization of the world economy, and the rapid development of the Southeast Asia economies, there are increasing numbers of multinational companies investing more and more into Greater China. In the spirit of free competition, employees in Hong Kong, Beijing (the capital of Mainland), and Taipei (the capital of Taiwan) are becoming more exposed to stressful Western and industrialized work situations. Mergers and acquisitions, new management styles, retrenchment, and job insecurity are now commonly found in these three cities. Hence, the fast emerging Greater China has provided a vast potential test field for the stressor–strain or stressor–performance relationships. In the current study, we therefore chose Hong Kong, Beijing, and Taipei as three targeted locations in Greater China.

As the basic mechanism relating stressors and reactions is appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the same stressor can be appraised as a challenge or hindrance depending on a host of individual and interpersonal factors. In the literature concerning interpersonal demands or interpersonal-oriented stressors and job performance, it appears that performance moderators have been neglected (Rosen et al., 2010). Such moderators are consistent with the matching-hypotheses (Cohen & Wills, 1985; de Jonge & Dormann, 2006). For the double match hypothesis, Cohen and Wills (1985) proposed interaction effects to be highest when there is a match between specific kinds of stressors and certain forms of social support, which represents a resource. According to the triple-match principle (de Jonge & Dormann, 2006), resources are most likely to moderate the relation between stressors and strains if resources, stressors, and strains all match. For instance, emotional support from colleagues is most likely to moderate the relationship between emotional stress (e.g., bullied by abusive customers) and emotional exhaustion. However, previous research on the matching hypotheses did not use job performance as an outcome. We believe social support would be an appropriate resource to mitigate the effects of social stressors on job performance. Because the role of social support as a moderator of the social stressor–job performance relationship is rare in both Chinese and Western research (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008), our study will contribute to the literature by reviewing such related issues, and provide evidence of a double match hypothesis (stressors and resources).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Social stressors and job performance in Greater China

Social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics should be relevant in Chinese societies. It is argued that culture is related to interpersonal conflict (e.g., Liu, Nauta, Spector, & Li, 2008; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, & Asai, 1988) and culture could affect how employees express conflict behaviours (Liu et al., 2007). Chinese societies place strong emphasis on group harmony, “forbearance” and Guanxi (good relationships) (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Hwang, 1997), and therefore Chinese employees may be more prone to stressors of interpersonal conflicts and organizational politics. It is a general belief that political behaviour is usually an undercover activity that can lead to high levels of uncertainty in Chinese societies, and the role of uncertainty is central in integrating concepts of stress and organizational politics (Ferris et al., 1996). Furthermore, as found by Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, and Ma (2004), Asians (including employees from Hong Kong and the People’s Republic of China) scored higher than Americans in socioinstrumental control (i.e., control via interpersonal relationships). Hence, high uncertainty that prohibits socioinstrumental control is more of a stressor in Chinese society.

Even though findings are inconclusive, studies have demonstrated that interpersonal conflict was negatively associated with job performance (e.g., Jex et al., 2003; Peters & O’Connor, 1980; Spector & Jex, 1998). Organizational politics was also found to be negatively correlated with job performance (e.g., Chang et al., 2009; Harris & Kacmar, 2005). Furthermore, neurobiological evidence with nonhumans (rats) suggests that repeated exposure to a social stressor has a long-term effect on motivated behaviour (Lucas et al., 2004). Taken together, based on previous literature and the basic model linking job stressors and job performance proposed by Jex (1998; see p. 35), it is hypothesized that individual social stressors relate to job performance directly.

**Hypothesis 1:** Social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics will be negatively related to job performance.
Social stressors, strain, and job performance

Many occupational stress models have suggested that stressors at work lead to adverse consequences (strains) (Beehr & Newman, 1978; French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982; Jex & Beehr, 1991; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). For instance, according to the person–environment fit model of stress (French et al., 1982), strain occurs as a result of imbalance between a person’s abilities and the demands in his/her environment. Strains reflect health and well-being, including negative physical, psychological, and emotional states resulting from exposure to job stressors. In line with findings in Western societies, job stressors have also been found related to strain such as job dissatisfaction, poor physical well-being, and poor psychological well-being in Chinese societies (e.g., Siu, 2002; Siu, Spector, Cooper, Lu, & Yu, 2002). Recently, it has been suggested that models that examine the relationship between stressors and strains should consider nonwork or outside of work factors (Edwards, Cockerton, & Guppy, 2007; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Hence, social stressors are also expected to be related to strain. In the current study, we operationalize strain as physical and psychological symptoms. Previous research on interpersonal conflict has demonstrated that it was strongly associated with psychological ill health including negative emotion at work that might disrupt someone’s work efforts through a number of mechanisms, such as distraction or producing fatigue (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Spector & Jex, 1998). The stressor of organizational politics has recently attracted research attention showing that it relates to low job satisfaction and job distress (e.g., Vigoda, 2002). Studies demonstrated that employees’ poor health experience exerted a negative impact on their work performance and productivity (e.g., Donald et al., 2005). Based on previous literature, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: Social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics will be positively related to strain (poor health experience).

In exploring the underlying relationship between stressors and job performance, one must delineate the kinds of stressors (Muse et al., 2003). According to the inverted-U theory, challenge stressors may be positively related to performance (on the left half of the inverted-U), whereas hindrance stressors such as conflicting demands may be negatively related to job performance (on the right half of the inverted-U) (LePine et al., 2005). In view of our conceptualization of the two social stressors, we believe interpersonal conflict and organizational politics could cause high strain, which would decrease the performance level. This can be explained by existing motivational frameworks (e.g., Bakker & Demeroutin, 2007; Hobfoll, 1998). According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, Hobfoll (1998) defines resources as “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual” (p. 516). Hence, employees who perceive interpersonal conflict at work or organizational politics would experience strain when they feel there is a potential or actual loss of resources. Then their motivation level can be negatively affected. For instance, Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) reported that employees who perceived organizational politics would demonstrate lower levels of task performance as a result of disengaging from their jobs in order to conserve mental resources. Similarly, the Job Demand–Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demeroutin, 2007) depicts that high job demands result in strains, which lead to reduced performance. Jex and Cunningham (2007) reported evidence that frustration and emotional well-being were mediators between situational constraints and interpersonal conflict. Chang et al. (2009) also found support that the relationship between perceived organizational politics and performance was mediated by strains. We therefore hypothesized that the relationship between social stressors and job performance may be mediated by strain.

Hypothesis 3: Strain aroused by social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics will be negatively related to job performance.

Hypothesis 4: Strain will be a mediator between each social stressor (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and job performance.

In sum, in our proposed theoretical framework, the two social stressors are independent variables, strain is the mediator (the antecedent of performance), and job performance is the dependent variable. This proposed model expanded Jex’s (1998) model and is in line with the strain path of the JD-R Model (Bakker & Demeroutin, 2007) and the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1998).

Direct and moderating effects of social support

The primary social factor hypothesized to mitigate the negative effects of stressors in the work setting is the degree of social support that an individual receives. In general, social support is defined as the availability of help in relationships and the quality of those relationships (Leavy, 1983). As summarized by Schwarzer, Knoll, and Rieckmann (2004), social support is basically a multidimensional concept that
Involves subjective concern, instrumental aid, information, or appraisal from different sources. A growing body of research has demonstrated that social support has important implications for many individual and organizational outcomes. As summarized by Cohen and Wills (1985), the literature on direct effects of social support (fewer symptoms of mental and physical ill-health) has been well-established. However, research on the direct impact of social support on job performance is relatively rare. One of the very few was conducted by Beehr, Jex, Stacy, and Murray (2000). They demonstrated that social support predicted performance, although with a rather small effect size. As social support implies availability of help in terms of instrumental aid, information aid, quality relationship, and the like (Leavy, 1983; Schwarzer et al., 2004), we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 5:** Social support will be positively related to job performance.

In stress research, social support has been found to interact with stressors to predict strain (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The rationale is that individual differences share an impact on both the perception of stressors and the reactions to these stressors, and experiences are filtered through individual difference variables (Jex, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, evidence for the buffering/moderating effects of social support has been mixed across studies (e.g., Abdul-Halim, 1982; Ganster, Fusilier, & Mayes, 1986). According to the matching/specificity hypotheses (Cohen & Wills, 1985; de Jonge & Dormann, 2006; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999), “if the right kind of support from the right kind of source of support is matched to the kind of stressors faced, then specific strains will be reduced” (Viswesvaran et al., 1999, p.318). Furthermore, the buffering effects are least likely to be found when very general, structural measures of social support are used (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Beehr et al. (2000) used greater specificity of contents of communication support measures and demonstrated that social support predicted psychological strains and performance. In the current study, we use more specific support measures. We agree that a close match with social support should exist when social stressors are considered. We therefore hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 6:** Social support will be a moderator of each social stressor–performance relation in that the negative relationship between social stressor and job performance will be reduced when the level of social support is high.

**METHOD**

**Sample and procedure**

For the sample recruited in Hong Kong, a multistage cluster random sampling method was used to recruit employees of various ranks from selected service industries, drawn by Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong. A total of 324 employees (132 males and 192 females) with a mean age of 32.1 years ($SD = 9.4$) was recruited. The mean tenure was 6.3 years ($SD = 6.1$). The return rate was 100%. For the Beijing sample, a total of 540 questionnaires were distributed to employees in various service industry settings, and 402 questionnaires were returned, making a response rate of 74.4%. The Beijing sample consisted of 209 males and 182 females (11 unidentified), with a mean age of 31.9 years ($SD = 7.4$) years. The mean tenure was 4.3 years ($SD = 5.2$). A total of 520 questionnaires were distributed to Taipei employees in various service industry settings, and 306 questionnaires were returned, making a response rate of 60%. The sample consisted of 134 males and 172 females, with a mean age of 32.9 years ($SD = 6.7$) years. The mean tenure was 6.3 years ($SD = 6.3$).

A survey packet consisting of an employee and a supervisor questionnaire, each marked with the same code, was distributed to each employee. A designated person, normally not the employees’ manager, from each selected company was invited to distribute the questionnaires and collect the completed questionnaires. The data collection in Hong Kong was administered by the research assistant of the first author. The second author and a university professor were responsible for data collection in Beijing and Taipei respectively, by adopting similar data collection procedures. The participants in the three regions were informed about the purpose of the study and participation was in a voluntary basis. The recruited participant gave the supervisor rating form to his/her immediate supervisor. An addressed self-adhesive envelope was included for respondents and supervisors to return completed questionnaires independently. The response rates for the supervisor rating form in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Taipei were 100%, 74.4%, and 60%, respectively. Data were collected from August to December 2003.

**Instruments**

**Social stressors.** Stressors were assessed with existing Western scales that matched our definitions and that have also been found to be reliable in Chinese samples (Liu, 2002; Siu, Spector, Cooper, & Lu, 2005) to assess two social stressors: interpersonal conflict (four items; Spector & Jex, 1998; e.g., “How often are people rude to you at work?”), and...
organizational politics (three items; one item from Cooper, Sloan, & Williams, 1988; two items from Kacmar & Carlson, 1997; e.g., “There has always been an influential group in your department that no one ever crosses”). Each scale was rated from “Less than once per month or never” (1) to “Several times per day” (6). Even though organizational politics is a multidimensional construct, we only adopted those three items that were used by Siu et al. (2005) and which captured the definition adopted in the present study. The alpha was .82 and .70 for the respective Hong Kong and Beijing samples in Siu et al.’s study.

Social support. Social support was measured with eight items, with two social support items extracted from the Chinese Coping scale developed by Siu, Spector, and Cooper (2006; e.g., “Whenever I feel stressed at work, I discuss with my superiors”), and six items from Evers, Frese, and Cooper (2000; e.g., “Go to colleagues for advice when my supervisor and I disagree”; “Ask people who have had the same problem as I what they have done to solve it”). Siu’s et al. (2006) Chinese Coping scale correlated significantly with the Western scales of coping strategies. We added the six-item Western measure to the two-item Chinese measure in order to enhance reliability. Even though there are cultural differences in utilization and benefits of social support, with Asians less willing to seek explicit social support for dealing with their stressful events (e.g., Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007), we believe contemporary Chinese workers are more individualistic than their older generations (Xie, 2004). Hence, we expected that these eight items measuring explicit social support (more specific contents of communication) would be applicable to employees in Greater China. Each item was scored on a 6-point scale ranging from “never” (1) to “very often” (6), with a high score indicating more frequently used social support.

Strain. The 19-item Psychological Well-being Scale of ASSET (An Organizational Stress Screening Tool; Cartwright & Cooper, 2002) was used to measure symptoms of stress-induced ill-health (e.g., insomnia/sleep loss; panic or anxiety attacks; irritability; mood swings; having difficulties in concentrating). We split the original first item into two items to create a 20-item scale, and adopted a 6-point scale ranging from “never” (1) to “very often” (6). A sum of ratings of these 20 items constitutes the strain measure, with respective high score denoting high level of strain.

Job performance. Spector’s (2006) five-item supervisory performance rating measure was adopted, including quantity of work, quality of work, attendance, job knowledge, and getting along with others. They were rated by the respondents’ immediate supervisor using a 6-point scale ranging from “poor” (1) to “excellent” (6). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the five items yielded one factor with factor loading ranging from .63 to .82, which explained 51.7% of the total variance. Hence, the job performance measure is one dimensional. A sum of ratings of these five items constituted the supervisory ratings.

The items in the questionnaire were translated into Chinese and then independently back-translated to English to assure language equivalence. Demographic information was also collected including age, gender, marital status, tenure (years in the current job), and job level (position in the current organization).

We used LISREL 8.70 to conduct multisample tests of measurement equivalence by choosing inter-item variance/covariances equality as an indicator of our measures equivalence across the samples from three cities simultaneously. The fit indices were acceptable, \( \chi^2 = 5914.96, df = 2220, \chi^2/df = 2.66; CFI = .92; NFI = .88; RMSEA = .078 \), which indicated that the measurement properties of our scales were equivalent across all three samples. Thus, three samples were combined for data analysis. We also conducted the whole sample tests for our measures of interpersonal conflict, organizational politics, social support, strain, and job performance. The results of confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that all fit indices were within the usually accepted values, \( \chi^2 = 4083.03, df = 730, \chi^2/df = 5.59; CFI = .95; NFI = .93; RMSEA = .077 \), suggesting factorial validity for measures in our study.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that the Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) for all main variables are all acceptably high, ranging from .77 to .94. Table 1 also shows that interpersonal conflict, \( r = -.15, p < .001 \), and organizational politics, \( r = -.09, p < .01 \), were negatively correlated with job performance, and they were both positively correlated with strain (interpersonal conflict, \( r = .47, p < .001 \); organizational politics, \( r = .43, p < .001 \)); strain was negatively related to job performance, \( r = -.12, p < .001 \); and social support was positively related to job performance, \( r = .13, p < .001 \).

We also tested the main effect hypotheses using hierarchical regression analyses by controlling some demographic variables (age, gender, tenure, and job level). Table 2 shows that after controlling the demographic variables in Step 1, (1) social stressor had a negative effect on job performance (interpersonal conflict, \( \beta = -.17, p < .001 \); organizational politics, \( \beta = -.10, p < .01 \); (2) social stressor was
positively related to strain (interpersonal conflict, $\beta = .44$, $p < .001$; organizational politics, $\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), and (3) strain had a negative effect on job performance ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .001$). Based on these results, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 can be fully supported.

Table 3 shows that after controlling the demographic variables in Step 1, social support had a positive effect on job performance, $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$, in Step 2. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 can be supported.

We tested mediating role of strain (Hypothesis 4) using structural equation modelling. As shown in Table 4, the relatively small chi-square values and reasonably high goodness of fit indices suggested that the fit of all four mediated models were acceptable. In order to test whether a full or partially mediation model was the best, we compared several main alternative partially mediated models with the full mediated model. The results depicted in Table 4 revealed that both partially mediated model A and C fit better than fully mediated model, $\Delta \chi^2 = 9.28$, and 10.53, respectively. Mediated model A was treated as our best fitting model since the direct path coefficient from organizational politics to job performance was nonsignificant, $\beta = .04$, $P > .05$, in partially mediated model C. Figure 1 presents the estimates for the paths in the best fitting model. As shown in the figure, the model suggests the interpersonal conflict–job performance relationship was partially mediated by strain, and the organizational politics–job performance relationship was fully mediated by strain.

In order to test the moderating role of social support in the relationship between social stressors and job performance, we used moderated hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 3). Table 3 shows that the interaction term between each stressor and social support was significant in Step 4 (interpersonal conflict, $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$; organizational politics, $\beta = .53$, $p < .001$), indicating that social support was a significant moderator.

To further clarify the moderating effects of social support, we examined separate simple slopes depicting the relationships between social stressors and job performance...
performance. Separate plots were drawn for individuals whose scores on the moderator (social support) were one standard deviation below or above the mean. The significant interaction item in the regression analysis means the two simple slopes (1 SD below and above the mean) were significantly different from each other (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Furthermore, for low level of social support group, the simple slopes were both significantly negative for the two social stressors (interpersonal conflict, $b = -1.17$, $p < .001$; organizational politics, $b = -1.14$, $p < .001$); whereas for the high level of social support group, the two simple slopes were both nonsignificant for the two social stressors (interpersonal conflict, $b = -0.06$, ns; organizational politics, $b = -0.02$, ns). Figures 2 and 3 have the same pattern, and consistently show that, when the level of each social stressor was high, participants who received more social support did not show as much decrement in job performance as those who received less social support. In other words, the negative relationship between social stressors and job performance will be reduced when the level of social support is high. Therefore, Hypothesis 6 was fully supported.

### TABLE 3
Results of hierarchical regression analyses testing the moderating role of social support between social stressors and job performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>JP</th>
<th>JP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job level</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.017***</td>
<td>.017***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational politics</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.027***</td>
<td>.009**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict $\times$ Social support</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational politics $\times$ Social support</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.007***</td>
<td>.008**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Job level (1 = “nonmanager”, 2 = “line manager”, 3 = “junior manager”, 4 = “middle manager”, 5 = “senior manager”, 6 = “top manager”); gender (1 = “male”, 2 = “female”). ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$. JP = job performance. To avoid multicollinearity, we did not put interpersonal conflict and organizational politics in the same regression equation.

### TABLE 4
Results of mediated model comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Model 1 (fully mediated model)</td>
<td>252.71</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Model 2 (partially mediated model A)</td>
<td>243.43</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Model 3 (partially mediated model B)</td>
<td>250.80</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Model 4 (partially mediated model C)</td>
<td>242.18</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CFI = comparative Wt index; GFI = goodness of Wt index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. In comparison to Model 1 (fully mediated model in which both relationships between two independent variables and dependent variable are fully mediated by strain): Model 2 (partially mediated model A) adds path from Interpersonal conflict to Job performance; Model 3 (partially mediated model B) adds path from Organizational politics to Job performance; Model 4 (partially mediated model C) adds path from Interpersonal conflict to Job performance and path from Organizational politics to Job performance.

Figure 1. The mediating role of strain on the relation between interpersonal conflict, organizational politics, and job performance.
DISCUSSION

The purposes of the current study were to examine the mechanisms of how social stressors relate to job performance, and to test whether social support was a moderator between social stressors and job performance. Our results corroborate previous findings in Western and Chinese societies that social stressors were positively associated with strain among employees (e.g., Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Jex et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2007, 2010). Further, our results showed that the social stressors of interpersonal conflict and organizational politics were negatively correlated with job performance. These results corroborated previous findings (e.g., Chang et al., 2009; Harris & Kacmar, 2005; Lu et al., 2010).

We also found support for some underlying mechanisms between social stressors and job performance, which has been a relatively less explored area in Greater China. Our results supported the hypothesis that strain could be a mediator between both types of social stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational politics) and job performance, supporting preliminary findings obtained in Western societies (e.g., Chang et al., 2009; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Jex & Cunningham, 2007). These results can be explained by the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1998) and the JD-R Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In general, job-related social stressors may induce emotional states that, in turn, impact performance. As argued earlier, it can be attributed to the fact that repeated exposure to social stressors may exert impact on job performance (e.g., Lucas et al., 2004). Therefore, our results have added value to existing theory and research in the West by providing generalizability evidence linking interpersonal-oriented stressors and job performance (Rosen et al., 2010) in the Chinese context. Our findings have also advanced the stressor–performance model by Jex (1998). Furthermore, adopting supervisory performance rating as a dependent variable in the current study is another contribution. To reiterate, our research findings contribute to the field of occupational stress by delineating the differential impacts of social stressors on supervisor-rated job performance.

Another contribution of our study is that we found evidence for the direct effects of social support on job performance, and the moderating effects of social support on the social stressor-job performance relationship. Specifically, individuals who reported low levels of social support reported declining performance as social stressors increased, whereas their high social support counterparts did not show this decline as stressors increased. Our results may help to explain why previous research on the moderating role of social support has been inconsistent. First, instead of using general measure of social support, we used a more specific measure (e.g., Beehr et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985) of explicit social support (e.g., Taylor et al., 2004) such as greater specificity of contents of communication support measures. Apparently explicit social support with more specific contents can be used cross-culturally.

Third, our study has also provided evidence of a double match hypothesis (stressors and resources) (Cohen & Wills, 1985), in that we investigated the role of social support on the relationship between social stressors and job performance. Although effect sizes in our moderator models were rather modest, they were all above the median effect size of .002 reported by Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, and Pierce (2005). In addition, Zapf, Dormann, and Frese (1996) found that stressors could explain only a maximum of 7% of the variance, and much lower if single stressor was treated as a predictor. They also found, the magnitudes of stressor-outcomes were lower in the studies using different source measures than those with all self-reported measures. Hence, the modest effect size found in this study may be attributed to the fact that we adopted self-reported measures and a supervisor-rated measure for job performance.

To conclude, we have provided evidence to reiterate Jex’s (1998) original recommendation by focusing on the relationship between specific stressors and performance. We also echo recommendations by
Rosen et al. (2010) by shifting focus from theory development to more precise testing of existing theory, and focus on testing moderators and mediators derived from existing theory. As argued earlier, most stress–performance studies were conducted in Western societies. It is therefore valuable to obtain data from Chinese employees. Our results can generalize Western findings to Chinese populations in Greater China and hence contribute to the development of theories and practices in organizational psychology.

Recommendations for future research

The direct and moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stressors and performance should receive more attention in future research. Social support could be the focus of attention in stress management interventions in dealing with social stressors in both Western and Chinese societies, and may represent a way of enhancing job performance as well as employee health and well-being. As argued earlier, due to their greater collectivism and focus on maintaining group harmony, Chinese employees may be more prone to stressors of interpersonal conflicts and organizational politics. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to replicate the study in Western culture in future to see if the findings would be different. Furthermore, the mediator and moderator tests were conducted separately in the current study; one could argue that these two processes are not independent because they are impacting the same outcome of job performance. Perhaps for future research, these two mechanisms should be examined simultaneously.

Limitations of the study

There are some limitations in the study. It should be kept in mind that these data all came from a cross-sectional study. One cannot draw causal conclusions, and although the results were consistent with mediation, they do not provide a strong test. Furthermore, it is not possible to conclude that performance was the effect rather than the cause or just a concomitant of stressor exposure and strains. To reiterate, since the study was cross-sectional, it is difficult to conclude that strain occurred prior to a reduction of job performance. Finally, it might prove fruitful to investigate the number of years this person has been supervising the respondent, and how many employees the person supervises.

Practical implications

Although we cannot draw causal conclusions, this study provides evidence for a link between employee well-being and job performance, suggesting that the two are best addressed together in order to improve both employee and organizational health simultaneously. One of the implications is that a managerial focus on reducing interpersonal conflict and organizational politics might prove useful in enhancing employee and organizational effectiveness. This could be accomplished by training supervisors to manage conflict in the workplace, both those they create themselves and those created by others. For instance, cooperative approaches emphasize mutual goals that can enhance conflict efficacy (e.g., Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000). To reduce office politics, managers can emphasize fair and respectful treatment and model such behaviour. They also might be a valuable source of social support in assisting their subordinates in coping with social stressors that are an inevitable aspect of social interaction with other employees as well as clients, customers, and patients. In particular, explicit social support such as talking about good/bad things about work and about nonwork things (Beehr et al., 2000; Beehr, King, & King, 1990) should be provided by managers or supervisors to their subordinates. Further, more workshops should be organized by human resource management groups to enhance employees’ coping mechanism to deal with the ongoing interpersonal demand of conflict and politics. Our results might well serve as a basis for future intervention studies (e.g., Semmer, 2003).

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