Conservation of Resources Theory (2006)

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Note: The 2001 version of this entry by Cynthia Thompson is also available.

Basic Concepts & Definitions

Conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989) is a comprehensive theory of stress based on the central tenet that people strive to obtain, build, and protect that which they value (e.g., resources), and psychological stress occurs when these resources are lost, threatened with loss, or if individuals fail to replenish resources after significant investment. Resources may be objects (e.g., home, car), personal characteristics (e.g., positive outlook), conditions (e.g., good marriage, financial security) and energies (e.g., time, knowledge). A cycle develops where resources are constantly used and replenished.

Hobfoll (1988, 1989) developed COR as an alternative to more traditional stress models (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Selye, 1950) that he criticized as lacking predictive capability. For example, Selye's (1950) “General Adaptation Syndrome” depicts stress as a physiological reaction that occurs when the body is threatened by environmental challenges. But by explaining stress in terms of outcomes, it becomes difficult to prospectively identify the cause of stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Likewise, another commonly adopted model is Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) "stress-appraisal-strain-coping" theory, which defines strain in terms of individuals' perceptions of their environments as stressful. This model places emphasis on the cognitive processes linking environmental demands to outcomes (e.g., cognitive appraisal), but ignores objective demands and therefore is reactive, focusing on the outcomes of the stress process. COR is different from these theories because it emphasizes the nature of one's environment, both objective (e.g., actual resources) and socially construed (e.g., access to resources), in determining the stress process, rather than solely the outcome of stress or the individual's cognitive appraisal of stressors (Hobfoll, 2001).

Hobfoll (1989, 2001) proposed two important principles of the COR model. The first is that "resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain" (Hobfoll, 2001, p 343). This proposition is initially based on findings in the psychology literature, whereby other things being equal, negative events appear to elicit more physiological, affective, cognitive and behavioral responses than neutral or positive events (Taylor, 1991). The second major principle of COR emphasizes the importance of resource investment.
Hobfoll (2001) proposed that “people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources” (p. 349). Furthermore, those with greater resources are more capable of resource gain and those with limited or fewer resources are more susceptible to resource loss (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993).

Much of the initial literature on COR was based on intervention research related to community psychology (Hobfoll & Leiberman, 1987; Hobfoll & Lerman, 1988; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993) and response to war and natural disasters (Hobfoll, London & Orr, 1988; Freedy, Shaw, Jarrel, & Masters, 1992). In the mid-1990’s, scholars began to use COR to understand the process of burnout and stress in organizational settings (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993; Freedy & Hobfoll, 1994; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Taris, Schreurs, & Van Iersel-Van Silfhout, 2001). According to Hobfoll and Freedy (1993), job demands threaten one’s resources, and over time, prolonged exposure to such demands will result in strain in the form of emotional exhaustion, a core dimension of burnout. People will attempt to minimize net resource losses, but in a work setting, the rate at which work demands use up employee resources is typically greater than the rate the resources are replenished, and “loss spirals” develop (Freedy & Hobfoll, 1994).

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) were among the first researchers to apply COR to examine work-family conflict (WFC). They argued that COR theory is an improvement over the use of role theory. Role theory is limited in its ability to explain work-family relationships because it fails to specify moderating variables that might affect the relationship between work-family stressors and stress outcomes. COR theory, in contrast, proposes that “interrole conflict leads to stress because resources are lost in the process of juggling both work and family roles” (p. 352). Furthermore, COR allows for predictions about the moderating relationship of individual differences (e.g., self-esteem, positive affectivity, internal locus of control), which may be viewed as resources.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) directly applied the COR model to work-family relationships. Their findings revealed that as chronic work and family stressors drained resources over time, participants experienced increased stress reactions, such as job and family dissatisfaction, life distress, poor physical health, and increased thoughts about quitting one’s job. Rosenbaum and Cohen (1999) used COR to examine the effect of individual resources (e.g., spousal support, self-control skills) on WFC among working women, and found that women who possessed at least one kind of resource were less distressed than those with none. Further, women who possessed resources were more capable of gaining additional
resources, thus supporting the second principle of COR theory: “gain begets gain.”

Jansen, Kant, Kristensen, and Nijhuis (2003) applied COR to focus on the outcomes of WFC, specifically prolonged fatigue and elevated need for recovery, in a longitudinal sample of both male and female employees. Demands such as conflict with co-workers for men and overtime work for women were found as risk factors for WFC. In contrast, resources such as co-worker/supervisor support for men and domestic help for women were found to enhance gain reserves. Further, women were more vulnerable to prolonged fatigue and need for recovery. These findings support the notion that women may be more susceptible to interrole conflict, and suggest that demands and resources may be valued differently by men and women.

A later study by Demerouti, Bakker, and Bulters (2004) provided evidence for the cyclical nature of WFC loss spirals. The authors used a three wave longitudinal study design and found that work pressure and exhaustion had causal and reverse causal relationships over time. For example, work pressure caused loss of resources, which evoked work family interference and then feelings of exhaustion. These feelings of chronic fatigue then resulted in more work pressure, thus starting the cycle over again.

Additional studies have used COR to examine how individuals can stop or prevent resource loss cycles and institute gain spirals during time away from work. Sonnentag (2001) showed that how employees spend their time while away from the job may influence the ameliorative effects of a leisure break. She found that participants who engaged in work-related activities during their evening off-hours reported higher strain before going to sleep. In contrast, those who engaged in social, physical (e.g., sports or dancing), or low-effort (e.g., watching TV or taking a bath) activities reported less strain. Thus, work spillover into family time resulted in higher strain. Fritz and Sonnentag (2005) extended this research to weekend experiences, assessing the influence of non-work hassles (e.g., conflict with partner, work at home), social activity, and positive work reflection (e.g., thinking about positive aspects of one’s job). Data revealed that non-work hassles, low social activity, and absence of positive work reflection during the weekend predicted burnout and poor general well-being. These findings suggest that building one’s personal resources, or instituting gain spirals during time away from the job, may be a preventative measure to reduce the onset of stress and strain at work. However, the restorative benefits of time away may be offset if one is thinking about work, or experiencing non-work hassles.

Most recently, Lapierre and Allen (2006) used COR to study the different coping methods employed by individuals to avoid WFC. Findings revealed that some coping methods are more useful than others to help individuals gain or conserve resources when switching between work and family roles. Specifically, social support from one’s family and one’s supervisor, as well as the use of problem-focused coping, were most effective for avoiding WFC.
Implications for Practice and Research

COR theory provides a framework for understanding the nature of stress, based on the belief that individuals seek to obtain, build and protect their resources. The theory has been applied to a variety of settings, including community psychology, disaster research, and organizational research. Furthermore, the model has been tested across many different cultures, including (but not limited to) China, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, Singapore and the United States. Based on the literature highlighted above, the COR model appears to be a promising perspective for advancing our understanding of work-family relationships. Empirical studies have used COR to examine the effect of interrole conflict on well-being (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999), the importance of resources in preventing or coping with WFC (Jansen, et al., 2003; Lapierre & Allen, 2006; Rosenbaum & Cohen, 1999), and the potential for WFC to lead to resource loss spirals (Demerouti et al., 2004). In addition, studies have used COR to provide evidence for the spillover effect between work and leisure (e.g., including family) time, such that these should not be viewed as two separate and distinct spheres (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2001). Future researchers should continue using the COR model as an underlying framework for studying the link between work and nonwork roles and their relationships to stress.

References


