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NEUTRALIZING JOB STRESSORS: POLITICAL SKILL AS AN ANTIDOTE TO THE DYSFUNCTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF ROLE CONFLICT

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We examined the neutralizing effects of political skill on relationships between perceived role conflict and strain. Strain was measured as psychological anxiety, somatic complaints, and physiological strain (heart rate and systolic and diastolic blood pressure). Results support the moderating effects of political skill: greater political skill reduced the negative effects of role conflict on all types of strain.

Job stress continues to be a major problem today, costing organizations billions of dollars in employee disability claims, employee absenteeism, and lost productivity (e.g., Xie & Schaubroeck, 2001). Because research has supported the deleterious effects of stressors on individuals' mental and physical health (e.g., Spector, Chen, & O'Connell, 2000), it is important to continue examining potential antidotes to strain and the related costs of strain to organizations. According to Lazarus's (1991) transactional theory, stress is a relationship between a person and an environment that the person cognitively appraises (or evaluates) as relevant to his or her well-being, and in which the person's resources are appraised as being taxed or exceeded. The essence of the transactional theory of stress is to consider how the individual appraises what is happening in order to understand his or her emotional and physiological reactions (Lazarus, 1991).

It is through the appraisal process that the individual and the environment are linked. There are two kinds of appraisal. *Primary appraisal* refers to what is at stake for the person, the sig-

nificance of an encounter for the individual's well-being (Folkman, 1992). *Secondary appraisal*, on the other hand, occurs when the person reviews the availability of coping resources for dealing with a stressor and decides what can be done to alleviate the negative impact of that stressor (Folkman, 1992). The focus of this paper is on political skill as an individual characteristic that, we believe, sheds further light on Lazarus's (1991) secondary appraisal construct and, thus, on his transactional theory of stress.

Using Lazarus's (1991) transactional theory assertions, we examine how one personal characteristic, political skill, might moderate the relationship between a work environmental factor, role conflict, and psychological anxiety, somatic complaints, and physiological strain. According to Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, and Anthony (2000), the negative effects arising from a stressor (such as role conflict) should be reduced for individuals high in political skill because of their increased confidence and sense of control. Combining the conceptual work of Lazarus (1991) and Perrewé and colleagues (2000), we argue that political skill is a unique type of coping resource and, thus, an antidote to the dysfunctional consequences of stressors.

The first two authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

Role Conflict and Job Strain

For several decades, research has shown role conflict to be linked with a number of dysfunctional outcomes, including job dissatisfaction and psychological strain (e.g., Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; Schaubroeck, Cotton, & Jennings, 1989). When two or more sets of role pressures exist in an individual's workspace, and the compliance with any one of these pressures impedes the accomplishment of another, role conflict is the result (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Experiencing incompatible or irreconcilable expectations associated with multiple roles, or with a single role, is presumed to be psychologically uncomfortable for individuals and to generate negative emotional reactions (Schaubroeck et al., 1989).

Role conflict occurs because of the roles occupied by an individual. As such, conflict is most often chronic rather than unique or temporary. In attempting to explain the mechanisms by which role stressors are linked to negative consequences for individuals, many researchers have examined the roles of personality traits and coping mechanisms in the experience of strain. For example, considerable work has reported a link between negative affectivity and psychological strain (e.g., Spector et al., 2000). Others have examined individual difference variables such as neuroticism (Zellars & Perrewé, 2001) and self-efficacy (Schaubroeck, Jones, & Xie, 2001) as important determinants of individuals' emotional and behavioral reactions to stressors. The evidence to date clearly seems to suggest that some dispositional characteristics influence individuals' perceptions of, and reactions to, conditions in their job environment.

However, more work is needed that examines the efficacy of individuals' specific coping resources in reducing strain. One such resource might be the political skill utilized in interpersonal interactions, given their association with role conflict (French & Caplan, 1972). In this study, we propose that political skill can serve as a coping resource that neutralizes the degree of negative outcomes experienced as a result of role conflict occurring on the job.

Political Skill

Although a large body of research on influence and politics in organizations has been developed, Jones (1990) noted that surprisingly little is known about the issues of personal style that might contribute to the success of specific influence tactics

and behaviors. He speculated that the components of style "have something to do with mixtures of self-confidence and self-mockery, comfort with one's achievements but humility in citing them, the ability to communicate in ways that touch and arouse constituents, and selected aspects of physical appearance and bearing that are difficult to locate in our psychological theories" (Jones, 1990: 199). Indeed, more than a decade after Jones's statement, researchers have yet to adequately address the effective execution of influence behaviors (e.g., Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, Blass, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2002).

Mintzberg (1983) coined the term "political skill" to refer to a personal characteristic of individuals they need to be effective in the political arenas of organizational life. Characterized by Mintzberg as an intuitive sense of how to use power effectively, political skill is the ability "to exercise formal power with a sensitivity to the feelings of others, to know where to concentrate one's energies, to sense what is possible, to organize the necessary alliances" (Mintzberg, 1983: 26).

Although the notion of political skill makes intuitive sense, and it has been used in the ensuing years in anecdotal and casual ways, serious scholarship on this construct was not initiated until nearly two decades after Mintzberg's initial statement. Furthermore, whereas Mintzberg tended to associate political skill explicitly with formal power, the political skill construct, as it is characterized today, fits better with the ideas of some scholars concerning the exercise of influence devoid of formal authority (e.g., Kotter, 1985).

Definition and construct delineation. Ferris and his colleagues (e.g., Ferris et al., 1999) initiated research on delineating the construct domain space of political skill, provided initial evidence for its convergent and discriminant validity, and developed a concise unidimensional measure of this construct. In their conceptualization, and following Mintzberg's (1983) work, political skill refers to the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives.

Political skill, thus, implies a facility in dealing with and through others, and feelings of enhanced control are gained by those with political skill as they are successful at influencing others at work. More specifically, Ferris and his coauthors (1999) argued that political skill should generate a sense of self-confidence and personal security because people will experience a strong sense of being able to understand and control both other people at work and the tactics needed to get what they themselves

want. It is this increased confidence and sense of control that explains why high-political-skill individuals should experience less anxiety and stress at work (Perrewé et al., 2000).

The six items developed by Ferris and his colleagues (1999) to measure political skill were, by their own admission, an initial attempt to representatively tap the principal aspects and features of this construct in a concise, unidimensional manner. Besides the Ferris et al. study, several other studies have assessed the factor structure of the six-item political skill scale and found strong support for its unidimensionality (e.g., Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, in press; Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2001). The definition of political skill embedded in this scale reflects the understanding of others at work and the use of that knowledge to influence others. For example, understanding others is exhibited in the item, "I understand people well." The use of knowledge about others for influence purposes is seen in the item, "I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me." Thus, the definition of political skill appears to convey the essential elements of the construct adequately and representatively, and the construct seems to be accurately "operationalized" by the six-item scale. (Use of the scale is further described below, and all items are listed in the Appendix.)

Construct validity. Concerning construct validity, Ferris et al. (1999) argued that political skill is expected to overlap with other social effectiveness constructs, but only to a modest degree, and not so highly as to indicate construct redundancy. Ferris, Perrewé, and Douglas (2002) reviewed the many social effectiveness constructs that have proliferated in recent years (including political skill) and concluded that each has a unique quality. They also suggested that there is natural overlap among the measures of most of these constructs, although it is limited.

Individuals high in political skill possess an understanding of people, along with a basic belief that they can control the processes and outcomes of interactions with others. A key component of political skill is the "development and leveraging of social capital" needed to achieve one's goals (Perrewé et al., 2000: 117). Individuals who have built social connections characterized by confidence, trust, and sincerity should sense greater control over their work environment.

Experienced strain is reduced as political skill enhances individuals' understanding of their work environment and the adverse stimuli encountered (Ferris et al., 1999; Perrewé et al., 2000). Furthermore, people high in political skill tend to view

interpersonal interactions as opportunities rather than threats, and they evaluate and interpret environmental stimuli differently than those low in political skill (Perrewé et al., 2000). Perrewé and colleagues argued that political skill can have two types of effects related to stress and strain. First, individuals high in political skill should generally perceive fewer stressors at work. Second, when politically skilled individuals do encounter stressors in a work environment, such stressors are less likely to produce dysfunctional consequences.

Therefore, political skill should moderate a perceived source of stressor-strain relationship. The negative effects arising from a stressor should be reduced for individuals high in political skill because they feel more adept at handling such situations. Therefore, we suggest that political skill serves as an antidote of sorts to the dysfunctional effects of role conflict. On the basis of the foregoing literature, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. The relationship between perceived role conflict and strain is moderated by political skill in such a way that higher political skill attenuates the negative relationship between role conflict and psychological, somatic, and physiological strain.

On the other hand, individuals low in political skill will experience the negative effects of role conflict in the form of increased psychological anxiety, somatic complaints, and physiological strain.

METHODS

Sample

We collected data from 230 full-time employees (99 had supervisory responsibilities and 131 did not have supervisory responsibilities) from three large oil companies in Brazil over a 15-month period. In theory and research on political skill, it has always been argued implicitly as well as explicitly that political skill is important for individuals whose work involves having contact with others (Ferris et al., 1999; Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000). Research on political skill has shown interesting and important effects on samples of social work caseworkers, secretarial/clerical employees, and recruiters/interviewers. Thus, political skill is argued to be important for all individuals, even those employees without supervisory responsibilities.

Participation in the study was voluntary. The sample was predominantly male (72.6%) and married (69%). The average number of years of work experience exceeded 19 years, and 82 percent of

sample members had 10 or more years of work experience. The questionnaire, designed by the authors, was translated from English to Portuguese and back-translated by two English teachers who were fluent in both languages. The two translators worked independently. Only a few minor discrepancies in wording emerged, and these were resolved by the translators as they talked through the differences.

Data were collected from each participant at two points in time as part of a large stress-related program sponsored by the companies. Each respondent completed a questionnaire containing personality and stressor items at a professional biofeedback clinic. The respondents returned to the clinic approximately one week later for the collection of data on experienced strain. Readings were taken for systolic and diastolic blood pressure and heart rate by a professionally educated clinical psychologist (an author) with more than 20 years of experience conducting and supervising biofeedback studies. Respondents also completed questionnaires that measured anxiety experienced in their lives.

Measures

The texts of the items in all of the following scales appear in the Appendix.

Political skill. Respondents' political skill was measured via six items developed by Ferris et al. (1999) that utilized a five-point Likert-type response scale (1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree"). Responses to the six items were summed and averaged into a composite, with higher scores indicating greater political skill. The coefficient alpha internal consistency reliability estimate was .71.

Perceived role conflict. We averaged responses to eight items developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) to measure role conflict ($\alpha = .81$; 1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree"). Higher scores indicated greater perceived role conflict.

Psychological anxiety and somatic complaints. We measured respondents' psychological anxiety and somatic complaints using scales developed by Lehrer and Woolfolk (1982). Using a seven-point format, with endpoints of "never" and "extremely often," respondents indicated how often they felt the way the statement described. The psychological anxiety measure contained 11 items ($\alpha = .82$), and the somatic complaint scale contained 16 items ($\alpha = .85$). Higher scores on each scale indicated greater anxiety.

Physiological measures. Heart rate was measured with a stethoscope, and blood pressure was measured with a sphygmomanometer. Each time a

heart beats, a surge of blood is pumped from the heart into the arteries, which increases the pressure in the arteries. In between heartbeats, the pressure in the arteries decreases. Blood pressure is reported as two numbers: the systolic value is a measure of the pressure of the blood against the artery walls when the heart contracts, and the diastolic measure is the pressure against the artery walls when the heart rests (Wellsource, Inc, 1996). Elevated levels of these cardiovascular measures have long been known risk factors for coronary heart disease (Fried, Rowland, & Ferris, 1984).

Control variables. In order to ensure that the hypothesis test was appropriately conservative, we controlled several variables in the regression analyses: total years of work experience, age, average number of hours worked per week, gender, marital status, education level, and hierarchical position within the organization.

Also, in view of prior research linking negative affect (NA) and psychological symptoms (e.g., Spector et al., 2000), we controlled for NA using the PANAS scales developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988; 1, "very slightly," to 5, "extremely"; $\alpha = .82$).

Finally, in order to make it clear that political skill represents something beyond mere general self-efficacy, we statistically controlled for this construct. General self-efficacy was measured with nine items developed by Riggs, Warka, Babasa, Betancourt, and Hooker (1994) to indicate respondents' confidence in their skills and abilities (1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .72$). Higher scores indicated greater general self-efficacy. Six items were reverse-coded. The original scale contained ten items, but we eliminated one item that appeared to be problematic, "Most people in my line of work can do the job better than I can." This is the only item in the original scale that requires respondents to compare themselves with others.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables are shown in Table 1. Because political skill has not been widely measured, we tested for its construct validity.

Construct Validity

Political skill. Ferris and his colleagues (1999) found that political skill was positively (but moderately) related, as expected, to self-monitoring ($r = .21$, $p < .01$), empathy ($r = .28$, $p < .01$), understanding of events ($r = .39$, $p < .001$), extraversion

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables^a

Variable ^b	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Years of experience	19.42	8.56														
2. Age	38.60	8.99	.93													
3. Gender	1.27	0.45	-.18	-.07												
4. Marital status	1.31	0.47	-.25	-.22	.30											
5. Hierarchical position	1.78	1.04	.24	.31	.17	-.03										
6. Hours/week	42.67	7.04	.06	.11	.08	-.01	.48									
7. Negative affectivity	2.73	0.65	-.09	-.05	.17	-.01	-.01	-.03								
8. General self-efficacy	5.22	0.98	.25	.19	-.10	-.08	.05	.13	-.34							
9. Conflict	3.18	1.27	-.04	-.02	.11	-.01	.09	-.04	.31	-.33						
10. Political skill	3.76	0.62	.02	.03	.14	.06	.21	.09	-.40	.31	-.05					
11. Psychological anxiety	3.14	1.05	-.02	.03	.16	-.02	.05	-.02	.67	-.38	.42	-.30				
12. Somatic complaints	3.23	0.97	-.05	.02	.21	-.07	.05	-.02	.69	-.37	.42	-.23	.83			
13. Diastolic blood pressure	78	10	.09	.16	.04	.01	.12	.09	.01	.05	.11	-.04	.04	.04		
14. Systolic blood pressure	123	13	.08	.14	.03	-.01	.01	.02	.02	.13	.03	-.02	-.02	.01	.79	
15. Heart rate	70	9	-.07	-.07	.20	.03	.14	.09	.10	.09	.11	.12	.09	.08	.09	.13

^a n = 230. Correlations greater than .12 are significant at $p < .05$; correlations greater than .17 are significant at $p < .01$.

^b Gender, 1 = male, 2 = female; marital status, 1 = married, 2 = single/divorced; hierarchical position, 1 = nonsupervisory, 2 = first-level manager, 3 = middle-level manager, 4 = upper-level manager.

($r = .28, p < .01$), positive affectivity ($r = .36, p < .001$), and conscientiousness ($r = .25, p < .01$). They also argued that political skill would be independent of general mental ability—that is, that political skill was an identifiable personal attribute in its own right, and not simply an aspect of general intelligence. Ferris et al. (1999) reported a nonsignificant correlation between political skill and general mental ability ($r = -.08, n.s.$).

It might also be argued that general self-efficacy and political skill are redundant constructs. Therefore, we needed to be able to demonstrate that whereas they might correlate, the relationship was no more than modest in magnitude. The zero-order correlation between political skill and general self-efficacy was $.31 (p < .01)$, placing it within the range of modest relationships that political skill has been argued (and found) to have with other interpersonally oriented constructs.

Measurement model. We assessed construct validity using the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) method. Under this method, convergent validity is demonstrated if the path loading from an item to its latent construct is significant and if the item's loading is more than twice the item's standard error. Discriminant validity is demonstrated when a chi-square difference test between the unconstrained measurement model and one in which a pair of latent variables is correlated at 1.0 is significant.

LISREL 8.3 was used to assess both convergent and discriminant validity. We estimated a measurement model consisting of all items for the constructs of role conflict, political skill, negative affectivity, and self-efficacy from a covariance matrix. Items within constructs were correlated if the correlation between the item and another item within the same construct was greater than or equal to $.25$. Correlations between items across constructs were not specified. Relationship equations associated the latent construct with its respective items. No relationships, constraints, or paths involving the latent constructs were specified. The fit statistics for the measurement model ($\chi^2 = 383.03, p = .08, df = 346, GFI = .90, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .02, \text{ and } SRMR = .05$) were acceptable (Kelloway, 1998). We then compared this model using chi-square difference tests against six alternate measurement models to assess discriminant validity. In each alternate model, one pair of latent constructs was correlated at 1.0, per the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) method. Setting the correlation for a pair of constructs to 1.0 implies that the two constructs are the same. Thus, if the alternate model fails the chi-square difference test, discriminant validity

is demonstrated, as the two constructs are not the same. In each case, the chi-square difference test was significant at the $.01$ level. Thus, discriminant validity among the constructs was demonstrated.

Alternate model tests. Two alternate models were tested to determine if specific latent constructs did indeed contribute to and have a significant influence on the hypothesized four-factor model. Both models started with the four-factor model, from which one latent construct (political skill or self-efficacy) was removed, producing a three-factor model, which was then compared to the hypothesized four-factor model. The analysis of these models was accomplished using two approaches: the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom, as recommended by Bollen (1989; also see Keeping & Levy, 2000: 715), and the AIC fit statistic (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996: 7–8). The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom was smaller in the four-factor model than in each of the alternate models (four-factor: 1.11; three-factor, without political skill: 1.29; three-factor, without self-efficacy: 1.43). The model AIC was lower in the four-factor model (four-factor: 683.03; three-factor, without political skill: 739.75; three-factor, without self-efficacy: 787.52). Thus, we concluded that the four-factor model effectively represented the data in our study.

Hypothesis Test

Moderated regression results. Once we were satisfied with the construct validity of our measures, we tested the hypothesis, which states that political skill moderates the relationship between perceived role conflict and strain in such a way that greater political skill reduces the effect of conflict on strain. All independent variables were centered prior to their entry in regression equations, and tests for normality demonstrated no violations of assumptions underlying the regressions. The results are shown in step 2 of Table 2. The interaction term significantly predicted psychological anxiety ($p < .01$), somatic complaints ($p < .05$), systolic blood pressure ($p < .05$), and diastolic blood pressure ($p < .05$), explaining variance beyond that accounted for by the “main effects” and control variables. However, the interaction term was not significant for heart rate. Therefore, we found strong but not full support for the hypothesis.

In order to examine the nature and form of the interactions more closely, we plotted them using procedures by Aiken and West (1991). They are

TABLE 2
Results of Multiple Regression Tests for the Effects of the Role Conflict and Political Skill Interaction on Strain

Variable ^a	Psychological Anxiety				Somatic Complaints				Systolic Blood Pressure				Diastolic Blood Pressure				Heart Rate							
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2					
	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.				
Step 1																								
Years of experience	-.02	0.02	-.01	0.02	-.16	0.02	-.16	0.01	-.40*	0.27	-.39*	0.27	-.44*	0.21	-.43*	0.21	.12	0.20	.12	0.20	.12	0.20		
Age	.09	0.02	.09	0.02	.20	0.01	.21	0.01	.49**	0.26	.49**	0.25	.54**	0.20	.55	0.20	-.24	0.19	-.24	0.19	-.24	0.19		
Gender	.04	0.12	.06	0.12	.08	0.11	.09	0.11	.02	2.10	.03	2.08	-.01	1.64	.01	1.63	.16*	1.56	.17*	1.56	.17*	1.56		
Marital status	-.03	0.11	-.02	0.11	-.10	0.10	-.10	0.10	.01	1.90	.02	1.88	.04	1.49	.05	1.47	-.03	1.41	-.03	1.41	-.03	1.41		
Hierarchical position	.03	0.06	.02	0.06	-.01	0.05	-.01	0.05	-.05	0.09	-.06	0.09	.05	0.77	.04	0.76	.12	0.73	.12	0.73	.12	0.73		
Hours/week	.00	0.01	-.01	0.01	.00	0.01	-.01	0.01	.01	0.14	-.00	0.13	.04	0.11	.03	0.10	.01	0.10	.01	0.10	.01	0.10		
Negative affectivity	.54**	0.09	.54**	0.09	.58**	0.08	.59**	0.08	.03	1.46	.03	1.45	-.05	1.15	-.04	1.13	.13	1.08	.14	1.09	.14	1.09		
General self-efficacy	-.12*	0.06	-.12*	0.06	-.12*	0.05	-.12*	0.05	.20**	0.99	.21**	0.98	.12	0.77	.12	0.76	.16*	0.73	.16*	0.73	.16*	0.73		
Role conflict	.21**	0.04	.21**	0.04	.19**	0.04	.19**	0.04	.09	0.72	.09	0.71	.15*	0.56	.16*	0.55	.09	0.53	.09	0.53	.09	0.53		
Political skill	-.06	0.09	-.04	0.09	.03	0.08	.05	0.08	-.08	1.57	-.05	1.54	-.11	1.23	-.09	1.21	.09	1.15	.09	1.15	.09	1.15		
Step 2																								
Role conflict \times political skill			-.13**	0.06			-.11**	0.05			-.16*	1.00			-.17*	0.78					-.05	0.75		
Model <i>F</i> (<i>df</i>)	24.19**	(10, 219)	23.28**	(11, 218)	27.40**	(10, 219)	26.01**	(11, 218)	1.54	(10, 219)	1.97*	(11, 218)	1.99*	(10, 219)	2.47**	(11, 218)	2.63**	(10, 219)	2.43**	(11, 218)	2.43**	(11, 218)	2.43**	(11, 218)
Overall <i>R</i> ²	.52**		.54**		.55*		.57**		.06		.09		.08		.11		.10		.11		.11			
ΔR^2	.02**		.02**		.02**		.02**		.03*		.03*		.03*		.03*		.03*		.03*		.03*			

^a Gender, 1 = male, 2 = female; marital status, 1 = married, 2 = single/divorced; hierarchical position, 1 = nonsupervisory, 2 = first-level manager, 3 = middle-level manager, 4 = upper-level manager.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

graphically illustrated in Figures 1a–1d. There appears to be sufficient evidence across the four criterion variables to support the hypothesis that political skill attenuates the negative effects of role conflict. As can be seen, the negative effects of role conflict are much more dysfunctional for individuals low in political skill than they are for those high in political skill. This relationship is most dramatically highlighted in Figure 1c, where increases in role conflict are associated with increases in systolic blood pressure for individuals low in political skill. However, increments in role conflict for those high in political skill are actually associated with reductions in systolic blood pressure. Figure 1d shows similar, but less dramatic, results for diastolic blood pressure.

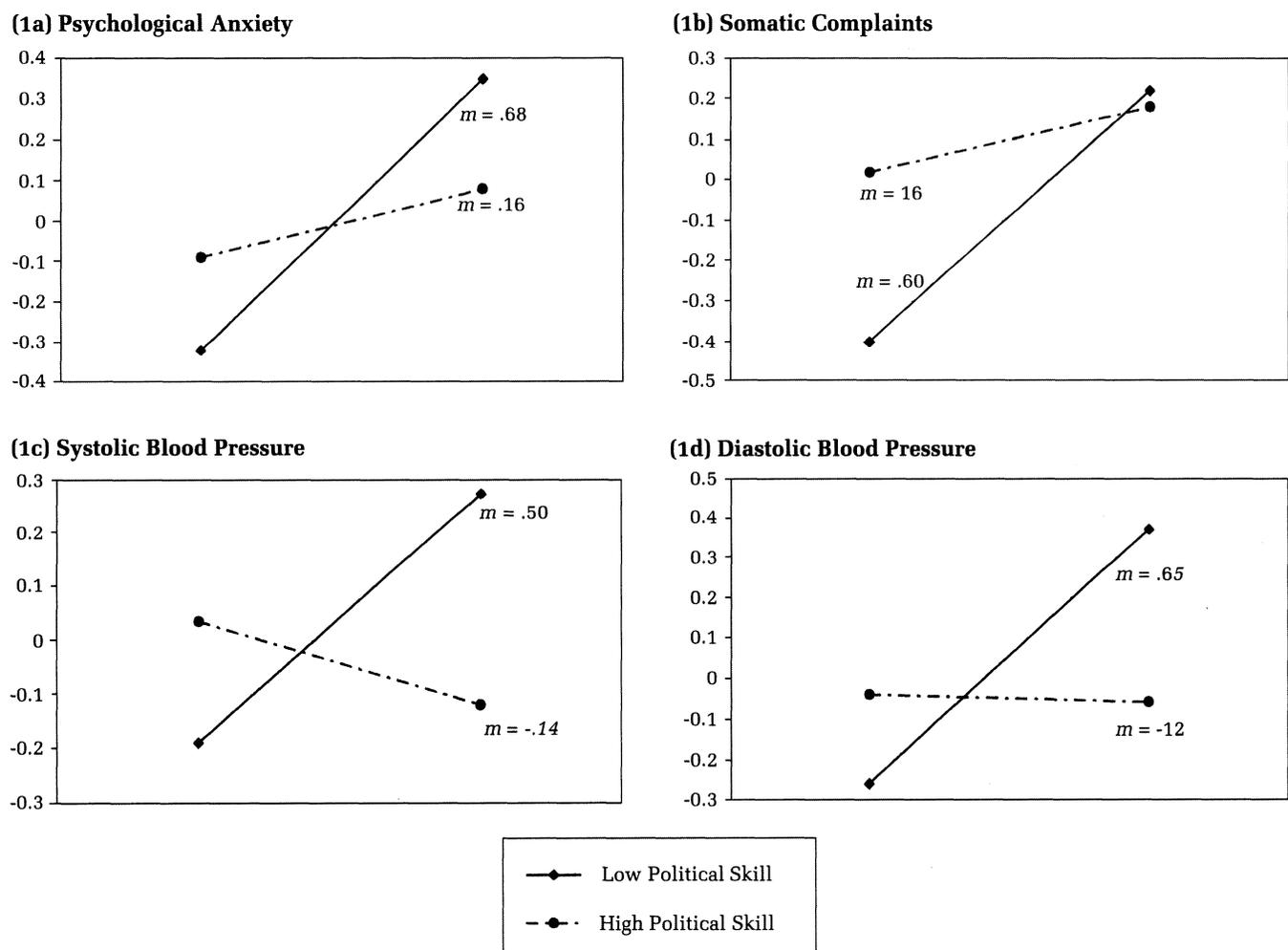
The role of general self-efficacy. To conduct the most rigorous assessment of political skills' moder-

ating effects, we repeated the moderated regression analysis, this time examining possible moderation by general self-efficacy of the role conflict–strain relationships with political skill controlled. The results of these analyses demonstrated that the interaction of role conflict with general self-efficacy was not significant for any of the strain outcomes. The p values ranged from .23 (diastolic blood pressure) to .75 (heart rate).

DISCUSSION

Job stress has been a costly and disruptive problem for organizations for decades, and it shows no signs of diminishing any time soon. Indeed, large-scale changes involving the downsizing and restructuring of organizations have resulted in numerous role changes for employees at work, thus

FIGURE 1
Effects of the Interaction between Role Conflict and Political Skills^a



^a The interaction equation is: $Y = C + \beta_1 IV_1 + \beta_2 IV_2 + (\beta_3 \times IV_1 \times IV_2)$. For each graph, the variable on the X axis is *perceived role conflict*. Line slopes are given by the m 's.

further increasing stress levels. Therefore, it is incumbent upon organizational scientists to develop a more informed understanding of the factors that can protect people from the negative consequences of job stress.

Following Perrewé and colleagues (2000), we hypothesized that political skill at work moderates the relationship between role conflict and psychological anxiety, somatic complaints, and physiological strain. Strong support was found for this hypothesis. For four of the five criterion measures, political skill attenuated the dysfunctional effects of role conflict, as predicted. We believe these results have interesting implications, and we discuss what we see as the key contributions and limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research.

Contributions to Theory and Research

The work of Lazarus (e.g., 1991, 1999) has largely influenced the proposition that “person variables” influence the stressor-strain relationship. That body of work has indicated that the degree of fit between a person and his (her) environment is a significant determinant of the amount of strain experienced. Instead of simply examining the environmental causes of strain, Lazarus suggested that strain results when a person feels unable to adequately cope with an identified threat. In the appraisal model, individuals assess whether events have implications for their well-being. Those deemed to be irrelevant have no bearing on well-being. Events that potentially affect well-being—in this case, instances of perceived role conflict—initiate a secondary appraisal in which individuals determine the adequacy of their coping resources. We argued that political skill is a unique and effective coping resource that, although it had not been considered previously in terms of Lazarus’s transactional theory, could shed further light on Lazarus’s secondary appraisal construct. The current examination of the role of political skill is a significant contribution in that political skill is a resource that appears more amenable to change and development by an individual than some of the previously examined individual differences known to influence experienced strain (such as negative affect). Moreover, unlike resources that, in general, only management can provide (for instance, increased staffing), political skill is a coping resource an individual can separately and uniquely control.

Further, previous stress research has not systematically examined psychological, somatic,

and physiological strain criterion measures in the same study. The fact that we found convergent findings across the three types of strain reinforces confidence in the validity of the results. The results provide further support for, and validation of, both the political skill construct and one of the roles it can play in the organizational sciences. Our findings support the view that political skill serves as an antidote to the dysfunctional consequences of stress.

As perceptions of role conflict increased, individuals with low political skill reported increases in psychological anxiety and somatic complaints at a higher rate than individuals with high political skill. Thus, it appears that high political skill can help to ameliorate the negative effects of role conflict. It is interesting that for somatic complaints, the largest degree of separation between low and high political skill occurred when perceived role conflict was low. Perhaps individuals with high political skill require a certain amount of stimuli or activation in their environment to feel comfortable. Stimuli that are stressful for some may be perceived as welcome challenges for individuals with high political skill. A quick examination of all four of the graphs presented here (Figures 1a–1d) indicates that strain was higher under conditions of low role conflict for individuals high in political skill. Clearly, additional research is needed to determine if individuals with high political skill require a higher level of activation than individuals with low political skill.

With regard to blood pressure, individuals low in political skill had higher increases in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure than individuals high in political skill as perceived role conflicts increased. Systolic blood pressure actually decreased for individuals with high political skill under conditions of high role conflict. Together, these findings provide strong support for the neutralizing effects of political skill in the role conflict–strain relationship.

Although political skill significantly predicted heart rate, no effect of the interaction of perceived role conflict and political skill on heart rate was detected. The reasons for this absence of significance are not clear. Researchers have reported mixed results for “background stressors,” which are sources of stress within one’s environment. In their review of background and acute stressors on cardiovascular reactivity (heart rate, systolic and diastolic blood pressure), Gump and Matthews (1999) noted that it is important to use several measures of reactivity because stressors

can exhibit different effects on blood pressure and heart rate reactivity. As they stated, "No one measure was more consistently associated with background stress than another" (Gump & Matthews, 487).

Limitations and Future Research

Although role conflict has been well substantiated as a key stressor in organizations, one of the limitations of this study is that only one stressor was examined. To some extent, we were constrained by the parameters of the data collection situation and had to limit the amount of information that could be collected. We recommend that researchers conducting future studies examine a broader set of job stressors to see if political skill demonstrates similar moderating effects. The inclusion of other health-related variables (such as smoking) as controls would also expand our efforts. Future conceptual work incorporating how an individual selects a specific coping resource as part of Lazarus's (1991) appraisal process will be critically important in this area of research.

Another limitation is that political skill was measured only through self-reported assessments. Although this procedure might be acceptable as an initial test of these ideas, future efforts should include additional assessments of political skill (such as peer perspectives), in order to ensure the construct is being captured in a valid manner.

Finally, the field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) has recently become one of the most exciting areas of stress research. Essentially, PNI is the examination of the relationship between stress, the immune system, and health outcomes (DeAngelis, 2002). Future research is needed to determine whether political skill may be one psychosocial factor that can buffer the stressor-stress response relationship. Previous research has demonstrated clear links between stress and the immune system and has examined the beneficial effects of psychosocial factors such as social support and optimism. The findings of this study suggest that political skill may, indeed, have psychological and physiological benefits for employees. An examination of the role of political skill in PNI may prove to be an important step in stress research.

Implications for Practice

The results of the present study provide some interesting implications for practice. Perhaps most

immediately, we would emphasize the importance of efforts to develop political skill. Characterizations of political skill have depicted it as part dispositional and part developmental (e.g., Ferris et al., 1999). Researchers should address political skill as an aspect of an internal stressor-strain neutralizing process. Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, Gilmore, and Harvey (2002) recently suggested ways to develop political skill through process-focused techniques such as drama-based training, developmental simulations, and behavior modeling. Such training and development efforts for political skill are complex and will need to be established carefully and effectively and evaluated systematically. In conclusion, this study provides strong evidence in support of the psychological and physiological benefits of possessing political skill in stressful contexts.

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APPENDIX

Scale Items

Political Skill

I find it easy to envision myself in the position of others; I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me; It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people; I understand people well; I am good at getting others to respond positively to me; I usually try to find common ground with others.

Role Conflict

I must do things that I think should be done differently; I work under incompatible policies and guidelines; I have to oppose a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment; I receive assignments without the manpower to complete them; I receive incompatible requests from two or more people; I have to work under vague directions or orders; I receive assignments without adequate resources and materials to execute them; I work on many unnecessary things.

Psychological Anxiety

I picture some future misfortune; I can't get some thoughts out of my mind; I dwell on mistakes that I have made; I think about possible misfortunes to my loved ones; I cannot concentrate at a task or job without irrelevant thoughts intruding; I keep busy to avoid uncomfortable thoughts; I can't get some pictures or images out of my mind; I imagine myself appearing foolish with a person whose opinion of me is important; I am concerned that others might not think well of me; I have to be careful not to let my real feelings show; I have an uneasy feeling.

Somatic Complaints

My throat gets dry; I have difficulty in swallowing; My heart pounds; My limbs tremble; My stomach hurts; My neck feels tight; I feel dizzy; I breathe rapidly; I can't catch my breath; My arms or legs feel stiff; My muscles twitch or jump; I experience a tingling sensation somewhere in my body; My arms or legs feel weak; I experience muscular aches and pains; I feel numbness in my face, limbs or tongue; I experience chest pains.

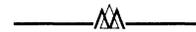
General Self-Efficacy

I have confidence in my ability to do my job; There are some tasks required by my job that I cannot do well; When my performance is poor, it is due to my lack of ability; I doubt my ability to do my job; I have all the skills needed to perform my job very well; I am an expert at my job; My future in this job is limited because of my lack of skills; I am very proud of my job skills and abilities; I feel threatened when others watch me work.

Negative Affectivity

Indicate the degree to which you generally feel this way—that is, how you feel on the average.

Distressed; upset; guilty; scared; hostile; irritable; ashamed; nervous; jittery; afraid.



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