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"Distinct Models of Burnout and Commitment Among  
Men and Women in the Military"

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## Distinct Models of Burnout and Commitment Among Men and Women in the Military

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*A study of 473 members of the Canadian Forces (232 men and 241 women) found considerable differences between men and women in levels of burnout, organizational commitment, and psychosomatic symptoms. Work environments into which women had been recently introduced were considered by both men and women to be impoverished in terms of support systems. Women found these environments to provide fewer coping resources. The results supported a prediction that supportive collegial relationships were of greater salience to women than to men, and that women were more concerned with issues of powerlessness when confronting organizational problems. The use of a multi-group LISREL analysis permitted a more extensive investigation of similarities and differences in the way men and women experience the military as a workplace. Implications for the development of a comprehensive model of occupational stress are discussed.*

This study applies a model of occupational stress and professional efficacy to reactions of women to their introduction into new occupational environments in the military. In the first place it assesses the extent to which women undergoing the transition into new work environments are experiencing more distress than are men. Secondly, it articulates distinct models of the way men and women use organizational and personal

resources to address occupational demands. Of particular interest was the hypothesis that the quality of social support at work would be of greater salience to women than to men.

### Sex Differences and Job Stress

The study of gender differences in the experience of job stress is one of increasing relevance as women enter fields of work and domains of management traditionally occupied by men (Pepitone-Arreola-Rockwell, Sommer, Sassenrath, Rozee-Koker, & Stringer-Moore, 1981). Jick and Mitz (1985) reviewed the empirical evidence of gender differences in stress dynamics and found that 19 studies indicated that although women tend to report higher rates of psychological distress, men are more prone to severe physical illness. In contrast, Rosenfield (1980) and Stewart and Salt (1981) found that women have consistently shown higher rates of depression and depressive symptoms than men. Hall and Hall (1980) and Tung (1980) suggested that professional women competing in a male dominated environment are subject to chronic stress. Nelson and Quick (1985) stated that unique sources of stress for professional women are discrimination, stereotyping, the marriage/work interface, and social isolation. Burke and Richardsen (1991) reported that female physicians reported more stress-related problems and sought more far-reaching changes in the health care system despite working fewer hours than their male counterparts. In sum, these studies suggest that women and men have distinct perspectives on occupational stress.

The difference in the experiences of men and women may be attributable to distinct stressors for women, such as harassment—especially sexual harassment (Gutek & Cohen, 1987)—and to insufficient support systems in the changing work settings. Wilson, Weikel, and Rose (1982) compared a sample of women in traditional and nontraditional careers. In this study the traditional career group comprised school teachers and the nontraditional group comprised women who either held an executive level position in a corporation, business, or organization, or held a position that represented line authority including the management of other people. They found most of the women in the nontraditional group reported discrimination on the job and in everyday life, and one fourth of the women contended that their career advancement was hampered by gender discrimination in employment.

Initial approaches to women in male-dominated organizations found that many women became overachievers in an attempt to prove themselves (Kanter, 1978). This was displayed through job performance and by attempts to be included in established support networks. Few organizations are more male dominated than the military. The expansion of women's roles in the Canadian military was monitored by the Canadian Servicewomen in Non-Traditional Environments and Roles (SWINTER). This study

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stress and commitment, one is best served by relinquishing the concept of opposite sexes and thinking, as did Virginia Woolf, of neighboring sexes.

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nor inevitable. Assessing their expansion into new domains is confounded by the fact that many of the work environments of the military are far from ideal. It is difficult to feel fully integrated into the larger organization when dodging icebergs in the North Atlantic or patrolling an outpost on Baffin Island. This is a process that will not reach a conclusion immediately, as indicated by General Norman Schwarzkopf's expressed disinclination to integrate women fully into combat arms in the U.S. Armed Forces. The developments in the military, which serve as an extreme case scenario, can be used to identify difficulties confronted by women attempting to expand their role in other male-dominated worksettings.

The distinctions between the two models of burnout are consistent with the hypothesis that women are more sensitive to the social context of peer relations and that women feel relatively powerless in a military organizational setting. Although women share the same degree of commitment as their male colleagues and the same problems with personal accomplishment, they are experiencing considerably greater problems with stress. The evidence of this study indicates that the greater stress experienced by women is more a function of insufficient supports than of extra hassles associated with their entry into new work environments or with discrimination.

According to the intergroup relations theory, one characteristic of groups is that they differ in the amount of resources available to them. Alderfer (1987) suggests that organizations have two broad sets of groups, namely identity groups (consisting of individuals who share common biological, historical, or social characteristics) and organizational groups (made up of individuals who hold comparable positions, or perform similar work). Although men and women may share an organizational group they do not belong to the same identity group. It is this difference in group membership that may explain the difference in use of support resources in the current data.

Given that the integration of women into male-dominated areas is a constantly changing issue influenced by organizational policy and larger cultural developments, the topics discussed here warrant further monitoring. Ideally the survey information assessed in this study would be enhanced by qualitative information derived from interviews and direct observation. This approach would be more time-demanding and intrusive than this study, but would have much to contribute. Replications of this study with nonmilitary organizations would also contribute to interpreting the material. The contrast with the Leiter (1991a) study of mental health care professionals indicates that the role of coping patterns is somewhat specific to an organization or employment sector.

Although this study has emphasized the differences between men and women in the predictors of burnout and commitment, these differences are seen against a backdrop of consistency. All of the relationships among the variables were in the same direction for both men and women; the differences that the model testing brought out were in degree. Work group cohesion was positively associated with organizational commitment for men as well as for women; it was simply of much less consequence for men, especially when viewed in relation to the association of supervisor support with commitment. Although an intervention that enhanced work group cohesion would primarily help women, it would probably enhance the quality of the men's worklife as well. When considering contrasts between men and women regarding occupational

established that servicewomen in the Canadian Forces reported experiencing self-imposed pressure to perform to a higher degree than expected of their male counterparts. In some cases, pressure led to requests for professional help for stress-related problems (Park, 1983). The fact of their being pioneers in these formerly male roles and environments increased their vulnerability to gender harassment and other forms of nonacceptance. Faced with varying degrees of sexism, paternalism, stereotyping, and attitudes about the impropriety of their place in these new environments, women reacted with anger, frustration, resentment, and hostility (Lamerson, 1987).

### Psychological Burnout

In light of the extensive, multifaceted nature of occupational problems, a thorough assessment of their impact requires consideration of employees' levels of occupational stress as well as their potential career effectiveness. These two issues are addressed in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which measures a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Leiter (1991a) has argued that the term *burnout* is applicable to only a few people scoring at the extremes of these three dimensions. A focus on the separate subscales provides a more comprehensive consideration of individuals' relationships with their work. Specifically, emotional exhaustion provides a stressful reaction to social demands at work, whereas personal accomplishment assesses professional efficacy, that is, self-efficacy in the occupational domain.

The burnout state is most pertinent to people doing human service work, and the MBI was developed with data from human service workers. Attempts to extend the concept to people working outside of human service fields have been partially successful, except that factor analysis has indicated that the distinction between depersonalization and emotional exhaustion subscales deteriorates with these populations (Evans, 1989; Hillier, 1989). Leiter (1991a) argued that the distinction between these two subscales arises because human service professionals have a disinclination (not consistently shared by people in other occupational groups) to depersonalize their relationships with clients on ethical and practical grounds.

Researchers have expected to find differences in the way men and women experience burnout, but the evidence of such distinctions has been weak and inconsistent. Maslach and Jackson (1985), arguing against the proposition that women were generally more burned out than men (Etzion & Pines, 1986), found that men score higher on depersonalization, but the size of the difference is generally so small as to be inconsequential (e.g., Burke & Greenglass, 1991; Lemkau, Rafferty, Purdy, & Rudisill, 1987). Heatherington, Oliver, and Phelps (1989) found that women score higher on emotional exhaustion, but also found women resident assistants scoring higher than men on depersonalization and on personal accomplishment. As pointed out by Maslach and Jackson (1985), these inconsistencies may well be a function of the different occupational roles of men and women.

Van Yperen, Buunk, and Schaufeli (1990) presented the most intriguing view to date of sex differences in burnout. Although they found no differences between men and women in MBI scores, they reported that women were much more sensitive to

imbalances in their equity relationship with their occupation: women who are highly invested in their jobs are much more likely to report burnout than women who are not, whereas men show little difference in burnout as a function of the equity balance with their jobs. Their findings point to potential differences in the manner in which women use support networks and the extent to which they feel empowered in the work setting relative to men.

A central issue in the definition of burnout has been the relationships among the three MBI subscales. Golembiewski and Munzenrider (1988) proposed a phase model in which depersonalization initiated the burnout process. Leiter (1989) argued that this phase model had more to do with the skewness of the distributions of the MBI subscales than with substantive issues regarding the development of burnout. Central features of the model proposed in Leiter and Maslach (1988) and further refined in Leiter (1990, 1991a), which gives the central role to emotional exhaustion, have been supported by Evans (1989) and Lee and Ashforth (1990). Figure 1 displays the model from the Leiter (1991b) study of mental health care workers. In this model the constructs measured by the MBI—especially emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment—mediate the impact of environmental conditions with various outcomes. That is, the quality of the work context affects occupational performance and stress outcomes to the extent that they have an impact on the subjective state of the worker. The study described here was designed to replicate this model with a military population and to explore the impact of including consideration of work environment and sex of respondent in the model.

Both sex and environment were expected to have an impact on the constructs measured in the study and on the relationships specified in the model.

**Hypothesis 1.** Overall, women were expected to find the Canadian Forces to be a more stressful environment than were men, especially in regard to emotional exhaustion and psychosomatic symptoms. At the time of this research the armed forces continued to be a relatively unfamiliar working environment for women, and service-women were very much in the minority.

**Hypothesis 2.** The nontraditional work environments were expected to provide less support than the traditional work environments, especially for women. The nontraditional environments included in this study were generally more isolated from the amenities of urban life, and less integrated with the organizational power structures of the Canadian military. In light of these features, nontraditional environments were expected to be associated with diminished personal accomplishment, and lower levels of organizational commitment.

**Hypothesis 3.** The nontraditional work environments were expected to provide less support relationships among personnel than the traditional work environments, especially for women. Both Hypotheses 2 and 3 follow in part from Hillier (1989) who discussed the diminished organizational commitment of CF recruit trainers who perceived the geographically and organizationally isolated role of recruit trainer as interfering with their advancement in the organization.

The multisample LISREL analysis provides a means of articulating distinctions between groups in a complex set of relationships. Although most of the relationships in the two models developed for men and women were identical, the differences in the models are indicative of differences in sensitivity to social context. For example, cohesion is indirectly related to organizational commitment by way of personal accomplishment for men and directly related to commitment for women. These findings are consistent with the proposition that belonging to a highly cohesive group enhances one's sense of accomplishment which in turn enhances the enthusiasm one feels toward the larger organization.

The direct relationship for women from cohesion to organizational commitment indicates that the quality of the relationships within the work group have an additional salience to the enthusiasm women feel toward the Canadian forces. It may be that women are extending their allegiance and sense of belonging derived from the personal relationships in the group directly to the larger, more abstract relationships in the organization. They share with the men the more utilitarian view that these relationships are pertinent to the extent to which they enhance one's sense of self-efficacy, but they extend the pertinence of cohesion by giving greater emphasis to the personal quality of the relationships.

For both men and women, emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship of psychosomatic symptoms with qualities of the work environment, although psychosomatic symptoms were significantly correlated with nearly every other variable in the study. This finding is consistent with the general hypothesis of Leiter (1991a) that people experience stress symptoms to the extent that they experience emotional exhaustion, which occurs in demanding, supportive work environments. The additional relationship for women from co-worker support to psychosomatic symptoms indicates that personal relationships among peers are additionally important to women in their experience of stress outcomes. It appears that for women the absence of supportive relationships serves to aggravate the stress experience indicated by emotional exhaustion.

In contrast to the more central role played by peer relationships (co-worker support and cohesion) for women, the relationship of supervisor support with commitment was distinctly pertinent for men. Although there is a relationship between supervisor support and commitment for women, it is overshadowed by the importance of cohesion.

The more central role for escape coping for women than for men may be indicative of differences in power as well as the salience of social relationships. The distinctly strong relationship of escape coping with personal accomplishment for women indicates that they do not experience this situation as a satisfactory resolution, but are becoming actively discouraged as they attempt to escape from stressors beyond their control.

### **Conclusion**

The military is a nontraditional setting for women. In both policy and practice, women are taking a stronger role in the military, but this progress is neither smooth

The differences found in this study are consistent with the hypothesis that women are more sensitive to the quality of supportive peer relationships than are men, who are more sensitive to the quality of supervisory relationships. Overall, this study found that women in the military were facing problems with insufficient support systems regardless of the additional demands. The implications of these findings and their limitations are discussed below.

The Canadian Forces is not experienced as an equivalent work setting by men and women. Although women and men reported equal frequency of hassles at work, women were more emotionally exhausted and experienced more psychosomatic symptoms. Further, they perceived their work groups as less cohesive, their supervisors less supportive. This perceived lack of support was associated with a greater proclivity to resort to avoidance strategies when addressing problems at work. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) point out that avoidance is an effective and appropriate coping approach when one is powerless to have an impact on events. The finding here that women were resorting more to escape coping may indicate that they feel relatively powerless to address problems at work. The cross-sectional data in this study do not permit a clear investigation of the causal influences among the variables: The data address neither the direction of causal influence nor the time required for such influence to occur. Within these limitations, this finding may indicate an organizational problem worthy of further investigation within a longitudinal design with interventions.

The contrasts between the traditional and nontraditional environments indicate that the Canadian Forces had not been keeping women out of the highly desirable work settings. To the contrary the work environments into which women have recently been introduced are characterized by diminished feelings of personal accomplishment, and low organizational commitment for both men and women. In light of these considerations, it is not surprising that women in the military resort more readily to avoidance when faced with problems at work.

The analysis presented a more fragmented view of burnout than have previous studies (Leiter, 1990, 1991b) in that it confirmed only work group cohesion as a predictor of both exhaustion and personal accomplishment. To some extent this difference could be attributed to the use of work hassles as a measure of demands rather than the distinct measures of work overload and interpersonal conflict used in the Leiter (1991b) analysis. Also, the inclusion of sex and environment, both of which were related to escape coping, may have further weakened the relationships of coping patterns with exhaustion. However, examination of the zero-order correlations indicates that the relationships of coping patterns to exhaustion were simply weaker for this military sample than for the health care sample in the Leiter (1991b) study.

The weak relationship of coping patterns and exhaustion may be influenced by the relatively low level of emotional exhaustion in the military sample. Overall, the people did not have a major problem with exhaustion, although they do report low levels of personal accomplishment relative to the Maslach and Jackson (1986) norms.

Although the differences between the reports of men and women in their perceptions of their work environments are good indicators of the shortfall in support systems for women in the military, the differences in predictors of burnout, commitment, and symptoms are fundamental to clarifying the role of gender in occupational psychology.

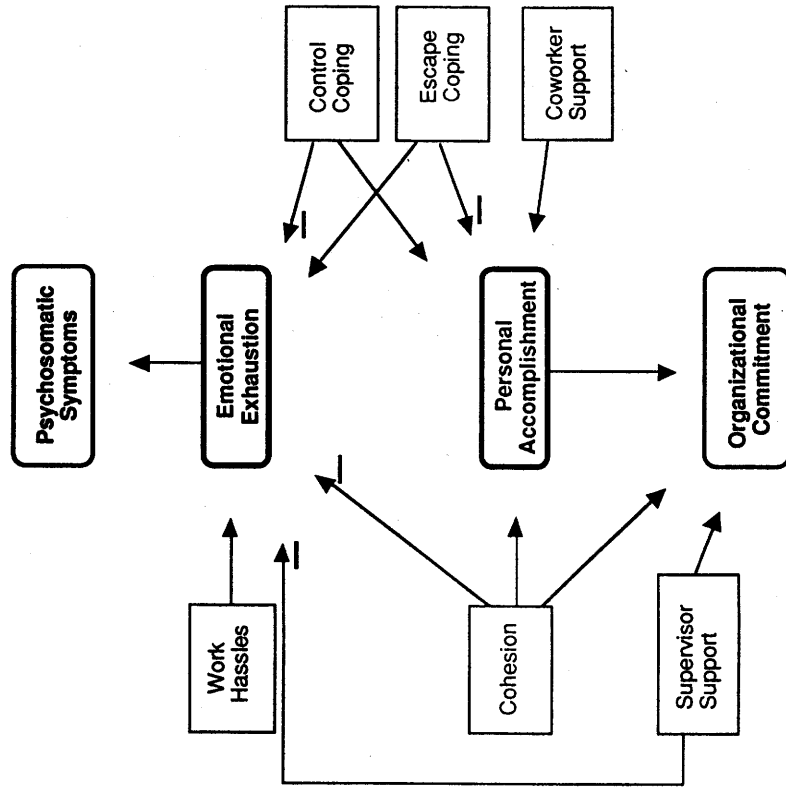


FIGURE 1: Theoretical Model of the Impact of Work Setting Factors and Coping Styles on Burnout, Organizational Commitment, and Psychosomatic Symptoms

NOTE: Rounded boxes signify endogenous variables; rectangles signify exogenous variables.

*Hypothesis 4.* It was expected that the relationships among the constructs in this study would in most respects be consistent with the Leiter (1991a) model both for men and women. The samples with which this model had been developed were predominantly, although not exclusively female (Leiter, 1988, 1990, 1991b; Leiter & Maslach, 1988). The findings of Van Yperen et al. (1990) with hospital workers and of Park (1983) regarding the SWINTER trials suggested that the quality of personal relationships may be of greater consequence for women than for men.

*Hypothesis 5.* It was expected that gender would account for some of the inconsistencies in relationships of group cohesion and co-worker or supervisor support with burnout (see Evans, 1989; Lee & Ashforth, 1990; Leiter, 1990, 1991b). Specifically, it was expected that social support—both co-worker support and workgroup cohesion—would be more closely related to the burnout dimensions for women than for men.

To summarize, it is predicted that women entering nontraditional work-settings will experience career crises to a greater extent than will women in settings that have traditionally employed women. They will also experience career crises to a greater

extent than will men regardless of setting. Career crises will be evident in greater emotional exhaustion, more frequent psychosomatic symptoms, diminished personal accomplishment, and low organizational commitment. Further, women entering non-traditional settings will perceive less social support from supervisors, co-workers, and the workgroup, and have access to a more limited range of coping behaviors.

To reiterate Hypothesis 4, it was expected that these differences would be evident against a background of similarity. That is, the relationships among the variables for men and for women would be similar in other respects.

## METHOD

### Participants

Questionnaires were mailed to 1,000 Canadian Forces (CF) servicemen and service-women employed in a total of 14 different military occupations. The randomized sample consisted of four groups, each comprised of 250 individuals based on gender and environment. Although the selected occupations have been classified as mixed gender for many years, a servicewoman could only serve or be employed in a restricted range of military units until the advent of recent policy changes within the CF. These policy changes resulted in women now being employed in seven additional classes of military units. Four of the classes of units to which women were recently introduced were used in this study: (a) auxiliary oil replenishment (AOR) ships (navy), (b) service battalion (army), (c) field ambulance (army), and (d) military police platoon (army). For the purpose of this article, these classes of units are collectively identified as being nontraditional environments. A random sample of 250 women now employed in these units was selected as the nontraditional environment group—female. An additional random sample of 250 was selected from women employed in traditional environments (for the purpose of this article, these are defined as those environments to which women formerly had access) as the traditional environment group—female. Random samples were made for males, establishing comparable groups. The overall response rate was 473 completed questionnaires for a response rate of 47%, which is good for a mail survey (Berry & Houston, 1993). The response rate was fairly even over the four groups: males in nontraditional, 44%; females in nontraditional, 41%; males in traditional, 49%; females in traditional, 56%.

### Canadian Forces

The number of women in the CF has increased from 1,624 (2% of the total strength of 82,700) in 1970 to 7,485 (9% of the overall CF strength of 83,502) in 1986. The increased employability of women in the CF since the 1970s has occurred largely as a result of federal government policies aimed at providing equality for men and women in Canadian society. In addition, the CF increasingly tended to enroll women when insufficient numbers of qualified young men expressed an interest in joining the forces (Park, 1986).

TABLE 3  
Goodness of Fit of Contrasting Models

Model	df	$\chi^2$	GFI <sup>a</sup>	PNFI2 <sup>b</sup>
Gender-Specific	94	257.86	.928	.733
Women's	92	269.86	.923	.708
Men's	96	331.02	.928	.701
Joint Sample	88	213.55	.937	.709
Shared Paths	100	569.30	.902	.566
Null	112	1,382.17	.593	

a. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.

b. PNFI2 = parsimonious normed fit index.

TABLE 4  
Goodness of Fit of Contrasting Models: Subsample 1

Model	df	$\chi^2$	GFI <sup>a</sup>	PNFI2 <sup>b</sup>
Distinct Models	94	134.96	.928	.741
Women's	92	133.21	.923	.725
Men's	96	151.62	.928	.720
Joint	88	124.64	.937	.704
Common	100	195.93	.902	.643
Null	112	634.97	.593	

a. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.

b. PNFI2 = parsimonious normed fit index.

TABLE 5  
Goodness of Fit of Contrasting Models: Subsample 2

Model	df	$\chi^2$	GFI <sup>a</sup>	PNFI2 <sup>b</sup>
Distinct Models	94	141.93	.928	.720
Women's	92	144.23	.923	.695
Men's	96	162.42	.928	.687
Joint	88	123.64	.937	.704
Common	100	233.24	.902	.533
Null	112	1,382.17	.593	

a. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.

b. PNFI2 = parsimonious normed fit index.

4 and 5. Both of these analyses support the advantage of the Gender-Specific Model over the other models.

## DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that occupational stress and organizational commitment are associated with distinct aspects of the organizational context of men and women.