

## WHEN AND WHY HIGH PERFORMERS FEEL JOB DISSATISFACTION: A RESOURCE FLOW APPROACH

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Our aim was to elucidate when and why high performers feel job dissatisfaction by taking a resource flow approach and focusing on team members' role overload (resource outflow) and relative leader–member exchange compared to other members (resource inflow). The sample comprised 136 supervisor–subordinate dyads, and we found that role overload decreased high performers' job satisfaction owing to the depletion of available resources, whereas leader–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) increased high performers' job satisfaction because of the attainment of exclusive resources. Moreover, job satisfaction was lowest when resource outflow from role overload was not restored by resource inflow through LMXSC. We discuss theoretical and practical implications in relation to the literature on talent management, employee motivation, and leadership.

*Keywords:* task performance, job satisfaction, role overload, leader–member exchange, leader–member exchange social comparison, resource flow.

Companies strive to acquire and retain talented employees, who form critical resources of organizational competitiveness (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014), by providing, for example, competitive salaries and fast-track promotions to high

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performers. These rewards keep a balance between high performers' perceived input and output, thereby enhancing employees' job satisfaction. Further, in prior studies conducted in the fields of talent management, compensation, and employee–organizational relationships, researchers have observed that these rewards promote job satisfaction (see e.g., Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014).

Nevertheless, many high performers still experience job dissatisfaction and decide to leave their organization (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) for various reasons, one of which is an imbalance occurring in the inflow and outflow of available resources from a social exchange perspective (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014). In the organizational setting, role overload from perceived job demands (e.g., Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012) and a poor-quality relationship with a leader (e.g., Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016) are regarded as typical factors in deciding perceived resource flows.

Previous scholars who have conducted studies on employee well-being and the transactions between leader and member—that is *leader–member exchange* (LMX; Martin et al., 2016)—have failed to capture the complex facets of dissatisfaction because they have separately dealt with the loss (role overload) and gain (LMX) of resources. Thus, in this study we took a resource flow approach to examine when and why high performers feel job dissatisfaction, by focusing on perceived role overload and relative LMX compared to coworkers. More specifically, we drew on social exchange theory (SET) and conservation of resources theory (COR) to explore how performance and job satisfaction are related; how role overload and leader–member exchange social comparison (LMXSC), respectively, moderate the relationship between performance and job satisfaction; and how these two factors interact to affect high performers' job satisfaction.

## Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

### Task Performance and Job Satisfaction

*Job satisfaction* refers to a pleasant emotional state or reaction to one's job (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Considering that good attitudes lead to desirable behaviors, previous researchers have demonstrated a positive relationship between job satisfaction and individual employees' performance (Judge et al., 2001). Although several scholars have reported finding no correlation between these variables, more researchers have reported a positive job satisfaction–performance correlation, ranging from slight ( $\rho = .17$ ) to modest ( $\rho = .30$ ; Judge et al., 2001). Vroom (1964) found that a high level of job satisfaction results in superior performance, and that high performance leads to increased job satisfaction. That is, high performers are likely to be satisfied

with their job because superior performance leads to both intrinsic (e.g., a sense of achievement) and extrinsic (e.g., promotion, salary increase) rewards (Locke & Latham, 1990). From an SET perspective, these rewards keep the balance between contributions to, and returns from, the organization (Blau, 1964). Consistent with these arguments, job performance has been found to have a significant positive causal effect on job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2001); thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Employees' performance will be positively related to their job satisfaction.

### **Resource Outflow: Role Overload**

In general, managers of firms utilize pay and promotions as inducements to elicit motivation and performance from employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014). As argued by SET theorists, in this situation a balance is created between the inducements provided by the management personnel of the organization and the contributions required from the employee (Farndale, Pai, Sparrow, & Scullion, 2014). However, work stress resulting from role overload is the primary reason that high performers feel job dissatisfaction and leave their current position to work at another firm, despite the rewards that are offered at their current organization. Indeed, many leaders tend to reassign to high performers work that was unfinished by low performers, or to give highly challenging tasks to high performers because this is the easiest and surest way to successfully accomplish this work and increase team performance (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). This situation aggravates employees' perceived role overload, which is defined as "a perception that role demands are overwhelming relative to available capabilities and resources" (Jones, Chonko, Rangarajan, & Roberts, 2007, p. 663), because assigning an excessive amount of work to high performers evokes the perception of a demanding role that depletes their available resources (Crawford et al., 2010; Matthews & Campbell, 2009).

According to COR theorists (Hobfoll, 1989), people strongly perceive the potential or actual loss of resources as a threat when mobilizing additional resources to perform burdensome tasks. Further, perceptions of the threat of resource outflow or actual resource loss arouse negative feelings and responses (Crawford et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2007; Lee, Chaudhry, & Tekleab, 2014). Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Role overload will negatively moderate the relationship between task performance and job satisfaction.

### **Resource Inflow: Leader–Member Exchange Social Comparison**

Because leaders hold the formal authority to evaluate and develop employees, a positive LMX relationship functions as a critical channel for exclusive inflow of potential or actual resources (Martin et al., 2016). Employees' perceptions

of LMX have been found to positively influence their attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment) and behavioral (e.g., in-role and extra-role performance) outcomes (Martin et al., 2016). Although the LMX model has increased understanding of differentiated dyadic relationships between a leader and each employee, scholars (Crawford et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2016) have called for more consideration of group contexts, including coworkers, pointing out that few leader–member dyads are isolated from work groups. In particular, because performance ratings inherent in leader–member dyads affect individuals' job performance, simply strengthening LMX might not be fully effective for improving high performers' perceptions of abundant and exclusive inflow of resources.

In this respect, Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, and Ghosh (2010) proposed the new construct of *LMXSC*, which is a form of within-group social comparison, in which work group members are used as the reference point (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Employees can acquire critical resources through LMX, yet their perception of having a better relationship with their leader—compared to the relationships that their colleagues have with the same leader—has a stronger positive influence on their job satisfaction and performance. The reason for this is that these idiosyncratic relationships provide high performers with not only practical resources to handle heavy job demands, but also symbolic meanings to secure their social status (Martin et al., 2016). Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3:** LMXSC will positively moderate the relationship between task performance and job satisfaction.

### **Interaction Between Resource Inflow and Outflow**

Because resources acquired via social exchange are formed from dynamically repeated gains and losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014), high performers' perception of LMXSC, that is to say, the balance in social exchange, is determined by the interactive effects of resource losses, role overload, and gains (Lee et al., 2014). In other words, simultaneously considering the compositive effects of losses and gains of resources can be helpful to synthetically capturing the more complex facets of high performers' dissatisfaction. On the basis of COR theory, employees strive to replenish their lost resources with new ones or to use the response mechanism of enriching their resource pool against the situation that led to the depletion of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). If burdensome role overload leads to high performers' resource losses and resultant negative job attitudes, the best way to minimize these negative effects is to restore the balance between contributions and inducements by replenishing lost resources with new ones (Crawford et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2014).

Considering that leader support functions as an effective buffer against the negative effects of perceived role overload on employee attitudes and behaviors

(Crawford et al., 2010), a high-quality relationship with a leader as a source of resource inflow can restore the employee's depletion of resources resulting from role overload. By contrast, if employees who are high performers perceive a low level of LMXSC, they have no opportunity to replenish their lost resources after performing an excessive amount of work (Martin et al., 2016). Because this condition simultaneously makes resource outflow high and resource inflow low, high performers will feel a strong imbalance between contributions and returns from the social exchange perspective; as a result, their job satisfaction may plummet. Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** There will be a three-way interaction of task performance, role overload, and LMXSC on job satisfaction, such that job satisfaction will be lowest when both task performance and role overload are high but LMXSC is low.

## Method

### Sample

With the help of the senior executives of the organizations, we randomly distributed survey packets to 320 employees and their supervisors working in the offices of technology, financial, food service, and manufacturing firms in South Korea. Of these, 136 supervisor-subordinate dyads returned usable surveys (response rate = 85%). In terms of demographics, the subordinate sample comprised 75 men (55.1%) and 61 women (44.9%), with an average age of 34.7 years ( $SD = 6.8$ ) and an average organizational tenure of 69.6 months ( $SD = 62.9$ ). The supervisor sample comprised 24 men (63.2%) and 14 women (36.8%), with an average age of 41.3 years ( $SD = 8.8$ ) and an average organizational tenure of 101.6 months ( $SD = 72.2$ ).

### Measures

To measure task performance, supervisors were asked to complete the seven-item scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). Sample items are "This employee . . . adequately completes assigned duties" and ". . . fulfills responsibilities specified in his/her job description" ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Subordinates completed Bolino and Turnley's (2005) three-item measure of role overload. Sample items are "It often seems like I have too much work for one person to do" and "I never seem to have enough time to get everything done at work" ( $\alpha = .85$ ), the six-item measure of LMXSC developed by Vidyarathi et al. (2010). Sample items are "Relative to the others in my work group, I receive more support from my manager" and "My manager is more loyal to me compared to my coworkers" ( $\alpha = .89$ ) Finally, the subordinates completed the Job Descriptive Index developed by Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969) to measure satisfaction with

work, pay, promotions, coworkers, and supervision ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Responses for all items were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

We also controlled for three demographic variables—gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (in years), and organizational tenure—because these have been widely used in previous research to reduce the possibility of results reflecting spurious relationships among perceived role overload, relationship with supervisor, and job satisfaction (e.g., Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012; Vidyarathi et al., 2010).

### Data Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to assess the validity of the constructs. Hierarchical regression analyses were also conducted, and then two- and three-way interaction patterns were examined by drawing separate regression lines.

## Results

The results of the CFA model comparisons show that the hypothesized four-factor model had good fit in both absolute and relative terms: chi square (181) = 362.10,  $p < .001$ , comparative fit index = .90, incremental fit index = .91, root mean square error of approximation = .09. In Table 1 the results for the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are displayed.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	34.71	6.82						
2. Gender	0.45	0.50	.01					
3. Tenure	69.60	62.94	.49*	-.05				
4. Task performance	5.08	0.84	-.20*	-.15	.04			
5. Role overload	3.93	1.04	-.13	.03	-.06	.19*		
6. LMXSC	4.22	0.91	-.05	-.12	.11	.10	.10	
7. Job satisfaction	4.31	0.96	-.07	-.27**	.16	-.04	-.15	.49***

Note.  $N = 136$ . LMXSC = leader–member exchange social comparison. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

As shown in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 was not supported, as the relationship between task performance and employee job satisfaction was nonsignificant. On the basis of Model 3 in Table 4, the interaction of task performance and role overload was significantly and negatively related to job satisfaction, which supported Hypothesis 2. Supporting Hypothesis 3, the LMXSC positively moderated the relationship between task performance and job satisfaction.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results

	Dependent variable: Job satisfaction				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Step 1: Control variables					
Age	-.19*	-.23*	-.19*	-.18*	-.20*
Gender	-.26**	-.28**	-.22**	-.25***	-.27***
Tenure	.24*	.27**	.19*	.15	.18*
Step 2: Main effect					
Task performance		-.14	-.13	-.16*	-.18*
Step 3: Moderating variables					
Role overload			-.17*	-.11	-.07
LMXSC			.47***	.47***	.44***
Step 4: Moderating effects					
TP × RO				-.19**	-.24**
TP × LMXSC				.14*	.16*
RO × LMXSC				-.17*	-.18*
Step 5: Three-way effect					
TP × RO × LMXSC					.16*
$R^2$	.12	.14	.36	.42	.45
$\Delta R^2$		.02	.22***	.06**	.03*

Note.  $N = 136$  subordinate–supervisor dyads. LMXSC = leader–member exchange social comparison; TP = task performance; RO = role overload.  $R^2$  change represents the incremental variance explained between each step. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

We plotted the moderating effects of role overload and LMXSC on the relationship between task performance and job satisfaction and conducted simple slope tests to assess these effects (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). Figure 1 shows that under the condition of high role overload, task performance was negatively related to job satisfaction ( $\beta = -.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas, when role overload was low, the relationship was nonsignificant ( $\beta = -.002$ ,  $ns$ ). As can be seen in Figure 2, a simple slopes test showed that when LMXSC was low, the negative relationship between task performance and job satisfaction was significant ( $\beta = -.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ); however, when LMXSC was high, the relationship between task performance and job satisfaction was nonsignificant ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $ns$ ).

In regard to the proposed three-way interaction among task performance, role overload, and LMXSC, as indicated in Table 2, the incremental  $R^2$  in Step 5 and the three-way effect were significant. To examine this interaction, we followed the widely used procedure developed by Aiken et al. (1993) to plot Figure 3. Results showed that when role overload was high and LMXSC was low, task performance had the strongest negative relationship with job satisfaction, and that job satisfaction was highest when task performance and role overload were high but LMXSC was low. Furthermore, this differed significantly from the other

slopes ( $t = 2.91, p < .01$  for slopes 1 and 2;  $t = -3.78, p < .001$  for slopes 2 and 3;  $t = -3.57, p < .001$  for slopes 2 and 4). These results support Hypothesis 4.

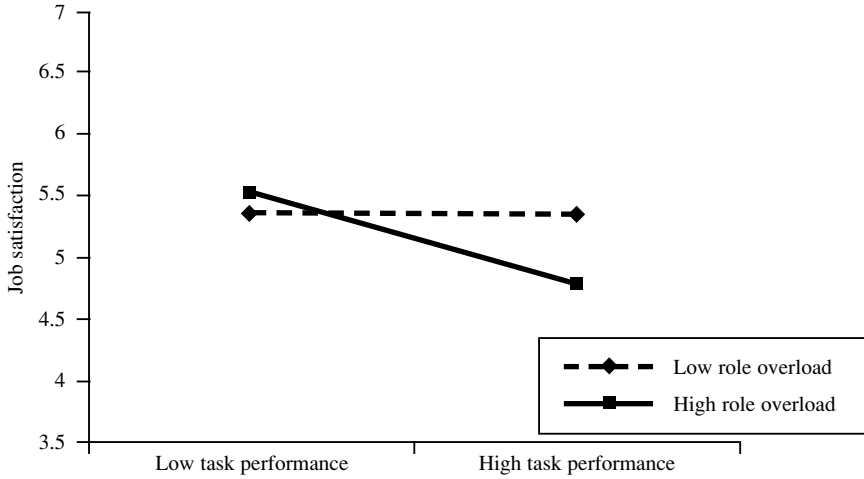


Figure 1. Two-way interaction of task performance and role overload on job satisfaction.

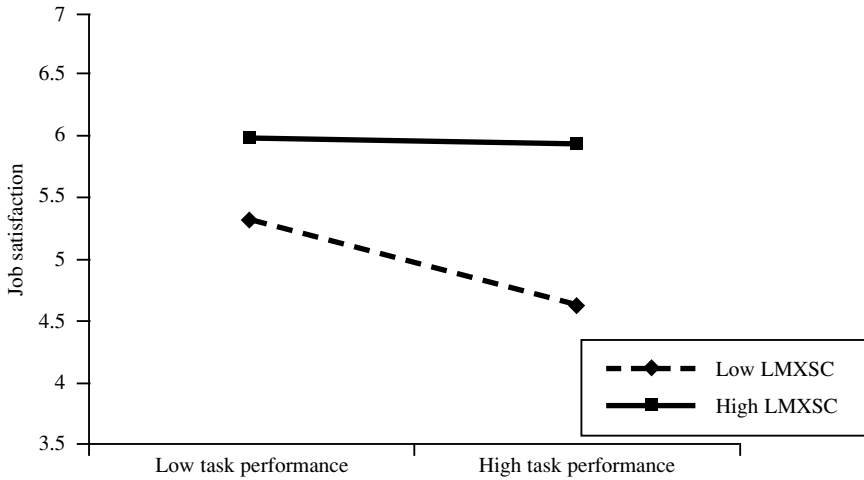


Figure 2. Two-way interaction of task performance and leader-member exchange social comparison on job satisfaction.

Note. LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison.



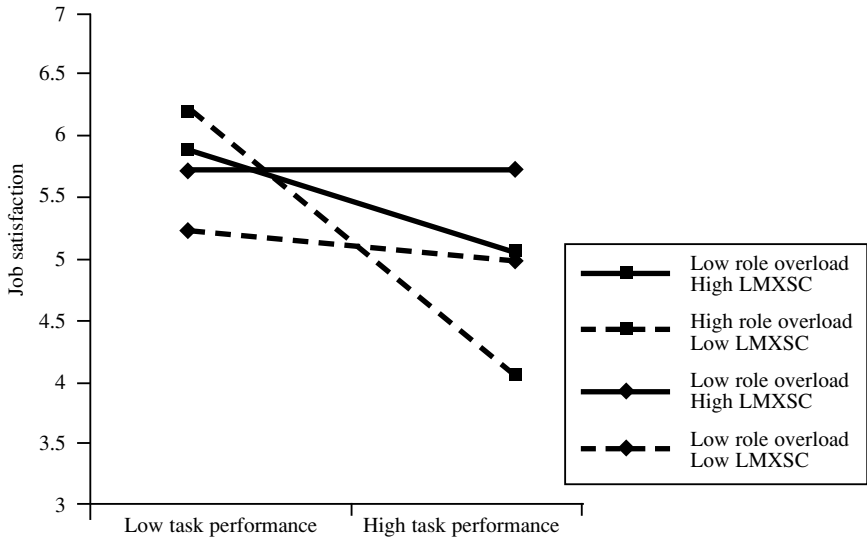


Figure 3. Three-way interaction effect of task performance, role overload, and leader-member exchange social comparison on job satisfaction.

Note. LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison.

## Discussion

Acquiring and retaining talented employees are the main tasks for organizations (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Even though organizations offer competitive rewards to attract and keep high performers, such employees can become dissatisfied and decide to leave the firm to work at competitor companies. Thus, identifying what makes high performers dissatisfied is critical for most organizations.

Drawing on SET and COR theory and taking a resource flow approach, we have made several contributions to the talent management, employee motivation, and leadership literature. Theoretically, we have offered integrated insights into why high performers feel job dissatisfaction in relation to perceived resource inflow and outflow. Although prior researchers have provided some understanding of why talented employees' job satisfaction decreases (see e.g., Lee et al., 2014; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), none have synthetically captured the more complex facets of high performers' dissatisfaction by dealing separately with gains and losses. Considering that resources acquired via social exchange are not static assets but are, rather, outcomes formed from dynamically repeated gains and losses (Crawford et al., 2010; Halbesleben et al., 2014), we argued that concurrent consideration of role overload as resource outflow and LMXSC

as resource inflow would contribute to an integrated understanding of why high performers' job satisfaction decreases.

In practical terms, our results show that managers of firms should focus on motivating their talented employees by balancing high performers' perceptions of resource inflow and outflow. In general, providing extrinsic rewards, such as greater incentives and fast-track promotions, have been regarded as the most effective ways to attract and retain talented staff members (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). By contrast, in this study, we have highlighted the contexts in which high performers feel dissatisfaction by emphasizing the demands of assigned jobs and the relationship with leaders. Even though assigning challenging tasks is a useful way to develop employees' competencies, it can backfire when they perceive their workload as burdensome (Lee et al., 2014). Moreover, front-line supervisors should pay attention to how high performers perceive their relative LMX, rather than focusing on the absolute level of exchange (Vidyarathi et al., 2010). In addition, we found that high performers' perception of role overload had the strongest negative influence on their job satisfaction in the absence of remuneration for resources used to perform excessively demanding roles, for example, through forming high-quality relationships with leaders. This result shows that leaders should simultaneously pay close attention to distributing work and maintaining close ties with their star employees.

### Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our results should be evaluated in the light of several limitations. First, we focused on high performers' role overload and LMXSC, but perceptions of these factors can differ greatly depending on individuals' personality (see e.g., Matthews & Campbell, 2009). Thus, future researchers could investigate the role of personality in perceptions of both job overload and LMXSC. Second, our findings need to be replicated in different social contexts because the perception of job demand can vary depending on factors relating to the national or cultural context (Hofstede, 1991). For example, because they are part of a collectivistic, as opposed to individualistic, culture, Korean employees are more likely to perceive that role overload owing to additional work is a common responsibility (Hofstede, 1991). Third, our results are based on cross-sectional data; therefore, future researchers should examine how the observed relationships change dynamically over time by using a longitudinal research design.

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