

STRESS MANAGEMENT AMONG ACADEMICS: A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the moderating influence of workplace spirituality on the relationship between work pressure, work overload, work environment, financial pressure and stress among academics. The purpose of this study is to propose a framework and state propositions. It is a conceptual paper which reviewed previous empirical studies on the antecedents of stress and workplace spirituality. Drawing from effort-reward imbalance (ERI) and job demand control (JDC) models, there will be a positive relationship between perceived work pressure, work overload, unfavourable work environment, financial pressure and stress. It is recommended that the regulators and administrators of tertiary institutions need to be aware of the causative factors of stress and the need to employ strategies to minimize the negative emotional, psychological, physiological, and health-related consequences of stress among academics. Also, there is a need to encourage spirituality in the workplace among academics as antidote to stress. In conclusion, it is worthy to note that this paper extended research on stress management by proposing a framework that employed workplace spirituality as a moderator. However, there is a need for empirical studies to test the proposed model.

Keywords: *Stress, work pressure, work environment, financial pressure, and workplace spirituality.*

INTRODUCTION

Stress has been noted to be a vital element in the workplace because it has an effect on outcomes such as absenteeism and productivity (Ganster & Schaubroeck,1991).Work stress has implications on employees, organizations and the economy of a country (Ganster &

Schaubroeck, 1991). Also, excessive stress can interfere with productivity and impact employees' physical and emotional health (Showkat, & Jahan, 2013). Hence, it can be seen that the study of occupational stress is justified, not only from an academic perspective, but also for the implications it has for occupational practice.

Studies have examined how job related stress influences employee health (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). More specifically, studies on personnel found that people in high stress positions are at a greater risk of various health and psychological problems (Karasek, 1979; Radmacher & Sheridan, 1995). Indeed, one of the many factors that may influence an employee's decision either to remain or not with an organization is stress (Dale & Fox, 2008). Also, Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) estimated that stress is a major factor in organizations to the tune of 50 percent of absenteeism, 40 percent of turnover, and 5 percent of lost productivity. However, there are some documented positive aspects of stress (eustress) in the workplace (Quick, Mack, Gavin, Cooper, & Quick, 2004). In an academic setting, Radcliffe & Lester (2003) found that stress in medical students increased motivation and performance. This stress was perceived as a positive type of preparation for the demands of a stressful career. However, several studies on medical careers have noted that stress is a major factor in causing burnout, which entails emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (McManus, Winder, & Gordon, 2002).

Empirically, the majority of studies on workplace spirituality were researched in the USA and Canada (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett, & Condemi, 1999, 2003), while a few articles have studied workplace spirituality cross-culturally (Rego, Cunha, & Souto, 2007; Pawar, 2009; Usman & Danish, 2010). Furthermore, limited studies have examined the impact of workload and work pressure on stress, especially among academics (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua & Stough, 2001). Another justification for this study is the neglect of the effect of financial pressure on faculty members, especially in this era of global economic downturn. Hence, this

paper is timely especially at a time when majority of academic staff members are experiencing severe financial pressure and agitations for improved working conditions in Nigeria's tertiary institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of stress

Occupational stress can be defined as a harmful physical and emotional response that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. In another word, it is any discomfort which is felt and perceived at a personal level and triggered by instances, events or situations that are too intense and frequent in nature so as to exceed a person's coping capabilities and resources to handle them adequately (Malta,2004). Stress is a term that causes anxiety and it is usually connected with nervous tension and fatigue (Showkat& Jahan, 2013).

The major antecedent of stress to academics is job demands. Job demands have been defined as those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive or emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). Similarly, Karasek and Theorell (1990) defined job demands as the task requirements or quantitative workloads involved with a particular job. These include the quantity and time pressures of the work such as how fast one must work, how hard one must work, whether there is enough time to complete the work, and whether there is an interception to the work. Some examples of job demand include high work pressure, unfavourable physical environment, and emotionally demanding interactions (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufelli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands also include situational factors such as ambiguity and conflict in role, stressful events, high workload and work pressure, pressure to make critical and immediate decisions, high responsibility, and having deadlines to meet (Rothmann, 2002; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). For the sake of this paper, work pressure and workload were considered as dimensions of job demands.

Work pressure and workplace stress

Work pressure refers to the degree to which an academic has to work fast and hard, has a great deal to do, but with too little time (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Similarly, Maslach et al. (2001) found that heavy workload and time pressure were strongly related to exhaustion. In other studies, job demands such as high work pressure, emotional demands and role ambiguity have been found to be related to exhaustion and impaired health (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Additionally, work pressure was negatively related to work engagement in a study involving 154 employees in Germany (Kuhnel, Sonnentag & Bledow, 2012) and 7869 service sector employees from eight European countries confirmed that work pressure lowered their level of engagement in the work (Taipale, Selander, Anttila & Natti, 2011).

Theoretically, job demand control model (Karasek, 1979) found that strain results from the joint effects of the demands of work situation (stressors) and environmental moderators of stress, particularly the range of decision making freedom (control) available to the worker facing those demands (Karasek, Baker, Marxer, Ahlbom, & Theorell, 1981). Based on JDC model and empirical findings on work pressure, it is proposed that:

Proposition 1: Positive relationship exists between work pressure and workplace stress among academics

Work overload and workplace stress

Workload is the professional efforts a faculty member devotes to teaching, research, administration, community services, and other academic related tasks (Allen, 1996). Several authors have agreed that job demands especially the workload can diminish the level of faculty's commitment to the institution (Daly & Dee, 2006; Gilbert, 2000; Griffin, 1998). In a study conducted by Rothmann and Jordan (2006) on 471 academic staff in South African higher education institution, workload was found negatively related to work engagement. A study on work pressure also showed negative relationship with work engagement when tested on 274 teachers in Netherlands (Lorente, Salanova, Martinez & Schaufeli, 2008). In addition, a study conducted in United Kingdom indicated that majority of the workers surveyed were unhappy with the current

work culture when they were required to work long hours with high workloads and at the same need to meet the production targets and deadlines (Townley, 2000). Also, Conley and Wooseley (2000) found that work overload creates strain because of the pressure to do more work, high expectation of the superiors, huge and unbearable workload that interferes with work quality, and the feeling of not being able to finish a given task within a specified period of time. Theoretically, the effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model claims that work characterized by both high efforts and low rewards represents a reciprocity deficit between “costs” and “gains”. This imbalance may cause sustained strain reactions. So, working hard without receiving appreciation is an example of a stressful imbalance which academics experience. On the bases of theoretical views discussed in this study and empirical findings on work overload, the researchers propose thus:

Proposition 2: Work overload is positively related to work stress among academics

Work environment and workplace stress

Work stressors or hazards are defined as environmental situations or events potentially capable of producing the state of stress. When exposed to a stressor, the body's reaction involves a number of physiological processes. Common responses are increased heart rate, increased blood pressure and more rapid breathing. This is because of sustained physiological arousal associated with the stressor. Environmental stressors include inadequate or faulty equipment, poor environmental conditions such as unavailability of office accommodation, poor lighting, and inadequate working aids. Similarly, Karasek (1979) argued that high demand jobs produce a state of normal arousal (i.e. increased heart rate, increased adrenalin, increased breathing rate), enabling the body to respond to the demands. However, if there is an environmental constraint, such as low control, the arousal cannot be channelled into an effective coping response. Also, unresolved strain may in turn accumulate and as it builds up, can result in anxiety, depression, psychosomatic complaints, and cardiovascular disease.

Theoretically, job demands represent the psychological stressors in the work environment. These include factors such as: time

pressures, conflicting demands, reaction to time required, pace of work, proportion of work performed under pressure, amount of work, and degree of concentration required. On the bases of these empirical findings and JDC model, the researchers propose that:

Proposition 3: There will be a positive relationship between work environment of institutions and work stress.

Financial pressure and workplace stress

In its 2014 Employee Financial Wellness Survey, PricewaterhouseCoopers found that about 48 percent of all employed adults experience stress because of their financial situation, compared to 52 percent in 2013 and 61 percent in 2012. With the current state of Nigerian economy, an increasing number of academics are finding themselves in stressful financial situations, majorly due to poor salary scale, salary cuts in many tertiary institutions, unpaid medical bills, high costs of living and lack of emergency funds to cover unexpected expenses. For instance, if a close relative falls ill or there is a need to fix a major mechanical breakdown in a car, someone could potentially go broke trying to pay for these bills. The situation is not palatable because faculty members find it hard to have savings or create an emergency fund as most lecturing jobs in Nigeria only pay you well enough to manage your bills and scrape off a little of your debt at a time.

Consequently, financial stress can affect the health of academics in many ways and these health issues can affect home, life and career. Financial stress results in anxiety and depression. These two conditions usually go hand-in-hand. Each one on its own is a debilitating condition that makes it hard to work, spend time with your family, and keep up with your bills and other financial responsibilities. Stress is a built-in physiologic response to a threat. When you are stressed, your body enters the 'fight or flight' mode. Medically, adrenaline (a hormone that increases heart rate, pulse, and blood pressure) races through your veins during a stress reaction while physical responses occur inside your body when you are stressed and this can drastically affect your body and lead to severe health issues (Bosma, Marmot, Hemingway, Nicholson, Brunner & Stansfeld, 1997). Furthermore, financial stress can cause or worsen heart disease/attack, gastrointestinal problems, weight

loss, eating disorders, diabetes, insomnia, cancer, high blood pressure and substance abuse (Amick, Kawachi, Coakley, Lerner, Levine, & Colditz, 1998; Penney & Spector, 2005). On the bases of these empirical findings, we propose that:

Proposition 4: There is a positive relationship between financial pressure and workplace stress among academics

Workplace spirituality as a moderator in the relationship between work pressure, workload, work environment, financial pressure, and workplace stress

Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) defined workplace spirituality as a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy.

Additionally, workplace spirituality means recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). During the past few years, workplace spirituality has emerged as an important dimension in workplace (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Garcia-Zamor, 2003; Kolodinsky et al., 2008). This popularity could be explained by the positive impact that the construct has on the individual, group, and organizational level (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Milliman et al., 1999).

Work place spirituality encompasses three dimensions: inner life, sense of community and meaningful work (Ashmos & Duchon (2000). Ashmos and Duchon (2000) firstly noted that inner life is when individuals find their inner strength and use it to conduct their activities at work. Secondly, sense of community is about working in an environment of interconnectedness while meaningful work refers to conducting activities that are of importance to the employee.

The three dimensions of workplace spirituality have relationships with work stress. Firstly, community at work is viewed as supportive and cooperation among employees. In the same vein,

Zaffane and Mc-Loughlin (2006) noted that a perceived degree of cooperation and support within organizations are important factors that have a positive effect on stress reduction. Similarly, Chen et al.(1998) found that a lack of cooperation within an organization can be linked to high levels of stress while Miller et al.(1990) pointed out that a lack of social support within an organization can have negative outcomes such as stress, burnout and lack of job satisfaction.

On the other hand, meaningful activities can also be seen as value-rich work (Knoop, 1994). Knoop studied the impact of work values on stress reduction on a sample of school teachers and administrators. Results show that conducting meaningful activities at work is negatively associated with physical, emotional and mental stress. Also, Danna and Griffin (1999) revealed that intrinsic factors present in the job can lead to stress and affect the well-being of an individual. In addition, Britt, Adler, and Bartone(2001) also argued that there is a human motive to derive meaning in events. They stated that when individuals find meaning in events, they can also perceive benefits during stressful events. Relatedly, Winefield et al. (2012) found that individuals who present high levels of psychological well-being are characterized as being happy, capable, well supported, and satisfied with their life. Following these findings, Robertson and Cooper (2011) noted that work activities that are rewarding, which does involve good relationships, and provide a sense of accomplishment are related to good psychological well-being, which is linked to positive mental states. Inner life is the third dimension of workplace spirituality. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) mentioned that inner life is about finding an opportunity in the workplace to express aspects of our own, not necessarily an ability to conduct physical or intellectual tasks. In addition, Duchon and Plowman (2005) noted that employees have spiritual needs (i.e. inner life), just as they have physical, emotional, and cognitive needs, and these needs don't get left at home when they come to work. According to them, the inner life part of workplace spirituality can be explained by the self-concept theory (Shamir, 1991). According to this theory, the employee will experience greater motivation when there is a match between the inner life of the individual and the work. Moreover, Duchon and

Plowman (2005) stated the fact that people whose self-concept includes a spiritual dimension will be motivated if their work context enables expression of their spiritual identity. So, the inner life part of workplace spirituality also involves a spiritual part that plays an important role in attitudes and aspects such as stress. Hence, the proposed exogenous variables are likely to increase stress among faculty members but this relationship can be moderated by workplace spirituality. Workplace spirituality creates meaningfulness at work, interconnectedness, oneness, harmonious relationship among colleagues and a feeling of transcendence. Therefore, the level of stress to be experienced by academics will be moderated by individual's level of spirituality.

Based on the above discussion, the researchers propose as follows:
Proposition 5: Workplace spirituality will moderate the positive relationship between work pressure, workload, work environment, financial pressure, and workplace stress. The relationship will be weaker (negative) for academics high in workplace spirituality than academics low in workplace spirituality.

Theoretical framework

Effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model

The ERI model (Siegrist, 1996) has its origin in medical sociology and emphasizes both the effort and the reward structure of work (Marmot, Siegrist, Theorell, & Feeney, 1999). The model is based upon the premise that work-related benefits depend upon a reciprocal relationship between efforts and rewards at work. Efforts represent job demands and/or obligations that are imposed on the employees while occupational rewards distributed by the employer (and by society at large) consist of money, status, esteem, control, and job security/career opportunities. More specifically, the ERI Model claims that work characterized by both high efforts and low rewards represents a reciprocity deficit between 'costs' and 'gains'. This imbalance may cause sustained strain reactions. So, working hard without receiving appreciation is an example of a stressful imbalance which academics experience.

Job demand-control model

Job demand-control (JDC) model put forward by Karasek argued that work stress arises primarily from the structural or organisational aspects of the work environment rather than from personal attributes or demographics (Karasek, 1979). According to this model, strain results from the joint effects of the demands of the work situation (stressors) and environmental moderators of stress, particularly the range of decision making freedom (control) available to the workers facing those demands (Karasek, Baker, Marxer, Ahlbom, & Theorell, 1981). In Karasek's model, workplace stress is a function of how demanding a person's job is and how much control (discretion, authority or decision latitude) the person has over their own responsibilities.

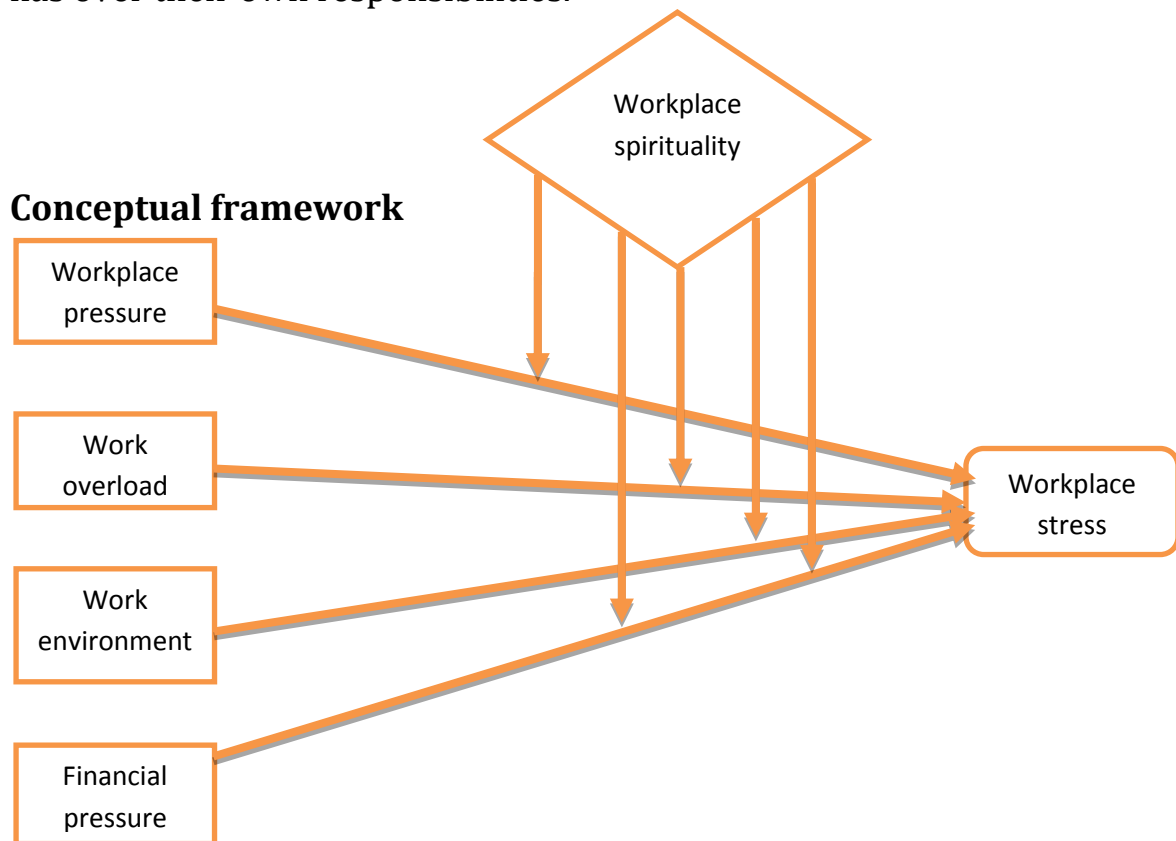


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above and review of past studies, this paper proposed a conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 1. The proposed conceptual framework shows the moderating effect of workplace spirituality on the relationship

between perceived work pressure, work overload, work environment, financial pressure and workplace stress.

Suggested stress management strategies

Strategies to manage stress in tertiary institutions may be implemented at the national level, institutional level, or individual level. Countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK) have enabling legislation for stress prevention (Houtman, Bongers, Smulders, & Kompier, 1994). However, some countries have not recognised work stress as an important policy issue. Despite the aforementioned antecedents of stress, there are some workable strategies to minimize stress among faculty members. First, stress management training. Such programmes teach faculty members about the nature and sources of stress, the effects of stress on health, and personal skills to reduce stress. Second, employers need to provide a stress-free work environment for academics. Third, there is need to embrace flexi-time/flexitime, or flexible work hours which eliminates fixed working hours thereby allowing academics to create their own work schedules. The concept of flex-time allows academics some liberty to choose their beginning and ending work hours in order to better serve the needs of individual students, as well as the institutions.

In furtherance to the above coping strategies, there are easy-to-do tips to overcome stress among academics such as deep breathing, meditation, and exercise 3 to 4 times a week for at least 30 minutes. Exercise releases brain chemicals called endorphins, which makes us feel good and lowers blood pressure and other symptoms of depression. Also, academics need to engage in other part-time income generating ventures in order to overcome financial stress.

CONCLUSION

This study proposed workplace spirituality as a moderating variable and it is expected that faculty members with high level of spirituality will be able to suppress the antecedents of workplace stress discussed in this study because the level of individual spirituality determines his perception of work situation, work environment and behavioural outcomes. Also, we postulated that workload, work pressure, work environment, and financial pressure

may have positive effect on workplace stress. Hence, faculty members may experiment the coping strategies suggested in this study. More so, there is a need to empirically test our proposed model.

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