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Job Differences in Perceived Occupational Stress among University of Ibadan Workers

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Abstract

The study examined job differences in perceived occupational stress among University of Ibadan workers. Two hundred and eighty (280) participants were selected from the population of employees of the university. They responded to a stress scale developed for the study. The Expost facto research design was adopted. Three hypotheses generated in the study were tested using appropriate statistical tools. Results obtained showed that Academic Staff experienced higher level of stress than the non-academic staff. On the contrary, gender did not significantly influence the workers' perceived level of stress. The long serving employees experienced lower level of stress than the newer members of staff. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations made based on the findings.

Introduction

Stress in the workplace describes physical, mental and emotional wear and tear brought by incongruence between the requirement of the job and the capabilities, resources and needs of the employee to cope with job demands. The stress in the workplace is said to be pervasive and invasive. From many studies, it is now clear that one of the main sources of adult stress is their work. This cut across occupations. Different jobs present varying tasks that can act as sources of stress (stressors) to the employees.

The stressors that employees encounter on their job could be physical or psychological. Regardless of how one job may be compared to another in terms of stress, it is helpful to know that every job has potential stress agent.

These stressors can be factors intrinsic to the job such as the working condition (including the physical environment), irregular working hours, work overload or under load. Another source of stress could be the relationships at work: if there is no harmonious relationship between co-workers or between an employee and his subordinate, it can result to highly stressful situation.

The stressors of the academic job on casual observation from interaction include the marking of a large number of examination papers, supervision of more than average number of students, writing of papers even in non-conducive environment like poor electricity supply, shortage of material and noisy environment. The non-academic members of staff also have work conditions that are capable of generating stress. Stress can result from such physical conditions as noise, heat, cold, safety hazards and shift work. Some of the non-academic staff especially those in the security and health unit run shift duties and even have to work with out-dated equipment.

The psychological stressors may come in form of meeting deadlines, extended hours of work and poor remuneration. The non-academic employees also are not spared. They have a poor working environment to deal with poor accommodation, transportation problems and poor pay especially the recent two-step salary affects both the academic and non-academic groups but the ones with little or no reserve feel it more. The formalized conservative structure in University of Ibadan could also act as a source of stress. It does not allow for innovation and creativity. Workers get into the University culture with the impression "this is the way it is done here". Job stress has been associated with varying degrees of job outcome ranging from absenteeism, loss of morale, a high turnover or actual quitting of a job, to poor overall performance and a high cost of running including complications for ill health.

Karasek (1979) drew attention to the possibility that work characteristics may not be linearly associated with workers health and that they may combine interactively in relation to health. Karasek (1970) had proposed a theory known as demands and constraints model to explain his argument. According to this model, two factors are necessary for an individual to perceive stress. They are environmental stressors in the form of job demands and the extent to which the individual has control over important decisions.

Similarly, Payne (1979) also came up with an alternative model that extends Karasek theory in two ways. First he returned to the person environment fit theory perception and purpose that it is the individual's perception and decision

altitude that are important. Secondly, he introduced the notion of support into the model making it a three dimensional model. Payne (1979) suggests that greater support means less adaptive energy has to be used to cope with the demands of the job under low decision latitude as a result, stress might be reduced by adding various support to the systems.

Other scholars have come up with theoretical explanations of stress. For example, Lazarus (1993, 1991 & 1984) postulated in his transactional model of stress that what is stressful depends on the cognitive appraisal and interpretation of events. According to this model, individuals who perceived they have a high level of control over their environment are more likely to adjust successfully to stress than those who perceive little opportunity for control.

Salami (1995) defined occupational stress as a state of psychological disequilibrium arising from work and that stress had been reported in teaching. University teaching has traditionally been regarded as a low stress occupation (Fisher, 1994). Seldin (1987), reported that the academic environment of the 1980 had imposed surprisingly high level of job stress on the academic and that the level of stress will continue to increase in future decades. This assertion may also hold among workers in Nigerian Universities, including Ibadan which might not be an exception. In a study on stress in seven New Zealand Universities, Boyd & Wyhe (1994) reported half of the academics find their work stressful while 80% believe their workload had increased and become more stressful in recent years. University staff play an important role in the creation, innovation and development of knowledge in addition to education and training. If the high level of occupational stress is not checked and managed, it will undermine the quality, productivity and creativity of employees work, in addition to his health, well-being and moral (Terry, Tonge & Callen, 1995).

The impact of occupational stress within the University is less well understood than its well-documented effects on the general work force. Bowen & Schuster (1985), identified the negative impact of stress on staff morale. Boyd & Wyhe (1994) reported an increased workload and work related stress among academic staff resulting in less time spent on research publishing and professional development. Jarret & Winefield (1995) surveyed all staff in a South Australian University reporting that the overall level of stress was very high particularly among academic staff. Due (1994) reported from a New South Wales University a similar finding. Researches conducted in the United

Kingdom, United States, New Zealand and Australia, identified several key factors commonly associated with stress among University staff. These include work overload, time restraints, lack of promotion opportunities, inadequate recognition, inadequate salary, changing job roles, inadequate participation at management level and inadequate funding (Boyd & Whlie, 1994; Siegiest, 1996; Balix, 1994). A similar study by Melilliam & Schiorr (1989), reported lack of communication, poor interaction with colleagues, inequalities in the system as common sources of stress in the University. Due (1994) highlighted lack of regular performance feedback as a common source of stress in his studies. This suggests that some sources of stress may be peculiar to the University environment.

Pealin & Schooner (1978) studied the relative contribution of a variety of occupational and non-occupational sources of stress to the psychological and physical health of service and clerical workers. Scales of job stress, and outcomes measure of job satisfaction were administered to 150 clerical and 61 service workers. The result showed occupational differences in the pattern of stress. The clerical workers were more sensitive to task insignificance and work environment while service workers were more affected by lack of autonomy and work overload. On the basis of this finding, one may be tempted to predict that employees in the University of Ibadan would report different levels of stress according to their job. French & Caplan (1973), reported that University staff who perceived high level of control over their work environment experienced less stress than those who perceived low level of control.

Cartez & Campbell (1988) used 90 employees of an industrial firm and 30 undergraduates who worked part-time. In the sample, 49% completed useable questionnaires. The result showed that for subjects receiving low levels of social support, an increased work stress was not associated with notable increase in perceived stress. Hammond (1998), studied 111 female University research scientists and administrators involved in multiple role lifestyles. The participants reported relatively no increase in the levels of stress and moderately high levels of satisfaction with their roles.

From the various findings reported in the literature above, it is clear that views of researchers differ in terms of occupational stress among workers in Universities. Why some submitted that there is no difference in occupational stress among the different categories of workers in Universities, others reported that a significant difference exists. However, such opposing views cannot be

generalized in Nigeria until it is empirically investigated. This necessitated the present study.

Hypotheses

- (i) There will be no significant difference in job stress between Academic staff the non-academic staff.
- (ii) There will be significant gender differences in the level of stress experienced by University of Ibadan workers.
- (iii) Long serving members of staff will experience less stress than others.

Methodology

The survey research adopted the ex post facto design. This was considered appropriate due to the limitations in manipulating the various in the study. Two hundred and eighty (280) employees of the University of Ibadan participated in the study. They were drawn using the purposive sampling technique. In the sample, 104 (37.1%) were academic staff. Among them were 202 (72.1%) males and 78 (27.9%) females. The ages of the participants ranged between 23 and 64 with a mean age of 39.6.

The closed-ended questionnaires used for data collection in the study were 280 in all. Each questionnaire comprised of three sections (A, B, and C). Section "A" was used to measure the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. Section "B" measured self-reported perceived stress. The scale was developed specifically for the study. It has 12-items scored on a 4-point likert format. The scale yielded a cronbach coefficient alpha of 0.65. The section "C" contained open-ended questions. It obtained qualitative information concerning coping strategies workers adopt when under stress, which were later subjected to frequency analysis.

All data were collected at the University of Ibadan by the researchers. The exercise lasted two weeks. The research was introduced to potential participants individually before given the questionnaires. They were encouraged to participate voluntarily.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that the academic staff would experience higher level of job stress than the non-academic staff. This hypothesis was tested using the independent t. test. This is presented in the table below.

Table 1 A t-test comparison of academic and non-academic staff on perceived job stress.

	Job status	N	X	S.D	t	df	P
Job Stress	Academic	104	27.78	6.26	2.047	278	<. 05
	Non Academic	176	26.16	6.44			

As shown in the table above, academic and non-academic staff differ on perceived job stress. ($t=2.042$, $df=278$ $p<0.05$). The non-academic staff reported a mean score of 26.2 while the academic staff reported a mean of 27.8. Therefore the hypothesis is not rejected.

The second hypothesis predicted that there will be significant gender differences in the level of stress experienced by the workers. It was tested using the independent t-test. This is presented in the table below.

Table 2: A t-test comparison of male and female differences on perceived job stress among the workers

	Sex	N	X	S.D	t	df	P
Job Stress	Male	202	26.77	6.50	0.034	278	>. 05
	Female	78	26.74	6.21			

As shown in the table above; no significant difference existed between male and females on perceived job stress ($t=0.034$, $df=278$; $p>0.05$). The males with mean score of 26.77 do not score significantly different from the females with 26.74 on perceived job stress. Therefore the hypothesis is rejected.

The third hypothesis stated that long serving members of staff will experience a lower level of stress than others. This hypothesis was tested using the independent t-test. This is presented in the table below.

Table 3: A t-test comparison of workers with short and long length of service on perceived job stress

	Length of service	N	X	S.D	t	df	P
Job Stress	Short	180	27.79	5.79	3.688	278	<. 05
	Long	100	24.91	7.06			

As shown in the table above there is a significant difference between long serving members of staff and short serving staff on job stress ($t=3.688$, $df=278$, $p<0.01$). The long serving members scored significantly lower ($X=24.91$) than the short-serving members of staff ($X=27.79$). Therefore the hypothesis is not rejected.

Discussion

The findings of the study showed that Academic members of staff experienced higher level of job stress than the non-academic staff. This finding is in line with the study in 17 Australian Universities, and that conducted by Gillespie in Melbourne Business School, which found academic staff to be higher on occupational stress than the non-academic. A similar study by Jarret and Winefield (1995) who surveyed all staff in a South Australian University reported also an overall high level of stress particularly among the academic staff. This might not be unconnected with the pressure to publish articles in international journals and the attendant competition that follow this category of workers. The workload associated with examinations, teaching, research, and marking under time frame might also be a possible explanation for the higher job stress recorded by the academic staff in the University as found in the present study.

Findings showed that there was no significant influence of gender on the perceived stress experienced by University of Ibadan workers as predicted by hypothesis two. This is in contrast with a Tennessee stress scale administered by McWilliams (1989) that found females scoring higher than the males. The study was however in agreement with Hammond (1998) Nevada study of 111 female University workers that reported no increase in level of stress and moderately high levels of satisfaction among female University workers despite

their multiple roles. In Smith et al (2000), their study revealed that gender had little or no overall effect on stress.

The result of hypothesis three showed that long serving members of staff experienced a lower level of stress than others. This finding is supported by Lazarus (1977) transactional theory, which emphasized that experience could influence role perception of stress in the workplace. For instance, length of service in an organization played significant role in stress experience. The long serving members of staff might have developed some coping strategies to the major causes of stress in the University community over the years. They can predict the likely periods and causes of stress and as such the impact on them is less.

Conclusion

Following the findings from the study, it can be concluded that the work of academic staff is more stressful than that of the non-academic staff as it is the case in other societies like Australia where a similar study has been carried out. It can therefore be concluded that academic work is highly more stressful than the non-academic work in Universities. Being male or female is not a major factor in the job stress experienced by workers in the University. That long-serving members of staff experienced lower level of stress than the others is an indication that they have developed thick skin to the stressors. Therefore, experience can be said to be a moderating factor in job stress as earlier proposed by Lazarus (1977).

The various findings imply that there is high level of job stress in the University system but differ between academic and non academic staff. It can therefore be recommended that efforts should be made by Management of Universities to develop deliberate policies and programmes aimed at alleviating workers' stress. Specifically, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) and training for academic staff should be designed to take care of their peculiar tasks that constitute much stressors on their job.

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