Organisational Stress: Theoretical Reflections and Proposed Directions for Management Research and Practice

Babatunde Akanji

Elizade University, P.M.B. 002, Ilara-Mokin, Ondo State, Nigeria
 e-mail: toyinbabs01@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article critiques the diverse theoretical sentiments accentuated in the field of work stress as well as incidences and impact of work stress within an organisational context. Thus, the purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it is to review the organisational factors increasing employee stress and further reflect on the contentious definition of work stress. Some main theoretical models that have been important in the field of stress research are also critically evaluated. Second, this study further focuses on unveiling promising areas of research that scrutinises stress management interventions that is a terrain where paucity of research is found to still exist. Third, this review concludes by presenting important research and practice implications.

Keywords: *occupational stress; paucity of research; stress management interventions; practice implications*

JEL Classification: *Y80*

Introduction

Work stress has been a topical research subject for almost eight decades in science, academic and practitioners' fields. The earliest research is traceable to Walter Cannon in the 1930s who conceptualised the 'fight or flight' theory to shed light on how living organisms respond to harmful environments. Further, Hans Selye in his influential book, *The Stress of Life*, published in 1956, popularised a theoretical distinction between positive stress (i.e. Eustress) and negative stress (i.e. distress) in showing the dynamic nature of stress responses. These landmark studies have immensely contributed to expanding knowledge on the adverse effects of stress on well-being. Building on these pioneered scholarships, many other organisational behaviour experts and stress authors have generally defined stress as any situational and/or dispositional reality that provokes adversarial outcomes when an individual's adaptive capabilities are overextended.

Within diverse organisational and work psychology fields of research, it is acknowledged that occupational stress still remains an albatross as a result of its detrimental consequences on employees' psychological wellness, physical health, work-life balance and negatively associated with outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, turnover and productivity (Kozuszsik, Rodriguez and Peiro, 2012). Despite the fact that some stress levels (i.e. eustress) can fuel alertness and generate motivation necessary to overcome challenging demands, however, chronic exposure to stress often leads to unfruitful work outcomes. Significantly,

some of the pronounced stressors identified at work have been characterised by the overwhelming globalisation prospects which is increasing fierce market competition, company mergers and acquisitions resulting in redundancies, organisational budget constraints, trade union declivities, changing technologies and demographics that is necessitating the use of a flexible workforce (Henry and Evans, 2008). Further, these identified stressors resonates with a model developed by Cooper and Marshall in 1976, that conceptualises factors causing stress within the workplace as falling into five broad factors which are: the intrinsic nature of work demands; employee intensive role participation; interpersonal workplace conflicts; slow career progression; fragmented organisational structure and climate. It is common perception that these factors are some of the realities causing unpredicted pressures on employees having to react, adapt and acquire new job skill sets for purposes of adjusting their abilities to march the high demands of changing employment relations (Mark and Smith, 2008). Thus, Kossek, Kalliath and Kalliath, (2012, p. 739) observed that the significant adoption of numerical flexible work arrangements arising from fierce competition and market changes has increased the precarious working conditions undermining labour productivity and employee well-being.

To this end, the widespread of reported claims of workplace stress have unequivocally created growing concerns in relation to economic losses incurred by both employees and employers. In Western countries for example, documented facts and figures are reported of organisations incurring staggering losses as high as $300 billion per year in the past from absenteeism, turnover, work-life conflict and other associated legal costs arising from poor health and safety standards (Grawitch, Barber and Justice, 2010, p. 127). Furthermore, reports from advanced economies like the United Kingdom have documented incidences of organisational stress problems between 2010 and 2011 at approximately 1.6million stress related cases with almost half of these cases related to sickness and absenteeism (Health and Safety Newsletter, 2012). However, these adverse cost implications in the Western economies are incomparable to what obtains in some developing countries in Asia and Africa where stress at work is reported in its extremity and sometimes considered part of life in these impoverished societies (Xiao and Cooke 2012). For instance, employment conditions across various formal and informal occupational sectors in most poor developing countries suffer from uneven enforcement of labour legislations, poor living standards, resource constraints, dark leadership, and high unemployment rates which are some of the disturbing factors that causes chronic stress situations, and unimaginable economic loses to organisations in these parts of the world (Wood, 2008). While occupational stress is still a threat on a global scale, it is obvious from the reading of literature on work stress that there is no consensus as to its definition that has posed potential problems in developing appropriate intervening measures in dealing with work stress.

The Nature of Stress Definitions

Colligan and Higgins, (2005, p. 90) described occupational stress as a complicated psychological phenomenon that "must be first conceptualised by its parent construct known as stress". Over the years, it has almost become a tradition in most stress research to reveal the lack of a precise and coherent definition of stress in literature (Hart and Cooper, 2001). Nelson and Quick, (1994, p. 202) argued that "stress is one of the most creatively ambiguous word in the English language; with as many interpretations as there are people who use the word. Even the stress experts do not agree on its definition". However, there are at least three different conceptual definitions of stress in literature. The first perspective is termed the "engineering approach" (Cox and Griffiths, 1995). Here, stress is conceptualised as a stimulus arising from either aversive or noxious stimuli from the workplace that impugns on an individual (Mostert, Rothmann, Mostert and Nell, 2008). One of the earliest theorist of this concept is Cox, (1978, p. 52) who argues that the antecedents of the stimulus model focuses on "what happens to the man, not that which happens in him".

The second perspective lies in the physiological domain, where stress is defined as the state of a person's biological reactions to the damaging or threatening environment (Cooper, 1998). In other words, stress is conceived as "a generalised and non-specific physiological response syndrome" to an alarming situation (Selye, 1974). Selye further argued that regardless of the beneficial or harmful stress experiences, the human body still undergoes its general metabolic processes for the purposes of either preparing reactive secretions to combat, accommodate or remove the causes of stressful conditions. The third view which basically is a consolidation of the two earlier approaches is the 'psychological perspective' that primarily focuses on stressor-strain issues occurring from the dynamic interaction between employees and their work environment (Cox and Griffiths, 1995). This approach is widely adopted in most occupational health and stress research. This interactive approach features how workplace stressors can give rise to negative emotions leading to strain outcomes that impairs health and productivity. However, it is argued in this paper that a critical observation of the antecedents of the three definitional approaches of stress in literature has failed to prove any significant difference. The three perspectives present basic but overlapping definitions. It is believed that these definitions are just a question of semantics. By observations, the engineering or physiological meanings are neither linear in nature nor dissimilar to the relational (i.e. stressor-strain) approach which can best be described as an advance definitional proposition. This is because it merges both the engineering and physiological perspectives. Subsequently, the rallying point is to accept the earlier two stress constructs as a progressive continuum in the development of an interactional definition.

Moreover, Hart and Cooper, (2001, p. 94) argued that the enlightened 'psychological approach' to stress also represents a relatively simplistic theory that views stress as occurring when job characteristics contribute to burnout, negative turnover, absenteeism, work dissatisfaction and psychological distress. Overall, the variance in definitional properties merely presents fragmented knowledge in conceptualisation. Thus, the antecedents still remains that it is virtually impossible to read or write about work stress without observing that there remains unevenness as to how it should be defined. Some experts further argued that the fragmented expostulations on the meanings of 'stress' for many years have produced a number of models widely used to depict its implications and outcomes.

Prominent Stress Models

There are various established stress models that have gained importance in theory, research and practice. These models vary in popularity and empirical support as to how stress at work impacts employees and organisations. However, four prominent frameworks are identified for the purpose of this review. First, the Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Model has been used widely in organisational stress research. It bears the popular notion that organisations and their employees must find common grounds on how well the characteristics of individual employees (e.g. skill sets, abilities, personality and competencies) and the environment of the organization (including culture, tasks and job roles) match each other in mutually beneficial ways. The P-E fit theory establishes that workplace well-being is better achieved with minimal discrepancies between the individual and environmental characteristics. However, the P-E model seems not to take into consideration individual differences and subjective well-being factors that may vary personal or situational experiences causing misfit.

Second is the Job Demand-Control (JDC) model designed by Karasek in 1979 and termed one as of the most influential conceptual frameworks that offers richer empirical insights into structural features of the workplace that exposes employees to stressful encounters. The model focuses on the extent to which job control is allowed to moderate the impact of work demands. It proposes that poor health becomes eminent when employees are exposed to high levels of work demands against disproportionate levels of autonomy or job control. While the model has

good predictive validity at the macro-level, it also does not take into account "individual differences in susceptibility to stressors, like the P-E fit model and cannot be used to explain for example, why the same level of demand and control in two individuals may give rise to different behavioural or health outcomes" (Mark and Smith, 2008).

Third, the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model takes a different approach when compared to the earlier two models. In literature, the ERI concept incorporates individual difference components. It means individual perceptions of work outputs and expected returns vary from person to person. The ERI model is based on the notion that perceived intrinsic and extrinsic efforts (e.g. motivation and commitment) put into work should be reciprocated by adequate rewards (i.e. money, esteem, job security and career opportunities) (Siegrist, 1996). Failure to achieve this social exchange can result into stress and job burnout. However, the model have also been criticised as inconclusive because of the limited components of effort and reward variables it considers.

The fourth model is the more elaborate transactional theory called the Cognitive-Relational (CR) approach conceptualised by Richard Lazarus & Susan Folkman in 1980. The main features of their model are the analytical processes of stress appraisals and coping responses that it presents. Specifically, the CR model explains how individuals initially assess stressful encounters for potential risks (which is called primary appraisal) that then informs the processes that frames an individual's development of coping strategies (i.e. secondary appraisal) to manage stress-related occurrences (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The CR framework elaborately examines the nature of diverse subjective perceptions arising from individual differences when evaluating taxing demands that can sometimes exceed coping behaviours. However, the model is also criticised by stress experts for being inexplicit and too vague because it provide no information like the P-E and JDC models about the specific types of variables that should be considered during appraisal and coping processes (Hart and Cooper, 2001).

The four stress models reviewed in this paper have been found to advance knowledge in the field of organisational stress research. A critical observation of some these models is that some suffer from either being too linear in scope like the P-E fit and JDC models because little consideration is given to evaluating the role of perceptual variations that frames responses to stressful environments. In addition, the ERI and CR are subject to diverse interpretations and perceived by Mark and Smith (2008) as lacking any "predictive validity" but open to a broad range of inconclusive views. For example, the transactional theory of Lazarus and Folkman proposes that people deal with stress either by proactively altering harmful situations (e.g. problem-focused coping) or by enduring adversity by intrinsically managing their emotions (emotional-based coping). Although the theoretical distinction between both unique coping strategies have been widely accepted in stress education, it has however been criticised as too simple and straightforward. This is because coping realities are highly subjective as people engage in a wide range of activities in confronting harmful and threatening events. For example, coping methods in the form of denying the seriousness of the problem or being passive in dealing with stressors may not fall into any of the two coping categories proposed by Lazarus and Folkman. Additionally, there appears to be an inexhaustible list of various cognitive, psychological and behavioural exertion used by people to confront taxing conditions. For example, in a qualitative study on coping, Newton and Keenan (1985) thematically coded 159 coping dimensions used by engineering professionals to moderate stressors found to be plaguing their performance. Rotondo, Carlson and Kincaid, (2003) found four categories of dimensions, namely- direct action, positive thinking, help seeking and avoidance/resignation used by people in managing work-life conflicts.

Drawing from the foregoing conceptual discussions on these dominant stress theories examined, one known fact is that occupational stress arises from unsustainable work burdens that elicit negative reactions from employees. In other words, accumulated research on work stress has

provided a wealth of knowledge on the multiplicity of stress processes that are often associated with aversive and unpleasant reactions from people in a wide variety of jobs. In essence, the diversity of these stress theories despite their limitations still provides a sound basis for proffering actions in tackling the detrimental organisational-person interfaces caused by workplace stress. These calls for more concentration on evaluative research on how organisations can mitigate the harmful impact of stress on its workforce. Notably, there is still ongoing extensive research in management and organisational behaviour on conceptual theories on the extent of stress-related health problems at work while less effort is devoted to advancing theory and research on stress solutions. For this reason, Kelloway et al., (2008, p. 57) emphasised that it has reached a period when stress research should transcend beyond mere empirical and case studies findings on causes and consequences of work stressors to deliberations that scrutinises stress management interventions that can effectively mitigate this epidemic that is ostensibly overwhelming employment relationships around the world. The huge volumes of research on problems associated with workplace stress seems to outweigh research that probes how to deal with the social menace found to cripple organisational productivity where it is allowed to flourish. Consequently, the second contribution of this review paper is to engage in a wakeup call for more research in stress management interventions (SMIs).

A practical example of the high level of stress in the workplace was further illustrated in a fieldwork carried by the author of this paper sometimes in February-November, 2015. This were business cases on sampled structured interview comments of 60 middle-line management employees working in the service industry (i.e. call centres, retail banks and motor insurance companies) in Nigeria, Ghana and Benin Republic about the level of burnout, fatigue, strain, absenteeism and sicknesses due to work stress. In addition, the level of SMIs practices to reduce organisational stress was examined. Thus, the interviews questions were structured using the Likert scale. So based on the scale of 1-10, (1) being very good and (10) being very bad, the managers of the study were asked to rate their experiences of stress in the organisations and the standards of stress management practices adopted by their employers to mitigate the negative stress impact. The results of the study are enumerated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Study findings

Type of organisation	Number of managers interviewed	Level of burnout	Fatigue	Strain	Absenteeism	Sickness	Level of SMIs
Call centres in Nigeria	19	7	8	6	6	5	3
Banks in Ghana	21	6	7	6	7	6	4
Hotels in Benin Republic	20	8	6	7	7	6	3

Source: Business case findings carried out by author, 2015

From the above, the findings revealed that all the managers   scored their level of stress experiences above (5) which means that working conditions in the these organisations were stressful and produced various negative outcomes itemised in the table. This is because the three African countries are known to have some economic and political challenges facing these nations. This is why the three countries are categorised as developing parts of the world. In addition, the level of stress management interventions was considerably low from the report.

While the problems associated with stress at work are well known using the study findings in Table 1 as an example, it is therefore contested in this paper that it is time for experts and practitioners to begin to pay more scholarly attention in scrutinising issues targeted at health promotion and stress prevention. Since occupational stress have been identified in a swathe as a

prevalent problem to modern organisational life, extending the same research interest with heightened alertness on stress intervention agendas will also be of significant value.

Addressing Stress at Work

Le Ferve, Kolt and Matheny, (2006, p. 548), broadly defines stress management interventions (SMIs) as "any purposeful action taken to reduce or alleviate the stress experience of [organisational] citizens in the execution of their work functions". Certainly, organisations seeking to establish employee-job fit must endeavour to comprehensively consider practices, procedures and policies that mitigates work stress. Typically, these intervention agendas consist of a number of cognitive-behavioural programmes that are aimed to reduce an employee's physiological and psychological stress symptoms, extenuate stressors, and/or change a person's cognitive appraisals of stress (Reynolds, 1997). Much of the literature on stress management interventions discussions have focused on the popular macro options known as the primary interventions (i.e. stress audits and prevention strategies), secondary (i.e. educating employees on managing stress) and tertiary (therapeutic interventions) (Defrank and Cooper, 1987). In more detail, primary SMIs are proposed to focus on taking actions of either modifying or eliminating any aspect of work characteristics and wider organisational conditions that are potentially adversarial to employees. Interventions of this nature for example, are aimed at reducing job intensiveness through ways such as redesigning working conditions, establishing flexible work schedules, encouraging participative management, fostering employee career development, role clarification, provision of adequate social support and feedback, building cohesive team relationships and recognisable reward systems among others (Cooper and Cartwright, 1997). Secondary interventions are designed for the purposes of assisting employees to cope with stress, typically through a variety of stress management agendas, wellness programs, time or self-management activities (Dewe, O'Driscoll and Cooper, 2010).

However, the frequent criticisms of secondary approaches are the perceived tendency for organisations to transfer the responsibility of managing stress to employees. By so doing, it discharges employers of ensuring that proactive interventions are implemented and thereby causing extra burden on employees to direct their personal resources to coping with stress at work. Le Ferve et al., (2006, pp. 550) argues that "this stance has a certain moral appeal and has been used to justify recommendations that primary SMIs should be the first choice for managing organisational stress". Thus, secondary stress interventions are not necessarily an alternative to primary preventions but instead are meant to be complementary solutions (Hargrove, Quick, Nelson and Quick, 2011). Despite the overwhelming arguments that secondary prevention are the most adopted stress reductionist approach in organisations, it is however, perceived that over-reliance on these approach is a problem since each employee have their personal stress threshold. This is why some employees thrive in certain stressful conditions while others suffer (Cooper and Cartwright, 1997). Moderating variables such as individual's personality, differences in the use of coping strategies, age, gender and other general demographic factors influences an employee's vulnerability to stress. This calls to question the effectiveness of secondary interventions.

The tertiary interventions are considered therapeutic in nature that takes the form of helping individuals already affected by traumatic experiences at work. One of the pronounced strategies under this category is the employee assistance programs (EAPs) designed to assist employees in dealing with personal problems that diminishes job performance and poses a risk to well-being. In general, tertiary controls are designed to focus on rehabilitation, injury claim management and return to work processes (Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2002). For instance, where claims for personal injuries suffered at work are brought forward by an affected party, it is imperative that HR management takes such cases seriously and making claims handling processes efficient at this level of intervention. The compensation culture is meant for purposes of assisting injured

individuals with the cost of health damage, possible rehabilitation and incentive to return to work. Although Reynolds, Taylor and Shapiro, (1993) argued that in most cases, it is extremely difficult to return claimants to an environment that was once perceived as harmful. Overall, Hargrove, Quick, Nelson and Quick, (2011, p. 189) suggested that perhaps the best tertiary intervention regarding claims is for organisations to seriously consider dealing with environmental conditions causing such work distresses.

Further, Cooper and Cartwright, 1997 pointed out that within the diverse stress management intervention debates, there appears to be a lot of discussions on the adoption of secondary and tertiary stress levels of intervention whereas the implementation of primary solutions are comparatively scarce. These concerns were comprehensively investigated by Dewe and O'Driscoll, (2002, p. 58) when they questioned if organisations are abreast with who (whether organisation or individual) should assume the responsibility for managing work-related stress. Subsequently, Dewe and O'Driscoll raised critical indications that there is a knowledge gap on what organisational managers understand by enforcing effective stress intervention at the primary level. Interestingly, the preference for individualised coping rather than proactive stress solutions further fuels scepticism as to whether all the commonly identified stress interventions are really designed to extenuate stress or "simply standard human resource practices being utilised in surrogate fashion" (Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2002).

Notably, Murphy (1988) argues that secondary and tertiary interventions, as opposed to primary methods often fail to address the salient issues of job autonomy. As stated earlier in the JDC model (Karasek, 1979), jobs consisting of high levels of work demands with non-commensurate job control generates stressful outcomes. This is because stress management training or EAP treatment of affected workforce may heighten the awareness of stressors emanating from this high tensioned work patterns and demanding schedules. Allowing high work demands and low control to continue makes employees incapacitated because of the lack of external resources in terms of when, where and how their work should be performed. Therefore, the implementation of either secondary or tertiary interventions may arguably exacerbate the problem (Cooper and Cartwright, 1997). This is because primary interventions aimed at tackling extreme work demands either by introducing more employee autonomy or control structures for better 'person-job fit' is absent (Giga, Cooper and Faragher, 2003). Therefore, organisations should be aware that a reliable way of bridging these gap or misfit between employees and their quest for job autonomy is to introduce primary interventions such as improving power sharing and decision-making processes between managers and their subordinates. Further, Hargrove, Quick, Nelson and Quick, (2011) suggest that where primary interventional options features alongside with the remedial actions of secondary and tertiary options will certainly heighten sustainable health and social well-being at the workplace.

However, some experts have questioned the opportunity cost implication of operationalizing all three-tier interventions which makes the realistic implementation sceptical (Cooper and Cartwright, 1994). Thus, past SMIs critics (e.g. Cooper and Cartwright, 1997; Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2002) contested that the resourcefulness of applying interventions that will create a healthy workplace seems to fail because of the lack of robust perspectives in the identification and selection of appropriate interventions. Further, some stress management reviews are perceived to apparently focus on interventions targeted at grooming employee's capabilities to manage stress more than focusing on organisational changes associated with key elements of increasing positive work engagements (Le Ferve, Kolt and Matheny, 2006). This is why we claim in this paper that more evidence-lead research on SMIs that can contribute to a number of significant knowledge outcomes critical to organisational interventions should be prioritised. As such, this review is also meant to create awareness on the need for stress researchers to focus on broader contextual issues in preventing organisational stressors. Evidently, stress management education serves a useful function in assisting organisational members not only to recognise stress symptoms, but also learn to overcome any negative signs associated with occupational

stressors. Consequently, the need to equip employees' with organisational skills, knowledge and resources to reduce stress is integral to safeguarding workplace health and safety (McVicar, Munn-Giddings and Seebohm, 2013). Accordingly, for SMIs to achieve desired outcomes, stress management researchers and practitioners are advised to pay more attention to salient organisational imperatives such as improved organisational culture, management style of leadership and corporate ethical behaviours aimed at reducing stress levels within the workplace.

Conclusions

In this paper we have sought to examine the ways in which work stress is a prevalent problem in organisational life. Subsequently, the review sought to revisit prior literature on the various major phases of research discussions and conceptual debates on work stress which often includes stressors that are identifiable as causes of stress typically emanating working conditions that are adversarial to well-being and produces negative outcomes exemplified in the case study earlier examined. Apart from also reviewing the concept of stress scarred with diverse definitional properties and the evaluation of important stress models, this review further focused on identifying the paucity of studies in stress management research. In this paper, the author sought to re-emphasise the need to develop more effective and evidence-based research on SMIs. This is because there are potentials for employees, HR managers, occupational therapists and the organisations in general to benefit from stress management research rather than recycling 'discursive descriptions' of sources, symptoms and outcomes of stress only.

This is not undermining the importance of broadly identifying and assessing excessive job pressures that often leads to strain, fatigue, sickness and organisational absenteeism, but it is propose that more emphasis be placed on proactively communicating with employees on the intended cause of actions to tackle workplace stressors. Earlier criticisms were raised in this paper on how the over-reliance of secondary and primary interventions misses important directions in solving organisational stress. This is because both agendas are set as reactive and pathological measures which have been argued earlier as inadequate in sustaining employee well-being (Cooper and Cartwright, 1997). Therefore, managers should aim to implement primary plans that extenuate extreme stressors that have no possibility of generating any positive work outcomes. Thus, it is argued that primary interventions are better achieved if ingrained in good human resource practices usually designed to improve employee capabilities. As such, organisations must prioritise policies and practices that involve its organisational members in decision making systems by focusing on aspects such as work autonomy, employee empowerment, self-managed team work groups and effective workplace communications at all levels. Advancing these systems potentially yields desired implications of creating attractive work organisations.

Examples of other practical individual-organisation interventions are proper workload adjustments, role clarification, securing proper workplace ergonomics, adopting transformational style of management and acceptable performance evaluation and feedbacks can also be classified as primary actions in dealing with work stressors. In achieving organisational health standards, it is further argued that the various stress models, particularly the four prominent frameworks earlier reviewed should be used in collaborative ways in identifying work hazards, followed by the implementation of appropriate stress control strategies. It is crucial for organisations to monitor and assess the reliability of these stress control measures and keep re-assessing work risk so as to ensure that the control programs fit. Importance should also be placed on reviewing the information and training needs of employees exposed to such intervening strategies. Thus, a key conclusion is that for SMIs to make any meaningful contributions to any corporate existence, managers should actively seek to increase employee

involvements in identifying and selecting suitable interventions that are primarily aimed at extenuating the adverse effects of workplace stress.

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