

# Occupational Stress: A Review on Conceptualisations, Causes and Cure

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## Abstract

*Given the complex nature of the concept - occupational stress (also known as work or job stress), it appears a daunting task reaching a unified definition of work stress because of the acknowledged fact that a singular approach may not be able to encompass the breadth of the phenomenon. To this end, the purpose of this paper is to provide a general review of some of the challenges surrounding the conceptuality of occupational stress in literature. Subsequently, the established knowledge regarding the nature and causes of occupational stress were examined in light of the conceptual typology of Murphy (1995) and Michie (2002) that portrays various sources of workplace stress which has been categorized as emanating from the context and content of work. These stress sources are consequentially known to produce dire organisational and extra-organisational outcomes such as low morale, poor performance, career uncertainty, absenteeism, health problems, work-life conflict, turnover and other reverses that undermine competitive objectives of business. As solutions, stress curative measures are discussed to assist managers to understand the significance of providing effective stress management interventions that can enhance employee well-being and organisational productivity.*

**Keywords:** *occupational stress, workplace well-being, concept of stress, stress management interventions*

**JEL Classification:** *I10*

## Introduction

### Conceptuality

Work stress is a universal phenomenon that has been found to raise adverse health, performance and general well-being concerns in diverse organisational and behavioural studies. However, Colligan & Higgins (2005, p. 90) claim that occupational stress is a complicated scientific construct that requires an initial understanding of the “parent construct” known as stress. Broadly speaking, stress is commonly perceived in terms of general physiological and psychological reactions that provoke adversarial mental or physical health conditions when a person’s adaptive capabilities are overextended. Thus, job stress is popularly described as occurring when there are discrepancies between the physiological demands within a workplace and the inability of employees to either manage or cope with such work demands. But Dewe & Trenberth (2004) suggested that the diverse nature and perception of stress experiences encountered within the workplace makes it difficult to find a unitary definition of stress in a

swathe of studies and reports on the impact of stress on organisational well-being and productivity. To this end, stress has been defined in different ways over the years as either a stimulus, or a response, or a stimulus-response combination or a transactional relationship between individuals and the environment. Stress as a stimulus is perceived as comprising the characteristics of the environment that are considered disturbing and have the effect of causing strain reactions in the individual exposed to such external features, situations or environmental factors. Thus, the antecedent of the stimulus-based models of stress focuses on what happens to the individual and not that which happens in the person. On the contrary, stress as a response mainly considers stress from an individual's psychological reactions to stressors. In this school of thought, early influential scholarship of Selye (1974) defined stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand upon it" and which has a high tendency of disrupting normal homeostatic regulatory physiological functioning of the individual concerned. Furthermore, Selye originally conceptualized the difference between eustress and distress. "Eu" being a Greek word which means 'good' was interpreted to mean that eustress represented positive responses to external stressors while distress is termed as reactions to stressors that are appraised as negative and adversarial to well-being (Colligan & Higgins, 2005). Thus, Selye argues that regardless of either stress reactions are beneficial (eustress) or produce harmful (distress) outcomes, the bodily stimulus still undergoes its general metabolic processes for the purposes of either preparing reactive secretions to combat, accommodate or remove stressful circumstances.

However, it is suggested that the linear nature of both definitions above led to a broader and generally accepted definition of the stimulus-response relationship. The consolidation of both earlier definitions is borne out of knowledge development that stress is not merely individual responses to external forces. But stress is an interaction between the individual and sources of demands that undermines wellness. This perspective takes into consideration that stress could be uncontrollable, unpredictable, ambiguous and sometimes unfamiliar and, making it more likely in some circumstances than others and in some individuals than others (Michie, 2002). But, the underlying submissions of the 'interactionist' approach to stress according to Cooper & Cartwright (1997, p. 7) depicts "stress as the consequences of a structural lack of fit between the needs and demands of the individual and his/her environment". As a result, the lack of a consensual definition of the term 'stress' over the years has also produced numerous models utilised within various context of stress research and beyond. Some of these occupational stress theories range from person-environment fit theory, job characteristics framework (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979), effort-reward imbalance concept (Siegrist, 1996) and the transactional theory of psychological stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These are some of the well-known models which have gained dominance over the decades in guiding stress research and practice despite their variance in popularity and empirical support (Mark & Smith, 2008). However, one of the influential stress models out of the pile is the transactional theory of psychological stress and coping.

The main features of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of psychological stress are the appraisals and coping frameworks which explain how individuals initially evaluate stressful encounters in terms of potential risk through an initial assessment (i.e. primary appraisal) which then informs the processes that frames an individual's development of coping strategies (i.e. secondary appraisal) utilised to accommodate, reduce or remove impending stressors. Therefore, within the context of work stress, the transactional approach examines the relationship between the employee and their work environment through the personal assessments that such employees make of their work environment or working conditions evaluated as potential health hazards. Subsequently, problem-solving and emotional-focused coping efforts were suggested as suitable resources utilised by individuals to deal with such health threatening demands. However, it was found that a limitation of the transactional model is that although it embraces variables such as subjective perceptions and the potential influence of individual differences in assessing stress responses, the complexities inherent in this

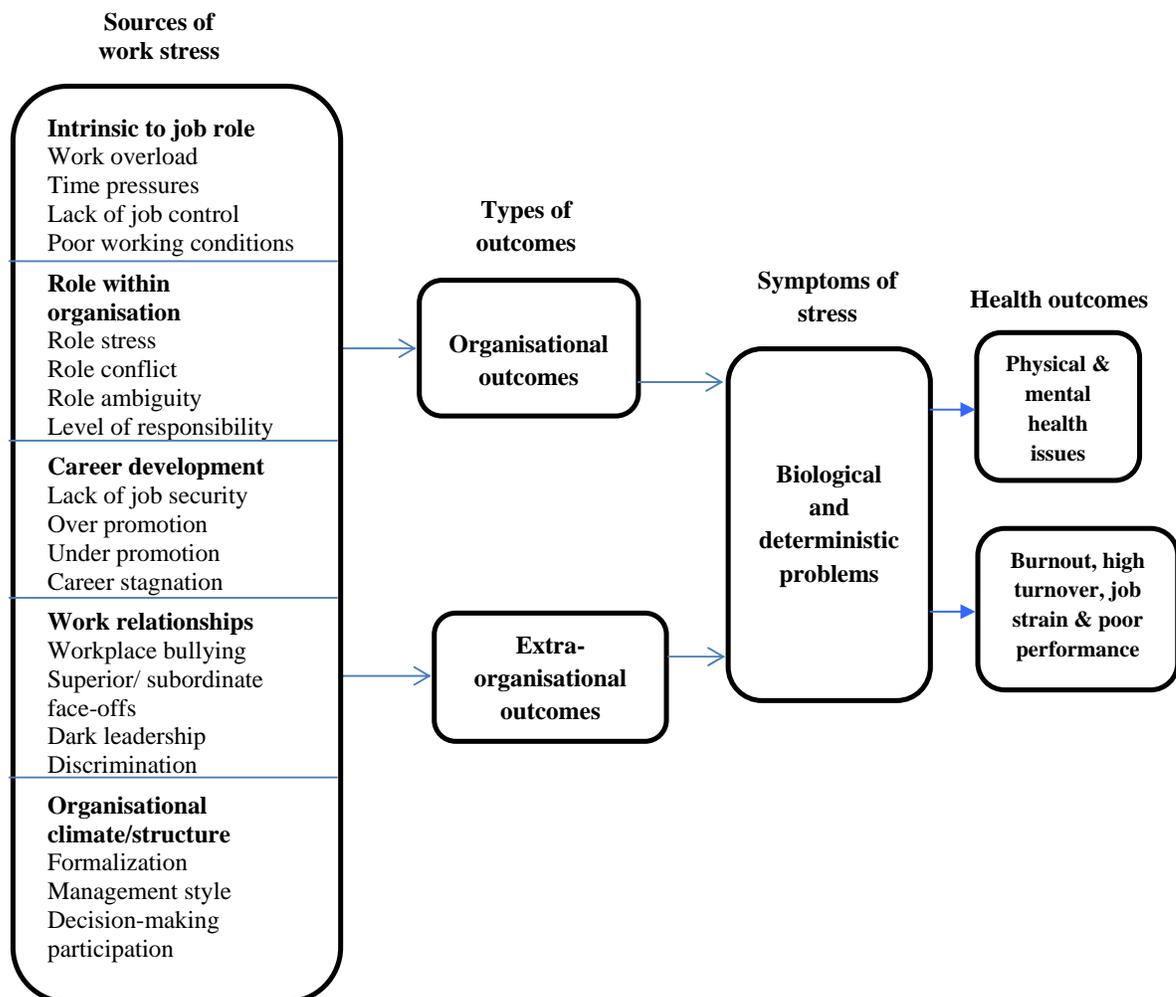
personality and behavioural variations make it hard to empirically evaluate the vast nature of how people react and cope under stressful conditions. Often used quantitative methodology in occupational stress research has been criticised as obtaining data that captures only a static moment in time (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012). In addition, surveys and questionnaire designs approaches have been criticised for their failure to harness the full extent of evolving complexities in timelines, antecedents and fluctuating subjective interpretations of peoples' stress experiences. Consequently, this limitation already inherent in such methodologies is often exacerbated if a transactional perspective is utilised. From the foregoing critical discussions on how the different definitional perspective of work stress has generated considerable disparity as to whether work stress should be conceptualised as either pressures from the environment, or strain within the affected individual, or the interactional or transactional relationship between the individual and external forces. In extending these arguments, the diversity and differences of stress models seem to further exacerbate the problem of finding an integrated meaning of occupational stress. Furthermore, the methodological confounds earlier highlighted also limit our full understanding of the endemic nature of job stress realities that is constantly evolving especially in our modern world deeply engrained in rapid technological advancements, fierce global market competitions, growing globalisation, automation of work processes and systems. This has generated unprecedented changes that are increasing stressful working conditions manifesting in many detrimental fashions. To this end, a general review is important to consider factors that contribute to stress within the workplace.

## **Organisational Factors Causing Stress**

Although the magnitude of the challenges of workplace stress is apparent within a swathe of stress literatures (McVicar et al., 2013) but the prominent sources that have been found to be major sources of work stress (see figure 1) are those dimensions that have to do with the content and context of work. Taking this debate further, stress experiences originating from the content of work are often associated with factors intrinsic to the job role as diagrammatised in figure 1 below. In this category, the employee is often found to struggle with job characteristics that cause a structural lack of fit between demands and their individual's capability to cope with such demands.

From the diagram below, a number of features within the workplace have the potential of producing negative organisational and extra-organisational outcomes which often impair mental health and physical well-being. The first are factors unique to the content of the job role (see figure 1). Factors such as workload (either overload or underload), excessive work pace (time pressures), lack of job meaningfulness, low work autonomy, external disturbances (such as noise and overcrowding) and toxic work systems are some examples that can pose health damage and disrupt well-being of employees engaged in such poor working conditions. Other sources of occupational stress within Murphy's model of work stress factors are theorised to exist within the context of work (Murphy, 1995). This model was reframed by Michie (2002) to include both organisational and extra-organisational outcomes that are generated from these sources of stress at work. For instance, the second category focuses on how stress is induced by the role and responsibility that an individual holds within the organisation. Stress occurrences of this nature are common among managerial roles saddled with higher levels of responsibilities without clear demarcations of role boundaries or where employees are made answerable to multiple demands from superiors and others within the organisation in a simultaneous but unrealistic manner. Where this is the case, such individuals are often prone to role stress comprising mainly of role ambiguity and role conflict. Role ambiguity is described as a situation where the employee perceives lack of role clarity and significant information that is required to perform work role adequately, while role conflict happens when jobs demands and expectations from members of the employee's role set (e.g. superiors, colleagues and even the

organisation) are incompatible and incongruent (Ackfeldt & Malhotra, 2013). The third category of contextual stressors originates from issues that undermine career development. Implicitly in this category is the reality that stress-related problems originating from lack of job security often have the potential of impeding careers progression and may negatively influence employees' sense of wellbeing and commitment to work. For example, the constant changes in the nature of work due to technological advancement utilised by modern organisations to improve workplace performance and sustain competitive advantage has led to a growth in non-permanent contracts and contingent work arrangements caused by downsizing, outsourcing, delaying, mergers and acquisitions, restructuring and re-organising work schedules to cope with the pace of global competition and technological sophistication (Kossek et al., 2012). Consequently, these changes in modern working life have generated stressful working environment that is resulting into low job autonomy, job insecurities, poor promotional prospects and even situations where the employee is "stuck in a position with no opportunity for advancement" (Colligan & Higgins, 2005).



**Fig. 1:** A schematic framework of factors associated with work-related stress & outcomes

Source: Murphy (1995) & Michie (2002)

The fourth category that serves as a contextual contributor to workplace stress is the prevailing work relationships within the organisation. Problematic relationships among managers, subordinates, co-workers in form of office bullying, threats of violence, biased opinions, unsupportive management, harassment, dark leadership, artificial social or physical workplace

isolation and other deviant behaviours most often cause social disruption which, as Dillard & Fritz, (1995, p. 12) pointed out, could generate outcomes ranging from “passive to active dislike, animosity, disrespect, or destructive mutual interaction” within the organisation. Resultant causes include job stress, burnout, personal injuries and negative turnovers that eventually cumulate into loss of earnings to both employee and the organisation. The final category relates to stress induced reactions originating from organisational structure and climate. Within this category, one of the main attributes of the structure of most organizations is formalization. This refers to the degree to which roles within the organization are standardized and the extent to which the content of work is guided by rules and regulations. Where jobs are highly formalized, then employees in this setting may have little autonomy to productively execute work demands. The fact that such formalization creates rigid procedures and rules of engagement, there is the likelihood that employees will experience high stress originating from inappropriate locus of control needed for work demands. In a similar vein, corporate climate revolves around the collective perceptions of employees on various aspects of organizational work-life. This includes business objectives that drive high performance, primacy in HR policies and best practices, leadership style, work design, technology, employee engagement, communication systems, motivational conditions, reward mechanisms, working conditions etc. Consequently, occurrences of role stress comprising of role conflict and role ambiguity, distorted communication flows, fragmented job characteristics, poor pay, job insecurity and low social value to work arising from a set of properties within a corporate climate are predictors that can produce negative organisational and extra-organisational outcomes.

## **Stress Outcomes**

From the foregoing considerations of the five separate, but yet interrelated factors that causes stress within the work area, evidence found in literature suggests that work stress can negatively impact both organisational and extra-organisational outcomes (see figure 1). Job-related stress has become a growing concern because it is found to have significant economic implications for the organisations and bad publicity (Kelloway et al., 2008). In practice, the poorest organisational outcomes manifest from effort-reward imbalances (ERI) conceptualised by Siergrist (1996) who postulates that job strain results from the discrepancies between the efforts individuals put into their work and the rewards they receive (Kinman & Jones, 2008). Thus, where an individual’s intrinsic characteristics of hard work or even (over)commitment to work demands is not reciprocated with adequate appreciation in form of financial entitlement (like salary, wages or bonuses), job security, esteem and career progression, then it is likely to elicit negative emotions and sustained employee stress.

The ERI rationality resonates with the social exchange theory which proposes that the rational man weighs the benefits versus the costs of any social or economic relationship involvement. Consequently, where the derived benefits of labour is considered detrimental in proportion to the input in performance and cognitive abilities, then common biological and deterministic strain outcomes such as low morale, poor health, burnouts manifesting in form of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced work accomplishment, absenteeism, negative affective conditions and eventual withdrawal intentions are imminent (see figure 1). Increasingly, organisational stress has also been found to have a spillover effect into non-working domains of individuals with equally high propensities of causing family problems, personal health issues and other plethora of life crises. However, the well-researched aspect of extra-organisational stress outcomes is work-family conflict (or conceptualised on a broader perspective) as work-life imbalance. This work-life discordance is identified as a form of inter-role conflicts where the fulfilment of role demands from one domain (i.e. work obligations) interferes with the performance of other role demands like family responsibilities or social life activities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These inter-role conflicts could result into time-based

conflict (i.e. appropriateness in time devoted to each role demand), strain-based (i.e. strain originating from one role makes it difficult to meet the expectations of another role) and behaviour-based conflict that refers to the idea that patterns of behaviours required in one role may be in dissonance with the desired characteristics of another role (Messersmith, 2007). Though role conflict is bi-directional (i.e. transference of conflict could be from work to life or intrusion of life into work), it is proposed in this paper that more emphasis should be placed on managing stress within the workplace since working individuals are known to be border-crossers that are continuously making behavioural and emotional transitions (un)consciously that negatively or positively affects both domains of life. Therefore, when incompatibility of roles occurs, spill over experiences present the extent of permeability to which psychological patterns of behaviour are sometimes stimulated by the over-arching outcomes from stress at work. Furthermore, Messersmith (2007, p. 430) pointed out that work-life conflict generated from work stress takes various forms of intrusiveness into family time, leisure activities, or some general inability to detach from one's world of work psychologically. Though stress could also be self-inflicted, it is the postulation of this paper that a concentration on thorough management of stress within the working environment may provide solutions to reduce the spread of its negative outcomes that distort people's non-working roles. This existing review agrees with extant literature on occupational stress that recommends that examination and evaluation of the effectiveness of organisational stress management interventions is the best direction to move research on workplace stress forward (Kelloway et al., 2008).

## **Stress Cure**

This final section examines various debates on stress management interventions. Le Ferme et al. (2006, p. 548) broadly define stress management interventions (SMIs) as "any purposeful action taken to reduce or alleviate the stress experience by [organisational] citizens in the execution of their work functions". In establishing the different frames of intervention, DeFrank & Cooper (1987) were among the first scholars to conceptualise that most stress interventions are often focused to separately benefit the individual, the organisation and then both individual-organisational interfaces. These various levels of interventions have been popularly theorised as primary, secondary and tertiary SMIs. Primary interventions are defined as organisational best practices aimed at reducing, modifying or eliminating tensioned work demands that impair health and performance (Lamontagne et al., 2007). Examples of these actions are job redesign that eliminates stress factors, labour flexibility practices and organisational culture that prioritise employee's wellness. Secondary interventions are framed to assist employees to cope with work stress and examples here include wellness programs, planned social events, provision of recreational facilities, stress management training and development. Tertiary interventions are however therapeutic in nature and aimed at helping employees who already have formed signs and symptoms of illness and other adversarial outcomes from work stress. Remedial actions such as counselling, employee assistance programs, rehabilitation sessions and payments on injury claims fit into this category. However, concerns articulated by various SMIs reviewers are often geared towards criticising the extent to which secondary and tertiary interventions are still the most popularly adopted stress reductionist approaches by employers (Ackfeldt & Malhotra, 2013). The approach was challenged by Cousin et al. (2004) in their arguments for more broadly based primary interventions given priority and made intervention of 'first choice' by employers (Le Ferme et al., 2006). The obvious reason for prioritising proactive interventions is that health risk management that focuses on removal or elimination of job stress is far more rewarding than minimising or treating manifested health damage. Furthermore, Biron (2012) emphasized that the negative cost associated with reduced performance, absenteeism, sickness and turnovers are substantially higher when compared to investment cost in keeping workers present, well and healthy by implementing primary SMIs. It is therefore proposed in this review

that organisations should begin to focus primarily on stress prevention that potentially eliminates extreme stressors which are always counter-productive (Michie, 2002).

## Conclusions

From the foregoing, a variety of managerial actions that seek to extenuate job stressors have become imperative for purposes of improving employee psychological capital and well-being. It has also become necessary that these proactive interventions be integrated within the structural context of work (e.g. job control, work schedules, staffing levels, physical work environment and organisational structure) and the psychological frame of employees (e.g. job commitment, psychological support, employee engagement and affective well-being initiatives). Furthermore, primary measures such as managerial stress awareness training, workload adjustments, hazard identification, creation of social structures that moderate stress effects and role clarification are effective strategies that are suggested for better organisational outcomes. It is also of practical implication that working conditions are adapted to the differences in people's physical, mental and contextual situations of life. Consequently, organisations should pay more attention to the work-life balance (WLB) of their employees by seeking to implement a variety of WLB practices and policies such as flexitime, job sharing, part-time work, home telecommuting, subsidised recreational and leisure activities amongst other family-friendly policies. Subsequently, adopting a more strategic approach to WLB can help promote improved employee performance, better mental and physical health, job satisfaction and reduced turnover (Kossek et al., 2012). In conclusion, Kellow et al. (2008, p. 56) highlighted the role of some countervailing interventions that can serve to mitigate occupational stress causes. The authors (Kellow & others) defined countervailing interventions as practices focused "on increasing the positive experiences of work rather than decreasing the negative aspects". For instance, it was suggested that positive development of the state of psychological capital of employees in the realms of self-efficacy, hope, trust, optimism and resiliency is essential for health and positive organizational behaviour that is required to validate competitive performances in today's workplace.

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