JOB STRESS CHARACTERISTICS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON THE
EMPLOYEES IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING: CO-WORKER’S
SOCIAL SUPPORT AS THE MODERATOR

By:

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ABSTRACT

JOB STRESS CHARACTERISTICS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON THE
EMPLOYEES IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING: CO-WORKER’S
SOCIAL SUPPORT AS THE MODERATOR

Melissa Chin Yu Fei

Stress occurs be it at home, school or the workplace. In the context of organization, stress affects how the worker performs and feels on and off the job. If stress is not handled properly it will further affect the worker mentally and physically. Several past studies have shown that social support can help to moderate the impacts of job stress on an individual. This research examines the impacts of job stress characteristics on the workforce on work family conflict and employee’s health. A sample of 203 from both academic and non-academic staff were obtained from several higher learning institutions in Kuching. By using Pearson Correlation Analysis and Hierarchical regression analysis, results shows that (1) job stress characteristics (role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) affects work-family conflict and employee’s health, and (2) co-worker’s social support does have moderating effects on the impacts of job stress characteristics on work-family conflict and employee’s health. Implications of the findings for research and interventions are discussed. The results from this study supported most research literatures in Malaysian organizational settings. Therefore, organizations in Malaysia may use this as a guideline to create a more balanced and healthy workforce.

Keywords: Stress, Work-family conflict, Employee’s health, Co-worker’s Social Support, Kuching
ABSTRAK

CIRI-CIRI TEKANAN KERJA DAN KESAN KEPADA PEKERJA DALAM INSTITUSI PENDIDIKAN TINGGI : SOKONGAN SOSIAL RAKAN SEKERJA SEBAGAI MODERATOR

Melissa Chin Yu Fei

Kata Kunci: Tekanan, Konflik Campur Tangan Kerja dan Keluarga, Kesihatan Pekerja, Sokongan Sosial Rakan Sekerja, Kuching
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement iii

Abstract iv

Abstrak v

Table of Contents vii

List of Tables xv

List of Figures xviii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

1.0 Introduction 1

1.1 Background of the study 2

1.2 Job Stress in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning 4

1.3 Problem Statement 6
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Objectives of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1</td>
<td>General Objectives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2</td>
<td>Specific Objectives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Research Hypotheses</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.1</td>
<td>Theoretical contribution</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.2</td>
<td>Methodological contribution</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.3</td>
<td>Practical contribution</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Definitions of Terms</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.1</td>
<td>Job stress</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.2</td>
<td>Role ambiguity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.3</td>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.4</td>
<td>Role overload</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.5</td>
<td>Co-worker’s social support</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.6</td>
<td>Work-family conflict</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.7</td>
<td>Employee’s health</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Time Frame</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Theoretical Evidence Supporting the Relationship between Job Stress Characteristics, Co-worker’s Social Support, Work-Family Conflict and Employee’s Health

2.1.1 Job Demands-Resources Model 2001
2.1.2 Karasek’s (1979) Job Strain Model
2.1.3 The Spillover Theory
2.1.4 Conservation of Resources Theory

2.2 Empirical Evidence Supporting the Relationship between Job Stress Characteristics, Co-Worker’s Social Support, Work-Family Conflict and Employee’s Health

2.2.1. Empirical evidence supporting the relationship between job stress characteristics, work-family conflict and employee’s health
2.3.2 Empirical evidence supporting the relationship between job stress characteristics, co-worker’s social support, work-family conflict and employee’s health

2.4 Practical Evidence Supporting the Relationship between Job Stress Characteristics, Organizational Social Support and Impacts of Job Stress

2.5 Chapter Summary

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH

3.0 Introduction

3.1 Research Design

3.2 Research Location, Population and Sampling

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques
   3.3.1 Phase I: In-depth interview
       3.3.1.1 Procedure of the in-depth interview

x
3.3.2 Phase II: Pilot Study 44
   3.3.2.1 Procedure of the pilot study 44
3.3.3 Phase III: Actual Study 45
   3.3.3.1 Process of designing the self-report questionnaire 46
   3.3.3.2 Procedure of the back translation of self-report questionnaire 47
   3.3.3.3 Content of the self report questionnaire design 48
   3.3.3.4 Process of conducting the actual survey 50

3.4 Data Analysis 51
   3.4.1 Data screening 51
   3.4.2 Psychometric assessments for measurement scales 52
   3.4.3 Pearson correlation analysis 53
   3.4.4 Hierarchical regression analysis 53

3.5 Findings of the In-Depth Interview 54

3.6 Outcomes of the Pilot Study 58
   3.6.1 The results of the pilot study using the survey questionnaire 58
      3.6.1.1 Respondents of the pilot study 59
      3.6.1.2 The results of the exploratory factor analysis 62
   3.6.2 The results of pilot study using a formal discussion on the survey questionnaires 67

3.7 Chapter Summary 71
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction 72

4.1 Sample Profile 73

4.2 Descriptive Data 76

   4.2.1 Role ambiguity 77
   4.2.2 Role conflict 78
   4.2.3 Role overload 79
   4.2.4 Co-worker’s social support 80
   4.2.5 Work-family conflict 82
   4.2.6 Employee’s health 83

4.3 Findings and Discussion 84

   4.3.1 Relationship between job stress characteristics and work family conflict 85
   4.3.2 Relationship between job stress characteristics and employee’s health 87
   4.3.3 Moderating role of co-worker’s social support in the relationship between
       job stress characteristics and work-family conflict 90
   4.3.4 Moderating role of co-worker’s social support in the relationship between
       job stress characteristics and employee’s health 96
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

5.0 Introduction 105

5.1 Summary of the Thesis 106

5.2 Conclusion 108

5.3 Research Implications 109
   5.3.1 Theoretical Contributions 110
   5.3.2 Robustness of the Research Methodology 111
   5.3.3 Practical contribution 111

5.4 Limitations of the Study 112

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research 113
5.6 Chapter Summary 115

References 117

Appendix I: Pilot Study Questionnaire 131

Appendix II: Actual Study Questionnaire 144

Appendix III: Time Frame of the Study 157

Appendix IV: SPSS Results of the Actual Study 158
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1
Respondent’s Profile of the In-depth Interview 54

Table 3.2
Findings of the In-depth Interview 55

Table 3.3
Sample Size of the Pilot Study 59

Table 3.4
Respondent’s Profile of the Pilot Study 60

Table 3.5
Item Validity for Pilot Test 64

Table 3.6
Item Validity and Reliability Analysis for Measurement Scale 67

Table 3.7
Respondent’s of the Pilot Study Using a Formal Discussion 68

Table 3.8
Results of the Pilot Study Based on Discussion 69
Table 4.1
Sample Size of the Actual Study 73

Table 4.2
Respondents’ Profile of the Actual Study 74

Table 4.3
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Role Ambiguity 77

Table 4.4
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Role Conflict 79

Table 4.5
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Role Overload 80

Table 4.6
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Co-worker’s Social Support 81

Table 4.7
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Work-Family Conflict 83

Table 4.8
Frequency of the Respondents’ Answer for Employee’s Health 84

Table 4.9
Pearson Correlation Analysis (Work-Family Conflict) 86
Table 4.10
Pearson Correlation Analysis (Employee’s Health) 88

Table 4.11
Results for Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Co-worker’s Social Support as Moderating Variable and Work-Family Conflict as Dependent Variable 92

Table 4.12
Results for Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Co-worker’s Social Support as Moderating Variable and Employee’s Health as Dependent Variable 98

Table 4.13
Results for Hypotheses Testing 102
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1
Conceptual Framework of the Study 14

Figure 2.1
Job Demands-Resources Model 29

Figure 2.2
Karasek’s Job Strain Model 31

Figure 4.1
Three Way Interaction Effects for Job Stress Characteristics (Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict and Role Overload), Co-worker’s Social Support and Work-Family Conflict 94

Figure 4.2
Three Way Interaction Effects for Job Stress Characteristics (Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict and Role Overload), Co-worker’s Social Support and Employee’s Health 100

Figure 5.1
Recommended Conceptual Framework for Future Research 115
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This study is conducted to explore on how organizational social support can moderate the effects of job stress on an individual or the employees. The first section and second section describe about the background of the present study and background of the studied organizations respectively, followed by the third section that identifies about the problem statement of the study. Meanwhile, the fourth section states the research objectives; which consists of general and specific objectives. As in the fifth section, describes the research hypotheses, followed by the sixth section, the conceptual framework is presented. The following section seven will discuss about the significance of the study, meanwhile the definition of terms will be presented in the section eight. Time frame is presented in section nine. The section ten describes about the outline of the remaining chapters in this study, followed by the last section of conclusion for this chapter. This chapter is important to provide an overview of the study and the justifications of conducting this study.
1.1 Background of the Study

Stress occurs in our daily lives and in any setting – be it at home, school or the workplace. The initial definition of stress is derived from the Latin word *stringere*, meaning to draw tight, and was used in the 17th century to describe hardships or affliction (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). According to Cox (1993), ‘stress’ is now understood as a psychological state that resulted from people’s perceptions of an imbalance between job demands and their abilities to cope with those demands. Stress produces a number of features and responses for example, disturbance of the natural equilibrium, taxation of the body’s resources, failure to cope, sustained anxiety, a non-specific response, pressure and extreme demands and imbalance between job demands and coping ability (Stranks, 2005).

Stress is divided into two main categories, namely positive (eustress) and negative (distress) (Abushaikha & Sheil, 2006; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bosredeaux & Brinley, 2005; Millward, 2005; Newell, 2002; Noor & Maad, 2008). According to Selye (1976), distress is generally damaging symptomatically or and is often unpleasant while eustress is often known as pleasurable, satisfying experiences. Distress is expressed further as general overloading of the body systems which creates anxiety, fear, worry or agitation (Selye, 1976; Stranks, 2005). In Selye’s studies, positive stress, which was mentioned as eustress helps to stimulate or drive a person to perform better in life. However, stress always comes with negative emotions and most people will think that stress is bad and should be avoided (Lovallo, 2004).

In the organizational context, there are many intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to the physiological and psychological stress of a worker (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Dua, 1994;
Sharpley, Reynolds, Acosta & Dua, 1996). Stress affects how the worker performs and feels both on and off the job (George & Jones, 2008). If stress is not handled properly, it will further affect the physiological and psychological health of the worker, thus lowering the working performance in the organization (; Basowitz et al., 2001; Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Saiyadain, 2003).

Recent studies identified job stress characteristics as one’s role in the organization (i.e. role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) as the main source of job stress in organizations (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brinley, 2005; Hogarth, Hasluck, Pierre, Winterbotham & Vivian, 2000). These three characteristics are mostly present in work domain and in most researches (Elloy & Smith; 2003). Role ambiguity is a scenario that occurs when an employee is unclear of their task, what is expected of them or how they should perform their task while role conflict implies to an employee having to carry a role or multiple roles that are different from each other (Cooper & Marshall, 1976; George & Jones, 2008; Gupta & Jenkins, 1985; Lewis & Cooper, 1988). Role overload happens when an employee are expected to do too many task at too little time (Johns & Saks, 2007). There are two types of role overload, quantitative overload (i.e. too many work to do) and qualitative overload (i.e. task is too difficult for an employee) (Caplan et al., 1975; Elloy & Smith, 2003).

As the number of institutions for higher learning in Malaysia has increased in tandem with the increase of students for the past few years (Tham & Kam, 2007), university academic and non-academic staff may face more problems in their job or may experience increased workload (Ismail, Yao, Yeo, Kong & Ju; 2010) and pressure to produce more research publications (Dua, 1994; Idris, 2009). Malaysian institutions for higher learning might experience competitive pressure and may set new goal to compete to getting more students (Ismail et al., 2010). Moreover with the government’s plan to produce 60,000 PhD graduates
into the workforce creates more pressure to universities (especially local universities). This
furthermore causes the staff to face more stress and will therefore affect their physical and
mental health (Ahsan, Abdullah, Yong and Alam, 2009) and tend to withdraw themselves
from work (Taris, Schreur & Van Iersel-Van Silfhout, 2001).

1.2 Job Stress in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning

Education is a priority of the Federal Government of Malaysia and it is committed to provide
quality education to all. After the independence of Federation of Malaya in 1957, its
education system has been following the nation’s growth to promote better economic
development. As such, the Education Act was proposed in 1961, followed by the opening of
the first public university of the country, Universiti Malaya (1962), Universiti Sains Malaysia
(1969) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (1971). In the same year, in 1971, the New
Economic Policy was also implemented to bring a better balance in enrolment among students
of different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Kho, 2010).

According to the 10th Malaysian Plan, Malaysian has made enormous strides in improvement
of its education system over past years with an adult literacy rate of around 92%. Currently,
Malaysia has established 20 public universities and 26 private universities, as well as 405
public skills training institutes and 584 private skills training institutes. In 2009, public
institutions for higher learning across the nation produced more than 181,000 graduates,
includes more than 81,000 graduates from private institutions for higher learning. Public skills
training institutions produced more than 120,000 graduates, includes more than 30,000
graduating from private skills training institutes (10th Malaysia Plan, 2010).
Meanwhile, higher education includes certificate, diploma and undergraduate as well as postgraduate studies. Undergraduate studies consist of Bachelor’s degree levels and professional studies while postgraduate studies consist of Master’s degrees and PhD levels. Generally, higher education at diploma level is for secondary school certificate (SPM) holder from the age of 17 years old onwards and the Bachelors degree is for students from the age of 19 years old onwards with post-secondary qualifications. The degree program normally takes between 3 to 5 years and after obtaining a Bachelor’s degree, a student can consider whether to proceed with postgraduate studies or not (10th Malaysia Plan, 2010).

According to MOHE’s statistical data from year 2002 till 2007, the Malaysian institutions for higher learning show a steady growth in total enrolment of students except for private institutions for the year of 2005. The total number of students enrolled at the tertiary level, in both public and private sector has increased from 576,439 in 2002 to about 748,797 in 2007. The number of graduates in institutions for higher learning also showed a steady increase (except in 2005 for private institutions) from the total of 196,585 in year 2002 to 168,879 in year 2007. The number of students for private institutions for higher learning dropped in the year 2005 as more Malaysian students went abroad to further their studies (10th Malaysia Plan, 2010).

Currently, in line with the Malaysian government plan to produce 60,000 PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) into the workforce by 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has proposed a program called MyBrain15 under the National Higher Learning Strategic Plan. This program aims to create a group of highly educated workforce in aiding to researches and innovation. MOHE has allocated RM483.9 million to develop MyBrain15 under the 2011
budget which will cover the fees of 7,610 current students and additional 11,170 future postgraduate students (News Straits Times, 7 November 2010). In need to follow government’s plan and maintaining academic standards, local institutes of higher learning faced problems in lacking of staff and facilities (Idris, 2009). With the increase of intake, this increases the workload and amount of stress among staff in institutions of higher learning in order to be able to meet the academic standards (Loh, 2005).

1.3 Problem Statement

Work plays an important role in our everyday lives. Many individuals spent about two-third of their waking hours in the workplace each day. Over the years, global economy has changed and in times of downturn, there will be lots of merging, layoffs and company downsizing. As work itself takes up a big portion of an individual lives and as the work nature has changed over the past decades, it is important to understand the job characteristics that affects one’s life (George & Jones, 2008; Westover, 2008).

According to Ganster and Schaubroech (1991), the experience of stress on health may be accompanied by feelings of emotional discomfort, and might significantly affect the well being of an individual at the time, it does not necessarily lead to the development of psychological or physiological disorder (Cox et al., 2000). The experiences of stress on health are also linked to the chronic adverse work environments, or acute traumatic events.