

**THE EFFECTS OF ORGANISATIONAL
STRESSORS ON WORK STRESS
WITH THE MODERATING
EFFECT OF LOCUS
OF CONTROL**

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DECLARATION

The materials in this thesis are original except for quotations, accepts, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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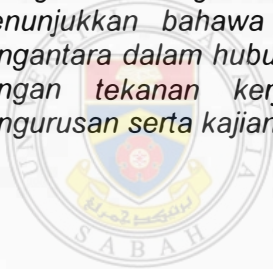


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ABSTRACT

KESAN PUNCA TEKANAN ORGANISASI TERHADAP TEKANAN KERJA DENGAN KAWALAN LOKUS SEBAGAI PENGANTARA

Kajian ini telah mengkaji kesan punca tekanan dalam organisasi terhadap tekanan kerja. Pemboleh ubah tekanan dalam organisasi ini adalah konflik peranan, halangan dalam karier pekerjaan, pengasingan, tugas yang berlebihan dan suasana pekerjaan yang tidak sesuai. Kajian ini juga telah menyelidik sama ada kawalan lokus dalam serta luar dan juga jantina menjadi pengantara dalam hubungan antara punca tekanan dalam organisasi dengan tekanan kerja. Sampel populasi di dalam kajian ini adalah kakitangan kerajaan yang dipilih secara rawak daripada kementerian serta agensi kerajaan negeri Sabah di Kota Kinabalu. Analisis terhadap 134 responden menunjukkan bahawa hanya halangan dalam karier pekerjaan, pengasingan dan suasana pekerjaan yang tidak sesuai mempunyai hubung kait yang positif terhadap tekanan kerja. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini mendapati bahawa tahap tekanan kerja di kalangan kakitangan kerajaan adalah rendah. Analisis seterusnya menunjukkan bahawa kawalan lokus dan jantina tidak menjadi pengantara dalam hubungan antara punca tekanan dalam organisasi dengan tekanan kerja. Keputusan kajian, implikasi amalan pengurusan serta kajian masa akan datang dibincangkan.



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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECTS OF ORGANISATIONAL STRESSORS ON WORK STRESS WITH THE MODERATING EFFECT OF LOCUS OF CONTROL

This study examined the effects of organisational stressors on work stress. The organisational variables are mainly role conflict, blocked career, alienation, work overload and unfavorable work environment. This study also investigated whether the locus of control both internal and external as well as gender moderate the relationship between the organisational stressors and work stress. The sample population of this study was the civil servants from randomly selected Sabah state government ministries and agencies in Kota Kinabalu. Analysis of 134 respondents revealed that only blocked career, alienation and unfavorable work environment have a significant positive relationship on work stress. In general, this study found out that the work stress level among the government employees is marginally low. Further analysis also found out that the locus of control and gender did not moderate on the relationship between the organisational stressors and work stress. The findings, implications for managerial practice and future research are being discussed.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

The study of stress at work is becoming increasingly prominent in behavioural science research (Arsenault and Dolan, 1983). The numerous challenges in the work environment, characterised by heightened competition, lack of time, more uncontrollable factors, lack of space, continuous technological development, conflicting demands from organisational stakeholders (Hall and Savery, 1986), increased use of participatory management and computerisation (Murray and Forbes, 1986), greater uncertainty, and others have resulted in higher job stress.

Selye (1976) stated that job stress has been defined as the non-specific response of the body to any demands made upon it. It is considered to be a reaction or an internal state to anything individuals consciously or unconsciously perceive as a threat, either real or imagined (Clarke and Watson, 1991).

Robbins (2001) mentioned that stress is a dynamic condition in which the individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint, or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Stress could be caused by environmental, organisational, and individual variables (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1999; Cook and Hunsaker, 2001).

Organisational variables have been known to create stress among employees at the workplace resulting in job stress (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). The various causes of job-related stress have been under investigation for some time and the list of potential culprits is a long one (Jewell, 1998). In this study, organisational stressors mainly on role conflict, blocked career, alienation, work overload and unfavorable work environment are being researched.

1.2 Research Problem

Work stress has the potential to affect the performance of all levels of staff, ranging from senior management to the young and newly employed. The employees of the state government departments and agencies also could not avoid from the pressures of their daily work demand. Prolonged exposure to stressful situations has been found to produce serious dysfunctional effects to an individual, which can affect job performance and the overall organisational effectiveness.

A study by Sparks and Cooper (1999) revealed significant statistical associations between a number of workplace factors and indicators of mental ill health, such as free-floating anxiety, somatic anxiety and depression.

There is much evidence in the past to indicate that there is significant positive relationship between organisational stressors and work stress (Dua, 1992; Roselina, Leong and Chua, 2003; Aizzat, Ramayah and Kumaresan, 2003). Role conflict has been found to have positive relationship with work stress (Roberts, Lapidus and Chonko, 1997) and Foot and Venne (1990) also revealed that there is a relationship between career advancement and work stress.

A study by Thoits (1995) discovered that alienation has a positive effect on work stress. Work overload both quantitatively and qualitatively has been empirically linked to a variety of physiological, psychological and behavioural strain symptoms (Beehr and Newman, 1978; Roberts, Lapidus and Chonko, 1997). Additionally, a working environment which is associated with unpleasant organisational climate, lack of privacy, a lot of hassle in conducting work, and distractions could result in higher stress (Miller and Ellis, 1990; Eugene, 1999).

Various studies have provided evidence that individual personality traits, for example, locus of control and type-A personality, play substantial roles in occupational stress (Cooper, Kirkcaldy and Brown, 1994; Davey, 1994; Wilson *et al.*, 1990). Spector (1982) stated that locus of control is perhaps one of the most prominent personality variables that moderates between stressors and stress that

has been studied in a variety of work and organisational settings. Ivancevich and Matteson (2002) also noted that locus of control is one of the personality variables which act as the stress moderator. Spector and O'Connell (1994) mentioned that locus of control concerns on people's generalised expectancies that they can or cannot control reinforcements in their lives.

According to Jex (1998), even though several demographics could potentially affect the relationship between stressors and work stress, gender has received more than passing attention in the occupational stress literature. Jick and Mitz (1985) mentioned that men and women may react differently stressors because of innate genetic or biological differences, differences in the characteristics of jobs, or differences in socialization and upbringing.

Thus the research question for this study is "to what extent does the organisational stressor affect the stress level of the employees and does locus of control and gender has the moderating effect on the relationship between the organisational stressors and work stress."

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are: (1) to gauge the extent to which organisational variables (role conflict, blocked career, alienation, work overload and unfavorable work environment) affect work stress, and (2) to examine whether locus of control and gender moderates the relationships between these organisational variables and stress among the civil servants of the state government departments and agencies in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

1.4 Scope of Study

This study will investigate the effects of organisational stressors mainly on role conflict, blocked career, alienation, work overload and unfavorable work environment on work stress with the moderating effect of locus of control and gender among the

civil servants of the state government departments and agencies in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

1.5 Significance of Study

According to Amat, Fontaine and Chong (2003), research on stress in the Malaysian working environment is limited and understanding the factors that contribute to occupational stress is necessary for improving stress management programs in Malaysian organisations. Such knowledge is important for both research and practical purposes. Human resource professionals wishing to implement stress management programs need to understand the sources of stress and stress measures.

It is hoped that this study will provide a clearer understanding whether the organisational stressors mainly, role conflict, blocked career, alienation, work overload and unfavorable work environment have a significant positive effect on work stress among the employees of the government sector. This research will also provide a better understanding on whether the locus of control and gender has the moderating effect between the organisational stressors and work stress. Critical factors could be identified and the necessary recommendations could be made.

1.6 Organisation of Study

This paper consists of five chapters. In chapter one, an introduction of the topic being discussed which formulated the research problem, objectives and scope, and the significance of the study. In chapter two, the literature review of stress will be discussed in order to get a clearer understanding and knowledge of the study. Chapter three basically deals with the formulation of the research framework and the methodology of this study. This covers the definition of variables involved, proposed hypotheses, instrument and sample of population, data collection method and also

data analysis. The last two chapters will discuss on the research findings, discussion and conclusion of this study.



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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the related literature review of work stress and the organisational stressors. Definitions on the concept of stress, organisational stressors, locus of control and gender were reviewed. Findings from various scholars in relations to this study are being included in this chapter.

2.2 The Concept of Stress

While many scholars accept the generic concept of stress, the literature is characterised by tremendous conceptual diversity (Shirom, 1982). Some used the term stress in reference to an 'objective stimuli condition' (Weitz, 1970); others used the term interchangeably with a wide variety of responses (Sells, 1970; Selye, 1974); yet others used the term in reference to a complete cycle of events representing both the stressors (stimuli condition) and the organism reaction to them (Lazarus, 1966; French, Rodgers and Cobb, 1974).

Selye (1946) discovered that virtually all stressful stimuli result in tissue damage, and entitled this occurrence the General Adaptation Syndrome. The researcher divided this syndrome in three stages: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. In the alarm stage, the internal stress system of the body is activated by an external stressor, and these results in a number of physiological and chemical reactions. If the external stressor should continue, the resistance stage is entered, when the body calls upon the needed organ or system to deal with the stressor. Should the stressor persist, the adaptive systems brought into use in the resistance stage may become drained, and the tertiary stage, exhaustion, occurs.

Lazarus (1976) suggested that an individual's stress reaction depends on how the person interprets or appraises (consciously or unconsciously) the significance of a harmful, threatening or challenging event.

Cummings and Cooper (1979) have designed another way of understanding the stress process that can be simply explained:

- (i) Individuals, for the most part, try to keep their thoughts, emotions, and relationships with the world in a steady state.
- (ii) Each factor of a person's emotional and physical state has a range of stability in which that person feels comfortable. On the other hand, when forces disrupt one of these factors beyond the range of stability, the individual must act or cope to restore a feeling of comfort.
- (iii) An individual's behavior aimed at maintaining a steady state makes up his or her "adjustment process" or coping strategies.

Baron (1986) referred stress to the presence of various stressors such as external sources of pressure. Stress has been commonly used to refer to the external conditions, which result in an individual experiencing "discomfort", "tension", etc.

Johnson and Indvik (1996) stated that stress is a mental and physical condition, which affects an individual's productivity, effectiveness, personal health and quality of work.

Ivancevich and Matteson (2002) defined stress as an adaptive response by individual difference that is a consequence of any action, situation, or event that places special demands on a person. In a response definition, stress is seen partially as a response to some stimulus, called a stressor.

Stress is defined as a pattern of emotional states and physiological reactions occurring in situations where individuals perceive threats from the environment beyond their ability to manage (Fang, 2001).

Rollinson, Broadfield and Edwards (1998) stated that stress is the degree of tension, anxiety and pressure experienced by a person. The authors further stated

that occupational stress is defined as a person's recognition of their inability to cope with the demands relating to work. They noted that in the literature factors, which cause stress, are usually referred to as stressors and the outcomes of stress as strain.

The US National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (1999) defined job stress as "harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker and job stress can lead to poor health and even injury". Work stress, job stress and occupational stress are often used interchangeably (Dollard, Winefield and Winefield, 2003).

Work stress is defined as a result of interaction between the individual with the job and environment that causes deviation in their normal functioning like being in anxiety and depressed (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1999; Beehr and Newman, 1978).

Gaillard and Wientjes (1994) stated that work stress is defined as the occurrence of negative emotions, which are evoked by demanding situations in the workplace. Examples of negative emotions are fear, anger, guilt, shame, grief, envy and jealousy (Buunk *et al.*, 1998). Emotions are defined as relatively short-lived affective reactions that have a specific object as a reference moods are more enduring states without referents (Ekman and Davidson, 1994; Fridja, 1993). Emotions and moods have a physiological (e.g. blood pressure), behavioral (e.g. facial expression) and a feeling component (Larsen, 2000).

Flippo (1984) stated that stress is any experience that creates physiological and psychological imbalances within an individual. Stress at the workplace occurs when an environmental situation is perceived as presenting demands which threaten to exceed a person's capabilities or resources in meeting them (Stoner and Freeman, 1989). Work stress, either acute or chronic, would mean that less organizational effectiveness since stressful employees usually are not able to fully concentrate on their task (Ungku Norulkamar, 1995).

Work stressors or hazards or risks are being defined as environmental situations or events potentially capable of producing the state of stress (Baker, 1985; Beehr, 1989; Beehr and Bhagat, 1985; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1987). Stressors could be physical or psychosocial in origin and both can affect physical and psychological health, and could interact with each other (Cox, Griffiths and Rial-Gonzalez, 2000). Physical stressors may include biological, bio-mechanical, chemical and radiological or psychosocial hazards.

Psychosocial hazards (stressors) are those aspects of work design and the organisation and management of work, and their social and environmental contexts, which have the potential for causing psychological, social or physical harm (Cox and Griffiths, 1995).

Dollard, Winefield and Winefield (2003) stated that there is general agreement in the literature about what a stressor is (antecedent of stress) and what a strain is a (consequence of stress). Strain refers to the reactions to the condition of stress and these reactions may be transitory, but short-term strains are presumed to have longer-term outcomes (Sauter *et al.*, 1990).

According to Schnall *et al.* (2002), occupational strain may include psychological effects (e.g. cognitive effects, inability to concentrate, anxiety), behavioural effects (e.g. use of alcohol, smoking) and physiological effects (e.g. increased hypertension). Burnout has been described as a three-dimensional syndrome characterised by the emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

According to Atkinson (1988), burnout is an excessive reaction to a continuing stressful situation. Symptoms of burnout include apathy, helplessness and hopelessness, overlaid with cynicism and possibly selfishness. The most common response to burnout is to leave both the job and the profession. Bitterness may pervade the individual who then has difficulty settling in any job. Burnout is an extreme and severe response, which probably requires professional intervention.

2.3 Managerial Stress Model

Various recent models of stress emphasize the impact of both structural factors and the individual subjective experience of these factors as stressful (Handy, 1988).

SOURCES OF STRESS

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

DISEASE

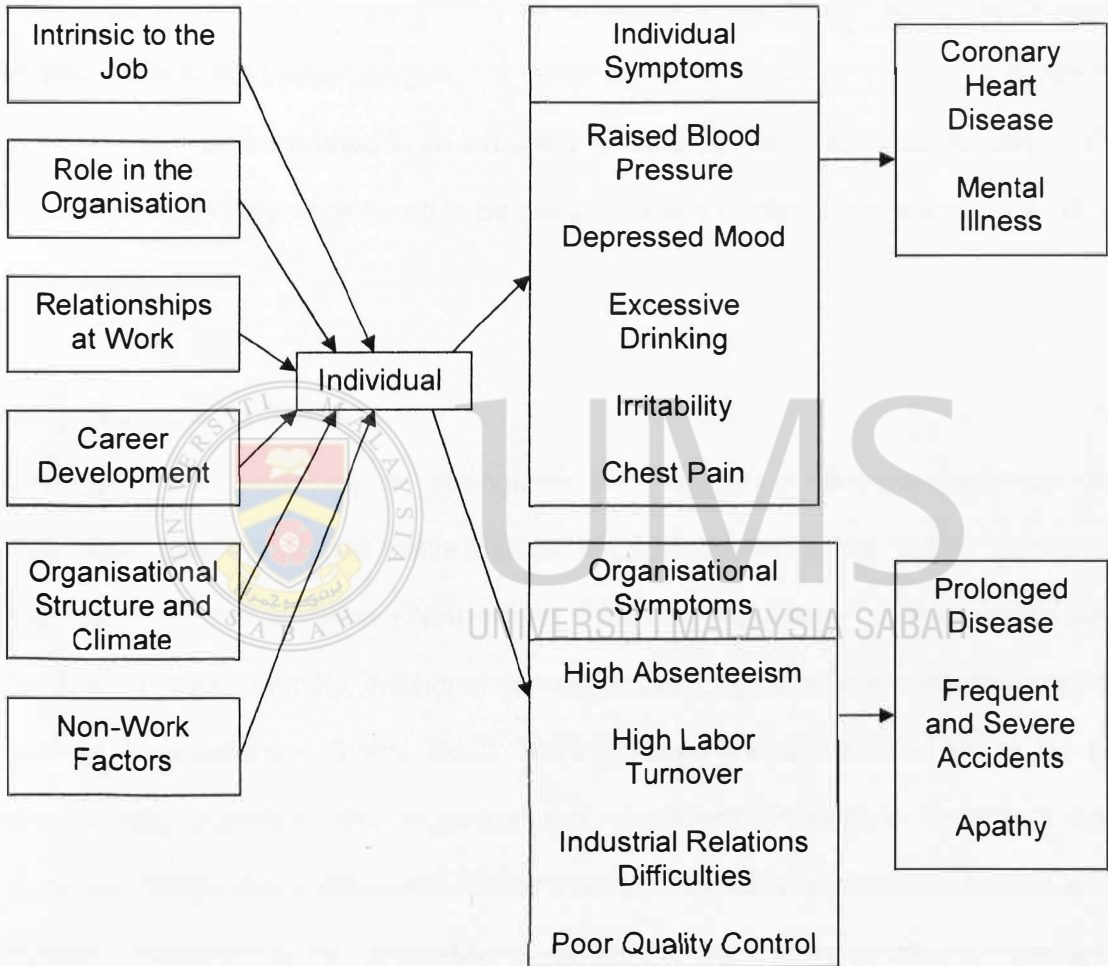


Figure 2.1: Dynamics of Work Stress

Source: Cartwright, S. and Cooper, C. L. 1997. "Dynamics of Work Stress." Managing Workplace Stress. pp.14.

According to Cooper and Marshall (1976), there has been a determined effort by social scientists to consider more systematically the sources of management and

organisational stress. The researchers stated that a study of the literature reveals a formidable list of over 40 interacting factors, which might be the sources of managerial stress. Seven major categories of stress were identified by them, which include factors intrinsic to the job, role in the organisation, relationships at work, career development, organisational structure and climate, extraorganisational sources of stress and characteristics of the individual.

Cartwright and Cooper (1997) presented a model on the dynamics of work stress which is illustrated in Figure 2.1 which identified six major sources of pressure at work which are implicated in an individual's stress profile. These factors vary in the degree to which they were found to be casually linked to stress in a particular work or organisation.

2.4 Consequences of Stress

Although stress may help to strengthen an employee's resistive resources, an overstress (distress) would make him or her feel overwhelmed, out of control or intimidated by the situation (Wan Halim, 1991). A number of consequences can result from stress, namely, individual consequences, organisational consequences or burnout (Moorhead and Griffin, 1992). The symptoms and outcomes of stress can be divided into individual and organisational symptoms (Rollinson, Broadfield and Edwards, 1998). The authors stated that individual symptoms comprise of increased diastolic blood pressure, increased cholesterol level, heart problems, smoking, drinking, depression, job dissatisfaction and reduced aspiration. Organisational symptoms include high absenteeism, high employee turnover, difficulties with industrial relations and poor work quality that lead to poor performance.

Mayer (2001) stated that some of the signs of job stress are headache, sleep disturbances, difficulty in concentrating, short temper, upset stomach, job dissatisfaction and low morale.

According to Wright and Noe (1996), health problems, absenteeism and turnover, performance problems and burnout are outcomes of stress. The authors further elaborated that many health problems have been linked – directly or indirectly to stress. When stress leads to health problems, not only the employees suffer, but also the organization ultimately bears higher costs. The cost of providing health insurance to employees has risen much faster than wages over the last few decades. The authors further stated that the health problems associated with stress may lead employees to be absent more often than they otherwise might be.

Wright and Noe (1996) also noted that stress could contribute to absenteeism by making employees less motivated to be at work. A belief that the job or the organisation is the source of negative stress also is among the reasons an employee might seek another job. Therefore, organizations with excessive stress may experience higher turnover. In performance problems, a person who is under stress focuses on the stressor, so the person's concentration on the job slips. Stress can also impair performance through the personal toll it takes; employees who are exhausted, distracted, or depressed simply cannot perform as well. Employees who experience excessive stress also tend to have more accidents and to behave more violently. The authors concluded that such behavior is damaging to the employee and those around him or her.

Sledge (1999) mentioned that a certain amount of stress is important to assist people in performance and a little pressure motivates people to perform. Wright and Noe (1996) stated that not all stress hurts employees and the organisations. If no demands are placed on employees, they will become bored and lack motivation. A moderate level of stress, such as challenging but achievable goals, can energize and motivate employees.

Gavin and Dileepan (2002) stated that stress to a certain degree is a good thing because it gets a person out of bed in the morning and makes him or her productive, but it's important to have just a healthy dose of it. The authors further

stated that the American Institute of Stress compares a healthy amount of stress to the correct tension on a violin string: "Not enough produces a dull, raspy sound. Too much tension makes a shrill, annoying noise or snaps the string. However, just the right degree can create a magnificent tone."

2.5 Factors Affecting Work Stress

Work-related stress is a growing concern because it has significant economic impact and implications for the organisations through employee dissatisfaction, lowered productivity and lowered emotional and physical health of the employees (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1987).

It has also been mentioned that organisational and extraorganisational stressors lead to stress through cognitive appraisal which, in turn, leads to poor emotional health, poor physical health and behaviours which harm the organisation (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1987; Cooper and Marshall, 1978).

Dua (1994) stated that there is a fair degree of agreement on the variables that act as organisational stressors. Cooper and Marshall (1978, 1988) have identified that intrinsic job factors (e.g. poor working conditions and work overload), role in organisations (e.g. role conflict and ambiguity), career development (e.g. lack of promotion policies and job security), poor relationships at work and organisational culture (e.g. politics in organisations and lack of participation in decision making) as organisational stressors. Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) have also noted similar factors as job stressors.

According to Rollinson, Broadfield and Edwards (1998), the potential stressors in a person's life can be divided into three groups, which are environmental, organisational and individual stressors. Environmental stressors include technical, social, political and economic changes. Organisational stressors comprise of organisational characteristics and conditions, job demands and role characteristics. Individual stressors consist of personal characteristics, strengths and weaknesses,