
THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AS PREDICTORS IN THE PROCESS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS FOR ROMANIAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

The present paper investigates the complex topic of occupational stress and presents the results of a research focused on the relationship between stressors, occupational stress effects and some personality dimensions, emphasising on the role of the individual differences, as predictors/ moderators for the perceived effects of occupational stress. For this study we have used the variables from the Romanian version of the *Pressure Management Indicator*: stressors (workload, relationships, responsibilities, managerial role, home/work balance, etc.), effects (job satisfaction, health, etc.), individual differences: personality (type A pulsion, impatience, influence and control) and coping strategies (problem focus, life-work balance, social support). The analysis and interpretation of data offered by the answers of 80 Romanian teachers have shown that a predictor role in the stress process is played by the coping mechanisms and specific personality factors.

Keywords: stressors, effects, coping strategies, individual differences, personality

1. Introduction

Stress in different work settings is one of the major topics investigated in the last years from different perspectives, because of the costs and effects at individual and organizational level. The literature presents numerous definitions, theories and models of occupational stress [1-11]. The teachers are an important socio-professional category in one's society life and they face different stressors that can lead to various stress reactions. These reactions are influenced by the individual differences and the stress management mechanisms. Stress at teachers is a real phenomenon and is associated with health related issues, recruitment and professional selection, and work place abandon.

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2. Research methodology

2.1. The purpose of the research

Stress effects depend on external factors, specific to socio-professional environment (different pressure sources) and internal factors (individual differences) that can have a predictor role, as measurable variables in the process of stress. An important role in the perception of occupational stress and in the relationship between sources and effects is played by specific coping strategies and personality factors.

In accordance to this, we proposed the following objectives: to diagnose the stressors' impact, to measure the way in which stress reactions are perceived by teachers and to identify the predictors for the occupational stress effects at teachers.

2.2. Procedure and measurement

The research was performed on a group of 80 teachers from a Romanian gymnasium. First of all, the teachers were questioned about their perception, in order to identify possible stressors, effects to occupational stress and specific coping strategies (including religious coping mechanisms) from the academic environment. There were organized also informal discussions and focus groups with the participants and then the Romanian version of the *Pressure Management Indicator* [3] was distributed.

2.3. The participants

The mean age of the participants was 39.88 years. Among them 23 (28.8%) were men and 57 (71.2%) women. The years spent in the organization (experience) vary from 1 to 37 years. 22.5% think they are the subject of external pressure and only 11 of them reported a major illness in the last 3 months.

3. Results and discussion

After processing and analyzing the statistical correlations, as shown in Tables 1-3 (only significant data are shown), we noticed the following facts:

- *Self Confidence* decreases as the *responsibility* for their facts increases ($r = -0.234$, $p < 0.05$), as their *work is overloaded* ($r = -0.221$, $p < 0.05$) and as the *organizational strains* increase ($r = -0.388$, $p < 0.01$).
- *Job satisfaction* correlates negatively with *Workload* ($r = -0.321$, $p < 0.01$), *Relationship* ($r = -0.271$, $p < 0.05$) and *Organizational climate* ($r = -0.250$, $p < 0.05$). So, the extreme perception of professional challenges, unsatisfactory relationships and tension in the organization decrease the *job satisfaction* of the teachers.

- Regarding the *organizational satisfaction*, it can be observed a negative correlation with the following factors: *Workload* ($r = -0.305$, $p < 0.01$) and *Relationships* ($r = -0.308$, $p < 0.01$). This can be translated as: the satisfaction at work decreases when the teachers have to perform a more difficult task and the relationships with the colleagues are unsatisfactory.

Table 1. Correlation between stressors and effects.

| Stressors Effects | W | Rel | Rec | Org | P Res | Man | Home | Daily |
|-----------------------------|----------|----------|---------|----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| Job satisfaction | -0.321** | -0.271* | | -0.250* | | | | |
| Organisational satisfaction | -0.305** | -0.308** | | | | | | |
| State of mind | | | -0.247* | -0.344** | -0.279* | -0.309** | -0.393** | -0.480** |
| Resilience | | | | | | | -0.374** | -0.353** |
| Confidence level | -0.221* | | | -0.388** | -0.234* | | | |
| Physical symptoms | -0.230* | | | -0.311** | | | -0.237* | |
| Energy levels | | | | -0.222* | | | | |

Note: $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$

Legend: W – workload, Rel – relationship, Rec – recognition, Org – organisational climate, P Res – personal responsibility, Man – managerial role, Home – home-work balance and Daily – daily hassles.

Table 2. Correlations between personality, coping and stress effects.

| Effects Personality | Job | Org sat | Org sec | Org com | State | Res | Conf | Phys | Energy |
|------------------------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----------|---------|
| Problem focus | | | | | 0.304** | 0.328** | | | |
| Life/work balance | 0.264* | | | | 0.293** | | | 0.255* | 0.342** |
| Impatience | | -0.225* | | | | | | -0.363** | |
| Control | | 0.225* | 0.461** | | | | 0.270* | 0.226* | |
| Personal influence | | 0.486** | 0.260* | | | | | | |

Note: $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$

Legend: Job – job satisfaction, Org sat – organisational satisfaction, Org sec – organisational security, Org com – organisational commitment, State – state of mind, Res – resilience, Conf – confidence level, Phys - physical symptoms and Energy – energy levels.

The coping mechanisms used in an efficient way, help teachers to perceive stressors at a low level with positive results regarding stress effects.

- *The Life/work balance* correlates positively with the *Job satisfaction* ($r = 0.264$, $p < .05$), with the *State of mind* ($r = 0.293$, $p < .01$), *Physical symptoms* ($r = 0.255$, $p < .05$) and the *Energy level* ($r = 0.342$, $p < .01$).

- *Focusing on the problem* positively correlates with the flexibility and teacher's *optimism* for solving problems ($r = 0.328$, $p < 0.01$) and with the *State of mind* ($r = 0.304$, $p < 0.01$).
- The *Managerial role* has a negative influence on *Life/work balance* ($r = -0.251$, $p < 0.05$).
- Is also interesting to observe that there is a negative association between *Personal responsibility* and *Personal influence* ($r = -0.258$, $p < 0.05$), meaning that teachers' capacity to influence the others decreases when personal responsibilities increase.

Table 3. Correlations between personality, coping and stress sources.

| Stressors Personality | Workload | Relationships | Recognition | Org. climate | Personal responsibility | Managerial role | Home/ Work Balance |
|--------------------------|----------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Life/work balance | | | | | | -0.251* | |
| Impatience | | 0.255* | 0.221* | 0.264* | | | |
| Personal influence | | | | | -0.258* | | |

Note: $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$

Table 4. Regression between personality factors and stress reactions.

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| | B | Std. Error | β | | |
| Constant | 110.753 | 21.198 | | 5.225 | 0.000 |
| Personality (individual differences) | 0.681 | 0.330 | 0.227 | 2.063 | 0.042 |

Dependent variable: effects/reactions to stress

Table 5. Regression between coping mechanisms and stress reactions.

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| | B | Std. Error | β | | |
| Constant | 106.994 | 16.803 | | 6.368 | 0.000 |
| Coping mechanisms | 0.880 | 0.310 | 0.306 | 2.835 | 0.006 |

Dependent variable: effects/reactions to stress

In the following part we wanted to identify the individual differences and coping mechanisms that can be prediction factors for perceiving the effects of stress. Therefore, after carrying out regression analyses between certain operational dimensions – considered independent variables – and the stress' effects – considered dependent variables – some prediction factors for the effects of the occupational stress for teachers were identified.

- Cumulated personality factors can predict the effects of stress. In general, an equilibrated level of personality factors determine a moderate level of stress, meaning a medium-high health level and work satisfaction at ($\beta = 0.227$, $p < 0.04$) (Table 4);

- The coping mechanisms (especially *problem focus* and the *life/work balance*) are predictive factors for general stress effects ($\beta = 0.306$, $p < 0.006$) (Table 5);
- The dimensions of *control* and *personal influence* are prediction factors for the general effects of stress ($\beta = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 6).

Table 6. Regression between personal influence, control and stress reactions.

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|---|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| | B | Std. Error | β | | |
| Constant | 96.360 | 12.996 | | 7.415 | 0.000 |
| Influence and control | 2.072 | 0.460 | 0.455 | 4.507 | 0.000 |
| Dependent variable: effects/reactions to stress | | | | | |

The results led us to the general conclusion that the *stressors variables* have generally a *negative impact on the outcome variables (effects)* and if the coping mechanisms are used in an efficient way, they will get teachers to perceive stressors at a lower level with positive results regarding stress effects.

As well, a strong relationship was established between teachers' personality and professional challenges. It could be observed that an equilibrated structure and behaviour are compatible with low socio professional stress. Some personality factors and coping mechanisms have predictor role for stress effects: control and personal influence, life/work balance, problem focus.

The participating teachers report also (from the qualitative data), that sometimes they use religious coping strategies for confronting extreme occupational and life stressors.

5. Conclusions

Relying on already published studies and research projects on occupational/organizational stress [12-14], stress regarded from a psychological and psychodramatical perspective [6] and the developing coping abilities in confronting stress in organisations [15, 16]), our study outlines the impact of coping mechanism and personality factors in the process of occupational stress for a group of Romanian teachers.

After diagnosis, we proposed some stress management strategies. It is better for teachers to be proactive, rather than reactive, with the management of stress. A widely recognized proactive stress management method is to maintain a *healthy physical state* through regular exercise, a nutritional diet and good sleep. Another well recognized proactive method of combating stress is to maintain a *strong mental state*: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Establishing clear classroom expectations can alleviate many of the stressors existing in a classroom between the teachers and students. For that we suggest the teachers to establish methods of instruction, methods of assessment, a code of conduct, the parental involvement, opened attitude towards pupils, to maintain the pupils busy during class, to offer pupils recompenses for their positive behaviour, to organize the lesson in advance, to improve physical

conditions and to assure the necessary material resources, etc. A good practice for teachers is to set up expectations from the beginning and to prevent any escalation of anxiety in the classroom.

Another proactive stress management technique is the **control of work environment**. An efficient and effective teacher is proficient in time management, prioritization and organization. Regarding this we recommend: to develop a supportive organizational culture towards the employers and pupils; to increase the group cohesion; to involve teachers in different projects and to stimulate the organizational commitment; to group problem solving; to increase communication inside the organization; to improve the management style; to use more frequently recompense and appreciation towards teachers' efforts.

Regarding **relationships**, we recommend: to express the feelings and ideas towards colleges in an assertive way; to talk problems with colleges; to ask for advice from the experienced teachers; to offer support/information from the experienced teachers to the young ones; to participate at courses for continuous training.

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In this article, all the authors have equal contributions.

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