

Literature Review on Gender Differences in the Causes and Management of Work Stress

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Abstract

Despite the fact that gender equality in the workplace is ideal, studies show that women tend to excel in some areas and men in others. However, under the present period of economic downturn, social upheavals and political uncertainty, employees from all works of life, ages, sexes, and levels are exposed to work stress. As such, different persons adopt different strategies to cope with and manage workplace stress. Stress is a state of psychosomatic or behavioural abnormality resulting from substantial imbalance between demands and response capability, which is caused by constraints imposed on an individual's ability to attain a desired outcome. This study drew from an on-going study on gender differences in coping and managing work stimulated stressors among employees. The research method adopted was a multi-methods literature search approach to ensure a wider coverage in researching available literature sources as well as in obtaining a wide variety of literature. Based on the literature reviewed, the study found that differences exist in the characteristics of males and females with regard to stress in the workplace as well as their sources of stress. Again, there are differences in stress management and coping strategies between males and females in the workplace. Based on the findings of the study, it is suggested among others, that managements of organizations should review their operations to accommodate gender differences by increasing the level of social support, paying workers' salaries timely and providing sporting/games facilities or even organizing sports fiestas, to keep males and females fit and more productive.

Key Words: Gender, Stress, Source, Gender Characteristics, Stress Management

Introduction

Growing evidence suggests that different types of situations stress women and men (Danku, Dzomeku, Dodor & Adede, 2016; Sulaiman & Akinsanya, 2011). Onoh (2009) observed that present day's executives in all sectors of the economy and, indeed, a reasonable number of people from all works of life are ravaged by stress, particularly under the present period of economic hardship, social upheavals and political uncertainty. As cited in Ubangari and Bako (2014), Oyerinde (2004) noted that every individual, regardless of race or cultural background, social and occupational status and even children experience stress in many ways. However, Calvarese (2015) observed that, overall, more females experienced higher levels of depression, frustration, and anxiety than their male counterparts when reacting to stress. Males also tended to have other psychological reactions. According to Matud (2004) and McDonough and Walters (2001), men are more likely to list finances and work-related events as sources of stress (stressors), whereas women were more likely to list family and health-related events.

Mahakud, Sharma and Gangai (2013) and Onoh (2009) noted that job stress is a prevalent problem in modern life. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2006) as recorded in Pilar, Rafeal, and Simo (2013), predicted that the number of people suffering stress-related conditions caused or made worse by work was likely to increase. This has the propensity to disrupt the behaviour of employees in an organization (Nwadiani, 2006), as the cost associated with it is enormous, affecting both employees and the organization (Hart and Cooper, 2001). Specifically, Brown and Uehara (2008) and Reskin (2008) found out that stress affects organizational performance and efficiency.

Pilar, et al (2013) noted that factors such as downsizing and outsourcing, the increasing need for flexibility in functions and skills, the increasing number of adhoc contracts, the growing job insecurity, and poor working conditions are imposing increasing severe demands on workers, with attendant tension. Ubangari and Bako

(2014) noted that it could be a side effect of serious illness or disease, and is associated with daily hassles, the workplace and family responsibilities.

Although Edword (2011) asserted that optional stress could be a source of positive motivation to succeed, most scholars associate stress with negative outcomes. Siu (2003) noted that it leads to greater health costs, a higher incidence of absenteeism and labour turnover, frequent accidents, and poor job performance. Juliana and NurAqilah (2012), Hurtado, et al, cited in Zakaria, Omar and Asmawi (2015), Times News Network (2013) and Odisha (2014) observed that people exposed to stress experience health complications such as heart attack, hypertension, migraine, depression, eating disorder; some consider migrating and leaving the job and, the worst, some tend towards committing suicide.

Many studies have been carried out on the concept of stress in the workplace. However, the present study focused explicitly on gender differences in managing stress in the workplace, using the literature review approach. It builds on the premise of Scott (2015), which stated that gender differences in the workplace typically stem from social factors, which influence the behaviours of men and women. That is, the focus is on how socially constructed gender norms affect employees' conditioned responses to the manifestation of work-related stress. The study specifically sought to find out whether:

- differences exist in the characteristics of males and females with regards to stress in the workplace;
- there are differences in the sources of stress between males and females; and
- there are differences in stress management and coping strategies between males and females in the workplace

Literature Review

Understanding Gender

By gender, we mean a socially constructed definition of women and men or the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity, determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life. McKeand (2016) observed that gender stereotypes begin to appear during puberty or adolescence, when gender roles intensify and are more clearly defined. Depending on the context, Udry (1994), Haig (2004) and the World Health Organization (2015) observed that gender characteristics may include biological sex (i.e., the state of being male, female, or an intersex variation), sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles), or gender identity.

To clearly understand gender in this context, we adopted the definition by Vlassoff (2007) that gender is the collection of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. The Health Canada's gender-based analysis policy of 2000 also stated that gender is relational. That is, gender roles and characteristics do not exist in isolation. They are rather defined in relation to one another and through the interaction of men and women or boys and girls. We therefore adopt that in relation to the study at hand; *gender refers to anthology of generally acceptable biological, behavioural, mental and psychological characteristics, which influence the ability of an individual to manage work-related stress*. Collins (2012) found that each gender has firmly entrenched characteristics, with women showing more sensitivity, warmth and apprehension than men; while emotional stability, dominance, rule-consciousness and vigilance are more typically male characteristics.

Meaning and Concept of Occupational Stress

Koontz, Cannice and Weihrich (2008) observed that as a very complex phenomenon, it is no surprise that stress has no commonly accepted definition. Selye (1964), cited in Okwuagwu and Agu (2017), defined stress as the physical and psychological response to adverse conditions or influences in the workplace setting or environment. Similarly, Ivancevich and Matteson (1993) provided a widely used working definition of stress, which is "an adaptive response, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological processes that is a consequence of any external (environmental) action, situation, or event that places excessive psychological and/or physical demands on a person. From the foregoing, Agu (2017), in Okwuagwu and Agu (2017), defined

occupational stress as “a state of psychosomatic or behavioural abnormality resulting from substantial imbalance between job demands and response capability which is caused by constraints imposed on an individual’s ability to attain a desired outcome”. This definition guides this study.

Causes of Stress among Males and Females

Several factors have been found to contribute to the level of stress between male and female genders. Collectively, Michac in Dwamena (2012) noted that factors such as poor time management, unclear job descriptions, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, inability to get things done, lack of communication, bad personal relationships, quality and complexity of task lead to stress. Ahsan, Abdullah, Fie and Alam (2009) identified home-work interface, role ambiguity and performance pressure. In the academic discipline, Akbar and Akhter (2011), Ofoegbu and Nwadiani (2006) and Archibong, Bassey and Effiom (2010) identified sources such as academic workload, student-related issues, role conflicts, research and publications, strike and school interruption, delay and irregular payment of salary and lack of instructional facilities, research, career development and interpersonal relationships are problematic.

Sulaiman and Akinsanya (2011) and Oguntimehin (2006) noted that most common causes of stress include life events or changes, frustration, minor annoyance, chronic discomfort, threat, general conflict, conflict of interests, lack of job satisfaction, system demands, and unrealistic desire for achievement, inadequate resources, and delay in promotion, overcrowding, and non-commensuration of salary with tasks, among others.

While discussing the causes of stress among female bank employees, Essien (2014) noted that the pressure of work, particularly those at the Customer Service Units and cashiers at payment counters predominantly some days when there are network problems for customers to utilize automated teller machines (ATM) for balance enquiries, withdrawals and other transactions need not be over emphasized.

Gender Differences in Stress and Coping Strategies

Tara, Kwangik, Bergquist and Sinha (2008) noted that women and men are at risk of different types of stress-related disorders, with women at greater risk for depression and anxiety and men at greater risk for alcohol-use disorders. Susceptibility to infectious diseases, hypertension, aggressive behavior, and drug abuse is generally observed to be higher in men. Conditions such as autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, depression, and anxiety disorders are relatively more prevalent among women (Holden, 2005, Kajantie & Phillips, 2005, Kudielka & Kirschbaum, 2005 & Lundberg, 2005).

Women endure higher rates of physical and mental diseases than men at all ages and in all regions of the world (Macintyre et al., 1996; Austad, 2006; Seedat et al., 2009). They experience more days of health-related reduced activity and work cessation, higher rates of hospital stays, and have higher health care costs, even when excluding diseases of the reproductive system (Wingard et al., 1989; Green and Pope, 1999; Case and Paxson, 2005). Women’s higher healthcare use further reduces their economic resources (Green and Pope, 1999; Bertakis et al., 2000; McIntyre et al., 2006). It is therefore essential to better understand gender differences in health.

The American Psychological Association (APA) in 2012 noted that men and women report wide gaps between determining what is important and how successful they are at achieving those behaviors. Thus:

-) Women are much more likely than men, to say that having a good relationship with their families is important to them (84 percent vs. 74 percent).
-) Women are also more likely than men to say that having a good relationship with their friends is important to them (69 percent vs. 62 percent)
-) Even though nearly half of all women (49 percent) say they have lain awake at night in the past month because of stress, three-quarters of women rate getting enough sleep as extremely or very important (75 percent compared with 58 percent of men).

-) Across the board, men and women's perceptions of their ability to succeed in areas that are important to their well-being are far out of line with the importance they place on these behaviors. Even more so than women, men report less likelihood of success in these areas.

To cope with stress, there are five strategies identified by scholars. These strategies are reconciled in line with existing findings, with particular focus on the American Psychological Association – APA (2012) report as follows:

- *Problem-focused coping strategy* (ability to manage or alter the problem that is causing the stress; making plans and coming up with different solutions to the same problem and concentrating on what to do next, Steyn and Kamper, 2006). Faizli, Rosli, Zam, Bahrudin and Mahudin (2007) also found that male respondents used problem-focused rather than emotion-focused coping style in dealing with stress as compared to the female respondents.
- *Emotion-focused coping strategy* (ability to control the emotions linked with the stress situation, Steyn and Kamper (2006), especially when it is believed that nothing can be done to modify environmental conditions, Richards, 2012). In the report of APA (2012), whereas men attached greater emotion to exercise as a coping strategy, women were more likely than men, to say they were just too tired (39 percent vs. 26 percent) to exercise. Six times as many women as men said that having more help with household chores would allow them to improve their willpower (23 percent vs. 4 percent).
- *Direct action techniques* (ability to take actions that help in eliminate the sources of stress, Sprenger, 2011). APA (2012) reported that men were more likely than women to say they did nothing to manage their stress (9 percent vs. 4 percent). On the other hand, women were more likely to say they needed more time (37 percent vs. 29 percent).
- *Social and community support* (ability to seek support from family, friends, and colleagues in order to receive advice, discuss feelings, get emotional support, get sympathy and understanding, Richards, 2012). APA (2012) report also shows that women tend to report more stress management activities that connect them with other people, like spending time with friends or family (54 percent vs. 39 percent) and going to church or religious services (27 percent vs. 18 percent). Again, they found out that men were less likely to say they need encouragement from friends or family in order to improve their willpower (28 percent vs. 42 percent) and slightly more likely to say they need more money (43 percent vs. 39 percent).
- *Physical coping strategies* (ability to enact the health-promoting behaviour such as physical exercises, social resources, avoidance, reading, hobbies, movement, and meditation to alleviate stress, Steyn and Kamper, 2006; Mapfumo et al., 2012 & Richards, 2012). APA (2012) reported that women were far more likely than men to say they read to manage stress (57 percent vs. 34 percent for men). On the other hand, men were more likely than women to say they played sports (16 percent vs. 4 percent) and listened to music (52 percent vs. 47 percent) as a way of managing stress.

Empirical Review

Gannon (2012) reviewed available studies and concluded that while Women are team players, persuasive, like challenges and are honest and dedicated, the Men, on the other hand are early adopters of technology, will ask for what they want, will 'wing' their doubt and make friends in high places. According to the APA (2012), regardless of their sources of stress and the physical and emotional symptoms of stress that men and women report, both groups say they manage their stress in very different ways. In general, though, both men and women tend to choose sedentary activities like reading, listening to music and watching television to manage stress over healthier behaviours like seeing a mental health professional or exercising.

Faizli, Rosli, Zam, Bahrudin, & Mahudin (2007) conducted a study on gender differences in stress coping styles among psychology students in International Islamic University Malaysia. It was hypothesized that male respondents would be more likely to use problem-focused rather than emotion-focused coping style in dealing with stress as compared to the female respondents. The actual survey was administered to 50 psychology

students (25 males and 25 females). An analysis of variance of the data failed to support the hypothesis, with $F(1, 48) = 3.273, p = .077$. Justifications of the results in terms of overlapping roles and responsibilities for both males and females were discussed.

In addition, the results of Kelly, Tyrka, Price and Carpenter (2008) on sex differences in the use of coping strategies: predictors of anxiety and depressive symptoms, showed that the interaction between biological sex and particular types of emotion-focused coping styles, including positive reframing and self-blame, are related to the experience of subclinical levels of depression and anxiety. First, women who reported lower levels of positive reframing also had higher scores on a measure of depression, although a similar effect was not observed with men. In addition, women who reported higher levels of self-blame also endorsed higher levels of trait anxiety; this was not true for men.

Gentry, Chung, Aung, Keller, Heinrich, & Maddock (2007) carried out a study on Gender Differences in Stress and Coping among Adults living in Hawaii. Four hypotheses guided the study, which included that there would be no gender differences in the readiness to use stress management strategies. A statewide cross-sectional telephone-survey of 1518 participants was conducted during the spring and summer of 2006. Results indicated that women reported higher overall perceived stress levels, but there was no difference in the experienced social stressors and health stressors between genders. Men perceived more stress from personal factors. There were no gender differences in the perceived ability to cope with stress. However, women were more likely to use adaptive coping strategies, whereas men were more likely to use maladaptive and avoidance coping strategies. There were no significant gender differences in stages of change for stress management. Based on the study, they concluded that interventions can be developed to help people better cope with stress.

The purpose of the study of Sio, Cedrone, Sanità, Ricci, Corbosiero, Traglia, Greco and Stansfeld (2017) was to assess the quality of life with special attention to gender differences. The HSE-IT questionnaire and the WHO-5 Well-Being Index were administered to a group of workers (74 males and 33 females). The authors also used Cronbach's alpha test to assess the internal consistency of both questionnaires and the Mann-Whitney test to evaluate the significance of gender differences in both questionnaires. The HSE-IT highlighted the existence of work-related stress in all the population with a critical perception regarding the domain "Relationships." Furthermore, gender analysis highlighted the presence of two additional domains in the female population: "Demand" ($p = 0.002$) and "Support from Managers" ($p = 0.287$). The WHO-5 highlighted a well-being level below the standard cut-off point with a significant gender difference ($p = 0.009$) for males (18, $SD = 6$) as compared to females (14, $SD = 6.4$). Cronbach's alpha values indicated a high level of internal consistency for both of our scales. The study concluded that the risk assessment of quality of working life should take into due account the individual characteristics of workers, with special attention to gender.

Craciun (2013) studied "Coping strategies, self-criticism and gender factor in relation to quality of life". The main objective of the study was to identify the relation between the perceived stress level, coping strategies and reported self-criticism. The second objective was to investigate the relationship between gender, coping strategies, level of self-criticism and the quality of life. A total of 228 students in psychology and law were investigated and they completed a perceived stress scale, a stress coping instrument, a Self-Criticism scale and Quality of Life scale. Results found significant differences between males and females in the selection of coping strategies. Results showed also that the variables coping strategies - task oriented and emotion, gender and self-criticism were significantly related to quality of life.

Calvarese (2015) examined the relationship between gender and reactions to stress among university students. University students were surveyed on how they typically responded when under perceived stress. There were significant differences between males and females concerning their reactions to stress. Overall, more females experienced higher levels of depression, frustration, and anxiety than their male counterparts when reacting to stress. Males also tended to have other psychological reactions different from those listed on the survey. In

addition, while the stress reaction of anger was barely statistically insignificant, more females expressed anger than males as a reaction to stress.

Summary of Findings

Based on the literature reviewed, the study found that:

- ✓ Differences exist in the characteristics of males and females with regard to stress in the workplace. Thus, males are early adopters of technology, ask for what they want, wing their doubts and make friends easily. On the other hand, females are team players, persuasive, like challenges and are more dedicated. Again, whereas males appreciate exercises and are not likely to seek encouragement from friends and family members, the females abhor exercises, attach more emotion to having help with household chores and report more stress management activities that connect them with other people.
- ✓ There are differences in the sources of stress between males and females. In other words, males perceive more stress from personal factors and need more money; while the females report higher overall stress levels. In addition, more than the males do, females report high level of self-blame, depression, frustration and anxiety.
- ✓ In terms of stress management and coping strategies, there are differences between males and females in the workplace. Although both males and females use sedentary activities such as reading, listening to music and watching television, the study found that males use problem-focused strategies; while females use more of emotion-focused strategies. Again, whereas females use adaptive coping strategies, males use maladaptive and avoidance coping strategies.

Conclusion

Employees need a certain degree of pressure to be motivated to perform well, solve problems and be creative. This situation gives rise to a feeling of confidence, of being in control and being able to tackle and handle tasks, challenges and demands. However, where a person's performance deteriorates, the adaptive bodily functioning becomes disrupted, the response, whether physiological, cognitive, emotional, or behavioural becomes maladaptive, thereby, results in stress. Different people adopt different strategies in order to cope with or manage the situations that lead to stress.

This study examined gender differences in stress management. To achieve this, various studies were reviewed. Following the findings of the study, we conclude that significant differences exist between males and females in the workplace. The differences are found in their characteristics, sources of stress and stress management and coping strategies.

Managerial Implications

It is in a manager's best interest to bring stress level in the workplace to the barest minimum. The findings of this study indicate that there is the need for managements of organizations to review their operations to accommodate gender differences. Thus, an increase in the level of social support will help to keep the female employees fit and more productive in a stress-free work environment. Timely payment of salaries will help keep the males fit and more productive. Again, managements need to provide sporting/games facilities such as gym, chess, scrabble, Crèche, Restaurant, Staff bus and staff quarters for use by employees so as to assist them cope with occupational stress. We recommend that managements should organize sport fiestas for their workers from time to time. This would make the work more interesting.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Moreover, more population-based research is needed in the Nigerian work environment to fully understand how gender affects the experience of stress, as previous studies have mostly been in the developed countries and used small samples from specific demographics, such as college teachers. Still, another aspect that has been less researched in the literature on gender and occupational stress is the relative potentials of the different stressors to generate stress for men and women.

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