



Organizational Factors Associated with Occupational Stress among Lecturers in Community Colleges, Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

Background: A cross sectional study conducted to identify the organizational factors associated to the occupational stress among lecturers in selected Community Colleges, Peninsular Malaysia.

Methods: Study was conducted by using cluster-sampling method and 189 self-administrated questionnaires were distributed. A validated Malay version of Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) was used to obtain the information regarding respondent's background and their respective job scope. JCQ described four organizational factors that were decision latitude, psychological job demand, social support and job insecurity.

Results: Response rate was 87.1% with 25.9% of the lecturers were stressed. There were no significant association between occupational stress with any socio-demography factors but the result showed significant associations between occupational stress and all four organizational factors studied, decision latitude ($P<0.001$); psychological job demand ($P<0.001$); social support ($P<0.001$); and job insecurity ($P<0.001$).

Conclusion: From the result, it clearly showed that stress among lecturers came from organizational factors in their workplace. The highest organizational factors reported were insufficient social support from the employer and limited authority in decision making. These factors might cause lack of communication and poor social interaction. The occupational stress among lecturers was associated with all the organizational factors (decision latitude, psychological job demand, social support and job insecurity) in this study. Therefore, preventive measures or intervention programs need to be implemented in Community Colleges to alleviate the negative consequences.

Keywords: Occupational stress, Lecturers, Organizational factors, Job content questionnaire (JCQ)

Introduction

The stressfulness of teaching has been widely recognized. The 1990 Labor Force Survey that conducted among those 15 years old and above found that there are around 183,000 cases of the national problems of work-related stress, anxiety or depression for England and Wales (1). The educational workers like teachers, lecturers and other professionals were reported to have significantly raised rates of such psychiatric illnesses (2). Community College is an education center that

provides the necessary training and skills to the students. Community Colleges will issue prospective technical talent from the area who are assets to our country to realize that Malaysia as a country that is oriented towards technology. Courses that available are Automotive, Domestic wiring, Bakery, Hotel Hospitality and Management and many other courses. One of the reasons why lecturers in Community Colleges are having strain is due to the heavy workload. Lecturer needs to prepare

lecture note, giving lecture and conducting practical class to the student. Apart of lecture, lecturers in Community Colleges do have their core business. This includes giving lectures to the communities in their surroundings on Saturday and Sunday. However, there was no study conducted to evaluate the stressfulness of teaching in Community Colleges before.

Nowadays in the modern world, occupational stress has also become one of the most serious issues that bring many problems to the workers (3). Previously, there were several studies had been done to investigate the severity of occupational stress in Malaysia. All the studies conducted among nurses, teacher, clerks, laboratory technicians and automotive workers; showed that occupational stress was significantly associated with the organizational factors. The study conducted among 125 lecturers in the School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia showed 23.3% prevalence of occupational strain (4).

Previous studies have shown the effect of occupational stress to the organizations, which can lead to economical loss up to billion dollars per year. Health influences of the occupational stress are like headache, high blood pressure and hypertension (5, 6). If occupational stress affects a large numbers of workers, the healthiness of an organization by low workers performances, increase unsafe work practices and increase staff turnover may be jeopardized (7). Most of the organization requires their workers to have the cognitive abstract qualification like decision-making, understanding of complex organization and strong teamwork. All employees are also required to be able to analyze and solve the problems in unexpected situations in any time. It is not an easy part to fulfill all the requirements needed. Along the process of achieving the cognitive abstract qualification, employees might experience one condition that has been recognized which is stress.

A study conducted among correctional officers in Kedah concluded that the organizational factors that make workers become stress are carrier development competition, lack of staff, heavy workload, long working hour and need to replace other worker's work (8). The respondents also experi-

ence the communication conflict with their colleagues which they sometime receive the disgraced words from their colleagues. This could make difficulties in teamwork, which could give the unhealthy working environment in the organization (8).

Because of these problems, this study was conducted to determine the prevalence of occupational stress and to identify the association between occupational stress and the organizational factors among lecturers in Community Colleges, Peninsular Malaysia.

Materials and Methods

This study was a cross-sectional in design and covered 13 campuses of Community Colleges in Peninsular Malaysia. Lecturers who were willing to participate in this study were selected as the respondents according to the inclusion criteria and the lecturers who do not suit the purpose or inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. The inclusion criteria are Malaysian, 21 years old or older, and have been working in the present occupation for at least 3 months. The exclusion criteria are pregnant, on leave for more than 3 months, and were diagnosed of any psychiatric illness by the respective doctors.

A validated Malay version of JCQ was used to measure the occupational stress among lecturers in the selected Community Colleges in Peninsular Malaysia. Originally, JCQ was developed by Robert Karasek but through time, it has been translated into Malay and translated back into English, which then give validity to the previous study. JCQ evaluate four scale; decision latitude, psychological job demand, social support and job insecurity aspect of a worker. All items were scored on a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree; or often, sometimes, rarely and never). In order to obtain the total score, all variables were calculated using the formula provided in the Job Content Questionnaire User Guide (9).

For each factors, the score was dichotomized by a median cut-off point. Based on JCQ, occupational stress is defined as a high strain job, which has a

combination of high psychological job demand and low decision latitude. In addition, a combination of high psychological job demand and high decision latitude was defined as 'active', low psychological job demand and high decision latitude was defined as 'low strain' and low psychological job demand and low decision latitude was defined as 'passive'. The respondents in low strain, active and passive were grouped in non-high strain group.

Results

Two hundred and seventeen lecturers from eleven Community Colleges were selected to participate in this study. However, only hundred and eighty nine of them were willing to participate which contribute to 87.1% response rate.

Majority of the respondents were female (72%), Malay (94.7%), Muslim (95.2%), and married (81%). From the educational status perspective, 59.8% of the respondent was a Degree holder. Majority (93.7%) of the respondents had age range from 18 to 39 years old with the mean age of 31.94 ± 5.26 years old. Out of 189 respondents, 74.1% of them have income more than \$967.70 per month (\$0.31USD = RM 1.00). The mean for monthly income was $\$1158.20 \pm 268.19$ and ranged from \$387.10 to \$2516.10. Most of the respondents (78.3%) were working in their current

position in Community Colleges more than 24 months and 61.4% had more than 5 years working experience. There was no significant association between occupational stress with any socio-demography factors in this study.

The identification of organizational factors is based on the each median values for all factors. Median for decision latitude is 68. Based on the median cut-off, the score of 68 and below were considered as low decision latitude while the rest that was above 68 were considered as high decision latitude. The median for psychological job demand, social support and job insecurity are 33, 24 and 4 respectively. Table 1 describe the significant association between all organizational factors and occupational stress ($P < 0.05$). Figure 1 showed the distribution of occupational stress levels among respondents in this study. The result showed that most respondent was in passive job group (31.7%) which having low psychological job demand and low decision latitude.

Among the 189 respondents in this study, 49 from them are in high strain group. In that group, 79.6% are female, 95.9% are Malay, 89.8% aged between 18 to 39 years old and 79.6% of then are married. Out of 49 high strain respondents, 63.3% of them are degree holder, 59.2% working more than 5 years and 79.6% of then have monthly income more than \$967.70.

Table 1: Association between occupational stress and organizational factors

Organizational Factors	High Strain (n)	Non-high Strain (n)	χ^2 -value	P-value
Decision latitude			48.55	<0.001*
Low	49	60		
High	0	80		
Psychological job demand			66.85	<0.001*
Low	0	95		
High	49	45		
Social support			13.24	<0.001*
Low	43	83		
High	6	57		
Job insecurity			15.93	<0.001*
Low	15	89		
High	34	51		

N=189

Low Strain 35 (18.5%)	Active 45 (23.8%)
Passive 60 (31.7%)	High Strain 49 (25.9%)

Fig. 1: Distribution of strain category based on Karasek-Theorell Job Strain Model

Discussion

The prevalence of occupational stress among lecturers in Community Colleges, Peninsular Malaysia was 25.9%. Another 74.1% (non-high strain) of the workers were categorized as passive (31.7%), active (23.8%) and low strain (18.5%). Thus, the result had indicated that the lecturers in Community Colleges were mainly in the passive group (31.7%), which is the combination of low decision latitude and low psychological job demand.

All four organizational factors showed the significant association with the occupational stress levels. More than half respondents reported having low decision latitude. They were not giving opportunity to make decision in the organization. In Community Colleges, most of decisions were made by the administration and top management. This is one of the reasons why they feel did not have freedom of speech in giving their own opinion. Decision authority was one of the significant risk factor of job satisfaction (4). Increase control of decision authority among workers can reduce the effect of stress. It can be done by allowing workers to face the demands when they are able to do so to find the most acceptable ways (10).

The psychological job demands dimension relates to 'how hard workers work' (11), organization constraints on task completion and conflicting demands. It also relates to the workload that workers need to do. In theory, the higher the psychological job demands the higher the stress the workers experienced. The experience of distress is

associated with a wide range of physical, psychological and behavioral disturbances. According to the lecturers in Community Colleges, the workload is a never-ending story but it was still acceptable and they can handle the workload, but once a while, they cannot handle the workload as they need to complete some of the task in the very short times. Even worst, they need to stay back after office hour to settle their work and the incomplete task, or they have to bring back and work from home. Psychological job demand is one of the contributor or stressor to occupational stress in the organization. This finding is supported by a research conducted among management staff in an International Tobacco Company (12). As a lecturer, sometimes they also need to do job for supporting duties in the organization like meeting and presentation besides teaching.

Social support is known to exert a positive influence on health. Although social support did not manifest any associations with job pressure, the study found that the relationship between job pressure and health was stronger in the presence of strong social support at work, lends modest support to the buffering function of social support. In other words, an effective social support system at the workplace can counteract the harmful effects of job pressure and health. From the result, most of the respondents (66.7%) reported to have low social support. In the organization, social support comes from two ways, which are support from the colleagues and support from the top management. Lectures in Community Colleges did not have any problems with the support from their colleagues. They were close to each other and able to help each other most of the times. For them, the problem is lack of support from the top management in the organization. Limited communication is one of the factors that make insufficient support from the top management to the lecturers in Community Colleges. The development of a strong inter-personal bond between workers, often described as a 'family atmosphere', was widely perceived to smooth out potential sources of interpersonal strife and confer a degree of protection from other stresses (13). Thus, how social relations at work are managed

can have a significant influence on subjective assessment of stress and experiences of health problems.

Job insecurity undoubtedly has importance influence on occupational stress. However, low job insecurity was believed to be associated with job security, steadiness of work and the valuable skills. Most of the respondents was confident that they will not losing their current job or position in Community Colleges. This is because, the respondents were believed to have experience and they might have been trained to do their work which making they felt more secured. This result is similar to the study conducted among dental healthcare workers which job insecurity was a significant risk factor of occupational stress in laboratory technicians in HUSM (14). Lack of control over work, the work place, and the employment status have been identified both as sources of stress and as a critical health risk for some workers. Employees who are unable to exert control over their lives at work are more expected to experience job stress, and are as a result more likely to have impaired health.

Conclusions

The prevalence of occupational stress was 25.9% where all four-decision latitude, psychological job demand, social support and job insecurity were the organizational factors that contribute to the prevalence of occupational stress in this study. Results showed that there was no significant association between occupational stress levels and socio demography factors. This shows that the stress among lecturers in Community Colleges are confirmed an occupational stress, because it was came from the organizational factors, not from the other factors.

Based on the findings from this study, the relevant authorities such as the Department of Community Colleges or the Ministry of Education should implement a healthy working environment by organizing stress control programs. The implementation of program must be careful and well planned. The main objective is to reduce the levels of stress and

to produce healthy workers at the work place by improving the working condition. Employees are encouraged to create a commitment to a healthy lifestyle and actively participate in the health promotion programs offered. It is included cultivation of healthy personality traits and behaviours, avoidance of known stressors, identification and restructuring of cognitive distortions associated with stressful events, planning and prioritization, and maintenance of good physical and mental health.

Ethical considerations

This study has obtained the ethical clearance from the Medical Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University Putra Malaysia. A written consent has also been obtained from all respondents and the confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

Ethical issues (Including plagiarism, Informed Consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc.) have been completely observed by the authors.

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