

WORKPLACE STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF OF AGRICULTURAL COLLEGES IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE, ABEOKUTA

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Abstract

The study considered workplace stress and coping strategies among academic staff of Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. Specifically, the study described the socioeconomic characteristics of the academia in the study area, determined the causes of workplace stress experienced by them, determined the effects of workplace stress on the academia in the study area and ascertained the coping strategies adopted by the academia in the study area. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select 75 respondents used for the study. Data were collected using a well-structured questionnaire and was analysed using appropriate descriptive statistical tools. The findings of the study revealed that a majority (77.0%) of the respondents were males and that the mean age of the respondents was 41 years. The mean year of experience on the job of the respondents was 10 years. Furthermore, the finding of the study revealed that heavy workload ($x = 4.66$) is the leading cause of workplace stress for the respondents and that the greatest effect of workplace stress on respondents was poor health ($x = 3.09$) and feelings of burnout ($x = 2.95$). The significant coping strategies utilised by respondents included proper time management ($x = 2.55$) and relaxation with family ($x = 2.47$). The study concluded that the greatest stressor of the academia is heavy workload. The study thereby recommended that the University should uphold the recommended student-lecturer ratio established by the National University Commission to reduce the workplace stress of the academia in the university.

Keywords: Workplace stress, coping strategy, Academic staff

1.0 Introduction

The concept of stress is as old as mankind and generally speaking everyone is vulnerable to it. Although stress is a poorly understood phenomenon and knowledge of how to cope with it is still rather imperfect; yet, scholars had attempted various definitions and explanations. Showkat and Jahan (2013) considered stress as that which causes anxiety and which is usually associated with nervous tension and fatigue. Michie (2002) defined stress as an interaction between the individual and the situation. He considered it as the psychological and physical conditions that arise when the resources available to an individual are not enough to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Various authors (Ivancevich and Matteson 1988; Moorhead and Griffen 1998; Ritchie and Martin 1999) had earlier defined stress as an adaptive response to a stimulus, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological processes that are a consequence of any external action, situation or event that places extreme physical and/or psychological demand on a person.

It implies that stress could be considered as the mental or physical condition that arises from individual perceived threat or danger and the pressure to remove it. It also presupposes that although people might be faced with the same amount of pressure from situations, circumstances or events, yet, they do not experience the same amount of stress due to individual's different threshold of adjustment and adaptation.

According to Derek (2008), some important facts should be understood anytime the concept of stress is being discussed. First, stress is primarily a reaction to an external force or demand and while anything physically or mentally demanding can create stressful situations, it does not necessarily mean that it occurs. Second, for stress to happen, the situation must have sufficient impact on the person to attract his or her attention, perhaps because it causes feelings of disappointment, annoyance, hostility or simply because the individuals feels that the situation should not exist.

Third, the pressure needs to be experienced as an issue or concern of serious magnitude that the person finds it difficult to cope with. Fourth, although stress can be weakening, it is basically an adaptive response to certain stressors and not simply a state of anxiety or nervous tension. Derek (2008), supporting Lazarus (1976), equally submitted that when subject to stressors, individuals experience stress in a different amount. This implies that there exist no objective criteria to define whether a situation or condition will be stressful. Finally, Derek (2008) opined that various people possess varying capacities to cope with different stressors and that the only one who can adequately explain when and to what extent a situation is stressful is the person on the receiving end.

Although it is dangerous to compartmentalise human behaviours, yet for the purpose of organizational analysis, workplace stress has been distinguished from stress in general. Beehr and Newman (1978) and Leka, Griffiths and Cox (2004) conceptualised workplace stress as conditions arising from the interaction of people and their jobs, which are evidenced by changes within people that push them to deviate from their normal functioning. Furthermore, workplace stress could be considered to be harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when the requirements of the job runs contrary to the competencies, resources or needs of the employees (Adeoti, Shamsudin and Wan, 2017). Bourne and Yaroush (2003) categorised workplace stress into four: environmental; organisational; immediate social context; and individual. However, Dessler (2000) alluded to only two categories of workplace stressors which are environmental and personal or individual.

Blackwell (1998) and Derek (2008) affirmed that stress could show itself in an employee in these three ways: physiological which includes susceptibility to minor illness, ulcers, heart disease among others; psychological which includes frustration and aggression, anxiety, depression and burnout; and behavioural which covers impaired performance, absenteeism, alcohol or substance

abuse and turnover. Derek (2008) added another dimension in which stress can show in an employee. This he called cognitive which entails decreased concentration, poor memory, decreased attention and thought disorders. This stand is being supported by Nekoranec and Kmosena (2015) who submitted that the effect of stress on employees could be in the form of reduced performance, perception disorder and attention deficit. Furthermore, they concluded that stress could slow down employees' motor activity, get interpersonal relationship to be disrupted and weaken memory.

As a result of the various stressors available in the workplace which at various level of exposure to, could result in any of the stress related issues mentioned above, various individuals had experimented various coping strategies to deal with the stressors and the outcomes of stress. Coping strategy is used in reference to the perceptual, cognitive or behavioural responses that are used in managing, avoiding or controlling situations that could be regarded as difficult (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Zeidner and Endler, 1996). Coping strategies could also be looked upon as behavioural and cognitive efforts utilised by individuals to tolerate, handle or reduce stress by a certain stressor or control individual response to it or both (Saleem, Jamil and Khalid, 2017). Coping strategy according to Amirkhan (1994); Beehr (1995) and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) can be categorized into two: problem-focused strategy and emotion-focused strategy. The problem-focused strategy is targeted at finding solutions to the issue or situation causing stress while emotion-focused strategy involves attempt to remove or lower the emotional effects of the stress without actually trying to do anything about the situation or issue itself. In other words, the coping strategies employed by an employee are in part dependent on his/her appraisal of the situations amenability to change (Edwards and Holden, 2003).

In today's academic environment, workplace stress has become a major concern all over the world. Higher institutions in Nigeria have been reported to

have similar stressors like gross inadequate salary package and unfavourable environmental (working) conditions (NEEDS Report, 2012). Apart from these, each institution has its own peculiar workplace stressors inflicting various degrees of stress on its employees. Generally, the demand on academic staffs had increased tremendously in recent times. Academia has had to cope with the advancement in technology, conducting research and publishing in A-rated journals, teaching excessively large classes and conducting examination and processing results for different categories of students. These demands mount both physical and psychological tensions on lecturers, which require different abilities to cope with such pressure confronting them (Moorhead and Griffen, 1998).

As a result of this, various academics have resorted to different approaches to coping with numerous workplace stressful conditions. In this current political dispensation in the country, Nigeria with great emphasis on reviving agriculture, it is pertinent to look into the various workplace stresses encountered by academic staffs, who are saddled with the responsibility of training and developing the manpower required to run the agricultural sector. Also, the various coping strategies utilised by these academics should be looked into to provide a template for understanding workplace stress in Nigeria higher institutions of learning. This study therefore sought empirical answers to the following research questions: What are the causes of workplace stress among the academic staff of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta?; what are the various outcomes of stress on the academic staff of this university?; and what are the various coping strategies employed by academic staff in dealing with workplace stress in this university?. The main objective of the study is to analyse the workplace stress faced by academia in core agricultural colleges in Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta and the coping strategies utilized by them. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. describe the socioeconomic characteristics of the academia in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta;
2. determine the causes of workplace stress experienced by academia in the study area;
3. determine the effects of workplace stress on academia in the study area; and
4. ascertain the coping strategies used by academia in the study area.

2.0 Methodology of the study

The study was carried out in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. The university is one of the three specialized universities of agriculture in the country. The university became operational during the academic session of 1988. The university has nine colleges, a postgraduate school and some specialised institutes and centres. The population for the study comprised of the total academic staff of the university. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select respondents for the study. At the first stage, a purposive selection of the three colleges (COLAMRUD, COLANIM and COPLANT) offering Bachelor of Agriculture (B.Agric.) programme was made. This is because by design, the three colleges run similar curricula and students from the three colleges jointly participate in the Farm Practical Year programme in their 400 level, the programme which is also supervised and coordinated by selected academic staff members within the colleges as part of the requirement for the award of the B.Agric. Degrees in the three colleges. At the second stage, a proportionate sampling of 40 per cent of the academic staff in the colleges was carried out to give 19 respondents from COLAMRUD, 26 respondents from COLANIM and 30 respondents from COPLANT. At the third stage, the specified number of respondents from each of the colleges was selected using simple random sampling technique. In all, 75 respondents were selected for the study.

Data was collected using a well-structured and valid questionnaire. The questionnaire had four sections based on the specific objectives of the study. Section one contained items on the socioeconomic characteristics of the academic staff. The personal

characteristics of the respondents were measured at both nominal and interval levels. Section two contained questions on causes of work-place stress. Work-place stress is measured using researcher-made tool having 18 items on a five-point scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). Section three contained questions on the effects of work-place stress on academic staff. A researcher-made tool with 10 items on a four-point scale of strongly agree (4), agree (3) disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1) was used. Section four contained items on coping strategies utilised by academic staff. Another researcher-made tool of 10 items on a three-point scale was used. Data collected were analysed using specific descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Socioeconomic characteristics of respondents

The results in Table 1 shows that majority (77.30%) of the respondents were males. This implies that male gender dominated the teaching profession in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta. The majority (86.70%) of the respondents were 50 years and below. The mean age of the respondent was 41.91 years with a standard deviation of 9.54 years. This shows that the academic staffs were relatively young and are expected to be strong, agile and able to cope with the rigours associated with their jobs. The results in Table 1 also reveals that majority (85.30%) of the respondents were married. This attribute of the respondents could serve as a buffer against work-place stress on one hand, or add to work-life imbalance on the other hand, if things are not properly managed. All the respondents practise foreign religion with majority (66.70%) of them belonging to the Christian faith. Also, many (56.10%) of the respondents were between Lecturer II and Senior Lecturer positions and 18.70 per cent were Graduate Assistant and Assistant Lecturer while 25.0 per cent of the respondents were in the professorial cadre – Associate Professors and full Professors. The average year of work experience of the respondents was 9.54 years with a standard

deviation of 6.40 years. It could be deduced from the findings that a majority (69.30%) had spent ten years and below as lecturers in the university. Also, a majority (84.00%) of the respondents had doctoral certificates. This corroborates the findings above that revealed that only few of the respondents are in training positions.

3.2 Causes of workplace stress for respondents

Results presented in Table 2 shows the causes of workplace stress experienced by respondents in the study area. It shows that heavy workload ($x = 4.66$) was the leading cause of workplace stress for the respondents. Results of further analysis in Table 3 show the breakdown of the workload of the respondents and the corresponding mean values. Large number of students per class ($x = 4.47$), large number of supervisees for research ($x = 3.09$), examination invigilation and marking of scripts ($x = 3.04$), compilation and processing of results ($x = 2.84$) and lecturing of full time, part time and postgraduate students ($x = 2.64$) were the various items that made up the heavy workload of academic staff in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. This findings support Leung, Sham and Chan (2007) who reported that one of the activities that causes workplace stress is the degree of workload. The degree of workload is a combination of many of the assignments listed above. Also from Table 2, the second leading source of workplace stress to the respondents was insufficient funds for research work ($x = 4.51$) followed by poor working facilities and equipment ($x = 4.47$). Erratic power supply ($x = 4.46$) and using salary to pay for publication ($x = 4.46$) jointly came fifth among the causes of workplace stress experienced by respondents in the study area. Other notable causes of workplace stress identified were inconsistent payment of other monetary benefit ($x = 3.77$), poor working environment ($x = 4.40$) and traffic to and from work ($x = 3.22$). These sources of workplace stress mirrors what had been established in literature as sources of workplace stress. Many of the factors listed above are in line with the broad classification of causes of workplace stress by Desseler (2000) and Derek (2008).

3.3 Effects of workplace stress on respondents

The result presented in Table 4 shows the various effects of workplace stress on the respondents in the study area. The principal effect of workplace stress on respondents was poor health ($x = 3.09$) followed by feeling of burnout ($x = 2.95$) and reduced performance and productivity ($x = 2.89$). Others include aggressiveness to students and colleagues ($x = 2.44$), loss of interest in work ($x = 2.41$) and absenteeism ($x = 2.19$). These findings are in line with that of Blackwell (1998); Blumenthal (2003); Derek (2008); and Saleem *et. al* (2017) who reported that the effects of workplace stress on employee could range from physiological effects like illnesses such as headaches, migraines, and ulcers; to psychological effects like frustrations, aggression and burnout and behavioural effects like impaired performance and absenteeism from work.

3.4 Coping strategies utilised by respondents

The findings of the study presented in Table 5 reveal the various coping strategies utilised by respondents against stress in the study area. It shows that proper time management ($x = 2.55$) was the leading coping strategy used by respondents to combat stress among the academic staff of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. This finding is in line with Payne (2001) and Lambert *et al.* (2007) who reported that proper time management was the most widely used strategy of employees to confront their respective challenges. Also, relaxation with family ($x = 2.47$) and participation in religious exercise (praying and meditation on holy writ) ($x = 2.47$) were among the leading coping strategies utilised by respondents in the study area. This finding on participation in religious exercise was in line with Carver, Scheier and Wientraub (1989) who reported that employees focus on religion to facilitate emotional support against stress and for positive reinterpretation of situations. Furthermore, consultation with spouse ($x = 2.41$), reading non-academic books ($x = 2.31$) and involvement in various entertainment activities ($x = 2.15$) were some of the other coping strategies

utilised in combating workplace stress in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. This finding is in support of Edwards and Holden (2003) and Rothmann and van Rensburg (2002) who reported that employees engage in recreation and entertainment activities to reduce stressful feelings caused by negative experiences.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study establish that the majority of the academic staff of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria were males and young. Heavy workload is the leading cause of workplace stress for the academic staff in the study area. The indices of the heavy workload included large number of students for lectures, supervision and examination with result processing. The study also concluded that poor health, feeling of burnout and reduced performance and productivity are some of the effects of workplace stress on academic staff. Proper time management, relaxation with family and participation in religious exercises of praying and meditation are some of the coping strategies utilised by academic staff in combating workplace stress in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The National University Commission regulation of student to staff ratio should be upheld so as to reduce the heavy workload of the academic staff
2. School calendars and lecture time-table should be done in a way to allow for a daily break and annual leave for academic staff.
3. Recreational facilities should be provided within campus so as to allow for academic staff to participate in sporting activities.
4. Adequate remuneration for work done and research and publication grants should be made available for academic staff to reduce their financial stress.

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Table 1: Socioeconomic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Central tendency
Gender of respondents			
Male	58	77.30	
Female	17	22.70	
Age of respondents in years			
<30	17	22.70	Mean = 41.91
31-40	21	28.00	Std. dev. = 9.54
41-50	27	36.00	
51+	10	13.30	
Marital status			
Single	9	12.00	
Married	64	85.30	
Divorced	1	1.30	
Widow/Widower	1	1.30	
Religion			
Christianity	50	66.7	
Islam	25	33.3	
Rank			
Graduate Assistant	5	6.70	
Assistant Lecturer	9	12.00	
Lecturer II	11	14.70	
Lecturer I	20	26.70	
Senior Lecturer	11	14.70	
Associate Professor	14	18.70	
Professor	5	6.70	
Year of experience			
<10	52	69.30	Mean = 9.54
11-20	17	22.7	Std. dev. = 6.40
21+	6	8.00	
Educational level			
PhD	63	84.00	
MSc	10	13.30	
BSc	2	2.70	

Table 2: Causes of workplace stress for the respondents

Causes of workplace stress	Mean	Std. dev.
Heavy workload	4.66	0.56
Insufficient funds for research work	4.51	0.72
Poor working facilities and equipment	4.47	0.74
Using salary to pay for publications	4.46	0.78
Erratic power supply	4.46	0.89
Poor working environment	4.40	0.79
Working overtime to meet deadlines	3.82	1.11
Non/Inconsistent payment of monetary benefits	3.77	0.97
Lack of recreational or relaxation centres	3.67	1.06
Performing tasks not in the job description	3.63	1.12
Slow progress or career development	3.30	1.14
Delay in salary payment	3.25	1.13
Traffic experience to and from work	3.22	0.90
Lack of annual leave	3.21	1.29
Non-conducive lecture time	3.05	0.87
Insufficient recognition of effort or contribution	2.91	1.13
Poor relationships with colleagues	2.68	1.12
Too many meetings	2.50	0.93

Table 3: Indices of the heavy workload of the respondents

Index name	Mean	Std. dev.
Teaching a large number of students in a class	4.47	0.70
A large number of supervisee both undergraduate and postgraduate	3.09	0.92
Examination invigilation and processing of results	3.04	0.89
Compilation of students results	2.84	0.89
Teaching part-time, full time and postgraduate students	2.64	0.92

Table 4: Effects of workplace stress on respondents

Variables	Mean	Std. dev.
Poor health	3.09	0.81
Fatigue/Burnout	2.95	0.79
Reduced performance and productivity	2.89	0.71
Increase in the cost of health maintenance	2.86	0.77
Reduction in quality of work output	2.66	0.85
Work-life imbalance	2.66	0.86
Loss of concentration	2.63	0.87
Aggressiveness	2.44	0.90
General loss of interest	2.41	0.86
Absenteeism	2.19	0.86

Table 5: Coping strategies utilised by respondents

Variables	Mean	Std. dev.
Proper time management	2.55	0.64
Prayer and meditation on religious books	2.47	0.67
Relaxation	2.47	0.65
Consultation with spouse	2.41	0.68
Reading non-academic books	2.31	0.80
Finding time to be alone	2.27	0.60
Listening to music	2.16	0.72
Watching an entertainment programme on TV	2.15	0.73
Exercising	2.11	0.75
Hanging out with friends	2.08	0.74