

LEVELS OF PERCEIVED PROFESSIONAL STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS

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ABSTRACT

The study intended to find out the prevalence of stress in varying degrees among university academics and aimed at contributing knowledge to create awareness about the problem of stress due to teaching among university academics. It was hypothesized that majority of university academics would have high professional life stress. Study further elaborates the gender differences in the perception of the perceived professional life stress.

A total number of 200 university academics, including 100 males and 100 females participated in the study. In order to assess the stress level of university academics, the “Professional Life Stress Scale” was administered.

Descriptive Statistics and t-test were computed for the statistical analysis of the data. The results revealed that 50 %, 27 % & 23% of the university academics experienced severe, moderate and mild levels of professional stress respectively. There was no significant result for gender differences obtained in the perception of professional stress among university academics.

Stress is an inevitable part of human life. It is considered as an outcome of an individual's response to physical, emotional or environmental factors. It can be referred to mental strain and arousal of the bodily responses to different demands one has to face in the environment. Hans Selye (1978) defines Stress as 'Any external event or internal drive which threatens to upset the organismic equilibrium'. According to Selye (1978); stress can be (1) good and bad, (2) the number of events does not determine whether one is stressed or not, it is one's reaction to them, and (3) is a demand made upon the body's capacities. If the capacities are good enough, the individual responds well. If they are not, they would become distressed (Fontana, 1989). According to the transactional approach developed by Folkman & Lazarus, (1988), the stress process is dynamic, and is constantly changing as a result of the continual interplay between person and environment. According to Wiley (2000), stress is a biological phenomenon that is experienced by all individuals without considering their socio-economic status, occupation or age. Hughes, Ginnet & Curphy, (2002) defined stress as a dynamic process in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint, urgency, pressure, mental or physical tension, or demand as related to perceived outcomes, both certain and uncertain.

At present, everyone is living in a complex world where they have to deal with stress in every corner of life either at home or workplace and the situations that have been potentials to challenge their well being. Evidently, Pakistan is in developing phase and it is going through life threatening, destructive and challenging situations, which are stressful to people's existence and well being. Some of these include economic instability, religious intolerance and insecurity. Everybody seems at a striving position in various fields of life. However, at a professional level

individuals are facing tough time in stressful work and life situations. In an environment where limited opportunities are available to professionals, it seems very difficult for them to perform their duties logically and accurately. Consequently, higher frequency of failure and deprivation leads to psychological problems.

The multidimensionality of stress is evident by the fact that it takes different forms, it results from different factors and occurs in all types of environments. Despite the positive function of a certain amount of stress on an employee, research has consistently demonstrated that excessive occupational stress has adverse effects for both the physiological and the psychological well being of the employee (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). As a positive influence, stress can bring a sense of excitement in an individual and compel an individual to take actions that can result in improved performance. As a negative influence, it can result in an array of feelings such as rejection, anger and depression, which can lead to decrease in physical well being including headaches, elevated blood pressure and heart disease (Landsbergis, et al., 2001). Equally, research indicates that elevated stress levels in an organization are associated with increased turnover, absenteeism, and low morale (Jackson, 1983; Geurts, Schaufeli, & Rutte, 1999). These phenomena have been reported among numerous occupational groups (Cooper, 1984; Cooper, Cooper, & Eaken, 1988) such as managers, executives and engineers (D'souza, Gururaj & Siddeqowda 2005); doctors (Clode 2004) including academics (Ravichandran & Rajendran, R., 2007; Gandapur, S. B. & Bashir, S., 2008).

Literature indicates that there is a growing prevalence of academic stress and documents its adverse effects on the learning process (Winefield, 2000). Although there is an increasing interest in stress studies among academics globally, the majority of the studies are concentrated in Western countries

(Gmelch & Burns, 1994; Sharpley, Reynolds, Acosta, & Dua, 1996; Winefield et al., 2003) under such variables like working conditions, poor motivation, external forces and low status (Boyd & Wylie, 1994; Lam & Punch, 2001). Gillespie et al. (2001) found that stress costs a university in terms of absenteeism, tardiness and turnover. He also concluded that role related demands, lack of resources, lack of support and insufficient time are the frequently reported sources of stress among academics. Taris et al; (2001) identified that stress lead to the reactions such as cynicism toward work, lack of organizational commitment and intention to leave the job. Dua (1994) studied work related stress and concluded that stress has significant implications for universities through their academic dissatisfaction, lowered productivity and lowered emotional and physical health. In developed countries professional stress and its effects on teachers in the universities have been studied. However, few studies have been done in Asian countries, (e.g. Xiao et al. 2000).

It is a well known fact that universities play an imperative role in the economic and social life of all the developed nations. They train the nation's scientist, engineers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals and also produce much of its cutting edge research. In order to accomplish these functions fruitfully, they require high qualified staff and provide a supportive working environment. Their ability to do so has been endangered over the past decade by deteriorating working conditions. Teachers have a great responsibility to assist students to acquire knowledge and skills. When they work in deteriorating conditions and with limited resources prevalent at their homes they become more prone to stress.

In Pakistan, stress has been studied among teachers at primary and secondary schools (Pervaiz & Hanif, 2003) and university levels (Gandapur & Bashir, 2008) targeting only particular areas of research. The present research aims at determining the prevalence of stress in varying degrees among university academics.

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The purpose of the present study is to contribute knowledge on the basis of hard evidence to create an increasing awareness about identifying and handling stress caused due to teaching among university academics.

In the light of literature review, it has been hypothesized:

1. The university academics would score high on the Professional Life Stress Scale.
2. There would be significant gender differences in the perception of professional stress among university academics.

METHOD

Sample:

The convenient (non-probability) sampling technique was adopted to gather data. A total of 200 teachers (100 males and 100 females) working in public and private sector universities located in Karachi, participated in the study. Their age ranged from 30 to 45 years.

Measures:

Demographic information focused on subject's name, age, gender, marital status, education and work experience. The Professional Life Stress Scale was used to find out the level of stress among academics.

The Professional Life Stress Scale (PLSS- Fontana; 1989) comprises of forty five items (with alternative choice answers) posing questions ranging from bodily symptoms (e.g. sleeplessness) to achieving personal/professional goals.

The reliability indicators for the PLSS are reported by Alpha Co-efficient at 0.74 and split half methods at 0.65. The scale generates ranges indicating different level of stress that an individual can experience.

Procedure:

The questionnaire was given to each participant, who was working as a university academic at the designation of lecturer, assistant professor or associate professor at different public and private universities located in Karachi. They were briefed about the purpose of the study and the willing academics were requested to fill in the questionnaire along with their informed consent.

Statistical Analysis:

Descriptive statistics has been used to identify the prevalence of professional stress among university academics. One-way Anova test has been employed to find out the significance of the difference among levels of professional life stress. t-test has been employed to test the significance of differences among the male and female university academics. All statistical calculations have been calculated through SPSS.

RESULTS

TABLE I

Table showing levels of professional life stress among university academics in terms of percentages.

Level of Professional Stress	Frequency	Percentage
Mild	46	23
Moderate	54	27
Severe	100	50
Total	200	100

Graph i

Different levels of Professional Stress among academics

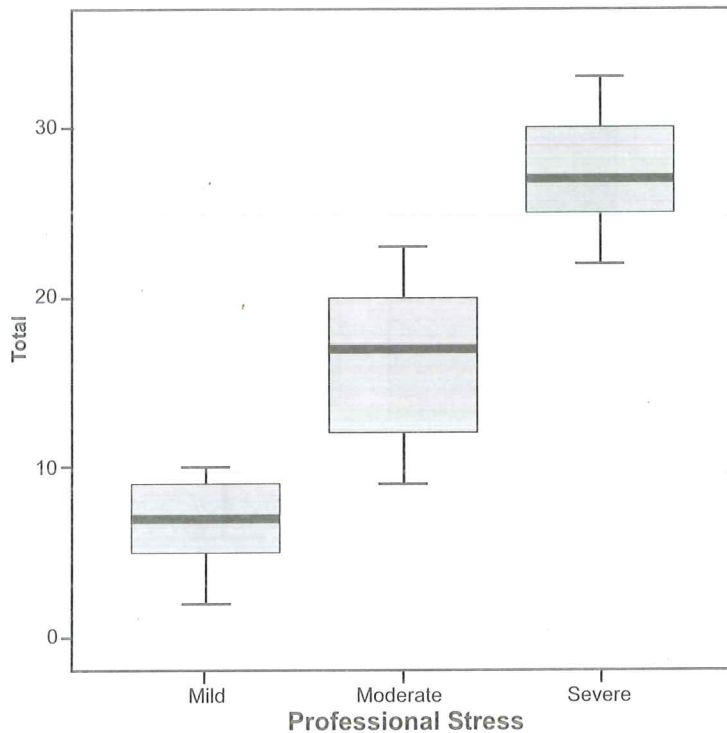


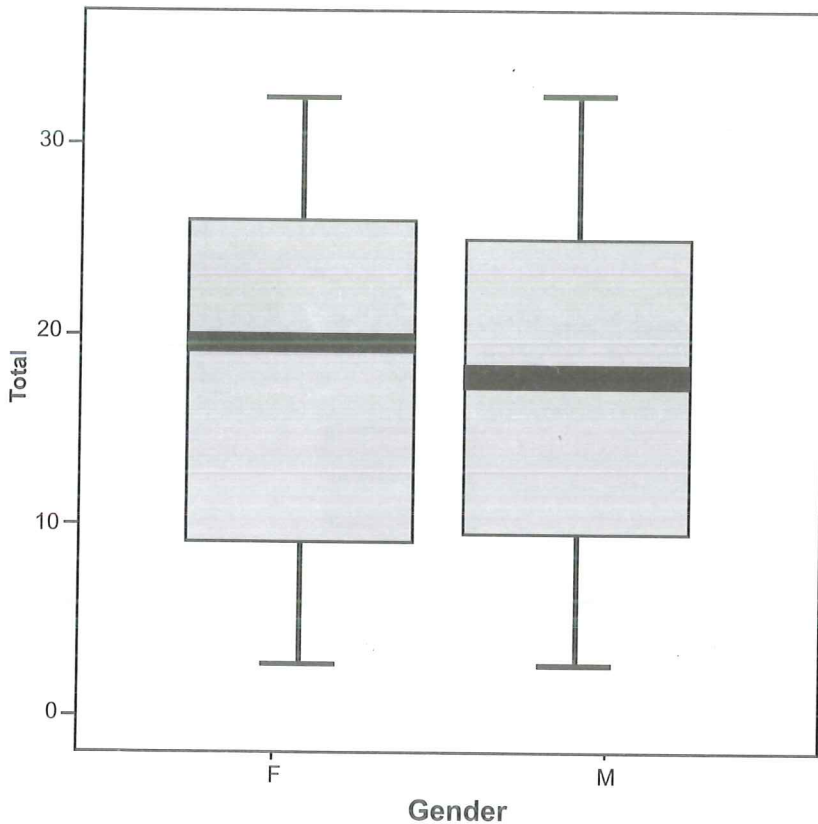
TABLE II

Summary of t-test showing gender difference.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Std. Error Mean	t	Df	Sig.
Total	Male	100	20.05	8.609	.861	0.345	198	P>0.05
	Female	100	19.61	9.418	.942			

Graph ii

Gender Difference in level of Professional Stress among University academics



DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that the university academics would score high on the Professional Life Stress Scale. Results in *Table I* reveal that almost every individual in the sample experienced professional stress at different levels of intensity. In general 50 % of the university academics in the sample experienced severe level of professional stress; 27 % academics experienced moderate level of stress whereas 23 % academics experienced mild levels of professional stress. So the Hypothesis 1 which stated the *prevalence of professional stress will be more among the university academics* is proved by the data.

These findings tend to support previous research by Gandapur & Bashir (2008) who concluded that more than 20 % of the university academics rated teaching as a stressful profession whereas Ofoegbu & Nwadian (2006) identified a similar finding of having significant difference in the levels of professional stress among university academics. Poor salary structure, work load (Gillespie et al, 2001), limited resources (Taris et al., 2001) are the main factors that contribute to high levels of stress in public universities.

In *Table II* results indicate that there is no significant gender difference in the levels of professional stress experienced by university academics. Hence the hypothesis 2 which stated *there would be significant gender differences in the perception of professional stress among university academics* is disapproved. Ofoegbu & Nwadian, (2006) identified that university academics experienced same levels of professional stress whether they are male or female. Unal S., (2000) found in her study that gender does not play an important role in the perception of professional stress in university academics. Gyllensten & Palmer (2005) identified no significant differences in the perception of stress at workplace among male and female. Martocchio & O' Leary (1989) conducted a meta analysis of 15 studies that examined gender differences in work stress and concluded

that there are no gender differences in occupational or professional stress. McDonald & Korbik (1991) reported that when male and female are exposed to the similar stressful situations, they respond to different stressors differently; quantitatively, there is no difference in the perception of the professional stress levels but they can differ qualitatively.

Conclusion:

The present study provides an important finding with respect to gender differences. It is evident that among the academics the level of stress is high irrespective of their gender. In the sample studied about 50% of the academics teaching at university level had high intensity of stress related to their profession of teaching.

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