

COMPARISON BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR EXECUTIVES ON KEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract Although, much of the debate is centered around structural differences of business sectors due to the emergence of liberalization and globalization policies in almost all spheres of business fields, hardly any research studies have been reported on existence of significant difference between public sector and private sector on psychological aspects. The present study, is aimed at investigating whether any significant difference exists between the public sector and private sector executives on various psychological aspects such as occupational stress, job involvement, hardiness and burnout. Data obtained from 60 (public and private sector) executives on the four key psychological aspects revealed that significant difference exists between the private and public sector executives. Private sector executives are more likely to have higher levels of occupational stress particularly in terms of role conflict, unreasonable group conflict and responsibility for persons. Further, the private sector executives tend to have higher levels of job involvement and hardiness personality and, lesser levels of emotional exhaustion (burn-out) than the public sector executives. Implications in terms of policy making, stress management program, hardiness training and ways to avert burnout are discussed.

Keywords Public and Private Sector Executives, Occupational Stress, Burnout, Job Involvement, Hardiness

INTRODUCTION

It is quite evident that the public sector enterprise focuses on the intricacies of the bureaucracy; emphasis is placed on serving the public and is constrained by the rules and law. The private sector, in contrast, emphasizes entrepreneurship, risk taking behavior [follow], encouraging creative approaches that challenge the parameters of the law as well as answering to the stockholders. However, in recent times, due to the implementation of liberalization, privatization and globalization policies in all the spheres of business fields and also the emergence of new technological development on the productivity and service industries, the distinctive characteristics of public sector enterprise is eroding gradually in every field such as telecommunication (BSNL), airline industries (Air India), petroleum industries (Indian Oil), postal service (India Post), state road transport organizations, public health care hospitals etc, as they are forced to remain competitive along the vivacious private sectors (Francis, 2011). In recent times, the occurrence of major business process re-engineering, downsizing, outsourcing activities due to radical changes prevailing in the business environment made the executives and employees in the public sector enterprises to re-orient their day-to-day activities (Burke, Ronald and Esther, 1998a, 1998b; McKinley, Sanchez and Schick, 1995). Further, insisting efficiency with fewer resources, prevalence of fiscal

constraints, imposing stringent managerial accountability, transparency in public spending increasing demand for the delivery of effective and better quality of public programme and services etc., have made the executives cadre of public enterprises to imbibe competitive work culture, values, beliefs, managerial attitudes, and be proactive to meet the ever changing demands from their customers/clients.

The public sector enterprises evolve a “General Framework for Action” based on the core business activities which creates integration and cohesion in the firm. They focus on achieving smaller and flexible business operation, setting best practices to meet bench marks which in turn boosts their executive cadre to gear up to face any challenges occurring in the business field. The revered position in the public sector enterprises once known for its apparent security, comforts, slow paced bureaucratic attitudes are gradually changing across all the fields which may likely to have a major impact on productivity, satisfaction, stress levels and the overall well being of the employees (Saha, Biswas, Sanghul, Sheetal and Mukherjee, Indrani, 2002; Specter and Paul, 2002; Naz and Bano, 2010; Maghradi, 1999; Schneider and Vaught, 1993; Smith, Kendall and Hulin, 1969).

In recent times research studies on Public-Private sector difference is revisited, as there is a sparked line of academic inquiry, addressing the question: in what ways do public and private sector organizations and the behavior of the people

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they employ differ significantly due to the emergence of business policies? (Buelens and Vanden Broeck, 2007; Rainey and Bozeman 2000; Feeney and Rainey, 2009). Although research attention has been given to the discrepancies at the organizational level, such as personnel flexibility and red tape (Feeney and Rainey, 2009; Baldwin 1990; Bozeman, Reed and Scott 1992), organizational politics (Vigoda-Gadot and Kapun 2005) and risk culture (Bozeman and Kingsley 1998; Tansel, 2005; Buelens and Van den Broeck, 2007; Rainey *et al.* 1976; Rainey *et al.* 1986) most of the recent empirical research has turned to *individual workers* with respect to how they relate to the nature of (various factors of organizing within) their employers' organization.

Despite the importance of this emerging scenario in terms of the changes in the role of public sector executives, there is relatively little information about their attitudes towards work, stress, job involvement, productivity etc. Though much of research studies dealt on the distinction between public and private executives with reference to job satisfaction (Paine *et al.*, 1966; Solomon, 1987; Schneider & Vauget, 1993), stress levels (Shultz, Wang, Olson, 2009; Raju and Seema, 2008; Raju, 2006; Shilpi, and Ruchi, 2009; Greenglass & Burke, 1998a, 1998b); burnout (Golembiesk *et al.*, 1988, Maslach, 1993), managerial, motivation (Buelens and Van den Broeck, 2007), objectives and planning (Rainey *et al.*, 1976) values and commitment (Lyons, Duxbury, Higgins, 2006) wages and gender differences (Tansel, 2005), hardly any research studies have been reported on those key psychological aspects such as occupational stress, job involvement, hardiness and burnout of the middle level executives who are employed in service oriented public sector enterprises in Indian Context.

Occupational Stress in Public and Private Sector

Occupational stress is considered as one of the leading causes of work-related health problems (headache, sleeplessness and back pain) in almost all professions around the world (Seema and Raju, 2009). Stress has been defined in different ways over the years. Originally, it was conceived of as pressure from the environment, then as strain within the person. The generally accepted definition of stress arises due to the mismatch between the situation and the individual. It is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Occupational stress is considered to have been globalized and is said to affect all countries, all professions and all categories of workers as well as families and societies in general (Ahmad and Ahmad, 1992). Occupational stress is any discomfort which is felt and perceived at a personal level and triggered by instances, events or situations that are too intense and frequent in nature so as to exceed a person's coping capabilities and resources

to handle them adequately (Malta, 2004). Bogg and Cooper (1995) compared 1056 private sector and 557 public sector employees and found that civil servants had the worse mental and physical health.

Workplace factors causing stress

The nature of workplace is an important source of both demands and pressures causing stress and structural and social resources to counteract stress. (Saha, *et al.*, 2002., Seema and Raju, 2009., Shilpi and Ruchi, 2009). Malik (2011) found that workplace factors are significantly related to stress and health risks which can be categorized as those to do with the content of work and those to do with the social and organizational context of work. Those that are intrinsic to the job include long hours, work overload, time pressure, difficult or complex tasks, lack of breaks, lack of variety and poor work conditions (for example, space, temperature, light).

Job Involvement in Public and Private Sector

Job involvement is said to be high, when employees consider their work as significant part of their life interest (Dubin, 1956) and perceive performance as vital to their self-esteem (Gurin *et al.*, 1960). Job involvement is defined as the "degree to which a person is identified psychologically with his work" or "the importance of work in his total self-image" (Lodahl and Kejner, 1965; Sudha, 2011; Griffin *et al.*, 2009). This concept was studied across sectors by Rainey (1983) and Buchanan (1974), who both used the Lodahl-Kejner (1965) definition and scale of job involvement. The variable was considered later to be an additional dimension of job motivation (Rainey 1983) and was described as "the internationalization of values about the goodness or the importance of work of the person" (Lodahl and Kejner 1965; Khan and Nemati, 2011). Buchanan (1974) found that public sector managers had *lower* levels of job involvement.

Hardiness in Public and Private Sector

A notable series of studies carried out by Kobasa (1979; 1982a.). Kobasa *et al.* (1982) explored the concept of "personality hardiness" as a resistance resource that mediates the negative consequences of high level stress. Concept of hardiness focuses on the person that remains relatively healthy after experiencing high amounts of stressful life events. Kobasa (1979) reported that persons who experience high degree of stress without falling ill have a personality structure differentiating them from a person who becomes sick under stress. This personality difference is best characterized by the term "Hardiness". Hardiness reflects the individual's response to life events both personally and professionally (Kobasa, 1979., Wiebe and Williams, 1992., Malik, 2011).

Three factors, commitment, control and challenge measure hardiness (Kobasa et al., 1982). Commitment reflects a dedication to oneself and to one's work. Control is the extent to which an individual influences life events to ensure a particular outcome. Challenge refers to life events and one's response to those events. Rush, Schoel and Barnard (2002), observed that the effects of Hardiness may serve as a significant counterforce to the effects of pressures for change among public sector workforce.

Burnout in Public and Private Sector

A review of the literature on burnout among employees across public (judges, clinicians, pediatricians, university teachers) and private (blue collar, IT sector, BPO, corporate) indicates that multiple factors contribute to burnout. The most common contributors are high levels of occupational stress which lead to job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and turnover (Baron, 1986; Maghradi, 1999; Maslach and Leiter, 1999; Manlove, 1993). Additional workplace characteristics associated with burnout include lacking authority over administrative decisions, feeling insufficiently supported by colleagues, long hours of direct contact with client (Pines & Maslach, 1978), and lack of clear performance feedback (Jorde-Bloom, 1982). Tsigilis, Zachopoulou and Grammatikopoulos (2006) found that early educators experienced moderate levels of emotional exhaustion. Public sector executives were more satisfied from the job itself and their immediate supervisor than their counterparts in the private sector.

Much has been written about private and public sector employee's attitudes, values, motivation, risk assessment, risk aversion, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, reward preferences, and organizational commitment (Lyons, Duxbury, Higgins, 2006; Nutt, 2006; Becker and Connor, 2005; Belante and Link, 1981; Barton and Waldron, 1978; Houston, 2000; Bogg and Cooper, 1995; Rainey, 1982). Hardly, any research study has been reported on sector differences in terms of psychological factors such as occupational stress, job involvement, hardiness and burnout. The comprehensive framework of public-private sector differences listed by Rainey *et al.* (1976), which was slightly revised over the years (Rainey 1989; Rainey and Chun 2005), mainly focused on organizational attributes and environments, rather than on the individual employees. This lack of attention for the individual level-of-analysis is intriguing as much of research is focused on macro-level organizational dynamics of Private and Public sector differences.

Methodology

Objective

To assess the extent to which the private sector executives and public sector executives differ with respect to occupational stress, job involvement, hardiness and burnout syndrome

Sample

The sample consists of middle level executives drawn from public and private sector enterprises which are involved in telecommunication business field particularly dealing with Internet Services. The sample constituted 60 middle level executives, of which 30 were drawn from private sector enterprises and the remaining 30 were from public sector. The participants for this study were drawn randomly from the list of employment rolls obtained from the Personnel Department of the concerned enterprises. In order to ensure uniformity in the nature of business operations, a due care has been taken to restrict to only one of the core business field – Internet Service Providers. The Public sector and Private sector executives who were involved in the activities of providing Internet Services were approached to furnish data on four key psychological variables. The middle level executives were in the age group of 25-35. The sample consisted of both male and female employees. The participants possess bachelors and masters degree in their respective fields.

Measures

i. Occupational Stress Index

A forty-six item occupational stress indicator developed by Dr. A.K Srivastava and Dr. A .K Singh (1981) was used to assess the occupational stress level of the executives. The respondents rated those items using a 5- point Likert type scale ranging from 1 – (Strongly Disagree) to 5 – (Strongly Agree). It consisted of twelve dimensions such as,

- I. *Role overload* covers job situations like workload, staff insufficiency, lack of time to care for personal problems, job dissatisfaction etc.
- II. *Role Ambiguity* is characterized by vague and insufficient information related to the job role, vague and poor planning of job, vague expectations of colleagues and supervisors.
- III. *Role Conflict* involves contradictory instructions from higher officers, vague instructions, and insufficient facilities regarding new assignment.
- IV. *Group and Political Pressures* covers the difficulty to adjust with the political or group pressures, formal rules and instructions, compulsion to perform unwillingly, maintenance of group conformity.
- V. *Responsibility for Persons* involves the thrust of responsibility of other persons, the responsibility of other employee's future, responsibility for the progress of the organization.
- VI. *Under Participation* represents job areas as the position of the person in the organization, high or low power, the acceptance of suggestion of the person etc.

- VII. *Powerlessness* is characterized as acceptance of decisions taken by authority on training programmes, coordination of interests and opinions.
- VIII. *Poor Peer Relations* embraces colleagues, colleagues attempt to defame and malign the employees as unsuccessful, non cooperative, low team spirit.
- IX. *Intrinsic Impoverishment* involves monotonous nature of assignments, opportunity to utilize abilities and experience independently, develop aptitude and proficiency.
- X. *Low Status* covers others respect to the person, nature of the job in enhancing social status, the due significance given by higher authorities to the post and work etc.
- XI. *Strenuous Working Conditions* includes tense circumstances, risky and complicated assignments, unsatisfactory working conditions.
- XII. *Unprofitability* indicates low salary, absence of rewards, lack of motivation.

ii. Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The 22 item Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to assess the burnout of public and private sector executives (Maslach and Jackson, 1993). Participants were requested to evaluate each item in terms of the frequency of their feelings ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). High scores of the first two scales (Emotional Exhaustion & Depersonalization) and low scores on Personal Accomplishment are indicative of burnout. It consists of three-dimensions such as,

- I. *Emotional Exhaustion* is characterized by depletion of emotional resources, workers tend to feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level.
- II. *Depersonalization* represents negative, cynical attitudes and feelings about one's clients.
- III. *Personal Accomplishment* refers to the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly with regard to one's work clients.

iii. Job Involvement Questionnaire

The Job Involvement Questionnaire purports to measure the degree of involvement that the employees experience while performing their jobs. It was developed by Kanungo (1982) and it consists of 10 items, each has to be rated on the five point scale.

i. Hardiness Scale

The Eighteen-item Hardiness questionnaire developed by Maddi & Kobasa (1984) was used to measure hardiness personality (ability of individual to turn stressful circumstance into growth inducing experiences). The scale consists of three dimensions such as Commitment, Control and Challenge.

- I. *Commitment* measures the extent to which individuals seek involvement rather than withdrawal.
- II. *Control* deals with the extent to which an individual strives to exert control over their circumstances rather than feeling powerless.
- III. *Challenge* measures the extent to which individuals strive to learn from experiences rather than feeling threatened.

Procedure

The respondents were given the four questionnaires such as Maslach Burnout Inventory, Occupational Stress index, Personality Hardiness and Job Involvement and were requested to respond to each scale as accurately and honestly as possible as per the manual. Only those who were interested to be part of the study were given the questionnaire. Out of 80 executives belonging to both public and private sector enterprises approached, 20 respondents could not return the questionnaires owing to heavy workload and hence only the 60 responses were considered for the analysis. They were assured that their answers would be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses used in the present study is 't' test to test the significant difference between the public and private sector executives on the key variables.

Results & Discussions

The 't' test was carried out to find out the significant difference between the public sector and private sector executives on the four key psychological dimensions such as Occupational Stress, Job Involvement, Hardiness and Burnout.

The results (Table I) revealed that there is a significant difference between private and public sector executives only on three key dimensions such as Role Conflict (mean = 16.03 , SD = 3.16 ; t value = 8.52 , P < .01), Unreasonable Group Conflict (mean = 13.86 , SD = 3.21; t value = 7.12 , P < .01), and Responsibility for Persons (mean = 10.50 , SD = 2.94 ; t value = 3.70, P < .01). Perhaps due to excessive work demands and unreasonable expectations, the private sector executives are more likely to experience the stress in fulfilling the requirements of different segment of stakeholders. Where as the public sector executives tend to have a proper hierarchy of authority and line of control, they experience to certain extent lesser level of such conflicting demands. Stress is an important symptom of burnout. Organizational stress symptoms may likely to weaken the executive's interest in exhibiting managerial skills, lack of interest against organizational goals, attitudes and

Table I The difference in Occupational Stress between Public and Private sector employees

Occupational Stress	Group	Mean	SD	t-test	Group	Mean	S.D.
Role Overload	Public	17.40	2.09	0.18 ^{NS}	Private	16.26	4.10
Role Ambiguity	Public	8.20	2.80	0.16 ^{NS}	Private	9.26	3.05
Role Conflict	Public	10.76	1.19	8.52**	Private	16.03	3.16
Unreasonable Group Conflict	Public	9.06	1.81	7.12**	Private	13.86	3.21
Responsibility for Persons	Public	7.93	2.39	3.70**	Private	10.50	2.94
Underparticipation	Public	12.00	2.85	0.50 ^{NS}	Private	12.46	2.43
Powerlessness	Public	10.56	1.16	0.14 ^{NS}	Private	11.33	2.63
Poor Peer Relations	Public	11.00	1.43	0.64 ^{NS}	Private	11.26	2.74
Intrinsic Impoverishment	Public	9.93	3.42	0.42 ^{NS}	Private	10.56	2.58
Low Status	Public	6.43	1.81	0.23 ^{NS}	Private	7.10	2.46
Strenuous Working Conditions	Public	8.06	2.31	0.35 ^{NS}	Private	8.63	2.39
Unprofitability	Public	5.73	1.99	0.23 ^{NS}	Private	6.30	1.70

P < .01, NS – Not Significant

behaviors. It is the psychological and physical state which is likely to get affected very severely when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Research studies also indicated that non permanent employees in the private sector have worse psychological stress and high risk for burnout (Tang,et.al. 2011; Macklin, Smith, Dollard, 2006). In the private sectors, the needs and demands evolve on a daily basis which places a greater challenge to the executives to accommodate oneself to the needs of the organization. When an individual is expected to deal with continuous change, the executive is expected to pull up the socks and turn to organizational learning. Hence, in the present study, private sector executives have indicated an obvious pattern of stress when compared to public sector executives. Ahola (2006) has observed that in today's continuously changing work life, the growing demands for learning and continuous flexibility has become a burden, particularly to aging workers who, on average, have less education than younger ones.

Table II The difference in Job Involvement between Public and Private sector employees

Dimension	Group	Mean	SD	t-test
Job Involvement	Public	22.10	2.64	5.03**
	Private	27.63	5.41	

P < .01,

The results shown in Table II revealed that there is a significant difference between public and private sector executives with respect to the level of job involvement. The private sector executives are more likely to exhibit high levels of job involvement in their assignment than the public sectors executives (mean = 27.63, SD = 5.41; t value = 5.03, P < .01). Perhaps, the prevalence of motivational

incentives and supportive organizational environment may facilitate to have high level of job involvement. The private sector job demands the executives to engage in diversified errands comparing to public sector executives. Further, the existence of difference in the crucial factors such as rewards, positions, promotions, fringe benefits etc, may likely to have an effect on the job outcomes. Although, even a public sector employee has rewards and promotions, the rate at which private organizations offer salary hike or promotions are meager among public sector enterprises. However, Rainey (1983) observed contradictory results and found no difference between the public and private sector managers on job involvement.

Table III The difference in Burnout between Public and Private sector employees

Burnout	Group	Mean	SD	t-test	Group	Mean	S.D.
Emotional Exhaustion	Public	19.86	4.06	8.36**	Private	25.73	9.56
Deperson-alization	Public	6.73	3.98	0.58 ^{NS}	Private	7.23	4.63
Personal Accom-plishment	Public	30.13	4.84	0.62 ^{NS}	Private	30.73	5.41

P < .01, NS – Not Significant

Consistent with the literature, the results shown in Table III revealed that the private sector executives are more likely to have higher level of emotional exhaustion comparing to the public sector employees (mean = 25.73, SD = 9.56; t value = 8.36, P < .01). Since private sector executives are likely to have one-to-one interaction with the clients continuously and also are involved in monitoring the follow up activities in order to clinch the business deals successfully, they are at more risk to experience feelings of emotional exhaustion.

Cordes and Dougherty, (1993) noted that customer service representatives are susceptible to “moderate to high” levels of burnout because they “are caught in a difficult position when they perceive that client demands cannot or will not be met by the organization. Tsigilis, Zachopoulou and Grammatikopoulos (2006) found that Public sector early educators were more satisfied from the job itself and their immediate supervisor than their counterparts in the private sector.

Table IV The difference in Hardiness between Public and Private sector employees

Hardiness	Group	Mean	SD	t-test	Group	Mean	S.D.
Control	Public	9.86	4.06	0.55 ^{NS}	Private	8.73	9.56
Commitment	Public	11.90	3.58	0.20 ^{NS}	Private	10.83	2.81
Challenge	Public	7.03	1.79	1.62**	Private	8.76	1.69

$P < .01$, NS – Not Significant

The results showed in Table IV revealed that the executives belonging to private sector tend to experience their nature of job as more challenging and possess more capability to face any such challenges to accomplish their tasks successfully comparing to their counterparts – public sector executives (mean = 8.76, SD = 1.69; t value = 1.62, $P < .01$). Hardiness is an existentially based construct representing the aggregate of three interrelated factors: control, commitment, and challenge. It can be perceived as a perspective that views events as meaningful, changeable, and of value for future growth. If stressful events are viewed through this lens, then individuals are freed to take actions that address the stressor. Owing to changes, that are frequent in private sector, the employees tend to feel challenged to accommodate oneself to such changes in equally swift manner. Research studies by Kobasa et al. (1982) confirm that the concept of “personality hardiness” is a resistance resource that mediates the negative consequences of high level stress at work. Theoretically, hardiness is said to reduce vulnerability to the effects of stress at several points in the stress process (Wiebe and Williams, 1992).

Implications

Policy Makers: The concerned authorities should implement job descriptions that are more or less consistent to the job roles in order to bring in basic clarity of roles, to reduce ambiguity and conflicts in roles especially with respect to private sector, since the private sector employees are more at risk for burnout and occupational stress when compared to public sector in the present sample. The Employment Service could take initiative in introducing a Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) or O*NET (The Occupational Information Network) programs that can act as primary source

of occupational information to prospective executives and the implementation of standardized and occupation-specific descriptors to understand the requirements of a role much before occupying a role could help facilitate the executives to understand what are they expected of in their duties.

Stress Management Program

Various relaxation programs and mindful meditation programs should be conducted in the business firms to relieve them of the pressure and stress the role occupant experiences. Muscle relaxation techniques, simple and effective stress buster’s techniques should be provided so as to use them at individual’s work station rather than collective exercise, which is time consuming.

The following are some of the simple activities to be performed at the work station to reduce the levels of stress:

- Use of Stress Busters – such as smiley soft balls which is used to help release muscle tension, soothing music to help mind relax, playing a game to distract oneself from ongoing thoughts (10mins)
- Evolving weekly planners and following relaxation techniques (e.g., planning ahead and realistically assessing one’s expectations, learning relaxation strategies, taking time off and developing supportive networks).

Enhancing Job Involvement

Actions to strengthen the job involvement may include training the executives, offering promotion opportunities, recognizing the individual contributions and rewarding them accordingly. Initiatives should be taken to create a culture that embraces internationalization of organizations beliefs and values and make it part of one’s core values. Other perks, rewards and recognition should be provided to make an employee feel part of the organization in a significant way.

Dealing with Burnout

The burnout reduction at individual level could be introduced by implementing suitable intervention strategies such as stress inoculation training, relaxation, time management, assertiveness training, rational emotive therapy, training in interpersonal and social skills, teambuilding, management of professional demands, and meditation.

A focus on the job enrichment and hardiness enrichment programs can be initiated to minimize the occurrence of burnout among the executives. The training should aim at analyzing problems in a way that transforms the challenge situation into opportunities for strengthening professional and personal satisfaction, health, stamina, and performance,

solving problems creatively and recognizing attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that undermine performance, vitality, and health, taking decisive steps to manage daily challenges etc.

Managerial Implications

By identifying those executives whose emotional exhaustion is relatively high, managers can take initiative to reduce the negative influence of such feelings on executives. This could be achieved by minimizing role conflict (creating policies and practices that do not place the executives dealing with clients directly in difficult situations), role ambiguity (clearly define duties and responsibilities), unreasonable group conflicts (fostering intra and inter-team collaboration among the members) etc

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