Impact of Organisational Stressors on Occupational Stress in Indian Army

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Abstract

The study finds out the impact of organisational stressors on soldiers' occupational stress. Structured instrument was used to collect first hand data from 165 combat soldiers of the Indian Army. The results of the study indicate moderately severe stress in the Indian Army. Infact, only two organisational stressors, i.e. 'workload and job pressure' and 'indifferent organisational attitude' were found to have significant impact ($p<0.05$) on occupational stress among Army personnel. Thus, the study also proposes strategies for reducing stress level in the Indian Army and presents future research perspectives.

1. Introduction

Occupational stress has become a health hazard in almost every profession. Researchers have made a significant contribution in studying work-related stress in various occupations, viz., hospital practice (Antoniou, Davidson, and Cooper, 2003; Sutherland, 1995), teaching (Winefield and Jarrett, 2001), aviation (Fiedler et al., 2000), academics (Sadri and Marcoulides, 1997), chefs (Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007), military (Bartone, Adler and Vaitkus, 1998; Pflanz, 2001; Pflanz and Ogle, 2006), police (Berg et al., 2006), construction (Ng, Skitmore, and Leung, 2005), health-care (Hemingway and Smith, 1999) etc. Sources of stress (stressors) specific to different jobs influence the occupational stress levels of individuals concerned and therefore, a detailed understanding of these stressors is a pre-requisite for examining job stress.

In context to health care services, Sutherland (1995) identified night calls, emergencies during surgery hours and interruption of family life with telephone calls as the top three sources of occupational stress among general practitioners in UK. In addition, Sadri and Marcoulides (1997) found both academic stress (frustrations, conflicts, pressures and changes experienced) and occupational stress (factors intrinsic to job, the

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managerial role, relationships at work, career and achievement, organisational structure and climate and home-work interface) strongly causing ill-health. Further, stressors, viz., role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload and death of patients, were found to mediate organisational climate-behavioural outcome relationship among nurses in USA (Hemingway and Smith, 1999).

Moreover, increased workload resulting from funding cuts was the main cause of Australian university staff's job stress, followed by information flow and barriers to promotion (Winefield and Jarrett, 2001). Antoniou, Davidson, and Cooper (2003) revealed that most important stressors experienced by Greek JHDs (junior hospital doctors) specific to their job were consequences of their mistakes, long working hours, non-supportive superiors, insufficient finance and resources, role conflict and role ambiguity. In addition, Kang (2005) found that job characteristics causing stress among medical representatives in India were interference of job in personal life, unsupportive colleagues, work overload and continuous pressure for improved performance.

In another study by Ng, Skitmore, and Leung (2005) construction project participants in China reported bureaucracy, lack of opportunity to learn new skills, work-family conflicts and different views from superiors to be the most difficult stressors to manage. Beside these, poor interpersonal relations, followed by poor organisational structure and climate, work inhibitors and inconsiderate superior were the major sources of stress in electronics industry (Kang and Singh, 2006). Moreover, Frone, Russell and Cooper (1995) found that positive relationship exists between job stressors (work pressure, lack of autonomy and role ambiguity) and depression and negative relationship between both work pressure and lack of autonomy and physical health.

2. Occupational Stress in Indian Army

Despite of enormous stress research work carried out in various professional fields, Army remains an under researched group, although the nature of work and hazards involved in the armed profession makes it more stressful when compared with other professions. Separation from families for long durations, prolonged deployment in counter-insurgency operations, fear of death, lack of freedom, posting to far flung areas or isolated posts, lack of control over tasks, hardships involved, lack of opportunities for change of routine, improper sleep/rest, humiliation and harassment by seniors, etc. make life tough in the Army (Every Matter, 2007; Gupta, 2008).

However, several theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted on US military force (Bartone, Adler and Vaitkus, 1998; Boehmer et al., 2003; Britt et al., 2004; Litz et al., 1997, Bray et al., 2001). Bartone, Adler and Vaitkus, (1998) identified five dimensions of military stressors, viz., isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and danger/threat, which soldiers encounter at different stages of deployment during peacekeeping operations. Further, while studying relationship between military service and health-related quality of life (HRQOL), Boehmer et al. (2003) found that active duty military men have highest mean days of poor HRQOL outcomes, lack of good mental health, pain, depression, anxiety, lack of adequate rest and lack of adequate energy level, which is contrary to the notion that military populations are generally healthier than civilian populations. On the contrary, veterans and reserve personnel reported better HRQOL than active duty personnel. Furthermore, work stress among a major proportion of military personnel was found to be significantly and positively related to symptoms of depression (Pflanz and Ogle, 2006). Another study by Bray et al. (2001) confirmed the association between work and health-related stress and lower level of job functioning.

Pflanz (2001) and Pflanz and Ogle (2006) asserted that though there are several studies available on humanitarian, peacekeeping and wartime missions, little research is available on occupational stress faced by healthy active duty military population. Thus, although in the recent past, media and newspapers have highlighted the problem of high occupational stress levels in the Indian Army, owing to the increasing suicidal and fratricidal cases in the Northern and North-East India, no empirical research has been conducted on Indian Army to find out the specific stressors, which are pressurising the soldiers to take such deadly steps. However, defence institutions do carry out stress-related researches at their own level, but the actual problem being faced by the soldiers might not have been expressed openly by them on duty.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to examine all the possible sources of occupational stress, since their reduction would positively affect the health of soldiers and in turn, increase the ability of the Army to defend the nation's interest (Pflanz and Ogle, 2006). It is in this context that the present study examines the stress level in the Indian Army by identifying organisational stressors experienced by Indian soldiers; determines the impact of organisational stressors on occupational stress in the Army; and finally makes recommendations to reduce stress in the Army.

Based on the literature reviewed, the present study hypothesises that:
H01: There exists moderately severe stress in the Indian Army.
H02: Organisational stressors have significant impact on occupational stress among Army personnel.

3. Method

The data were collected through a structured instrument from a sample of 165 active duty combat soldiers of a significant Indian Army unit. Since soldiers have restricted time, their selection was left at the convenience of the Army. The Army unit selected is an operational unit, which safeguards the most sensitive and terrorist-hit region of the nation. Moreover, the reported increased suicides and fratricidal cases in India in the recent past from the region selected (Singh, 2007; Pubby, 2010), justifies the area of research for the present study. Due to security reasons the specific identity of the unit and region selected has not been disclosed here. Further, the instrument used to measure occupational stressors was adapted from Baty (2002). All the items were based on 5-point Likert scale ranging from no stress (1) to severe stress (5). The overall Cronbach's alpha obtained for this measure was 0.94.

4. Results

Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation was

applied on individual dimension of organisational stressors using SPSS. Organisational stressors initially consisted of 43 items, which got reduced to 33 items clubbed under 10 independent factors. The factors extracted were 'unsupportive supervisors', 'uneasy leadership style', 'insensitivity toward soldier's personal welfare', 'unsupportive colleagues', 'indifferent organisational attitude', 'inadequate awareness about profession', 'workload and job pressure', 'lack of control at work', 'role ambiguity' and 'self-role conflict'. Moreover, good factor loadings (above .50), communalities (above .50), satisfactory KMO values and variance explained figured in this process (Table 1).

In order to test first hypothesis (i.e., there exists moderately severe stress in the Indian Army) t-test was applied. Since overall mean arrived at 3.37 (above average), the responses toward the items under ten factors were compared with the above average value (4) of stress and nine out of ten t-values were found to be significant ($p<0.001$), except for 'lack of control at work' ($p>0.05$). Thus, acceptance of this hypothesis suggests that there exists moderately severe stress in the Indian Army **(H01)**.

Multiple regression analysis was applied in order to find out the influence of organisational stressors on Army occupational stress. All the ten organisational stressors were regressed with the statement 'I experience job stress in my job'. High values of multiple R (.712), R2 (.507) and Adjusted R2 (.475) signify the strength of organisational stressors in predicting occupational stress. Further, a high F value of 15.844 significant at .001 level prove the validity of the regression model. The result reveals that out of all the organisational stressors only two, i.e. 'workload and job pressure' and 'indifferent organisational attitude' have significant impact ($p<0.05$) on occupational stress among Army personnel **(Table 2)**, thereby rejecting the second hypothesis **(H02)**.

5. Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate a moderately severe stress in the Indian Army personnel. Further, two main organisational sources of stress found to induce occupational stress among the soldiers are 'workload and job pressure' and 'indifferent organisational attitude'. Workload and job pressure (t=3.06) is identified as the leading source of high stress level among Indian soldiers. Similarly, 'working more than defined working hours' and 'expectations to do too much in too little time' with highest loadings and high mean scores reveal that soldiers are moderately stressed due to excessive workload in the Army. With a similar result, Puffer and Brakefield (1989) found that heavy workload, time pressures and unrealistic deadlines were the most stress-producing job aspects among three-fourths of the respondents. Further, high workload and lack of sleep lead to various strains like psychological ill-health, job dissatisfaction and low morale among soldiers (Britt et al., 2004). Although soldiers work 24-hours, work overload and sleep deprivation should be thoroughly checked by all the seniors to over rule these strains.

Secondly, 'indifferent organisational attitude' is proved to have a significant impact on job stress in Army, thereby indicating lack of culture of mutual trust, support and respect for soldiers. All this make soldiers stressed. Moreover, items under this factor, viz., 'insincere implementation of dignity-related policies' and 'lack of emotional and practical support' with highest mean values (3.77 and 3.16), contribute the highest toward its factor causing stress. Thus, organisations must adopt a culture where harmonious interpersonal relationships, group belongingness and loyalty towards the organisation exist and different treatment is given to employees according to their status, background and connections (Chang and Lu, 2007).

Though regression analysis supported only two sources of stress, factor analysis highlighted some vital sources of stress among Indian soldiers. The overall high mean score (3.29) and high mean values of both the variables under 'insensitivity toward soldiers' personal welfare' (3.45 and 3.13) indicate lack of consideration for soldiers' welfare that generates stress among them. Since, supportive behaviour of leaders in the form of showing concern for subordinates' personal welfare helps in de-stressing the soldiers and induces positive attitude (low levels of hostility) among them (Britt et al., 2004), thus, all seniors in the Army must take due care of their juniors' welfare in order to reduce their stress level.

Further, the variable viz., 'inability to talk openly' (mean=3.45) under the factor 'unsupportive colleagues' adds to soldiers occupational stress. In this regard, Zeffane and McLoughlin (2006) suggested that absence of work team cooperation and employees' stress are strongly related, since it leaves only a few people at their level easily available for open discussions and sharing. Also, 'non-availability of constructive feedback by seniors' (mean=3.59) under the factor 'uneasy leadership style' causes stress among soldiers. This may be due to the fact that experience of work-related stress depends upon the perception of subordinates about the effectiveness of communication with their superior/managers (Zeffane and McLoughlin, 2006) and the degree of support received by their supervisors (Gignac and Appelbaum, 1997; Britt et al., 2004). This suggests that sound relationships with colleagues and seniors can control a great deal of stress.

Furthermore, 'lack of control at work' with overall mean score of 4.40 and high mean scores of all the variables under it **(Table 1)** also leads to occupational stress in the army men. In this regard, Pflanz (2001) remarked that routine stressors like, low autonomy and little control over work are related to more stress among military patients than military-specific stressors (combat stressors, periodic change of stations, hazards involved, etc). In addition, organisational stressors viz., 'inadequate awareness about profession' (3.98) and 'self-role conflict' (3.72) with high mean scores of all the variables under them infuse stress among soldiers. In line with this, Litz et al. (1997) observed that peacekeeping duty of Army personnel is associated with frustration, boredom and role conflict, particularly for those soldiers specifically trained for active combat.

6. Practical Implications

Leaders should be trained to acquire skills to build harmonious superior-subordinate relationships; good communication skill to pull the unit members together to accomplish objectives; instil confidence among soldiers that their problems would be solved and would not have any adverse consequence on them and create a supportive atmosphere while working and encouraging

an output-oriented behaviour. Further, leaders should take care of the work-family balance issues while allotting work to the soldiers and completion of tasks should not encroach upon the rest breaks of soldiers. It means that personal welfare of soldiers should be considered while working so as to reduce their high workload. Also, stress management programmes for all soldiers should be ensured frequently, at least twice a year, and the Commanding officer of every unit must make sure that everyone in the unit gets an opportunity to attend them.

A suggestion box should be placed in every regiment, where all soldiers can put their complaints and suggestions openly without any fear. Further, some flexibility should be provided in the strict communication channel being followed by soldiers, so as to facilitate the reduction of gap between officers and soldiers. Furthermore, a specific code of ethics should be framed relating to the dignity issues of all ranks, where soldiers are empowered to complain about their senior's misbehavior and any complaint of deterrence to the code should be subjected to fine and punishments. This implication needs to be sincerely implemented to eradicate bullying and harassment in the Army. In addition, a strict rule should be followed in the Indian Army to restrict the activities such as being appointed as helper to the officer, assigning personal work of seniors, sweeping, toilet cleaning, etc. Only job specific (trade) persons responsible for sweeping and toilet cleaning should be allotted such type of work. Any deviation in this rule should be subjected to strict punishment. Moreover, every soldier should make a leave plan and submit it in the beginning of the year and leaves should be granted accordingly and not as per the liking of the seniors because soldiers undergo a lot of mental harassment at the hands of their seniors in this process.

Apart from the above-mentioned implications, Sahaja Yoga meditation should be made a routine mental exercise in every Army unit to be practiced twice a day for 10-15 minutes before physical exercises so as to enhance the mental fitness level of the soldiers. This is the most beneficial stress coping strategy for the soldiers since Sahaja Yoga meditation helps purifying the subtle system by cleansing energy centres, thereby gradually removing the blockages of these centres and putting a stoppage on further deterioration of physical, mental and emotional well being. It may not be out of place to mention that during the survey, this technique was taught to many soldiers, which has substantially affected their psychological state, especially gaining a relaxing state through meditation.

7. Limitations

There are certain factors limiting the interpretability of the present study. Firstly, owing to the sensitive nature of topic of research, Army personnel might have underreported or underestimated their stress levels. Secondly, the study being cross-sectional restricts its generalisability to other occupations. Thirdly, inclusion of only combat unit is another limitation of this study. Thus, a comprehensive research in future taking into consideration combat arms, combat-support arms and services will help remove this problem. Lastly, this research paper focuses only on organisational stressors and an extension of this research to study the effects of all types of stressors and coping among soldiers will help the authorities to better understand and prevent stress in the Indian Army.

Table 1: Factor-wise Mean, Loading, Variance Explained and Cronbach's Alpha

Factor	Dimensions	Mean	Factor Loading	Variance Explained (%)	Cronbach's Alpha
F1	***Unsupportive Supervisors***	2.47		53.335	.77
1.	Unsupportive feedback on work by officers	2.91	.719		
2.	Lack of support regarding difficult or emotionally demanding work	1.95	.715		
3.	Non-appreciation of efforts	2.21	.697		
4.	Incompetent officers	2.34	.642		
5.	Unfree to talk about work and/or home issues	2.83	.510		
F2	***Uneasy Leadership Style***	2.79		64.417	.72
1.	Uncomfortable management/leadership style	2.51	.786		
2.	Inability to give open/free feedback about work concerns	2.25	.751		
3.	Non-availability of constructive feedback by seniors	3.59	.683		

F3	***Insensitivity toward Soldier's Personal Welfare***	3.29		78.256	.72
1.	Lack of encouragement to raise concerns about work stress	3.45	.837		
2.	Lack of encouragement for maintaining healthy work-life balance	3.13	.800		
F4	***Unsupportive Colleagues***	2.84		64.785	.71
1.	Unhelping co-workers	2.50	.860		
2.	Unhappy working relationships	2.58	.831		
3.	Inability to talk openly	3.45	.716		
F5	***Indifferent Organisational Attitude***	3.09		69.034	.77
1.	Lack of mutual trust and supportive culture	2.35	.867		
2.	Lack of emotional and practical support	3.16	.831		
3.	Insincere implementation of dignity related policies	3.77	.793		
F6	***Inadequate Awareness about Profession***	3.98		87.851	.86
1.	Unawareness about Army's rules and regulations	3.98	.937		
2.	Unclear understanding of the vision, strategies and objectives	3.98	.937		
F7	***Workload and Job Pressure***	3.53		60.000	.83
1.	Working more than defined working hours	3.79	.863		
2.	Too much work in too little time	3.81	.772		
3.	Inadequate rest breaks	3.53	.757		
4.	Too many or too complicated tasks	3.51	.754		
5.	Unachievable targets	3.02	.710		
F8	***Lack of Control at Work***	4.40		64.245	.71
1.	Inadequate control over breaks between work	4.31	.843		
2.	Inflexible working hours	4.66	.828		
3.	Insufficient authority over techniques and timing of work	4.24	.728		
F9	***Role Ambiguity***	2.26		77.253	.87
1.	Inadequate understanding of duties and responsibilities	1.89	.921		
2.	Ill-defined role and scope	2.12	.897		
3.	Inadequate knowledge about work	2.14	.870		

4.	Unclear about others' expectations	2.89	.825		
F10	***Self-role Conflict***	3.72		68.089	.76
1.	Perpetual gap between tasks undertaken and Army initiatives	3.73	.892		
2.	Assignment of unexpected work	3.98	.805		
3.	Conflicting Army role and individual work tasks	3.44	.774		

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis showing impact of organisational stressors on occupational stress

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.426	.580		-.734	.464
Unsupportive Supervisors	.079	.148	.045	.535	.593
Uneasy Leadership style	.198	.123	.118	1.613	.109
Insensitivity toward Soldier's Personal Welfare	-.076	.092	-.078	-.820	.413
Unsupportive Colleagues	.031	.148	.018	.212	.832
Indifferent Organisational Attitude	.264	.136	.220	1.944	.050
Inadequate Awareness about Profession	.171	.169	.073	1.009	.315
Workload and job pressure	.404	.132	.290	3.056	.003
Lack of Control at work	-.081	.104	-.057	-.782	.436
Role ambiguity	.116	.102	.098	1.137	.257
Self-role Conflict	.160	.091	.135	1.764	.084

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