13. SOURCES AND MODERATORS OF EMPLOYEE STRESS IN STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

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Abstract: This study examined the linear and curvilinear relationships between job and situational stressors and stress using questionnaire data provided by 1,100 employees in China. Results show that job demands had a U-shaped, curvilinear relationship with stress and an inverted U-shaped relationship with job satisfaction. Job complexity had a U-shaped, curvilinear relationship with stress and a positive relationship with job satisfaction. Economic, interpersonal, and family stressors had a linear, positive relationship with stress. Perceived ability-job fit moderated the relationships between the job stressors and stress. The situational stressors enhanced the relationships between the job stressors and stress.

The present study examines the linear and curvilinear relationships between stressors and stress in China. During the last three decades, job stress has become a key concept in academic research and management practice because of its pathological consequences. Job stress is related to a number of physical and mental ailments (see the reviews by Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991, and Kinicki, McKee, & Wade, 1996). It generates significant costs to organizations by contributing to lower employee performance and employee withdrawal behavior (Spector & Jex, 1991). As reviewed in the Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety (Stellman, McCann, Warshaw, Brabant et al., 1998), job stress has become a leading source of worker disability in North America and Europe. Moreover, there is a rapid growth of stress-related health problems in non-Western societies such as Japan (e.g., Kawakami & Haratani, 1999), Hong Kong (e.g., Schaubroeck, Lam, & Xie, 2000), and the mainland of China (e.g., Xie, 1996). Therefore, there is an imperative need to investigate the causes and consequences of job stress.

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stress in different cultural environments in order to explore what might constitute generally applicable knowledge about stress.

The stressors to which people are exposed are multifaceted. The stressors inherent in the workplace have received much research attention. A large body of research has examined the relationship between job design and jobholders’ well-being. Reviews of this literature (e.g., Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992) illustrate a general tendency among researchers to focus on linear relationships between job stressors and stress. This tendency is consistent with Selye’s (1982) notion of “eustress” versus distress. According to Selye, eustress is the stress of fulfilment and achievement, and it provides opportunities to use one’s capacity successfully. Distress, on the contrary, is the stress caused by stressors that are not intrinsically motivating. Thus distress is likely to cause mental health problems (Selye, 1982).

Among the theories on job design and jobholders’ well-being, the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) and the job demands–decision latitude model (Karasek, 1979) are particularly influential. According to the job characteristics model, enriched job characteristics (that is, job complexity) lead to increases in employee job motivation and performance. In the job demands–decision latitude model, employee control moderates the negative effects of job demands on stress. Although the two models focus on different job dimensions and outcome variables, they both assume linear relationships between job characteristics and employee well-being. Other “linear job stressors” that have been frequently examined include role conflict, role ambiguity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985), lack of control over job-related activities (Karasek, 1979), poor work conditions (Kinicki et al., 1996), workload, shift work (Jex & Beehr, 1991), and responsibility (Schaubroeck & Ganster, 1993).

As is reviewed later in this chapter, only a small number of studies have examined curvilinear relationships between job stressors and stress (e.g., De Jonge & Schaufeli, 1998; French, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1982; Warr, 1990; Xie & Johns, 1995). The lack of systematic examination of nonlinear relationships has theoretical and practical implications. For one thing, popular belief in linear relationships has led researchers to focus on identifying the causes of eustress and distress. However, questions remain as to whether there is stress potential inherent in eustress and whether there is motivation potential relating to distress. Moreover, the practical implication of linear relationships is that more (or less) is better (Coward & Sackett, 1990). For instance, with the belief that job complexity contributes positively to jobholders and organizations, many organizations have implemented various interventions to increase the complexity of jobs. It is possible that, beyond particular levels, a continuing increase in job complexity will provoke stress and poor health. Furthermore, individuals might differ in perceptions of and