Sources of stress in academe – the Israeli case

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Abstract. The effects of stress on the physical and psychological well being of people in different professions and occupations have become, in the last decade, the focal interest of researchers and clinicians. There is a growing body of evidence that stress adversely affects the performance, productivity, job satisfaction, health and the general quality of life of professionals and people in general (Farber, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Originally, research on stress focused on the “helping professions” and “human services” occupations (Cherniss, 1980; Father, 1983). More recently, other occupations which involve continuous, intensive interpersonal relationships between people, have been investigated and were found to be a potential source of stress (Holt, 1982). The growing interest in the study of stress and its manifestations resulted among others in newly defined concepts such as: burnout, tedium, wear and tear, deadwoods, midlife crisis, etc. (Maslach and Jackson, 1979; Manuso, 1979; Freudenberger, 1980; Pines, Aronson and Kafry, 1981; Farber, 1983).

Stress and its manifestations, such as burnout, tedium, etc., existed long before they were the focus of present attention. But the proliferation of books, research reports, popular articles and the growing number of organized workshops and other activities, designed to teach people how to cope with these phenomena, have already caused some alarm. Several writers (Cherniss, 1980; Farber, 1983) have begun to question whether the growing interest in the study and treatment of stress and burnout has not become another fashion, or even a “fad” which will fade like many other so called “burning” issues in the behavioral sciences. Even though some may view this growing interest as exaggerated, there seems to be a general consensus that stress and its manifestations are a significant phenomenon of modern life style and there is a need to understand it and learn how to cope with it.

Theoretical construct

The basic theoretical construct underlying our investigation is based on Lazarus' (1966) concept of stress which is advocated also by many other researchers such as McGrath (1970) and French, Rodgers and Cobb (1974). Accordingly, stress is what occurs when the demands of the environment, in the person’s eyes, clearly exceed the resources of that person to handle it. Foremost among these resources is how the person construes the situation. Does he or she judge
it as threatening or as a challenge? Thus, psychological stress resides neither in the situation nor in the person; it depends on a transaction between the two. It arises from how the person appraises an event and adapts to it. Since demands may be perceived differently by people in the same environment, be it the work place, or any other setting in the same culture, it stands to reason that the difference will be even greater when perceived by people in different cultures. There might be also cultural differences in the coping strategies of people.

As for conceptual models of coping, Lazarus (1966), and Monat and Lazarus (1977) suggested to differentiate between two general strategies of coping with stress: direct action in which the person tries to master the stressful transaction with the environment, and indirect or palliative strategies whereby the person attempts to reduce the disturbances when unable to manage the environment or when action is too costly for the individual. While direct coping strategy is applied externally to the environmental source of stress, indirect or palliative strategies apply internally to one's own behavior or emotions. Pines and Kafry (1981) and Pines et al. (1981) added an active/inactive dimension to the direct/indirect dimension proposed by Lazarus. Active strategies involve confronting or attempting to change the source of stress or ones own way of reacting to stress, while inactive strategies involve avoidance or denial of the sources of stress by cognitive or physical means.

More recently, Lazarus (1981); Lazarus and Folkman (1984); Folkman (1984); Folkman and Lazarus (1985) redefined and amplified the previous dimensions of coping strategies. "Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (master, reduce, or tolerate) a troubled person-environment relationship". Folkman and Lazarus (1980; 1985) view coping as having two major functions: one is the regulation of distressing emotions (emotion-focused coping). The other is an attempt to change the problem causing the distress (problem-focused coping). Problem-focused coping is used more frequently in encounters which are appraised by the person as changeable. In contrast, emotion-focused coping is used more frequently in encounters which are appraised as unchangeable.

Cross-cultural aspects

This paper does not treat the cross-cultural aspects of stress and its manifestations. It is proper however to mention some findings and interpretations which support the basic theoretical construct adopted in our investigation. Cross-cultural research on stress and burnout is reported mainly by Pines, Kafry and Etzion, who studied the phenomena in the U.S.A. and Israel (Pines and Zimbardo, 1978; Pines, Kafry and Etzion, 1974; Pines et al., 1981; Etzion, Pines