STRESS ON CAMPUS:
An Interactional Perspective

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Faculty stress was investigated with the use of an interactional model of stress including roles, personal characteristics, coping strategies, and environmental characteristics. A random sample of 191 faculty members and 67 student-affairs staff members completed standardized measures of stress, strain, and coping resources and open-ended questions regarding sources of stress. Significant differences were found among faculty from different academic disciplines, between genders, and across semester time periods. Major stressors included time pressures, work overload, and interpersonal relationships. Body signals and poor interpersonal relationships were primary indicators of stress, and taking specific action and exercising were frequent coping behaviors. These findings have implications for administrative policy and faculty development programs.

Stress is a major health concern for faculty (Eckert and Williams, 1972; Horowitz et al., 1984; Koester and Clark, 1980). Lack of time, poor facilities, intrafaculty relationships, administrative red tape, and high self-expectations are frequently reported sources of faculty stress (Bowers, 1980; Burschfield, 1979; Miller, 1980; Newman and Rowbottom, 1966; Shull, 1972). Researchers have examined faculty productivity and stress (Wilke, et al., 1984), the relationship of academic field to stress (Gmelch et al., 1984) and organizational and role-related stressors (Hurbert et al, 1984). Higher education is, however, a relatively new focus for concern about occupational stress (Phillips, 1982). The social cost of work pathology is high in many occupations (Osipow, 1979), and in a setting where faculty mood and expectations may affect the lives of college students, the social cost of faculty stress could be quite high.

An interactional perspective has served as a primary framework for study-
ing stress in recent years (French, Kaplan, and Van Harrison, 1982; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kahn, 1973; Levi, 1981; Magnusson, 1982). From this perspective, situational variables are believed to interact with personal variables to lead to different stress reactions. The work environment may be a source of physical and psychological stress, but the amount of personal strain experienced is influenced by the availability of coping strategies and personal resources such as relaxation or self-care. Relatively high stress levels might not be debilitating if a person has adequate resources to handle stress. Low stress levels, however, may be debilitating if personal resources and coping strategies are limited.

Most investigations of faculty members focus on the extent of stress that exists and the sources of stress. Few studies have investigated how situational, personal, or role variables may be related to faculty stress and strain. This study used an interactional perspective to investigate the relationship of a key situational variable (time of semester), a personal variable (gender), and a comparative campus-role variable (faculty member or student-affairs staff member) to reported occupational stress and personal strain. It also looked at the relationship of these variables to faculty members reports of coping strategies and their personal resources for handling stress.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

An interactional perspective of stress suggests that stress reactions vary across situations and differ from person to person (Magnusson, 1982). This perspective is in contrast with a relative-consistency model of stress in which stress reactions are viewed as consistent across situations (Magnusson, 1976). The consistency model is comparable to a trait model for personality theory and measurement. In the consistency model, the relative rank order of stress levels among individuals in reaction to different stressful situations would be expected to be essentially the same. The interactional perspective proposes, however, that not all individuals have the same reaction to the same stressful situations, nor would the relative rank order of individual stress reactions across situations be the same. Discussions of the merits of the interactional and consistency models are comparable to those about state and trait anxiety, but the level of knowledge, or at least the volume of studies, about stress is not yet comparable to that available on anxiety (Endler and Edwards, 1982).

Although not using the interactional model explicitly, the Gmelch et al. (1984) study of faculty stress can be viewed from this perspective. In a comprehensive study of faculty stress, Gmelch et al. (1984) used a 45-item Faculty Stress Index to compare faculty in different academic disciplines from 80 doctorate granting institutions in the United States. The Biglan