



Does Gender Matters? Understanding Correctional Staff Occupational Stress

Awanis Ku Ishak¹, Hanissah A Razak² and Armanurah Mohamad³

^{1,2,3} School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract: Excessive occupational stress is an imperative issue in any organizations because it prohibits wellness that deters employees' optimal performance. Correctional staff are among occupation most affected by occupational stress despite gender differences. In high risk and harsh workplace environment, correctional staff' wellness and occupational stress are two interrelated issues. Nevertheless, gender differences are always appealing issues due to developmental difference between male correctional staff and female correctional staff. The difference is causing protruding quandary to female correctional staff in order to survive in the men's world at some extent especially in the traditionally male dominated workplaces such as prison organization. The gender difference has certainly caused both genders to experience and perceive their occupational stress differently. Hence, this study seeks to examine significant differences of occupational stress level between male and female correctional staff. The study used survey method on 417 correctional staff as respondents. Research findings revealed significant difference between male and female correctional staff. The differences of roles, personality, attitude and behavior between male and female are due to biological and social influences.

Keywords: correctional staff, occupational stress, gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is an upsurge attention on the influence of employee wellness at the workplace (Ku Ishak, 2010, 2011, 2012; Botha, 2007; Els & De La Rey, 2006; Myers and Sweeney, 2005; Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Keyes & Haidt, 2003). Most organizations in trade, industry as well as government have realized the importance of employee health and wellbeing in attaining acceptable performance and productivity. The increasing attention is caused by gradual increase of stress at the workplace due to the evolution towards globalization era comprising of the change phenomenon in society, technology advances, the availability of resources, and the social structure in order to achieve optimum profitability and resilient competitive advantage as affirmed by Zafir & Fazilah (2006).

Organizations specifically in health and social service have recognized substantial impact of employees' optimal health and wellbeing or simply known as "wellness" has on overall organization's profitability and performance. This issue is important especially to the prison professionals who are dealing with substantial risk at work. Globally, several researchers specifically in human service fields have found the consequences of human services employees such as prison employees having a direct long term contact with their clients (in this case prison inmates) that may impact their wellness level and indirectly impact their productivity and performance (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Senol-Durak, Durak & Gencoz, 2006; Armstrong & Griffin, 2006; Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001; Zapf, 2002; Holman & Fernie, 2000). Particularly correctional staff, among other human service occupations such as ambulance workers, customer service employees in call centres and police is identified as being most stressful resulting depleting physical and psychological well-being and having the lowest level of job satisfaction (Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor & Millet, 2005; Borritz, Rugulies, Bjorner, Villadsen, Mikkelsen & Kristensen, 2006; Armstrong & Griffin, 2004). Correctional staff' work implicated prolonged stress conditions, emotional labour, incessant threats of violence and excessive workload that can have negative impact on employees' mental and physical health at long term (Senol-Durak, Durak & Gencoz, 2006; Armstrong & Griffin, 2006; Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001; Zapf, 2002; Holman & Fernie, 2000). The importance of maintaining wellness among prison professionals is necessary in order to guarantee performance at work and effective prison service that entails long-term benefit to the society. In high risk and harsh workplace environment, frontline correctional staff' wellness and occupational stress are two interrelated concern.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

At present the world of work has tremendously evolved based on three pertinent factors which are the shifting of demographics patterns, the pace of technological change and the path of economic globalisation (Károly & Panis, 2004; Zafir & Fazilah, 2006). The change is anticipated to gradually proliferate in the near future (Károly & Panis, 2004; Zafir & Fazilah, 2006). This is particularly true looking at the mixture of workforce's demographic characteristics in any civilization has been increasingly becoming more disparate than before. The shifting demographic patterns of the world workforce have definitely changed the role of women in the economy and society (Bell & Graubard, 1997). The prison industry is no exception and has benefitted from this trend. Today, more and more women have entered male-dominated work organisation specifically the prison organisation (Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). The notion of prison as male-dominated work organisation is clearly narrated and documented by various scholars (Scott & Davis, 2007). Previous scholars such as Cullen, Link, Wolfe, & Frank (1985) have stated prison organisation is characterized by male-dominated working environment. The environment serves as the breeding grounds for the manifestation and promulgation of gender and sexual harassment (Dantzker & Kubin, 1998; Stohr, Lovrich, & Mays, 1997) and can negatively affect employee stress (Morash & Haarr, 1995). However, the scenario is progressively shifting. Thanks to the shifting state of affairs, hence, gender differences in terms of stress levels have been identified among employees in the criminal justice research literature (Scott & Davis, 2007). Today, female correctional staff are growing in numbers and their visibility in prison organisation industries that have previously been dominated by men are tremendously felt (Scott & Davis, 2007; Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). The increasing numbers of women being attracted to work as a prison officer could be expected, when the work organisation is recognised as human services work organisation (Scott & Davis, 2007; Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011).

Currently, as the scenario of prison organisation has gradually changed, the society's insight of prison as male-dominated work organisation has steadily faltered. Prison is considered as human services work organisation and this has been universally understood (Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). As the human services workers are predominantly female therefore it is reasonably realistic considering women are the predominant applicants for university courses in the human services. This gender divide remains true especially education qualification is definite requirement for human services work. Women are the predominant applicants for university courses in the human services. Women entering the job of prison officer, perhaps attracted by its human services focus are confronted with some aspects of the job that have not developed significantly from the paramilitary model Scott & Davis, 2007; Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). This poses a significant challenge to the women themselves as prison officials. Since women have contributed substantially to the growth and development of prison, their characters in maintaining their health and wellbeing as well as their level of stress at work should deem be taken into consideration (Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). In this article, the author intends to examine the relevant literature and apply it to the findings to enhance interpretation and understanding of significant differences of occupational stress between male and female correctional staff.

Thus, the objective of the research is to examine the difference of occupational stress between male and female correctional officers.

3. A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE: CORRECTIONAL STAFF' OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Employees' occupational stress is a timely and important topic where it is the condition in which some factors or combination of factors interferes with the worker to disrupt their physical, psychological, or social homeostasis (Lou, 1997) that prohibits the person to perform optimally. Correctional staff are among occupation most affected by this problem (Senol-Durak, Durak & Gencoz, 2006). Uncontrollable stress will deplete mental wellbeing of correctional staff (Ku Ishak, 2014). The necessity of maintaining wellness among prison professionals is imperative to guarantee performance at work and effective prison service that entails long-term benefit to the society (Senol-Durak, Durak & Gencoz, 2006; Ku Ishak, 2014). In high risk and harsh workplace environment, correctional staff' wellness and occupational stress are two interrelated issues. According to research and subjective evidences, occupational stress among correctional staff is massive and it seriously retards and causes correctional staff' wellness to deplete unswervingly at long-term run (Ku Ishak, 2014; Senol-Durak, Durak & Gencoz, 2006; Pfeffer, 2010; Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton & Swart, 2003; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). These researchers' discovery on correctional staff' stress is verified during informal interviews with several correctional staff in various prison locations in Malaysia. These correctional staff regarded their daily work conditions extend from tedium to imminently dangerous. They are also required to supervise imprisoned individuals awaiting trial or convicted of a crime, maintain security, account for inmates, and enforce rules and regulations, preventing disturbances, assaults, or escapes. Usually unarmed in a team of 3 to 5 officers, they often worked in cellblocks of 500 to 1000 inmates. Apart from guarding the prison inmates, their task included rehabilitating the detainees; starts from discipline training through physical activity to spirituality development. Thus, this has signified correctional staff' duty to be an "all-rounder" – an adviser, counsellor, teacher, supervisor, trainer, instructor as well as safeguarding fellow convicts. This discovery has supported Senol-Durak, Durak and Gencoz's

(2006) revelation on the correctional staff' constant stress through direct and unremitting contact with prison inmates when they were on duty.

In essence, correctional staff' daily work that revolves around the general routine of prisoners' life (the prison inmates themselves repelling from being held in prison and being closely supervised), characterized by strict and regimented hierarchies, depersonalized relationships between staff members and pervasive bureaucracy could initiate intense stress (Cheeseman & Dial, 2008) that slowly depletes their wellness in long term run. These occupational stress trigger correctional staff' harmful physical and emotional responses when the requirements of correctional staff' job do not match their capabilities, resources or needs (Hall, 2004; Rosnah & Azmi, 2008). Due to these account, on daily basis, preserving correctional staff' wellness while working in prison environment will not be easy. For this reason, prison work has often been characterized as one of the toughest position in law enforcement. In order to maintain the role of prison services and safe custody, it is pertinent that prison officials be optimally functioning and well balanced. The unique working environment of correctional staff, however, increasingly jeopardizes the fulfilment of such expectations.

Women working in prison

Gender differences are always appealing issues among I/O psychology researchers, psychologists, behaviourists and neurologists (Cheeseman & Goodlin-Fahncke, 2011). The fascination on gender differences is mainly stemmed on the developmental differences between male and female being during childhood and continuously to be different during adolescence, adult and elderly. The difference is causing protruding quandary to the women in order to survive in the men's world at some extent especially in the traditionally male dominated workplaces such a construction, engineering and prison. The gender difference has certainly caused both genders to experience and perceive their occupational stress differently. These women entering the male dominated workforce bringing their strengths and attributes and the occurrence has gradually changed the traditional masculine way of the male-dominated workforce to less masculine. The fact that women are present in the prison workplace helps to enhance the normalization of prison facilities in relation to society in general. Female prison professionals tend to be more able to multi-task and are more observant in comparison to male prison professionals who are more comfortable with single task completion and excel in synthesizing information. Regardless of the obstacles or challenges women have faced, they have found success working in prison.

Hypothesis from differential aspect

Marini (1990) revealed there were differences of roles, personality, attitude and behaviour between male and female due to biological and social influences. Subsequently, researchers found female prison warders reported more work related stress than their male counterparts thus might deteriorate their wellness (Cullen, *et al.*, 1985; Zupan, 1986). However, other study revealed mix results when they demonstrated no significant gender differences for prison warder stress (Triplett, Mullings and Scarborough, 1996; Walters, 1992). It was noteworthy that earlier studies conducted in the 1980's demonstrated gender differences, but more recent studies found no gender differences. But then, Morgan *et al.* (2002) asserted that female warders had learned how to cope better with working in a prison environment in recent years that would help to boost their level of wellness.

In addition, another study by Norvel, Hills and Murrin (1993) also found that female law enforcement officers did not report higher levels of stress than did the male law enforcement officers. In another recent studies by Bradway (2009) and Clark, Martin and Martin (2009), the results supported previous studies when these researchers concluded on the negligible importance of stress adaptation between genders. Furthermore, in another study, female correctional staff in Nigeria were reported to have higher stress than their male counterparts (Okuza, Imhonde and Aluede, 2010). This was because women had a lot to contend with roles as a worker, housewife and mother. Therefore, it was considered normal for women to be more stressful compared to male correctional staff. On the contrary, Savicki, Cooley and Gjesvold (2003) concluded that female correctional staff developed a variety of effective coping skills to enable them to manage their working environment compared to their male counterparts. Nevertheless, although some previous researches suggested that gender might be an important demographic characteristic to consider in the experience of stress; then again some research revealed no differences between women and men in relation to occupational stress (Martocchio and O'Leary, 1989). Other research had noted on differences on stressors and severity of stress between the sexes (Decker and Borgen, 1993). It had also been reported that although women and men were exposed to the same stressors, women also faced unique stressors (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2001; Palmer, Cooper and Thomas, 2003). Meanwhile, in another study, by Deaux (1984) and Martocchio and O'Leary (1989) revealed the existence of occupational stress among correctional staff without gender difference. In particular, psychological research on sex and gender, Deaux (1984) concluded that in most research little variance was accounted for by sex. Meanwhile Martocchio and O'Leary (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of fifteen studies that had examined gender differences in occupational stress, and they concluded that there were no gender differences in occupational stress. Based from the literature, it is evidenced of inconsistent results. Due to the inconsistencies, this study aims to examine the possible difference of occupational stress between male and female correctional staff. Thus, it is hypothesized that there is difference of occupational stress between male and female correctional staff.

H1 There is significant difference of occupational stress between male and female correctional staff.

4. METHODOLOGY

Participants

Since the grand total of correctional staff at 8 locations are 4,783, then the required respondents sample for the populations is between 354 and 356 (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970; Dean, Sullivan and Soe, 2009). In tandem, Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) has advised appropriate sampling calculation should be subjected to the measured construct variable (in this research, parcelled items) of 10:1. Meanwhile McMillan (2004) has suggested the rate of return should be at least at 60%. Considering all suggestions, the author settled for the usable returned questionnaires amount because it is between the recommended sample size and also suitable for item parcelling purposes. The returned questionnaires are totalled at 570 whilst usable returned questionnaires are at 417. The sample size has satisfied the proposed minimum by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), Tanaka (1993) and Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). This has indicated acceptable returned questionnaires are at 62.68% and has met the suggested rate (McMillan, 2004). The questionnaire is completed by front line Correctional staff as selected respondents (n=417; mean age 33 years).

Instruments Occupational Stress Scale for Correctional staff

Occupational stress has put a major impact in one's life. Individuals who are exposed to work-related stress will put a tremendous influence on individual's mental and physical health. Thus through comprehensive understanding on the sources and causes of occupational stress are crucial to increase job satisfaction, job performance and wellness of the individual. Specific characteristics of the particular job also influence the level of occupational stress of an employee such as police officers (Patterson, 2003) and correctional officers (Armstrong and Griffin, 2004; Pollack and Sigler, 1998). The operational definition of occupational stress among correctional staff in this study is the occupational hazard in prison environment. In addition, correctional staff have reported to endure prolong and greater stress due to cultural diversity, increased negative perception towards the occupation and shift of expectations from the mere punitive institution to treatment facility (Senol-Durak, Durak and Gencoz, 2006). Hence considering the respondents of the research are correctional staff, thus the usage of Occupational Stress Scale for Correctional Officers as developed by Senol-Durak, Durak and Gencoz (2003) is deemed appropriate. This is because the correctional staff are exposed to constant and different high level of stressful conditions at work especially for front-liner correctional staff that are distinct compared to other job. WSSCO is developed in particular for correctional staff. It is a self-report instrument with 35 items on the effects of given conditions upon the prison employees (Senol-Durak, Durak and Gencoz, 2006). Responds are obtained from 4-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = it has no effect at all to 4 = it has a very strong effect. Item dimensions are: i) work overload, ii) role conflict and role ambiguity, iii) inadequacies in physical conditions of prison, iv) threat perception and v) general problems. The overall internal consistency of the instrument is at .94 and inter-item correlations ranged from .31 to .75 (work overload internal, role conflict and role ambiguity, inadequacies in physical conditions in prison, threat perception & general dimension subscale). Since the instrument is being tested the first time on a Malaysian population, therefore the instrument is slightly adapted to fit the Malaysia application.

Procedure

Initially, an extensive accessible literature on occupational stress in prison environment was conducted. Next, the instruments used to measure occupational stress constructs in this study were translated into Malay version questionnaire to suit cross-sectional survey design (Brislin, 1970). The instruments were then tested for validity and reliability through face validity, content validity, construct validity and internal consistency analysis. Thus in considering the thoroughness of this study, it contributes to an extension of the knowledge the theory and functional behavioural science specifically in prison environment. Cross-sectional survey method was adopted where the questionnaires were distributed to eight selected prison facilities. Multistage sampling technique was used to address prison officer samples in the most effectual approach possible. Through the stratified random sampling, the correctional staff were divided into homogenous subgroups; then taking a simple random sampling in each subgroup (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001). Data then are analysed using SPSS version 16. Statistical analysis used is t-test analysis.

5. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Respondents profile

Respondents are consisted of 417 correctional staff (of 233 male and 184 female; 56% and 44% respectively). This sample reflects real situation of correctional staff population where majority are male dominated.

Larger numbers of female front line correctional staff are concentrated at Penjara Wanita Kajang (female prison). This sample also reflects true populace of the profession where it is dominated by Malay ethnic (94.24%) whilst other ethnic group (Chinese, Indian and others) is at 5.76%. Age mean and age mode of respondents are at 32.8 years and 25 years respectively where 47.2% of respondents are between 20-29 years, while 28.1% are between 30-39 years. 24.7% of respondents are at age between 40 to 59 years. Most respondents worked between 4-10 years with 39.3% (n=164) while 28.8% (120) respondents have worked 3 years and below. 31.8% respondents have served the department between 11 to 20 years and between 21-30 years.

Reliability Analysis

According to Cavana *et al.* (2001), the reliability of a measure indicates the extent to which the measure is without bias and hence offers consistent measurement across time and across the various items in the instrument. Cavana *et al.* (2001) also have mentioned that the reliabilities less than 0.60 are considered poor whilst the reliability value range between 0.6 and 0.8 are acceptable. Reliability value at 0.8 and above is considered good. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha values of WSSCO instrument is .89, indicating acceptable internal consistency of instruments. However, two dimensions of Occupational Stress Scale for Correctional Officers scale namely Work Overload and Inadequacies in Physical Conditions of Prison reveal the least Cronbach's alpha value of .614 and .602 respectively (Cavana *et al.*, 2001).

Differential Analysis: Occupational Stress according to Male and Female Correctional Staff

Based on the result, significant difference of occupational stress between gender is apparent where occupational stress ($p = .022$, t value = 1.875). The mean and standard deviation scores for occupational stress of female respondents are at 2.84 and .388 respectively compared to male respondents' scores at 2.94 and .426 respectively. This signified that female respondents have slightly lower occupational stress compared to male respondents. Hypothesis H1 is substantiated as the significance value was at .022 ($p < .05$); indicating that there is significant difference of occupational stress level between male and female respondents.

Table 1
t-Test on Occupational Stress according to Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev	T	Sig.
Occupational stress	Male	233	2.94	.426	1.875	.022
	Female	184	2.84	.388		

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This finding supports previous research on stress by Okoza, Imhonde and Aluede (2010) and Lam Zhang and Lam (2001), when they revealed that gender had significant interaction effect on stress as experience by prison workers that indirectly influence their health and wellbeing. As occupational stress in prison environment was a major problem, no one could escape from experiencing stress during work that would continually depletes health and wellbeing of correctional staff especially at early work year (Okuza, Imhonde and Aluede, 2010); however, the stress level is different between male and female correctional staff. According

to the results of the present study in general, correctional staff were experiencing moderate occupational stress level at work. However, male correctional staff experience higher occupational stress compared to female counterparts. This finding may indicate male officers are more prone to stress compared to female officers. This is confirmed during interview with few local correctional staff on the possible reason for higher stress was due to the extensive work burden and expectation from their immediate superior to perform well. This was especially relevant to male correctional staff; since it was considered as a norm. The pressure weight to perform well was highly placed on the male correctional staff's shoulder compared to women otherwise their performance would be underrated by their tough male supervisors. Besides, the daily work in safeguarding and rehabilitating prison inmates also put constant pressure on the correctional staff. Male correctional staff constantly faced and threatened by incarcerated male criminals (with variety of sentenced degree) who were more aggressive and violence leading to massive stress. What's more, adding on to their stress is the facing financial burden due to low salary to support and sustain their family as the breadwinner despite of excessive stress at work.

The pressure weight to perform well was also highly placed on female correctional staff though not as much as their male counterparts. This finding was supported by Farnworth (1991) when he pointed pertinent findings pertaining to this issue. Farnworth (1991) reported that due to the nature of work as a prison officer was highly male-stereotyped, it created several integration problems for female correctional staff. In that situation, female correctional staff performed differently compared to male officers. Nevertheless, the female correctional staff were not disadvantaged promotionally because the prison management recognized them as competent correctional staff. The finding of female correctional staff experienced lower stress level supports Savicki, Cooley and Gjesvold (2003) when they affirm on the ability of female correctional staff to develop effective coping skills to enable them to manage their working environment compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, based on the research findings, although female correctional staff also played similar role as an employee, wife and mother, it was interesting to note that their stress level did not succumb to natural "highly stressful" circumstances of working women. The reason is yet to be determined and is suggested for future research. However, the recent finding had some similarity with previous finding (Okuza, Imhonde & Aluende, 2010) when it proved that gender gave significant interaction effect on stress.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

One more suggestion for future research direction is the need to scrutinize on occupational stress among correctional staff in Malaysia. Feedback from face-to face interviews during preliminary investigation have revealed that from Malaysia viewpoint there have only been a scant knowledge of the issues pertaining to wellness, occupational stress and coping among correctional staff within the literature. Therefore, another potential issue is to look at in future research is correctional staff's coping ability and its measurement according to Malaysia respondents, culture and its norms. In addition, future research also needs to probe into other possible stressors in prison setting (Triplett, Mullings & Scarborough, 1999). The comments given by the correctional staff at the end of the survey and the amount of variation explained by the models, both, suggest that all the relevant sources of stress are not covered. Future research need also assess variation in the effectiveness of different coping mechanisms across different sources of stress. Finally, variation across race and gender in the use of effective coping strategies should be examined. (Triplett, Mullings & Scarborough, 1996).

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