

The effect of personality on occupational stress among employees in Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis

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ABSTRACT

The education sector has significant well-being issues, with high levels of occupational stress and burnout. Previous research has focused on environmental factors in isolation, overlooking the influence of personality. Universiti Teknologi Mara Perlis (UiTM Perlis) ($n=100$) completed an online survey composed of three questionnaires; the NEO Five-Factor Inventory, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Job Stress Survey. Multiple regression analysis revealed that personality is a better predictor of occupational stress than environment ($p<.001$). Neuroticism is the trait that significantly predicts occupational stress ($p<.001$), and the components of neuroticism that contribute the most to stress are depression ($p=.002$) and anger hostility ($p=.005$). Overall findings suggest that newly employees are at greater risk of suffering from high levels of occupational stress than those well established in the profession, and with higher levels of depression and anger hostility are likely to experience greater levels of occupational stress. Implications highlight the need for greater awareness of potentially susceptible personality traits in the employee's admissions process. This would allow for the identification of those at risk and the implementation of interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress (OS), is defined as the reaction of an employee towards the workplace that poses challenges to one (Raišienė et al., 2023). Low levels of autonomy, a lack of recognition, and a high workload can all contribute to stress among employees. Occupational stress also caused by the organisational environment, the climate within it, and conflicts that arise due to unclear work requirements (Omeke et al., 2023). The impact often goes beyond the workplace and result in a decline in performance, productivity, and engagement (Robertson & Cooper, 2011). There is an increasing amount of occupational stress in today's world, and most serious health issues are associated with occupational stress (Kambam et al., 2022). An individual is subjected to occupational stress when the requirements of their job do not match

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their abilities, resources, or even needs (Ram Kumar et al., 2022). Everyone processes information differently and deals with stress differently, irrespective of age. Stress has both physical and emotional effects on individuals which some experts regard as necessary for normal and healthy growth. When employees are under some degree of stress at work, they become motivated to learn new skills and master their jobs, which results in improved productivity. However, the problem arises when stress is not managed appropriately. The introduction of new technologies, changing policies, changing economic conditions, market dynamics, and changes within an organisation are some of the factors that may influence stress levels in the workforce, which create an impact on individual and organisational productivity (Ma et al., 2023). Physical complaints like anxiety, headaches, sickness, and disrupted sleep are frequent signs of stress (Kivimäki, 2006). Although preventative interventions exist, those that manage stress can be more effective (Dawson & Thompson, 2017). Most workers will experience stress at some point during their careers, but if it persists and is not relieved, it can lead to depression and burnout. In severe cases, some people feel so hopeless to the extent that they commit suicide. The high levels of stress and pressure imply that managing employee well-being is necessary. Previous studies have revealed that despite having higher levels of stress exposure than paramedics, teachers, and social workers, these occupations have lower suicide rates (Johnson et al, 2005). High stress levels have been linked to environmental factors, hours worked, client expectations, and unexpected outcomes. The maintenance of knowledge and technical skills, interpersonal and professional relationships, finances, individual expectations, career concerns, responsibility, and challenging life circumstances were additional considerations (Gardner & Hini, 2006).

The problem of stress in the workplace is a chronic issue that is often discussed in every organisation. This problem exists in almost all organisations including large organisations such as in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. The problem of stress needs to be overcome as best as possible because it can affect the performance and productivity of an organisation. A report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that workplace stress could be one of the causes of human health problems by 2021. In Malaysia, Union Congress Employees in Public Service (CUEPACS) stated that there are more than 21,000 workers who retired early due to workplace stress in 2018. The main thing to emphasise is whether the employee can overcome the problem before it gets worse. Unfortunately, Malaysia has little producing empirical national data on the prevalence of OS (Ismail et al., 2023). According to the study conducted by Mukosolu et al. (2015) regarding the prevalence of Job Stress and factors associated has proof that employees in Universiti Putra Malaysia experienced stress at a rate of 23.1%, which is greater than the average rate for other sectors (19.8%). The determination of how depressed employees are, and their prevalence will provide valuable data and information to those who are concerned with this problem. This finding can also be used for future intervention programs that will benefit employees in Malaysia.

HYPOTHESIS

There are two hypotheses for this study which are:

1. Employees experiences of occupational stress will be explained more through personality factors than environmental factors.
2. The personality traits of neuroticism and conscientiousness will be more related to occupational stress than the traits of extraversion, openness, and agreeableness.

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

According to Patching and Best (2014), stress is defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of a job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. The authors claim that stress is managed by a part of the brain that deals with the emotional memory, which controls certain processes of the autonomous nervous system by hiding neurohormones. Moreover, stress is managed by a part that primarily controls the way we respond to intense emotions, such as fear and

aggression. This part of the brain controls and regulates important body functions, such as heart rate, body weight, sleep and alertness. Furthermore, it controls and regulates the pain and pleasure regions, which are important regions in relation to how individuals perceive stress. In other words, the part of the brain that deals with stress takes in information from our senses, identifies it and then categorises it. Occupational stress can express itself in a number of forms, including compassion fatigue, a diminished ability for and interest in establishing a good rapport with the misery of everyone else, and psycho-social concerns such as nervousness or hopelessness (Besagas & Branzuela, 2023).

PERSONALITY TYPE

Jung's theory of psychological types is one of the leading theories in modern differential psychology. The theory was developed by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist Carl Jung. In the work "Psychological Types" published in 1921, he laid foundations of the theory introducing a number of new concepts and describing some hypothetical provisions. The book "Psychological Types" became the conceptual foundation for the future theory of psychological types (Makhaev et al., 2023). Later after Jung's death, Jung's hypotheses were confirmed in the study by Myers (1962). These works confirm the hypothetical positions of Jung's theory and contribute to the further development of ways to a deeper understanding of complex personality characteristics and their interaction with socially determined variables. Many people associate a "Type A" personality with a more organised, rigid, competitive, and anxious person, for example. Yet there's little empirical support for the idea. The personality types supplied by the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) have also been challenged by scientists. Psychologists who study personality believe such typologies are generally too simplistic to account for the ways people differ. Instead, they tend to rely on frameworks like the Big Five model of trait dimensions. In the Big Five model, each individual fall somewhere on a continuum for each trait—compared to the rest of the population, a person may rate relatively high or low on a trait such as extraversion or agreeableness, or on more specific facets of each (such as assertiveness or compassion). The combination of these varying trait levels describes one's personality.

PERSONALITY TYPE AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

The theoretical underpinnings of psychology consider how the interplay of environmental, societal, cultural, and biological factors influences a given outcome. Certain theorists believe that there is a direct relationship between stress and personality (Parkes, 1994). This has led to the "constitutional predisposition model," which states that the relationship between stress and personality is conceptualised through an "inner weakness" or susceptibility, and stress may aggravate any underlying issues (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2007). The Big Five personality theory, composed of five main personality traits, dominates much of the field. Personality research, neuroticism and conscientiousness have consistently been found to correlate with stress. For example, high levels of neuroticism and low levels of conscientiousness are associated with depression, stress, and dysfunctional coping, whereas low levels of neuroticism combined with high extraversion and conscientiousness have been shown to predict low stress exposure (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Conscientiousness involves discretionary behaviours that aim at preventing work related problems, for example-providing advance notice to colleagues when something is changed by you which may affect them (Mahmud et al., 2022). It may affect and influence depression through increased exposure to negative life events (Klein et al., 2011). Incongruences among expectations, resources, capability, and value regarding a role can lead to stress related to job role. Three facets of OS (role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload) were examined in relation to the Big Five. Results demonstrated that neuroticism is related to instability, proneness to stress, insecurity, and depression, and that individuals who possess high levels of agreeableness will experience less role stress (Rai & Kumar, 2012). Similar findings found that conscientiousness, extraversion, and neuroticism were all negatively associated with occupational health and well-being. Primarily, neuroticism positively predicted physical ill health, and negatively predicted job satisfaction; extraversion presented the inverse correlation. However, contrary to prediction,

conscientiousness failed to contribute directly to the prediction of physical ill health and job satisfaction over and above extraversion and neuroticism.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study used a within-groups correlational design, predominantly assessing the relationship(s) among personality, environment, and OS. The personality was considered in terms of the Big Five personality traits, environment in terms of job-related pressures, and OS in terms of burnout and job-related stress.

Data Collection

This research is focused on primary sources of data by surveying 100 employees from different areas of work in Universiti Teknologi Mara Perlis (UiTM Perlis). The population for this study is about 779 staffs of UiTM Perlis. The proportional random sampling was based on the systematic and stratified method while the sample size determination was based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, which provided the provision to achieve at the required sample size from various departments. The total was then divided into several categories of jobs which are upper management, lower management and lecturers. Moreover, the suitable sample size for most of the research is larger than 30 and less than 500 (Roscoe, 1975).

Source of Questionnaire

The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) is a widely cited personality test with good levels of reliability (test-retest, two-week period, .86-.90), internal consistency (.68-.86), and validity (McCrae & Costa, 2004). Due to its shorter length compared to its predecessors, it appears to be an obvious choice in light of boredom effects and dropout rates (Costa & McCrae, 1989). The 60-item inventory measures openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism on five scales. Participants are required to rate the extent to which the items reflected them as individuals on a 5-point scale (0=strongly disagree, 1=disagree, 2=neutral, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree). The sum of the answers provides a category for the degree to which the trait is evident in the participant: very low, low, average, high, or very high. To partly compose the measure of OS, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used. This measure is widely supported based on literature and was selected because the scale not only refers to stress within the workplace (as opposed to general stress) but also measures frequency over a sufficient period of time (every day to a few times a year). Other scales were found to only specify frequency over the past month (e.g., General Health Questionnaire). In addition, the MBI possesses sufficient levels of reliability for the three sub-scales of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalisation (DP), and personal accomplishments (PA) (.88, .83, and .70, respectively) and good levels of validity, particularly criterion validity relating to anxiety and depression (Pisanti et al., 2013). The 22-item questionnaire assesses EE (9 items), DP (5 items), and PA (8 items). Responses are based on the frequency of which participants experience the stressors (0=never, 1=a few times a year or less, 2=once a month or less, 3=a few times a month, 4=once a week, 5=a few times a week, 6=every day). The sum of the answers for each sub-scale provides a category for the severity of burnout: low, moderate, or high.

To measure environmental and emotional stress, the Job Stress Survey (JSS) was used. This 30-item survey assesses both the severity and frequency of job stress (JS), job pressure (JP), and lack of organisational support (LS). JP was used in isolation as a variable because it best represents environmental stress. LS was combined with burnout to ensure an emotional aspect of job stress was present in OS, in addition to burnout. The JSS has good reliability (internal consistency .80) and validity (Jannoo et al., 2015). Responses were recorded on a scale ranging from 1 to 9 for severity (1=no stress to 9=maximum stress) and 0-9+ for frequency (0=not experiencing the event/task on any days during the past 6 months to 9+=experiencing the event/task on 9 or more days during the past six months). The frequency and severity

scores for each sub-scale were combined and then a percentile rank was computed based on a similar occupational group titled managerial/professional, which equated to a score of low, average, or high for JP and LS.

STUDY FINDINGS

Response Rate

The questionnaires were distributed to the employees of Universiti Teknologi Mara Perlis (UITM Perlis). The population of this study were 779 employees and the sample size were 100 respondents. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed to the employees. Total of 100 questionnaires were collected and completed, while another 16% (20 questionnaires) were unreturned.

Frequency statistics was done to describe the main characteristics of the sample. Frequency is the number of times an event occurs. Frequency analysis is an important area of statistics that deals with the number of occurrences. The table below shows the demographic profile of the respondents. Six variables have been questioned in the questionnaires which are gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, education level, and working experience.

A total of 100 questionnaires have been collected from the respondents which consisted of 46 (46.0%) female and 54 (54.0%) male employees involved in the study. 17 (17.0%) of the respondents were 20 to 29 years old, 36 (36.0%) were 30 to 39 years old, 27 (27.0%) were 40 to 49 years and 20 (20.0%) were 50 years and above. For ethnicity, majority of the respondents were Malay with 99 (99.0%) and Chinese only 1 (1.0%). In terms of marital status, they were married 77 (77.0%) and single 23 (23.0%). All of the respondents were 100% Malaysian. As for the education, there were Degree 16 (16.0%), Diploma, STPM or Certificate 19 (22.0%), SPM 20 (20.0%), Masters 39 (39.0%) and PHD 3 (3.0%).

Hypothesis Testing

Results for H_1 revealed that personality can explain 7.3% ($R^2=.073$) of the variance in OS. The final model indicates that personality has a significant effect on OS ($F[1, 309]=24.411, p<.001$). The beta coefficient confirms that personality significantly predicts OS ($\beta=.271, t[309]=4.941, p<.001$).

H_2 confirms the findings of H_1 and clarifies that neuroticism is the only significant predictor of OS out of the Big Five. Neuroticism can explain 7.3% ($R^2=.073$) of the variance in OS. The final model indicates that neuroticism is a significant predictor of OS ($F[1, 309]=24.411, p<.001$). Likewise the beta coefficient confirms this ($\beta=.271, t[309]=4.941, p<.001$). Conscientiousness did not qualify as a significant predictor.

To ascertain the strength and influence of personality, H_1 was explored further. When neuroticism was removed from the regression equation, environment was found to be a significant predictor of OS. The results show that environment can explain 2.2% of the variance in OS when neuroticism is removed ($R^2=.022$). The final model indicates that environment has a significant effect on OS ($F[1, 309]=6.958, p=.009$). The beta coefficient also shows that environment significantly predicts OS ($\beta=.148, t[309]=2.638, p=.009$). However, neuroticism has a greater significant effect on OS than environment, and a stronger correlation. Hence when neuroticism is included in the regression equation, it is a significantly stronger predictor and therefore overshadows environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the validity of H_1 , as personality outperformed environment as a predictor of OS. H_1 led to H_2 , which sought to identify the precise personality traits that influence OS the most. Neuroticism and conscientiousness were anticipated to be significant predictors based on prior research and findings. However, the findings showed that the only characteristic that significantly predicted OS was neuroticism. These results are consistent with earlier studies that claimed conscientiousness has ambiguous effects on

OS. (Lievens et al., 2002). When neuroticism was taken out of the regression equation to investigate Hypothesis 1 (H_1), environment emerged as a significant predictor of OS. Despite this finding, neuroticism continued to be a better predictor of OS than environment; in the regression equation, neuroticism dominated environment. Neuroticism, rather than personality, is a better predictor of overall survival on employees than environment. The results showed that depression was the strongest predictor of OS, with anger hostility being a significant predictor of OS as well. In support of this, none of the facets of conscientiousness revealed as significant predictors of OS, which corresponds with the non-significant effect of the trait as a whole. This indicates towards the "hierarchical structure" the NEO-FFI is built upon, encompasses broad to narrow traits, which can help with theory development. The broadest aspects of personality are reflected by domain (trait) scores, whereas facets-level analysis enables internal replication of more general findings. The ability to account for individual differences is most important. This occupational group may be the only one that experiences depression and hostility, which could account for why there is more variation at the facet level than at the domain level. This study also confirms the previous study on veterinarians in United Kingdom that higher levels of depression and anger hostility are likely to experience greater levels of occupational stress (Dawson & Thompson, 2017) and in Hong Kong where employees expected themselves to exhibit occupational stress when under certain types of personalities such as neuroticism (Chan et al., 2023).

Several valid implications of this study extend across individuals, the workplace, society, and academia. Not only has the research contributed to a developing and niche area of occupational psychology, but it has also provided insight into an angle that has lacked focus and has previously been overlooked. The employees will be better informed as to the types of individuals who may be a risk of OS and therefore will be able to focus on interventions to manage and alleviate the effects. Newly employees may need close monitoring in the workplace and support to develop healthy resilience strategies that positively affect their well-being and discourage maladaptive coping mechanisms. Studies have shown that employees in other countries have access to mentoring schemes and help-lines, but such services need to be made more accessible. Furthermore, employees may be interested in the personality traits and facets that this study has found to be associated with OS. Given that UiTM Perlis employees are excessively oversubscribed to, admission boards could choose to filter out certain applicants in the selection processes, identifying those who are at greater risk of stress before they begin their studies and subsequent careers. Researchers have recognised the potential of such an intervention as well as the potential of introducing education and awareness around mental health in degree programs. On a societal level, by implementing both well-being interventions and better selection processes, the suicide rate would hopefully decrease and the well-being of this occupational group would be of less concern. This in turn would lead to clients being confident in the profession's ability to deliver a high level of care.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving such a large sample size is a real strength of this study, as it gives the results weighting and representation. Unlike in previous studies, this study was able to gather extensive demographic information, which allows for greater insight into relationships. As concluded, the error in direction of relationships within the study can be attributed to the lack of sensitivity between the scales and thus measurement error. With regards to the measures, the MBI is very well established and has been used as a valid indicator of workplace burnout in many studies. However, to ensure greater validity of the study it would be beneficial to have a tool that measures workplace stress specifically regarding a clinical environment, and the emotional characteristics associated with such a workplace. This would provide a more balanced and realistic view of OS in the clinical professions, because although the MBI is representative of environmental and emotional factors, the focus is more on emotional contributors to stress and environmental factors are very general in nature. The select and somewhat restricted range of OS measures currently available is reflective of their lack of suitability.

In future, a similar study could be conducted incorporating adapted measures, such as a more suitable OS tool, and additionally a larger sample size. This would increase the validity of the study and representation of findings. Likewise, the findings of this study could be dissected further at facet level (e.g., ascertaining if there are any interacting environmental factors that exacerbate and aggravate anger hostility and depression). The trait of perfectionism offers additional avenues for future research; researchers should explore whether this trait is as prevalent among employees as the literature suggests and whether it could be a predictor of OS. Building upon the foundations of the present study, the incorporation of a coping mechanism measure would also provide further insight.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study has provided a novel, valid, and beneficial finding for employees and occupational psychology. There is a strong evidence to suggest that personality can better predict OS employees than environmental factors and that high levels of neuroticism are accountable to some extent. Depression and anger hostility have been found to best predict OS, explaining more of the variance than neuroticism alone. In addition, findings indicate that newly employees are at greater risk of suffering from OS than senior employees. This suggests that delegates and those involved with the well-being of employees need to apply greater focus to how employees cope with stress and how personality contributes to well-being, particularly during the early stages of a career. Specifically, practitioners involved in selection processes need to be aware of candidates with potential predispositions or susceptibilities, and able to identify high-risk individuals at initial stages. Despite the specificity and niche nature of this area of work, well-being issues affecting the sector remain serious in both scale and degree.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Luqman Mahmud carried out the research, wrote and revised the article. Associate Professor Dr Ahmad Nizan Mat Noor the central research idea and supervised research progress.

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