

GENDER AND STRESS AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF IN NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA.

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Abstract

Organizations overtime, have put in place strategies to help staff tackle stress in the organization. But, these strategies may not have considered the fact that the nature of stressors in male employees differs from that of female employees based on their gender role. Therefore, this study tried to establish a link between gender and stress. It aimed at investigating the strategies adopted by academic staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, to cope with stress and the extent to which these strategies have effectively tackled stress in both gender. The study answered four research questions and anchored on the Transactional theories of stress because it effectively explains the link between gender and stress. The study adopted a qualitative research design because; the researcher made use of qualitative method of data collection and data analysis. Data used for this study were derived using secondary sources of data collection technique and Key Persons Interview (KPI). Data derived from this study were analysed using a thematic and verbatim method of data analysis. Findings revealed that female staff are more stressed than their male counterparts and that, the strategies adopted by staff are effective for coping with their stress individually. It was revealed that these strategies are; relaxing, sleeping, listening to music, cooling off in restaurants and other places of choice and drinking water. on official level, it was revealed that the strategies adopted include; take breaking, go for training/ retraining and engaging in sporting activities. The study recommended that, staff take advantage of the sporting activities, leave and break to rest and also, explore the opportunities which the co-operative organizations offer to relief themselves of economic stress.

Key words: Gender, Role, Social expectation, Staff, Stress.

Introduction

Gender is a social construct, attached to males and females, which distinguishes males from females and females from males. The World Development Report (WDR) (2012) defined it

as socially constructed norms and ideologies which determine the behaviour and actions of males and females. According to UNICEF (2017) this social construct is also, a cultural construct which distinguishes differences in the attributes of males and females, and accordingly can be used to refer to the roles and responsibilities attached to being a male or a female. These roles and expectations may vary from society to society but a common attribute in most societies shows that males are expected to provide for the family while females take care of the family.

However, this role seem to have changed over time as women tend to contribute and assist the male gender in providing for the family by engaging in economic activities that are not within their social role. This additional role tends to cause these women stress as they struggle to adapt to their new role and also, effectively handle their social role. Kumar & Bhukar (2013) opined that women who fail to combine both roles effectively may experience incompatibility mentally and stress and thus, suffer from problems associated from inadequate adaptations which may cause psychological troubles and induce deviant behaviours.

Stress emanates from changes that require numerous readjustments from an individual. It can also be a physiological response to a perceived threat (Pinel, 2003). Kamini(2016) explained that, stress is an emotion or bodily reaction to physical, psychological or emotional demands. It is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceived that demands exceeded their personal and social resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Colquitt et al., 2010) and this can be caused by internal and external factors.

Gender is one of the determinants of one's susceptibility and perhaps, reaction to stress. Nolen-Hoeksema(1990) and Weissman et al. (1996) noted that across nations, cultures and ethnicities, women are about twice as likely as men to develop stress which can be linked to anxiety. They further reported that women face a number of stressors; socially and economically and this, contributes to a higher rate of depressive anxiety. Recent studies further revealed that women report higher levels of stress than their male counterpart (Hogan, et. al. 1992; Tamres, et. al. 2002).

While men may be more likely to face economic sources of stress (stressors), women are more likely to encounter family, health-related (Matud, 2004; McDonough & Walters, 2001) and in recent times, economic sources of stress. Marin et al., (2011) opined that this can be associated with the development of major mental health problem like; depression, PTSD and physical problems like; heart disease, cancer, and stroke (Cohen, et. al. 2007). It could also lead to negative health behaviours and relapses like; smoking, alcohol abuse, illicit substance use and sleeplessness (Kassel, et. al. 2003; Herman, 2012; Ellis, et al., 2012).

Kamini (2016) added that these symptoms vary in accordance to individuals' situational factors. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the situational factors that constitute stress for both gender and the coping mechanism adopted by both gender. It established a link between gender and stress and further, examined the stress management strategies in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Statement of problem

Stress causes health, social, mental and emotional threat to employees. These threats may include; headache, sleep disturbances, feelings of anxiety or tension, anger or concentration problems, being moody and feeling sick, high blood pressure, backaches, failure in sexual performance etc. The implications of all these on work performance can be very detrimental for the overall productivity of the organization. Taking this into cognizance, organizations have put into place strategies that will help employees cope with organizational stress. These strategies which includes break, leave taking etc. may not have considered the fact that the nature of stressors in male employees differs from that of female employees based on their gender role.

While males may engage in activities like hanging out with their friends in bar and club to tackle stress, female employees may not be able to hang out due to their domestic responsibilities. Thus, it may seem that men tends to end up stress-free more than their female counterparts even when these strategies are put in place to tackle the stress of employees irrespective of gender.

This may have had visible consequences in the work performance of male and female employees. While males may be approachable, friendly and effective in the discharge of their duties; females tend to be less-friendly, unapproachable and moderately not as effective as their male counterparts.

Therefore, this study aimed at establishing the link between gender and stress. It aimed at investigating the strategies adopted by academic staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, to cope with stress and the extent to which these strategies have effectively tackled stress in both gender.

Research questions

1. Do female employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University experience more stress than their male counterparts?
2. What are the strategies that have been put in place to help employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University cope with stress?
3. How have these strategies put in place in Nnamdi Azikiwe University enabled male and female employees respectively; to cope with stress?
4. How best can employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University effectively tackle stress; irrespective of their gender.

Empirical review

Sanjeev and Bhukar (2013) investigated Stress level and coping strategies of college students. The study aimed at investigating the stress levels and coping strategies of professional students belonging to Physical Education and Engineering professions. A sample of 60 subjects was randomly selected from the Physical Education and Engineering Institute, India. Each profession group had 30subjects (15 boys and 15 girls) with age range of 21 ± 3 years. Stress scores due to frustration and inhibition, overload and compulsive, time-urgent and aggressive behavior were measured for the selected subjects using the questionnaire developed by Daniel et al. (1979). The second questionnaire developed by George and Everly

and used by Heyward (1991) was also administered to the students to measure their coping strategy. Data were analyzed using SPSS 17 version. Two way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that stress due to all the stimuli was significantly higher among girls in comparison to boys of their profession. Coping strategy was higher in boys than girls of their respective profession, but Physical Education girls had higher coping strategy than boys and girls of Engineering. Therefore, it can be concluded that Physical Education students had better coping strategy than engineering students.

Gentry, et al. (2007) examined the Gender Differences in Stress and Coping among Adults living in Hawaii. The study hypothesized that women will report higher levels of stress than men; that women will report being stressed by family and health related stressors while men will report stress related to finances and work-related issues; that women will report using adaptive coping strategies more frequently while men will report using maladaptive and avoidance strategies more frequently; and that there will be no gender differences in the readiness to use stress management strategies. A state wide cross-sectional telephone-survey of 1518 participants was conducted during the spring and summer of 2006. Results showed that women reported higher overall perceived stress levels, but there was no difference in the experienced social stressors and health stressors between genders. Men perceived more stress from personal factors. There were no gender differences in the perceived ability to cope with stress. However, women were more likely to use adaptive coping strategies, whereas men were more likely to use maladaptive and avoidance coping strategies. There were no significant gender differences in stages of change for stress management. Based on these findings, interventions should be developed to help people cope better with stress. Interventions for women may focus on increasing the use of adaptive strategies such as praying and talking to friends and family, while interventions for men may introduce the use of adaptive coping strategies such as exercise and actively fighting causes of stress. This study shows that gender differences in stress levels and coping in Hawaii are similar to previous studies conducted on the mainland. More research into specific stressors and coping strategies may help tailor interventions that are more effective and comprehensive.

Stafyla, et. al. (2013) examined the Gender differences in work stress, related to organizational conflicts and organizational constraints: An empirical research. The study aimed at examining the gender differences as far as the ways that stress is witnessed in the workplace is concerned. Participants in this study were 231 Greek adults, employed at various workplaces. During their working hours they were asked to fill in a questionnaire which contained two different measurement scales. The main hypothesis was that men would show interpersonal conflicts at workplace to a larger extent; also that both men and women would not be so different on stress that stems from organizational constraints. The research findings did not confirm all the research hypotheses, because men were found to express their stress at a larger extent through interpersonal conflicts with their colleagues as a result of organizational constraints.

Esia-Donkoh, et. al.(2011) carried out a study titled, 'Coping with Stress: Strategies Adopted by Students at the Winneba Campus of University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.' The study aimed at investigating if students of the Winneba Campus of UEW (University of Education, Winneba), have appropriate strategies to cope with stress. Four hundred students who were selected based on stratified random sampling technique from all the departments at the

Winneba Campus of the university were used for this study. The questionnaire which was adapted to suit the study environment was pre-tested at the University of Cape Coast. The results of the study showed that among the ten strategies used, “active coping” and “positive reinterpretation and growth” were the two most predominant for problem-focused and emotion-focused styles of coping respectively. The study also indicated that students of the Winneba Campus of UEW used more of emotion-focused strategies than problem-focused strategies in managing stress. The study recommended that the Counseling Unit of UEW should strengthen its services by having social support groups that consist of lecturers and students, so that supportive skills, such as talking and sharing, can be developed and students may then become very comfortable to let out their feelings

Kokutensa (2021) investigated Stress and the coping strategies among distance working employees during covid-19. This study was aimed at understanding the stressful situations and stress coping strategies among employees who were working from home during the covid-19 pandemic. In attempt to bridge this knowledge gap, a critical incident approach was employed. Twelve (12) participants who were working from home were obtained purposively to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through zoom to collect data. Critical Incident Technique was used during interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The study revealed stressors which are lack of enough resources, extra work, lack of autonomy, work future uncertainty, stress due to covid-19, lack of help when needed, difficulties to reach colleagues, job inefficient and presence of tele-work unsuitable jobs. Coping strategies revealed were positive mind-set, seeking social support, physical exercises, and self-efforts to find solution of tele-work challenges, working extra hours and not answering calls or emails on purpose. It was recommended that organizations should determine suitable jobs for tele-work, providing required resources, granting employees working autonomy, as well as establishing a channel which can be used as a means of communication among employees as well as to be used as an inspiration and encouragement channel through providing motivational ads to help employees to relive their stressful situations.

Afnan, et. al.(2018) examined the Causes and Coping Strategies for Stress among Employee. This study aimed at assessing the causes and coping strategies for stress among employees. Structured and pre-tested questionnaire was designed to include demographics, socio-economic aspects and set research objectives. All the Employees of Gomal University Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan were taken as population of the study. The collected data were tabulated and analyzed by using percentile as statistical tool. Findings revealed Negative attitude of boss, Harsh attitude of boss, Unnecessary work load, Insufficient salary, Lack of co-operation on part of boss are the basics causes of stress among the employees similarly it also found out that Friendly attitude of boss, Sufficient work load on the basis of employee abilities and capabilities, Sufficient salary, Co-operation on part of boss are those strategies through which we can easily reduce the stress among the employees. The researcher also concluded that Co-operation on part of colleagues, Job satisfaction, Motivation, Appreciation, Incentives or awards on the basis of performance are those strategies through which we can easily reduce the stress among the employees.

The above studies are a departure from the present study. Despite the fact that they focused on stress they failed to establish a link between gender and stress among married employees in the university system.

Theoretical framework

This study anchored on the Transactional theories of stress. This theory was postulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). It opined that stress is the direct product of a transaction between an individual and their environment which may tax their resources and thus threaten their wellbeing (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). A more recent version of this theoretical model suggests that it is the appraisal of this transaction that offers a causal pathway that may better express the nature of the underlying psychological and physiological mechanisms which underpin the overall process and experience of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 2001).

Based on this theory, stress emanates from the environment. Therefore, individuals are likely to be more stressed if they have a lot of stressors around them. For instance, married men are faced with the responsibility of providing for the family, paying the rent, school fees etc.; all of which can be subsumed under economic stressors. Due to the changes in the society, married women whose duty used to focus on taking care of the family, now contribute financially to the upkeep of the family.

In view of this, females who are married and also work, tend to have more stressors and thus, experience more stress than their male counterpart. Though this theory effectively established a link between gender and stress, it failed to explain the effect of stress on employees.

Research methodology

Nnamdi Azikiwe University came into being as an offshoot of the defunct Anambra State University of Technology (ASUTECH). ASUTECH was established through Law No. 7 of 30 July 1980 by the Government of the old Anambra state. It was operated as a multi-campus university; with campuses in Abakiliki, Enugu, Awka and Nnewi.

In 1991, after the former Anambra State was split into Anambra and Enugu States, the Awka and Nnewi campuses of the former Anambra State University of Technology (ASUTECH) were combined into Nnamdi Azikiwe University, which was later taken over by Federal government.

The institution has a total of 14 faculties, 57 departments and about 2,810 academic staffs. These staffs work for six days in a week; on week days and Saturdays, attending to their academic roles. They engage in researches, project supervision, lecturing; both at undergraduate and post graduate levels, and other roles that may be assigned to them. In some cases, these staffs are unable to effectively combine their gender role with their work role and adjust properly to this role. Thus, this study focused on establishing a link between gender and stress and assessing stress management strategies that enables staff in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to effectively cope with stress.

The study adopted a qualitative research design because; the researcher made use of qualitative method of data collection and data analysis. Data used for this study were derived

using secondary sources of data collection technique and Key Persons Interview (KPI). The key persons that were interviewed were Christians, PhD holders and of the rank of senior lecturers and above in their various disciplines. These interviewees comprised of 5 males and 5 females who are married with children and were selected using a snowballing sampling technique. The researcher sampled married individuals because; they are more likely to experience stress than single individuals. However, data derived from this study were analysed using a thematic and verbatim method of data analysis.

Research findings

Do female employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University experience more stress than their male counterparts?

All the interviewees stated that the level of stress depends on lots of factors like family and economic responsibilities, work situation and one's personality. One of the male interviewees stated that "....some people can absorb pressure without feeling stressed or perhaps, take longer time before feeling stressed so, personally I think stress goes beyond being a man or a woman.....but yes, it seem females are more stressed judging from their gender role, as the case may be." Another male stated that, "males are more stressed basically from economic factors but, on the other hand, females tend to tidy the house, cook, take care of the family and still report at work..... Yes they end up more stressed....." another male interviewee stated that, "....i can't say because, I am not a woman." All the female interviewees stated that they go through a lot of stress especially, when their children were tender. One of the females stated that, "you rarely have time for yourself; from school to the house....no resting except you have helpers."

What are the strategies that have been put in place to help employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University cope with stress?

All the interviewees stated that the government did not put in place any strategy to help staff cope with stress. They all stated that coping with stress is an individual effort in the institution. One added that the academic union has organised an exercise group to help staff cope with stress and keep fit. A female staff added that the university staff organized a co-operative to relief staff of economic stress. This co-operative makes available loans with little interest rates and foodstuffs on credit to staff. A male interviewee stated that, "..... when I am stressed, I drink water; plenty of it, relaxing and also, listen to music.....I rest when students are on vacation.....I have never gone on break or leave....i do not even know if we have such except for sabbatical leave or leave of absence because, our academic calendar is messed up as it is." A female interviewee stated that, her coping strategy is sleeping, visiting family and friends and having a minimum one hour quiet time daily. Talking about the loan by the university co-operative as a coping strategy for stress, a male interviewee added that, ".....it is very effective because it has a very low interest rate, easy to access by all staff and easy to repay as it is spread over many months" another interviewee stated that "... on individual basis, staff take care of themselves by way of cooling off in restaurants and other places of choice but, on official level, one can only take break, go for training and retraining and sporting activities.."

How have these strategies put in place in Nnamdi Azikiwe University enabled male and female employees respectively; to cope with stress?

All the interviewees stated that, the strategies adopted by every staff obviously would be very effective at helping them cope with stress. A male interviewee stated that, “..... there is no hard and fast rule. Simply do what suits you best as a person.”

How best can employees in Nnamdi Azikiwe University effectively tackle stress; irrespective of their gender.

All the interviewees stated that, there is no best way to tackle stress as what works for an individual may not work for another, individuals should stick to what works best for them. A female interviewee stated that, “men should be encouraged to help out in domestic chores. I mean, it’s not a crime.” A male interviewee also stated that, “I think when women are educated and empowered... this would also enable them to build a career. This would discourage them from having many children. The more the children one has the more the stress. Moreover, with education, people’s minds are enlightened. One discovers that women do not belong to the kitchen as tradition has made us believe. Some gender roles are de-emphasized. So a woman doesn’t need to stress her life out doing all the domestic chores at home.”

Discussion of research findings

Findings revealed that stressors vary from family and economic responsibilities, work situation to one’s personality but, female staff are usually more stressed than their male counterparts because of their gender roles. This gender role subjects them to numerous domestic chores and family care responsibilities; especially, females who are married with children despite their role in the economy as working women.

The study found out that staffs have devised means of coping with stress on individual basis and that the government and school management put no strategy for staff to be able to cope with stress. It was revealed that ASUU and the entire staff of UNIZIK formed a co-operative that tackles their economic stress by making available loans with little interest and providing goods for members to buy on credit. Also, ASUU member formed an exercise group to relief stress and keep members fit.

On individual basis, the coping strategy adopted by staff includes; drinking of water, relaxing, listening to music, sleeping, visiting family and friends and having a minimum one hour quiet time daily and cooling off in restaurants and other places of choice. On official level, it was found out that, staffs take break, go for training/ retraining and engage in sporting activities. It was found out that these strategies are effective at reducing stress among staff. It was also revealed that stress among female staff will reduce if female staffs give birth to less number of children and if their husbands assist them with the domestic chores in the home.

Conclusion/ recommendations

Gender cannot be detached from the social expectations on individuals. These expectations cause individuals to attend to specific roles as members of the society. However, these roles seem to have changed for females overtime as females presently tend to engage in economic activities outside the home in addition to their gender role of taking care of the family. On the other hand, men's role seems not to have changed. Thus, while most of the stressors they experience are economic, stressors in female go beyond economic stressors and covers social stressor.

Nnamdi Azikiwe University as well as the government has failed to put in place strategies that will help staff cope with these stress. Nevertheless, the academic staffs have put in place measures to help them cope with stress on a group and individual basis. These measures which include; exercising, relaxing, going restaurant or choice places, sleeping etc. may not be gender specific and may not have worked well for all the staff but, they have effectively helped those who practice it to reduce stress irrespective of their gender.

The following recommendations were made based on the research findings. They are;

1. Men should be encouraged to help out in domestic chores in the home. Women should also, not abuse but, appreciate this help.
2. Women should engage in recreational activities and hang out with their husbands in restaurant and choice places. Men should also, take their wives out even if not regularly, but once in a while.
3. Women should employ domestic staff to assist them with their domestic work. Men also, should allow their wives employ these helps.
4. Women should be discouraged from giving birth to too many children. Men should also support their wives in the family planning procedure.
5. Staff should also take advantage of the sporting activities, leave and break to rest and also, explore the opportunities which the co-operative organizations offer to relieve themselves of economic stress.

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