SOURCES OF STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY ACADEMIC SENIOR MEMBERS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

Mate Siakwa, Grace*
Counselling Centre, University of Cape Coast
gracematesiakwa@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study assessed stress and their attendant coping mechanisms employed by the senior members in the University of Cape Coast. The descriptive survey research design was employed in conducting the study. In all, 214 senior members were sampled through the use of the convenient sampling procedure. Questionnaires were used to solicit for the requisite data for the study. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean scores and standard deviations were used to analyse the data on the research questions. Inferential statistics were used to compare relationship among variables which included analysis of variance (ANOVA), post hoc multiple comparisons analyses (Tukey) and Pearson correlations.

The study among other things found out that senior members barely experienced stress related disorders. The most predominant stress related disorders faced by the senior members of the university were pains of any kind, sleeping problems, and feeling overwhelmed. It was also found out that respondents found interpersonal relationships, research work, teaching and professional development as stressful.

The respondents adopted coping strategies such as confronting, distancing, self controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escaping avoidance, planned problem solving and positive reappraisal. It was recommended that the university should liaise with industries to offer solutions to the problems of industries whilst equipping academic senior members with the needed research skills.

Key Words: Stress, Coping Strategies, Models, Theories, Academic staff, Stressors.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As at the early 1990s there were only three public Universities in Ghana. The number of universities both public and private has increased from a humble beginning of three to thirty two by the beginning of 2011 (National Accreditation Board, 2010). How to provide adequate funding for the increasing number of tertiary institutions continues to be a major challenge to public institutions in Ghana, (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2010). Students’ intake has also increased as a result of increased numbers of candidates seeking tertiary education. Management of these public institutions is compelled to increase intake to raise fund through internally generated fund to ensure smooth running of their institutions. Competitions among the universities require the attraction of high quality students and staff to remain in business.

Large student numbers mean heavy work load for academic staff. In the course of this, underfunding can also limit the avenues for their career progression through professional development by acquiring terminal degrees. Academic staffs are promoted based on publications of articles. Heavy teaching schedules and lack of funds have been identified as major drawbacks to research and publication which could lead to the promotion of the academic staff (Abouserie, 1996; Adeyemo & Ogunyemi, 2005). All these become pressures on the academic staff and could be termed stressors.

However, higher levels of stress were reported as arising from funding cuts to universities, heavier teaching loads, difficulty in securing research funds, lack of resources, poor relationships with colleagues and unrealistic expectations from management as stated by Winefield and Jarret (2001) and Ahmdy et al (2007).

Stress can be destructive if not well managed. In addition to its effect on the health of the individual, it also has a direct bearing on the individual’s performance at work and productivity.
On the basis of this, it is important that every occurrence of stress be properly managed to ensure that such negative effects are minimized if not eliminated. This can be best achieved by adopting coping mechanisms. Effective coping with work stress was found to be very necessary to academic staff involved with higher education Winefield & Jarrett, (2001). Several studies indicate that academic staffs adopt various coping mechanisms to deal with stress (Peacock, Wong, & Reker 1993, Winfield, 2000; Greenglass, 2002; Kokash, 2011).

1.2 Problem Statement

Stress is recognized as an inherent feature of the work life of most professionals and growing evidence shows that it may be increasing in severity (Lee, 1983). Work related stress has been implicated as a major contributing factor to growing job dissatisfaction, rapid turnover and high attrition rate among professionals. Lee (1984), found that job stress does not only impact on the health of the individual but also their ability to cope with job demands and this invariably, seriously impairs the efficacy of service delivery. Available statistics indicates that lecturer/student ratio is 1:37 for the humanities and 1:42 for the sciences far above the values recommended by the (National Accreditation Board & National Council for Tertiary Education, Basic Statistics, 2011). Expansion of facilities does not commensurate with students' intake. Apart from the normal teaching, scoring, grading of students examinations, supervision of project work/thesis, lecturers are also expected to do research and publish for their promotion. Some of the lecturers take up part time appointments in other universities and departments to earn extra income to meet their growing needs. There are limited resources within the university to enhance research and publication which retard the progress of academic senior members in terms of promotion. It is therefore not surprising that majority of senior members are of the lecturer grade (297) with fewer senior lecturers (99) and those of the professorial ranks (71) (Vice Chancellor’s Annual Report, 2010).

1.3 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study is to identify the possible sources of stress experienced by academic senior members working in the university

1.4 Research Question

What are the sources of stress among academic senior members?

1.4 Hypothesis

Hₐ: There are no significant differences in sources of stress among senior members within the major specialty areas under study.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This investigation is aimed at identifying sources of stress among academic senior members. Thus knowledge obtained would be useful in the formulation of recommendations to address stress among academic senior members in the University of Cape Coast. The study can serve as a guide to policy makers and stakeholders of Tertiary Education like the National Council for Tertiary Education. Finally the study could contribute to the research on stressful conditions by adding to the existing literature.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984b), the Cognitive-relational theory of stress, is defined as a "particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). Appraisals are determined simultaneously by perceiving environmental demands and personal resources. They can change over time due to coping effectiveness, altered requirements, or improvements in personal abilities. The cognitive-relational theory of stress emphasizes the continuous, reciprocal nature of the interaction between the person and the environment. Since its first publication (Lazarus, 1966), it has not only been further developed and refined, but it has also been expanded recently to a meta-theoretical concept of emotion and coping processes (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Within a meta-theoretical system approach Lazarus (1991) conceives the complex processes of emotion as composed of causal antecedents, mediating processes, and effects. Antecedents are person variables such as commitments or beliefs on the one hand and environmental variables, such as demands or situational constraints, on the other. Mediating processes refer to cognitive appraisals of situational demands and personal coping options as
well as to coping efforts aimed at more or less problem-focused and emotion-focused. Stress experiences and coping results bring along immediate effects, such as affects or physiological changes, and long-term results concerning psychological well-being, somatic health and social functioning.

2.2 Models of Stress

Some models of stress were reviewed to serve as a guide for the study. They included the traditional and the bucket models of stress.

2.2.1 Traditional Model

According to NDL (2002), stressors lead to a perception of stress which can lead to mental, physical and emotional fatigue which can result in short term safety and long term health outcomes. This is what they called the Traditional model. This model sought to show the simple idea that stressors could lead on to the perception of not being able to cope and that this might result in fatigue, which could have both short and long term consequences.

This model was not bad in its time and place. It acknowledged that something called “stress” could happen in workplaces and could lead to undesirable outcomes (NDL, 2002). New Zealand Department of Labour (2002) again looks at the flip side of the model and says the way in which each individual sees or evaluates his or her situation gets no mention. All people are regarded as the same and as reacting in the same way. It does not speak about positive experiences.

In the University setting, every individual or senior member in one way or the other perceives or is perceived to be doing so much in terms of work load. They are seen to be lecturing, marking, undertaking research activities, reaching out to communities among others. The traditional model says, these perceived stressors lead to mental, emotional or physical stress eventually in the short or long term.

2.2.2 The ‘Bucket’ Model

A person is like a bucket filled with resources at the start of the day and drained at the end of it. Normal processes overnight and at weekends normally replenish the bucket. This model began from a very simple picture of fatigue first proposed by the ergonomist Etienne Grandjean, who likened the human body to a bucket that could be ‘filled’ daily with unpleasant experiences, with sleep and recuperation emptying it for a fresh start the next day.

NDL (2002) reversed this model to show the human body as a reservoir of ability that was drained during the day and re-filled at night and weekends. Again, this model casts everyone as reacting in the same way. It acknowledges undesirable possibilities, but makes little allowance for positive experiences at work for the way in which work can be rewarding and stimulating, for example, and thus fill the bucket during the day.

As far as this thesis is concerned what happens in the University academic senior members in relation to the bucket model is quite similar. The bucket is always emptied and never refilled due to the tight schedule of senior members. The word “rest” is missing in the books of these members and it is a source of concern to the members in question and the researcher and hence the topic.

2.3 Empirical Review

This section reviewed the studies of other researchers which had bearing on the current study. These were considered under the sub themes discussed below.

2.3.1 Stressors in the Workplace

Several researchers have categorized types of job stressors. For example, Cartwright and Cooper (1997) suggested six major sources of pressure at work: stress in the job itself, role based stress, relationships, career development factors, organizational structure and climate, and the work-family interface. Five categories were suggested by Ivancevich and Matteson (1980), three of which focused on social psychological stressors in the workplace. They employed the frequently used organizational psychology categorization by level of thought and inquiry; individual level, group level, and organizational level.

While these approaches have taken a fairly broad view, trying to develop categories into which many specific stressors could be placed, Thomson, Murphy and Stradling (1994) have settled for a much narrower set of categories: role overload, role insufficiency, role ambiguity, role boundary (role conflict) and responsibility.
Atindanbila (2011) conducted a study to examine the perceived stressors that lecturers at the University of Ghana encounter in their work. Four hundred and thirty two lecturers were drawn from the University of Ghana for the study. The data was collected using the Teacher Stress Inventory. MANOVA, ANOVA and Independent Sample t tests were used to analyze the data. Analyses of the data revealed that lecturers had moderate stress levels and their major stressors were related to the school environment whilst the least was the administrative role. The Junior Lecturers perceive more stressors than the senior ones and the Professors. However; it was found that all the faculties experience similar levels of stressors. The recommendations centred mainly on expanding on existing infrastructural facilities in the University and improving on the working conditions of lecturers. The results of the current study would be compared to the findings stated above so that differences and similarities could be brought out.

2.3.2 Stresses among Academics

Stress is recognized as an inherent feature of the work life of academic staff, and growing evidence suggest that it may be increasing in severity. Numerous studies have indicated that job stress is significant in academic staff. High job stress of academic staff is well documented. Heavy workload, poor staffing, dealing with students and colleagues, career progression, and lack of resources and organizational support have been identified as the major sources of job stress according to (Lee, 2003; Archibong & Effiom, 2010; Abouserie, 1996; Adeyemo, & Ogunyemi,2005;Ahmdy, Changiz, Masiello and Brommels,2007; Akinboye, Akinboye, & Adeyemo, 2002; Blix, Cruise, Mitchell, & Blix, 1994; Liu, & Zhu, 2009).

Stress according to D’Arcy (2007) is the body’s way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet tough situation with focus, strength, stamina and heightened alertness. Ofoegbu and Nwandiani (2006) see it as a process in which environmental events or forces threaten the well being of the individuals in the society. Adeyemo and Ogunyemi (2005) see it as an unavoidable characteristic of life and work. Thus, in relationship to occupation, it is the physical, mental and emotional wear and tear brought about by incongruence between the requirements of the job and capabilities, resources and needs of the employee to cope with job demands according to (Akinboye & Adeyemo, 2002).

D’Arcy (2007) emphasizes that everyone experiences stress a little differently, it can be a good thing, but overload of it is a different story. He explains that stress overload is caused by the overreaction or failure of the stress response to turn off and reset itself properly. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (2001) define stress as the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them. They maintain that stress affects us in different ways at different times and is often the result of a combination of factors in our personal and working lives, and that stress is not a weakness but if unnoticed it can lead progressively to a decrease in performance, poor health and long term absence from work. Winfield (2000) indicates that there is prevalence of occupational stress among academic and general staff of universities. Studies by Awopegba (2001), Lam and Punch (2001) and Boyd and Wylie (1994) are in support of stress among academic staff of universities.

Indeed, in the clamour for university education and with each university determined to achieve its goal, the academic staff are bound to be stressed. Ahsan, Abdullah, Fie and Alam (2009) identified stress inducing factors in academic staff to include: work overload, home work interface, role ambiguity and performance pressure. In support of stress on academic staff, Abouserie (1996) found workload and conducting research as factors of stress. Listing the most related stressors on academic staff, Ahmdy, Changiz, Masiello and Brommels (2007), included workload, conflict, demands from colleagues and supervisors, incompatible demands from different personal and organization roles, inadequate resources for appropriate performance, insufficient competency to the demands of their role, inadequate autonomy to make decision on different tasks and feeling of underutilization.

Findings by Ofoegbu and Nwandiani (2006) reveal significant factors influencing stress among academic staff to include strike and school interruption, delay and irregular payment of salary, lack of instructional facilities, preparation of examination results, invigilation of examination, campus militancy, high cost of living, office accommodation, lack of research facilities, lack of annual leave/ holiday and underfunding of education. Management role expectations and home work interface was identified by Alexandros-Stamatios, Matilyn and Cary (2003). Additional sources of academic stress identified in studies by Rutter,
Hezberg and Paice (2002) showed high self expectation, securing financial support for research, insufficient development in the field, inadequate salary, manuscript preparation, role overload, conflicting job demands, slow progress on career advancement, frequent interruptions and long meetings as causes of stress among academic staff. Working conditions, poor motivation, external factors and low status were identified by Lam and Punch (2001) and Boyd and Wylie (1994). Arguing, Blix, Cruise, Mitchell and Blix (1994) posited that limited resources and shortage of time, slow progress in career advancement, poor faculty communication, professional disillusionment and inadequate salaries were directly related to pressure experienced by academic staff. Goldenberg and Waddell (1990) insisted that heavy work load, role ambiguity, conflicting job demands, frequent interruption and publication efforts were causes of stress on academic staff.

However, higher level of stress were reported as arising from funding cuts to universities, heavier teaching loads, difficulty in securing research funds, lack of resources, poor relationships with colleagues and unrealistic expectations from management by Winefield and Jarret (2001) and Ahmdy et al (2007). On gender, level of stress was found not to be different among male and female academic staff by Abouserie (1996) and Ofoegbu and Nwandian (2006). However, Liu and Zhu (2009) found that female academic staffs experience less stress than their male counterparts.

### 3.1 SAMPLE

Sample size is the number of subjects needed in a sample (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Uys and Basson (1991) on their part define the sample as the number of units of the population under study and should represent the characteristics of the population being studied. According to the Student Records and Management Information Section (SRMIS) of the University of Cape Coast (2011), there are 482 academic senior members in various Faculties. The sample size derived from this was two hundred and fourteen (214). According to Kreciej and Morgan (1970) if a population is 482, the desired sample size is 14.

### 3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire which consisted of four sections was used to solicit information regarding sources of stress and the adopted coping strategies of academic senior members working in some departments in the university. The first section attempted to delineate academic senior member’s demographic profile, such as age, rank and years of experience. The second section delineates the job demands of the academic senior members and the number of courses taught per semester, credit load and other responsibilities.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to extract information from the respondents with regard to the objectives already stated. In all, the questionnaire was made up of 80 items formulated from the research questions for the study. The questionnaires were made up of both open and close ended items.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The data was checked for mistakes committed by respondents: items in which the subject provided two responses when only one was requested; items in which the subject has marked a response between two options and items that ask the subject to write in some information such as, academic department, work area and years of experience. Data was coded and entered into an Excel Spread sheet. A 10% random sample of questionnaire was checked against the data entered. Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics was used to illustrate the demographic profile of the participants, sources of stress and adopted coping strategies. Frequencies, mean scores and standard deviation were used to analyse the research questions.

Analytical statistics was used to compare relationship among variables which include analysis of variance (ANOVA), post hoc multiple comparisons analyses (tukey) and Pearson correlations. Statistical treatment of the data included correlations of variables with each other. Due to complexity and the dynamic nature of the stress system one would expect a high degree of interdependency between different factors. Correlation analyses allow one to examine the extent of the interrelatedness of variables, such as sources of...
stress and ways of coping, as suggested by (Govender, 1995; Healy & Mc Kay 2000; Lee 2003).

4.1 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What are the sources of stress among academic senior members?

This question was posed to find out the sources of stress among senior members. Descriptive statistics mainly means and standard deviations were employed to analyse the data collected. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the items designed to solicit for this information.

Table 1: Senior Members’ Views about the Sources of Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Stress</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University management</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing funding for research</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication of finished articles</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting exam questions</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in lecturing</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking of exam scripts</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University conditions/provisions for professional development</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkage to avenues of professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean of means= 2.11
Average standard deviation=0.86

1= Not stressful, 2= Stressful, 3= Very stressful, 4=extremely stressful

It can be concluded generally that most of the respondents chose the option stressful in the items designed to find out the sources of stress among academic senior members thus the respondents are mostly stressful according to the results in Table 23. This is because when the mean of means of 2.11 was run to the nearest whole number it fell on the scale 2(stressful). The respondents found interpersonal relationships, research work, teaching and professional development as stressful. Out of these, the most stressful part of it was sourcing for funding for research. Ahsan, Abdullah, Fie and Alam (2009) identified stress inducing factors in academic staff to include: work overload, home work interface, role ambiguity and performance pressure. In support of stress on academic staff, Abouserie (1996) found workload and conducting research as factors of stress. Listing the most related stressors on academic staff, Ahmdy, Changiz, Masiello and Brommels (2007) included workload, conflict, demands from colleagues and supervisors, incompatible demands from different personal and organization roles, inadequate resources for appropriate performance, insufficient competency to the demands of their role, inadequate autonomy to make decision on different tasks and feeling of underutilization. Similarly, Paice (2002) showed high self expectation, securing financial support for research, insufficient development in the field, inadequate salary, manuscript preparation, role overload, conflicting job demands, slow progress on career advancement, frequent interruptions and long meetings as causes of stress among academic staff. Working conditions, poor motivation, external factors and low status were identified by Lam and Punch (2001) and Boyd and Wylie (1994). The findings of this study correspond with most of the stress inducing factors found by other researchers. Just that, those conflict and role ambiguities were not present among the respondents. The following is a report on the individual items designed to find assess the sources of stress among the university staff.

Senior members were asked to give responses to a question concerning students being a source of stress 1.95 was recorded as mean and .75 was recorded as standard deviation which actually means that to most senior members it is stressful working with students which is indicated by scale 2. From Table 23, pressure from colleagues is not a source of stress for the academic staff who were involved in the study. This is said because a mean of 1.38 and a standard deviation of .62 were obtained for this item. When the mean is run to the nearest whole number, it falls on the scale 1(not stressful). The management of the university in one way or the other causes stress among academic senior members. A mean of 2.2 and a measure of spread of .90 were achieved for this item designed to find solicit this information. On this note the mean falls on the scale 2(stressful) meaning university management put some level of stress on the lecturers.

With respect to the item sources of funding for research is a source of stress for senior members,
2.57 (mean) and .97 (standard deviation) were obtained. This indicates that the respondents find this as very stressful. The mean falls on the scale 3 (very stressful). Just as sourcing for funding for a research is very stressful, publication of finished articles is also stressful (2.37 mean and 0.84 standard deviation). There are cases where it takes more than two years before a lecturer gets one article published. The article review takes very long time to go through the processes.

Setting examination questions (2.04 mean), marking examination script (2.32 mean) and difficulty in lecturing (2.08 mean) are sources of stress for the respondents. The means for these three items fall exactly on the scale 2 (stressful) meaning majority of the respondents chose the option stressful for these items. In connection with university conditions/provision for professional development and linkage to avenues of professional development means of 2.29 and 2.06 were obtained respectively. It could be concluded that a greater proportion of the respondents saw these as stressful. Sources of stress partly influence the type of coping strategies that a person adopts in order to curtail that stressful situation. The next research question bothered on the coping strategies that the senior members adopt.

H0: There is no relationship between sources of stress and coping strategies used by academic senior members.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources of stress</td>
<td>21.0985</td>
<td>5.44915</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>76.1330</td>
<td>13.66672</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The means for sources of stress and coping strategies by academic senior members are 21.09 and 76.13, respectively. The standard deviations are also 5.45 and 13.66, respectively. However, the relation between the two variables is determined in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation between Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of stress</th>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.407**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results in Table 3 indicate a positive fairly strong relationship between sources of stress and coping strategies. This is indicated by the correlation coefficient $r = .407$. In other words, the result shows that sources of stress influence the coping strategies adopted by the senior members. Thompson, (1994) suggested that the effects of stress upon people will be governed not only by the level of pressure experienced, but also by the coping strategies people subsequently utilize in an attempt to deal with it. Similarly, in order to prevent stress every person develops a repertoire of coping strategies. Coping according to these authors can be seen to occur at four levels by: removing the stressors from their lives, not allowing ‘neutral’ events to become stressors, developing a proficiency in dealing with situations we do not wish to avoid and seeking diversion from the pressure(s) or by relaxation. No matter how one looks at it, this study gave a clear indication that sources of stress one way or the other influence the coping strategies adopted to deal with it.

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

Although senior members are endowed with knowledge on stress and its attending issues, the study revealed that they still go through stress. It is fascinating however that they have defensive mechanisms or adaptive strategies thereby making the coping strategies adopted work for them. This explains why they scarcely experience stress related disorders.

It again concluded from the study that, the sources of stress among major specialty areas and the ranks of academic senior members differ. What could serve as a source of stress for assistant lecturer would not necessarily be a stressor for a professor. This was noticeable in the area of research and professional development.
5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that the University should liaise with corporate institutions and industries to identify their problems and offer solutions by way of research. This will not only benefit the institutions or industries but also the university and academic senior members. The industries will fund the research and the research process will also equip the senior members with research skills to enhance the academic progressions.

The University as a matter of urgency should be proactive in organizing seminars, workshops and symposia to sharpen the research skills of academic senior members and to also equip them with skills for sourcing for funds. The University again should strengthen its counselling center to manage some of the effects stress brings on academic senior members.

6.1 REFERENCES


Educational and Psychological Measurement, 30, 607 – 610.


41 University of Cape Coast (2010). Vice-Chancellor’s annual report. Cape Coast: University of Cape Press.

