



The Role of Involvement and Employment in Perception of Stress and Coping Abilities of Women

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the present investigation is to examine the role of involvement and employment in the perception of stress and coping abilities of married women. The study involves 2 (working versus non-working) x 2 (involved versus less-involved) factorial design. Non-working women are categorized into involved and less-involved subgroups on the basis of the median split of their scores on family involvement. Working women are categorized into similar subgroups on the basis of the median split of their combined scores on family involvement and work involvement. The participants of all the four groups are compared with respect to their perception of stress and coping abilities. The result indicated that involved women perceived less stress and indicated more coping abilities in personal, family and finance related matters and also in overall stressful encounters. The finding also revealed that working women perceived more stress in personal and family related events where as non-working women perceived more stress in finance related events. The overall level of stress experienced by working women is also higher than that of the non-working women.

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Introduction

Stress is an unavoidable and inevitable life experience closely linked with human striving for excellence in the complex world. Technically speaking, stress is an unpleasant state that arises when people perceive that the demands of the environmental events are beyond their coping abilities. There are so many different uses of the word stress that it may be more confusing than anything else. Some consider stress to be event external to the organism that makes demand on it, others suggest that stress is organism's response to the event that challenges it (Selye, 1936); still others view both external and internal events as stress, emphasizing the interaction between environment and response (Lazarus & Lunier, 1978; Mason, 1975). In simple terms, stress is a reaction/response to events that disrupts or threatens to disrupt the physical and psychological functioning of the organism (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 a; Taylor, et.al, 2000).

No events are universally stressful. The same event may be viewed differently by different individuals and the level of stress experienced depends on their perception of the event. It is obvious that an individual does not passively receive but actively appraise and evaluate the stimulus. This evaluation depends on personality variable, past experience and current condition of the individual. The notion of appraisal is the central component of most psychosocial research on stress and coping. Individual's feeling of threat, vulnerability and ability to cope is more important than the stressful event itself (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 b; Lazarus, 1993). Life event is not what produce stress; rather it is one's view of the situation that causes the event to become stressful. A wide range of situations seem capable of generating stress. But there exists a large differences in individual's ability to withstand the impact of stress (Outlette-Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983).

Increased employment of women in India is one of the most important and impressive social changes in the recent years. Ramu (1989) holds that research on working women has been sparsh and uneven in India. Unfortunately they have not received adequate attention in spite of being highly susceptible to the adverse effect of work on family and vice versa. Employed women are required to manage the demands of both family and work. They try to do the multiple roles of wife, mother and employee. Employment requires high investment of time and energy which may create problem for personal and home life. Several studies hold that stress can result when the demands of the dual roles are excessive. For Indian women, family role has been assumed to be the core role and paid employment is a non-traditional and additional role. Psychologically employed women have considerable difficulties dropping the core roles of wife and mother. Due to role overload and role conflict they are likely to experience more stress and readjustment difficulties compared to unemployed ones.

Furthermore, it seems possible that the perception of these life stress factors and coping are determined by the women's involvement with the process of life. Involvement is a central life interest. Involvement is considered relevant in view of its conceptualization as a mediating mechanism. Involvement results in a commitment to a particular activity in which successful performance is regarded as an end in itself. Psychologists are of opinion that involvement requires one's psychological identification with a particular thing and perception of the same as contributing to his/her self-esteem. According to Kanungo (1982) involvement in work/family may be defined as an undimensional cognitive or belief state of psychological identification with work or family context. It is posited that the extent of involvement is determined by two sets of events; historical and contemporaneous. The former refers to the past cultural conditioning and socialization influences on

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one's belief about the value of work/family in one's life. The later refers to more current environmental and situational influences on one's belief about the potentialities of work/family context to satisfy his/her needs. Involvement enriches life experiences. It can be conjectured that perception of stress and coping abilities in a particular domain will be influenced by individual's involvement in that domain. So, it is assumed that involved women are likely to perceive less stress and indicate more coping abilities compared to less-involved women while encountering stressful life events in different domains of life. Parenting, transition to parenthood, work-related stress and the variation in mental health conditions are associated with competing demands, which can lead to role overload and resulting stress (Androde et al, 1999, Bidyadhar & Sahoo, 1997, Devi, 2000, Rani & Yadav, 2000).

Method

Respondents

Two hundred forty respondents (120 working and 120 non-working women) are selected at random mainly from urban areas of Odisha. All the respondents are married and have children. They have middle socio-economic status. They are educated and their minimum qualification is fixed at graduation. The age range of the respondents varied from 30 to 45 and their average age is 36.41 years (SD=4.94 years).

Measures

In the present study, a number of standardized scales are employed to examine the hypotheses.

Measures of Work and Family Involvement : Kanungo and Mishra (1988) developed a multipart questionnaire to measure both work involvement and family involvement. This was a cross culturally validated and a standardized measure. The scale has been found to possess internal consistency, unidimensionality and construct validity in bi-national studies using both Indian and Canadian samples (Mishra, Ghosh & Kanungo, 1990). The pan-cultural validity and generalizability of these new measures and predictions derived from the motivational framework have been empirically supported (Mishra, Kanungo, Rosenstiel, & Stuhler, 1985).

A total of eight items each are used as measures of work involvement and family involvement respectively. Involvement in the work context is measured by the work involvement questionnaire and graphic scales developed by Kanungo (1982b). Six involvement items are in the form of questionnaire and two are graphic items. The six questionnaire items of work involvement include : (a) The most important thing that happens in life involves the work; (b) People should get involved in the work; (c) Work should be a large part of one's life; (d) The work should be considered central to life; (e) An individual's life goals should be mainly work oriented; (f) Life is worth living when people get totally absorbed in work. The graphic scale has two items. In one graphic item, two circles representing work and self respectively are presented with varying degrees of overlap (no overlap representing total alienation to complete overlap representing total involvement). In other item, involvement in the work context was portrayed with a human figure (representing self) and a house (representing work) with varying distances between them. In this item, the degree of proximity represented the degree of involvement.

Involvement in the family context is measured by another set of eight items (six questionnaire items and two graphic items). The questionnaire items include six items as listed above with the word "family" replacing the word "work". In graphic item, where two overlapping circles are used, the two circles represented 'family' and 'self' respectively. The other graphic

item portrayed a human figure (representing self) and a house (representing family) with varying distances between them. All the involvement items for both work and family contexts used a seven point response format. A rating of 1 indicates very little involvement and rating of 7 indicates high involvement. The scores of questionnaire items are added and the average score is calculated. Again the average score of two graphic measures is calculated. The involvement score is obtained by summing up the average score of the questionnaire and graphic measures.

Measure of Stress and Coping. A measure of stress and coping is employed to evaluate the degree of coping necessary on the part of the respondents while encountering various stressful situations of life. The scale was developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967). It has been developed to measure life stress. The scale is titled as "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" (SRRS). The SRRS is the best known and most widely used measure. A total of forty two stressful situations are given in the questionnaire. Sixteen stressful situations are related to family, twenty three are personal stressful situations and three of them are related to finance. The respondents are asked to indicate the units of adjustment they require to deal with each event. In other words, respondents are to evaluate each item according to its intensity and the length of time necessary to accommodate regardless the desirability of the event. Marriage is arbitrarily assigned a stress value of 50 units; all other items are evaluated using this reference point. For example, an event twice as stressful as marriage would be assigned a value of 100 and event one-fifth as stressful as marriage would be assigned a value of 10. However, rating 1 indicates minimal adjustment necessary and rating 100 indicated maximal adjustment required. Total score was computed by adding scores given to individual stressful situation. This scale is widely used in clinical as well as general adaptation literature. In addition to various validity studies of this scale, Rahe and Holmes in an unpublished report document the positive association between Life Change Unit (LCU) scores and disease susceptibility. The SRRS consists of 42 life events ranging in stressfulness from death of a spouse to losing some valuables.

Procedure

Two hundred women participated in the study. The study involves a (involved versus less-involved) x 2 (working versus non-working) factorial design. Non-working women are categorized into involved and less-involved sub-groups on the basis of the median split of their scores on family involvement. However, working women are categorized into similar sub groups on the basis of their combined scores on family involvement and work involvement. The respondents of these four quasi experimental groups are compared with respect to their perception of stress and coping/readjustment ability.

Result

The stress and coping measure consists of three sub scales : family readjustment, personal readjustment and financial readjustment. The summary of the analysis of variances of the scores of working and non-working as well as involved and less-involved women in different areas of readjustment (coping) are presented in Table-1.

The analysis of variances performed on readjustment scores in family, personal, financial and overall stress indicate significant effect for status, $F(1,236) = 36.39$ $P < 0.1$, $F(1,236) = 25.09$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 27.96$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 4.12$, $P < .05$ respectively. The mean scores for family, personal and overall stress indicate that working women perceived more stress in personal and family related matters and also in overall stressful encounters. ($M = 58.57$ & 51.87) ($M = 49.70$ & 43.82)

and ($M = 149.98$ and 142.73) etc. But the non-working women perceived more stress in financial matters compared to working women ($M = 47.04$ & 40.70).

Table 1. Summary of the Analysis of variance of the Readjustment Scores of Participants in Different Areas of Stress

Readjustment Scores in Different Areas of Stress	Sources	df	MS	F
Family	Status	1	2695.611	36.39
	Orientation	1	1373.06	**
	Status x Orientation	1	132.21	18.03
	Orientation	236	76.16	**
	Error			1.74
Personal	Status	1	2077.93	25.09
	Orientation	1	2130.16	**
	Status x Orientation	1	137.07	25.72
	Orientation	236	82.82	**
	Error			1.66

Financial	Status	1	2411.29	27.96 **
	Orientation	1	1064.92	12.35 **
	Status x Orientation	1	1.67	.19
	Error	236	86.24	
Overall	Status	1	2342.44	4.12 *
	Orientation	1	1419.27	23.62 **
	Status x Orientation	1	601.57	1.06
	Error	236	568.10	

** $P < .01$

* $P < .05$

The Summary of the mean ratings and standard deviations of the readjustment scores of the participants in different areas of stress is presented in Table-2.

Note : It is important to point out that readjustment scores obtained are indicative of coping difficulties (stress), hence higher is the score, higher is the stress experienced.

The analysis of variances performed on readjustment scores in different areas of stress (family, personal, financial and overall stress) indicate significant effect for orientation, $F(1,236) = 18.03$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 25.72$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 12.35$, $P < .01$, $F(1,236) = 23.62$, $P < .01$ respectively. The mean scores for family, personal, financial and overall stress indicate that involved women perceived less stress than less-involved women ($M = 52.82$ and 57.81) $M = 43.78$ & 49.78 , $M = 41.76$ & 45.97 and $M = 138.37$ & 183.33 respectively).

Discussion

The present empirical investigation examines the impact of involvement and employment on the perception of stress and coping abilities of women.

The finding clearly shows that working women perceived more stress and indicated greater readjustment difficulties in personal and family related matters and in overall stressful encounters. But non-working women perceived more stress in finance related events. Traditional gender roles prescribe different emphasis for men and women; work is for men and family responsibility is for women. Society continues to reward and support traditional role distributions. Thakar and Mishra (1999) demonstrated that social acceptance for women's employment is still not widely prevalent. They found employed women receive less social support and consequently experienced more daily hassles compared to non-employed women who received more social support and went through less daily hassles. Despite many changes in gender role in India in past forty years; traditional role distribution persists. Women's work outside the home has not changed the gender division of work within the family. Redistribution of roles within the family to

take increased role responsibilities outside or inside the home has not yet occurred. Sharma and Wellington (1998) explored the role of expectation of couples where the wife was either employed or non-employed. It was found that husbands of both categories of women expected the major share of domestic work like taking care of children, housekeeping, entertainment etc to be performed by women.

This lack of change in work and family role expectation is particularly surprising given many societal and organizational changes that have occurred during last few decades. Interestingly the gender role stereotype has not changed over the years. They are passed on largely unchanged, throughout the generations. Men still fit the aggressive, independent, instrumental and bread earner stereotype while women are the passive subservient home makers, working along the expressive dimension irrespective of age and level of education. Although employed women gain power and contribute to family status, they do not significantly get more help in household work from their husbands. Employed women who feel equal to their husbands in terms of ability and intelligence still perceive household work as their own responsibilities and spend more time in these tasks than their husbands. Therefore working women are over loaded with the responsibility of both work and family. Employment requires high investment of time and energy. Family also makes persistent demands on their energy and resources. Therefore working women perceived personal and family related events as more stressful compared to non-working women. In other words, it is conceivable that since working women encounter greater demands because of their participation in both the work and home domains, they are more negatively affected by personal and family related stressful events. Aujla et al (2004) found that because of shortage of time and overburden of work, working women are more stressed. But working women perceived less stress in financial matters compared to non-working women. It seems that the financial resources brought by their jobs enhance their sense of control over the financial matters. Involved women perceived less stress and reported less coping difficulties while dealing with personal, financial and family related stressful events compared to less-involved women. Involved women considered work/family to be the most important part of their life and they are engaged in them as an end in itself. Involvement in work/family means psychological identification with these dimensions and perception of same as contributing to their self-esteem. Due to increased involvement and commitment they take actions to solve problems instrumentally and there is a greater sense of control over life events. Empirical studies indicate that increased involvement of employees is directly associated with lower level of perceived work stress (Kathleen, Holahan & Gottlieb, 2001). This is the reason why involved women perceived less stress or coping difficulties in different areas of stress compared to less-involved women.

Conclusion

Work- family linkage is of particular relevance to urban, educated, middle class working women who have to juggle multiple roles in a context of inadequate help and support in household work and stereotypical beliefs about the primacy of women's domestic role and the consequent pressure they exert, leading to anxiety, stress, guilt, dissatisfaction and such other negative mental health outcomes. But involvement and commitment to roles may mitigate the negative effects generated by them. Research shows that involvement is the key mediating variable that reduces role stress and strain and leads to less mental health outcomes.

Table 2. Summary of the Mean Ratings of the Readjustment Scores of the Participants in different Areas of Stress

Readjustment Scores in Different Areas of Stress	Groups	Working Women		Non-Working women		Combined
		M	SD	M	SD	M
Family	Involved	56.92	9.86	48.73	7.92	52.82
	Less-involved	60.22	8.50	55.03	8.51	57.61
	Combined	58.57	-	51.87	-	-
Personal	Involved	47.48	9.83	40.08	8.49	43.78
	Less-involved	51.96	9.01	47.55	9.01	49.78
	Combined	49.70	-	43.82	-	-
Financial	Involved	38.68	8.38	44.85	9.83	41.76
	Less-involved	42.72	9.01	49.23	9.83	45.97
	Combined	40.70	-	47.04	-	-
Overall	Involved	143.08	21.16	133.67151	22.45	138.37
	Less-involved	154.87	26.65	.78	24.87	183.33
	Combined	148.98	-	142.73	-	-

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