Occupational stress in the armed forces: An Indian army perspective

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Abstract   This study attempts to explore factors influencing occupational stress faced by Indian army soldiers and evaluate applicability of the scale used for measuring occupational stressors. Structured interview schedules were used to collect first hand data from a sample of 415 soldiers. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) highlights lack of control at work, role conflict, inadequate awareness about profession, workload and job pressure, and indifferent organisational attitude as the major occupational stressors in the Indian army. In addition, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirms occupational stressor as an eight factor model in the army. The study recommends implementing commitment-based management approach and techniques such as Sahaja Yoga meditation in the army.
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Introduction

Occupational stress has become a major area of concern in the field of Human Resource Management in today's competitive era. Apart from the stressors outside the organisation, such as family-related stressors and individual stressors, there are various stressors affecting an employee, which are associated with the organisation itself (Luthans, 2002). Occupational stressors are various job-related stressors which negatively influence the performance and well-being of the employees (Kang, 2005), since they exist in every organisation, though their degree may vary from occupation to occupation and individual to individual (Gignac & Appelbaum, 1997). Some stressors are common to all occupations whereas some

are unique to a specific occupation; thus specific stressors must be explored to manage stress in any occupation (Kang, 2005).

Among the various dimensions of occupational stress, the most important of them are work characteristics, organisational environment and psychological/behavioural characteristics of an individual (Zeffane & McLoughlin, 2006). Management style including lack of participation of workers in decision-making, poor communication in the organisation and lack of family–friendly policies contribute to work stress (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999). However, close relationships between supervisors and their subordinates can often lead to dysfunctional organisational consequences like unethical behaviour (Khatri, 2011). In addition, poor interpersonal relations of employees with their colleagues can be a leading source of stress between them (Kang, 2005). Chang and Lu (2007) identified dissonant relations with colleagues and seniors as salient stressors, but found poor relations with colleagues to be a more severe stressor

than that of unsatisfactory relations with seniors. Besides the personal beliefs and values of the employees, the cues received from the conduct of seniors and co-workers shape the employees' perception about the organisational climate (Nair & Kamalanabhan, 2011). Further, deficient social support in the organisation causes stressful situations, which increases work stress (Kaufmann & Beehr, 1989). Hence, the lower the level of support from the organisation, the higher is the level of stress experienced by employees at work. In a study by Jain and Cooper (2012) stress was found to have significant negative impact on organisational citizenship behaviours thereby affecting the performance of the work group and the organisation simultaneously.

Further, lack of training was identified as an important stress factor among junior hospital doctors (Antoniou, Davidson, & Cooper, 2003). Lack of training and development can have several ill-effects on the individuals concerned, especially on army men who usually work with hazardous equipment under dangerous conditions. Savery, Hall, and Collier (1983) indicated high correlation of excessive work demands with job stress. Also, Hemingway and Smith (1999) found high work pressure and poor supervisory support to be related with heavy workload. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999) expressed heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long working hours, shift work, hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning as important job conditions leading to stress. Also, the quality of home and family life is adversely affected by high work intensity or work pressure as it amounts to fatigue, anxiety or other adverse psycho-physiological consequences due to which an individual is unable to devote adequate time for family needs (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011).

Autonomy in the job is an essential requirement for taking day-to-day decisions at work and a lack of empowerment results in job stress among employees (Kang, 2005). Moreover, high control job holders are less likely to be absent, whether due to illness or otherwise (Liu, Spector, & Jex, 2005) and therefore, contribute more towards the organisation's productivity. Further, high role ambiguity is associated with high occupational stress (Gignac & Appelbaum, 1997) as well as negatively affecting employee's health and job satisfaction level (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1995; Yousef, 2000). Additionally, people with more role ambiguity are more likely to incur injury at work (Hemingway & Smith, 1999). Also, low decision authority, high uncertainty, and complexity in the job lead to high role conflict (Tummers, Landeweerd, & van Merode, 2002).

Occupational stress in the armed forces

In the context of the armed forces, some research is available on the US military (Bartone, Adler, & Vaitkus, 1998; Boehmer, Boothe, Flanders, & Barrett, 2003; Britt, Davison, Bliese, & Castro, 2004; Florkowski, 2001; Litz, Orsillo, Friedman, Ehlich, & Batres, 1997; Stetz, Castro, & Bliese, 2007). Bartone et al. (1998) studied military stressors faced by soldiers during peacekeeping missions such as isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and danger/threat. Active duty military personnel were found to have poor mental and physical health compared to veterans and reserve personnel in a study conducted by Boehmer et al. (2003). Britt et al.

(2004) emphasised that leadership behaviours can ameliorate or buffer the stressors experienced by soldiers. Further, frequent uncontrollable conditions of peacekeeping mission under unsafe conditions were found to make the soldiers experience frustration and predicted post-traumatic stress disorder among them (Litz et al., 1997). Florkowski (2001) pointed out that suicides committed by soldiers are not incidental and are an outcome of several highly complicated processes occurring simultaneously. Stetz et al. (2007) pointed out that improved organisational support in the form of lowering occupational stressors improves the psychological wellbeing of soldiers and also helps in lowering their depressive symptoms.

In the last decade India has not indulged in any war activity, though several counter-insurgency operations have been accomplished by the Army. The stress levels, however, have still increased. In this regard, Pflanz and Ogle (2006) observed that though military personnel have managed to adapt to the temporary hardships of wartime and humanitarian missions, the chronic stressors faced at the home base are found to be beyond their tolerance limit. Moreover, occupational stress arising out of routine military work environment is found to have significant negative impact on the mental health of military personnel (Pflanz, 2001; Pflanz & Ogle, 2006).

Despite volumes of research work available in the domain of occupational stress, there is a lack of empirical research on the Indian army; thus it is important to study the phenomenon with special consideration to the Indian army. To the best of our knowledge, this is probably the first empirical study focussing on the Indian army apart from studies available to the defence institutions. Moreover, reports on the rise of suicidal and fratricidal incidents in the Indian army in the past decade denote the relevance of such a study. As per the figures presented by the Defence Minister A K Antony to the Lok Sabha on March 6, 2013, a total of 368 defence personnel committed suicide from 2010 to 2012, out of which 310 soldiers belong to the Indian army alone; in 2010, 115 cases were reported as compared to 102 in 2011 and 93 in 2012. In addition, the Indian army was reported to be facing a shortage of 26,433 personnel below officer rank (Indian Military News, 2013). Consequently, the present study aims to explore the occupational stressors creating severe negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of the Indian soldiers and forcing them to take such steps. Hence, the objectives of the present research work are stated as follows.

Objectives

- To identify the factors causing occupational stress in Indian soldiers
- To evaluate the applicability of the scale used for measuring occupational stressors in the Indian army
- To formulate strategies to curb occupational stress in the Indian army based on the results of the study

Methods

The respondents for the study were 415 Indian army soldiers working in one of the most sensitive regions of the nation. The respondents were randomly selected from the Combat