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Stressful Life Events and Gender Differences

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Abstract
The present research was carried out to investigate the effects of stressful life events and gender differences. Objective was to see the difference in the male-female perception of stressful events. Sample consisted of 100 respondents (50 males and 50 females) postgraduate students of different departments of University of Peshawar, Pakistan. Their age range was between 22 to 24 years. The perception of stressful life events was measured using Life Stressor Checklist (LSC) taken from the Social Readjustment Rating Scale of Homes and Rahe (1987). It was hypothesized that females would perceive some stressful life events more seriously and would report more physical and psychological effect as compared to males. The results indicated a great difference in perception of stressful life events faced by males and females.

Stress is the “wear and tear” of body due to continually changing environment. It has physical and emotional effects on humans and can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help to stimulate individual to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, skin-rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. Stress is often triggered with changes like, the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship. In the process of adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder a person depending on how an individual reacts to it.

Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and some people thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment in lives. Goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it for help. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may result in harmful effects.

Stress is the demand made on an organism to adapt, cope or adjust some stress is healthful and necessary to keep us alert and occupied. Stress researcher Hans Selye (1974) referred to such stress as eustress. But prolonged stress can over tax adaptive capacity, affect mood, impair ability to experience pleasure, and harm the body (Bereubamu & Connelly 1993; Cohen et al. 1993). There are many sources of stress e.g daily hassles, life changes, conflicts, irrational beliefs and Type-A behaviour.

Innovation is often an important element of a successful work environment. Without new ideas, new products and services, and new ways of doing things, most businesses would probably not stay in business too long. Research has shown that innovation is associated with factors
like goal clarity, feedback, and communication. Stress, however, has been somewhat neglected in most research on innovation in the workplace. Researchers in Finland recently published the findings from a study in which they investigated whether occupational stress is associated with innovation. Lansisalmi & Kivimaki (1999) in a study surveyed 1,767 employees from healthcare organizations and the metal and retail industries. The results showed that increases in stress are associated with decreases in innovation. Furthermore, stress was distinguishable from the other factors related to innovation and it influenced the relations between innovation and the other factors related to innovation.

Although the present study was not designed to determine whether occupational stress influences innovation in the workplace or visa versa, it nonetheless demonstrates that the two are related. Evidently, an innovative work environment is not a high-stress work environment.

Plante et al. (2000) in their research used 72 faculty and staff of various ages who were recruited from Santa Clara University. The participants engaged in two stressful tasks. One involved giving a brief speech, and the other involved reading the names of colors printed with ink that was a different color. Before, during, and after the stressful tasks, blood pressure and pulse rate were recorded and the participants responded to a questionnaire measuring calmness. The results showed that perceived physical fitness was associated with changes in systolic blood pressure and calmness throughout the course of the stress tasks, even after taking into account other factors that were associated (i.e., actual physical fitness, gender, fitness were associated with less anxiety, less depression, and higher self-esteem). Thus, both actual and perceived physical fitness are important for stress relief.

One of the body reaction commonly associated with stress in an increase in cardiovascular activity, such as heart rate and blood pressure. Therefore, the researchers decided to measure participants' cardiovascular reactions to different stressful events. To begin the experiment, participants sat in a comfortable chair and listened to soft music for 10 minutes. During this time the researchers measured the participant's heart rate, diastolic blood pressure, systolic blood pressures, and mean arterial pressure. These measurements served as a stress-free baseline the researchers could then compare later measurements against. After the baseline readings were taken, participants completed four different tasks. Three of the tasks were designed to be performance-oriented and one task was designed to be appearance-oriented. For the performance tasks, participants had to do subtraction problems, while being timed, trace a star pattern while only looking at its mirror image, and squeeze a hand grip for 150 seconds. For the appearance-oriented task, participants had to give a four minute speech on what they liked and disliked about their body and physical appearance. After participants finished each task, the researchers again measured their cardiovascular responses.

The results showed that men's cardiovascular system reacted more than women's during the performance-oriented tasks. In other words, men's cardiovascular readings rose above their baseline levels during the performance-oriented tasks, whereas women's cardiovascular readings did not rise. During the appearance-oriented tasks, however, women's cardiovascular readings rose above their baseline levels, whereas men's did not. These results seem to suggest that men respond more to performance situations, whereas women respond more to appearance situations.

When men and women work together, it's important for them to realize how each gender reacts to certain types of situations. Situations that do not appear stressful to men may be very stressful for women and vice versa. Being sen-
ative to these differences can help reduce annoyance at another person’s stressed out reaction to a seemingly “harmless” event and even prepare working partners to better help each other cope.

Tahir Sumaira (2003) carried out a research to investigate the relationship between lifestyle, stress and cardiac illness. The sample consisted of 100 adult males (50 cardiac patient and 50 normal with age range of 40 to 65 years. Both the group were marked on age, gender, marital status and occupation. The lifestyle and stressors faced during last 1-3 years were measured. Questionnaires for lifestyle and life stressors checklist were constructed and administered to the patients individually. The results indicated a significant difference in lifestyle and stressors faced by normal and indoor cardiac patients suggesting a significant relationship between lifestyle stress and cardiac illness.

**Methodology**

Present research was designed to study hypothesis that “Females would perceive some stressful life events more seriously and would report more physical and psychological effect as compared to males.”

**Sample:** 100 respondents (50 male and 50 female) post graduate students of different departments of Peshawar University were taken for this study. Their age range was between 20-24 years. The life stresses experienced by the subjects during the last 12 months were measured.

**Instrument:** Holmes & Rahe (1967) Social Re-adjustment Rating Scale was used. It comprised of 43 life events. Respondents were asked to tick mark life events that have been experienced during the last one year. The ratings that indicate differential stressfulness of events are totaled for all the events actually experienced to produce a life change that score, a weighted sum of events.

**Procedure:** Permission was taken from the department authorities to draw the sample from different post graduate departments. The subjects in the research were matched on their age range, gender and education. Social Re-adjustment Rating Scale was administered to each subject. They were also asked to report physical and psychological effects of stressful life events.

**Results and Discussion**

Besides descriptive statistics, t-test from statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis and to determine whether there is any difference between perception of stressful life events by male and female postgraduate students. The results given in table 1 indicate that there is a significance different ($t = 5.299 \ p < .01$) between (M: 130.8) (M= 222.1) in terms of perception of stressful life events.

The objective was to see the difference in the male female perception of stressful events. Results indicated significant difference in the male female perception and reception of stressful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>130.8</td>
<td>63.24</td>
<td>5.299</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>222.1</td>
<td>104.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P= .0001
events. Female students scored high on social readjustment scale than the male students. The age range of the respondents was 22-24 years. At this particular age the young women usually develop sense of responsibility and perceive stressful life events as threatening. On the country men at this age are not so vulnerable to stress as women. Research conducted by Stroud, Laura, Niaura and Stoney (2001) showed that in men cardiovascular system reacts more than women's during the performance oriented tasks. When men and women work together, it's important for them to realize how each gender reacts to certain types of situation. Situations that do not seem stressful to men may be very stressful for women. Being sensitive to these differences can help reduce annoyance at another person's stressed out reaction to a seemingly “harmless” event.

Present findings revealed that women take the severe effect of stressful life events physically and psychologically as compared to men. Not only the scores show difference in men and women perception of stressful situation but the reports on physical and psychological effects by the respondents also proved that women respond more negatively and seriously towards stressful life events as compared to men.

References


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