

Stress and Work Engagement Among Academicians of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Afghanistan: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

A wealth of studies on work engagement is found in the literature. However, relating stress to work engagement among academicians of the private higher education institutions is the area that lacks a comprehensive research framework. Therefore, this study was aimed at 1). providing a review of the extant literature on stress and work engagement; 2). employing the ASSET model of stress to work engagement; further 3). hypothesizing the relationship among these variables, and finally 4). developing a conceptual framework. Based on the application of the ASSET model of stress, this paper proposes a model of the relationship between stress and work engagement through health and commitment. Suggestions for practice and future research are also presented.

Keywords: ASSET model, PHEIs, Stress, Work Engagement, Afghanistan

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Introduction

Based on the studies related to stress at the workplace, commitment, health, and work engagement, this study was designed for the academicians working in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) of Afghanistan. According to Selye (1973), stress is the general response of an organism. This response is created by any demand or unexpected situations. An 'Organizational Stress Screening Tool' or the ASSET model (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002) is a well-known stress model which is used to measure stress level among employees in many organizations around the world (Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009). This model has not only a good construct validity (Johnson & Cooper, 2003) but it also has shortened the test to get an easy and higher response rate to measure the stress level (Faragher, Cooper, & Cartwright, 2004). The ASSET model indicates that, among many, work relationships, work-life balance, work overload, job security, control, resources and communication, aspects of the job, and pay and benefits are the most common workplace stressors. Cartwright and Cooper (2002) posited that this stress has many consequences including commitment and health and ultimately leading to a lower level of work engagement. The engagement level will be measured through three work-related behaviors such as vigor, dedication, and absorption behavior (Schaufeli & Bakker 2014).

1.1 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Afghanistan at a Glance

The higher education system of Afghanistan generally comprises of degree-granting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Universities both in public and private sector (The World Bank report, 2013). In the year 2001, after the establishment of the new government, the higher education sector has progressed remarkably. In addition to public universities, the number of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Afghanistan has increased drastically over the last one and a half-decade. Currently, there are 131 PHEIs operating around the country (CSRS Report, 2019). These PHEIs accommodate both fulltime and part-time academicians. The low capacity of public universities in the country and increasing demands of the Afghan community for the higher education has made the presence of PHEIs essential (CSRS Report, 2019).

There are two main reasons for the students to enroll in PHEIs. First, as public universities cannot accommodate a large number of students due to their low capacity. Alternatively, students approach PHEIs. Second, most of PHEIs are flexible in terms of class timings. Given the fact that, due to an intense financial need, the majority of students in PHEIs are on job and they come for their classes either before going to work or after the working hours. This flexibility in time by the PHEIs has attracted a large sum of students. Although the number of PHEIs has increased to a greater extent, however, in comparison with the number of students aspiring for the higher education, there exists a huge gap. Hence, there is enormous pressure on the existing PHEIs to accommodate more number of students not only but

a great amount of stress is also there among academicians in these PHEIs to provide quality education with limited resources (CSRS, 2019).

A plethora of previous studies has shown that stress among academicians has multiple impacts or consequences such as turnover intention and poor job performance (Jacobs et al., 2007; Idris, 2009; Curran & Prottas, 2017). The stress, being a critical phenomenon, among academicians in the PHEIs of Afghanistan has been overlooked by the researchers. Being unaware of the stress phenomena will solve nothing.

Hence, a need is demonstrated here to fill up this knowledge gap which will not only assist the academicians in reducing their workplace stress but will also help them improve their commitment and health, which subsequently will lead to fostering their engagement levels at work.

The current study aims at; reviewing the extant literature concerning stress and work engagement; applying the ASSET stress model, hypothesizing, and developing a comprehensive conceptual framework concerning the relationship between stress and work engagement. Further, highlighting the issues related to stress, the impact of stress on the commitment and health, and subsequently on the work engagement among academicians of the PHEIs is indispensable. In doing so, sufficient knowledge will be available to recommend to the leadership and management of PHEIs the ways to reduce stress among academicians in the workplace but also to enhance their engagement level at work. The probable recommendations of this study are to apply intervention strategies at different levels i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, as well as the provision of different on the job and off the job training to manage stress.

2. Literature Review

This section briefly discusses the related underpinning theories. Variables identified in the current study have been extracted from the following theories.

2.1 Stress-Related Theories

According to Beehr and Franz (1987), stress can be defined in three ways. Firstly, based on the 'Stimulus Theory', stress is stimulated by the environment. Secondly, based on 'Response Theory', that refers to the psychological or physiological by the stimulus that has just occurred from the environment for a moment. The final and the most acceptable definition of stress is built on the 'Interactional Theory', which combines elements from the above-stated definitions altogether. This definition can be frequently seen in stress researches related to stressor-strain relationships. Arnold, Cooper, and Robertson (1998) opined that the 'Interactional Theory' of stress is superior to other theories of stress due to its subtleties and holistic vision of stress. For this very reason, this current study uses the same definition of stress which is at the same time an integral element of different stress-related theories, such as 'General Theory of Stress (GToS)' (Beehr & Newman, 1978), ASSET Model of Stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002), and

'Model of Occupational Stress (MoOS)' (Beehr, 1995). Therefore, these three theories have been taken as underpinning theories for the current study.

The GSoT underscores seven stress features which include environmental, personal, organizational consequences, process, adaptive response, time, and human consequences. Moreover, based on the MoOS, work relationship (from the environment facet) as one of the stressors will interact with strain, such as commitment and health (from human consequences facet) to shape the individual work performance (from the organizational consequences facet), individual. The current study takes into account the eight most common workplace stressors that are identified by the ASSET Model of Stress.

2.2 Development of Study Hypothesis

2.2.1 Relationship between Stressors and Commitment

The GToS postulates that workplace stressors usually come from the environment facet of an organization (Beehr & Newman, 1978). As identified by the ASSET Model of Stress, the current study examines the following eight common stressors at the workplace.

Work Relationships – the relationship between coworkers or superiors at the workplace is referred to as work relationships. Considering the current situation, working with people is challenging. Hence, when support from coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors is not available, this is a source of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). Poor relationships might be faced with the customers, and from the academicians' perspective, students are the customers.

Work-Life Balance- work-life balance's demands are different at work and home. Hence, there is a potential that these two different demands might affect one another (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). If academicians work extra hours, they might confront the issue of a work-life balance issue.

Overload – overload in the current study is referred to as high workloads. Hence, this can be a probable source of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). Increasing workloads for the academicians such as engaging them with research and other administrative works might result in work overload.

Job Security – the current study considers job security as the expectations that individuals have about their job for life. The fear of losing a job can be a potential source of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). The job security of academicians in the PHEIs mainly depends on the number of students in those HEIs. Meaning that, larger the number of student, better the job security and vice versa.

Control –employees who do not perceive the environment well, they might lose control. This may also involve the way a job is organized and executed. Thereby, leading to a potential source of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). This happens when an academician is unable to argue even though he/she has met all the required key work performance indicators.

Resources and Communication – it means the provision of equipment, adequate training, other job-related resources, and maintaining better communication with employees. The presence of such resources and communication will make employees do well at their jobs (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). Generally, academicians in the PHEIs face the problem of tight budget constraints. As a result, they are under pressure to perform within the limited budget. Hence, another potential stress's source.

Job Aspects – it involves the task's nature, physical working environment, and satisfaction level (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). Sometimes the nature of a job itself becomes a potential source of stress. Academicians' job is very demanding as they have to do multiple jobs such as teaching, research, and administrative activities.

Finally, *Pay and Benefits* – the financial rewards that are paid for the performance of a job are referred to pay and benefits here. This is essential for leading a good life but it also shows the worth of an employee's services from the organization's perspective (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). In comparison with the academicians in public universities, academicians in private HEIs might have lesser benefits. Thus, indicating a potential source of stress.

The term commitment in the current study refers to both individual commitment and organizational commitment. Where organizational commitment means the commitment of employers toward their employees. In general, factors such as trust, respect, and the perceived value are the expectations of all employees from their employers (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002).

A large volume of studies has acknowledged the negative relationship between stress and the perceived commitment of the organization towards the employees. For instance, Viljoen and Rothmann (2009) found several stressors such as communication, resources, and control that lead to lower organizational commitment. On the other hand, individual commitment indicates the commitment of employees to their organization. Employers expect their employees to be the best at their jobs besides dedication and loyalty (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002).

Concerning commitment, generally, the interactional theory of stress, which is the stress-strain approach, is widely accepted (Beehr & Franz, 1987). As argued by Cooper, et al (2001), as the response to stressors at work, employees will feel the strain behaviorally, physically, as well as psychologically. In psychology, the strain has been mostly studied in relationship with job attitudes such as organizational commitment (Jex & Beehr, 1991; Sulsky, Smith & Thomson 2005). In connection with the ASSET Model of Stress, poor commitment is one of the stress outcomes. As a result of strain, academicians will be less committed.

In past, several empirical studies have shown the effect of stress on the commitment of the employees to their organizations. For instance, the study of Viljoen and Rothmann (2009) among the academicians and the

support staff at the university of technology, South African, found that pay and benefits, overload, control, and aspects of a job lead to the lower commitment of employees (academicians and support staff). Similarly, anxiety was reported to be influencing career commitment significantly in another study (Wang, Chiang, & Lee, 2014). Working along the same line, by using ASSET model of stress, a significant negative relationship between lack of job security, lack of work-life balance, lack of good working relationship, lack of resources and poor communication, and commitment was documented in different studies (Jacobs, et al., 2007; Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009; Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Jackson & Rothmann, 2006). In conclusion, the stress among academicians will affect their commitment, which is leading to our first hypothesis of this study:

H1: There will be a negative impact of stressors on the commitment of academicians in the PHEIs of Afghanistan.

2.2.2 Connection between Stressors and Health

Health includes both physical health and psychological well-being in this study. According to (Kahn & Byosiére, 1992), occupational stress affects the mental and physical well-being of an employee. There are empirical evidences available that indicate that the substantial levels of occupational stress (Siu, 2002; Winefield, et al., 2003), if not considered seriously, will affect individuals' physical and mental health, which, as a result, will lead to poor organizational outcomes such as turnover and job dissatisfaction. This has been exhibited among the administrators and coordinators where poor physical health is prevalent. There are symptoms of poor physical health such as irritability and always being tired (Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009). Further, if the stress persists for a longer period, it might result in critical illnesses which include depression and hypertension.

Most of the stress-related studies, using stress general theory (Beehr & Newman, 1978), identify seven main features of stress. These features can be grouped into the environment and human consequences. Job insecurity as an element of the environment contributes a lot to stress related to a job. While, different aspects of mental and physical health i.e., depression, as a part of human consequences, will result in job stress. The occupational stress model (Beehr, 1995) identifies a clear linkage among the aforementioned facets. The model links the environment to the human consequences. This nexus between environment and human consequences can be, health is an after-effect of the source of stress. The current study theorizes a negative connection between stressor and health. Academicians who suffer from stress will suffer from poor health in the workplace.

In previous studies, health has been found to have a negative relationship with; work-life balance (Jacobs et al., 2007), work overload (Mostert et al., 2008), job insecurity (Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009), lower job controls (Jackson & Rothmann, 2006), poor resources and communication (Tytherleigh, et al., 2005), poor aspect of the job (Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009), and lastly poor pay and other benefits (Tytherleigh, et al., 2005).

Thus, based on the above discussion on the available literature, this can be hypothesized that:

H2: The impact of the stressor on health will be negative among the academician in the PHEIs of Afghanistan.

2.2.3 Connection between Stressor and Work Engagement

According to Schaufeli and Salanova (2007), there are three dimensions of work-engagement such as ‘vigor’, ‘dedication’, and ‘absorption’, which result in a work-related state of mind which is positive and fulfilling. In comparison with a momentary and specific state, work engagement, as an affective cognitive state, is more persistent and pervasive.

The ‘Vigor’ dimension refers to mental resilience and a high energy level while being at work. Vigor is demonstrated by employees when they not only invest their efforts in their work but also show persistence while facing difficulties. Dedication, meanwhile, means high employees' involvement with work-related activities and the feeling of being challenged, inspired, and important. Lastly, absorption indicates when employees are being focused and happy at work. It also means that employees find it hard to separate themselves from their work with the passing time.

The MoOS (Beehr, 1995) articulates that there is a possibility of interaction between stressors (from the environment facet) and work engagement or job performance (as organizational consequences facet) such as in connection with this, the ASSET model of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2007), posits that the productivity level relates to stress's sources. With stress, the performance of an employee increase but up to a certain point, and then the performance starts decreasing. This is in alignment with the Yerkes-Dodson Law of Arousal (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Several previous studies have provided evidence that there is a direct connection between work stressors and performance.

Academicians in the private HEIs academics will exhibit lower work engagement if they suffer from stress. There are empirical shreds of evidence that indicate that stress negatively affects work-engagement. That is to say, stressors like lack of job security, job-rigidity, as well as role-ambiguity have been found to have a significant negative relationship with work engagement (Coetzee & de Villiers, 2010). The above discussion leads to the conclusion that stressors will negatively affect the work-engagement among the academicians of PHEIs. Subsequently, the study presents the following hypothesis:

H3: Stressors will negatively impact the work engagement among academicians in the private HEIs.

2.2.4 Connection between Commitment and Work Engagement

The MoOS (Beehr & Franz, 1987) states that stressor-strain is formed due to the interaction between humans and the environment. As a result of this interaction, there will be consequences for the organization (e.g., work engagement). Further, all factors leading to organizational effectiveness can be adversely impacted by job stress. The presence of stressor will make

academicians of the PHEIs suffer and, in turn, they will demonstrate a lower level of work engagement.

On the other hand, employees' affective commitment leads to an enhanced level of work engagement (Poon, 2013). The positive connection between commitment and job-performance has been demonstrated in many past studies. On the other hand, job-demands as a cause of stress lead to psychological strain and, as a result of it, individuals' exhibit poor job performance (Lang, et al., 2007). This has been proven empirically in different studies.

Similar to affective commitment, past studies have shown a significant positive relationship between employees' commitment to their supervisors' job performance (Becker, et al., 1996). Applying the ASSET model, there is a significant positive relationship between organizational commitment and measures of performance (Jacobs et al., 2007). Additionally, applying the step-wise regression method, employees' perceived organizational commitment affects job-performance positively in the current study. Hence, the academicians' commitment will be affected by the stress, which will eventually influence their engagement at work engagement. Hence, in light of the discussion made above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Because of stress, the poor commitment will be resulting in poor work-engagement among academicians of PHEIs of Afghanistan.

2.2.5 Connection between Health and Work Engagement

The MoOS (Beehr, 1995) links-up the stressor-strain's core relationship with the organizational consequences facet. Consequently, this can be theorized that the academicians in the PHEIs, who suffer from the stress, will experience poor health conditions and that subsequently will result in their lower level of work-engagement. Nevertheless, the mental well-being (opposite to poor health) of employees has been found to have a significant positive relationship with work engagement (Kanste, 2011). Most of the previous studies have demonstrated a negative relationship between health and productivity that can be shown through absenteeism due to sickness and presentism (Aronsson, et al., 2000; Brouwer, Koopmanscap & Rutten, 1999; Heuval et al., 2010; Schultz & Edington, 2007). Loepke et al. (2007) argued that the costs of loss in productivity because of health are four times higher than the costs of medical and pharmacy. In connection with this, the study of Boles et al. (2004) also found the association between loss of productivity and health. On the other hand, using the ASSET model, performance has been found to have a positive connection with good physical health (Jacobs et al., 2007). In another study of Winefield, et al. (2003), both psychological well-being and performance measures are highly correlated. In conclusion, stress will have an effect on health which will subsequently lead to work disengagement among academicians of private HEIs. Thus, given below is our next proposed hypothesis:

H5: Stress being a reason, the poor health of academicians of private HEIs of Afghanistan will result in their lower levels of work-engagement.

2.2.6 Commitment as a Part of the Relationship

Based on the MoOS (Beehr, 1995), stressors as an environment facet impact the commitment as human consequences which consequently lead to work engagement as organizational consequences. Therefore, the study theorizes commitment as a mediating mechanism between stress and work engagement among private HEIs' academicians. Also, commitment has been found to mediate the relationship between role anxiety and turnover (Glazer, et al., 2005). The study provided a piece of strong evidence that how role anxiety predicts employee's commitment to their organization which, as a result, affects the job quitting intentions. Similarly, the connection between strain as a result of stress, organizational commitment, and turnover has been assessed in one of the longitudinal studies conducted among academicians of the public universities of Malaysia (Idris, 2009). The empirical evidence obtained provides clear support that organizational-commitment mediated the relationship between strain and the intention to leave. Along with the same line, in another study of Makhbul, et al. (2014), the commitment was found to be partially mediating the relationship between stressor and employees' productivity. Thus, the academicians, who suffer from stress will have an impact on their commitment level which, eventually will influence their level of work-engagement. Thus, our next hypothesis, based on the above discussions, will be as follows:

H6: the relationship between stress and work-engagement will be mediated by commitment academicians of PHEIs of Afghanistan.

2.2.7 Health as a Part of the Relationship

Following the MoOS (Beehr, 1995), the relation between stressor and strain (health) will result in consequences for the organization i.e. work-engagement. Hence, in the relationship between stressor and work-engagement among academicians of private HEIs, health will become a mediator.

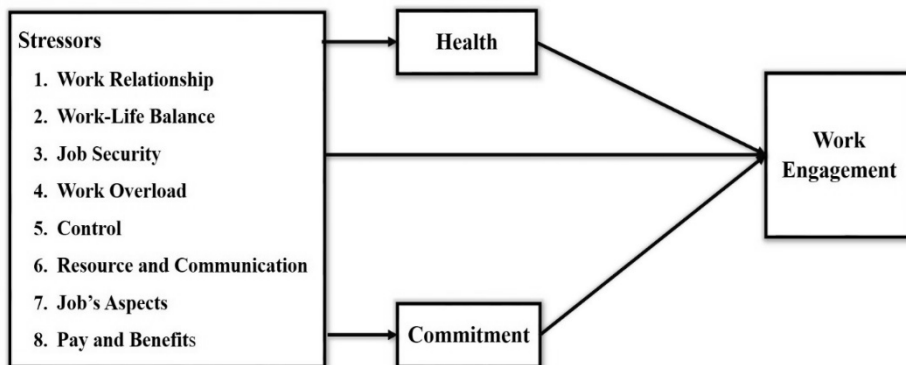
Health has been used as a mediator in different stress-related studies. For instance, in the study of Darr and Johns (2008) psychological illness and Somatic (health-related problems) were found as a mediating mechanism between stressor and absenteeism. Likewise, Lang et al. (2007) documented the mediating role of physical and psychological strain (health-related) in the relationship between job demands and performance. Working along the same lines, the physical symptom of strain (health) mediated partially between challenges and hindrances (stressor types), organizational citizenship behaviors' outcome and job performance in another study (Webster, et al., 2010). Furthermore, in the study of in Makhbul, et al. (2014), the relationship between stressors and individuals' productivity was found to be partially mediated by health. Therefore, academicians who suffer from stress will have a health issue and that will subsequently be impacting the engagement levels at work. Hence, the below given will be our last hypothesis of this study:

H7: between stressors and work- engagement, the health of academicians of PHEIs of Afghanistan will be mediating the relationship.

3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework as shown in Fig.1 comprises eleven variables in total. Using the 'ASSET model of stress' as a base, this study has taken eight stressors as the independent variable. While the other two variables such as commitment and health are taken as the mediating mechanism between the stressors and the work engagement relationship. Meanwhile, work engagement has been considered as a dependent variable. Commitment in the present study refers to both perceived organizational commitment and individual commitment and will be measured with these two dimensions. Meanwhile, health will be measured with psychological well-being and physical health. Similarly, the vigor, dedication, and absorption dimensions will be used to measure the work engagement of academicians. The proposed conceptual framework is based on the relationships between the 'stressors and commitment', 'stressors and health', 'stressors and work-engagement' while taking both 'commitment and health' as a mediator in the relationship between the stressor and work engagement as already hypothesized.

Figure 1: The Proposed Conceptual Framework



Source: Author's compilation

4. Conclusion

Through literature reviews and application of the ASSET model of stress, this study has attempted to conceptualize the stress and work engagement relationship. This conceptual framework provides support to research among academicians of private HEIs within the context of Afghanistan. This proposed conceptual framework encourages also to extend the model to use other mediators such as job satisfaction or other stressors like role stressor to be tested in the future.

Upon testing the conceptual framework, if the results support the study hypotheses, then practice-wise, particularly for the policymakers in the higher education sector need to review their policies regarding the critical stressors as well as promoting the health and commitment of their academicians to enhance their level of engagement at work.

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