The Effects of Gender Role on Perceived Job Stress

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ABSTRACT

Job stress results in significant costs related to employees’ health and satisfaction. Prior research has focused on the outcomes of job stress, with little attention paid to the particular personal characteristics, such as gender roles, and emotional intelligence that may affect perceived job stress. The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether gender roles may affect perceived job stress. In order to ensure that the empirical results relate to a single job environment, all participants were required to be employed as a bank clerk in Taiwanese banks. Based on the findings, implications related to choosing employees who are less affected by stress are discussed. In turn, employers can look to recruit employees that are better able to function in stressful situations, which would assist firms to lower costs associated with helping employees deal with stress. This finding also suggested that for job stress (work-related psychological stress) studying, gender role (a psychological construct) may be a more suitable construct than sex role (a biological construct) to be used to explore the relationship with job stress.

Keywords: gender roles, sex roles, job stress.

INTRODUCTION

For the majority of people, their job represents a central part of their everyday life. As such, work also plays a critical role in terms of individual health and happiness. The significance of the impact of work on the lives and welfare of people during both working hours and non-working hours has grown over time (Ivancevich, Matteson, & Preston, 1982). Job stress is a growing problem for employees in Western industrialized societies, and increasing job stress has led to greater health costs, a higher percentage of absenteeism and turnover, more accidents, and inefficient performance (Siu, 2003). While almost all job stress research has been developed and empirically tested in Western industrialized societies, scholars have indicated that the phenomenon likely also exists in developing countries in spite of a paucity of research (Siu, 2003). As Taiwan is currently recognized as falling between a developed and developing country, it is likely that Taiwan employers are experiencing similar problems.

Further, the majority of previous research has focused on the outcomes of job stress, with little attention paid to the particular personal characteristics, such as sex, gender roles, and emotional intelligence that may affect perceived job stress. Some evidence suggests that the individual differences (e.g., personal characteristics) have an influence on the reactions to stressful situations (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983). It is important to note that job stress is a subjective cognition (Ivancevich et al., 1982). For example, different people (e.g., bank clerks) working in same task environment may perceive different levels of job stress. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that people with different personal characteristics tend to perceive different levels of job stress under the same task environment.
Within the literature, there are multiple categories pertaining to various personal characteristics. The current study focuses primarily on gender roles, to investigate their effect on perceived job stress. Based on the findings, implications related to choosing employees who are less affected by stress are discussed. In turn, employers can look to recruit employees that are better able to function in stressful situations, which would assist firms to lower costs associated with helping employees deal with stress.

**Related Literature on Gender Roles**

Gender role research began in the field of psychology, and is used to explain gender divergences attributed to biological, psychological, or sociological reasons. Although the words “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably, they have clear distinctions in terms of definition (Meier-Pesti & Penz, 2008; Deaux, 1985). In general, scholars define “sex” as either male or female; this biological difference depends on the presence of egg cells or sperm cells (Money, 1955; Borna & White, 2003). While the sex of a person is biologically determined, the gender of a person is based on culture and social construct: gender is a socially constructed category that represents the cultural definition of feminine traits and masculine traits (Meier-Pesti & Penz, 2008). Gender role is defined that “all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively” (Money, 1955, p.254). Kracher and Marble (2008) also distinguish between these two terms—they use ‘sex’ for the biological construct, and ‘gender’ for the psychological construct.

Femininity is noted for traits that reflect an emotional, interpersonal orientation toward others, such as being sensitive to needs of others, and understanding. This emotional orientation is associated with the ability to characterize others’ emotions in a detailed, complex manner (Conway, 2000). Masculinity pertains to a more instrumental and assertive orientation, with measure items that include independence, aggressiveness and competitiveness. This orientation discourages any detailed consideration of people’s emotional reactions (Conway, 2000).

Stereotypes and role perceptions play an important role in the understanding of gender-specific behavior. Harriman (1985) defined roles as the expected and actual behaviors or characteristics that attach to a particular social status, and stereotypes as the set of attributes that are attributed to all individuals who occupy a particular role. Since gender stereotypes dictated the approved masculine or feminine image, they are powerful in terms of their ability to influence how people act and what they believe (Kohlberg, 1966). In addition, the distinctions between male-valued and female-valued components of the sex-role stereotypes have principal implications for the self-concept of men and women (Kohlberg, 1966). Bem (1975) indicated that psychologically androgynous individuals might be more likely than either feminine or masculine individuals to show gender role adaptability across situations, and engage in effectual behavior without regard for stereotypes that suggest this type of behavior is more appropriate for one gender or the other.

**Related Literature on Job Stress**

Lazarus (1990) addressed stress as a subjective rather than objective phenomenon; in turn, some scholars define stress as an individual’s perception of a situation. Some researchers refer to stress using various terms that include strain, burnout, ambiguity, conflict, and anxiety, among others (Sager, 1991). However, stress does not directly result from either the person or the environment—the theoretical and empirical literature indicates that stress is a consequence of the interaction of the environment and individual factors. Hence, greater inconsistencies between the person-environment fit lead to more significant levels of experienced stress (Ivancevich et al., 1982).
Sager (1991) defined job stress as a psychological state perceived by individuals when faced with demands, constraints, and opportunities that have important but uncertain outcomes. Job stress is very much an individual reaction, and differs from general stress as it is also organization- and job-related (Chen, 2008). Thus, job stress refers to work-related psychological stress, as well as an individual’s ability to handle a particular situation or work environment (Jamal, 1999). Similarly, Parker and Decotiis (1983) indicated that individuals experience stress in various forms, which can pertain to psychological states (e.g., anxiety, tension). In sum, job stress is the outcome of a lack of person-work fit; it is also a subjective cognition that can lead to work-induced emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, or disgust (Lazarus, 1990).

Job stress is different from stress in that it is work-related psychological stress. Job stress may occur when an individual is not given adequate training or is not provided with the necessary resources to perform the job, or is confronted with conflicting job demands (Jamal, 1990). An excessive work load may make people feel job stress (Jamal, 2004). Other potential sources of job stress include the organizational climate created by the leadership style of supervisors (Parker and DeCotiis, 1983). Job stress can produce adverse consequences for both the individual and the firm since it has the effect of lowering motivation levels and performance, and increases turnover intentions (Montgomery, Blodgett & Barnes, 1996).

**Gender Role and Perceived Job Stress**

Conway (2000) indicated that individuals owning high masculinity exhibit less emotional complexity when they deal with tasks and events than individuals owning high femininity. In addition, Conway’s (2000) study showed that when facing an identical problem, individuals associated with high levels of masculinity are less depressed and less anxious than individuals associated with high levels of femininity.

In other words, people that possess high levels of femininity may feel greater anxiety, which is an emotional orientation way of expressing stress when confronting a work-related problem. Conversely, people that possess high levels of masculinity are unlikely to feel depressed or anxious because they are more confident in their ability to solve problems. On this basis, it was hypothesized

Hypothesis: When the work environment is the same, employees associated with masculine traits will perceive a lower degree of job stress than will employees associated with feminine traits.

**METHODS**

**Sampling**

To ensure that participants worked in a similar job environment, this empirical study only considered bank clerks working in Taiwanese banks as potential participants. Data were obtained from 293 respondents (N = 293) from five banks and their branches. The sample was 41.0% male (n = 120) and 59.0% female (n = 173).

**Measures**

*The Bem Sex Role Inventor-Short Form*

Bem (1981) developed the 30-item BSRI-SF instrument, which was modified from Bem Sex Role Inventor developed by Bem (1974). This 30-item survey was used to measure participant perceptions regarding their gender role. The BSRI-SF measures masculine and feminine scores separately, rather than
on one continuum. The BSRI-SF consists of three 10-item scales, which reflect masculine gender role and feminine gender role, and 10 neutral items. Each item was rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with anchors 1 (never or almost never true) and 7 (always or almost always true). Participants are identified as “masculine”, “feminine”, “androgynous”, or “undifferentiated” according to the differences between the masculine and feminine characteristics in their personalities. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 for masculine items and 0.84 for feminine items.

**Job Stress**

The job stress scale measures employees’ perceived work-related psychological stress (e.g., anxiety, tension). The scale includes 13 item scales developed by Parker and DeCotiis (1983). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.87.

**RESULTS**

In this study, the respondents’ average masculine score was 4.2 (SD. = 1.1), and their average feminine score was 4.9 (SD = 1.0). Using these two average scores as the cut off scores for grouping, this study grouped participants into four gender role groups based on Bem’s (1981) aforementioned categories: {Low masculine, Low feminine; i.e., undifferentiated}; {High masculine, High feminine; i.e., androgynous}; {Low masculine, High feminine; i.e., feminine}; and {High masculine, Low feminine; i.e., masculine}.

According to Bem (1981), it is possible that masculine and feminine traits may coexist within an individual. However, individuals might tend to emphasize masculine traits when they are associated with high levels of masculine and low levels of feminine characteristics. Conversely, individuals might tend to emphasize feminine traits when they are associated with high levels of feminine and low levels of masculine characteristics. For this study, only two of the four gender role types were considered—{Low masculine, High feminine; i.e., feminine}; and {High masculine, Low feminine; i.e., masculine}—for the constructs feminine and masculine, respectively.

A t-test analysis was used to examine the hypothesis. When the work environment is the same (i.e., participants are bank clerks), masculine bank clerk perceived job stress scores (M = 2.5, SD. = 0.3) differed significantly (t-value = -6.03, p<0.001) from feminine bank clerk perceived job stress scores (M = 3.1, SD. = 0.5). Thus, hypothesis is supported.

In addition, this study conducted an exploratory study to investigate whether sex affects perceived job stress. A t-test analysis was used to analyze this exploratory study. When the work environment is the same (i.e., participants are bank clerks), male bank clerk perceived job stress scores (M = 2.9, SD. = 0.5) did not differ significantly (t-value = -0.81, p=0.42) from female bank clerk perceived job stress scores (M = 3.0, SD. = 0.65).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study attempts to investigate whether gender roles affect perceived job stress. The hypothesis is supported by the results: when the work environment is the same, employees associated with high levels of masculine traits report lower perceptions of job-related stress than do employees associated with high levels of feminine traits. However, this exploratory study indicated that there is no significant difference between the male and female bank clerks’ perceived job stress scores. One possible explanation for this
phenomenon may be that the criteria (i.e., job stress) in this study is work-related psychological stress; therefore, the relationship between gender role (a psychological construct) and job stress (work-related psychological stress) is more significant than the relationship between sex role (a biological construct) and job stress (work-related psychological stress). This finding suggested that for job stress (work-related psychological stress) studying, gender role (a psychological construct) may be a more suitable construct than sex role (a biological construct) to be used to explore the relationship with job stress.

As noted earlier, stress does not always directly result from the source of the pressure itself, but rather from the perception of that pressure (Lu, Siu, & Cooper, 2005). Consequently, this study suggests that when the work environment is the same, masculine employees are more able to deal with stressful matters associated with their jobs than are feminine employees.

The findings of this study provide employers with suggestions on how to design recruitment strategies that assist in the selection of appropriate job seekers for their organizations. For a highly stressful work environment like a bank, employers should look to identify applicants who possess masculine traits during the interview stage through the use of a personal characteristics test. Employees associated with high levels of feminine characteristics may benefit from organizational programs that focus on stress-management techniques.

One limitation that must be noted is that while four gender role types are outlined in the literature, participants were selected from only two of four types: feminine and masculine. The other two gender role types were not discussed in this study. Bem (1981) has stated that masculine and feminine traits may coexist within an individual. Individuals tend to emphasize masculine characteristics when they are associated with high levels of masculinity and low levels of femininity. Conversely, individuals tend to emphasize their feminine characteristics when they are associated with high levels of femininity and low levels of masculinity (Bem, 1981). Future research may explore the relation between job stress and the other two gender role types.

While the literature has identified multiple categories of personal characteristics, the present study focuses primarily on gender roles. Future research might investigate the associations between other personal characteristics (e.g., emotional intelligence, sex role, and Type A behavior patterns) and job stress to clarify these relationships. For example, prior studies pointed out that individuals possessing higher emotional intelligence should be more tolerant of stressful environments because they can adapt well to circumstances (Matthews et al., 2006; Furnham & Christoforou, 2007). In addition, Furnham and Petrides (2006) indicated that high emotional intelligence individuals can see themselves as flexible and control their emotional reactions well. If so, for same work environment, high emotional intelligence employees would report perceiving a lower degree of job stress than would emotional intelligence employees.

REFERENCES


