

CHAPTER ONE

THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Stress is very much a part of work life. Though stress existed throughout history, the problems associated with stress have escalated with the rapid development in the twentieth century. According to Cooper (1981), stress is the Black Plague of the twentieth century. The twentieth century period has been called by management consultant Peter Ducker (Albrecht, 1979) as the Age of Discontinuity, economist John Kenneth Galbraith (Albrecht, 1979) as the Age of Uncertainty, writer and philosopher Alvin Toffler (1975) as the Age of the Future Shock and organizational development consultant Karl Albrecht (1979) as the Age of Anxiety. Thus the twentieth century can indeed be identified as the Age of Stress!

Studies on occupational stress can be traced back to AD 1700 when Bernardino Rammazini, described as the Father of occupational medicine by Vecchio (1991), showed how certain diseases were caused by certain aspects of work. In the 1900, psychologist Hugo Munsterberg (Vecchio, 1991) looked at the effects of fatigue in various jobs and recommended that a rest period be instituted to improve the situation. An early research by Fraser in 1947 shows that the factors associated with an increased incidence of neurosis were related to work (Cox and Mackay, 1981).

Though Fraser's study was done about fifty years ago, it can be seen that many of the later studies also displayed such similar depressing pictures. The history of occupational stress shows that interest in this area dates back to almost three centuries. Such interest was largely prompted by the negative effects that occupational stress created. Earlier studies on stress have concentrated on either acute stress situations, or on psychosocial stress laboratory studies. Only more recently has there been an interest in studying stress as the daily hassle of living and working.

Stress "is like Janus, the Roman god who had two faces looking in opposite directions. Stress is both therapeutic and debilitating; it has beneficial as well as adverse effects" (Greenwood and Greenwood, 1979, p.2). Eustress is the stress of achievement, triumph and exhilaration. Distress is unpleasant or disease-producing stress and is the stress of losing. Distress is an inherent element of all diseases and experimental animals are known to die from distress. It is noted that all studies known to the writer concentrated on distress, even though eustress is very much part of stress. Thus it is not surprising to find the word "stress" used synonymously as "distress".

1.1 The Concept And Nature of Stress

Selye (1956) noted that stress as a scientific concept has suffered the fate of being widely used but little understood. Stress is used as a substitute in what otherwise is called anxiety, conflict, emotional distress, extreme environmental conditions, ego-threat, frustration, threat to security, tension, or arousal.

One concept of stress is borrowed from the field of engineering. The law of Elasticity formulated by Robert Hooke can be seen in the case of occupational stress. If the strain within the worker falls within his coping limits (elastic limits), no damage results. This engineering's concept encourages most researchers to focus on hyperstress, stress caused by overload of the person's capabilities, though experimental evidence shows that underload caused hypostress. The engineering concept treats stress as a stimulus where stress is viewed as an independent variable. •

Walter Cannon, the famous Harvard physiologist, is perhaps the first person to look at the stress reaction of the body, using the term, "the fight or flight response". This response is useful during the Stone Age to either fight with or flee from the saber-toothed tiger and similar life threatening situation. The saber-toothed tiger had long gone and this response is still with humans today, well over 25,000 years later. Presently powerful work and social norms prohibit the overt expression of negative emotional reactions such as anger, frustration and hostility. An administrator who is angry with his boss for giving him unreasonable deadlines cannot punch him in the face or run away from him; otherwise he will lose his job. He can only bury his anger. Psychiatrist Theodore Isaac Rubin observed that "Anger may be buried, but it's buried alive" (Albrecht, 1979, p.152). With this, buried emotion can cause a great deal of psychosomatic diseases.

The treatment of stress by Cannon brings about the "response" approach, looking at stress as a dependent variable. This "response" approach is made popular by Selye who defined stress as "the

state manifested by a specific syndrome which consists of all the nonspecifically induced changes within a biologic system" (Selye, 1956, p.54).

Selye formulated a theoretical construct of stress based on the emergence of three stages (alarm, resistance and exhaustion) called the General Adaptation Syndrome or commonly known as GAS. A person's reaction follows a certain pattern; for at first, the experience of stress is difficult, then one is used to it and finally one cannot stand it any more.

In the course of one's work life, one goes through the first and second stages of GAS many times. Prolonged and severe stress may lead to the third stage, that is the stage of exhaustion and death. According to Matteson and Ivancevich (1982), the two important variables for the breakdown equation are the duration and the frequency the GAS is activated. Thus the more one is in the "fight-or-flight" mode and the longer one stays in that mode, the more likely he is going to experience a breakdown.

According to Albercht, the "greatest enemy of human health is ... the prolonged, unrelieved state of worry, anxiety, and arousal that many people experience and cannot escape" (Albercht, 1979, p.64). Many workers experience continuous, unrelieved stress for a large portion of their working day. The human body can handle episodic stress quite well but cannot handle the chronic stress of the continuous, low grade nature which workers can experience in the work place.

According to Lazarus (1966), stress occurs when the individual's demands outstripped capabilities. The three components to Lazarus's definition are: (1) the idea of demands on the person; (2) the idea of some form of appraisal or interpretation to that threat, and (3) the importance of the response of that person. Lazarus uses the interactionist approach where strong individual and situational characteristics with perceptual and cognitive differences play important roles.

In view of the different concepts of stress such as described above, "stress" has not achieved any kind of closure, either in the area of its concept or the delineation of boundaries. This is so because different methodological approaches are used to treat stress. Stress can be seen as a stimulus, a response or an interaction process. For the purpose of this study, the response-based approach by Selye (1956) is used. With this approach, stress is seen as a body response in excess of the normal or usual states to stressors and can be identified as symptoms. This study cannot use the interactionist approach as it does not intend to look at the mediating processes of stress for reasons explained in Section 5.3 under limitations of the study.

1.2 The Background Of The Study

This study is on the occupational stress of Assistant Registrars of the University of Malaya. The following sections provide a brief background on the University as well as the administrators of the University.

1.2.1 The Setting Of The University Of Malaya

The history of the University of Malaya goes a long way back to 1905 when the King Edward VII College of Medicine was set up. In 1929 the Raffles College was set up to meet the urgent demands of education. The King Edward VII College of Medicine was amalgamated with the Raffles College in 8 October 1949, leading to the founding of the University of Malaya. The rapid growth of the University resulted in the setting up of two autonomous branches of University, one in Singapore and the other in Kuala Lumpur.

The founding of the present University of Malaya on 1st January, 1962 came with the passing of the legislation in 1961. The university has expanded rapidly with the setup of various faculties and centers running first Degree, Diploma, Master and Doctoral courses. From 1959 until end of the 1993/1994 session, the University has produced a total of 57,056 first degree graduates.

To run the various activities, the University was operating on an annual budget of RM185,714,830 in 1995 of which 81.6 percent came from the government, 8.5 percent from fees, 2.3 percent from other income of the University and 7.6 percent from the University's Accumulated Fund. The salaries and allowances of the staff used up 73 percent of the annual budget. There were 4699 employees in the University as at 1st January 1995 of which 152 were Professors, 385 were Associate Professors, 911 were Lecturers, 383 were tutors or language teachers, 222 were administrative staff

(which includes Registry staff, Bursary staff, computer specialists, librarians, engineers and others) and 2646 were general staff.

1.2.2 The Administrators Of The University

There are various kinds of administrators that are appointed to assist in the running of the university. As provided by Section 9(3) of the University Constitution, the Vice-Chancellor of the university is the principal executive and academic officer of the university. The Deputy Vice-Chancellors assist the Vice-Chancellor in his duties. Deans of Faculties, Directors of Centers, Heads of Departments, Chairman of Divisions, Masters of Residential Colleges are also appointed to assist in running the day-to-day matters of their respective areas. However all these appointments are only part time temporary appointments of a few years (like two years for the Dean) and are usually done together with their other full time duties, such as teaching and research.

Other than these part time temporary administrators, the university appoints full time career administrative staff to assist the above in their administrative duties. Presently the administrative staff in the Registry consists of a Registrar, twelve Principal Assistant Registrars (of which one of them is appointed as "Deputy Registrar" under the old scheme of service), and sixty-four Assistant Registrars. There are also a Principal Assistant Registrar and an Assistant Registrar who are not involved in administration work fully but doing counseling duties.

The career administrative staff in the Registry consists of three groups who are appointed according to the salary structure of the New Remuneration System. The highest category is in the N1 salary structure of which the Registrar is the only one appointed against this salary structure. This study shall not include the Registrar as he is the one and only person in this category. The second category is in the N2 salary structure and they are the Principal Assistant Registrars. The rest of the administrators, the normal grade Assistant Registrars, belong to the N3 salary structure.

Only the post of the "Registrar" is mentioned in the Constitution of the University of Malaya (Section 10). Phase 1 of Statute XVI defines the duties of the Registrar as the custodian of the records, and documents, the secretary to all University Authorities, arranging for the examinations, and performing such other functions as may be necessary.

Phase 2 and 3 of Statute XVII provide for the appointment of the Assistant Registrars whose duties are to assist the Registrar in the performance of his duties and the distribution of work shall be arranged by the Registrar in consultation with the Vice-Chancellor. Therefore the role of the Registrar reflects the roles of the Principal Assistant Registrars and the Assistant Registrars as they are to assist him.

Nicoll (1991) has considered the Registrar to be responsible to the Vice-Chancellor for the day-to-day management of the University. According to Nicoll, Registrars see themselves as more of a

clearing house and not part of the policy making process. To Moodie and Eustace (Nicoll, 1991), the Registrar is often, and normally a close confidant of the Vice-Chancellor, kept well informed, and provides great support to the Vice-Chancellor, such as in assisting him to form his own opinion as well as to act for him in dealing with others.

1.3 Statement of The Problem

According to Burns (1981), "Stress is universal. It is far more common than the common cold and can be far more dangerous" (p. 95). Yet it can be claimed that this universal stress is not consciously given its importance in the occupational area of our local administrators in the universities.

Each organization has its own set of stressors and the University of Malaya is no exception. The peculiar set up of the University of Malaya, with its very own administrative structure, style and policies has in its own way been a stressor to some administrators or a satisfier to others.

Role ambiguity is one of the common stressors found in complex organizations and it is not surprising that it is present among the administrators of University of Malaya. Assistant Registrars often appear to have little information, feedback or evaluation on their role behavior. Thus it is not uncommon to find some administrators experiencing ambiguity on the extent they assist academic staff in the translation of languages, provision of typing and other clerical facilities. Role ambiguity is

associated to job dissatisfaction, anxiety, and boredom, (Latack, 1981); and anxiety, tension, physical stress symptoms and propensity to leave (Ivancevich and Donnelly in Latack, 1981). A study by Margolis and Kroes (Cooper, 1981) found significant relationship between symptoms of physical and mental ill health with role ambiguity.

Assistant Registrars are often placed in situations of role conflict, torn by conflicting demands or forced to do things that they do not want to do or do not think of such demands as part of their job.

Intrasender conflict, intersender conflict, interrole conflict and person-role conflict continue to play a part in causing occupational stress among the administrators. Most Assistant Registrars are assigned to one or more officials of the university such as the Dean of the Faculty, and yet the final assessment of the performance is determined by the Registrar who may not have daily contact with the work of these administrators. Thus these administrators are often in a bind as to who is the real "boss" as both have legitimate control over them.

There is a great deal of interdependency in the administration. Administrators can experience stress when delayed work is due to the action or inaction of others of whom they depend on. It becomes extremely stressful when the administrators are made responsible for the delay, even when the delay is not due to them. Moreover the causes of such delays are usually not supposed to be revealed; thereby putting the brunt on the administrators. Thus the nature of the job of the administration can itself be stressful as administrators are merely implementing decisions made by others, whether they themselves agree to the decisions or not.

Administrators are often put in very responsible positions and any responsibility can lead to stress (Vecchio, 1991). Almost all administrators are responsible for people, specially their own staff. Responsibility for people leads to greater stress than responsibility for things (Yates, 1979). Various studies have found that responsibility for people is related to coronary heart disease (Cooper, 1981).

Workload and time pressure are found to be common stressors in some departments than in others. Administrators who have to rush papers for meetings, process urgent and massive amount of applications, perform task with deadline and time pressure face more stress than their counterparts who are allowed to pace their work accordingly.

Administrators whose career developments are thwarted or who feel they are underpromoted may experience occupational stress. As the administrators of the University of Malaya stays in a close service, and promotion to higher positions is dependent on vacant posts due to resignation or retirement, the upward movement for most administrators can be frustrating. Those administrators who are still at the bottom of the service, similar to where they started more than ten years ago may experience a feeling of lack of control on his own career development and this can be a stressor.

Baharudin Ishak (1991) expressed that there was dissatisfaction with the overall performance of administrators in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. A symposium in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Baharudin, 1991) has commented that the administration appeared to have failed to adjust to

a changing external environment and was following outmoded procedures and practices. This dissatisfaction has made it even more desirable to look at this group of administrators. Only by understanding the reasons that prompted such undesirable actions and behavior can remedial action be taken. Suitable training programs to equip them to handle their jobs so as not to experience distress, counseling in the form of employee assistance program, job redesign and many more can be taken by the management to assist, develop, and upgrade this human resource group.

Events such as the pending desire to corporatise University of Malaya has brought on a new dimension of work style and pace among University administrators. As noted by Ogle (1991), the university has historically been an institution but has now become a mixture of institution, enterprise and agency. The change from the traditional to the corporate image of the university has threatened the position of the administration (Puniamurthy, 1966). Dua (1994) in his study has found that university reorganization is a major stressor.

The sudden expectation to live up to the image of the corporate world has not been a smooth change as the work habits and style of administration have already been entrenched after over thirty years of existence of the university. Work culture cannot be discarded overnight. Added to this, the new experience of the university having a corporate man as the Vice-Chancellor to head the university, and a senior Government official as the Registrar to head the administration have brought about new challenges to these administrators. The advent of new technology has made its negative impact on

staff who are not ready to face the new changes. Research by Adams (1981) has proved that changes cause stress.

1.4 Purpose of The Study

Studies on university administrators have been very scanty and are all on foreign cases. As far as is known, no research has been done on the occupational stress of administrators of Malaysian universities.

The main purpose of the study is to look at the stress level and identify the occupational stressors of Assistant Registrars of the University of Malaya. Clearly, the attainment of a healthy work environment in the university requires, at the start, an assessment of the stress level as well as an understanding of the stressors that are associated with the occupational stress of Assistant Registrars. Only then can action and strategies be planned to remove or reduce the effects of job stressors. High stress level among Assistant Registrars is certainly unhealthy for the proper functioning and development of the university.

This study also attempts to look at the cognitive, physical and behavioural responses of these administrators towards stress (herewith called stress responses). The purpose of looking at the stress responses is to see how far occupational stress has affected these administrators.

Lastly, the study attempts to make comparisons in terms of the level of stress, the occupational stressors, and stress responses of the following groups of administrators:

- (1) Principal Assistant Registrars and the Assistant Registrars;
- (2) Administrators in central and non central administration;
- (3) Administrators with less than ten; ten to nineteen; and above nineteen years of service; and,
- (4) Administrators with less than six staff, six to fifteen staff and more than fifteen staff to control.

More specifically, this study aims at answering the following questions:-

1. What is the level of occupational stress experienced by the Principal Assistant Registrars and the Assistant Registrars of the University of Malaya?
2. What are the occupational stressors affecting these administrators?
3. How do these administrators think, feel and act in response to occupational stress ?
4. Are there differences in terms of the level of occupational stress, the types of occupational stressors and the occupational stress responses for the following groups:
 - (1) Principal Assistant Registrars and the Assistant Registrars;
 - (2) Administrators in central and non central administration;
 - (3) Administrators with less than ten; ten to nineteen; and above nineteen years of service; and,

- (4) Administrators with less than six staff, six to fifteen staff and more than fifteen staff to control ?

1.5 Significance of The Study

The status of work stress has been summarized by Matteson and Ivancevich (1982) as:

"The scientific study of stress at work is still in its infancy. However, there is now a growing realization of the mind-boggling cost of stress-linked problems. More and more companies and individual researchers are attempting to study stress in the work environment. To study stress, to understand it, and to cope with it all requires a starting point" (p.52).

Therefore it is hoped that this study provides the starting point for similar research in Malaysian institutions of higher education.

In recent years, the problem of occupational stress has received much attention due to its toll on human health, and organizational productivity such as causing mental and physical ill health, diminishing effectiveness of work and life, lowered efficiency, and increased turnover. With the information obtained from the study, the determination of stressors and some of the preventive measures can be taken.

As far as is known, no study of this kind has been conducted in the University of Malaya. This study is significant particularly to the management of University of Malaya. Information on the stress level can serve as an indicator on how well the management as well as the organization is performing.

Administrators of the university experiencing unspecified symptoms such as diffuse aches and pains, disturbed sleep, apprehension, anxiety, and mild forms of depression can take hints that though these symptoms may be of diverse etiology, they are often indicators of chronic work-related stress. These dysfunctions, if neglected can lead to health impairment, resulting in clinically definable diseases. This study is therefore useful to the university administrative staff themselves. Staff who find themselves struggling with intolerable levels of stress may then know they are paying too much in terms of their own health and well-being. They are not able to function in their jobs as effectively as they should be. As these staff lose, the university also loses. Therefore identifying the stress level and knowing the stressors that affect them are important.

Other than knowing for themselves, Assistant Registrars will be able to understand the stress faced by the staff working for them. As "managers" in their own respective departments, they have to look beyond themselves and help manage the problems associated with their department or area of work. Subordinate staff may likewise experience some degree of stress caused by the same stressors that affect these administrators in their department. Assistant Registrars can easily understand their subordinate staff and their less effective ways of working as well as take constructive action to reduce and manage stress.

Organizational commitment to stress management of their staff is important in view of the current emphasis of the Government on Vision 2020 and the desire of most public organizations to meet the standard of the ISO 9000. If University of Malaya is to develop together with its staff, stress and its management deserve serious attention. Therefore this study is of significance also to other universities and educational organizations in Malaysia as well as the Ministry of Education as it aims to provide some insights into the occupational stress faced by educational administrators that if not corrected or halted, can bring about many undesirable results.

Most literature on stress and stress management are merely based on the Western experience and therefore may not be applicable in the local university context. Any efforts to study stress must be done in the home ground. The cultural aspects of a study on stress in University of Malaya may be quite different from that of the Western nations. It is thus pertinent that the research findings reflect the university's particular situation.

Stress is also a topic of interest to the Government because of its social and economic implications. Professor Dr. M.P. Deva, head of the Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Malaya (The Star, 22 October 1996) is of the opinion that mental illness is on the rise and is expected to be the second largest factor of the world's economic decline by the year 2020. According to him, ten per cent of the population is mentally ill, though not mad yet. Studies that were done by the

World Bank recently (The Star, 22 October 1996) reported that due to mental illness, fifty billion working days a year are lost and is the fourth contributing cause to economic decline.

El-Batawi (1987) has summed it up well by stressing on the urgent need to initiate systematic studies of occupational stress in the developing countries. According to El-Batawi, it is important that factors leading to excessive stress be recognized and controlled at an early stage of development, drawing on the experience of developed countries; and that cross-sectional studies and surveys, utilizing simple practical means of investigation be encouraged.

1.6 Operational Definitions

The same word may have different meaning to different people as there is sometimes a lack of common understanding as to what the term means. The following terms are defined to provide consistency in their meaning.

1.6.1 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is the physiological or psychological response of a person to stressors related to the work environment of that person's occupation.

1.6.2 Stressor

A stressor is any element, factor or variable, either tangible or intangible that leads a person to experience stress. Stressor is in the environment while stress is in the person. Thus a physical stressor may be in the form of heat or noise; a social stressor may be in the form of relationship with own boss or colleagues or customers; while an emotional stressor may be the form of deadlines, perceived risk of threat, sole accountability for a high-risk project. Each of these stressors is capable of generating the physiological stress reaction within the body.

1.6.3 Assistant Registrar

For the purpose of this study, the Assistant Registrars include the following groups:

1. Principal Assistant Registrars

This is the job title given to an administrative staff who is holding a full time position drawing a salary from the N2 salary structure of the New Remuneration System.

2. Assistant Registrar

This is the job title given to an administrative staff who is holding a full time position drawing a salary from the N3 salary structure of the New Remuneration System.