



Critical Review of Literature on Effect of Occupational Stress Interventions on Performance of Academic Staff in Kenyan Universities: A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critical review of both theoretical and empirical literature on the concept of the effect of occupational stress interventions (OSI) and academic staff performance in Kenyan universities. The review was informed by the fact that there exists limited research on this topic in the Kenyan context hence this relationship is not adequately understood. In the theoretical review section, the paper reviews four theories in relationship to the proposed study variables i.e., person-environment fit theory, job-demand-control-support theory, broaden and build theory, and cognitive dissonance theory. From the empirical literature review, the paper proposes the studying of the mediating and moderating effect of psychological capital and social support respectively on the relationship between the independent and the dependent variable. A conceptualization that hypothesizes that OSI directly affected academic staff performance and is mediated by psychological capital, while social support moderates the relationship is proposed. The proposed study assumes that the performance of academic staff depends on the practical implementation of OSI, social support, and the psychological capital of the academic staff.

Keywords: *Occupational stress interventions (OSI), academic staff performance, psychological capital, social support, person-environment fit theory, job-demand-control-support theory, broaden and build theory, cognitive dissonance theory*

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities can promote the economic, social, and political growth of a nation. They have the mandate of creating a workforce with the skills needed to drive an economy. Consequently, university education is pivotal in any society worldwide, and its success is a significant indicator of an education system's health. Since the teaching staff carries out the universities' core mandate, lecturers' performance is critical to a university's performance (Dandona, 2014; Suryaman, 2018). The key performance indicators for academic staff include research and innovation, teaching and supervision, consultancy, and services (Suryaman, 2018).

Although the lecturing professional has traditionally been attractive due to tenure, minimal workload, and status, studies reveal that lecturers at the university level experience a lot of occupational-related stress. The high-stress level is a result of the high number of untenured lecturers, the pressure to publish to get a promotion, and an ever-increasing workload due to the high lecturer-to-student ratio (Suryaman, 2018). Empirical studies carried out in Europe findings reveal that insufficient recognition, low salaries, inadequate funding and resources, high workloads, inadequate participation in management, time constraints, and changing job roles cause occupational stress (Dadona, 2014). In Kenya, major revolutions in the universities in the recent past have caused an increase in the job demands from the lecturers causing strain. Previously, the Kenyan lecturer enjoyed a two-semester academic year but today an academic year consisting of three semesters taking away time that lecturers would have utilized to perform other duties such as offering service to the community, publishing, and engaging in further studies. Higher education is also grappling with funding issues due to



policies on higher education made by the government that has reduced universities' income from self-sponsored students (Mwenda, Kiffleman & Kimani, 2018).

Scholars have observed gaps in university lecturer performance regarding teaching, research, innovation, consultancy and community service. According to Gunawan et al. (2018), optimum performance levels in these areas in Maritime universities are far from being realized. Lecturers are reported to lack enthusiasm and show low levels of innovation. They have also recorded a low frequency of submission of syllabuses within the scheduled time and intense research work.

Suryaman (2018) makes similar observations in a study on Indonesian universities. He noted that Indonesian universities had experienced an unprecedented upsurge in the number of university education institutions. However, this increase in the number of universities is not matched by an increase in quality. He observes that since lecturers are in charge of delivering a university's core business, their performance will vastly influence education quality, university carrying capacity, and sustainability.

Occupational stress interventions can be defined as techniques or methods that are implemented by an organization to promote employee's well-being and minimize their stress levels by either removing the root cause of the stress or offering the employee a way of dealing with the stress (Nielson, 2017; Holman, Johnson & O'Connor, 2018). Different typologies have been employed in categorizing occupational stress interventions. According to Holman, Johnson & O'Connor, (2018) the interventions can be classified into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention. Primary interventions are aimed at preventing stress from occurring in the first place. These interventions can be employed at both individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, they include selection and assessment and pre-employment medical exams. At the organizational level, they include mentoring, job redesign, working schedules, and management training. Interventions at the secondary level aim at mitigating the severity of the stress. At the individual level, they include interpersonal skills training, relaxation techniques, mindfulness training, health promotion, and psychosocial interventions. At the organizational level they include conflict management, career planning, improving communication, coaching, and inclusion in decision-making. Tertiary occupational interventions are rehabilitative and include employee assistance programs such as financial assistance, daycare services and counseling, disability management, and post-traumatic stress assistance at the individual level. Tertiary interventions at the organizational level include vocational rehabilitation and outplacement (Pignata *et al.*, 2017).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

Four theories can be used to explain the relationship between occupational stress intervention and the performance of academic staff, the mediating effect of psychological capital, and the moderating effect of social support on the relationship. The theories critically analyzed in this section include person-environment fit theory, job-demand-control-support theory, broaden and build theory, and cognitive dissonance theory.

The person-environment fit theory was developed by a group of social scientists, Kahn, French, Caplan, and van Harrison in 1987 but has been developed by other scholars over the years. This theory states that work stress arises from a lack of harmony between a person's ability, skills, resources, and the work environment's demands. People have the innate need to fit in their environment as they prefer consistency and having control of their environment. People seek certainty and predictability and want to be in a place where they feel they belong (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013; Wilkinson, Johnstone & Edward, 2017). Moreover, the environment in which a person works will shape their response. The theory postulates that the lack of fit can take three forms. One form is where environmental demands supersede the abilities of the employee. The second form is where the environment consistently fails to satisfy workers' needs and the third is a combination of the two (Wilkinson, Johnstone & Edward, 2017).

The person-environment theory is suited for studying academic staff performance. This theory proposed that task execution is impacted by the means, skills, and abilities at hand to the employee. Besides, the theory proposed that the existence of fit ensures optimal performance regardless of the direction. This proposition offers a firm foundation for studying the association between occupational stress intervention and academic staff's ability to work. Suppose the performance of the lecturer is affected the environmental factors, then public universities can consider offering a



conducive work environment such as by implementing more occupational stress interventions to improve the lecturer's performance.

The job–demand–control–support (JDCS) theory was an improvement of the job-demand-control (JDC) model by Karasek (1979) and was developed by Johnson and Hall (1988). This theory is centered on the equilibrium between the needs of an employee and their autonomy. It postulates that individuals with high levels of work pressure but a reduced level of control have an increased risk of suffering from work-related stress. It states that job strain will arise from job control and psychological job demand. Psychological job demand is also known as the workload and is a function of role conflict and time pressure (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel & Schulz-Hardt, 2010; Mulder, 2017).

Johnson and Hall (1988) further developed the theory by including a third variable, workplace social support, which buffers the relationship between job demand and strain. In this case, the concept of social support is used to refer to supportive social interactions accessible on the job from both supervisors and co-workers. The interaction between psychological decision latitude, job demands, and social support is critical in the extended model. The most undesirable individual performance outcomes are expected in cases of a combination of high job demand, reduced decision latitude, and reduced support (Mulder, 2017). The JDCS model is appropriate for studying academic staff performance as it highlights the conditions for superior performance. Further, the JDCS model was appropriate for studying the controlling effect of social support on the association between occupational stress interventions and the lecturer's performance. The theory proposes that social support acts as a cushion on the association between stress and job demand. It also suggests that better individual performance outcomes are achieved when the psychological needs and social support are high, promoting learning and development opportunities. This theory thus created a conceptual basis for studying the moderation effect of social support on the association between OSI and lecturer's performance.

Broaden and build theory developed by Barbara Fredrickson in 1998 stated that positive emotions start a cycle of more positive emotions. Fredrickson (2001) asserts that positive emotions are a vital component of subjective well-being and happiness. Fredrickson describes ten positive emotions of serenity, joy, amusement, gratitude, pride, awe, interest, aspiration, love, and hope, which are personal growth and advancement drivers. Research shows that individuals who experience these emotions with adequate frequency and authenticity expand the scope of individual attention, allowing them to become more flexible, open, and accepting (Tlarico, Berntsen, & Rubin 2009). Broaden and build theory is important in studying academic performance as it explains the source of exceptional employee performance. This theory was also applicable in studying the mediation function of psychological capital in the relationship between OSI and academic staff performance. The current research proposes that employees' positive emotions improve their performance since they become more open, flexible, and accepting. These positive emotions comprise optimism, resiliency, hope, and efficacy, which are used as psychological capital indicators. These positive emotions, in turn, build both physical and mental resources (Fredrickson, 2001). This theoretical proposition anchored the current study objective of determining how psychological capital interposes between academic staff performance and OSI.

Cognitive dissonance theory was developed by Leon Festinger in 1957. Cognitive dissonance is the mental stress or discomfort that people experience when acting contrary to their belief system. Festinger postulates that individuals are always motivated to ensure that their actions are aligned with their beliefs. When there is an inconsistency of action and belief, they experience stress and develop ways of regaining harmony, achieved in several ways. One way is through the justification of the move based on the outcome. For example, a person can justify their engagement in an uncomfortable activity by exaggerating the outcome's desirability. Another way is through effort (Festinger, 1957). Suppose a person has invested a lot in action in a particular venture. In that case, they can justify that venture even though they eventually discover that it is contrary to their shared beliefs.

Cognitive dissonance theory provided a theoretical underpinning for the study of academic staff performance as it explains sources of poor performance. This theory proposes that inconsistencies of action and belief (cognitive dissonance) cause stress, and employees develop ways of regaining harmony. The theory further suggests that if cognitive dissonance is left unaddressed, it harms employee performance exhibited by increased absenteeism and high employee turnover coupled with inappropriate employee behavior such as sabotage and aggression. This theory considers that occupational stress interventions such as work-life balance, pre-employment medical exams, job redesign, and leadership development can reduce lecturers' cognitive dissonance, hence promoting their performance. Thus, the theory provided a theoretical background for the conceptualization of the relationship between OSI and the way lecturers execute their duties.



2.2. Empirical Review

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Include	Exclude
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Studies done between 2014 to 2020 ✓ Abstract with one or more of the key search terms highlighted ✓ Studies related to OSI and performance ✓ Studies in the service industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies in the non-service industry • Articles unavailable in English • Content not related to human resource management • Non-scientific studies

Pignata, Boyd, Winefield, and Provis (2017) conducted a study to understand employee perception of stress reduction interventions employed in three Australian universities. They used a cross-sectional method and targeted both academic and non-academic staff. The study concluded that some of the interventions to reduce occupational stress include changing work and job-related roles (job redesign), new departmental heads or supervisors, organizational-level interventions that include leadership development, counseling services, family-friendly policies, personal resources and policies, and increased staffing systems (Pignata, Boyd, Winefield & Provis, 2017). The current study adopted some of the interventions used in this research, such as job redesign, EAPs, and leadership development. It also included other interventions not applied in this study, such as health promotion exercises, career planning, disability management, vocational rehabilitation, and pre-employment medical exam. The study recommended that universities implement multistage interventions to improve employees' well-being, hence their performance. This research was done in Australian universities, and the current research proposes a similar study in Kenyan public universities. However, the present study proposes a different conceptualization where the performance of academic staff is treated as the dependent variable and not a reduction of stress. The study also focused on non-teaching and teaching staff, while the current study proposes only focusing on the teaching staff. The findings in this study can be criticized because the data collected was based on the respondent's perceptions making the study highly subjective.

Job redesign is one of the primary OSIs. A study by Siengthai and Pila-Ngarm (2016) examined job redesign's impact on employee satisfaction and productivity in two industries in Thailand: The banking industry and the hotel resort industry. The research study assumed a qualitative research method that applied a cross-sectional design. The findings were that redesigning the job is meaningfully and inversely correlated to task execution at the initial implementation stage. The study also concluded that work satisfaction is notably related to job performance. They resolved that the organization should promote employee satisfaction during job redesign to improve performance. As such, job redesign should only be conducted if it improves employee satisfaction. This study only focused on one OSI, i.e., job redesign. The current research proposes the adoption of more OSI such as work-life balance, EAPs, peer support, leadership development, health promotion exercise, career planning, disability management, vocational rehabilitation, and pre-employment medical exam.

Hua and Dai (2015) carried out a systematic review of OSI's effects in the workplace abroad. The study was not restricted to any industry. The interventions included cognitive-behavior therapy, relaxation techniques, exercise, interventions aimed at the organization (job redesign, leadership development), combined interventions, and multi-level interventions. The study was based on randomized trials, self-controlled studies, and non-randomized trials from 12 countries, including Britain, Japan, and Germany. The study applied an explorative study design that was longitudinal applying secondary data from studies between 2000 and 2014. They concluded that OSI could significantly improve occupational stress and desirable work outcomes. However, the interventions' effectiveness depended on the subject's level of stress before the intervention. The effectiveness of the interventions was also higher at the individual level rather than at the organizational level. The study recommended that future studies focus on cost-benefit analysis of the interventions and used a broad-based methodology. The current study proposes an expansion of the independent variable to include more interventions such as a pre-employment medical exam, work-life balance conflict management, career planning, disability management, and vocational rehabilitation. The current study also proposes narrowing the scope to



academic staff only, allowing for collecting in-depth details on the concept, and filling the knowledge gap of the Hua and Dai (2015) study.

Kihara and Mugambi (2018) researched the impact of the strategies used to manage stress on the task execution of Kenyan public servants. They targeted 700,000 employees in 21 ministries and applied a descriptive research design. Stress management strategies included relaxation techniques, flexi-time, meditation, and counseling. The study concluded that all these variables are significantly positively correlated to employee performance. However, organizations should increase the awareness of occupational stress interventions among employees. This study was limited because it only explored the effect of a limited number of occupational stress interventions. The current study proposes focusing on several OSI at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Mousa, Riahi, and Malekitabar (2016) conducted a study on psychological capital on psychological well-being and job-burn out. According to Guan, Li & Ma, (2017), Psychological capital is a person's mental state and includes optimism, resilience, self-efficacy, and hope. It implies that people who score high on the psychological capital index have a positive outlook on life, effectively deal with hard times with a positive attitude, and recover quickly from such situations. A descriptive correlative study design was adopted in this study, which targeted high school managers and their assistants in 116 schools. The result showed that psychological capital and psychological well-being were significantly and positively linked. Moreover, psychological capital was negatively correlated with job burnout. In this study, psychological capital affected job burnout, which affects employee performance. Psychological capital was treated as an independent variable, while this research study proposes studying the moderation effect of psychological capital on the relationship between OSI and the performance of lecturers.

Several studies have studied the moderation effect of social support. One such study by Xu and Wei (2013) measured social support's moderation effect on the association between depression and anxiety. This study was conducted by interviewing survivors of the Wenchuan earthquake and focused on different social support types. Two thousand eighty adult survivors participated in the cross-sectional survey. Social support was seen to moderate the relationship between depression and anxiety, especially in dealing with female victims of depression. It was reported to reduce stress and depression significantly, especially in female survivors. Employee performance is quantified in terms of anxiety in the study. The current study proposes the adoption of consultancy, innovativeness, publications, and teaching as key performance indicators of academic staff performance.

Conversely, a study by Hua and Dai (2015) showed that co-worker support directly affects work-related stress and presenteeism. This study was carried out on the United States (US) aging workforce. The study utilized secondary data from the 2010 Health and Retirement Survey in the US. Work-related outcomes are enhanced by comfortable relationships among employees, support from employers and colleagues, and increased concern and respect for employee stress in the workplace. Job stress was observed in a direct connection with presenteeism. Coworker support was found to have an inverse relationship with job stress and presenteeism. This study utilized primary data in place of secondary data. Whereas this study gauged employee performance in presenteeism, the current study proposes the measurement of the lecturer's performance in innovativeness, teaching, publications, and service to the university.

Muindi, Obonyo, and Pokhariyal (2018) researched supervisor support as a moderator of the link between compensation and the performance of lecturers in Kenyan public universities. The design applied for this study was descriptive cross-sectional research. Questionnaires were used as the tool for collecting data. Supervisor support and compensation were positively and significantly linked to academic staff's performance. However, the interactive term between supervisor support and payment was not significant; supervisor support does not moderate the relationship. The study conceptualized supervisor support as both emotional and instrumental support. In the proposed study, social support is conceptualized as perceived peer social support, supervisor social support and organizational social support. The performance of academic staff in this study was task performance and contextual performance. Still, the current study proposes a different conceptualization with lecturer performance measured in teaching and supervision, innovation and research, consultancy, and service to the community.



III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the theoretical and empirical review above, it can be noted that the association between OSI and academic staff performance is quite intricate and is influenced by several factors. It can thus be concluded that there are several different intervening factors that could influence this relationship.

Conversely, this paper proposed the study of psychological capital as a mediator of the relationship between OSI and academic staff performance. Broaden and build theory justifies the studying of psychological capital as a moderator of this relationship since positive emotions have been linked to good performance. The paper also proposes the inclusion of social support as a moderator of the relationship between OSI and academic staff performance. The study of social support as a moderator is anchored by JDCA theory since social support buffers the relationship between job demand and stress.

The discussion above unearths several theoretical and empirical gaps which the proposed study will seek to fill. For instance, JDCA theory has been criticized because of being ambiguous and hence hard to test in empirical studies. The results from this study could be used to clear this confusion. Moreover, the extant empirical literature has a limited focus on the impact of occupational stress interventions on the ability of academic staff to execute their tasks in Kenyan universities. Moreover, it has been noted that limited empirical data exist on the mediation impact of psychological capital and the moderation of social support on the association between OSI and academic staff performance.

From the literature review, a conceptual framework that hypothesizes that OSI directly affected academic staff performance and is mediated by psychological capital, while social support moderated the relationship is proposed. The study assumes that the performance of academic staff depends on the practical implementation of OSI, social support, and the psychological capital of the academic staff.

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