Lay theory explanations of occupational stress: the Malaysian context

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the causes and consequences of job stress in Malaysia and make a comparison between Western and Eastern perspectives.
Design/methodology/approach – A grounded theory approach was used to develop a lay representation of Malay people's descriptions of their experiences at work, including job stress. Interviews were conducted with 48 employees in Malaysia, using six semi-structured interview questions adopted from Kinman and Jones and translated into the Malay language, as a guide.
Findings – Although most respondents perceived that individual factors play an important role in work stress, organizational factors seemed to be the dominant factor identified that contributes to work stress. Respondents also perceived the individual as key to stress reduction rather than management interventions. A new concept emerged in this study that was related to external factors impinging on work (such as globalization).
Practical implications – Organizations should formulate strategies to prevent job stress among employees. They must also be alert to the impact of external factors that are now common in the Malay workplace.
Originality/value – Research of job stress in employees in Eastern cultures is rare. The paper provides in-depth preliminary research which will lead to further investigations of job stress in Eastern workplace settings.

Keywords Qualitative research, Cross-cultural studies, Malaysia, Employee behaviour, Stress

Introduction
Employees around the world have reported that they feel increasingly stressed at work (Murphy and Sauter, 2003). However, the majority of studies on job stress have been undertaken in Western countries, especially in the UK and the USA, and also in Canada and Australia (Spector et al., 2002a). In contrast, such studies are lacking in developing countries (Chopra, 2009; Kortum et al., 2008). Additionally, most job stress theories have originated in Western economies.

There are comparatively few cross-cultural studies of job stress and most of these have adopted a Western approach. This problem has been accentuated by scholars assuming that the concepts of job stress are transferable from country to country or culture to culture (Sanchez et al., 2006). In general, most cross-cultural studies have used Western-based questionnaires (Liu et al., 2007), but on occasions these have proved to be unconvincing in regard to documenting 'subjective' phenomena accurately (Frese and Zapf, 1995). The tools fail to explain satisfactorily the concrete features of job stress (Liu et al., 2007). To overcome this problem, scholars have argued that using qualitative methods can lead to a better, more in-depth understanding of job stress (Liu et al., 2007; Narayanan et al., 1999).

Therefore this study emphasizes the use of qualitative methodologies to develop a more detailed understanding of work stress from a Malaysian perspective (Furnham, 1997; Kinman and Jones, 2005). Specifically, it will examine the meaning, causes and
consequences of job stress and how people in Malaysia deal with stress. We will compare the results obtained with those from a similar study in the UK (Kinman and Jones, 2005). We believe that by using this method, we can provide new insights about how job stress is understood in an Eastern developing country. Finally, we consider these in the light of Western concepts of job stress.

The significance of research in Malaysia
Malaysia is a fast emerging economy in South-East Asia (World Competitiveness Yearbook, 2007). The country practices a moderate form of Islam (Tong and Turner, 2008) and the population consists of three major ethnic groups, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians. Almost all Malays are Muslim, the Chinese are either Buddhist or Christian and the Indians are either Hindu or Christian. Although Malay culture and the Islamic tradition have been accepted as the country’s mainstream ‘culture’ (Neo, 2006), other religions are tolerated [1].

Although there have been few studies on job stress in Malaysia (Sadhra et al., 2001), they have focused on similar stressful workplace experiences reported in developed countries. In Malaysia, for example, employees reported that they experienced stress that is provoked by several factors such as workloads, organizational politics and a lack of autonomy in the workplace (Aziah et al., 2004; Edimansyah et al., 2008; Huda et al., 2004; Manshor et al., 2003; Poon, 2003). Recent data reported that disputes between employees and employers have led to a rising number of cases being referred to the Industrial Court, from 3,100 cases in 2001 to 6,979 in 2007 (Labour Bulletin, 2008).

Our study contributes to the cross-cultural literature in two ways. First, it compares Eastern and Western explanations of job stress. Our study adds an interesting dimension, since Malaysia is mainly Islamic (Hassan and Dollard, 2007). Previous cross-cultural studies on job stress in Asia have focused on China or Taiwan (Chang and Lu, 2007; Liu et al., 2007, 2008; Lu et al., 2003, 2008), countries that are ethnically homogeneous and where most people follow either a Buddhist or Confucian philosophy. A well-known international comprehensive study about job stress and well-being at work in cultures in Asia, East Europe and Latin America (Spector et al., 2002b, 2004, 2007) did not include Malaysia. The studies mentioned above discovered similarities and differences between Eastern and Western culture in regard to the nature of job stress, yet were silent in regard to Muslim countries.

One previous study compared Iranian and American managers (Spector et al., 2002a). Iran and Malaysia share similarities such as Islam being the official religion. They are also characterized as collective societies and have a high power distance between rulers and the ruled (Spector et al., 2002a). However, unlike Iran, Malaysia is a pluralistic and hybrid culture that embraces various ethnic groups and religions, and this makes it almost unique (Hassan et al., 2007). Indeed, Malaysia is not an absolutely theocratic state such as Iran (Thio and Neo, 2006) because the government in Malaysia has incorporated British common law as part of the Constitution.

Second, while some studies on job stress have been conducted in Malaysia (Aziah et al., 2004; Edimansyah et al., 2008; Manshor et al., 2003; Poon, 2003) and used Western questionnaires as their research tools, no study has used lay theories (derived from the ordinary person) in the Malaysian context. This study includes a preliminary investigation using qualitative methods to evaluate job stress in Selangor, a state of Malaysia, prior to our more general population study.
Job stress from a cultural perspective
Culture plays a pivotal role in the manifestation of human feelings and behaviours (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2004). While individualism emphasizes personal achievement (Triandis, 2006), collectivism places a priority on group or communal goals over the needs and ambitions of the individual. For example, in one cross-national job stress study that used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a study of Chinese and American employees (Liu et al., 2007), the authors discovered important differences. In the qualitative study, Americans who had been brought up to believe in the ‘cult’ of individualism complained about lack of job control as their major source of job stress. In contrast the Chinese in their collectivist system reported that they experienced stress due to firstly, mistakes at work and secondly, job evaluation. This study also discovered that American employees experienced significantly more anger, frustration and feeling overwhelmed, while Chinese employees indicated that they felt more anxiety and helplessness.

One study that compared Muslim employees was conducted among Iranian and US managers (Spector et al., 2002a). At one level, this study found that Western findings could be generalized to the Middle East. However, using a more detailed analysis, the study also found that Americans reported having a higher sense of well-being and fewer sources of pressure (e.g. roles, home/work balance and support) than Iranian managers. Although both samples experienced similar stressors that led to reported strain, the results were to some extent culture-specific.

Another remarkable study that involved 24 countries (Spector et al., 2002b) set out to find whether Western findings were applicable to other cultures. Although the study did not specifically examine job stress, the investigation on how collective and individualistic cultures have influenced well-being in the workplace proved useful. Unexpected results were found in that the study failed to show conclusively that individualism/collectivism moderated the relationship between locus of control in the workplace and well-being. Spector et al. (2004) selected three culturally distinct regions involving a total of 15 countries – the USA and Canada, China (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan) and Latin America (i.e. Argentina, Brazil). A stronger relationship was found between work stressors (e.g. work hours) and work-family stressors in white Anglo samples than in Chinese and Latin American samples. Their study also showed that culture does wield an influence on the ways in which people perceive their longer working hours and how these affect family matters.

Grounded theory as a methodology to analyse job stress
The grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2002) was employed in our study to enable a more comprehensive examination of the concept of job stress among Malaysian employees. Although quantitative data can also be used in grounded theory (Glaser, 1999), in practice, qualitative data are more useful as it offers enriching descriptions of people's lives (Glaser, 2002). Using this strategy is considered crucial (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), particularly for preliminary work (Hallberg, 2006) because it enables the discovery of new phenomena as they emerge in the data (Glaser, 2002; Hallberg, 2006).

One of the explanatory devices that fits the grounded theory criteria is lay theory (Dewe and Trenberth, 2004; Furnham, 1997; Kinman and Jones, 2005; Lewig and Dollard, 2001). Lay theory can be defined as the public explanation of a social behaviour (Kinman and Jones, 2005). Lay theory reflects people's beliefs (Furnham, 1997; Pollock, 1988). Therefore a combination of grounded theory as a basis for
conceptualizing data (Glaser, 1999) and lay theory as a tool for obtaining opinions about job stress is considered useful. Lay theory also enables the utilization of ‘cause-and-effect relationships’ (Kinman and Jones, 2005), and sometimes functions to explain complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Furnham, 1997). Consequently, a combination of both approaches is very relevant.

Although both lay and scientific theories have their conceptual differences, there are obviously many similarities between them (Rydstedt et al., 2004). Parker et al. (1993) found that lay persons and health workers held similar conceptions about the relationship between stress and particular health consequences. In a similar vein, Clark (2003) found that the lay perspective sometimes underlines concepts that have similarly been described by professional discourse.

The importance of lay theories in understanding job stress
To date, only a few studies have examined lay representations of job stress (Dewe and O’Driscoll, 2002; Furnham, 1997; Sharpley and Gardner, 2001). The studies have generally concluded that employees believe that occupational stress refers more to under-performance and low productivity rather than psychological strain (Furnham, 1997). Employees believed that they were unable to control the stressors (Dewe and O’Driscoll, 2002) and that most perceived stress was a response to workplace events (Sharpley and Gardner, 2001). Kinman and Jones (2005) in their qualitative research on 45 individuals in the UK found that although participants agreed that organizational factors contributed to work stress, employees perceived the impact of stress as affecting them more than the organization. The majority of respondents in Kinman and Jones’ study (2005) categorized occupational stress as a stimulus-response (47 per cent), and most of them perceived occupational stress as a stimulus (33 per cent). Only nine respondents perceived job stress as a response.

Sharpley and Gardner (2001) interviewed 36 managers of successful companies in Australia. The researchers concluded that most managers indicated that occupational stress emerged as a response to the work environment, while the others emphasized work stress as a stimulus. Only one respondent categorized job stress as a relationship between stimulus and response. Although managers have different views on employees who were involved in a job stress intervention program, they labelled the workers who attended such programs as “weak” and failing to adapt to job demands.

In a similar way to the lay theorists, Harkness et al. (2005) used discourse analysis to measure the meaning of occupational stress among 22 female clerks in Canada. Although using solely female participants may constitute a gender bias the researchers’ conclusions were interesting. Work stress is one way of workers expressing their discomfort when they were not treated well, such as being under-valued or under-appreciated. Furthermore, an employee who fails to cope with stress was regarded as “abnormal”, in line with what was found in Sharples and Gardner’s (2001) study.

Lay beliefs about work stress have also been collected using a different strategy. Lewig and Dollard (2001) analysed 51 articles which were published in major newspapers in Australia in 1997. The results showed that work stress is represented in the media as an “economically costly epidemic” (p. 179), and as a response to poor working conditions. Despite the newspaper reports that sub-standard working conditions led to some health problems, this phenomenon was represented as a public sector crisis and not applicable to privately owned and operated industries or businesses.

Previous studies as stated above may have discovered a plethora of lay beliefs on work stress (Harkness et al., 2005), but do not explain job stress among employees in
developing countries. Are there any similarities or differences in lay discourse between workers in Western and Eastern countries? Most researchers (Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2002; Furnham, 1997; Kinman and Jones, 2005; Lewig and Dollard, 2001; Sharpley and Gardner, 2001), using lay examinations, have discovered that occupational stress is viewed as a consequence of workplace experiences or as an interaction between stimulus-response. However, none of these specific studies was conducted in Eastern or developing countries. For these reasons, we explored lay theories to enhance our understanding of job stress in Malaysia, the first study of this kind from an Eastern perspective.

Method

Participants
A total of 48 employees (31 male and 17 female) participated in the study. Participants were selected from a range of occupations (e.g. manager, lecturer, teacher, newspaper reporter, government employee, production worker, nurse, medical doctor).

Materials
Six questions were used and they derived from the semi-structured interview questionnaires developed by Kinman and Jones (2005). We used their questions to ensure that we had comparative data. The questions were as follows:

(1) What do you think the term “occupational stress” means?
(2) Some people think there is more work stress. To what extent do you agree with this view?
(3) Are there any particular jobs or working conditions that you think are more stressful than others? If so, what are they, and why do you think they are more stressful?
(4) Are there any particular types of people that you think would be more likely to suffer from stress? If so, what types of people are they, and why do you think they are more stressed than others?
(5) If somebody was experiencing stress at work, what would be the signs?
(6) A number of things can be done to help people manage stress at work. If people are stressed at work what do you think can be done about it?

Since our study used the Malay language to communicate with participants, the term “occupational stress” or “work stress” was translated as “tekanan kerja”. Sometimes the word “stres” (Malay spelling for stress) was also used. Both of these terms are acceptable in Malaysia.

Procedure
Following Kinman and Jones (2005), participants were selected using purposive sampling via personal and professional connections. Participants were first approached via phone or e-mail where we invited them to participate in our study. We selected them on the basis that they were currently working, were between 18 and 55 years of age and we tried as much as possible to ensure that each occupation sampled (e.g. manager, lecturer, production worker) involved both genders. We also invited employees from different ethnic groups to participate. Individual interviews which lasted from 5 to 25 min were conducted in the Malay language. All recorded interviews were transcribed manually, and then analysed using NviVo version 8 software (rater 1, AI).
The framework for analysis initially consisted of the themes and sub-themes developed by Kinman and Jones (2005). For themes arising in our analysis that were not identified by Kinman and Jones (2005), new categories were constructed (e.g., religion, anger). To ensure reliability and avoid interpreter bias, a proportion of data was analysed by a second rater with expertise in job stress. A proportion (15 per cent) of the sample was accessed by another researcher as this benchmark has been employed by Kinman and Jones (2005). The inter-rater reliability between the two coders was Kappa = 89.29. This provided evidence of reliable rating, hence rater 1 completed the remaining coding.

**Results and discussions**

In general, the main finding from this study was that, at the first level of analysis, Malaysians do not differ markedly from Westerners in terms of the way they classify job stress (e.g. stimulus, stimulus-response, response). However, as the analysis progressed, we found that Malaysians and Westerners differed in the way they perceived organizational stressors. Our study also revealed that Malaysians use different methods to reduce or manage their job stress. A slight distinction between Malaysians and Westerners can also be described in terms of their perception regarding the consequences of job stress.

**Job stress – a complex phenomenon?**

In general, the main themes arising in the study were consistent with previous Western studies in suggesting that environmental stressors and individual factors are significant sources of job stress (Kinman and Jones, 2005). Respondents emphasized that environmental stressors are more important than individual factors as causes of stress for employees. Interestingly, whereas respondents perceived that mainly organizational factors produced unfavourable emotions among employees, they believed that the individuals themselves were responsible for reducing their occupational stress. This result is similar to those reported in a study of New Zealand managers (Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2002). Furthermore, although job stress is sometimes recognized as either beneficial, harmful or unavoidable (Harkness *et al.*, 2005), our analysis found that respondents only indicate job stress as being detrimental and unavoidable.

In our study, we characterized job stress perceptions in terms of a stimulus belief, a response belief or an interaction between stimulus and response beliefs (Jex *et al.*, 1992). In general, stimulus refers to any aspect of the work environment (e.g. workload, role conflict) that is potentially harmful to employee well-being. These conditions are also known as “stressors” (Jex and Yankelevich, 2008). In contrast, response refers to an individual's reaction to job stressors. Employee reactions to these unfavourable working conditions are also termed “strain” (Jex *et al.*, 1992). Finally, job stress is also categorized as an interaction between both stimulus (job stressors) and responses (individual strain) (Jex *et al.*, 1992; Kinman and Jones, 2005).

Our study found that 39 per cent of respondents (*n* = 19) revealed their understanding of occupational stress as an interaction between stimulus and response, a further 39 per cent of respondents defined occupational stress as a stimulus (*n* = 19) and the remaining 22 per cent viewed job stress as a response (*n* = 10). This pattern is similar to Kinman and Jones (2005) as their respondents also conceptualized job stress as a stimulus and response (47 per cent), a stimulus (33 per cent) or a response (20 per cent). Our respondents’ conceptualization of job stress as an interaction between stimulus-responses can be detected in their statements like: "job stress is when we felt
pressure with our tasks, we are not feeling well and we felt it is better to leave the job”. People also believed that occupational stress is derived from a stimulus (negative conditions at work). For example: “Job stress is work overload experienced by employees. It may be because of management, too many duties, unnecessary tasks, tough to handle or don’t get support from teamwork”. Their classification of job stress as a stimulus also can be found in statements like: “work stress is . . . heavy workload. Everything is fast paced, a condition of the environment which is not comfortable . . . .” An example of job stress classified as a response is: “we always feel pressure, not only at working times, but we still think about the job at off-job time”.

Overall, our results show similarities with the study by Kinman and Jones (2005). One of their respondents described job stress as: “It is a mental thing – something that is in people’s head . . . An emotional thing, not a physical pressure . . . .”. Similarly, our study shows a typical understanding when one respondent indicated: “In general work stress is mental confusion, not a physical pressure. It’s as a consequence of interaction between employees with several factors at work”. This translated statement reveals that at one level, there are similarities between Western and Malaysian lay beliefs regarding job stress.

Job stress – external factors?
The majority of participants (77 per cent) agreed that occupational stress had increased recently. Their view is encapsulated in one statement: “This is an undeniable fact. What we needed in the past was different from what we want now. Everything is moving fast. People need to move fast for them to cope with others. If not, we will be left behind”. When asked whether the working environment in recent years has changed, most respondents (80 per cent) also emphasized that the nature of work has changed dramatically due to changes in how life is lived socially. Some (20 per cent) indicated the impact of social and economic forces in Malaysia has changed the work environment and trapped employees in new career challenges. One respondent described her husband’s work: “When the business becomes bigger, the workload becomes higher. Like my husband’s company . . . right now he comes back very late . . . 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. . . . and Saturday and Sunday has to go to work. Sometime his stress is [transferred] to me, [even though] myself is steady. This is another type of stress”.

Employees also noticed that the impact of globalization creates more competitive working conditions. This finding supported the proposition that an organization’s work model (Murphy, 2002; Sauter and Murphy, 2003) itself not only caused job stress but was also a consequence of external factors. One respondent commented: “We are now living in a competitive world. We must ensure that our organization is able to compete with competitors. That’s why the present job is more stressful. If we fail to deliver, we cannot cope with the other players. In the past we were more relaxed because of a lack of competitors”. Another respondent indicated that: “Maybe the company needs to survive in the current globalization time, the company needs to compete, and should act aggressively. When company activities become more aggressive, it will affect employees. Companies should not survive, if they are not innovative, maybe companies can’t stay longer. So they should find new technologies; they encourage employees to learn new technologies, it produces job stress”.

Social change and advanced technologies have also had an impact on the business organization’s environment. For example: “Advanced technology. It also contributes to job stress. Before this we worked manually but now with technology, using a computer, the organization’s vision and mission is to become faster. They need to make a very
fast profit, because they already have advanced technology; people become robots. For some people technology may help their job, but for some people there are problems, people need to learn”. Employees also identified information technologies as leading to change in job features, for example: “Work instruction becomes faster. They can reach us everywhere, cell phone... e-mail. There are no spaces between human interactions. With the current system, they can reach us even when we are overseas”.

**Stressors: environmental or individual?**

An analysis of recorded statements (Table I) reveals that sources of job stress comprise mainly environmental stressors (or 55 per cent) and the rest comprise individual stressors (43 per cent). This finding is in line with the statements on type of stressors. However, a few statements (2 per cent) emphasized job stress as “a test given by God” – a new facet which was not identified in previous studies on work stress, nor in textbooks. One respondent said, “God will test us with stress... just to know whether we still remember Him”.

In relation to the workplace environment, time pressure or deadlines were described as the most common stressor (10.28 per cent). One respondent said: “In the Malaysian context, whether you are stressed or not, they don’t care. The important thing is you must finish your tasks, and submit your report. They give you only two or three days to complete. Finally, without sufficient time, you just report on surface problems, not on factual issues. In the end, the actual problems arisen [at work] can’t be solved”.

In some cases, deadlines and work overload combined to make work more stressful. One respondent described the situation: “Job stress occurs when we are faced with a lot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of stressors</th>
<th>Number of statements/percentage (current study)</th>
<th>Number of statements/percentage (Kinman and Jones, 2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental stressors</td>
<td>(55% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(78% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job insecurity</td>
<td>3 (2.80)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>20 (7.43)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time pressure/deadline</td>
<td>11 (10.28)</td>
<td>22 (8.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work overload</td>
<td>6 (5.60)</td>
<td>17 (6.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring and repetitive work</td>
<td>3 (2.80)</td>
<td>12 (4.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>1 (0.93)</td>
<td>12 (4.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities for welfare of others</td>
<td>1 (0.93)</td>
<td>11 (4.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of job control</td>
<td>1 (0.93)</td>
<td>11 (4.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>1 (0.93)</td>
<td>11 (4.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with managers/co-workers</td>
<td>ND&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>10 (3.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with stressed people</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>10 (3.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long working hours</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>9 (3.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>32 (29.90)</td>
<td>62 (23.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual stressors</td>
<td>(45% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(22% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>19 (17.75)</td>
<td>25 (9.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of person-environment fit</td>
<td>10 (9.34)</td>
<td>5 (1.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor time management skills</td>
<td>6 (5.60)</td>
<td>2 (0.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God test</td>
<td>2 (1.87)</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11 (10.28)</td>
<td>30 (11.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I.**

Categories of perceived organizational stressors

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>The number in the parentheses denotes percentage of total responses; <sup>b</sup>ND = not detected
of tasks. They set us a very tight deadline and we can’t cope with it. While we are still working on existing jobs, we need to complete the other jobs”. Another respondent expressed feelings about his job: “Sometimes, they gave us a very important job, but we need to fulfil it in a short period of time”. Although employees are expected to meet their deadlines, sometimes they are also provided with only limited knowledge. Work overload as a common work hazard is well documented in Western studies. This experience seems to be similar in Malaysia as well and was reported in two other quantitative studies (Aziah et al., 2004; Huda et al., 2004).

In our study, one customs officer revealed his frustration about his current job: “We worked with multi-tasking jobs. We experienced a lot of cases, everything must be handled, and everything must be investigated, even at midnight. I worked day and night. Sometimes, 2 or 3 days we do not even go to bed, but our salary is still the same (not increased)”. Moreover, respondents also became involved in certain tasks that were not their responsibility. One respondent, working as a secondary school teacher, stated: “Sometime we need to be involved in tasks that not supposed to be for teachers. We need to arrange chairs, tables. This task is supposed to be completed by general workers, but they don’t want to do it. As a teacher, we just follow the headmaster’s instruction”.

Our study also found that Malaysian employees did not mention the importance of job control as a job stressor, although this variable is frequently discussed in the Western literature. However, other studies could explain the fact that Asian employees did not emphasize control at work as much as Western employees. For example, Spector et al. (2004) discovered that Chinese employees generally work as a collective entity and do not put an emphasis on job control, which is a typical trait of American employees. However, Huda et al. (2004) in their study in Malaysia found that job control is considered to be an important source of stress among employees. Their study focused on academics in university settings and therefore their conclusion could be expected as respondents were more educated and typically have more autonomy at work.

While Kinman and Jones (2005) found that UK employees experienced conflict with their co-workers or supervisors, our research did not produce any such statements regarding such tensions. However, it is possible that respondents’ statements may have hidden any experience of conflict or conflict had an indirect character. Asian cultures generally tend to promote group harmony (Liu et al., 2008; Sanchez et al., 2006), and therefore Malaysian employees may not outwardly express their dissatisfaction with their colleagues or supervisors in the interests of maintaining group harmony.

Although organizational factors were identified as the biggest contributor to work stress, individual characteristics were also cited as causes of stress. In the study by Kinman and Jones (2005), employees commonly referred to personality as an individual stressor. Similarly, our study found that personality was frequently mentioned by respondents. This suggests that Malaysian employees have similar notions about individual stressors as their Western counterparts do.

Employees with a pessimistic outlook appear to be people who fail to adapt to working conditions. One respondent said: “If someone perceives negatively, they will become stressed. But if they look at something in positive ways, of course stress can be avoided. But if they are always negative, pessimistic, they will experience stress, even if they are just cleaners. But, if they look positively, even if they were appointed as managers, CEOs, Members of Parliament, they will perform the tasks well”. According to the respondents’ views, people are responsible for their own stress experiences. For example, “If someone has high motivation, they will accept pressure and not perceive it
as a kind of stress, but for those people who do not take the job seriously, even small things (tasks), they will feel the stress”.

Lack of person-environment fit was also perceived as a significant factor that caused job stress. One respondent, who worked for an international manufacturing company, said: “Your attitude toward your work, [will depend on] your interpretation [of your job] description. Everybody has their own job descriptions, has a list of tasks. If I think in this way, I’m not supposed to take on other jobs. If I have this kind of attitude, of course we will be trapped with stress. For me we must have the right attitude toward our work”.

Another respondent indicated that lack of interest about the job also contributes to job stress, for example: “…if someone has chosen a job that they enjoy, they will be happy, they can work even 24 hours per day, because they enjoy their job… but if they have a job which does not interest them, it will cause them stress…”. Another respondent stated: “…maybe they chose a job they were forced to work in, for example a doctor who has chosen a medical field because of family pressure… of course they will experience stress”.

Individual poor time management was also identified as a source of stress among employees. One respondent claimed of others that: “They have no planning, so it is madness to not prioritize [their work]. At the end of the day, people complete tasks that do not add value [instead]… it will consume a lot of time. At the end, [it will result in] maximum levels of stress”. Respondents also identified a type of person who always procrastinate, or delayed getting a job done.

How Malaysians deal with job stress

The results in Table II show that Malaysian employees use both individual and organizational strategies to manage stress. However, although a couple of strategies are perceived as important, the results suggest Malaysian employees mainly focus on individual strategies (83.1 per cent) rather than organizational interventions (16.9 per cent).

Our results are therefore consistent with Kinman and Jones (2005) whose respondents emphasized the individual, with slighter smaller percentage of statements emphasizing the individual (76 per cent for individual strategies; 24 per cent for organizational strategies). Time management, self-analysis and expressing emotions were identified as important ways to cope with occupational stress in the Kinman and Jones (2005) study. Unlike them, we found that Malaysian employees underlined the importance of talking to their manager as their main strategy for coping with occupational stress, followed by slowing down, religious activity and talking to friends.

The importance of talking to one’s manager was suggested by one respondent: “If stress is because of workload, the better way to answer it is to discuss it with your superior”. Another respondent suggested that: “We should look at the antecedents (of stress). If the problems occurred because of work itself, it would be better to discuss it with the superior…”.

The importance of talking over problems with a manager is expected as Malaysia is a country that has been classified as having high power distance (Hofstede, 1991); employees are expected to be well mannered with others, accept hierarchical structures and show loyalty to their leaders (Abdullah, 1992 cited in Rose et al., 2007). Moreover, Malaysian employees are expected not to confront or disagree with their superiors due to the shared cultural belief of people having a different and clearly defined status (Rose et al., 2007). This situation has been reported in other studies (Lu et al., 2003) which illustrates that unlike the results shown in Western studies, Asian employees
show more respect to their superiors. This result is not unexpected because this is characteristic of Malaysian organizations, norms and culture.

Although not many researchers have examined the usefulness of religious activities as coping strategies (Levin and Vanderpool, 1989), our results suggest that spiritual beliefs are important for some Malaysian respondents. Although they believed that occupational stress is the consequence of work, an interaction between the individual and workplace, their whole experience is said to be the work of God. For that reason, “back to God” is one of their solutions for managing stress. One respondent indicated: “...to be close with God...do a lot of reading of al-Quran, and thinking of dying”. Another respondent disclosed: “Even though we should have a positive personality, people should return to their religion...”. One respondent revealed that his method for relieving job stress is to perform some religious deed such as making a donation, and via redha and tawwakal (being fully accepting of a situation even if it is difficult). This finding is consistent with the study by Loewenthal et al. (2001) which showed that Muslims are more likely to engage in religious activities when dealing with depression, than to seek professional help or use other methods. In a similar vein, a study among cancer patients in Israel found that religiosity played an important role in coping with illness (Lea et al., 1999).

With only 16.9 per cent of responses describing organizational interventions, it seems that Malaysian employees expect that they should manage their occupational stress. It might also show, however, that occupational stress intervention strategies are still underdeveloped in Malaysian organizations. We were also not able to detect any

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Number of statements/percentage (current study)</th>
<th>Number of statements/percentage (Kinman and Jones, 2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual strategies</td>
<td>(83.1% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(76% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management/personal organization</td>
<td>5 (7.04)</td>
<td>9 (10.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self analysis/introspection</td>
<td>4 (5.60)</td>
<td>8 (9.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>2 (2.81)</td>
<td>6 (7.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies, interests, leisure</td>
<td>1 (1.40)</td>
<td>5 (6.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on individual – (what works)</td>
<td>1 (1.40)</td>
<td>4 (4.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change your reaction/attitude</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>4 (4.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication/medical advice</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>3 (3.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to your manager</td>
<td>9 (12.67)</td>
<td>2 (2.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow down</td>
<td>7 (9.85)</td>
<td>2 (2.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take leave</td>
<td>5 (7.04)</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to your friends</td>
<td>5 (7.04)</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion – back to God</td>
<td>6 (8.45)</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othersc</td>
<td>14 (19.7)</td>
<td>19 (23.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational strategies</td>
<td>(16.9% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(24% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More control, information and knowledge</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>6 (7.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational in general</td>
<td>1 (1.40)</td>
<td>4 (4.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigates sources</td>
<td>6 (8.45)</td>
<td>2 (2.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5 (7.04)</td>
<td>8 (9.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: aThe number in the parentheses denotes percentage of total responses; bND = not detected; csome items in these categories were excluded for analysis because they were too small or not relevant for comparison

Table II. Stress management strategies
suggestions or responses from interviewees suggesting that organizations should provide any suitable training or train employees on how to manage their stress. One respondent even thought that there are no ways to reduce stress: “...even though we provide motivation talks...it cannot solve the problem...maybe we should ask employees themselves...sometimes by sending them to training, but in the end it still doesn’t work”.

For most participants, investigating the source is a most important solution for occupational stress. For instance, it was stated: “We should investigate the main factor...then we can solve it” or “…whether people stress because of work, or because of their boss, or external problems or marital problems. From them we can solve the problems” or “their boss should ask them”. However, although participants tended to blame the organization, it should be emphasized that this study gathered information using the participant perspective (Randall et al., 2007). Thus further investigation is needed from a management perspective. Alternatively, using a different strategy (e.g. recording participants’ narrative during the process of an intervention) could also be a useful method.

Consequences of job stress: what do lay representations tell us?
The consequences of job stress in this study (see Table III) seem to be similar to those reported by Kinman and Jones (2005). Their results suggested that people perceived job stress as having various psychological (28 per cent), behavioural (30 per cent), physical (22 per cent) and cognitive consequences (20 per cent). Despite this close similarity, however, our analysis found that Malaysian employees perceived occupational stress as having a strong psychological impact (42 per cent), followed by behavioural (26 per cent), cognitive (18 per cent) and physical (14 per cent) domains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Number of statements/ percentage (Current study)</th>
<th>Number of statements/ percentage (Kinman and Jones, 2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological outcomes</td>
<td>(42% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(28% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension-anxiety-worries</td>
<td>2 (2.35)a</td>
<td>26 (12.56)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression-unhappiness</td>
<td>11 (12.94)</td>
<td>10 (4.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>10 (11.76)</td>
<td>NDb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>13 (15.29)</td>
<td>22 (10.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral outcomes</td>
<td>(26% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(30% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritability–being argumentative</td>
<td>3 (3.53)</td>
<td>18 (8.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital difficulties</td>
<td>1 (1.18)</td>
<td>14 (6.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>7 (8.23)</td>
<td>6 (2.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11 (12.93)</td>
<td>24 (11.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical outcomes</td>
<td>(14% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(22% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor physical health</td>
<td>1(1.18)</td>
<td>16 (7.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migraine and headache</td>
<td>5 (5.88)</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6 (7.06)</td>
<td>29 (14.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive outcomes</td>
<td>(18% of overall statements)</td>
<td>(20% of overall statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor standard of work/making mistakes</td>
<td>6 (7.05)</td>
<td>20 (9.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor concentration</td>
<td>1(1.18)</td>
<td>10 (4.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8 (9.41)</td>
<td>12 (5.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III.
Categories of perceived outcomes of occupational stress

Notes: aThe number in the parentheses denotes percentage of total responses; bND = not detected
From the 42 per cent of responses in psychological outcomes, most deal with depression-unhappiness (12.94 per cent) and anger (11.76 per cent). Tension-anxiety-worries were the most prominent psychological outcomes (12.56 per cent) in Kinman and Jones’ (2005) study. Our study reveals that the percentage for our Malaysian respondents (2.35 per cent) was too small to represent a meaningful outcome. While depression-unhappiness is the most mentioned consequence for Malaysian employees, this outcome is relatively small for UK respondents (4.83 per cent). Our result is consistent with other Malaysian studies (Aziah et al., 2004; Rusli et al., 2008) which proposed that job stress influences employees’ depression. It may reflect the fact that in Malaysia, where many employees are still not familiar with how to manage job stress, they may not actually recognize that they have depression.

Interestingly, while anger outcomes were not documented in Kinman and Jones (2005), our study shows a different pattern in that employees highlighted this outcome repeatedly. Some comments regarding anger were: “very fast to get angry”, “we get angry very easily”, “they will be angry when dealing with the public” and so on. This result contrasts markedly with the findings in other collective cultures (e.g. for China, see Liu et al., 2007) while Americans tend to exhibit more anger than their Chinese counterparts (Liu et al., 2007). In the case of Malaysia, anger may result from being unable to achieve organizational goals; frustration may in turn lead to aggression (i.e. Frustration-Aggression hypothesis, see Dollard et al., 1939, cited in Fox and Spector, 1999). Alternatively, it may result from a lack of organizational support or suggestions regarding appropriate methods for employees to deal with stress.

In relation to behavioural aspects, the respondents believed that job stress influences human performance at work, specifically with respect to absenteeism. For example: “Employees tend to be lazy at work, their faces show an unhappy mood, have a tendency to take leave, get medical certificates [MC] and absenteeism increases”. One respondent told us: “A very easy symptom that you can see...people tend not to come to work, take MC. He or she tries to escape from the issues being raised. The short cut (way) is to do this (absenteeism)”. However, in a similar category, we found that UK respondents perceived job stress has more of an impact on irritability, and being argumentative (Kinman and Jones, 2005). On the other hand, Malaysian employees did not indicate being argumentative as a consequences of job stress as in the UK study.

This may be explained by the fact that Malaysian employees work in a collective sense and try to avoid conflict scenarios (Liu et al., 2008). Kinman and Jones (2005) also reported respondents indicating that job stress has implications for marital relationships. However, we found a reverse situation where our respondents did not indicate marital conflict as a consequence of job stress. This finding can be explained in terms of one’s work being important as it supports a family in a collective-oriented community (Hassan et al., 2007). Similar conclusions have been reported in previous research in collective cultures (e.g. Spector et al., 2004) which indicated that work functions to make a better life for the family. For these reasons, Malaysian employees – in contrast to Western individualist cultures – do not regard job stress as influencing family harmony detrimentally.

In relation to cognitive categories, respondents emphasized poor work standards as a consequence of job stress. Comments such as “fail to finish tasks”, “can’t concentrate on the job”, “deliberately made a mistake”, and “deliberately waste time” arose in our study. These results suggest that Malaysian employees have similar beliefs to Western employees about the impact of stress on worker performance, and this reinforces conclusions made in studies on other collective cultures (Liu et al., 2007). However,
there are significant differences between Malaysian employees compared to those in the UK (Kinman and Jones, 2005). While we mapped physical health outcomes, we found that Malaysian employees did not perceive them as a major consequence of job stress. Since there are no similar studies in this area, we can assume that Malaysian employees are still not fully aware of these consequences (Sadhra et al., 2001) because they are not looking at the impact of job stress on their health as much as Western communities do. For example, employees in Malaysia neglect to highlight their health problems at work (Department of Occupational Safety and Health, 2006), and employers still expect them to work even if they are not feeling well. This is a common situation in developing countries (Chopra, 2009). In summary the main domains proposed by Kinman and Jones (2005) were found in the responses here, but we found some differences in the relative emphasis in the outcome domains. Furthermore within these domains we note some differences between Eastern and Western countries concerning psychological outcomes (i.e. depression and anger vs anxiety) and in physical outcomes (i.e. poor physical health vs migraine and headache).

**Conclusion and future research**

This study showed that job stress is a global phenomenon (Spector et al., 2004). It occurs in both Western and Eastern workplace settings. Malaysian and UK employees share similarities in particular aspects (e.g. organizational factors as major stressor and prevention strategies). This may be expected as Malaysia is a Commonwealth country and has adapted British systems in some aspects of its administration, legal and education policies. Some lay arguments in the present study show that the conceptualization of job stress is mainly an interaction between unfavourable working conditions and individuals’ characters. Our finding also suggests that organizational and individual factors have an impact on employees’ job stress, and employees use preventive methods to deal with stressors in a Malaysian context (Quick et al., 2000).

However, the cause, impact and the way people interact with job stress is different. Cultural traditions, expectations and norms influence the way people think about and react to job stress. Organizational factors are perceived as stressors for Western and Eastern employees, but work environments have unique features that affect employees’ job stress. Respondents in both this study and Kinman and Jones (2005), emphasized the individual’s responsibility to reduce occupational stress, rather than what the organization could do. This situation seems to be unfair as organizational factors emerge as the source of job stress, but employees are expected to deal with it or resolve it in some way. However, culture influences the way the employees react to job stress; Malaysian employees choose to avoid conflict and maintain harmony at work (e.g. talk to manager), while UK employees use their initiative (e.g. time management) or look for more effective methods of job control.

A new category that emerged in this study was made possible using the grounded theory approach. The impact of globalization and external factors were represented by Malaysian employees as important sources of job stress. Recent papers have described multi-factorial models that explain work stress, including external (e.g. political, economic), organizational (e.g. supervisory practices), task level (e.g. demands, resources) (Sauter and Murphy, 2003) as well as individual factors (Dollard and Kang, 2007). These external factors have not been mentioned in previous lay perspective research. Therefore our research indicates that employees in developing countries are alert to these external forces, as they impact on and change the nature of their workplaces.
For these reasons, future research should give consideration to developing new tools that reflect a multi-level of job stress (e.g. external, organizational and work context) to examine job stress in the developing countries. It may not only enhance our understanding of occupational stress in the developing countries, but can help avoid the assumption that the nature of job stress is the same or similar in all countries.

Practicality
This study presents preliminary research on job stress from the lay perspective in Malaysia. It not only represents the first study of this kind in Malaysia, but could be the first such study in an Eastern Muslim country. Although the findings may explain the job stress scenario in Malaysia, it may also enhance our understanding of job stress in developing countries. The study found that Malaysian employees have a similar conception about job stress as their Western counterparts. Despite these similar conceptions, the way they react to job stress may differ, perhaps because culture functions to influence the way people's beliefs are articulated. Organizations should create a better work environment because this was identified as a major source of job stress. On the other hand, given that external factors are now becoming job stressors, policy makers could propose a suitable solution to protect employees from new threats emerging in the Malaysian workplace environment.

Limitations
Interviews were undertaken to gain valuable information from employees about their job stress experiences. However, in our study, respondents were not very forthcoming in expressing their feelings and experiences, and did not actively make conversation. This situation is very common in the Malaysian workplace setting (Schermanhorn and Bond, 1997) because of the power distance and living in a collectivist culture. Malaysians have also been influenced by the need to avoid the “malu” (ashamed) personality (Goddard, 1996) and not to make conversations complicated. In our study, we used informal discussions to build rapport and trust in order to create a better communication process. Most participants were contacted via e-mail and phone to inform them of our intention to conduct this study. Although some interviews were quite short and people spoke quite quickly, we decided to use these conversations because they answered all the questions and answers ranged from 300 to 350 words. This proved to be suitable for analysis.

Note
1. It should be noted that religious freedom applies only to non-Malays. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Article 160) states that Malays must profess the Muslim religion (see Neo, 2006) and each Malay ‘remains in the Islamic faith until his/her dying days’ (Thio and Neo, 2006)

References


Further reading

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