Does Occupational Stress Really Matter?

A Study of Psychological Climate, Stress and Job Satisfaction in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effects of psychological climate and stresses on job satisfaction in a non U.S. setting. A total of 450 surveys were sent to employees in 11 organisations in Thailand. The results partly support the expected association between positive psychological climate dimensions and lower level of stresses among Thai employees. Further regression analysis tested whether positive psychological climate dimensions and low level of stress were associated with high job satisfaction among Thai employees. Contrary to expectations, only stress variables predicted job satisfaction. The discussion speculates that Thai cultural influences may explain the results

Keywords: occupational stress, psychological climate, job satisfaction, culture, Thai

Psychological climate, the degree to which employees feel they are able to satisfy important personal needs through their experiences in their employing organisation (Brown & Leigh, 1996, p.358), is a central construct in the study of quality of work life (Loscocco & Roschelle, 1991; Campbell, Converse & Rogers,, 1976; Davis & Cherns, 1975) Psychological climate is subjective: it focuses on employees' perceptions and valuations of the environment rather than the environment *per se*. Employees' subjective evaluations, it is argued, mediate their attitudinal and behavioural responses (James & Jones, 1974; James et al., 1978). US-based meta-analytical research indicates that psychological climate has reliable relationships with employees' work attitudes, psychological well-being, motivation and performance (e.g. Toulson & Smith, 1994; Kaczka & Kirk, 1968; Schneider, 1972; Pritchard & Karasick, 1973). The findings also indicate that psychological climate has a strong relationship with employees' work attitudes (such as job satisfaction) and psychological well-being (such as occupational and psychological stress) (Parker, Baltes, Yong, Huff, Altmann, Lacost, & Roberts, 2003, p. 405). The job demands-control model by Karasek (1979) captures this relationship. Jex and Beehr (1991, p. 322) suggested that job demands put an employee into an aroused or motivated state. If this aroused or motivated state is accompanied by low decision latitude or control over the job, this arousal will not be released in the normal execution of the job. Karasek speculated that this non-release leads to negative psychological and physical consequences. A social support component was subsequently added to the demand-control model on the supposition that support from colleagues and/or managers would aid the worker in coping with the job demands (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

However, the bulk of published research into job satisfaction has been conducted in western countries (Loscocco & Roschelle, 1991, p. 16). Little attention has been given to non-western countries. The rapid growth in Asian economies highlights the need for increased research effort to test the generalisability of western-based organisational

psychology theory. Thailand, the world's second fastest growing economy (Cochrane, 2004), is a case in point. This paper partly addresses the need for non-western research and examines the relationships between psychological climate, occupational stress, psychological strain, and job satisfaction in Thai organisations.

Published findings suggest psychological climate influences on the stress related processes (Griffin, Hart & Wilson-Evered, 2000; Hemingway & Smith, 1999; Micheka, Lukaskie, & Allegrante, 1995 cited in Hart & Cooper, 2001, p.93-95). Two hypotheses are proposed for the Asian sample:

Hypothesis 1. Positive psychological climate dimensions (high managerial support, recognition and role clarity) will be associated with lower level of stress (occupational stress and psychological stress) among Thai employees.

Hypothesis 2. Positive psychological climate dimensions and low level of stresses (occupational stress and psychological stresses) will be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction among Thai employees.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study were employees in 11 medium-sized service organisations in Bangkok, Thailand in 2004. The Ministry of Industry in Thailand defines medium-sized organisations as organisations that employ 50 - 200 employees. Of the 450 surveys sent out, 325 were returned, for a return rate of 72 percent. The majority of respondents were male (61%), had undergraduate or above educational levels (81%), and were between the ages of 30-60 years (66%).

Procedure

Initially, the principal author contacted organisations by letter and/or telephone to explain the research objectives and procedure, in order to receive collecting data permission.

The questionnaires were posted to organisations with a pre-paid return envelope. In essence, this is a convenience-sampling technique, whereby the researcher gains access to the sample via the contacts in the employing organisations. However, the return of the questionnaires is generally better, as evidenced by the high return rate for this survey.

Accompanying each questionnaire was a letter explaining the general purpose of the study, assuring anonymity, and giving instructions as to what to do with the survey when completed. The translation of the questionnaire into Thai language is accomplished through a two-stage translation-back translation procedure. The questionnaire is first translated from English into Thai by the researcher. The Thai version was then back-translated into English by a bilingual volunteer who is not aware of the purpose of the study. Following this, the original questionnaire was compared with the back-translated English version, and differences are resolved through discussion. This process is used to help ensure an accurate, literal translation of the original English language version of the questionnaire.

Measures

Psychological Climate. A subscale from Brown and Leigh (1996) was used. It captured managerial support (e.g., My manager is supportive of my ideas and ways of getting things done), role clarity (e.g., The amount of work responsibility and effort expected in my job is clearly defined), and recognition (e.g., The organisation recognised the significance of the efforts and contribution I make). Participants were asked to use a 7-point grading to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree). The Cronbach alpha value for this scale and the Thai sample was 0.88.

Occupational Stress. A subscale from the Occupational Stress Inventory (OSI: Osipow & Spokane, 1987) was used to measure the overall occupational stress levels of respondents. There are normally three sub-scales of the OSI; occupational stress, psychological stress, and coping resources. In this study, the 40 item occupational stress sub-scale (ORQ) and the 40

item psychological stress sub-scale (PSQ) were used. Two examples from the ORQ are: "I am competent in what I do" and "If I make a mistake in my work, the consequences for others can be pretty bad". Examples of items in 40 PSQ are: "My eating habits are erratic" and "Lately, I have been anxious". The OSI uses a 5 point scale from 1= *is rarely or never* to 5 = *is most of the time*. The Cronbach Alpha for these items and the Thai sample was 0.91.

Job Satisfaction (JS). Job satisfaction was measured by the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) developed by Weiss, Dawis, England and Lofquist (1967). Participants indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they feel with various aspects of their job, by selecting a number on a 7-point scale from 1 = *I am very dissatisfied with this aspect*, to 7 = *I am very satisfied with this aspect*. The MSQ has been cited as a job satisfaction measure with strong psychometric properties. The Cronbach Alpha for these items and the Thai sample was 0.87.

RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, Pearson correlations among all variables are reported in Table 1. As expected, job satisfaction was significantly related to both psychological climate and two levels of stress (occupational and psychological stress).

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among all study variables (N=325)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Managerial Support	-					
2. Role Clarity	0.48*	-				
3. Recognition	0.55*	0.42*	-			
4. Occupational Stress	0.18*	0.40*	0.23*	-		
5. Psychological Strain	0.06	-0.01	0.24*	0.56*	-	
6. Job Satisfaction	-0.14*	-0.08*	-0.19*	-0.39*	-0.23*	-
Mean	2.84	3.30	2.91	2.63	2.33	4.44
SD	0.93	1.26	1.11	0.36	0.43	0.73

($*p<.05$)

The results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to test the two hypotheses are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

In multiple regression, Correlation Coefficient R can assume values between 0 and 1. To interpret the direction of the relationship between variables, one looks at the signs of the regression or B coefficients (Tabachinick & Fidell, 1996). From the present study, the *B* coefficient is negative among occupational stress and role clarification (B = -0.05; Rs = 0.26; p < 0.05); and psychological strain and managerial support (B = -0.03; Rs = 26; p < 0.05), then less role clarification among employees influenced high level of occupational stress. Likewise, less managerial support significant influence high level of psychological strain.

Further, there are positive *B* coefficient among occupational stress and managerial support (B =0 .05; Rs = 18; p < 0.05) and recognition (B = 0.07; Rs = 24; p < 0.05), then managerial support and recognition perceptions significant influence the occupational stress among Thai sample.

Therefore, hypothesis 1; Positive psychological climate dimensions (highly managerial support, recognition and role clarity) will predict lower level of stresses (occupational stress and psychological stresses) among Thai employees was partially accepted.

TABLE 2

Regression Analysis of Psychological Climate Dimension on Stresses

Predictor	Occupational Stress				Psychological Strain			
Psychological Climate	B	β	t	Rs	B	β	t	Rs
1. Managerial Support	0.05	0.14	2.01*	0.18	-0.03	-0.07	-0.95*	0.26
2. Role Clarity	-0.05	-0.16	-2.49*	0.26	-0.04	-0.11	-1.78	0.01
3. Recognition	0.07	0.23	3.43*	0.24	0.13	0.32	4.90*	0.26

(*p<.05)

Further regression analysis tested hypothesis 2 that positive psychological climate dimensions (highly managerial support, recognition and role clarity) and low level of stresses

significantly influence higher job satisfaction among Thai employees (see Table 3). Contrary to expectation, psychological climate seemed to be irrelevant in explaining job satisfaction among Thai sample. There are only occupational stress (B = -0.74; Rs = 15; $p<.05$) and psychological strain (B = -.01; Rs = 15; $p<.05$) predict job satisfaction significantly. Therefore, the lower stress and strain, the higher will be job satisfaction.

TABLE 3

Regressions of Psychological Climate Dimension and Stresses on Job Satisfaction

Predictor	Job Satisfaction			
Psychological climate dimension	B	β	t	Rs
1. Managerial Support	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.03
2. Role clarity	-0.03	-0.04	-0.73	0.04
3. Recognition	-0.05	-0.08	-1.25	0.04
Predictor	Job Satisfaction			
Stress Variables	B	β	t	Rs
1. Occupational Stress	-0.74	-0.37	-5.80[*]	0.15
2. Psychological Strain	-0.01	-0.01	-0.12[*]	0.15

($*p<.05$)

DISCUSSION

This study explored the influence of psychological climate and stresses on job satisfaction among Thai employees. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. The finding was similar to Blumenthal, Lavender, and Hewson's (1998) study which indicated that the higher role clarity, the lower perceived job-related stress. Interesting, our results suggest managerial support and recognition increase, rather that decrease, occupational stress. Thai culture may play a role in the influence of psychological climate on stress. It is possible that the Thai respondents may conceptualise occupational stress differently to westerners. If this is the case, they may have interpreted the questions about stress differently from their western counterparts. Even though the questions are in Thai language, what the questions ask may have different meanings a Thai setting.

Thai culture focuses on the grateful relationship orientation (Komin, 1995; 1990). This orientation is characterized by the highly valued "grateful" quality in a person, that is,

one renders help out of goodness and recipients appreciate and seek to reciprocate the kindness. When Thai employees perceive support from their supervisor, they perceive an expected obligation to return the support by providing their best performance. For this reason, employees who perceive high support from a supervisor may also perceive high pressure on their job performance. Although occupational stress measures ask about general job stress, not stress specifically related to feeling pressure to being the best, the reciprocal kindness culture is rooted among Thai people unconsciously. Likewise, Thai employees feel that high recognition from supervisor increases expectation on their job performance. This means when a supervisor indicates appreciation or rewards employees for their efforts, the employees feel obliged to maintain or even improve their performance standard. The finding is similar to Glynn and Jimmieson's (2003) study. They found that praise and recognition strengthened, not weakened, the positive association between the task stressor and strain.

Only occupational stress predicted job satisfaction in the Thai sample, but perceptions of climate did not significantly influence any changes in job satisfaction levels. Therefore, occupational stress and psychological strain play a significant role on job satisfaction in this case. Regardless of how employees perceived workplace climate, if they experience high levels of stress and strain, this causes job dissatisfaction.

This study is not without limitations that could have influenced the results. Firstly, since the survey was a self-report measure, there is a potential for raters' bias. Notably, the potential exists for respondents to supply socially desirable answers. A second limitation for the study concerns the effect of organisational size. Some of the organisations employed as few as 20 people, while others employed more than 100 employees. The size of the organisation may influence respondents' perceptions of their organisational environment and job satisfaction levels. For example, employees in larger organisations may feel more alienated than employees in smaller organisations. Wider sampling would quantify the

importance of concerns associated with organisational size. To overcome some of the limitations, controlling for organisational size is recommended in further studies. Finally, this paper relied on translations of existing measures. Additional research is required to determine the appropriateness of the constructs in new contexts. Clearly, much more remains to be done with larger samples with other non western countries to determine the true robustness of the findings.

The present paper increases understand of employees within Thai culture context. It demonstrates that scholars and practitioners should realise that western-proven conceptual frameworks may not be applicable to different cultures. The findings are especially relevant to expatriate managers who will deal with local employees in Thailand.

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