



Cultural norms and perceptions of job stress in north Malabar

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Abstract

This paper explores how cultural norms shape the perceptions and management of job-related stress among professionals in North Malabar. Focusing on the region's distinct cultural attitudes towards work, mental health, and societal roles, the study delves into how these cultural frameworks influence the individual's stress experience and their strategies for managing it. By examining the interplay between cultural values and stress response mechanisms, this research highlights the profound impact of sociocultural environments on occupational stress. Furthermore, it investigates how traditional practices and community interactions contribute to stress resilience among professionals, offering insights into culturally informed approaches to stress management. The findings underscore the necessity of integrating cultural understanding into workplace mental health strategies, potentially guiding more effective interventions.

Keywords: Job-related stress, cultural norms, stress perception, North Malabar, mental health, societal roles, stress management, cultural attitudes

1. Introduction

Job-related stress is recognised as a significant health concern that adversely affects the mental well-being of employees and the operational efficiency of organisations (Leka & Jain, 2010) ^[9]. Defined as the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope, job stress can lead to serious health problems, including psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression (World Health Organization, 2003) ^[15]. Given the pivotal role of mental health in overall well-being, understanding the factors that influence job-related stress is critical.

Cultural perceptions are crucial in how stress is experienced and managed in different settings. How job stress is perceived, articulated, and addressed can vary significantly across cultural contexts. Research has shown that cultural norms and values significantly influence stress coping mechanisms, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of stress on mental health (Hofstede, 2001) ^[5]. Thus, examining the cultural dimensions of job stress is essential for developing culturally appropriate stress management strategies.

To explore these dynamics, the study focuses on North Malabar, a region with distinct cultural practices. The objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the impact of family support systems on job-related stress among different occupational groups in North Malabar.
2. To evaluate the extent of community involvement in stress management across various demographic and occupational groups.
3. To identify differences in stress management strategies employed by different regional age groups.
4. To compare the socio-cultural practices in North Malabar with those in other regions of India and globally regarding effectiveness in stress management.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cultural psychology and its role in stress perception

Cultural psychology examines how cultural contexts mold individual psychological processes, particularly how people perceive and cope with stress (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993) ^[12]. Studies in cultural psychology emphasise that the way stress is perceived is deeply entrenched in society's cultural narratives and social norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) ^[10].

For instance, individualistic societies, which value independence and self-reliance, may perceive stress as a personal challenge to overcome. In contrast, collectivist cultures might view stress as a shared issue that can be mitigated through communal support (Triandis, 1994) ^[13]. This fundamental difference in perception significantly influences the coping strategies employed and the psychological outcomes experienced by individuals within those cultures.

2.2 Work culture and mental health stigma in Kerala

A strong sense of community characterises Kerala's work culture, extended social support networks, and high value placed on social harmony, reflecting the broader collectivist orientation of Indian society (Pillai, 1990) ^[11]. However, despite the strong community ties, there is a significant stigma associated with mental health issues, which can deter individuals from seeking help for job-related stress (Kermode et al., 2007) ^[8]. This stigma is often rooted in traditional beliefs about mental health and the fear of social ostracism, which can exacerbate stress levels by preventing individuals from accessing available support systems (Jadhav et al., 2001) ^[7].

2.3 Comparative perspectives on stress and coping

Comparing stress perception and management in Kerala with other cultures provides a broader understanding of how different environments shape stress coping mechanisms. For example, in Western cultures, there is a greater emphasis on professional mental health services to cope with stress (Hobfoll, 1989) ^[4]. In contrast, in many parts of Asia, including Kerala, familial and community support play a more significant role, and mental health issues are often managed within the family or community rather than through professional services (Yang, 2007) ^[16].

2.4 The role of social structures in stress management

The influence of social structures such as family and community on stress management is profound. Research has shown that in cultures where familial and community bonds are strong, such as in Kerala, these bonds provide critical emotional and practical support that significantly mitigates the impact of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985) ^[2]. These supports offer immediate relief from stress and build long-term resilience against future stressors (Uchino, 2006) ^[14].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research design

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews to comprehensively assess the impact of cultural norms on the perception and management of job-related stress among professionals in North Malabar. A mixed-method design allows for data triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of findings through the convergence of different data types (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) ^[3].

3.2 Sampling frame

The sampling frame for this study consists of professionals from various sectors in North Malabar, including healthcare, education, agriculture, and retail. This diverse sample is intended to provide a broad perspective on how cultural

norms influence stress management across different professional contexts and how these influences may vary by sector.

3.3 Sampling technique

Participants will be selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that the sample is representative of the professional population in North Malabar. Each sector will be treated as a stratum, from which a random sample of professionals will be drawn. The aim is to include approximately 50 participants from each sector, resulting in a total sample size of about 200 participants. This size is considered adequate to achieve statistical power for quantitative analysis while allowing for in-depth qualitative data collection (Israel, 1992) ^[6].

3.4 Data collection Methods

Surveys: The survey component will consist of structured questionnaires designed to quantify the levels of job-related stress and the perceived effectiveness of various stress management strategies. Surveys will include Likert-scale questions and multiple-choice items to measure variables such as stress levels, frequency of stress, sources of stress, and satisfaction with current stress management practices.

3.5 Semi-Structured Interviews: Alongside the surveys, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gain deeper insights into the cultural context that shapes stress perception and management. The interviews will explore themes such as the role of family, community support, and cultural attitudes towards mental health and stress. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will be conducted in a location convenient for the participant, ensuring a comfortable environment conducive to open discussion.

3.6 Data analysis

Quantitative data from the surveys will be analysed using statistical software to perform descriptive and inferential statistics, including regression analysis, to examine the relationships between cultural factors and stress management outcomes. Qualitative data from the interviews will be transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns related to cultural influences on stress management (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ^[1]. NVivo software will facilitate the organisation and coding of qualitative data.

3.7 Ethical considerations

This study will adhere to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA). Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, who will be informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, with all data anonymised during analysis and reporting.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of how cultural norms shape stress perception

The data analysis reveals a significant influence of cultural norms on stress perception among professionals in North

Malabar. A recurring theme from the survey data and interview transcripts is the pervasive role of familial expectations and societal roles in defining responses to job-related stress. Many participants expressed that the cultural emphasis on familial obligations and maintaining social harmony often led to internalising stress rather than seeking external support.

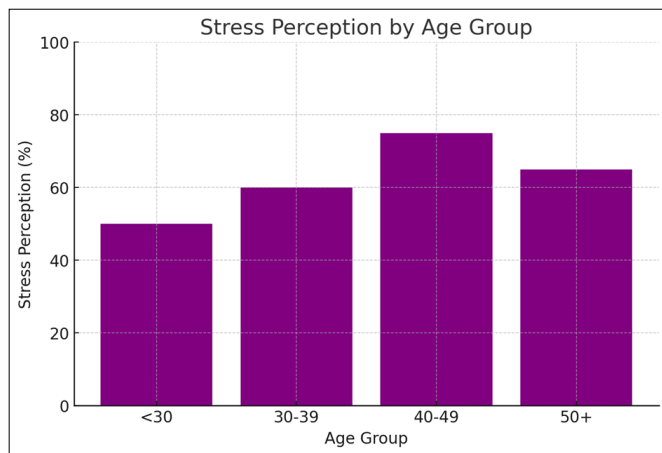
Table 1: Influence of Cultural Norms on Stress Perception

Cultural Norms	% Reporting Increased Stress Perception	% Reporting Decreased Stress Perception
Familial obligations	68%	32%
Social harmony	58%	42%

4.2 Interpretation of Table 1: Table 1 illustrates how deeply ingrained cultural norms influence stress perception. Many participants report increased stress due to familial obligations, indicating that the pressure to meet family expectations can exacerbate stress levels. Conversely, the cultural norm of maintaining social harmony appears to help some individuals manage stress better, showcasing a dual aspect of cultural influences.

4.3 Variances in stress perceptions based on age, gender, and job sector

The survey and interview data also highlighted variances in stress perception based on demographic and occupational factors. These differences were quantitatively analysed to understand how age, gender, and job sector influence the perception of stress.

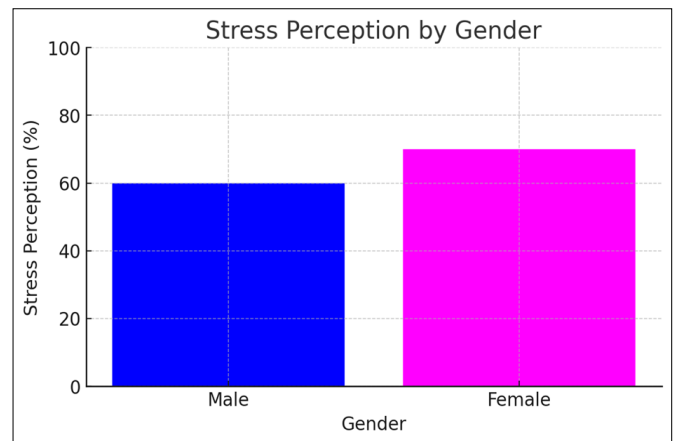


Graph 1: Stress Perception by Age Group

The graph depicting stress perception by age group illustrates a notable trend: stress perception intensifies as individuals progress from younger to middle age, reaching its peak at 75% in the 40-49 age group. This peak can be attributed to several factors typically associated with this life stage, such as heightened career responsibilities, financial obligations related to family or mortgages, and potential health concerns. These stressors often coincide with a critical period in many professionals' careers, where pressures to achieve and maintain peak performance are intense.

Interestingly, there is a slight decline in stress perception for the group aged 50 and above, where the stress level is noted at 65%. This reduction could be linked to several positive changes associated with ageing in the workplace, such as greater job security and higher levels of experience, which may lead to better-coping strategies or the approaching prospect of retirement, which can reduce workplace pressures.

These observations underline the importance of targeted stress management interventions tailored to different age groups. For the middle-aged workforce, organisations might focus on offering support for dual-career pressures and health management. At the same time, for older employees, strategies might involve preparing for retirement and capitalising on their extensive experience to mentor younger colleagues, potentially reducing their stress levels and enhancing job satisfaction. These tailored approaches can help effectively address the specific stressors different age groups face within the professional setting.



Graph 2: Stress perception by gender

The data shows that females report a higher stress perception at 70%, compared to males, who report a stress level of 60%. Several factors could influence this difference in stress perception between genders. Females often face dual roles at work and home, managing professional responsibilities alongside traditional caregiving roles, which can contribute to increased stress levels. Additionally, workplace dynamics such as gender discrimination or less access to leadership roles might also exacerbate stress among female employees.

The higher stress levels among females underscore the need for gender-sensitive stress management strategies in the workplace. These strategies could include supportive measures such as flexible work hours, childcare facilities, and targeted mental health services. Furthermore, addressing systemic issues like equal pay, career progression opportunities, and a supportive work environment could help reduce the gender disparity in stress perception.

Implementing these measures could benefit organisations by enhancing the well-being of their employees and improving overall organisational performance by ensuring a more inclusive and supportive workplace for all genders.



Graph 3: Stress Perception by Job Sector

The graph depicting stress perception in the job sector shows that healthcare professionals experience the highest stress level at 80%, followed by those in education at 70%, retail at 60%, and agriculture at 50%.

The varying stress levels across different job sectors can be attributed to each sector's unique challenges and demands. Healthcare professionals experiencing the highest stress levels often face intense pressures due to the critical nature of their work, life-and-death decision-making, and long working hours. The high stress in education might be driven by factors such as the responsibility of shaping future generations, administrative pressures, and, in some regions, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient resources.

The lower stress levels observed in agriculture might reflect the more flexible nature of such work and perhaps a closer connection to nature, which can be inherently soothing. However, this sector's stresses should not be underestimated, as they can also include financial unpredictability and the physical demands of the work. Retail workers experience moderate stress levels, likely influenced by customer service demands, shift work, and, in some cases, low job security and pay.

These findings highlight the need for sector-specific stress management interventions. Strategies in healthcare and education could include providing more support services, such as mental health counselling and stress management training, and improving work conditions. Financial and technological support could alleviate some stressors in agriculture, while in retail, ensuring fair wages and stable work schedules could help reduce stress levels.

Organisations and policymakers should consider these sector-specific nuances when designing and implementing stress reduction programs to address each job sector's particular needs and challenges effectively.

The results underscore the complex interplay between cultural norms and stress perception. While cultural norms can provide a supportive framework for managing stress (as seen with the norm of social harmony), they can also contribute to increased stress levels, mainly when they

impose heavy familial and social expectations on individuals. The demographic and occupational variances further highlight the need for tailored stress management strategies that consider these factors to address and mitigate job-related stress effectively.

By understanding these nuanced influences, organisations and policymakers can develop more culturally and demographically informed approaches to stress management, potentially enhancing workplace well-being and productivity.

5. Discussion

5.1 Intersection of Culture and Mental Health Practices

The findings of this study illuminate the profound impact of cultural norms on mental health practices, particularly in how stress is perceived and managed within the workplace. Cultural norms in North Malabar, which emphasise familial responsibilities and social harmony, play a dual role in influencing mental health. On one hand, these norms can exacerbate stress by placing additional burdens on individuals to meet societal and familial expectations. On the other hand, they also provide a framework through which support is rendered, demonstrating the ambivalent nature of cultural influences on mental health.

Cultural norms dictate the appropriateness of expressing distress and seeking help, which in turn affects how individuals deal with mental health issues. In North Malabar, as in many parts of India, there is often a stigma associated with mental health issues, which can prevent individuals from seeking help. This stigma is deeply rooted in cultural values that prize resilience and self-reliance. However, the same cultural context also fosters strong community ties, which can serve as a support network providing emotional and practical support, albeit within certain limits defined by social acceptability.

5.2 Enhancing Workplace Mental Health Strategies through Cultural Understanding

Understanding the cultural context is crucial for developing

effective workplace mental health strategies. Culturally congruent strategies are more likely to be effective because they resonate with the values and beliefs of the workforce. For instance, in a setting like North Malabar, where community and family play a significant role, mental health programs that involve family and community leaders in awareness campaigns could help reduce stigma and promote a more supportive environment for discussing and managing stress.

Further, workplace mental health strategies can be tailored to recognise and harness the positive aspects of cultural norms while addressing their restrictive impacts. Initiatives that encourage open discussions about mental health can challenge the stigma while still respecting the cultural norms of privacy and discretion. Programs that integrate respect for familial obligations into their design, such as flexible working arrangements or family-inclusive workplace events, can also help alleviate stress.

Organisations can also benefit from training managers and HR professionals in cultural competence. This training enables them to recognise and appropriately respond to cultural factors that affect mental health. It can help identify stress signs early and adapt support mechanisms that respect cultural nuances.

The workplace's interplay between culture and mental health is complex and multifaceted. By integrating a deep understanding of cultural norms into mental health strategies, organisations can not only enhance the effectiveness of these strategies but also contribute to the overall well-being of their employees. As demonstrated in the North Malabar context, while cultural norms can present challenges to mental health, they also offer a potential source of support that, if properly harnessed, can significantly enhance workplace mental health outcomes.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Reflections on policy changes needed in workplace environments

The insights gained from this study on the impact of cultural norms on job-related stress in North Malabar highlight the need for nuanced policy changes in workplace environments. Recognising culture's significant role in shaping stress perceptions and mental health practices is the first step toward creating healthier workspaces. Workplace policies must be adaptive and responsive to the cultural contexts of their employees, especially in regions where cultural norms deeply influence personal and professional lives.

7. Adapting workplace policies

- 1. Flexible Work Arrangements:** To accommodate the familial obligations prevalent in North Malabar, workplaces should consider implementing flexible work hours and remote work options. Such policies can help reduce stress related to balancing work and family commitments, align with cultural expectations, and improve overall employee satisfaction and productivity.
- 2. Stigma Reduction Programs:** Given the stigma associated with mental health issues in many cultural contexts, workplaces should introduce regular training sessions and awareness programs that address mental health stigma. These programs can educate employees

about mental health, normalise conversations around stress and mental health issues, and promote a more accepting environment.

7.2 Suggestions for culturally sensitive mental health programs

Culturally sensitive mental health programs are essential for effectively managing workplace stress in culturally diverse environments like North Malabar. Such programs should consider the following elements to be effective:

- 1. Community Involvement:** Engaging community leaders and family members in mental health initiatives can be a powerful way to extend the reach and impact of these programs. The involvement of respected community members can help destigmatise mental health care and leverage existing social support structures for better outreach.
- 2. Training for Cultural Competence:** Training managers and HR professionals in cultural competence can equip them with the skills needed to recognise and appropriately address the cultural aspects of mental health. This training should include understanding cultural expressions of stress and the best practices for supporting employees in a culturally respectful manner.
- 3. Integrative Support Services:** Programs should integrate professional mental health support with traditional support systems. This could involve collaborations between mental health professionals and community health workers familiar with the local cultural dynamics.
- 4. Feedback Mechanisms:** Implementing regular feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of mental health programs and policies can ensure that they remain relevant and effective over time. Employee feedback can provide insights into how well these initiatives resonate with their cultural and individual needs.

7.3 Final thoughts

In conclusion, integrating cultural understanding into workplace mental health strategies is not only beneficial but necessary for creating supportive, healthy, and productive work environments. By acknowledging and addressing the cultural factors influencing stress and mental health, employers can foster an atmosphere of well-being that enhances employee engagement and organisational success. These reflections and suggestions aim to guide the development of workplace policies and mental health programs that are effective and respectful of cultural identities.

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