

Interpersonal Stressors in the Chinese Organizations: Etic and Emic Concepts Comparison

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The problem of job stress has always been explored and examined by behavior researchers. It is an important issue in the field of occupational health psychology. In the Chinese context, workers have to view interpersonal issues as the primary task. If they cannot properly deal with an interpersonal problem, it will be difficult for them to complete their job tasks. Understanding the meaning and influence of interpersonal stressors is more important than job stressors for Chinese workers. Although some researchers have conducted studies about interpersonal stressors in the Western context, the results cannot be generalized to non-Western societies. Researchers have suggested that considering cultural values in interpersonal stressor research is a critical factor to solve this dilemma. Thus, this study adopts an inductive approach to offer a comprehensive definition of interpersonal stressors in Confucius-based societies. This study collects the interpersonal stressful incidents within the organizations by Critical Incident Technique. 84 workers responded 272 descriptive interpersonal incidents. Interpersonal stressors include nine dimensions are found in this study. Four dimensions are etic dimensions and five dimension are emic dimensions. Finally, contributions and limitations are discussed. Overall, this study clarifies the concepts of interpersonal stressors in Chinese organizations. Cultural value should be considered in the interpersonal stressors research. Based on this study, suggestions are provided for future studies and managerial implications.

Keywords: Chinese management, collectivism, harmony value, interpersonal stress, stressor

Background

Job stress is an important topic in the field of occupational health psychology. Most previous studies have focused on workload, role stress, situational demands, and so on, ignoring interpersonal stressors. However, in a Chinese context, workers view interpersonal issues as a primary task. If they cannot properly deal with an interpersonal problem, it will be difficult for them to complete their job tasks. Understanding the meaning and influence of interpersonal stressors is more important than understanding job stressors in a Chinese setting. Although some researchers have studied interpersonal stressors in a Western context, the results cannot be generalized to non-Western societies. Researchers have suggested that understanding the role of cultural values in interpersonal stressors is a critical factor in this research. Thus, this

study adopts an inductive approach to developing a comprehensive definition of interpersonal stressors in Confucius-based societies.

Methods

This study used an inductive approach and the critical incident technique. We collected data on stressful interpersonal incidents from 84 workers. The distribution of the demographic variables was as following: 44.05% male and 55.95% female; average age 32.78 years; 44.05% unmarried; 82.14% graduated from university; 67.86% employees; and average tenure 7.34 years. The industries represented were the service (22.6%), finance/insurance (17.9%), traditional manufacturing (17.5%), high-tech (11.5%), and public administration (13.1%)

industries.

We used content analysis to categorize the interpersonal stressful incidents. First, a total of 252 descriptive interpersonal incidents were identified. Second, we re-sorted by carefully combining repeated types of incidents into a single response. Third, the four-person team discussed and sorted the individual descriptions until all of the descriptions were classified into categories agreed upon by the team. In the end, nine dimensions were identified.

Results

Table 1 presents the nine dimensions of interpersonal stressors and their definitions, respective categories, and frequencies. Four of the dimensions are similar to those identified in previous studies: social isolation, no acknowledgement of importance, improper devaluation, and political struggle. The other five dimensions extend previous studies: stubbornness in action, selfishness, false courtesy, excessive requirements, and persuasion via

interpersonal relationship.

The first dimension, “social isolation,” is an inability to express empathy toward others and ignoring others’ calls for help. Twenty-five responses are categorized in this dimension (9.92% of total responses). The second dimension, “lack of acknowledgement of importance,” is a failure to show the necessary respect to others, and failing to value and notice others. Twenty-five responses are categorized in this dimension (9.92% of total responses). The third dimension, “improper devaluation,” is verbal and physical abuse of others during interactions. Thirty responses were categorized in this dimension (11.91% of total responses). The fourth dimension, “political struggle,” is infighting to enhance competitiveness. Twenty-five responses are categorized in this dimension (9.92% of total responses).

The fifth dimension, “stubbornness in action,” is displaying stubbornness and not working well with others. Thirty-one responses are categorized in this dimension (12.30% of total responses). The sixth dimension, “selfishness,” is valuing only one’s own

Table 1. Dimensions, Definitions, Categories, and Frequencies of Interpersonal Stressors (N = 252)

Dimensions	Definitions	Categories	Frequencies (%)
Similar			
Social Isolation	Inability to express empathy toward others and ignoring others’ calls for help .	Lack of empathy, isolation, standing around without doing anything.	25 (9.92%)
Lack of Acknowledgement of Importance	Does not show the necessary respect to others, and does not value or notice others.	Lack of respect, returning kindness with ingratitude.	25 (9.92%)
Improper Devaluation	Verbal and physical abuse during interactions.	Offensive verbal attacks, grumbling.	30 (11.91%)
Political Struggle	Infighting to enhance competitiveness.	Interpersonal comparison, jealousy of others’ abilities	25 (9.92%)
Extended			
Stubbornness in Action	Stubbornness and not working well with others.	Stubbornness, hard to work with.	31 (12.30%)
Selfishness	Valuing only one’s own interests and disregarding the rights and needs of others.	Motivated only by self-interest, seeking only the betterment of oneself.	19 (7.54%)
False Courtesy	Forced friendliness with others and following norms.	Strive for harmony, hypocrisy, peer pressure.	15 (5.95%)
Excessive Requirements	Excessive demands on oneself.	Excessive demands, getting greedy, inability to separate work and private requests.	39 (15.48%)
Persuasion via Interpersonal Relationship	Ask for repayments on the basis of interpersonal relationships and use privileges to persuade.	Relationship debts, relationship distress, privilege.	43 (17.06%)

interests and disregarding the rights and needs of others. Nineteen responses are categorized in this dimension (7.54% of total responses). The seventh dimension, “false courtesy,” is forcedly showing friendliness to others and following norms. Fifteen responses are categorized in this dimension (5.95% of total responses). The eighth dimension, “excessive requirements,” is making excessive demands of oneself. Thirty-nine responses are categorized in this dimension (15.48% of total responses). The last dimension, “persuasion via interpersonal relationship,” is asking for repayments on the basis of interpersonal relationships and using privileges to persuade others. Forty-three responses are categorized in this dimension (17.06% of total responses).

Table 2 shows the logistic analysis of the interpersonal stressor dimensions. As only a few cases are associated with outsiders, we exclude these cases from

this analysis. “Lack of acknowledgement of importance” and “excessive requirements” are significantly predicted by supervisors. “Political struggle” is significantly predicted by colleagues. The other dimensions are not influenced by the sources of the stressful incident.

Conclusion

This study identifies the interpersonal stressors in Chinese organizations. Nine dimensions are identified. Some dimensions, i.e., social isolation, lack of acknowledgement of importance, improper devaluation, and political struggle, are similar to stressors in Western contexts, but other dimensions, such as stubbornness in action, selfishness, false courtesy, excessive requirements, and persuasion via interpersonal relationship, have not been identified in other studies. The results show that our

Table 2. Logistic Analysis of Interpersonal Stressor Dimensions (N = 219)

Dimensions	Control variables					Independent variables	Chi-square Test
	Gender β	Age β	Marriage β	Education β	Job level β	Source β	
Similar							
Social Isolation	.12 (.47)	-.01 (.06)	.25 (.59)	.04 (.62)	-.26 (.57)	-.12 (.45)	.59
Lack of acknowledgement of Importance	.20 (.53)	.10 (.06)	-1.77* (.72)	-1.15 (.80)	.83 (.59)	-1.12* (.49)	15.84*
Improper Devaluation	-.61 (.45)	-.02 (.07)	-.66 (.64)	.12 (.51)	.82 (.63)	.25 (.48)	7.22
Political Struggle	1.30 (.69)	-.32* (.99)	1.09 (.59)	-1.79 (1.13)	.05 (.85)	1.62* (.69)	43.39**
Extended							
Stubbornness in Action	.24 (.44)	.05 (.05)	.40 (.64)	.92 (.55)	.22 (.50)	.51 (.48)	7.39
Selfishness	-.05 (.52)	.08 (.06)	-.65 (.62)	-1.26 (.83)	-.71 (.61)	1.28 (.66)	9.29
False Courtesy	-.41 (.61)	.05 (.07)	.88 (.96)	1.05 (.78)	-.62 (.71)	.22 (.63)	3.85
Excessive Requirements	-.54 (.54)	.17* (.08)	1.02 (.66)	-.14 (.77)	.37 (.71)	-1.96** (.51)	21.41**
Persuasion via Interpersonal Relationship	-.42 (.41)	.07 (.05)	-.51 (.55)	.09 (.48)	-.50 (.51)	.04 (.41)	4.54

Note. The numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female); Marriage (0 = unmarried, 1 = married); Education (1 = university, 2 = master degree; 3 = PhD); Job level (0 = employee, 1 = supervisor); Source (0 = supervisor, 1 = colleague).

dimensions are more integrated and have more clarity.

Overall, the results suggest that cultural values should be considered in research on interpersonal stressors. The new interpersonal stressor constructs incorporate a Chinese culture perspective into the analysis. This study contributes to the identification of interpersonal stressors for Chinese workers, and has practical implications for the management of employees' job stress. The limitations of this study are discussed and possible directions for future study are indicated. In addition, we discuss some managerial implications for human resources managers.