

Exploring Perceived Stress and Coping Styles in Male and Female Employed Professionals

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Abstract: Coping with stress is a vital aspect for individuals aged between 30 - 65 years, due to the plethora of demanding stressors in their lives. It is not unknown that individuals in this age bracket, especially when under employment, portray higher stress levels which in turn demand for both healthy and unhealthy coping styles. Perceived stress and coping styles of salaried males and females have been explored in this research. The chosen sample (n=80) comprised of male and female mid - level to senior level working professionals, falling between the 35 - 60 years of age category. All professionals reside and work in the city of Kolkata, West Bengal. The perceived stress scale (Cohen) and Brief Cope Scale (Carver) were utilized as the primary tools for the study. Independent samples t - test through SPSSv.20., revealed no significant difference ($p>0.05$) between the perceived stress levels (mean= 16.98 and 18.46 respectively) and coping styles utilized by the male and female sample. It was further found that both males and females prefer taking a problem focused approach when it comes to coping with stress followed by emotion - focused coping and lastly avoidant coping.

Keywords: Perceived stress, coping styles, working professionals

1. Introduction

Professional requirements have changed drastically over the last 3 years considering the prevalence of the pandemic explosion. The topic of work stress has remained as one of the most well researched topics since the last century. Studies have only made it clear that stress has increased over time in working adults owing to growing industrial demands. Research began at the question of work family conflict and has now reached the point where work and personal life is being studied an enmeshed format. This highlights how a working individual is exposed to both work and personal life stressors. In order to deal with the integrated work and life stress every individual resort to a variety of coping mechanisms that is further categorized into 2 - 3 specific coping styles. Few of these coping styles are regarded as healthy and functional. This makes the study of stress and coping style imperative to identify the level of stress and coping styles used maximally by male and female working professionals individually. Gaining a compartmentalized view of the males and female working professionals shall help us identify requirements and develop functional strategies to not only reduce stress but as well reassure whether any particular coping style should be regarded as the ultimate.

Before we proceed it's important for us to understand stress. Stress is the body's response to any demands, changes, or threats. Stress is considered healthy when it can facilitate awareness to threats so consider it as desirable. According

to the psychological perspective, a stressful experience cannot be inferred by uniform reference to any particular event. Rather, such an inference necessarily depends on how such an event is construed by the individual. This approach is represented by Lazarus and Folkman's (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus and Folkman, 1986, as cited by Cohen et al., 2016) seminal work on stress appraisal, which proposes that people appraise both the degree of potential threat posed by events and the availability of resources needed to cope with them. Threat appraisals of events are influenced by the imminence of harm and the intensity, duration, and potential controllability of the event, as well as by individuals' beliefs about themselves and the environment, their values and commitments, and related personality dispositions. Coping appraisals may focus on actions designed to directly alter the perceived threatening event or on the viability of thoughts or actions that are intended to change emotional and behavioral responses to the event. A threat appraisal without the belief that effective coping responses are available is experienced as stress, which engenders emotional responses including worry, fear, and anxiety.

Coping strategies is a stabilizing factor that help to individuals for maintain mental adaptation during the stressful events. The coping process is a very complex response that occurs when a person is exposed to stress or a perceived threat from the environment. Schoenmakers et al. (2015) showed two types of coping styles; problem - centered and emotion - focused, in problem - focused coping person ignore the stressful position, while emotion -

focused coping person rapidly reduction or adjustment with stress. Therefore, it can be concluded that using different coping techniques, including problem - centered and emotion - focused skills, are needed to effectively deal with stress. Orzechowska et al. (2013) in own study showed a significant link between coping and psychological symptoms, so only 25%–35% of those who had psychological symptoms used some effective coping strategies and more aware to recent stressful life events in their lives, as well. McCarthy in 2018 found a significant relationship between coping styles and mental health is different in both sexes. They also demonstrated that among coping styles, problem - oriented and emotion - oriented styles with sexual variables in predictors of mental health played a role. In other study revealed that coping skills play a predictive role in the mental health of adolescents and young inmates (Hanna et al., 2019)

Gender affects each element in the stress process as much in the input, by determining whether a situation will be perceived as stressful, as in the output, influencing coping responses and the health implications of stress reactions (Barnett et al., 1987). Although the literature examining the relation between gender and stress reveals several conflicting outcomes, numerous authors have determined that women find themselves in stressful circumstances more often than men (e. g., Almeida & Kessler, 1998; McDonough & Walters, 2001). Other authors have suggested that it is possible that women appraise threatening events as more stressful than men do (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992). Furthermore, women have been found to have more chronic stress than men (McDonough & Walters, 2001; Nolen - Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999) and are exposed to more daily stress associated with their routine role functioning (Kessler & McLeod, 1984 as cited by Matud, 2004). Women are also more likely to report home and family life events as stressful (Oman & King, 2000) and stress related to gendered caring roles (Lee, 1999, Lee, 2001). In addition, women experience gender - specific stressors such as gender violence and sexist discrimination, which are associated with women's physical and psychiatric events (Heim et al., 2000; Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000). Women happen to be affected by stress perception of people in their closest surroundings due to their emotional perception and involvement in their social circles (Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Turner et al., 1995).

Gender differences in the selection of coping strategies have been identified, with males adopting more problem focused strategies and females adopting a more emotion focused approach (Ptacek et al., 1994). We must say that there are many disputes on this subject and it hasn't been yet clarified through experimental studies. Thus, the results of a 1995 study of Porter & Stone shows that a part of the men who adopt a direct - action style in stressful situations, while women mostly use avoidance as a punctual strategy. Another study from 2004 indicated that the women scored significantly higher than the men in chronic stress and minor daily stressors. The women scored significantly higher than the men on the emotional and avoidance coping

styles and lower on rational and detachment coping. The men were found to have more emotional inhibition than the women. (Matud, 2004)

2. Methodology

The present study adopted a non - experimental quantitative approach to explore the level of perceived stress and 3 primary coping styles in working males and females within the age range of 35 - 60 years.

The objective of the study is to identify whether the level of perceived stress of males and female working professionals and the whether any significant difference exists between the two. The second objective of the study is to find the primary coping style used by the male and female professionals and if any significant difference exists in the same.

Hypothesis -

- 1) There is no significant difference between the perceived stress levels of male and female working professionals
- 2) There is no significant difference between the coping styles used by male and female working professionals.

Tools Used

The present study has utilized majorly two tools to assess perceived stress and primary coping styles of males and female working professionals, namely -

Perceived Stress Scale - The Perceived Stress Scale was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) to measure the perception of stress levels by individuals. It is a 5 - grade Likert - type scale that consists of 14 items in total. Cohen (1988) shortened the PSS - 14 and removed 4 items to make PSS - 10 for improvising item reliability. In this research study the PSS - 10 has been used. PSS - 10 is known to have adequate internal consistency reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78. Other studies have also reported that the PSS - 10 has good internal consistency reliability (Barbosa - Leiker et al., 2013), and adequate convergent validity based on associations with measures of physical and mental health (e. g; Mitchell et al., 2008).

Brief COPE Scale (BCS) - The Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997) was designed to assess a broad range of coping responses among adults and can be used for anyone aged above 12. It contains 28 items and is rated on a four - point Likert scale. COPE is the abbreviated version of Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced and the measure has 14 styles distributed into 3 kinds of primary coping strategies - acceptance, emotional social support, humour, positive reframing, and religion as emotion focused coping. On the other hand, active coping, instrumental support, and planning are considered as problem - focused strategies. Finally, behavioural disengagement, denial, self - distraction, self - blaming, and substance use and venting forms the dysfunctional coping strategy group (Carver, 1997). The BCS has revealed to have good internal consistency and is reliable and valid for use. Item - total correlation coefficients and Cronbach's alpha coefficients

were found to be ≥ 0.70 revealing fair internal consistency reliability of the test. The Goodness - of - fit index (GFI) being ≥ 0.95 makes it a good fit. In a study on Malaysian cancer patients, discriminant analysis was performed to show that the scale was able to differentiate between the coping strategies used by women who have undergone mastectomy and lumpectomy in domains like Active coping and Planning at $p < 0.01$ and Acceptance at $p < 0.05$ indicating the test being reliable and valid. (Yusoff, Low & Yip, 2010).

3. Procedure

The population chosen for the study was (a) males and females within the age range of 35 - 60 years, (b) mid - level to senior level working professionals, (c) belonging from healthcare, education and the marketing sector (d) with a work experience of at least 10 years and (e) with graduate being the lowest educational limit. Purposive sampling was followed to gather the sample for the present study. All the participants were working within the Kolkata municipality. The sample was then distributed into 2 study groups - group 1 being males and group 2 being females. The study was conducted on 80 participants out of which 40 were males and 40 were females. Participants belonging from the lower and upper socioeconomic status were excluded from the study. All participants in the study were strictly biological males and females not undergoing any form of physical and psychiatric illness. The present study considered only married participants with at least one offspring. The tools used in the study, i. e., Perceived Stress Scale and Brief Cope Scale were then procured from verified and ethical sources online. All the items and instructions from the tools mentioned above were organized with accuracy and serially into a soft copy by the help of Google forms. A set of questions regarding the participant's socio - demographic details - marital status, educational background, socioeconomic status, professional details etc., were added at the beginning of the form along with the consent form for data collection. The subjects were assured that all their responses were to be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes. The link to the Google Form with the set of questions was then passed on to the population aged between 35 - 60 years through various social media platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp for data collection as well as through survey method. The participants were informed regarding the purpose of the research before filling up the form. Descriptive statistics to assess the mean and S. D. of perceived stress, problem focused, emotion focused and dysfunctional coping styles. Independent samples t - test was also computed to find statistical differences between the two groups of study. All statistical computation was computed by IBM SPSS version 16.

4. Results

Table 1: Mean and SD scores of Perceived Stress

| Variables | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | T score |
|-----------|----|-------|--------------------|---------|
| Male | 40 | 16.98 | 5.83 | - 0.187 |
| Female | 40 | 18.46 | 3.78 | |

Table 2: Mean and SD scores of COPING STYLES used by male and female professionals

| Variables | Sample | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t - score |
|-----------------|--------|----|------|--------------------|-----------|
| Problem Focused | Male | 40 | 2.74 | 0.79 | - 0.404 |
| | Female | 40 | 2.82 | 0.71 | |
| Emotion Focused | Male | 40 | 2.20 | 0.73 | - 0.471 |
| | Female | 40 | 2.27 | 0.54 | |
| Avoidant Coping | Male | 40 | 1.80 | 0.61 | 0.761 |
| | Female | 40 | 1.70 | 0.52 | |

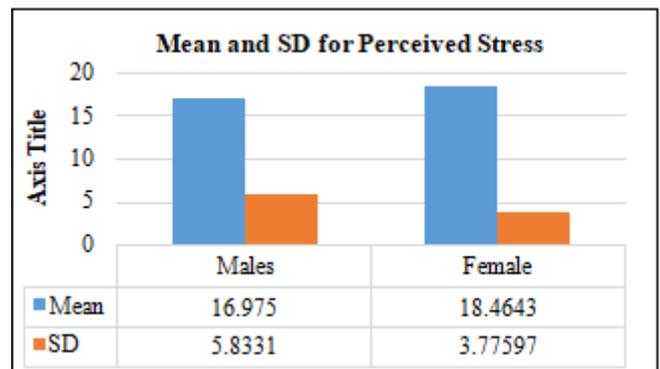


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of mean and S. D. of Perceived Stress

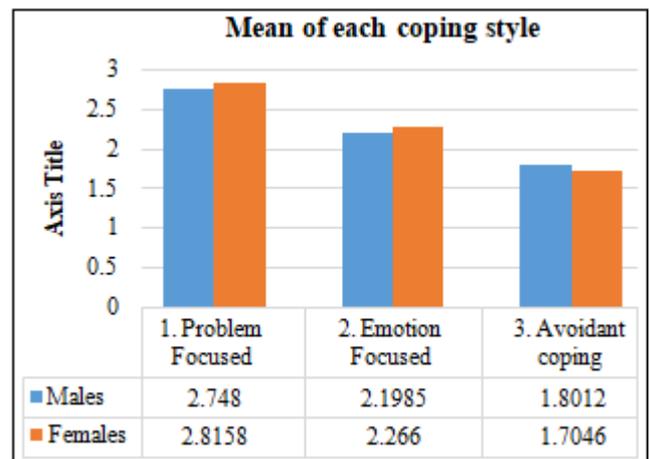


Figure 2: Graphical Representation of mean and S. D. of coping styles.

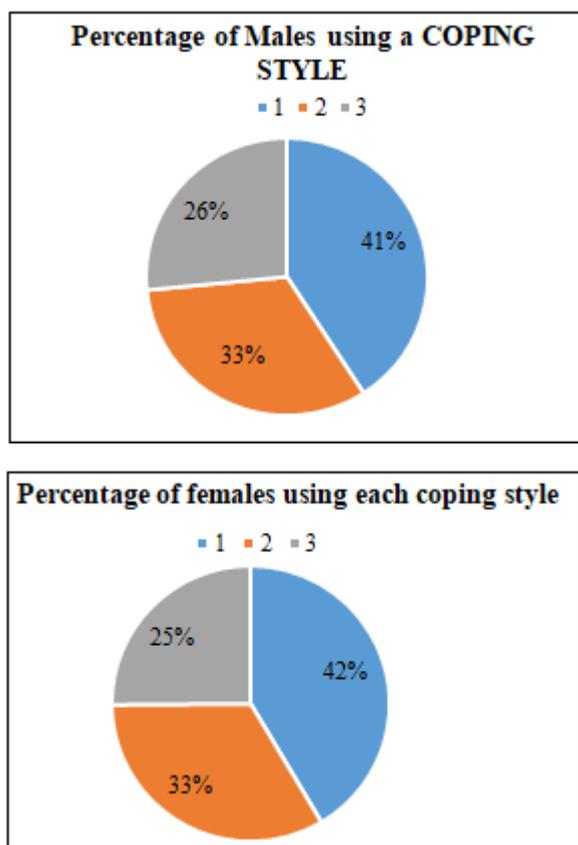


Figure 3: Pie chart showing the percentage of male and female sample using each coping style

Legend

- 1) Problem Focused Coping
- 2) Emotion Focused Coping
- 3) Avoidant Coping

Table 1 shows scores of males and females within the age range of 35 - 60 years, mid - level to senior level working professionals, belonging from healthcare, education and the marketing sector, with a work experience of at least 10 years and with graduate being the lowest educational limit. The computation was done by summing up all the scores for 40 males and 40 females.

Scores reveal that the mean for males is 19.78 and females is 18.46, indicating that there is no significant difference between the two. The mean scores for females have been found to be slightly higher than the males. The Standard Deviation between males and females stands as 5.83 and 3.78 respectively. Hence, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

Scores in table 2 indicates the coping styles adopted by males and females within the age range of 35 - 60 years, mid - level to senior level working professionals, belonging from healthcare, education and the marketing sector, with a work experience of at least 10 years and with graduate being the lowest educational limit. The mean for males in problem - focused coping is 2.74 and for females is 2.82, for emotion - focused coping the score for males and females stands as 2.20 and 2.27 respectively. For avoidant coping, males obtained a mean score of 1.80 and females it was 1.70. The mean scores indicate no such significant difference amongst

the genders. The Standard Deviation for males in problem - focused coping is 0.79 and for females is 0.71, for emotion - focused coping the score for males and females stands as 0.73 and 0.54 respectively. For avoidant coping in males is 0.61 and for female is 0.52. The mean scores indicate no such significant difference amongst the genders as well. 42% and 41% of males and females respectively, in the sample use problem - focused coping style. 33% of both males and females utilize emotion focused coping styles and 25% and 26% of males and females respectively employ avoidant - focused coping styles.

The scores also imply that both the genders show dominance in adopting Problem - focused coping style as the mean and S. D scores are the highest as compared with the other coping style, viz. emotion - focused coping style and avoidant coping style. However, both the genders viz, male and female indicate no significant difference in adopting coping styles. Hence, hypothesis 2 is accepted.

5. Discussion

Although the literature examining the relation between gender and stress reveals several conflicting outcomes, numerous authors have determined that women find themselves in stressful circumstances more often than men (e. g., Almeida & Kessler, 1998; McDonough & Walters, 2001). The reason why females tend to perceive stress is more has been explored previously. In context to the present sample the females belonged to the middle - class income group with a working background at varying from mid - level to senior level professional strata. It is not unknown that working women have higher stress levels as compared to non - working women (Patil, 2016; Bharadwaj, 2019). This result may be observed because of the responsibility that a woman has to take up particularly in India. In this study, the sample belonged to particularly to three sectors - healthcare, marketing and education. Considering the job demands of the sectors along with the age category that is above 35 years of age to 60 years of age, higher perceived stress in females is justified. Stress perception in females be it employed or unemployed have been found to be higher as compared to males of the same category in recent research (Costa et al., 2021). Studying into the scores, both males and females in the midlevel to senior level professional strata have been found to have moderate stress level, where overall functioning of the individual remains unharmed. This may be due to the coping styles and strategies used by the sample.

Previous literature has highlighted a variety of coping strategies utilized by both males and females and they reveal that males happen to use problem solving coping styles and strategies, like planning and active coping, compared to females. In females, emotion focused coping styles has been observed to be the primary coping mechanism like seeking social support, at times of extreme stress as per reviewed literature. In contrast to existing literature, this study has found females at the midlevel to senior level designations happen to utilize problem focused strategies to cope with their stress. This finding may be due to a few reasons,

primarily their age - women above 35 years happen to have settled in their personal life where their emotional needs are quite much met and responsibility supersedes emotional requirements. Secondly, women at the higher work designations are expected to be having resilience to meet the plethora of stressors on a daily basis, which further enhances their ability to utilize problem solving strategies in dealing with stress. Thirdly, ambitious individuals happen to possess stronger problem management abilities as compared to low achieving individuals (Love, et al., 2011).

In the present study the sample was found to be utilizing problem solving coping strategies followed by emotion focused coping and avoidant coping style. This variation in the valence in the usage of the three coping styles may be understood from their professional as well as age standpoint. All the three professional sectors of marketing, healthcare and education happen to require active planning, decision making, problem solving and readiness at the work sphere. Perhaps, consistent cognitive engagement improvises a person's ability to cope with moderate levels of stress and hence problem focused coping styles deems to fit for the present sample. High usage of cognitive capacities sometimes, leads to burn out and exhaustion. At such level, any individual would tend to their emotions for relief and rejuvenation. Therefore, this may be a reason for emotion focused coping to be one of the preferred ways to cope with stress for the present sample. High job demands and familial responsibilities as the age level that has been taken into account often leaves no room for avoiding stress and indulging in pleasurable activities to cope with stress. In the present study, the least preferred coping style is the avoidant type which may be justified to the above reason.

Although much more research is required in this field to understand coping in male and female working professionals, this research concludes no such significant difference to be observed in coping styles or perceived stress levels of male and female working adults aged 35 years and above. This study may be utilized to build programs to manage stress at the workplace and improve job output and health of employees.

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