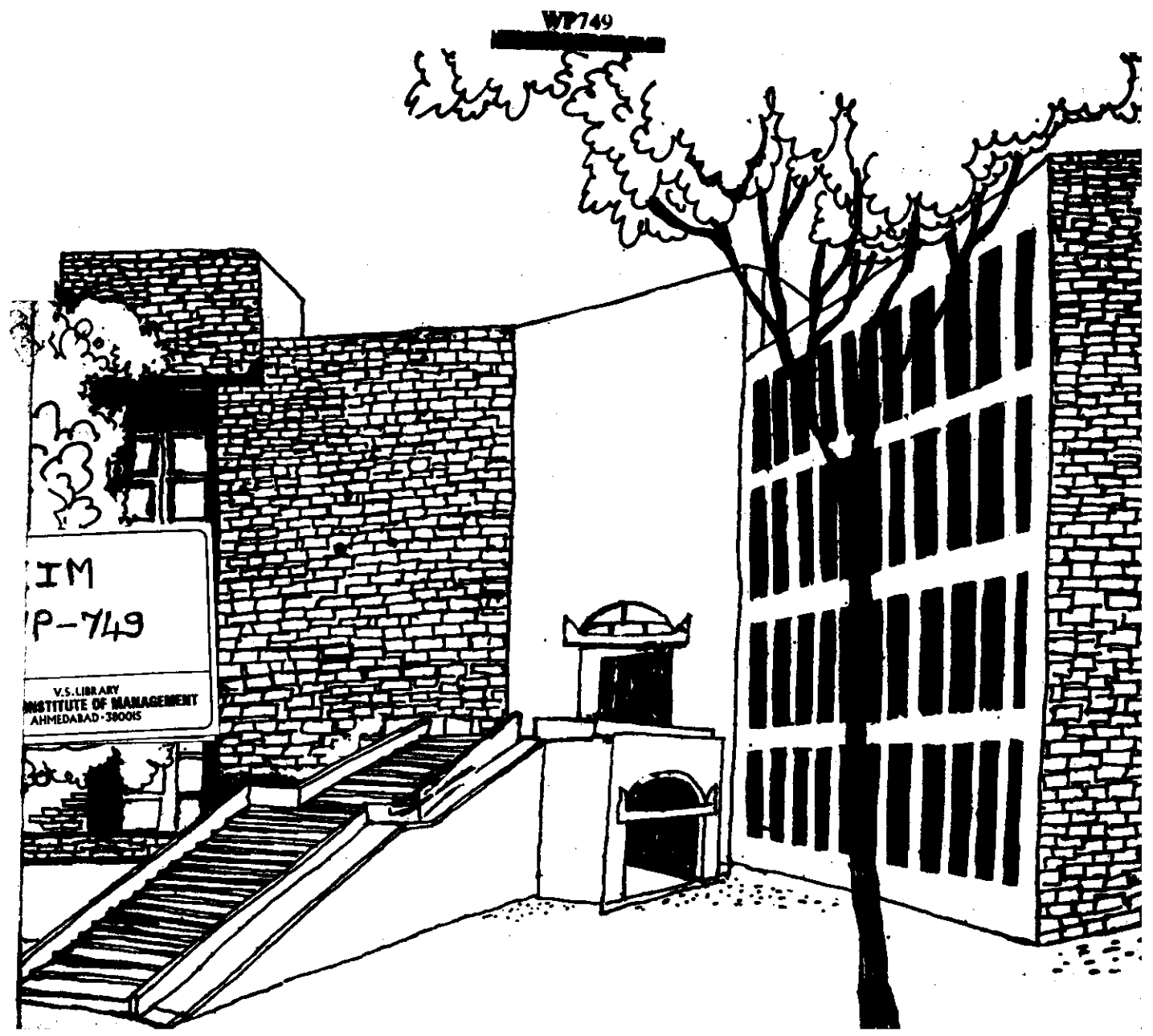




Working Paper

WP749



A STUDY OF ROLE STRESSES IN TOP AND
MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

By

D.M. Pestonjee

WP749

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WP

1988/749

W P No. 749

May, 1988

The main objective of the working paper series of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test out their research findings at the pre-publication stage.

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD-380015
INDIA

ABSTRACT

In the present study, attempt is made to explore the types of role stresses experienced by top and middle management personnel and to establish the degree of relationship among these role stress variables. 'ORS Scale' developed and standardized by Pareek (1983) was administered on a sample of 221 top managers and 326 middle managers. This scale measures ten types of role stresses as well as overall role stress. Critical ratio test, median test and Pearson's product moment coefficients of correlation were used to analyse the data.

Findings of the study revealed that Middle managers (MMG) scored significantly higher on interrole distance, personal inadequacy, self-role distance and resource inadequacy. Role expectation conflict, role ambiguity and overall role stress were also found to be significantly higher in case of middle managers (MMG) as compared to top managers (TMG). Out of 55 coefficients of correlation among role stress factors, 53 for top managers and 51 for middle managers emerged as statistically significant. In the light of findings, implications of the study are also discussed.

A STUDY OF ROLE STRESSES IN TOP AND MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

By

Dr. D.M. Pestonjee
Professor, Organisational Behaviour
Indian Institute of Management
Ahmedabad 380015, Gujarat
INDIA

Introduction

An extremely important part of life, the work, plays a central role in overall health and happiness of individuals. There is a growing awareness of significant impact of work on life welfare and mental health as well as, high cost of dissatisfied workers to both, industry and society (Cooper and Fayne, 1978). Growing body of empirical researches in various organisational settings have concluded that almost every aspect of the job context for example, work activities, supervisory style, interpersonal patterns, the structure of job characteristics etc. can act as potential stressors. Scholars for example, Beehr and Newman (1978) and Van-Sell et al (1981) among others, have found that personal characteristics are equally responsible for both, the focal person's perception of stressors as well as reactions to them. Some of the personality variables which were examined to assess the individual's sensitivity to stress situations are locus of control (Spielberger, 1966), job involvement (Weissenberg and Gruenfeld, 1968) and many demographic

variables like age, sex, educational level, organisational tenure etc. An overview of the large literature that deals with these spheres reveal important achievements mixed with certain discontinuities and deficiencies. For example, it is striking that despite the attention given separately to various personal and job/organisational stressors in causation of stress reactions, there is hardly any study which dealt with the intricate linkage that prevails between different type of role stresses and state-trait anger and/or type-A pattern of behavioural disposition.

Scholarly work, so far done in the field of stress may be categorised in three major conceptual domains: (i) the sources of stress, (ii) the mediators of stress, and (iii) the manifestations of stress (Peartin, Menaghan, Lieberman and Mullan, 1981). As regards sources of stress, researchers report of two major segments namely, environment and person that interacts, resulting in various stress reactions. Empirical findings suggest that occupational stress is not a characteristic of either environment or person. Instead, it is the consequence of interaction of these two. For example, Lazarus (1971) emphasized that an individual's perception of a situation, referred to as the 'cognitive appraisal', defines that situation as stressful. Individual's response depends on the appraisal and it is this appraisal which concludes that the situation is harmful, disgusting or challenging. Appley (1962) designated this appraisal by the term 'threat perception'. Stress, thus can be viewed as the

outcome of incongruence or lack of person-environment fit. Hence, greater the incongruence of fit, the more significant the level of experienced stress (Lofquist and Dawis, 1969; Marshal and Cooper, 1978).

Figure 1 presents conceptual framework used to formulate this study in which stress is presented as the outcome of the interaction of environment and person factors. Organisational behaviour scientists (Kahn et al 1964; Rizzo, House and Lirtzman; 1970, Pareek, 1981; Morris and Koch;1979) attempted to identify role stresses in the conceptual framework of role theory. The stressors are the elements in the organisational environment that contribute to the personally experienced stress. The present study focuses only on the potential role stresses arising from the role set and role space of the managers/administrators working in public and private organisations. In this regard a fit between a person and the environment implies conditions that are described by Lofquist and Dawis (1969) as 'harmonious'. In such a situation, there would be low levels of stress as well as high levels of satisfaction. The framework presented in Fig. 1 suggests that an individual's experience of stress is reflected in discrepancies between the environmental stressors (e.g., role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, self-role distance, interrole distance etc.) and person-stressors (e.g., type-A behaviour, state anger, trait anger, locus of control etc.).

Organisational Role Stressors

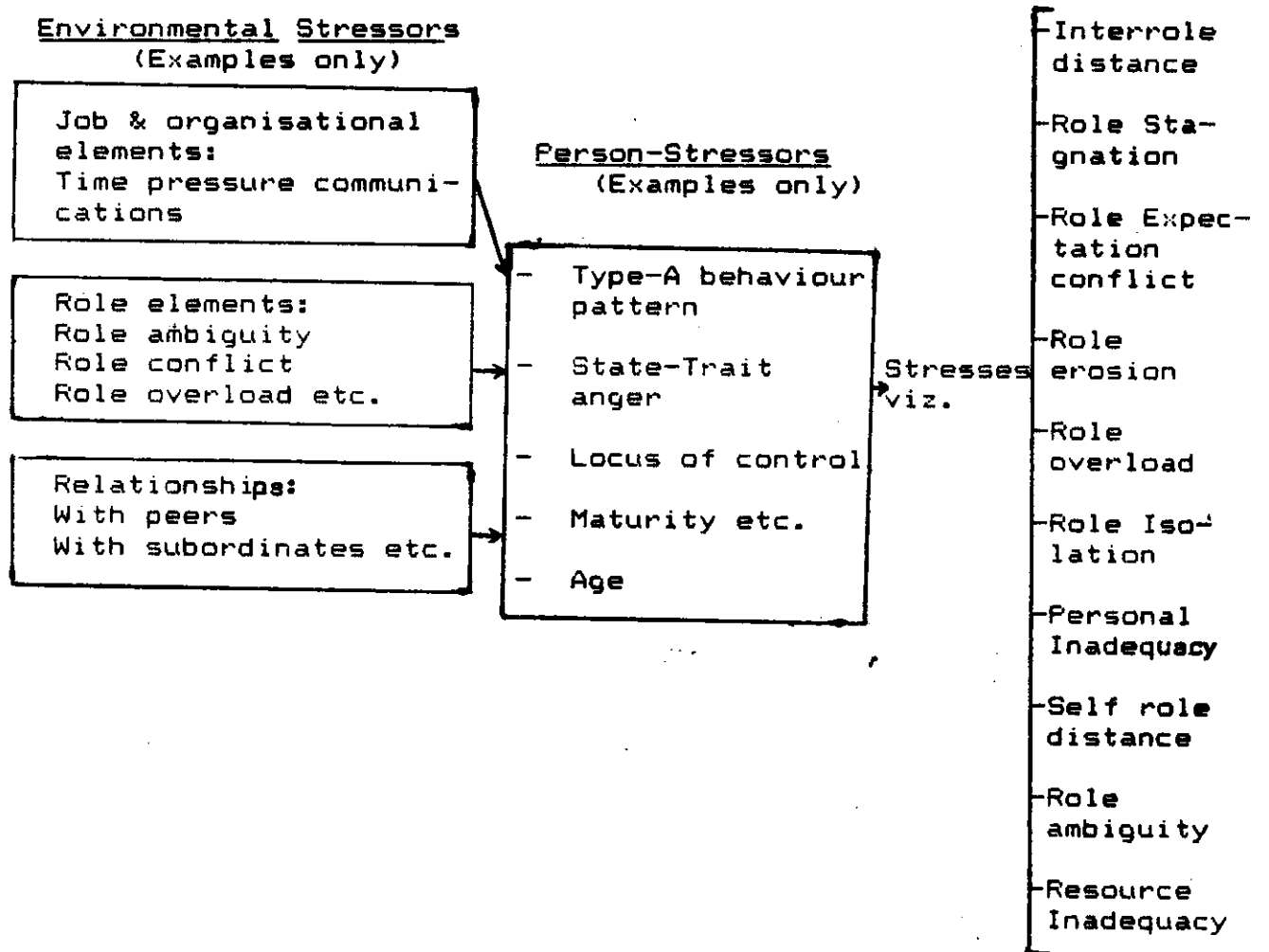


Figure 1

Katz and Kahn (1966) suggest that role concepts are the major means for linking the individual and the organisation. It is at once the building block of social systems and the summation of the requirements with which such systems confront their members as individual. Pareek (1976) defined this term as "any position a person holds in a systems (organisation) as defined by the expectations of various

significant persons including himself have from that position". Since the concept of "role" is inextricably linked with "expectation", the organisational factors like time pressure, frequency of change, organisational level, task characteristics etc. as well as organisational context assume importance due to their influence on a particular position. Further, the concept of 'role' as proposed above involves several variables like the self, the other roles, the expectation held by the other roles and the expectations held by the self. It is, therefore extremely difficult to imagine a situation in an organisation in which there is no conflict among these variables. The very nature of role, in fact, has built-in potential for stress.

The area of role stress has been systematically explored. In their initial attempt, Kahn et al (1964) identified four basic types of role strain or job related tensions such as person-role conflict, intrasender conflict, interrole conflict and intersender conflict. Rizzo, House and Litzman (1970) in a factorial analysis, verified two basic constructs of role stress, namely, role conflict and role ambiguity and related these constructs to threat and anxiety, discomfort, pleasantness, work satisfaction, turnover and decision delay. Kiretz and Moos (1974) proposed three factors in the effect of stress. These are: kind of adjustment required; perception of control over stress source and valance (for example, loss in death vs gain in marriage or bussiness). Pareek (1981) on the basis of theoretical

speculation and statistical analysis has identified ten different types of role stresses prevalent in any organisational setting. These are described by him as follows:

1. Inter-role distance (IRD):

An individual occupies more than one role at a time. His organisational role may often come into conflict with his family role or with roles in other organisations or groups. The distance or conflict among these various roles represents inter-role distance.

2. Role Stagnation (RS):

This kind of stress is the result of gap between demand to outgrow his previous role and to occupy new role effectively. Such a type of stress results into perception that there is no opportunity for one's career progression. This perception may be more intense when the role occupant holds a role for longer period and enters in new role in which he feels less secure.

3. Role Expectation Conflict (REC):

This type of stress is generated by different expectations by different significant persons about the same role. It is possible that the significant persons differ in their expectation about the same role and the role occupant is ambivalent as to whom to please.

4. Role Erosion (RE):

This type of role stress is the function of the role occupant's feeling that some functions which should properly be belonging to his role are transferred to/or performed by some other role. This can also happen when the functions are performed by the role occupant but the credit for them had gone to someone else.

5. Role Overload (RO):

When the role occupant feels that there are too many expectations from the significant roles in his role set, he experiences role overload. There are two aspects of this stress, quantitative and qualitative. The former refers to having 'too much to do' while later refers to 'too difficult'.

6. Role Isolation (RI):

This type of role stress refers to psychological distance between the occupant's role and other roles in the same role set. It is also defined as role distance which is different than inter role distance in the sense that IRD refers to the distance among various roles occupied by same individual. The frequency and ease of interaction among the roles is a measure of the strength of the linkage among the roles.

7. Personal Inadequacy (PI):

This type of stress arises when the role occupant feels that he does not have the necessary skills and training for effectively performing the functions

expected from his role. This is found to happen when the organisations do not import periodic training to enable the employees to cope with the fast changes both within and outside the organisation.

8. Self-Role Distance (SRD):

When the role a person occupies goes against his self concept, then he feels self-role distance type of stress. This is essentially a conflict arising out of mismatch between the person and his job.

9. Role Ambiguity (RA):

It refers to the lack of clarity about the expectations of role which may arise out of lack of information or understanding. It may exist in relation to activities, responsibilities, personal styles and norms and may operate at three stages:

- a) when the role sender holds his expectations about the role
- b) when he sends it, and
- c) when the occupant receives those expectations.

10. Resource Inadequacy (RIn):

This type of stress is evident when the role occupant feels that he is not provided with adequate resources for performing the functions expected from his role.

Role stresses identified by Pareek (1981) and presented above seem to account for overall role stress experienced by role occupants in the organisational settings. As a matter of fact, majority of studies have focused merely on seemingly

highly stressful occupations such as air traffic controllers (Rose, Jenkins and Hurst, 1978), police officers (Kroes, 1975) and army personnel in combat (Lazarus, 196). Is it not that prior judgements about the stress associated with any occupation or specially within an occupation can be inaccurate, and that inaccuracy can result in lack of management action to improve the work situation so that the stress is minimised. For example, management research literature for years has projected the assumption that top level managers in the organisations suffer the highest job stress (Coates and Pallegrin, 1975). However, the empirical findings portray a very different picture. Pell and D'Alonzo (1958) in a longitudinal study, for example, found that the incidence of heart attack was inversely related to occupational level. Marshall and Cooper (1978) reported that middle level managers experience higher job pressures than did their counterparts in a number of job areas. Kahn et al (1964) argued that role conflict and ambiguity are probably greater in middle management group as compared to their seniors or juniors. Thus, although a great deal of speculation and description for different levels of management is available, special attention usually is paid to the top level managers.

The reoccurring question is whether the top level managers are more at risk from role stress problems than other levels of management such as middle management personnel. Such issues can be resolved by studying multiple

stressors experienced by varying managerial groups. In the present study we propose to test following null hypotheses:

1. There will be no difference in levels of different role stress factors including overall role stress, experienced by top management (TMG) and middle management personnel (MMG).
2. Relationships among role stress factors will not be statistically significant in the two groups, namely, top management personnel (TMG) and middle management (MMG).

Methodology:

Sample:

221 top management personnel and 326 middle management personnel constituted the sample for present study. The average age of top and middle managers were 48.58 years respectively.

Instrument:

'Organisational Role Stress Scale' developed and standardized by Pareek (1981) has been used to obtain scores on different type of role stresses one encounters in his job. This scale measures ten different types of role stresses viz. interrole distance, role stagnation, role expectation conflict, role erosion, role overload, role isolation, personal inadequacy, self role distance, role ambiguity and resource inadequacy. There are 50 items in the questionnaire, 5 for each role stress dimension. The respondent is asked to mark 'Zero' if he rarely or never feels the way described in the item and 'four' if he very frequently or always feels the way

described in the item. The other shades of opinions are expressed in between. The total score for each role-stress is obtained simply by adding the scores of each item in a particular area. Total role stress score is obtained by adding the scores of various dimensions.

Procedure:

ORS Scale was administered on the respondents to obtain data pertaining to factors of role stress. The participation of respondents was voluntary and confidentiality of responses was assured.

Different statistical techniques were used to test the hypotheses. Critical ratio test and median test were carried out to compare mean scores obtained by each job category on factors of role stress. Product moment coefficients of correlation were computed between role stress factors for top and middle management groups to test the significance of relationship among the variables. The critical ratio values, chi-square values and coefficients of correlation obtained for above were checked at .05 and .01 level of significance.

Results:

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics namely, means, medians and standard deviations pertaining to different factors of role stresses for data on two sample groups, namely, top management and middle management. As regards overall organisational role stress, middle management group (MMG) scored higher (45.95) followed by top management group

(TMG) (41.95). As regards role stress factors, it is apparent from Table 1 that on 9 role stress factors namely, role stagnation, role-expectation conflict, role erosion, role overload, role isolation, personal inadequacy, role ambiguity, resource inadequacy and self-role distance, middle management group scored higher than top management group. The only exception was interrole distance on which TMG scored higher than MMG. It is evident from above that between two management groups, MMG experience more role stress.

Table 2 shows at a glance, ranks secured by each category on various factors contributing to overall role stress where '1' represents the highest score; '2' represents next highest score and so on uptill '10' which describes lowest obtained rank. As can be seen from this table, interrole distance and role erosion are the common contributor of role stress whereas role ambiguity and personal inadequacy rank the same in each group being the remote contributor of role stress.

The apparent differences in average scores of TMG and MG were tested for statistical difference. It was found that difference in mean scores of five role stress factors, namely, interrole distance (CR = 2.02, $P < .05$), role-expectation conflict (CR = 1.97, $P < .05$), personal inadequacy (CR = 6.03, $P < .01$), self-role distance (CR = 6.56, $P < .01$), role ambiguity (CR = 5.28, $P < .01$), resource inadequacy (CR = 2.85, $P < .01$) as well as overall role stress (CR = 1.99, $P < .05$) were statistically significant (Column

7; table 1). Table 3 summarises the findings of median test for this comparison group. It can be seen from the table 3, that median test further verified the significance of difference in mean scores of four role stress factors of this comparison group. The chi-square value for these factors, namely, interrole distance ($X^2 = 5.57$, $P < .02$), personal inadequacy ($X^2 = 8.55$, $P < .01$), self-role distance ($X^2 = 4.54$, $P < .05$) and resource inadequacy ($X^2 = 5.36$, $P < .05$) were found to be statistically significant. As compared to the findings of critical ratio test, in median test, role-expectation conflict ($X^2 = .86$, $P = NS$), role ambiguity ($X^2 = .42$, $P = NS$) and overall role-stress ($X^2 = 1.36$, $P = NS$) were found to be statistically insignificant indicating that apparent differences in mean scores of these factors may be attributed to the artifact of sampling fluctuations.

Results of correlational analysis between role stress factors for top and middle management groups are summarised in table 4 and 5 respectively. Some particular patterns of relationship among role stress variables are evident from these correlation matrix:

- i) All the ORS variables correlated positively with one another in both the data sets of management personnel. However, the only exception was RE vs RO for both top and middle management group which correlated negatively though insignificantly.
- ii) Magnitude of coefficients of correlation were found to vary from one job category to another (table 4 & 5).

it ranged between $-.06$ to $.79$ for top managers and between $-.04$ to $.73$ for middle managers.

iii) Most of the role stress variables were found to be significantly associated with other role stress variables in both the job categories. For example, five role stress factors such as role stagnation, role expectation conflict, role isolation, self role distance and role ambiguity as well as overall role stress associated significantly with all other role stress factors in both job categories. In case of top management group two more role stress factors, namely, interrole distance and resource inadequacy associated significantly with other role stress variables.

In case of top managers, inter-correlation of role erosion with role overload and personal inadequacy were found to be statistically insignificant whereas these variables (RE, RO and PI) associated significantly with other role stress variables. Similarly, in case of middle management group the intercorrelation of role erosion with interrole distance, role overload, personal inadequacy and resource inadequacy were also found to be insignificant. These variables (RE, RO, PI and RIn) correlated significantly with other role stress variables.

Conclusion:

As regards the first hypothesis, analysis revealed that middle managers experience significantly higher stress on six role stress variables as compared to top management group. These role stresses were role expectation conflict, personal inadequacy, self-role distance, role ambiguity, resource inadequacy and overall role stress. Our second null hypothesis was in regard to relationship between the role stress factors. It is evident from our discussion that correlation coefficients between factors of role stress were found to be positive and statistically significant. However, the only exceptions were two correlation coefficients (RE vs RO and RE vs PI) in case of top managers and four correlation coefficients (RE vs RO, RE vs PI, RE vs RIn and RE vs IRD) in case of middle managers.

Implications:

Whether it is top management or the middle management cadre, stress seems to be an important component of the executive life. There is, in fact, increasing awareness among both, researchers and executives that excellence in any sphere of life is essentially accompanied by stress. Of course, too high or too low stress is injurious for effective functioning of organisation as also the role incumbants. It is in this line of thought that when controlled and reigned in properly, it can add to quality of performance (Pestonjee, 1987). In the light of above some implications of the present study can be suggested as follows:

1. Need for Stress Audit:

Stress audit refers to the attempt organisations make to study, explore and control the various types of stress which the individual executives experience by virtue of their organisational membership. At least two important facts emerged in this study which emphasize the need for stress audit. One, some role stresses are significantly dominant for middle managers as compared to top managers (see table 1). Two, analysis of relative standing of mean scores of role stress factors in two job categories of managers reveals that each job category has its own pattern of dominant stressors. It is, therefore, necessary for organisations to have indepth knowledge of particular stressors, dominant for each job category. Stress audit is the best way to attain this objective.

2. Need for intervention to take care of organisational role stress:

Table 4 and 5 show that organisational role stresses covary in case of both, top and middle management group. In other words, presence of one stressor may be viewed as catalyst for other dormant stressors and vice-versa. Organisations, therefore are suggested to develop strategies to take care of role stresses. Several interventions such as use of scientific inputs, checking with family doctor, spreading the message, hard look at

oneself, staying alert, taking risks, avoiding isolation and stretching for success can be suggested in this regard (Pestonjee, 1987a).

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Table 1

Means, Medians and Standard Deviation Scores (Column 1 to 6) and Critical Ratio Value (with level of Significance) pertaining to role stress factors of TMG and MMG.

Sl. No.	Variables	MEAN		MEDIAN		STANDARD DEVIATION		Comparison Group I CR (TMG vs MMG) (7)
		Category (1)	Category (2)	Category (3)	Category (4)	Category (5)	Category (6)	
1.	IRD	6.07	6.06	7.00	5.00	4.67	4.50	2.02**
2.	RS	3.56	4.09	3.00	3.00	3.26	3.47	1.82
3.	REC	4.01	4.60	4.00	4.00	3.36	3.55	1.97**
4.	RE	6.94	7.09	7.00	7.00	3.88	3.92	NS
5.	RO	3.45	4.01	3.00	3.00	3.34	3.83	1.81
6.	RI	4.78	4.86	4.00	5.00	3.79	3.47	NS
7.	PI	2.66	3.83	2.00	3.00	2.70	3.50	6.03*
8.	SRD	3.54	4.22	3.00	3.00	2.89	4.63	6.56*
9.	RA	2.29	2.63	1.00	2.00	2.85	3.00	5.20*
10.	RIn	3.90	5.29	3.00	4.00	3.45	7.18	2.85*
11.	ORS (Total)	41.95	45.95	39.00	43.00	22.72	23.59	1.99**

Category I = TMG
 Category II = MMG
 * Significant at .01 level
 ** Significant at .05 level

Table 2

Relative standing of mean scores of role stress factors in top management and middle management personnel

S1. No.	Variables	Category I Top Mgt.	Category II MMG
1.	IRD	II	II
2.	RS	VI	VII
3.	REC	IV	V
4.	RE	I	I
5.	RO	VIII	VIII
6.	RI	III	VI
7.	PI	IX	IX
8.	SRD	VII	VI
9.	RA	X	X
10.	RIn	V	III

Table 3

Median test for comparison of scores on role stress factors as well as overall role stress between top and middle management personnel

Sl. No.	Variables	Category I (T.M.G)	Category II (M.M.G)	X ²	p
1.	IRD High Low	113 93	135 173	5.57	.02
2.	RS High Low	117 72	200 84	3.35	.10
3.	REC High	114 87	176 111	.86	NS
4.	RE High Low	117 89	172 115	.37	NS
5.	RO High Low	87 110	146 144	1.56	NS
6.	RI High Low	108 91	168 125	.36	NS
7.	PI High Low	98 99	139 109	8.55	.01
8.	SRD High Low	96 99	161 119	4.54	.05
9.	RA High Low	107 81	166 109	.42	NS
10.	RIn High Low	103 93	186 107	5.36	.05
11.	ORS(T) High Low	111 104	184 138	1.36	NS

Table 4

Intercorrelation among role stress factors in case of top management personnel
(N = 221)

Sl. No.	Variables	IRD	RS	REC	RE	RO	RI	PI	SRD	RA	RIn	ORS(T)
1.	IRD	X	.30*	.36*	.14**	.53*	.15**	.19*	.30*	.26*	.28*	.56*
2.	RS		X	.54*	.44*	.33*	.59*	.33*	.51*	.50*	.48*	.75*
3.	REC			X	.28*	.49*	.53*	.41*	.61*	.62*	.56*	.79*
4.	RE				X	-.06	.50*	.03	.46*	.40*	.30*	.54*
5.	RO					X	.22*	.34*	.30*	.32*	.38*	.57*
6.	RI						X	.28*	.55*	.60*	.56*	.74*
7.	PI							X	.35*	.31*	.33*	.50*
8.	SRD								X	.50*	.51*	.75*
9.	RA									X	.52*	.75*
10.	RIn										X	.73*
11.	ORS (T)											X

* Significant at .01 level

** Significant at .05 level

Table 5

Intercorrelation among role stress factors in case of middle management personnel
(N = 326)

Sl. No.	Variables	IRD	RS	REC	RE	RD	RI	PI	SRD	RA	RIIn	ORS(T)
1.	IRD	X	.31*	.36*	.03	.55*	.25*	.28*	.25*	.15*	.20*	.58*
2.	RS		X	.45*	.25*	.43*	.47*	.35*	.40*	.43*	.29*	.71*
3.	REC			X	.16*	.44*	.50*	.38*	.41*	.44*	.37*	.73*
4.	RE				X	-.04	.27*	.05	.24*	.30*	.10	.41*
5.	RD					X	.29*	.32*	.31*	.24*	.32*	.63*
6.	RI						X	.31*	.30*	.44*	.26*	.69*
7.	PI							X	.26*	.35*	.22*	.56*
8.	SRD								X	.41*	.23*	.55*
9.	RA									X	.35*	.65*
10.	RIIn										X	.49*
11.	ORS (T)											X

25

*Significant at .01 level.