

## Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

This study aims at investigating Romanian employees' intuitive beliefs concerning the causes of workplace stress as well as the solutions for reducing it. Another objectives aim to measure the gender differences at the level of these beliefs and the relation between these beliefs and the tenure. A total of 104 employees (50% women) who occupy various hierarchic levels in different organizations completed a questionnaire derived from the questions used in Rydstedt, Devereux, & Furnham's study (2004). The questionnaire contains items for the causes of workplace stress as well as for the solutions for reducing it. Factor analysis provided a solution with 6 factors for causes and 5 factors for solutions. *Age difference and conflict, gender differences, and supervisor attitude and job satisfaction* are the factors that reveal significant differences between men and women. Also, results show a negative significant correlation between the tenure in organization and the factor named *excess information and hierarchy*. Identifying its own employees' beliefs regarding stress can contribute to the organizational strategies development for the reduction and control of occupational stress.

**Key words:** stress source; gender differences; tenure; intuitive beliefs

### Résumé

La présente étude a pour objet l'analyse des croyances des employés roumains relatives aux facteurs susceptibles de provoquer le stress professionnel et l'identification des solutions visant la réduction de son incidence au travail. Un objectif sous-jacent est l'évaluation des différences de genre liées à ces croyances et des relations existant entre les croyances des employés et leur expérience de travail. Un échantillon de 104 personnes (dont 50% femmes) de diverses organisations et de niveaux hiérarchiques différents a complété un questionnaire dérivé de l'instrument utilisé par Rydstedt, Devereux et Furnham (2004). Le questionnaire comprend des items portant sur les causes du stress et sur les solutions visant la réduction de son incidence au travail. Par l'analyse factorielle, on a identifié 6 facteurs correspondant aux causes et 5 facteurs favorisant les solutions. Les résultats de l'analyse signalent l'existence de différences de genre significatives au niveau de trois facteurs : différence d'âge et conflit ; différences de genre ; attitude du superviseur et satisfaction au travail. Les résultats soulignent également la corrélation négative significative entre l'expérience de travail et le facteur « excès d'information et hiérarchie ». L'identification des croyances des employés sur le stress professionnel peut contribuer au développement de stratégies d'entreprise visant la gestion et la réduction du stress au travail.

**Mots clés:** causes du stress, différences de genre, expérience de travail, croyances intuitives

### Rezumat

Studiul de față urmărește analiza credințelor intuitive ale angajaților români privind factorii care pot cauza stres la locul de muncă, precum și soluțiile de reducere a acestuia. Un alt obiectiv urmărește măsurarea diferențelor de gen la nivelul acestor credințe, precum și evaluarea relațiilor dintre aceste credințe și experiența în organizație. Un număr de 104 persoane (50% femei) care ocupă nivele ierarhice diferite în diverse organizații au com-

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### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

pletat un chestionar derivat din instrumental utilizat de Rydstedt, Devereux și Furnham (2004). Chestionarul conține atât itemi referitori la cauzele stresului, cât și la soluțiile de reducere a acestuia. Prin analiză factoră, s-au identificat 6 factori pentru cauze și 5 factori pentru soluții. Rezultatele au evidențiat diferențe semnificative între bărbați și femei la nivelul a 3 factori: *diferența de vârstă și conflict*; *diferențe de gen*; *atitudinea supervisorului și satisfacția în muncă*. Alte rezultate arată o corelație semnificativă negativă între experiența în organizație și factorul numit *exces de informație și ierarhie*. Cunoașterea credințelor angajaților privind stresul ocupațional poate fi un punct de plecare în dezvoltarea strategiilor organizaționale de reducere și control al stresului la locul de muncă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** surse ale stresului, diferențe de gen, experiența în muncă, credințe intuitive

In Romania, during the last twenty years, significant economic shifts have taken place: important steps have been made in the transition from a controlled economy to a free-market system (Fein, Vasiliu, & Tziner, 2011, p. 516). Specific of today's Romanian society is a substantial growth in stress levels and an increase of the reactions towards what have been defined in the literature as „stressors” (Bogathy, 2007).

One of the most important faces of stress is *workplace stress*, considered to be a common concern for employers and employees, as well as for researchers, on an international, European and national level (Shirom, Oliver, & Stein, 2009).

Organizational stress – often called „occupational” or „professional” stress – has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in today's society, constituting a real social problem. It is generated by professional life and the work environment, bearing immediate consequences on the socio-professional activity, but also on the health of those carrying out the job (Pitariu, 2003). Probably now more than ever, stress due to one's workplace represents a threat to the health of the employees and of the organization. In this respect, the Council Directive passed by the European Council on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1989, on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work (89/391/EEC) compels all employers to protect the health and safety in the workplace of all employees.

#### The scientific perspective on work stress

In the workplace, stress occurs as a result of insufficient psychic resources for coping with the professional demands and requirements (Bren-

ninkmeijer, Demerouti, le Blanc, van Emmerik, & Hetty, 2010). In such situations, one can speak of occupational stress or professional activity stress. In order to provide a dynamic overall view of organizational stress, researchers (Lazarus, 1999; Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Spielberger, Vagg, & Wasala, 2001; Hastings & Brown, 2002) have tried to develop a series of explanatory models. Although the aim of this study is to capture and analyse the basic beliefs and intuitive explanations held by the people, about occupational stress, we'll describe in short three major scientific models of work stress: the person-environment, the demand-support-control, and the cognitive-behavioral approach. We selected these models, because the item content of the administered questionnaire refers to concepts as personal needs, demands had of the job, specifics of perception of control and support, these being notions that appear in the first two scientific models mentioned above. Because the answers of the participants depend on their personal, subjective interpretation of the stressors and solutions given in the questionnaire, we consider the cognitive-behavioral theory most appropriate.

#### – The Person-Environment Fit Theory

In person-environment fit theory, stress results neither from the person, nor from the environment, but from the degree of fit between the two (Spielberger et al., 2001). Stress may occur when the coping supplies do not match the person's needs, or, in some situations, when the coping supplies exceed the person's needs (Devereux, Hastings, & Noone, 2009). Similarly, stress occurs when the demands of the job exceed the person's capacities but it also may occur in some situations where the abilities exceed the demands. In person-environment fit theory, if the fit between the person and the environment is less

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

complete, individuals may experience workplace stress (Spielberger et al., 2001).

#### – *The Demand-Control-Support Model*

The demand-control-support model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) states that the generation of occupational stress is affected by the interaction between the perceptions of a person on the work demands, its control on the situation, and the support received. The demand-control-support model states that jobs that are high in demands, low in control and low in social support are those that exhibit the highest risk of stress for people.

#### – *The Cognitive-Behavioral Approach*

In the cognitive-behavioral approach, stress is conceptualized as a cognitive process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within this cognitive-behavioral model, stress is the result of the interaction between the person and its work, this interaction is called a „transaction”. A stimulus becomes a stressor if it is perceived and interpreted as such (Lazarus, 1995). This model is able to explain individual differences in the stress response elicited from people who are in similar situations, or are in a same situation at different times.

Attempts to develop such models were also made in the Romanian management and organizational psychology literature – the model of occupational stress among managers, developed by Pitariu (2003) is one such example. This model is a model of occupational stress specific for the period of socio-economic transition in Romania and is based on three major variables: the Person, the Situation, and the Results. These three categories, which describe the work context, can become sources of stress, influencing behavioral reactions at the workplace.

#### The perspective of lay people on work stress

In everyday life, people use various cognitions in order to understand events and to create connections about the surrounding world. These cognitions used by people have been named as lay, naïve, intuitive theories, and basic beliefs because people are not necessarily aware of them or of the impact they have on their social

construction of reality. While scientific theories provide formal and explicit explanations for behavior, lay theories are defined as „implicit theories or beliefs constructed by individuals, but not on the basis of academic research or scientific empirical evidence” (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005, p. 97).

Dweck, Chiu, & Hong (1995) have shown that intuitive theories held by people build a frame of reference for processing information, attributing causality, understanding behavior, representing social events and making behavioral predictions. In this context, Dweck et al. (1995, p. 268) state that:

„We do not see implicit theories as rigidly determining people’s behavior. Instead, we see them as creating a framework and then fostering judgments and reactions that are consistent with that framework”.

Thus, people’s beliefs function and act as self-fulfilling prophecies: they will form and activate certain expectations, which, in turn, will orient behavior.

The beliefs that people hold in relation with workplace stress affect the decisions taken at different levels: in the workgroup, in the organization, and even in society at large, involving actors belonging to various professional groups (Rydstedt et al., 2004).

The way in which employees conceptualize stress affects their perception of various workplace events. For example, if in their system of beliefs they hold the idea that the main stress-inducing aspect is their relationship with their supervisor and colleagues, then they will react in an exaggerated manner even when confronted with low criticism. Furnham (1997) shows that the set of stress related beliefs held by people influences the way they perceive the causes of stress.

Due to the close connection between the way people conceptualize workplace stress and the way they cope with it, knowledge about lay beliefs regarding these aspects is a very useful tool.

A large number of studies and researches aim at identifying implicit beliefs regarding factors that have the potential to induce workplace stress. For example, Furnham (1997), in a study

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

where employees had to answer to a series of statements with contents referring to the possible causes of work stress, used factor analysis and found that the main causes of stress were conflict, dissatisfaction, intimidation and authority. Muncer, Taylor, Green, & McManus (2001) in a research carried out on a group of nurses, investigating the way their participants perceived the sources of workplace stress, reached the conclusion that two of the most frequently perceived sources of stress were inadequate support from colleagues and limited possibilities of promotion.

Harkness, Long, Bermbach, Patterson, Jordan, & Kahn (2005) show that irreverent language at work was considered to be the main source of stress among women working in churches. The main solution given by the participants to the study was mutual respect and compassion.

Lewig & Dollard (2001), examining the perception of causes and solutions related to workplace stress among mass media employees, showed that stress was perceived as a context variable, related to unfavorable working conditions, whereas the solution suggested by the participants were strictly individualized. In other words, the authors concluded that stress was mainly attributed to factors of an organizational nature (poor communication, work overload, deficient managerial practices, etc).

Kinman & Jones (2005), in semi-structured interviews with employees belonging to very diverse professional domains, reported the existence of very low consensus of the way the participants conceptualized stress. The results of the study were in accord with those of other researches run on the same topic, i.e. that stress was perceived as particularly related to organizational variables, and that people tended to place more importance on the effects of stress on employees than on the organization (Sharpley & Gardner, 2001).

In a recent study on the importance of social support in the perception of workplace stress, Guillet, Hermand, & Mullet (2010) showed that social support was the highest-loading factor among all sources of stress, higher than task requirements or task control. Time pressure and the support perceived as being

received from the supervisor were considered the factors with the highest potential to induce stress. The fact that social support is given so much importance in the employees' conceptualization of stress is consistent with the solution suggested by them for stress reduction. This also explains the strongly individualized nature of proposed solutions for dealing with stress: social support is most often associated with a particular person, colleague or supervisor.

Rydstedt et al. (2004) in an ample longitudinal study investigated the perception of 2270 participants from 20 different companies, on the perceived causes of stress and suggested solutions for its reduction. Using factor analysis as a method to analyse both causes and solutions, the authors identified 5 factors for the causes of stress, and 4 factors for the solutions of stress reduction. For the perceived causes of stress, the relevant factors were: career development, conflict/isolation, demographic status, pressure/danger and routine/external control. For the solutions of stress reduction, the 4 factors obtained were: internal control, confidence in the capacity to solve a given problem, seeking social support and avoidance. In their follow-up studies, the authors point to the existence of two constructs regarding the causes of stress, which are significantly correlated to the perceptions of work stress: danger and pressure, when positively correlated, were indicative of the fact that those who perceive workplace aspects related to this construct as the main sources of stress tended to perceive higher work stress levels. Also, the authors show that in the longitudinal study, social support and internal control as solutions for stress reduction are negatively correlated with subsequently felt work stress.

Lay and scientific theories on stress bear numerous similarities and it has been proven that these theories reinforce each other (Furnham, 1997; Pollock, 1988). The relationship suggested between everyday beliefs and scientific theories can have significant consequences for employees. First, empirical theories play an important role in the etiology of stress and its reporting. Theories held on the causes and consequences of stress may determine a person's expectations regarding the source of stress within oneself and others (Furnham, 1997).

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

Second, it has been noted that the organizations tend to incorporate similar ideologies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Scott, 1983). It is said that organizations are structured not only to reach rational goals of efficiency, but are often structured according to normative theories in the environment in which they function. As a result, organizations tend to become increasingly similar, a process that reinforces the prevalence of norms and finds expression in similar technologies, policies and programs (Meyer & Scott, 1983). Therefore, workers find themselves in environments that have become homogenous in structure and ideology.

#### Gender differences and work-related stress: previous research

Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector (2011) have reviewed qualitative studies on occupational stress. Results show that the nature of the stressors varies by occupation, country, seniority and gender. One of the results of this study indicate that (a) coping strategies vary by gender, occupation and country and (b) compared to men, women tend to report more interpersonal stressors.

According to Martocchio & O'Leary (1989), few, if any, differences exist between the amount of occupational stress experienced by men and women. Consensus does exist among researchers, however, about the fact that males and females differ in their management of stressful events – a notion supported by Bellman, Forster, Still, & Cooper (2003), who purport that differences might indeed also exist between males and females in their perceptions of stress sources and outcomes.

Day & Livingstone (2003) identified gender differences with regard to perceived levels of stress and the use of social support as a coping mechanism. Despite considerable research showing that males and females perceive different sources of stress and generate different solutions, little is known about whether they actually adopt different routes when processing stress (Kohler, Munz, & Gratwisch, 2006).

In a research on teachers, managers and physicians, which measured workplace stress levels and coping strategies, Ogus (2008) shows

that female professionals experienced significantly higher negative work outcomes than did males across all examined professions.

Because certain coping styles associated with behaviors related to the feminine gender role are useless and maladaptive for men (González-Morales, Peiró, Rodríguez, & Green-glass, 2006) it is important to study the differences between males and females in their perceptions of stress sources and outcomes. Moreover, research suggests that the use of coping styles that are not matched with the gender role may even be harmful (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2006).

The present exploratory study will investigate the response patterns of people, when asked about the causes of workplace stress and about solutions for reducing it. The questions are derived from an instrument described below and the analysis will focus on exploring how such responses are structured.

The main objectives of the present research are:

- identifying and analyzing the perception of employees on the sources of stress and the factors which have a stress-reducing potential;
- identifying and evaluating gender differences with regard to the perceptions held by employees on the sources of stress and the possible ameliorating factors;
- analyzing the relationship between the perception of employees regarding the causes of occupational stress and solutions for stress reduction, on one hand, and tenure, on the other hand.

### Method

#### *Participants*

In order to reach the proposed objectives of this study, a number of 104 employees were considered (50% women), who work both in the public and the private sector in Timișoara. Participants are aged between 20 and 50 ( $M = 31.6$ ) and their jobs are of the most diverse (medical, social or technical area, etc.).

#### *Method*

In conducting this research and reaching the established objectives, we used the inventory devised by Rydstedt et al. (2004) and used in

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

a study on the work force in Great Britain. This inventory focuses on factors considered to be sources and remedies of workplace stress. The questionnaire's aim is to identify the intuitive beliefs of employees about the sources and the remedies of workplace stress.

The inventory contains 36 items related to beliefs on workplace stress; 22 items address causes of workplace stress and 14 items address the possible solutions for reducing occupational stress. All items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, indicating the intensity of approval or disapproval (1 = strong disapproval, 7 = strong approval).

The original questionnaire was translated into Romanian and then back-translated. The questionnaire took about 20 minutes to administer and the majority of the participants showed a fair amount of interest in the subject. The internal consistency of this measure was good (alpha Cronbach = .73). Alpha Cronbach was also computed

for each of the two sections separately (causes of stress: .83; stress-reducing factors: .66).

## Results

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS 16. We computed means and standard deviations, run a factor analysis and computed loadings on each factor, analyzed demographic differences and possible relations between the variables. Results of these analyzes are found in tables, and are described by objective.

### Objective 1

#### The sources/causes of organizational stress

As a first step we computed the means and standard deviations for each item included in section one of the inventory. These items refer to the causes of organizational stress. The results may be consulted in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of beliefs regarding the causes of occupational stress

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
Q1. People who are not busy or challenged at the workplace cannot truly experience stress.	4.58	1.69
Q2. Stress only affects people who must receive orders from others.	2.88	1.72
Q3. The persons who have just been promoted cannot truly be stressed.	2.58	1.55
Q4. The persons working for others or those who must consult with their colleagues are much more stressed.	3.77	1.74
Q5. Men aged 40/50 cannot experience stress because they have already developed professionally and have stable positions.	2.70	1.49
Q6. Workplace stress mainly affects people who must travel frequently or on long distances.	3.32	1.73
Q7. A person is mainly stressed because he/she is not satisfied at the workplace.	3.68	1.97
Q8. If you like what you do, you cannot be stressed at work.	4.25	2.03
Q9. Stress affects people whose ideas are conflicting with those of the company.	4.47	1.72
Q10. A person is usually stressed at work because he/she does not have friends.	2.66	1.51
Q11. Stress mainly affects people who have a disrespectful supervisor.	3.70	1.81
Q12. If an organization has many young employees, the old ones tend to feel threatened by these, thus leading to stress.	3.82	1.69
Q13. Women are more stressed than men at the workplace because their careers develop more slowly and because performance expectations are higher for a possible promotion.	3.41	1.71
Q14. A woman will be much more stressed at her workplace because men's attitude towards women supervisors or colleagues creates a difficult and permanently competitive climate.	3.22	1.72
Q15. A female employee will be much more stressed if her supervisor is too friendly.	3.33	1.71
Q16. The persons whose job implies physical risk, such as police work, are very often stressed.	4.39	1.65
Q17. The risk of information excess is a very stressful factor.	4.22	1.71
Q18. The higher one's status, the greater the stress.	4.96	1.86
Q19. Stress results from the fact that one must work very fast in a limited time span.	5.71	1.40
Q20. It is less stressful to be periodically checked at work, because in this way possible mistakes are avoided and expectations are better outlined.	4.32	1.65
Q21. If one works with dangerous instruments, in order to avoid stress all one needs to do is work carefully.	4.49	1.61
Q22. If the supervisor is very authoritative, then the job requirements are clearly outlined and the employees will not be stressed.	3.05	1.88

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

**Table 2.** The total variance explained

Factors	Eigenvalues			Loading
	Total	% of the variance	% Cumulative	Total
1	4.12	18.73	18.73	2.83
2	3.00	13.65	32.38	2.12
3	2.01	9.15	41.53	1.97
4	1.75	7.99	49.53	1.94
5	1.23	5.60	55.13	1.69
6	1.14	5.20	60.33	1.64

Based on the proposal of Rydstedt et al. (2004), a factor analysis was carried out, because this method is able reveal consistent patterns of response or rating.

Based on the factor analysis of the items that refer to the possible causes of organizational stress (22), eight factors resulted, each of these encompassing more items. Two of these were loaded by only one item each, which lead to their elimination – Q1 (*People who are not busy or challenged at the workplace cannot*

*truly experience stress.*) and Q8 (*If you like what you do, you cannot be stressed at work.*).

For the remaining factors, a factor analysis with a varimax orthogonal rotation was carried out. The factor analysis revealed a number of six factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00 (Table 2). We selected only the items that load each factor over .60.

Based on this analysis, we may state that in the Romanian culture we have obtained a structure based on six factors, named according to

**Table 3.** Means and factor loading from the factor analysis

Factors	M	SD	Lo
<i>1. Excess information and hierarchy Eigenvalue = 4.12; Var = 18.73%; alpha: .67</i>			
Q2 Stress only affects people who must receive orders from others.	2.88	1.72	.75
Q4 The persons working for others or those who must consult with their colleagues are much more stressed.	3.77	1.74	.74
Q17 The risk of information excess is a very stressful factor.	4.22	1.71	.70
<i>2. Status and work relationships Eigenvalue = 3.00; Var = 13.65%; alpha: .53</i>			
Q15 A female employee will be much more stressed if her supervisor is too friendly.	3.33	1.71	.70
Q18 The higher one's status, the greater the stress.	4.96	1.86	.64
<i>3. Danger Eigenvalue = 2.01; Var = 9.01%; alpha: .58</i>			
Q20 It is less stressful to be periodically checked at work, because in this way possible mistakes are avoided and expectations are better outlined.	4.32	1.65	.68
Q21 If one works with dangerous instruments, in order to avoid stress all one needs to do is work carefully.	4.49	1.61	.80
<i>4. Gender difference Eigenvalue = 1.75; Var = 7.99%; alpha: .82</i>			
Q13 Women are more stressed than men at the workplace because their careers develop more slowly and because performance expectations are higher for a possible promotion.	3.41	1.71	.87
Q14 A woman will be much more stressed at her workplace because men's attitude towards women supervisors or colleagues creates a difficult and permanently competitive climate.	3.22	1.72	.74
<i>5. Age difference and conflict Eigenvalue = 1.23; Var = 5.6 %; alpha: .51</i>			
Q9 Stress affects people whose ideas are conflicting with those of the company.	4.47	1.72	.67
Q12 If an organization has many young employees, the old ones tend to feel threatened by these, thus leading to stress.	3.82	1.69	.76
<i>6. Supervisor attitude and job satisfaction Eigenvalue = 1.14, Var = 5.2%; alpha: .58</i>			
Q7 A person is mainly stressed because he/she is not satisfied at the workplace.	3.68	1.97	.67
Q11 Stress mainly affects people who have a disrespectful supervisor.	3.70	1.81	.81

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

the common psychological meaning of the items loading each of the factors.

The first factor was labeled *excess information and hierarchy* and it explains 18.73% of the variance. As shown in Table 3, the items strongly loading on this factor refer to orders or consultation received from others, and to the excess of information. Thus, the participants consider the excess of information to be a source of workplace stress; also, working for others, in general, seems to be perceived as a source of stress.

The second factor explains 13.65% of the variance and was named *status and work relationships*. The items that strongly load on this factor refer to workplace situations in which the female employees are treated too friendly by the supervisor and to status as a source of stress.

The third factor explains 9.01% of the variance and was named *danger*. The items loading on this factor suggest that workplace stress can occur as an effect of mistakes done through not checking one's work and can also appear as a function of situations in which one works with dangerous instruments.

The fourth factor explains 7.99% of the variance and was labeled *gender difference*. The two items strongly loading on this factor refer to

females being more affected by stress within an organization than males.

The fifth factor identified is called *age difference and conflict* and it explains 5.6% of the variance. The items with a strong loading on this factor refer to conflict situations in the workplace, which are perceived as threatening, among them age-related conflict. For instance, the content of Q9 shows that conflict of ideas is perceived as a powerful source of stress.

The last factor identified is called *supervisor attitude and job satisfaction*, and explains 5.2% of the variance. This factor is strongly loaded by items Q7 and Q11, which refer to the employees' level of job satisfaction and the a disrespectful attitude from the supervisor.

#### Reducing stress depends on...

Using SPSS, we computed means and the standard deviation for each item in section two, which focuses on factors potentially reducing organizational stress. The results may be consulted in the Table 4.

The items in Table 4 were entered in a factor analysis with a varimax orthogonal rotation. The solution revealed a number of five factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00 (Table 5),

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations of beliefs regarding stress reducing factors

Items	Mean	Standard deviations
Q23 ...how hard a person is trying.	4.42	1.67
Q24 ...a person's general ability to overcome problems.	5.70	.96
Q25 ... a person's level of self-control.	5.41	1.35
Q26 ...how embarrassed a person is to have a certain problem.	3.78	1.73
Q27 ...whether there is something wrong with a person's nervous system.	4.06	1.92
Q28 ...a person's confidence in being able to eliminate the problem.	5.67	1.17
Q29 ...how much information a person has about the problem.	5.41	1.42
Q30 ...whether the problem is a symptom of a deeper problem.	4.17	1.64
Q31 ... how damaging the problem is to a person's self esteem	4.73	1.51
Q32 ...a person's action to seek medical or psychological help.	4.12	1.64
Q33 ...a person's participation in mutual help groups for similar problems.	4.49	1.66
Q34 ...how lucky a person is.	3.31	1.70
Q35 ...to what extent eliminating the problem would please others.	4.45	1.59
Q36 ...how much a person avoids situations that make the problem worse.	5.08	1.44

**Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study****Table 5.** The total variance explained

Factors	Eigenvalues			Loading
	Total	% of the variance	% cumulative	Total
1	4.06	29.01	29.01	2.12
2	1.71	12.25	41.27	2.12
3	1.44	10.32	51.59	1.81
4	1.23	8.81	60.41	1.80
5	1.07	7.68	68.09	1.66

explaining a total of over 68% of the initial variance. We selected only the items loading each factor over .60. The factors were named according to the common psychological meaning of the items that load on each of them.

The first factor (Table 6) explains 29% of the total variance and has been labeled *problem depth*. The items with a strong loading on this factor refer to a person's state of mind in the instant he/she is dealing with a problem. The participants consider that reducing stress is influenced by this factor.

**Reducing stress depends on...**

The second factor is called *searching for information and convergence* and it explains 12.25% of the total variance. The items with the strongest loading on this factor refer to the extent

to which employees search information about the problem and try to solve the problem, in order to please others. In other words, employees think that to be informed about the problem is a possible way to reduce workplace stress.

The third factor was named *internal/external control* and it explains 10.32% of the variance. The items loading on this factor – Q25 and Q34 – relate to self-control as an internal factor and to luck as a situational, external factor in reducing workplace stress.

Factor four explains 8.81% of the total variance and was named *seeking support*. Only two items load this factor – Q32 *...a person's action to seek medical or psychological help* and Q33 *...a person's participation in mutual help groups for similar problems*. The participants consider that seeking specialized help or, even better,

**Table 6.** Means and factor loading from the factor analysis

Factors	M	SD	Lo
1. <i>Problem depth</i> Eigenvalue = 4.06; Var = 29.01%; alpha: .72			
Q26 ...how embarrassed a person is to have a certain problem.	3.78	1.73	.64
Q27 ...whether there is something wrong with a person's nervous system.	4.06	1.92	.73
Q30 ...whether the problem is a symptom of a deeper problem.	4.17	1.64	.78
2. <i>Seeking information and convergence</i> Eigenvalue = 1.71; Var = 12.25%; alpha: .68			
Q29 ...how much information a person has about the problem.	5.41	1.42	.76
Q35 ...to what extent eliminating the problem would please others.	4.45	1.59	.82
3. <i>Internal/External control</i> Eigenvalue = 1.44; Var = 10.32%; alpha: .48			
Q25 ... a person's level of self-control.	5.41	1.35	.75
Q34 ...how lucky a person is.	3.31	1.70	.61
4. <i>Seeking support</i> : Eigenvalue = 1.23; Var = 8.81%; alpha: .66			
Q32 ...a person's action to seek medical or psychological help.	4.12	1.64	.63
Q33 ...a person's participation in mutual help groups for similar problems.	4.49	1.66	.84
5. <i>Ability and effort</i> Eigenvalue = 1.07; Var = 7.68%; alpha: .47			
Q23 ...how hard a person is trying.	4.42	1.67	.65
Q24 ...a person's general ability to overcome problems.	5.70	.96	.80

**Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study**

sharing the problem, can contribute to reducing workplace stress.

The fifth factor – *ability and effort* – explains 7.68% of the variance. The items refer to the employee’s skills and competencies in approaching stressful situations. An analysis of the items shows that a person’s general ability to overcome problems seems to be useful in reducing occupational stress.

**Objective 2**

**Sources of organizational stress**

No significant differences between male and female participants could be found in the items of factors *excess information and hierar-*

*chy, status and work relationships, and danger and failure avoidance* (Table 7 and 8).

Gender comparison in the factor *gender differences* found a significant result:  $t(102) = -4.52, p < .001$ . An analysis of the means for the two groups shows us that the sources of stress referring to gender are perceived as stronger by women. The effect size is  $d = .89$ , indicating a very strong effect.

*Age difference and conflict* is the second factor for which significant differences between men and women can be noticed:  $t(102) = -2.08, p < .05$ . We can state that beliefs about the conflict of ideas between the people and the company, and the threat of young employees as

**Table 7.** Means and standard deviations regarding beliefs about the causes of stress according to the subjects’ gender

Factors	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Excess information and hierarchy	male	52	15.96	6.13
	female	52	17.58	6.14
Status and work relationships	male	52	15.88	3.63
	female	52	17.44	4.56
Danger	male	52	13.77	3.91
	female	52	15.35	4.98
Gender differences	male	52	5.35	2.87
	female	52	7.92	2.93
Age difference and conflict	male	52	11.94	3.68
	female	52	13.42	3.55
Supervisor attitude and job satisfaction	male	52	8.08	3.07
	female	52	6.69	3.17

**Table 8.** Gender differences regarding beliefs about the causes of professional stress

Factors	Levene’s test		T test	Df
	F	Sig.		
Excess information and hierarchy	.09	.76	-1.34	102
Status and work relationships	1.35	.24	-1.92	102
Danger	4.69	.03	-1.79	96.5
Gender differences	.65	.42	-4.52 **	102
Age difference and conflict	.004	.95	-2.08 *	102
Supervisor attitude and job satisfaction	.24	.62	2.25 *	102

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study****Table 9.** Means and standard deviations regarding the subjects' beliefs about stress reducing factors according to gender

Factors	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Problem depth	Male	52	11.87	3.93
	female	52	12.15	4.62
Seeking information and convergence	Male	52	20.88	3.78
	female	52	20.35	4.48
Internal/External control	male	52	13.08	2.93
	female	52	13.83	3.97
Seeking support	male	52	8.67	2.86
	female	52	8.56	2.90
Ability and effort	Male	52	9.92	1.91
	female	52	10.33	2.47

**Table 10.** Gender differences regarding beliefs about professional stress ameliorating factors

Factors	Levene's test		T test	Df
	F	Sig.		
Problem depth	.57	.45	-.34	102
Seeking information and convergence	2.52	.11	.66	102
Internal/External control	4.54	.03	-1.09	93.79
Seeking support	.31	.57	.20	102
Ability and effort	4.47	.03	-.92	95.95

sources of stress are more often found in women than in men. The effect size is  $d = .41$ , indicating a medium-to-low effect.

Another set of beliefs with important gender differences is the one regarding *supervisor attitude and job satisfaction*:  $t(102) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . Males have a stronger belief in the fact that low workplace satisfaction and a negative attitude from the supervisor are a significant stress factors. The effect size is  $d = .44$ , indicating a medium effect.

**Factors reducing workplace stress**

Tables 9 and 10 show differences between men and women regarding beliefs about factors reducing workplace stress.

We may notice that no significant differences could be found between male and female regarding the perception of stress reducing factors.

**Objective 3**

Table 11 shows the correlations between tenure and the sources of workplace stress on one hand, and stress reducing factors on the other hands.

The analysis reveals a significant negative correlation between the number of years worked in the organization, and *excess information and hierarchy* as a source of workplace stress. Thus, employees with less work tenure perceive excess of information and receiving orders from others as significant sources of workplace stress. The effect size is  $r^2 = .052$ , a low-medium effect size.

Significant correlations between tenure and the other sources of professional stress were not identified, nor those between tenure, and professional stress reducing factors.

## Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

Table 11. Correlations between beliefs about stress and tenure

	Tenure
Excess information and hierarchy	$r = -.23^*$
Status and work relationships	$r = .10$
Danger and failure avoidance	$r = -.01$
Gender differences	$r = .13$
Age difference and conflict	$r = -.03$
Supervisor attitude and job satisfaction	$r = -.04$
Problem depth	$r = .00$
Seeking information and convergence	$r = -.17$
Internal/External control	$r = -.08$
Seeking support	$r = .07$
Ability and effort	$r = .02$

N = 104. \* significant correlation at  $p < .05$ .

### Discussion

The current study sets out to explore lay theories of Romanian employees regarding the concept of occupational stress, in order to identify the major themes appearing in their discourse in relation with this concept.

Factor analysis of implicit beliefs on the sources of stress, and on the factors for its reduction, carried out on the Romanian sample, have revealed a factor structure different from the one obtained on the analysis of British employees (Rydstedt et al., 2004).

Regarding the sources of workplace stress, the first difference relates to the number of factors. The original model identified 5 factors, whereas applying the data of Romanian employees outlined 6 factors. Some items were grouped according to the initial model, but a part of them was distributed to other factors or formed a new one.

The factors identified by Rydstedt et al. (2004, p.248) for the British population are: career development (the level of career development and the status within the organization), conflict and isolation (lack of satisfaction, interpersonal conflicts or conflicts of ideas), demographic subgroups (sources of stress related to the female gender and age), danger/pressure (work under pressure or high-risk work situa-

tions), routine and external control (work routine and exercising strict external control).

Even if the labels of the original factors are also found in the analysis carried out on the Romanian population, their distribution in results of the factor analysis is different. For example, item 17 „*The risk of information excess is a very stressful factor*” loads the *danger/pressure* factor in the original model, whereas in the Romanian model it loads the factor *excess information and hierarchy*. The same can be said of item 15 „*A female employee will be much more stressed if her supervisor is too friendly*” – in the British model it loads the *demographic subgroups* factor, and in the Romanian one – the *status and work relationships* factor. Items 7 and 11 form a distinctive factor that has been labeled *supervisor attitude and job satisfaction* which cannot be found in the original model. These two items associate in order to form a distinctive factor perceived as a source of workplace stress. The fact that, at the level of employee perception of workplace stress sources, lack of work satisfaction is associated with a disrespectful attitude of one’s supervisor confirms results of previous studies in Romanian organizations. For example, Gavreliuc & Maricuțoiu (2004) show that Romanian management is more relation-centered and less work-centered.

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

For *stress reducing factors*, 5 factors were outlined for the Romanian population as opposed to 4 factors for the British population. The factor structure identified by Rydstedt et al. (2004) includes: internal control (self-confidence and self control as the primary means to overcome workplace stress), confidence (the belief in one's own powers and own abilities to overcome problems), seeking help (an employee's tendency to seek specialized help) and avoidance and external control (stress reduction depends on forces external to the subject). These factors are partially found in the structure highlighted on the Romanian population: problem depth, seeking information and convergence, internal/external control, seeking support, and ability and effort. However, the items specific for stress reducing factors are distributed differently in the two models (Romanian and British). In the Romanian sample, items 23 and 24 formed a separate factor labeled *ability and effort*.

For the *gender difference* factor, an analysis of the means for the two groups shows that gender related sources of stress are perceived as stronger by women. The effect size is very high, highlighting the practical relevance of this result. It seems that in Romanian society, gender-role stereotypes generate in women (at a subjective level at least) the perception that one of the most relevant sources of occupational stress is the attitude of men towards women. In essence, the items that load on this factor refer to the attitude of men – supervisors or colleagues – towards female employees as being discriminatory; in other words, they refer to sources of stress of interpersonal origin. This finding is supported by the Watson, Goh, & Sawang study (2011), which shows that stressors reported by professional women include gender-role stereotypes and occupational sex discrimination. Research carried out on gender differences at the level of stress perceptions shows that women usually experience higher levels of stress, especially in the case of interpersonal stressors (Hankin, 2010). It is also possible that the pressure felt by women in organizations to adopt the masculine model of interpersonal relations and of performance is associated with stress (Bellamy & Ramsey, 1994) and leads to the belief that *the attitudes of men towards women in organizations*

*creates a difficult and permanently competitive climate* (Q14).

In terms of stress effects, research shows that women report higher levels of stress when they are the target of gender discrimination (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2006). There is only a small step from this belief to workplace victimization: research on workplace victimization shows that the negative affectivity of the target (the victim) is a powerful predictor of interpersonal conflict and of occupational stress (Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010). Rodriguez (2003) shows that even perceptions of discrimination in the workplace positively correlate with job stress. With regard to a competitive climate generating occupational stress in the perception of female employees, Hibbard (2000) made a distinction between superiority competitiveness and mastery competitiveness. Superiority competitiveness means a focus on outperforming others, while mastery competitiveness means a focus on improving one's own performances. The author shows that superiority competitiveness is associated with negative socio-emotional outcomes for females only. It is possible that a competitive climate in the workplace is perceived as stronger by women because their effort to outperforming males, effort associated with stress and negative emotional reactions.

*Age difference and conflict* is the second factor that reveals significant differences between men and women:  $t(102) = -2.08, p < .05$ . This is a medium-to-low effect size, indicating that this result has not a relevant practical importance. Beliefs that potentially threatening situations, like the threat posed by young employees for older ones, favor the occurrence of professional stress are more often found with women than with men. On one hand, this result may be explained in light of some theories on the perception of sex roles, i.e. the set of social expectations on the role that a man or a woman assume in the social field. The belief that conflicts of ideas favor professional stress, more often specific of the women in the studied group, can be explained by the reduced tendency of women, when compared to men, to engage in conflict situations and risk behaviors (Johnson & Gleason, 2009). Jianakoplos & Bernasek

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

(1998) show that women have been found to be more conflict averse than men and to think more about the risks associated with performance (Larkin & Pines, 2003).

Another set of beliefs that has shown significant gender differences is the one regarding *supervisor attitude and job satisfaction*:  $t(102) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . The effect size is medium, indicating that this gender difference is „active” and has a relative relevant importance, from a practical point of view. Males perceive that a low work satisfaction is an important stress factor. Studies highlight the significant and negative correlation between organizational stress and job satisfaction and this relationship was found significant for males as well as for females (Gupta & Sahu, 2009). The fact that women believe less that low professional satisfaction is a stress generator can also be explained by the theory of dual roles that discusses among others the role of employees and their partners in a relationship. Thus, researches show that coworker support is more important for the job satisfaction of men than of women (Roxburgh, 1999). Another explanation of this result could be the fact that men, when they answered the items of the questionnaire, might have been more willing to express dissatisfaction with work than women, because of different social modeling.

Regarding the third objective, this study reaches the conclusion that employees with less work experience perceive the excess of information and the receiving of orders from others as significant sources of workplace stress. In other words, persons with more years of experience do not find that *excess of information and receiving orders* are stress generating factors. The items loading on this factor, identified through factor analysis, refer to the relationship with others (receiving orders or working for others, consulting with one’s colleagues) and to information excess as a workplace stress generator. People with greater professional experience disagree with the fact that a relation of subordination or of collegial consulting induces professional stress, as well as with *information excess* being a workplace stress generator. The perception that professional stress is related to information excess and subordination to an authority is found with persons with less work experience.

We observe two different issues: a cognitive issue referring to information and an interpersonal issue referring to the relationship with others. A possible explanation comes from the expert-novice paradigm: on one hand, people with more years of experience learned to discriminate the relevant information from the irrelevant one, information redundancy is better controlled and, as a result, it is less perceived as a source of stress, as compared to people with less work experience. Because of this, excess of information is perceived less as a source of workplace stress. We know also that, at the beginning of the career, employees want to demonstrate their abilities and skills, what they can and what they know, to others: because of this, it is possible that people with less work experience declare subordination to an authority and consultation with their colleagues as significant sources of workplace stress, more than people with more years of experience.

According to Huberman’s study (1989) on the professional cycle, at the beginning of one’s career one experiences a process of survival and discovery, the middle of one’s career is marked by a period of experimenting and activism, and towards the end of the career, one enters a period of disengagement, marked either by serenity, or by disappointment.

As Sternberg (1997) shows, people with greater work experience are considered to have reached a certain expertise that comes with experience and with acquiring tacit knowledge; these people access and organize information in a different way as compared to the beginners in the field (less experience).

*As theoretical and practical implications* there are at least five reasons a lay perspective on workplace stress may be considered valuable:

1. The nature of beliefs about workplace stress may affect the process of self-evaluation, in the sense of developing one’s own reference framework for making interpersonal comparisons. For instance, if a person thinks that the higher one’s status, the greater the stress, then status becomes the reference framework in which that person makes comparisons between him/herself and others, in order to evaluate his/her own level of stress.

### Lay Theories of Workplace Stress – Evidence from a Romanian Exploratory Study

2. Lay theories of workplace stress and its possible evaluation may have significant effects on an educational and social level. The individual subjective perception on stress underlies future attitudes and beliefs which, in turn, influence organizational behavior. Moreover, the way the perception of employees on the causes of stress is built is closely related to the degree of trust in the efficiency of different organizational policies aimed at stress reduction.

3. In a lay perspective on stress, certain elements which participants associate with this organizational issue may come up, which do not appear in the scientific theories of workplace stress, and, as a result, may not be highlighted in explicit measures established for the measurement of stress. It is very important for a HR practitioner to have available information regarding the causes and solutions perceived by the target group.

4. Personal beliefs on stress in organizations hold an important place in attributing meaning to various interpersonal relationships at work, either as an actor or an observer of behaviors.

5. A lay theory of stress can be a valuable starting point in developing a scientific perspective, in the same way in which intuition can give rise to scientific theories. Thus, researchers in the organizational field can develop future theories or can propose new ways of assessment, taking into account the meanings given to this term in the lay theories.

In this respect, the validity of personal beliefs should not be judged by reporting them to the norms created by scientific theories, but rather by their practical utility in everyday life. In this context, Kinman & Jones (2005) show that the knowledge of how people interpret the concept of stress has a high utility in health psychology, also.

*The limits* of this study refer to: (a) a small number of participants; (b) factor analysis can reveal significant patterns of response, but it does not tell us about the importance of a given cause. As Muncer et al. (2001, p. 43) highlight, there may be other more appropriate methods for examining the perceived interrelationships between causes of work-related stress, like the network drawing approach.

There are some *future research directions* we can draw: identification of intercultural differences at the level of the subjective perception of people about workplace stress; taking into consideration lay theories of stress, reframing organizational strategies in order to control occupational stress; rethinking methods by which we can measure the representations of people on the perceived causes of stress and the relationships between potential causes, as identified from individual cognitions.

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