

JOB INSECURITY AND STRESS LEVEL

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Resumen

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar la influencia de variables tales como edad, género y nivel socioeconómico sobre el *nivel de estrés* de las personas que atraviesan una situación de *inseguridad laboral*. Con tal fin se administró un cuestionario de datos personales y una escala para medir el nivel de estrés (Rodríguez Feijóo, 1994) a una muestra accidental, por cuotas, integrada por 200 sujetos de ambos sexos, que atravesaban una situación de inseguridad laboral, pertenecientes a diferentes niveles socioeconómicos, cuyas edades oscilaban entre 35 y 54 años y que habitaban en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (Argentina). Dicha escala fue construida con un enfoque cognitivo-perceptivo, considerando el fenómeno del estrés como un proceso en el cual se incluyen las fuentes del mismo (eventos vitales estresantes), los mediadores (estrategias de afrontamiento, apoyo social) y sus manifestaciones psicósomáticas. En estudios anteriores fue probada la validez factorial de este instrumento. Con el propósito de analizar la influencia de las variables independientes (edad, género y nivel socioeconómico) sobre el nivel de estrés, se calcularon  $\chi^2$  fijándose un nivel de significación de .01.

Los resultados obtenidos mostraron que las variables anteriormente mencionadas, influyen significativamente sobre el

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nivel de estrés. Así se observa que los varones, las personas de más edad y de menor nivel socioeconómico tienen mayor nivel de estrés que las mujeres, las personas de menor edad y de mayor nivel socioeconómico.

*Palabras clave:* Psicología social - inseguridad laboral - nivel de estrés.

### Abstract

This paper studies the influence of some socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and occupational level, on stress levels. The impact of other relevant variables such as social support and coping strategies, were also analyzed in connection to stress in a sample of 200 subjects suffering from *job insecurity*. Results show that most of the above mentioned variables have a significant influence on the *level of stress*. Apparently, stress was higher in people with poorer social support; the coping style also proved very important.

*Key words:* Social psychology - job insecurity - level of stress.

## Introduction

Technical progress, unfortunately, is not always accompanied by progress in human relations. The rapid development and use of technology (computers, robotics, etc.) are increasingly substituting human work.

This entails high levels of unemployment which, compounded with poverty, marginal situations and an increase in delinquency, modify interpersonal relationships in the job environment. Hostility and high levels of competitiveness prevail in these contexts. No one feels secure in his or her job, as they can be replaced at any moment by a younger and more efficient person willing to do the same work for a lower salary. Relationships in pri-

many groups formed in large factories or companies were, according to Parsons (1937), typically emotional, particular, diffuse, adscript, and focused on the interests of the whole group. They have now become, in most cases, emotionally neutral, universalistic, specific, emphasizing performance and individual over group interest.

Workers feel as if they were chess pieces that can be moved according to the will of their boss. They all feel replaceable and disposable.

Comments among workers about their bosses are not spontaneous. They fear their words may be reported to their superiors by one of their peers seeking his superior's esteem or some other benefit, heedless of the confidential character of such comments.

Generally speaking, individualism comes first in job environments and solidarity is a rare asset.

Until not long ago, workers who remained in their office longer hours than originally convened in order to go through or finish some task were looked askew by their colleagues. It was seen as submissive behaviour. This has changed radically: workers who stick to the established schedule are looked upon disapprovingly by those who normally remain longer than their contract demands.

Many workers go to work even if they feel sick, as they are afraid to be made redundant and unable to find another job. The job environment becomes more menacing, thereby increasing health and depression problems.

In a preliminary stage, both the theory and research on stress focused on physical causes (Selye, 1956), it later expanded to include psychological ones.

Lazarus (1966) has defined *stress* as a generic term covering the entire field: including problems connected to the stimulus that trigger stress reactions, the reactions themselves and several intervening processes.

Baron, and Byrne (1998) call stress the negative replies to physical or psychological events that are seen as menacing by the subject (either physically or emotionally).

According to Bar-Tal, and Spitzer (1994), when someone feels menaced, he tries to face the situation. Taylor, Buunk, and Aspinwall (1990) state that this behaviour is deemed successful if it is able to reduce or eliminate the menace.

Several researchers, such as Parkes, and Rabenan (1993), Marshall, and Barnett (1993), Perrewe, and Anthony (1990), Hamilton, Hoffman, Broman, and Rauma (1993), Schwarzer, Jerusalem, and Hahn (1994), among others, have studied the issue of stress in the job environment when

there is a work overload, lack of support to satisfy job demands, injustice, etc.

Bandura (1993) holds that the individual's own perception of his or her level of self-efficiency when facing stressing factors, affects body reactions that are essential to keep a good health. Therefore, factors that cause stress and are beyond our control are harmful for our psycho-physical well-being.

Following Pearlin, and Scholer (1978), we see stress as a process that includes the following: sources of stress, (stressors), stress mediators: social support and coping strategies and their psychosomatic manifestations.

## Aims

The aim of this work is to study the influence of variables such as age, gender, and socio-economic status upon the level of stress of people who are undergoing a situation of job insecurity.

## Method

### Measuring instruments

A questionnaire was drawn up to gather information on basic data such as: age, gender, level of education, and occupational level.

*Stress level* was measured according to the effort that a person must do in order to adapt to a situation that he or she sees as menacing his or her psycho-physical well-being. In view of this, a scale designed by the author (1994) was administered in order to measure the level of stress. The scale was drawn up from a cognitive-perceptive approach, taking the stress phenomenon as a process that includes its sources (stressing events), mediators (coping strategies, social support), as well as their psychosomatic expression. The contents of the items in the scale focus on the points mentioned above. Previous studies had proved the factorial validity of this instrument (Rodríguez Feijóo, 1993, 1994).

## Subjects

The instruments were applied to an accidental (random) sample formed by 200 individuals of both sexes (43% male, and 57% female) who were undergoing situations of job insecurity. They belonged to different socio-economic groups (middle class: 67%, upper middle class: 33%), aged between 35-54, living in a large city like Buenos Aires (Argentine).

## Statistical techniques

With the purpose of analysing the influence of the independent variables (age, gender, socio-economic status) over the level of stress,  $\chi^2$  were calculated, fixing a significant level at .01.

## Results and Conclusions

The average punctuation in the stress scale obtained by the individuals in our sample, with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum of 7, is 5.12, the standard deviation being 1.08. This average shows a high level of stress. The 12% of the individuals obtained under 3.43 points (*low stress level*); 35% were between 3.5, and 4.49 (*medium stress level*), and 53% were over 4.5 (*high stress level*).

Crossing the different independent variables with the dependent one (stress level), it was noticed that age, gender and socio-economic status have a significant statistical influence on the stress level of people who are undergoing a situation of job insecurity.

We noticed that people aged 45-54 show a higher level of stress than those aged 35-44 (Table 1). This was predictable, since an older age means greater difficulty in finding a new job if the current one is lost. On the other hand, people over 45 experience greater trouble adapting to new technologies and the new interpersonal relationships in the job environment.

Gender (Table 2) also plays a significant role in the level of stress. Men show higher stress levels than women.

A possible explanation for this difference may be that in spite of the incorporation of women into the labour market, most men still believe they must be the main source of income in their homes. Besides, the stress that role conflicts used to cause in women –worker/housewife- has decreased notoriously. Predictable and repetitive routines have turned into a shelter or haven, giving them a feeling of security, which they cannot find in the job environment.

When it comes to coping with stress, women focus on emotions whereas men concentrate on the problem itself. Ptacek, Smith, and Zanas (1992) obtained similar results. This difference may be due to the differences in the education of men and women when it comes to handling stress during the process of socialization.

As regards the socio-economic status (Table 3), people belonging to the upper middle class show a lower level of stress than those in the middle

class. Needless to say, having several financial resources (real estate, bank deposits, etc.) which they can tap on and sell if necessary, diminishes the menace cognition caused by job insecurity.

Lastly, as current high levels of unemployment are not likely to change in the near future, it would be highly convenient that people exposed to job insecurity should acquire the type of behaviour that can help them lower stress levels. Among these behaviours, it is worth mentioning keeping fit through an appropriate diet, enough hours of sleep, and physical exercise. Generating positive affections, modifying cognition, attending training courses to increase their feeling of self-efficiency, having a hobby or doing some gratifying activity and looking for social support among family, friends and self-help groups. Members of these groups undergo similar situations. They share experiences, and by helping and supporting each other: the group acts as a stress control factor.

Finally, it would be very convenient to launch self-help programmes at a municipal level, in non-governmental organizations, parishes, etc. They should focus on underscoring the acquisition of behaviour patterns that can diminish the stress impact and maximize social, family and community resources.

Table 1  
Age

Level	35 - 44		45 - 54		N
	n	%	n	%	
Low	17	21	7	6	24
Medium	33	41	37	31	70
High	30	38	76	63	106
Total	80	100	120	100	200

$\chi^2 = 17.01$   
 $p < .01$

Table 2  
Gender

Level	Male		Female		N
	n	%	n	%	
Low	6	7	18	16	24
Medium	22	26	48	42	70
High	58	67	48	42	106
Total	86	100	114	100	200

$\chi^2 = 12.42$   
 $p < .01$

Table 3  
Socio-economic level

Level	Middle class		Uper middle class		N
	n	%	n	%	
Low	7	5	17	26	24
Medium	45	34	25	38	70
High	82	61	24	36	106
Total	134	100	66	100	200

$\chi^2 = 20.93$

$p < .01$

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