

More Blessed and Less Stressed at Workplace: The Role of Spirituality in Managing Stress

Rameesha Abbas

1. School of Management Sciences, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract:

Leaders in organizations have sought to provide a workplace with a less stressful work environment through tailored stress management systems. One of the ways is the essence of personal spirituality and its interaction with workplace spirituality (WS) that enhanced “intrinsic, extrinsic and total work rewards satisfaction”. The quest for strategies and measures influencing workers in stressful workplaces indicates that leaders are concerned about enhancing employee well-being. Consequently, researchers have expressed intrigue about exploring what roles spirituality and stress play in understanding the employees with the propensity to work in a high-stress workplace. Therefore, the current study aims to support the literature on how spirituality handles workplace stress in different working environments. This study provides summarized details and key insights for practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: Stress, Workplace Spirituality, Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

In recent literature, researchers have occasionally interchanged the term *individual spirituality* with *personal spirituality* (Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Adnan, Bhatti, & Farooq, 2020). The seminal academic literature on workplace stress, regardless of the type of organization’s industry, emphasized employee job-related stress with attributed detriments to professional and personal well-being, including loss of productivity, cardiovascular ailments, and burnout (McVicar, 2003; Spielberger & Reheiser, 1994; Rabbing et al., 2022). To mitigate stress, spirituality provides an opportunity to bridge this gap between healthy work environments and related workplace stress (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Singh & Singh, 2022). However, little research has been conducted to bridge this gap extensively. Therefore, this study contributed to the literature on how leaders across different industries could foster a healthy workplace that accommodated personal spirituality.

Researchers have examined personal spirituality as the predictor variable and workplace stress (WPS) as the outcome variable (Creswell, 2014; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Crocetta et al., 2021). They sought to explore how, if any, one’s spirituality influences the extent or manner in which they perceive the stress related to their respective jobs. Seminal work on spirituality dates back several years before researchers’ interest in spirituality at work became relevant; however, Waaijman (1993) explored this concept in *The Challenges of Spirituality in Contemporary Times*. Waaijman (1993) reviewed divergent aspects of spirituality, such as “Liberation,” “Feminist,” “eco-spirituality,” or “lay spirituality.” However, none were more relevant to this research than “primordial spirituality” (Waaijman, 1993, p. 2; Lev, 2023). Waaijman (2007) highlighted primordial spirituality as “closely related to life as it is directly lived, connected with realities as birth, education, house, work, suffering, death” (p. 7). Mitroff and Denton (1999) similarly highlighted WS and how one’s personal spirituality was a vital component of an organization’s

environment, where spirituality—not religion—constituted part of its culture. Organizational leaders should accommodate the changing dynamics of spirituality and religion in the workplace.

Stress refers to one's feelings or perceptions of anxiety that one feels due to a lack of personal control over matters of concern. Stress is widely documented in the psychological literature. The feelings of burnout occur due to excessive exposure to an external stimulus that causes anxiety. Moreover, one could attribute the widely individualized or personalized phenomenon of stressed feelings to various stressors (AIS, 2018). These challenge organizational workers significantly (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005; Coyne et al., 2020). Understanding how these two theories relate to each other requires insight into what stress entails. Therefore, finding a mechanism that influences the worker's well-being at work not only intrigued me but also potential evidence of the effectiveness of personal spirituality in mitigating workplace stress (Ishaq et al. 2022).

Spielberger and Reheiser (1994) confirmed that stress in the workplace was a significant problem and was highly documented as influencing several aspects of an organization's well-being. This influence included "organizational productivity," "absenteeism," the rates of employee turnover as well as their personal "health" (Spielberger & Reheiser, 1994, p. 199; Rabbing et al., 2022). Stress constituted the highest cause of burnout and employee loss among employees working in service industries. Losing employees led to an increased workload and loss of the bottom line for such an organization (McVicar, 2003). Spirituality often becomes evident in the exercise of one's religion. Moreover, spirituality is often considered taboo in the workplace because spirituality, when misrepresented as religion, is deemed by some theorists as institutionalized and divisive and thus incompatible with the workplace (Waaajman, 1993; Lev, 2023). Spirituality—personal spirituality in particular—provides a mitigation mechanism to stress (Ramya & Jose, 2013; Golanowski, 2021). However, little academic research existed to enhance the literature on how individuals within high-stress organizations express their spirituality as a coping mechanism (Ramya & Jose, 2013; Hildebrand, 2021).

A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW ON SPIRITUALITY & STRESS

Ramya and Jose (2013) discussed the challenge of work-induced stress that several leaders of service organizations faced across the globe. The researchers mentioned that it was a universal problem for years. They argued that an absence of organizational or leadership support for workers constituted a significant reason for increased stress. In addition to their arguments, the authors suggested that increased "work pressure" led to emotional health concerns and several other related issues. The arguments that Ramya and Jose (2013) made were a central theme in this research, as these related to how a coping mechanism, such as one's individual spirituality, could be an opportunity to mitigate the measures of stress.

Kolodinsky et al. (2008) discussed how spiritual values expressed in the workplace had business ethics connotations, where the focus often had been at the "organizational level" but rarely at the individual level. Kolodinsky et al. mentioned that workplace spirituality should be seen as integrating personal spiritual values in the workplace. Further, they argued that though spirituality was gradually being introduced into organizations, the need for "connectedness" and a sense of meaning or purpose among workers was often ignored by organizational leaders. Consequently, there was a need to shift the focus to "personal spirituality" in the workplace to enhance the organization's well-being because the individual's values enhanced the organization's values, and, ultimately its bottom line.

McVicar (2003) concluded that several sources of stress included the volume of work, the organization's leadership and management practices, and the need to focus on stress mitigation efforts to enhance well-being. Laal and Aliramaie (2010) concluded that there was a significant indication of "positive methods of coping" for those who had longer periods of employment (tenure) on the job (p. 168). They indicated that the more one used stress mitigation strategies, the longer one stayed on the job. To that end, the value of reducing stress or finding ways to prevent it highlighted the methods or measures, such as spirituality, that could bridge that gap. Therefore, discovering whether the practice of spirituality had any bearing on McVicar's (2003) notion was worth considering in this research.

In Daniel's (2015) cross-cultural study on workplace spirituality and work stress, the findings indicated that regardless of ethnicity or cultural background, employees who engaged in "meaningful activities" experienced what they perceived as less stress in their work environments. Furthermore, the study sought to provide organizational leaders with an opportunity to see the value meaningfulness had in combating stress in the workplace. Because of the focus on spirituality and work stress experienced in the workplace, the author's recommendation for future study or research in the interaction of spirituality and stress in high-stress organizations gave impetus for this research. Lawal and Idemudia (2017) discussed developing and using WSS by addressing its effectiveness in highlighting sources of what employees perceived as stressors. They further mentioned that the instrument developed by the Marlin Company and the AIS was acknowledged for its value in measuring physical and emotional well-being at work, job pressure, and lack of organizational support. Additionally, the unique correlations identified among the items were particularly important in addressing the concerns of employees in the workplace. Therefore, this instrument was vital in providing an opportunity to measure employee perceptions of their leaders, as well as how that influenced their well-being on the job.

Mitroff and Denton (1999) echoed the central theme of spirituality. They mentioned that participants found religion adversely unpopular compared to spirituality in the workplace. Interestingly, the authors suggested that organizations that operated as "more spiritual" were also perceived as "more profitable" regarding the return received from employees in the workplace. Ultimately, they concluded it was essential to recognize that, at this stage of human and organizational development, spirituality must become and be inseparable from organizational management for organizations to remain viable. Consequently, in understanding that spirituality was considered an essential component of an organization, its influence on an individual who perceived a high level of stress within a service industry organization was intriguing to discover.

Spielberger and Reheiser (1994) discussed the measure of gender differences in occupational stress and indicated no marked differences across genders. However, several differences were identified in the severity and frequency of occurrence perceived based on particular stressors experienced by the individuals. It is to be noted that stress influenced employees differently, regardless of gender, based on the types of stressors impacting one at a particular time and level. This finding indicated that knowing how other factors in the workplace influenced such individuals would also provide significant management information. Some of the strategies included listening to music, shopping, reading, hiking, and using several other strategies to mitigate stress. Consequently, it was intriguing to determine if the same measure (positive) was evident among participants with longer tenure in this study.

The AIS (2018) discussed extensively the influence of stress on American adults and indicated that the “person-environment fit” was the critical component of this “highly personalized” phenomenon that plagued several American organizations today (para. 2). They mentioned that 80% of American workers admitted to experiencing job-related stress, and 52% of those admitted they desired assistance coping with this \$300 billion per year issue. Piedmont et al. (2008) discussed the internal validity and reliability of the religious sentiments and spirituality scales in short form. They discussed the various applications of the scale across a wide range of measures and determined that the short form of the instrument was just as effective as the long form.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) cautioned the reader to get used to the notion that spirituality is gradually becoming more of a norm rather than an exception. They mentioned that the workplace was becoming more of an institution providing several employees with a sense of community. The authors also discussed the *spirituality movement* growing across organizations. Additionally, they mentioned that the loss of sense of belonging or community from social institutions, such as the church, “civic groups,” or “neighborhoods,” compelled employees to find comfort in the workplace as a source of spirituality for their wellbeing. Spirituality could be a stop-gap or relief for many employees when no other medium of personal or social coping mechanism existed to endure the challenges of daily stress.

Piedmont (2010) researched to determine if there were any gender and age differences across the spectrum for the fundamental structure of the factors employed in ASPIRES for religious sentiments and spirituality. The results indicated varied differences across both spectrums; the basic premise or meaning of the constructs employed using ASPIRES remained the same for age and gender. Waaijman (1993) highlighted his seminal work on the challenges of spirituality and provided significant insight into what different forms spirituality took, from “lay” spirituality to “primordial” spirituality (p. 20). In his position on spirituality, the author argued that primordial spirituality concerned the natural processes that formed one’s very being, suggesting that this kind of spirituality was distinct from the more formalized and institutionalized forms of belief. He highlighted a variety of spirituality forms and concluded that the essential challenge with spirituality was an education on spirituality forms. Hence, primordial spirituality represented the core of personal spirituality.

Waaijman (2007) discussed spirituality and focused extensively on what spirituality was and how the diverse notions or forms of spirituality shaped the understanding of the varied perspectives on spirituality. The author discussed schools of spirituality, primordial spirituality, counter-spirituality, and the elements of spirituality. He stated that spirituality was seemingly complex, and one underwent a process when finding a means of communication with self and God. Waaijman (2007) emphasized primordial spirituality; this perspective of spirituality was most relevant to the study of personal spirituality because this study provided a unique opportunity to measure the aspect of spirituality most natural and evident in everyday processes. Shapiro et al. (2005) discussed a new word emerging in modern spirituality literature: *mindfulness*. They suggested in the results of their case study that *mindfulness-based stress reduction* (MBSR) can aid stress reduction and enhancement of the quality of life.

IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to investigate how personal spirituality and WPS among employees handle stress and to further the research on Daniel’s (2015) quest for research on how individual spirituality affected those with the propensity to work in stressful environments. I

sought not only to enhance discussion of the stress and spirituality in the workplace literature but also to foster the discussion on the influence of these variables across organizations, especially in situations where no stress mitigation strategies were employed, or opportunities to exercise personal spirituality were considered. The notion that personal spirituality influenced WPS as a causal effect warranted further research.

Daniel (2015) recommended that future researchers investigate workplace spirituality and stress among high-stress industries. I accomplished this goal by highlighting a commonly held notion: Spirituality influenced stress; hence, I also recommend conducting future research on this notion. The research revealed that there was no causal relationship between spirituality and stress. Additionally, Csiernik and Adams (2002) suggested that employees reported working in stressful environments and concluded: "spirituality contributed to wellness and assisted in counteracting workplace stress" (p. 29). However, Ashmos and Duchon (2000) suggested that the workplace was becoming a "primary source of community" (p. 134); therefore, healthy work environments would be enhanced by an opportunity to practice healthy spiritual habits in the workplace as a stress mitigation measure. These premises, though well intended, based on the results of this research, provided unsubstantiated predictability to support any relationship between personal spirituality and WPS. Additionally, though WS was a perception incurred by workers from several industries, there was potential that other stress mitigation factors in conjunction with personal spirituality might account for the desired healthy work environment that Ashmos and Duchon discussed.

Kim and Seidlitz (2002) admitted, based on the results of their study; spirituality moderated the adverse effect of both physical and emotional stress. Organizational leaders have called for mitigating measures to combat stress in the workplace, and spirituality, specifically WS, was mentioned as a potential solution. Based on the results of this study, future researchers could investigate the buffering effects of personal spirituality on WPS, as these results did not account for what other factors might be attributed to reduced stress if spirituality did not correlate or predict levels of perceived WPS. An equally informative approach to future research would be a qualitative inquiry into specific environments to ascertain their perceptions of WPS and how their individual attributes of personal spirituality might influence their work environments. Several factors could have accounted for the absence of correlational or predictive capacity of personal spirituality on WPS, such as cultural demographics, inter-disciplinary culture among workers, religious perspectives, or mitigating, but not direct roles that personal spirituality might have on influencing WPS.

The notion that spirituality does not influence stress is broad and relative because the definition of spirituality does not provide specific attributes of religion and how it influences one's perception of stress. Religion, as a spiritual attribute of one's well-being, may provide insight into whether religious connotations or attributes alter the perceptions of WPS. Therefore, investigating whether specific religious practices or faiths act as a mitigating factor or perceptual approach may perceive WPS. Consequently, using religious instruments to measure the impact and influence of one's faith or religion on WPS may add value to the literature. The respective disciplines within the service industry tend to have their own idiosyncrasies that warrant exploration to determine if spirituality impacts stress based on respective or relative skills within the industry.

One of the future research initiatives will be to investigate if spirituality acts as a mediating variable with other predictor variables to determine stress reduction levels among practitioners. Amplifying research on this notion will help explain exactly what the direct relationship is, if any, between spirituality and stress. As scholars in various organizational sectors presume that spirituality or religion has some impact on mitigating stress, it is unknown or unfounded what may be that impact. Consequently, having spirituality as a mediator variable in the quest to discover what influences or mitigates stress experienced in the workplace will be instrumental to furthering the research in this broad industry.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this research, spirituality, as defined or assessed by the ASPIRES, did not establish any statistically significant correlation with WPS based on the WSS or predict the levels of perceived stress. The research results indicated that though demographic information depicted in the descriptive statistics showed unique idiosyncrasies, such as more stress revealed among men than women or more attributes of prayer fulfillment among respondents than the other spirituality factors, none of the hypotheses were statistically significant. Consequently, spirituality was an evident and important factor in the lives of the employees but did not have a predictive relationship with their perceptions of WPS.

As organizational leaders seek to foster healthy work environments with stress mitigation measures or workplace spirituality opportunities, consideration must be given to the notion that there is no direct influence of spirituality on stress, though it is one of several factors that may account for how stress is managed by the service company employees. To conclude the perspectives on this research, the research objective to determine spiritual effects on stress has not only been investigated but the literature has also been enhanced to enlighten any misconceptions or mistruths.

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