

A Post Pandemic Phenomenological Study of Manager's Response to Psychological Stress in the Construction Industry

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ABSTRACT

Psychological health has developed into a global concern in the modern era. Psycho-social hazards such as work stress and fatigue have a detrimental effect on mental health over time, affecting both individual focus and organizational production. Unmet timetables, a lack of complete control over staff, project environment pressures, and inter-organizational friction and conflict are all well-known sources of tension for strategic and operational stakeholders. In the construction industry, time-stretching is an additional crucial concern as it jeopardizes workplace safety and workers' physical and mental health. The 2017 National Health and Morbidity Survey states that 29% of Malaysians have depression and anxiety disorder, an increase of 17% recorded within a duration of 6 years. This scenario continues to perpetuate as complexities in work-life heighten due to the Covid-19 pandemic. More recently, a 2019 study by AIA Malaysia finds that 20-29% of employees in the country's healthiest workplaces experience work stress due to a lack of perceived authority at work. Evidently, construction companies cannot afford to downplay the issue of employees' mental health as poor judgments can cause detrimental effects on the companies' reputation, their going concern, and most importantly, human lives. This research aims to gain insights into how managers in the construction sector strategically and tactically respond to psychological stress. Questions in this study revolve around construction managers' response to psychological stress, the decision-making process, and factors influencing such a process. In this study, a conceptual framework is designed based on three theories; (i) the Human Factors Theory which explains human error as the main cause of an accident, (ii) the General Adaptation Syndrome on physiological changes caused by stress, and (iii) the Transactional Coping Theory which gives a phenomenological description on how human copes when experiencing stress. Dimensions from Malaysia's occupational safety and health regulatory framework are also considered in the framework for sense-making on findings to be carried out within the current and anticipated future local setting and context. This research employs a phenomenological approach in soliciting construction managers' lived post-pandemic experiences in responding to workplace psychological stress. Purposive sampling is used to help in the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. Focus group interviews will be conducted with two categories of five construction managers with a minimum of three years in a leadership role. The first category comprises companies with a project value of RM5 million and below, or G1 – G5 segments according to the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), whilst the second, above RM5 million. Semi-structured in-depth interviews will also be conducted with three management level informants, as well as three professionals representing the regulatory bodies, specifically CIDB, and the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) in Malaysia. Thematic analyses will be conducted to identify repeated patterns as well as new themes that will shape the emergent framework. If required, more informants will be identified through a snowballing technique to ensure data saturation is achieved. It is hoped that findings from this research can inform players in the sector in managing or overcoming the present and future pandemic occupational, and psychosocial challenges for business sustainability.

Keywords: psychological stress, construction managers, post-pandemic, phenomenological study