Employee perspectives on the association of work stress and mental health at an institution of higher learning in the Western Cape Province, Southern Africa

By

Samukelisiwe Mbambo

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Supervisor: Dr Mandisa Malinga

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ABSTRACT

Work stress has been identified as an epidemic within the workplace in South Africa and other parts of the world. Work stress has been shown to negatively affect employees' mental health, leading to the onset or exacerbation of common mental disorders such as chronic depression and anxiety. A strong body of evidence suggests that higher education institutions are high stress environments. Therefore, employees in higher education institutions experience significant work stress, resulting in poor mental health. A number of studies have investigated the link between work stress and mental health. However, there is a paucity of research on how local academic staff experience the impact of work stress on their psychological well-being and mental health. The aim of this study was to investigate employees' experiences of work stress, and the impact thereof on their mental health. A qualitative methodological approach was utilised. Eligible participants were academic staff from a local tertiary institution. Semi-structured interviews were utilised in a virtual format, and data was analysed using thematic analysis. The four themes that emerged from the analysis were reported in two categories. The findings revealed the adverse impact of work stress on psychological well-being, and shed light on how academic staff members cope with work stress and improve their psychological well-being and mental health. Therefore, there is a negative association between work stress and mental health, and academic employees are making use of varying coping mechanisms to curb the impact of stress on their mental health such as attending therapy sessions, engaging support systems, and creating boundaries, for example, planning, organising, and time management, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the relationship between work stress and mental health in the workplace from a South African perspective.

Keywords: academic staff; mental health; psychological well-being; qualitative research; higher education institutions (HEIs); thematic analysis; work stress; work stressors.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis, '**Employee perspectives on the association of work stress and mental health at an institution of higher learning in the Western Cape Province, Southern Africa',** is my work and that all resources that were used or referred to by me during the research study are completely acknowledged through a complete reference or an acknowledgement statement.

Student name: Samukelisiwe Mbambo

Student number: MBMSAM002

Signed by candidate

Signature: _____

Date: 15 February 2021

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LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF APPENDICES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CHE	Council of Higher Education
CMD	Common Mental Disorders
GDP	Gross Domestic Profit
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LSE	London School of Economics
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SADAG	South African Depression and Anxiety Group
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UCT	University of Cape Town
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This introductory chapter begins with a short background on work stress in general, followed by work stress in higher education institutions[1] (HEIs) in particular, thereby orientating the reader to the topic under investigation. A brief discussion around the impact of work stress on mental health is then put into context. This is followed by the problem statement, rationale and purpose of the current study, together with the main research questions. The penultimate section outlines the forthcoming chapters, followed by a brief conclusion.

1.2 Work stress

Work stress has been identified as an epidemic within the workplace, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. It has been shown to negatively affect the mental health of employees, leading to the onset or exacerbation of common mental disorders (CMD's), such as chronic depression and anxiety (Dano. 2018; Khan et al., 2016). Work stress is described as harmful physical and emotional responses caused by work stressors. Responses to work stress include symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and depression, which have an adverse impact on job satisfaction and productivity (Karadzinska-bislimovska et al., 2014). Work stressors are various factors that lead to work stress. Such factors may include a highly demanding job with very low control and low supportive relationships, as well as lack of resources (Cheng et al., 2000).

[1] For the purpose of this study, the abbreviation HEIs has been used, referring to higher education institutions, which includes institutions of higher learning. The terms are understood as synonymous.

A strong body of evidence suggests that HEIs provide high stress environments, therefore employees in HEIs experience work stress that results in poor mental health (Coetzee & Rothmann, 2005; Rothman & Grobler, 2020; Smith, 2018). This study therefore uses semi-structured interviews to explore how employees experience work stress, and how work stress experiences are associated with mental health in academia.

1.3 Work stress and work stressors in higher education

Existing literature has reported various work stressors that affect mental health in HEIs. Stigma and discrimination of various groups in HEIs are two identified work stressors. Particular groups are vulnerable to discrimination, namely, women, and persons living with mental and physical disabilities (Brohan & Thornicrof, 2010). Another known work stressor within higher education (HE) is the demand/control relationship characterised by low control and high demand of one's job. This work stressor has been shown to predict high rates of ill-health and absenteeism, whilst effort/reward relationships characterised by perceived imbalance between high effort and low rewards equally predicts a range of poor health outcomes. A body of evidence in recent years supports the view that increasing work stressors, such as harassment, violence, and bullying, lead to poor mental health (Harvey et al., 2017; Khamisa et al., 2016).

In addition, the HEIs within the South African context have been characterised as high stress working environments due to work stressors, such as industrial strikes, student protest actions, and adverse effects on organisational restructuring in the form of mergers. If left unattended, work stressors can affect the mental health of employees (Clearly, 2010). Collins and Parry-Jones (2000) pointed out that academic life may have been perceived as comprising of privileges that include good conditions of employment and flexible work hours. However, they contend that the universities have experienced huge cuts in resources available to them, whilst student numbers have expanded. Similarly, organisational restructuring, such as mergers

in South African HEIs, have increased the number of students enrolled, thus creating work pressure due to a higher workload, exposing employees to work stress.

The South African Council of Higher Education (CHE) recognises that HEIs play a developmental role for South Africa. Some of these HEIs are currently a result of mergers existing well-over a decade ago, making them larger universities across South Africa. Most of these HEIs have various campuses with an increased student admission, whilst having a low staff complement. Currently, the staff complement of HEIs employs permanent and contract employees which include academic staff, service workers, and support services. For HEIs to function effectively, they require healthy staff who are supported to manage work stress. Work stress has an adverse impact on performance, productivity, and overall quality of the HEIs. This further negatively impacts on the sustainability and development of HEIs and the South African economy. HEIs are regarded as a key aspect for the global economy. However, mental health problems negatively affect the economy whilst also affecting mental health (Meyer et al., 2016; Pascoal et al., 2016). The effect of work stress on mental health is an issue deserving global attention as it has high financial implications for organisations due to increasing absenteeism and decreasing job commitment (Miller, 2010). Researchers from the London School of Economics (LSE) conducted a survey in 2016, reporting that mental health problems costed the South African government at least 5.7% of the country's GDP, either due to absenteeism or presenteeism, which is the attempt to work while feeling depressed (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2016).

Moreover, one may argue that the poor working environment caused by the recent Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., lockdown restrictions) has exacerbated the adverse effects of work stress, such as decreased productivity (Akour et al., 2020; Majumdar et al., 2020). Employees now work remotely with little or no face-to-face interaction due to mandated social distancing, leading to employees experiencing poor communication and poor interpersonal relations. In

addition, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) reported an increased rate of depression in the workplace during Covid-19 due to various stressors, such as the loss of loved due to Covid-19; fear of contracting Covid-19; recovering from Covid-19, and financially supporting family members affected by the lockdown (Rothmann & Grobler, 2020). The working community has had to make adjustments as a way to cope and improve their psychological well-being.

Given the various work stressors discussed, such as the large number of students and low number of staff members at the various HEIs, there is a need for increased understanding of the work stress that employees experience and how best to manage it.

1.4 Mental health and psychological well-being of employees in the workplace

'Mental health' and 'psychological well-being' are related terms that are often used interchangeably to describe an individual's health status. The literature defines 'mental health' as the effective presentation and functioning of mental processes, which results in constructive, positive, and productive activities, and includes fulfilling relationships with others, whilst having the ability to adjust to changes and cope with challenges or problems (Johal & Pooja, 2016). 'Psychological well-being' is defined as the capacity to maintain personal development and the motivation towards growth. Psychological well-being includes an individual's attitude, commitment, and progress with life goals, the consciousness of their potential, the productive nature of their relationships with others, and their personal perceptions about their own life (Johal & Pooja, 2016).

In 2018, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated a prevalence of 450 million people globally who currently suffer from CMD's, such as bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia, dementia, anxiety, and depression. Of the 450 million people, 300 million have

been diagnosed with depression. The Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) defines depression as ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Forms of depressive disorder range from reduced self-esteem, and reduced concentration and attention, to disturbed sleep and diminished appetite. The effects of these symptoms in the workplace may cause an individual to feel incompetent, diminish their ability to reach their full potential, or render the employee incapable of presenting their best self. Depression has been noted as a pandemic in the world of work as more and more employees grapple with the disorder. The academic environment has also been reported as having high records of cases of employees experiencing depressive symptoms as presented by occupational health surveillances (Venables & Allender, 2006). While depression in particular is the most evident CMD experienced by employees in the workplace due to work stress, it is also often agreed that burnout symptoms are an example of work stress (Cleary, 2010). Burnout symptoms occur as a consequence of work stress in individual employees with no prior historical records of experiencing any common mental illnesses (Cleary, 2010). The common symptoms of burnout are depersonalisation, fatigue, and decreased personal achievement, along with job-related disillusionment.

Across the world of work, there are attempts by employers to assist employees who experience work stress through various interventions, such as employee wellness programmes (Wert, 2020). These programmes seek to facilitate awareness of how employees can cope with work stress and improve their psychological well-being, thereby increasing productivity.

The ability to cope with work stress positively correlates with work-life balance and contributes to improved mental health and psychological well-being (Shafee et al., 2020). Additionally, improved mental health contributes to employees having good cognitive and executive abilities, such as improved problem solving and decision making at work. Such employees are also better equipped to maintain positive interpersonal relationships with other colleagues. Work stress in HEIs in South Africa has not received adequate attention, with little

existing research on the topic. The findings of this study will therefore contribute to the body of knowledge in the field, as well as provide the opportunity to better understand and manage work stress more effectively.

1.5 Problem statement and rationale for the study

Some studies (Shah et al., 2016; Collins & Parry-Jones, 2000) have investigated associations between work stress and mental health. However, few studies have explored how local academic staff experience the impact of work stress on their psychological well-being and mental health. Hence, work stress is a neglected factor that contributes negatively to the mental health of academic staff. Previous studies, such as the one by Hanisch et al., (2016), utilised quantitative methods which do not focus on the lived experiences and perceptions of employees regarding the effects of work stress on their mental health. It is essential to understand the experiences of work stress and how that impacts on employee mental health. This study is also in line SDG 4 and SDG 8 of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) (UN Assembly, 2015). Respectively, these goals focus on ensuring quality education and decent employment for all. The findings will add value to understanding the dynamics of work stress specific to employees in the academic environment. It is essential to address work stress and to contribute to employees' holistic well-being to improve productivity (Karadzinska-bislimovska et al., 2014).

1.6 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to *investigate employees' experiences of work stress and the impact thereof on their mental health.*

Understanding work stress and the association thereof on mental health will help to identify better ways of supporting staff members of HEIs. This investigation is expected to inform efforts of improving HE legislation on mental health for employees and other related

policies, such as the provision of programmes aimed at identifying work stressors and managing work stress.

1.7. Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine how academic employees understand work stress.
2. Identify factors that lead to work stress.
3. Exploring the perceived association between experience of work stress and psychological well-being.
4. Explore how employees cope with work stress and what improves their psychological well-being.

1.8 Research questions

The following questions were formulated to guide this research:

1) How do academic employees understand work stress?
2) What are the perceived factors that lead to work stress?
3) What is the nature of perceived association between experience of work stress and psychological well-being of academic staff.?
4) How do employees cope with work stress and what improves their psychological well-being?

1.9 Chapter outline

Chapter 1 introduced the topic under study and clarified key elements and concepts of the research.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review and theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology employed in the study. The techniques used to select the participants and collect and analyse the data are described. Attention is also given to the ethical considerations adhered to in this study, along with reflexivity and how trustworthiness is ensured.

Chapter 4 summarises the results of the study following thematic analysis. The results are presented in the form of categories, addressing the objectives of the study.

Chapter 5, the final chapter, discusses the results of the study. In addition to providing a conclusion in relation to the research questions, the implications and limitations are also described, along with recommendations for future studies.

1.10 Conclusion

This first chapter introduced the study and topic under investigation, as well as provided a description of the main elements of the research process.

The next chapter presents the literature review and theoretical framework of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The review presented in this chapter reveals that research on work stressors and work stress, and the impact thereof on mental health, has varied in terms of methodology, sample characteristics, and settings. Consequently, there are a plethora of diverse conclusions and recommendations, depending on the study topic, population, and context. This chapter also presents the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

2.2 The impact of work stress

Barnes et al., (2010) argue that the most common work stressors, particularly in low- and middle-income nations, are due to organisational restructuring in the form of mergers of HEIs. They assert that mergers have led to high student admissions in universities, however, with a lower number of employees to meet the rising need of more students being registered. In addition to high student numbers, academics are expected to balance and manage their teaching responsibilities alongside an active research profile. The impact of work stressors is noticeable through work stress where employees experience emotional responses, such as feelings of insecurity, due to inconsistency between job demands and available control to address the demands of the job (Gie, 2017; Lambert et al., 2007). On an individual level, work stress may manifest as symptoms of burnout, among others, whilst on an organisational level, the effect of work stress is noticeable in the high rate of absenteeism amongst staff members, resulting in lower productivity levels.

Some evidence (Ernst et al., 2004; Ganske-Bulk, 2005; Gie, 2017; Egan et al., 2007) suggests that the impact of work stress is detrimental to an individual's psychological well-

being. The contexts of most of these studies have been from sectors other than HE. There, however, appears to be a paucity of research on how work stress impacts mental health. In addition, existing studies are predominantly quantitative studies and systematic reviews.

A few studies have focused on employees' experience of work stress in relation to particular demographics (Ernst et al., 2004; Foster et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2016). Some of these studies posit that employees who have more work experience, such as five years and above, tend to be more resilient and present with greater job satisfaction, compared to employees with lesser work experience (Khan et al., 2016). Similarly, employees who are older, such as 40 years of age and above, are reported to be more inclined to have better coping skills than younger employees. Foster (2020) suggests that improving resilience and preventing psychological distress is determined by the support provided to young nurses. This includes providing resilience building programmes for student nurses and nurses who are entering the world of work. Khan et al., (2016) concur stating that teachers of socio-demographic characteristics, such as being unmarried, being a less experienced junior teacher, and being male, were potentially at risk of poor psychological well-being. Moreover, there are a few studies regarding employees' suggestions on coping, managing, and improving mental well-being, especially within the HE context.

2.3 Employee experiences of work stress in the international context

Numerous studies have been conducted on work stress in diverse fields other than academia. For the purpose of this study, these will be consulted as a reference point due to the lack of studies focusing specifically on academia. Attention is first given to a qualitative study conducted by Marshall (2017) who examined social workers' perceptions of work stressors. Marshall's study comprised twelve participants who were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were experienced social workers based in Pennsylvania and New York. An investigation was conducted through focused interviews on common experiences of social

workers and their experiences of work stress. The major finding of the social workers' experience of stress was *job flexibility*. Job flexibility provided the convenience of having flexible weekly work schedules; thus, job flexibility was perceived as a work benefit, which helps alleviate work stress. Managing difficult patients and client deaths were identified as a work stressor by all of the participants and often led to burnout. Similarly, Newell and MacNeil (2010) found that burnout can occur in most and any social work setting. This study provides an understanding of how work stressors contribute to work stress and lead to poor mental health, such as experiencing burnout symptoms, and thus adversely contributing to the employees' work performance. However, these studies do not allow for generalisations to local settings due to the small sample size and the research approach utilised. In addition, the work conditions of social workers may also be dissimilar to those of academics.

Furthermore, de Jong et al., (2016) conducted a review of 39 longitudinal studies from the period 2000–2012. The work stressor under investigation was organisational restructuring. This study analysed how short- and long-term restructuring by staff reduction impacts on staff well-being. Lower stress levels and lower rates of interpersonal conflict were found in some groups of employees. Restructuring was found to adversely impact the well-being of employees in various ways, including fostering feelings of job insecurity. In this regard, Tytherleigh et al., (2007) found that changes, such as restructuring, short-term contracts, and demand for publications in the HE sector of the United Kingdom continues to affect academic and support staff. Job insecurity was also found to be a major stressor for educators. These studies reflect clearly how a work stressor, such as organisational restructuring, adversely contributes to employees' work environments, hence employees experience a poor working culture, lack of job security, and thereby exposure to work stress.

A quantitative study by Stanley and colleagues (2010) found a correlation between mental illness and employees' coping skills. This study noted that coping skills determine the

employee's ability to perform under high stress and cognitively demanding circumstances. Another longitudinal study that examined common effects of work stressors and counteractive work behaviour revealed that the effects of work stressors vary, depending on many factors, including gender (Meier & Spector, 2013). These studies provide insight into employees' resilience to work stress. Therefore, lending to one's coping skills, the experience and impact of work stress on mental health may vary from one employee to the other.

Furthermore, the study by Miller et al., (2010) of a nationally representative study of Americans examined the financial impact of chronic physical and mental health problems among employees in ten different companies. The researchers computed the funds spent by companies on treatment costs for employees, self-reported absenteeism, and productivity lost using the WHO Health and Work Performance questionnaire. Depression was ranked the costliest mental health illness as it was the cause of most productivity losses. Newell and McNeil (2010) noted that depressed employees change jobs regularly and often have their employment terminated. Hammarstrom et al., (2015) affirmed that mental health problems, such as depressive symptoms, are potential outcomes of a poor work environment. A poorly functioning environment may include work stressors such as inadequate space utilisation, inefficient workplace processes, and a toxic company culture.

The Harvard Mental Health Review suggested that low adherence to treatment influences employees' job satisfaction and productivity within the workplace (Miller et al., 2010). Furthermore, Henderson et al., (2013) reported that 18% of British employees' experience symptoms of mental health disorders but are not willing to seek treatment due to stigma associated with psychotic disorders. It was also reported that they fear losing their jobs due to this stigmatisation. The same can be said for local South African employees, considering the diverse historical and cultural factors. Additionally, Newell and MacNeil (2010) opine that mental health disorders are more likely to be expressed in psychological responses, such as

tension and agitation, including physical discomforts. In addition, employees may develop isolation in conjunction to not being productive. Employees also highlighted fatigue and sleep difficulties as a result of mood disorders (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Fatigue often leads to poor decision making at work.

In contrast to other studies, Joyce et al., (2015) conducted a systematic review exploring workplace interventions for common mental illnesses. The study identified effective interventions, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to manage stress among employees. This was also expressed by other research studies focusing on employee wellness (Miller, 2010; Hammarstrom, 2015). The findings reveal that there are interventions that can assist in the recovery of employees who are experiencing mental illness and also in the prevention of common mental illness of employees (Joyce et al., 2015). The literature reveals various efforts by individuals and organisations to enhance the coping and psychological well-being of employees and to increase job satisfaction and productivity. The studies below unpack some of the coping strategies used by employees and organisations to facilitate better coping with work stress.

Wert (2020) conducted a study on firms both in Canada and the United States to identify whether mental health impacts the productivity of workers. Particular attention is given to workplace wellness programmes to reduce absenteeism. The study contributes to the knowledge of workplace wellness programmes as the main catalyst by firms to promote employee psychological well-being. In addition, evidence was provided to support the effectiveness of these programmes, confirmed by the increased productivity in the workplace.

Whilst the workplace wellness programmes enhance the ability to cope with work stress, a study conducted by Shafee et al., (2020) contributed to the body of knowledge on work-life balance, which has been known to improve the mental health of employees. The study was conducted in an HEI in Malaysia. The findings demonstrated that having a balance

between life and work is an aspect of human life and responsibility. Work-life balance thus further positively contributes to psychological well-being and improves the individual's capacity to function well at work and live a productive life.

Selected studies on work stress from other countries make use of diverse methodologies and approaches. Some findings are similar, although factors leading to work stress are different. However, all studies in this section confirm that work stress has a detrimental impact on the mental health of employees, such as employees experiencing depressive symptoms and symptoms of burnout.

Having reviewed studies on work stress from a global perspective in the sections above, attention now shifts to a review of the literature on the topic in the South African context.

2.4 Factors leading to work stress in the South African context

Although the South African context is similar to other middle-income countries, it should be noted that the political history of apartheid continues to play an enormous role in shaping the mental health of almost every individual, including employees (Mengen et al., 2014). This is also true for employees in HEIs, since institutions are continuously shaped by historical and current socio-political factors. What's more is that some of the stressors are fuelled by inequalities that are still to be addressed (Leibbrandt et al., 2012; Webster & Francis, 2019).

Bowen et al., (2013) conducted a survey that sought to examine the relationship between harassment and discrimination when compared to the experiences of work stress. The sample comprised 626 South African employees. The findings suggest that harassment and discrimination directly contributed to work stress experienced by an employee. Participants who had been exposed to harassment reported significantly higher levels of stress when compared to employees who had not been exposed to harassment. Similarly, participants who felt that they were paid less due to their demographic difference, such as language, race, gender,

and sexual preference, reported higher stress levels compared to respondents who did not report such discrimination (Bowen et al., 2013). This study therefore provides insight into the effects of harassment and discrimination in the unique post-apartheid South African context.

Similarly, Botha and Pioneer (2006) recognise that each organisation may have its unique work stressors and stress. In the correctional service in South Africa, the work stressors identified were job insecurity, sitting too long, repetitiveness, and lack of autonomy. For this study, a cross-sectional design through simple random sampling was used. In addition, 157 employee participants were sampled from a total population of 605. Participants were from the Free State Correctional Services department. Transactional process models of occupational stress were utilised to conceptualise stress. Similar to studies by Joseph (2009) and Stanley et al., (2010), a relationship was found between positive affect and independence, or the employee's belief that they are able to control their life in some way, such as having an internal locus of control. Negative affect was associated with employees who generally felt their circumstances result from factors outside their control, reflecting an external locus of control. It was therefore concluded that correctional services officials who perceive themselves as having some control in their lives experienced lesser work stress than employees who lack autonomy and independence.

As mentioned, a descriptive study on non-governmental organisations (NGO's) by Joseph (2009) analysed the experiences of social workers who were newly qualified. This study was conducted in the Western Cape on a sample of 20 participants over a period of 24 months. The focus of the study was coping strategies on work stress utilised by social workers. The findings suggested that there are factors related to the role of social workers that may contribute to the work stress they experience. The personality traits of the social workers proved to be a main contributor, regardless of other environmental factors that led to work stress. The study concluded that the state or prevalence of personality traits, such as extraversion and autonomy

among social workers, may have an effect on how they manage burnout and work stress, among other related aspects.

However, a different cross-sectional study in South Africa was conducted to predict safety compliance and work stress (Masia & Pinner, 2011). Participants (n=158) were conveniently selected from the mining industry. The findings noted that work stress, such as an emotional response where an employee experiences insecurity with their job, led to poor levels of safety compliance. Similar findings by Lambert et al., (2007) show that job satisfaction is a greater predictor of work stress than job security and organisational commitment.

Barkhuizen and Rothmann (2008) conducted a cross-sectional study to determine indicators of work stress experienced by academic employees within South African HEIs. Work overload, staff benefits, and the pressures of life were identified by academics as a contributor to higher levels of stress. However, the study concluded that the levels of stress and their effects varied depending on the demographic information of participants.

More recently, the South African context, as well as the world at large, have had to deal with the outbreak of the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the government-imposed lockdown restrictions have been identified as a major work stressor of these times. In this regard, a study conducted by Mujumdar et al., (2020) in India investigated 203 professionals in the corporate sector and 325 university students who worked from 9 am until 5 pm during the 'work from home' phase of lockdown. The study discusses how lockdown restrictions hampered the economy due to demands to cease most operations as a means to institute and adjust to social distancing as a way to curb the spread of the virus. The findings on Covid-19 as a work stressor include: compromised health, poor well-being, anxiety, disrupted sleep, isolation, worry, and depressive symptoms, including chronic stress of living through the pandemic.

Although there is a body of literature with regard to work stress across the globe, it is evident that there is still limited evidence and knowledge on the experiences of work stress for HE in South Africa. Existing studies have varying conclusions and often recommend further research in a number of sectors. It is therefore paramount to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the experience of work stress and how it impacts on the mental health of academic staff.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is described next.

2.5 Theoretical framework

This current study is guided by the transactional theory of work stress. The theory suggests the transaction between an employee and their environment as having a direct contribution to one's experience of stress. For instance, the pressure experienced where there are limited resources may negatively impact on one's well-being. The transactional theory also proposes that stress is experienced as an evaluation of the situation an employee finds him/herself in. The transactional theory suggests that employees go through two stages of evaluation before responding to a feeling of stress. The stages include deciding whether the situation is significant, and secondly, if there is an ability to cope. The studies discussed earlier from different workplace environments (Bowen et al., 2013; Botha, 2016) adopted the transactional theory. The findings of these studies posit that an improved mood was positively associated with the belief an employee had on the ability to control their life, such as having an internal locus of control and independence, whilst having a high external locus of control was associated with poor well-being due to low mood. This reveals that the transactional theory is applicable in a number of contexts, including HEIs (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). The theory was developed by Lazarus in 1986 and modified by Lazarus and Folkman in 1987. The framework underpins the holistic experience and development of stress by describing the

causal pathway which reveals the nature of fundamental psychological factors (Lazarus et al., 2001).

The framework is flexible, regardless of whether the study is quantitative or qualitative. It is a widely used framework in various sectors (Cox et al., 2000; Webster et al., 2011; Biggs et al., 2017). The transactional theory is also designed in a way that elicits information that reflects on the employees' experience with their environment and their appraisal of it. In addition, the transactional theory is also applicable at all employee levels, such as between line managers (supervisors) and general employees. The case study of the university consists of several levels since it is an academic institution. Employees in academic institutions are prone to various stressors for diverse reasons.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented literature on various aspects related to work stress and the impact thereof. The literature was predominantly from the American and European context, with very few studies focusing on HEIs. Various conclusions and recommendations such as supporting employees to cope were proposed by the numerous researchers in their diverse contexts.

In addition, the theoretical framework underpinning this study was also presented in this chapter. Transactional theory was noted as the theory guiding this study. This theory is particularly suitable for this research as it focuses on the effects of the environment on stress, which is of particular interest to this study, which explores the ways in which the academic environment impacts on academic employees and the stressors experienced within academia.

The next chapter outlines how the study was conducted to address the study's objectives.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the literature review and theoretical framework of the study. Building on the insights obtained, attention now shifts to the methodology employed in this study. The process and steps followed to collect and analyse the data are outlined. How trustworthiness is established is also explained. In addition to noting the researcher's reflexivity during the research process, the ethical considerations adhered to are also described. A brief conclusion wraps up the chapter.

3.2 Research design

This study utilised a qualitative approach. As Bell (2012) pointed out, most of the literature on *work stress* and *mental health in the workplace* – the two central concepts of this study – has been quantitative in nature. A qualitative approach was found to be particularly suitable for the current study, as it seeks to obtain new information that cannot be acquired through quantitative means. Of particular interest is employees' experiences of work stress, which is essential for contributing to new knowledge within HEIs. An interpretive paradigm was adopted as it allows for the subjective experiences of participants. Willis (2007) mentioned that interpretivism generally explores experiences in a specific setting or context. This paradigm makes use of meaning-based methodologies, such as interviewing. Interviewing relies on a subjective relationship between the researcher and participants (Jackson, 2011; Ponterotto, 2005; Creswell, 2013). This paradigm was considered appropriate for this study as it is interested in the effect of work stress on mental well-being, such as experiencing depressive symptoms, which may vary depending on the participants' environment,

background, and current context. Moreover, this may include how employees interpret experiences.

3.3 Research setting

This study took place at a HEI in the Western Cape, South Africa. The name of the institution is withheld to preserve the integrity and uphold the reputation of the University. This was also a request from the Ethics Committee of the University.

The particular university under study is described as fairly diverse, as it attracts students with varying backgrounds from across all nine provinces of South Africa and including internationally. It is also located in one of South Africa's biggest and most popular cities – Cape Town. Contained within South Africa's borders are various ethnic groups speaking diverse languages, including Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, Ndebele, English, and Afrikaans, to name a few. The University provides a range of academic programmes, including commerce, applied science, health sciences, education, hotel school, engineering, and information technology. The University is the product of a national transformation process where a number of HEIs were amalgamated. As a result, the University has had a high number of students registering over the years, however, with a contradicting low number of staff members. In addition, the University has campuses spread across the Western Cape.

The research information is not for the direct use of the university under study, neither for my current employment position at the University. Instead, this study emerges as part of the MA Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

3.4 Participants and selection

All academic staff were eligible to participate in the study. This resulted in a diverse group of participants from various departments and faculties, allowing for well representation of information across the University. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants,

which is a method based on particular criteria when selecting participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2007). Furthermore, purposive sampling enhances the transferability of the findings and increases the information obtained from the participants. In addition, all the participants were familiar with the topic being researched due to direct engagement and exposure to the subject under investigation. Creswell (2013) posits the method as a careful selection of knowledgeable and willing participants who contribute constructively for the researcher to comprehend the research question and the problem due to their involvement and experience of the topic under study. To allow for some level of homogeneity in terms of roles in the university, participants for this study were all academic employees at the University at different levels of their academic careers. This allowed for in-depth engagement with issues specific to the sample. Data saturation was achieved after 20 semi-structured interviews, as no new information came to the fore (Francis et al., 2010).

3.5 Demographic information of the participants

The response to the study invitation was positive in that it attracted an adequate number of participants representing all faculties. When data saturation was reached, the interviews were discontinued, and all interested employees were made aware that there would be no further interviews.

Participants in this study were lecturers, excluding the Deans and Deputy Vice-Chancellors who form part of management. There were a few participants who had previously been lecturers and had developed their careers into management positions, such as heads of departments or line managers. Amongst the participants were junior and senior lecturers. The highest qualification amongst the participants was a PhD, whilst the lowest was a master's degree. Prior experiences included corporate experiences and being educators in high school, whilst most of the participants started their career as academics within higher education. The participants' work experience at the HEI ranged between 3 and 22 years, and their ages ranged

between 33 and 63 years. In terms of ethnic or racial composition, six (6) of the participants were black South Africans, five (5) of which were Xhosa-speaking and one (1) was Zulu-speaking; three (3) were black African foreign nationals from Zimbabwe and Burundi; five (5) were coloured[2], and were both English- and Afrikaans-speaking. Six (6) participants were white, four (4) of which were Afrikaans-speaking and two (2) English-speaking. In total, 11 of the participants were female and nine (9) were male. In addition, the participants were well represented across all faculties, namely: engineering, health and wellness, applied science, and commerce. Table 3.1 presents the participants' demographic information.

Table 3.1: Selected demographic information of participants

Characteristic	Number
Gender identification	Female = 11 Male = 09 Other = 0
Age	Below 25= 0 Between 25 and 50 = 17 Between 51 and 65 = 3 Above 65 = 0
Tenure at the institution	Less than 3 years = 01 Between 3 and 5 years = 07 More than 5 years = 12
Qualification	PhDs = 03 Master's degree = 17

3.6 Method of data collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews which were used to explore the ways in which employees experience the impact of work stress on mental health. An interview schedule was utilised to guide the interview process (see Appendix A). The interview schedule was not prescriptive and only linked to the research questions. An interview schedule is

[2] The term coloured is embraced as an identity label by some within the South African context, whilst it remains challenged by others. The term is a contentious label that forms part of the apartheid racial categorization and is used in various documents.

believed to allow for greater discoveries in terms of meaning and in-depth information (Allawi, 2014; Voutsina, 2017). This method of collecting data assists the researcher in understanding the participants' experiences (Creswell & Path, 2018). Semi-structured interviews also allowed for participants to naturally share rich information (Creswell & Path, 2018). In addition, this method was suitable to adequately explore the topic under investigation to produce broad and substantive data (Howitt, 2010). The interviews were conducted mainly in English, and took place between September and October 2020. The online platform 'Microsoft Teams' was utilised due to the worldwide Covid-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic and lockdown restrictions suggested by the WHO and implemented by the National Government of South Africa.

3.7 Procedure of data collection

After getting the go-ahead to conduct the study from the Psychology Department's Research Ethics Committee at UCT and the institution which is the focus of the study, I consulted the institution's Human Capital Department, as they are the custodians of the database of all academic staff members within the university (all faculties and departments).

After explaining the purpose of the study, I requested the Human Capital manager (Talent and Employment Relations) to allow me to seek support from all seven Human Capital business partners that represent all faculties and departments. After introducing myself, I explained the purpose of my study to all the business partners. The procedure for participating in the study was outlined, as indicated in the consent form. Thereafter, I requested the Human Capital business partners to email the invitation form (Appendix C) to all the heads of the academic departments in all the faculties. They in turn distributed the invitations to academic staff within their faculties and requested participants to email me directly should they wish to participate. The invitation was open to academic staff of any age, gender, or qualification, as each of these factors would shape the findings significantly. Potential participants were sent an MS Teams invite for an online interview. Prior to participating in the online interviews,

informed consent (Appendix D) was obtained from each participant. This was done via email. Although alternative mediums were made available, the study was conducted in English since it is the official language of communication at the institution. Most online interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussions of employees' experiences of work stressors and mental health in the workplace. Interviews were conducted during the day (weekdays and weekends) between 8:30 am until 4:30 pm. The interviews were recorded on the Microsoft Team platform for transcription purposes. I conducted all the transcribing aided by 'Microsoft Streams', an application on Microsoft Teams. The application allowed for convenient recording and transcription via captions which were converted into text. The recordings were immediately deleted from Microsoft Teams and saved on my personal password-protected laptop. Data collection and analysis took place simultaneously, until no new themes emerged, as proposed by Francis et al., (2010) and Guest et al., (2006). The sufficiency of sample size for qualitative research is not determined by frequency, but rather by the magnitude of data, and thus, samples of participants must be those that directly signify and represent the research topic (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

3.8 Data analysis

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described data analysis as a method of creating meaning of verbatim text collected from participants, providing understanding and meaning to the larger amount of data gathered. The data analysis process provides interpretation to the mass of data collected, whilst constructing order (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This entailed searching for and identifying general statements made by the participants, giving rise to patterns or relationships (themes) within the data (Braun et al., 2016). The thematic analysis captured important data concerning the qualitative question of the overall research. Braun and Clarke (2014) affirm that thematic analysis is commonly used as a qualitative analytic method in the domain of psychological research and should be seen as

a fundamental procedure for qualitative analysis. To elaborate, Larkin et al., (2009) mentions that thematic analysis is a fundamental method for qualitative analysis and incorporates everything from classifying and analysing patterns to the reporting of the data. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set.

The six phases prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006) that were followed in this study are outlined below.

3.8.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation and immersion

This is the first step of thematic analysis and necessitated that I familiarise myself with the data. The crucial feature of this step was to fully immerse myself in the transcripts in order to become well-informed. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that this creates the 'bedrock' for the rest of the analysis. The process of immersing myself in the transcripts was accomplished in two ways: First, I initially conducted and collected the data that provided a way to start understanding the content entailed in the data. My reflections and field notes supported me to develop an idea of the themes that may emerge. Second, I developed initial impressions by reading and re-reading the transcripts, thus providing me with better knowledge of the scope and depth of the content of the data. I read the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings of the interviews multiple times. This step enabled me to gain a general sense of the data, obtain a deeper sense of knowledge, and begin to understand the participants' experiences.

3.8.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

This second phase involved generating initial codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that the analyst needs to work methodically and expansively through the data. This entails thoroughly focusing on each item of data, and identifying significant aspects according to the frequency of patterns. The generation of codes was done manually as I read through the transcripts. In line with Braun and Clarke's guidance, I generated as many codes as possible to

allow myself to identify significant aspects across the data. More than 300 codes were generated from the information collected from participants. I also manually verified the codes to identify words that may have a similar meaning but utilised different wording or phrases. The codes were significantly minimised during this process.

3.8.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes

During phase three, I searched for themes in the transcripts. The coding of data allowed a broader step which focused on the themes the codes uncovered. There were four themes that emerged after this process. This phase involved creation of sub-themes that were later identified as larger themes. Some of the code names developed into themes. I identified 12 themes and combined similar themes.

3.8.4 Phase 4: Examination and reviewing of themes

The fourth phase supported me to review the themes cautiously, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). After completing this process, I explored the significance between the themes, looking for where all the themes had a connection that built a concrete idea and story in terms of work stress as experienced by the academics and its impact on mental health. The connection of themes allowed for the construction of the overall results of the analysis. This phase assisted in combining and breaking down some of the themes into categories. The process ensured that information provided is coherent and reflects the views of the participants and is in line with the objectives of the study.

3.8.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming the themes

The fifth phase allowed me to identify the fundamental and central nature of all the themes, and all that is entailed in the data that each theme encompasses. This process facilitated the naming of each of the four themes relative to their functions. The themes were discussed with my research supervisor for additional input. The above phases then led to producing the report.

3.8.6 Phase 6: Write-up

The report is a reflection of the complete thesis as elaborated in the results, discussions, and conclusion sections, respectively, demonstrated in Chapters four, five, and six of this report.

Attention now shifts in the sections below to establishing the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher's reflexivity, and compliance with ethical standards in research.

3.9 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Rigorous criteria were applied in this study to assess the perceptions and experiences of staff members in the academic environment. Trustworthiness was ensured using criteria suggested by Rebar and Macnee (2010). These are *credibility* through detailed descriptions of the participants and research setting; t*ransferability* through describing the research context and the assumptions that apply to the research study; *dependability* through verification by the supervisor of the study; and c*onfirmability,* which was ensured by keeping collected data.

Throughout the study, I remained aware of my role in the interviews as a researcher. I do acknowledge that having experience as an employee wellness specialist in the HE sector facilitated assuring and achieving rigor as I am familiar with the environment over a five-year employment period. However, this may also have produced bias in my data analysis due to the interaction with staff members in HEIs prior to the study. Moreover, this may have informed certain assumptions about work stress that I may have brought to the interview space.

The credibility of this study was attained through persistent engagement with participants and research reflexivity. The process facilitated an opportunity for participants to provide accuracy of facts and interpretations. Credibility was further enhanced as I have knowledge and research skills to perform interviews. I am a qualified social worker and have been practicing for 10 years. I also have experience interviewing employees regarding

psychosocial issues that affect their work performance. This skill supported me to conduct the semi-structured interviews that consisted of open-ended questions. Hence, I was able to listen, probe, summarise, and seek clarity during the interviews.

Due to purposive sampling, the selected sample had a significant level of homogeneity (academia only) which assured some *transferability*.

The ethical considerations adhered to in this study are described next.

3.10 Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study and ethical clearance was sought from the Research Committees of the two institutions involved. Permission to access employees was requested from the Human Capital Department. This is in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act No. 4 of 2013 (POPI Act). The Act seeks to protect sensitive, personal information whilst recognising the right to privacy (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2013). In this regard, employees' information kept by the institution is not openly accessible to me. Participants received a letter of invitation directly from the institution which explained the purpose of the research study, and also outlined the rights and responsibilities of the participants and that of the research.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. In other words, withdrawal from the study would not result in any loss of employee benefits. Consent was required from the participants beforehand. This consent included allowance of being recorded during virtual interviews (see Appendix D). Confidentiality was upheld and participant information was safeguarded during the collection, storage, and analysis phases of the research. Anonymity was maintained and no personal identifying information was disclosed. Both their identity and information provided were kept confidential. For example, identifying words/phrases were replaced with general words and pseudonyms were used instead of real

names. The demographic information provided does not lead to the identification of any particular participant at all. In addition, the only two people that had access to the data was my supervisor and myself. The data was stored in a secure location on a password protected laptop.

Furthermore, this study is in the best interest of the University, and the findings are reported in an ethical way and in adherence with the integrity and good reputation of the University. Participants shared sensitive information about discrimination and other work-related challenges. In such instances, free counselling services were made available should the need arise (see Referral list: Appendix E). However, no participants utilised the free service.

Some concluding remarks follow next to wrap up the chapter.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in this study. Particular attention was paid to how the study was conducted, including the eligible participants and how they were selected for the study. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Ethical considerations adhered to were also considered. The trustworthiness of the study was confirmed, along with the researcher's reflexivity during the research process.

The next chapter provides a discussion of the study's findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate academic employees' experiences of work stress, and the impact thereof on their mental health. By listening to and analysing the employees' experiences, significant information was collected on employee knowledge of work stress; how employees identified factors leading to work stress; the impact of work stress on psychological well-being; and employees' suggestions for coping and improving psychological well-being. Four thematic domains finally emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes were categorised to address the objectives of the study.

4.2 Themes

As shown in Table 4.2 below, four themes emerged from the analysis of the data, namely: '*Personal knowledge of work stress*', '*Factors leading to work stress'*, '*Impact of work stress on psychological well-being*', and '*Coping strategies'*.

Table 4.2: Thematic categories

Category 1: Work stress	Personal knowledge of work stress Factors leading to work stress
Category 2: Psychological well-being	Impact of work stress on psychological well-being Coping strategies

These four above-mentioned themes emerged from the 300+ codes that came to the fore during the six phases of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These are supported further below by participant excerpts and literature.

The four themes are presented in two categories, namely: '*work stress*' (Thematic category 1) and '*psychological well-being*' (Thematic category 2).

The category of work stress is discussed first, followed by psychological well-being thereafter.

4.3 Thematic category 1: Work Stress

This category consists of two themes, namely: 'personal awareness of work stress' (Theme 1) and 'factors leading to work stress' (Theme 2).

4.3.1 Theme 1: Personal awareness of work stress

The first theme to emerge addressed *awareness of work stress*. Most of the participants expressed prior awareness of work stress and were able to cite their experiences by focusing on particular work stressors. Participants defined 'work stress' by using examples of work stressors such as deadlines, high workload, and work interfering with family time, particularly working from home during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Dealing with work deadlines was notably the core example provided by the participants when asked to describe their perception of work stress. In this regard, Ndile, a 36-year-old Xhosa speaking female participant and a junior lecturer, noted the following:

"It is deadlines, it's timelines, it's making sure that everything is done within a certain time and it's getting that content across to [the] student[s] as much as you can so that they understand it."

The above sentiment was echoed by some of participants, evident as follows:

"Work stress is deadlines right! So if you've got X amount of work to lecture, and X amount of weeks to lecture it. It's stressful because all of a sudden, students decide to have strikes (protest actions), then you have to work around that and you can't get your job done." (**Juan** – 42-year old, female, senior lecturer).

"For me it would be having a lot to do and having a lot of deadlines, like to write reports…so, if I have a lot to do and the deadline is yesterday, you know that type of thing would cause a lot of stress." (**Naj** – 51-year-old, 11 years' experience at the University).

"The work stress that we have is often deadlines … different things that we have to do. We have to do research; we have to publish. We do this work after hours, weekends or vacation period." (**Rashi** – 52-year-old, senior lecturer with, 13 years' experience at the University).

In addition, Sibo, a 51-year-old female junior identified her emotions of work stress by stating:

"I'm_scared because I have big student numbers and a small space … how will we reduce the number to keep the social distance [during Covid-19]".

Similarly, Rashi mentioned that:

"There's a lot of pressure to produce, I feel as academics we suffer from burnout".

The participants raised concerns about the amount of work that is expected from them, including the number of students in a module. Additionally, participants talk about the large amount of work in relation to the limited time they have to do their tasks, such as doing research and publications. Participants raised the concern of how these tasks are completed on weekends and during vacations which limits the time spent with their families. It also seems that the issue of deadlines and other related stressors is not influenced by an academic's age or work experience. As confirms by Cox et al., (2000), work stress is a state of emotional suffering that emanates from an individual's appraisal of a potentially stressful situation at work. It is unpleasant as it results when a person becomes aware that they are unable to cope with the situation as it may bring demands and pressure on the individual, or when their efforts are not acknowledged or recognised. The experience of work stress escalates when they feel they have insufficient control over their situation and receive minimal support from others. The following excerpts from two of the participants indicate how some academics define work stress, with one highlighting the issue of burnout.

> *"I would say work stress is burnout, especially now with COVID-19. There's a lot more to deal with than previously when you were able to divide work life and home life. But now you at home all the time, so the stress is more. It's double because students in this environment have a lot more access to you, you dealing with queries or concerns maybe late at night…"* (**Moen** – *33-year-old, female, junior lecturer).*
>
> "*In my understanding, I believe work stress is stress that will affect you so negatively that it will impact on your health and your behaviour at home, and it will affect your family relationship at home. You might not want to come to work and have excuses to come to work".* (**Pule** – female, junior lecturer).

Whilst deadlines and timelines were used by most of the participants to describe work stress, they also presented other examples that were unique to their individual experiences:

> *"I think one of the things that has stressed me was when I was doing my master's and not getting support from my supervisor (line manager), just really that for me was one of the most stressful things."* (**Lind** – female, junior lecturer).

> *"I think one of the things that's been quite stressful for me is not knowing who to ask or not knowing where to go, a simple thing like booking a venue is stressful."* **(Basch** – female, junior lecture).

The unique experience of work stress, such as the compulsory requirement and pressure for attaining a master's degree, signified a compulsory requirement. Some participants ascribed work stress to constant lecturing pressures, such as marking examination scripts, whilst simultaneously trying to build a research profile through attaining a master's degree and publications. **Lind** mentioned a lack of support from her line manager when her application for study leave was not approved in time, resulting in the delay of her own research work. Reflecting on her experience of work stress, **Lind** mentioned that the resultant delay of her own research negatively impacted her emotionally, i.e., giving rise to feelings of frustration. She also mentioned that she had to consult a psychologist for therapy as it had been a difficult time for her. Some participants also expressed institutional systems and processes as a source of work stress. For example, **Basch** talked about how she struggled and felt overwhelmed during her early days of employment at the HEI. The lack of support from her department meant that she had limited information regarding simple institutional systems that are designed to facilitate her lecturing duties, such as booking her lecturing venue.

The participants' sources of work stress, such as deadlines, high workload, and research work, as described in the excerpts above, negatively impacted on their families. This was confirmed by **Marn** as follows:

> *"For instance, we don't have weekends, so a lot of times we have pressure from our families. My kids will come to me and say 'mom, are you working again … You need to separate yourself from work but at the end of the day when they go to bed you come back to work because you haven't finished what you had to finish".* **(Marn** – female, senior lecturer).

Previous research also suggests that work stress may influence family life, resulting in unstable or dysfunctional family dynamics. As employees experience work stress, they may be less motivated to participate actively in family life, such as participating in the daily lives of their children (Repetti, Wang, & Saxbe, 2009).

However, **PauM,** a male senior lecturer expressed having a different experience to that of the other participants, saying that:

> *"… well you know, in this environment [academic] I haven't really experienced work stress. I come from a trading environment which was very fast where you had to be on your toes … and where somebody is always trying do something behind your back. If I compare, the academic environment is not stressful at all."* (**PauM).**

PauM notes how his previous employment which had far greater challenging work tasks may have served as a buffer to cope with the demands of the HEI environment. This shows that the perceived effects of work stress varies among academics for a number of reasons, including previous work experience. A noteworthy point, however, is that the experience of work stress does not only affect the employee, but the family as well.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Factors leading to work stress

The second theme that emerged during the data analysis is that of *factors leading to work stress.* For example, participants were asked to comment on factors that lead to work stress; about their general experiences as academics; and to describe the nature of their job. In this theme, participants described various work stressors, such as no physical interaction with colleagues during Covid-19; work pressure when they were unable to complete tasks effectively or timeously; and poor management and human capital challenges, such as a shortage of staff within their respective departments. 'Work pressure' was a leading code and embodied various types of pressures that relate to participants' experience of work stress, such as pressure from one's personal goals. For example, Ndile, a junior lecturer, mentioned:

"I *want to make sure what I do is worthy, since I get paid for it*".

While Reg, a foreign national senior lecturer and supervisor, described her work pressure as being overstretched:

"It's *being short staffed because I'm doing some co-ordination for a job that was to be done by two people, so I'm overstretched".*

Another example of work pressure that was demonstrated by most academics was the pressure to produce. for example, Rashi, a female senior lecturer, mentioned:

"There's lots of pressure to produce in a limited time period…and you have to be able to manage your time and manage it fairly well in order to succeed in academia".

Various studies have identified work stressors in the academic environment and how these work stressors contribute to work stress experienced by academic staff members (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010; Egan et al., 2007; Foster et al., 2020; Fukasawa et al., 2015). These identified work stressors include work overload, lack of job control, lack of resources,

and poor communication (Barkhuizen & Norman, 2008), some of which can be found in the current study.

Most participants in this study reflected on factors leading to work stress when asked to describe their general experiences as academics, and whilst describing their current jobs. For example, Juan, a senior lecturer, described her general experience as an academic by mentioning:

> "*Sometimes the support from the University itself is not so great, but the Department itself makes up for it"*.

Similarly, Reg described the nature of her job as "*a hectic one"*. She described various comprehensive duties involving being a manager within her department, such as having the responsibility to supervise and employ new staff members; her lecturing duties, such as marking and supporting post-graduate students with their master's and doctoral studies. She went on to describe all the committees that she has to sit in.

An essential observation from this theme was that all participants had a combination of factors leading to work stress, such as external stressors existing in their work environment, and internal stressors, such as the attitude they have toward themselves and their work. The following excerpts demonstrate how differently the participants experience both external and internal stressors.

> *"The factors leading to work stress is, you have to teach during the day and somehow you have to catch up with your admin and co-ordination [in the night]"*.
>
> (**Marn** – female, junior lecturer).

> *"I mean; you don't get motivated from one another to do anything … So you get kind of stressed up in doing simple things you should be doing anyways, e.g.,*

when I saw John working so hard and John was not promoted. So obviously, what's the point of me working hard". (**Jerr** – male, senior lecturer).

"When you working towards a goal [in the department] and people don't do their part as well, everyone doesn't pull their weight. It's hard, it's a challenge and it can be stressful". (**Nico** – female, senior lecturer).

"It's the student protest… sometimes they take for about a month … so that's a lot of time lost and you just have to push yourself". (**Mas** – male, senior lecturer).

Participants also demonstrated the ability to experience work stressors constructively, as indicated below:

"*… Academia takes over your life, my life, if I can put it that way. It's quite exhausting, but it's a good space in terms of growth and in getting that feeling of being part of something and part of growing*". (**Reg).**

Generally, the participants demonstrated a clear understanding when describing their experiences of factors leading to work stress. Cheng et al., (2000) mentioned various factors that may lead to work stress, including low control of an individual's job, lack of resources to complete tasks, a high demanding job, and low support from others at work. This description of stressors was demonstrated in the passage below regarding low control of one's job and high job demands.

"I guess poor management skills sometimes … So one day you are an academic, the next day you are also in management and you haven't been trained adequately to balance". (**KevM** – male, African foreign national, junior lecturer).

KevM explained poor management as a consequence of academics being promoted to senior management roles without sufficient management training and low support from executive management. He experienced this as a direct stressor in his own department when he observed no clear direction from executive management. However, he also explained that he is currently in management and finds it to be a great challenge as he requires administrative training to facilitate development of his management skills. He explains his stress as feeling frustrated as he attempts to balance his management roles whilst attending to his lecturing duties.

Reg, on the other hand, who is also in a management role, contrary to KevM's experience, has had a more productive experience in her management role and also acquired the necessary administrative skills to facilitate her management role. The work stressors, or factors leading to work stress that she describes emanated from not having sufficient staff members within her unit. However, she does cite being in a small unit with a limited number of employees as adversely impacting her time with her family.

> *"... it also means that being in a small unit with a limited number of academic staff – the work becomes really a lot. And that means that you might have less time with family*". (**Reg).**

Whilst high workload was reported as a stressor by all the participants, responses on how the high workload adversely affected family dynamics was also observed, depending on how the participants grappled with work stress. This was particularly significant during the Covid-19 lockdown period instituted by the government as a response to prevent further transmission of the virus and reduce the number of infections. Mandated to work from home, the transition for the family was noted as a particularly difficult period where employees need to actively balance work, home schooling for the children, and family time. Some literature suggests that family time may support in managing the effects of work stress, such that

employees who are stressed at work experience improved symptoms of burnout. However, working from home may also present with it additional challenges, as noted by Ndile below;

'... because we are at home, it's the kids, it's home schooling ... and work responsibilities'.

Covid-19 lockdown regulations also contributed negatively to interpersonal relationships amongst academics. Interactions were limited to online engagement with minimal support. Participants reported a sense of disconnection from their colleagues, exacerbating poor interpersonal relations, as highlighted by **Jerr**:

"*… poor interpersonal relations are a stressor in a way, yeah, we don't support one another*".

Whilst **PauM**, a male senior lecturer, mentioned:

"*… I guess the only stressor I could pick out is being away from everyone else, not having that, you know, interaction*".

The literature argues that when employees have good interpersonal relations with each other, they are more likely to be aware of each other's efforts and provide positive feedback, while poor interpersonal relationships leave employees confused and convey apathy.

Participants in the study revealed various factors that lead to work stress and how these factors contribute to the work stress experienced by participants. Notably, work pressure was identified by most of the participants as contributing to feeling overwhelmed and experiencing burnout.

4.4 Thematic Category 2: Psychological well-being

This section presents two themes, namely: '*the impact of work stress on psychological well-being*' (Theme 3) and '*coping strategies for work stressors'* (Theme 4)*,* as shown in Table 4.2. Each theme is supported by participant excerpts and supporting literature.

4.4.1 Theme 3: The impact of work stress on psychological well-being

This theme emerged from information provided by academic employees on how work stress impacts their psychological well-being. Participants provided various responses which included mental distress (feelings of losing one's mind); constant deep exhaustion and fatigue; taking out one's frustration in the home environment, such as irritability; not being able to think straight; not being able to relax; and other various psychological effects. Previous evidence (Bowen et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2013; Johal & Pooja, 2016) suggests that many professionals experience high levels of stress; as a result, employees are exposed to psychological, physical, and sociological strain effects, and therefore adopt various coping mechanisms in an attempt to manage their health conditions. What also became apparent is that some participants reflected on *eustress* or good stress. Eustress is experienced as a positive form of stress with a beneficial effect on health, motivation, work performance, and emotional well-being. Some participants felt inspired by challenging work projects or tasks. Such that, their work stressors enhanced their growth and development. For instance, Masi (a male senior lecturer) was under pressure due to loss of academic time as a result of student protests, he mentions:

> "*Challenging work demands motivate me to think constructively and develop creative strategies to make up for time lost with students. Being proactive in challenging times had enhanced my level of creativity and developed my academic career".*

The psychological effects of work stress for staff members ranged between mild to more severe effects. For example, participants experienced mild feelings of fatigue and irritability, to severe feelings of withdrawal, numbness, and panic attacks. It became evident that participants were experiencing depressive symptoms, including anxiety and burnout symptoms. In addition, most of the participants indicated how their productivity dropped due

to the confusion from the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, and as a result of the lockdown restrictions, most of the academics became more aware of how the Covid-19 environment exacerbated the effects of work stress on psychological well-being, particularly as they reflected on how it affects the home and family environment. This was evident in the excerpt below where Ndile expressed that she had felt as though she had been 'losing her mind', revealing the severity of adverse psychological affect. Similarly, Pule also indicated not being able to 'think straight' at times, while Moeb lamented being unable to 'switch off' from work. Additionally, Nico, Marn and Jerr revealed how their families were directly and negatively affected by the adverse psychological effects of their experienced work stress, such as not engaging with family members and feeling irritable at home. The excerpts below reveal how work stress negatively impacts participants' well-being, and hence, contributes to poor job satisfaction and productivity.

> *"Um, honestly before lockdown. I think it was absolutely fine, or maybe because work stress is something that's just been there all the time, so we really never take note of it. So being at home and working from home and being with yourself every single day the whole day. It yeah, psychologically it's been tough, I think. Yeah. One day you feel like you're losing your mind. The next day, you, not. The next day you cry the next you OK, you happy. Um, it's been, I think only now during the lockdown this year that [work stress] actually affected me psychologically".* **(Ndile).**
>
> *"Uh, it impacts [your psychological well-being] ... with your husband at home and your children at home. Also affects your physical health. Yeah, because we're stressed you are not able to think straight ... So it affects the way you think and how you do things".* (**Pule** – female, senior lecturer).

"You need to be involved in trying to resolve it [work stress] and some [work stress] you do bring home. You know you try not to". **(Nico).**

"Your family suffer the consequences of you being stressed out from work. In my case, I had an experience of not receiving promotion. Particularly when the time came that I was supposed to be promoted and after working so hard, they tell you sorry, you don't meet the requirements. And obviously you don't even want to do anything [after that experience] ... you don't want to engage ... and the ripple affect you come home [with work stress]". **(Jerr).**

"Um, definitely, irritability. It's almost like you irritated when you can't get to your work, but you get irritated because you can't get your kids or your family as well. So it's definitely that ... We have that exposure to computers the whole time, that [leads to] physical stress, your eyes tired and deep exhaustion. I sleep much less than I did, and then if you sleep you wake up and then you think about, oh, I might still do this and what's going to happen tomorrow? And what must I still do?" **(Marn).**

"It's like you don't know how to basically switch off or relax because you work from home. I mean you not cutting off at 4:00 o'clock or three o'clock. You know, as your usual time or when the class ends you are constantly busy. You done with the class. Now you['re] dealing with admin things, or other related things, so I think it's just a constant cycle". (**Moeb** – female, junior lecturer).

The effects of work stress on psychological well-being reported by the participants had an adverse effect on their work-life balance, particularly as employees were working from home. Other responses on how work stress impacts on psychological well-being included employees experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout. For example, **Emman**, a male lecturer, mentioned the following:

"*I sometimes just have this panic attacks [anxiety], you know?"*

Similarly, the passages below demonstrate how participants were experiencing poor mental health, such as presenting with symptoms related to CMD, including feelings of withdrawal, mental block, feelings of drowning, feeling inadequate, feeling overwhelmed, and overthinking. All these symptoms contribute to an inability to produce and attend to work tasks.

> *"Yes, so I think what happens is, I am usually withdrawn. Yeah, I do become withdrawn and I don't communicate".* (**Naj** – female, junior lecturer).
>
> *"I find that when I'm too stressed, my brain freezes. My ability to produce reduces. Then none of the things I'm trying to do get done ... for me it becomes a vicious cycle".* (**Reg).**
>
> *"It impacts negatively; it feels like you're drowning. There is a feeling of inadequacy".* (**KevM).**
>
> *"I feel so overwhelmed that I just freeze up. I just you know, I just don't want to deal with you know things. I just put them in a box put them there and don't think about them. Until you know things have piled up".* (**Lind).**
>
> *"... it did affect me, you know, I lie awake at night, thinking about how I'm going to solve problems ... and I play it over in my mind all the time ... which is the best way to do things, and so on. So my mind often becomes overactive and I don't sleep very well".* (**Rashi).**

The various effects of work stress reflected by the participants above, such as anxiety attacks, lying awake at night, being overwhelmed and withdrawn, resulted in poor performance and decreased productivity in the workplace.

Webster and Francis (2019) mentioned that a paradox exists within the South African workplace where legislation to eradicate inequality exists alongside persistent and widening inequality, and thus there are high levels of inequality that have been sustained in the post-

apartheid South Africa. Participants demonstrated how inequality and discrimination, as a work stressor, contributed to experiencing work stress, such as not being able to focus, or becoming demotivated about work. Consequently, participants also reflected on how their experience of discrimination resulted in poor psychological well-being, such as experiencing depressive symptoms, as quoted in the passage below.

> *"You cannot focus ... because there's an injustice taking place in the workplace and ... you just feeling numb".* (**Kev** – male, junior lecturer).

The injustices **Kev** was referring to was that of racial differences. He observed that some students were receiving less academic support compared other students due to racial differences. Whilst organisations have become more inclusive and tolerant of diversity, Zurbrugg and Miller (2016) opine that discrimination (for example, racial injustice) in organisations remains prevalent. Kev reflected on injustices such as racism. He remarked:

> "*... students [from previously marginalised races] received less recognition and academic support as compared to students [from previously advantaged racial groups] ...*"

Furthermore, he expressed his frustration about the inequality and conflict he had observed on how the University preferred other ethnicities. In this regard, he stated:

> "*... the University employed mostly black foreigners over local/South African lecturers ...*"

He explained that there was discrimination he could not understand. Moreover, he expressed:

> "*... I was not able to engage my PhD studies this current year as I had felt numb from the injustices ... "*

Other types of discrimination included employees who were on a short-term contract for over 5 years and employees who had not received promotions from junior lecturer to senior lecturer when it was due to them.

Contrary to most responses, some participants reflected on work stress to be a positive factor. This corresponds with the study by Botha and Pienaar (2006) who posited that internal locus of control contributes to an improved work stress experience. Participants in the study demonstrated the belief that they have control over their own lives. They reflected on positive psychological well-being experiences as a consequence of an internal approach to processing work stress. This is captured as follows:

> *"I might get a bit irritable. But other than that, I believe I am capable of separating my work life and my home life. It's two separate things, the one doesn't interfere with the other. I think maybe because I love my job".* (**Juan)**.
>
> *"When I'm under high stress, then I go into solution mode ... It's almost a positive impact where I draw on inner strength ... there's always a good outcome".* (**Basch)**.

It was therefore evident that personal motivation facilitated a better experience to work stressors. Hence, work stress was not experienced as adverse outcomes, but rather experienced as opportunities for the growth and development of a few participants' careers. Participants were able to demonstrate how to cope with work stress, and thereby improve their psychological well-being.

4.4.2 Theme 4: Coping strategies to improve psychological well-being

This theme emerged as a consequence of participants' demonstrating good knowledge on the stressors they experience. Hence, it facilitated the ability to identify coping strategies that assist in improving their psychological well-being. There is a growing body of evidence on work stress and its adverse effect on psychological well-being (Barkhuizen & Rothman,

2008; Biggs et al., 2017; Bono et al, 2013), as well as more evidence on the management of work stress (Aderibigbe et al., 2018). Masi elaborated on the frustration of protest actions, such as the protest action which occurred during 2016 referred to as Fees Must Fall. Masi explained how time was lost while students were striking and not attending classes. As a coping strategy, he explained how the University could offer support during these times.

> *"If maybe the University can give us more time (shorten recess time, vacations periods and extend academic year to cover time loss) to make sure that the students catch up when they come back from protesting (strikes) so that we can be able to catch up instead of us being under pressure".* **(Masi).**

The common response from the participants was that of setting boundaries that may include proper planning and scheduling of activities. Successful coping may reduce the threat that stress carries for an individual's health, such as creating structure and organising one's time. In this regard, Reg commented: "… *I improve coping with the work stress through planning"*. Masi reflected on personal motivation that helped them cope, whilst other participants, such as PauM, demonstrated the potential of support systems for improving one's psychological well-being and for coping with work stress. Physical activities, such as taking a walk, was also noted by some of the participants (for example, Sibo) as a way to cope with work stress and to improve psychological well-being. In the following passages, participants reflected on the various experiences they had on setting boundaries for themselves at work and in the home environment.

> *"I think it's creating boundaries … and just taking a breather or a walk".* **(Moeb).**
>
> *"I do plan very well. For example, I immediately start marking, I don't postpone*". **(Juan).**

"I think coping is just a planning, organising, and managing your time. Also, to strategise, prioritise, and have all of those under control". (**Nico).**

"I have a set time for things, so I will still take time off. So [I] only respond to my emails, say in the afternoon. I make sure that I do not take on too much at the same time". (**KevM).**

"If things are more organised, that would help. Also, leadership. I think if you have a good leader, strong leader ... that is also something that would help to improve psychological well-being". (**Naj).**

"If we have structure, if I have structure. So I have structure in my household. For instance, we have things that we need to do even though they [children] don't go to school. For instance, we all do the same thing together. We get dressed together, we eat together. We start working together. So even though my attention is divided, they're working while I'm working. So the structure is that we have breaks together. Um, so I feel structure is very important". (**Marn).**

The role of setting boundaries is noted, as emotional and physical limits are created to safeguard oneself from overcommitment. The type of boundaries that participants reflect on include planning, time allocation for work tasks, and structuring family activities. Whilst creating boundaries was a major response, the participants were also able to demonstrate how their personal motivation (internal locus of control) assisted them in coping and improving their psychological well-being, as seen in the passage below. Jerr, a male junior lecturer on contract employment, shared how philanthropy work helped him to cope with work stress. Various research findings confirm that a sense of meaning, demonstrated by Jerr in the passage below, can be achieved through serving others (engaging in developmental community projects), hence having a positive effect on mental health as it reduces stress.

"It's just working for the love of it. And to do it for the passion and skills and not looking for any reward … and to develop yourself. Keep yourself busy you know. Keeping oneself busy either with studying or engaging in [developmental] community programmes or something" **(Jerr).**

Responses to coping varied. The participants below demonstrated the diverse personal ways they seek to improve their psychological well-being.

"What I think I can do to improve coping on my work is overcome the impostor syndrome". **(Basch).**

"I think religion for me plays an extremely big role and as a dedicated Christian, I know where my strength come from. I spend a lot of time praying and meditating about the word so that to me is also kind of a thing that keeps me". **(EriV).**

Previous studies (Marshall, 2017; Meier & Spector, 2013) affirmed the impact of religion on mental health. The studies noted that devout individuals have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as a better ability to cope with stress.

Impostor syndrome, as described by Basch whilst reflecting on her experiences, referred to the way she described her thinking habit of doubting her skills and how she often believed that she is not as competent as her colleagues perceive her to be. At the end of the interview, Basch had appreciated the questions as she explained how they helped her talk, become aware of the impostor syndrome, and how she will work on this during therapy.

Furthermore, KevM felt that looking for other opportunities helps him cope. He had been frustrated by being on a contract and not employed as permanent staff. For him, he felt that being on contract limited opportunities for his growth, such as not getting paid equivalent to others who do the same work, but because they are permanent, they receive benefits such as medical aid and provident fund benefit. He illustrates his coping as follows:

"So yeah, so you found that perhaps the best way you find yourself coping is to look at other opportunities outside the academic space that perhaps can offer a better contract. Yeah, you thinking around, maybe you should leave the higher education institution and look for lecturing jobs elsewhere". (**Emman).**

Support systems were also demonstrated by participants as facilitating coping. 'Support system' was the second common response after 'setting boundaries'. The passages below demonstrate what assisted participants to cope with work stress.

"For me it's the support system both from the colleagues and at work. Number two is planning because if you plan your work then you stop panicking because if you don't and then you start to panic because now you want to do many things at the same time and then you fail, you know. And then, thirdly, for me would be to exercise change of lifestyle … So exercising [physical activities] and maybe changing the lifestyle in terms of choosing which foods might be feeding the brain. You know those kind of things and try and maybe associate yourself with positive people. People that will speak positive things to you. Even with WhatsApp groups". (**Sibo).**

"I think basically what I've learned is for example, definitely going to see my therapists, also for me, writing things down". (**Lind).**

"So opening up and talking and getting the support from the colleagues and the University". (**Pule).**

"I have [social and family] support structures. I speaking to my wife daily telephonically [couple lives in different provinces]. I'm living in a communal facility. There's six of us in this house, and we have a fantastic rapport in the house. We support each other". (**PauM).**

Participants in the extracts above mentioned significant points on coping, such as support systems, exercise, and attending therapy. They demonstrated that these coping mechanisms have a positive impact as they help to manage and relieve work stress. Support systems in the home were noted as highly beneficial to participants. Hence, the ability to engage about work stress with household members, such as children and spouses, was effective for relieving the adverse impact of work stress. Participants expressed feeling better after sharing their work stress with family members. Similarly, maintaining a fitness routine, such as doing aerobics in the home, taking a walk, and jogging were noted as providing relief from work pressure. Participants reported feeling happy afterwards, which improved work motivation. Furthermore, some participants also reflected that the efforts by the University to offer a support system was effective in managing work stress. Additionally, attending therapy also provided relief from work stress, in that the participants who attended therapy noted an improvement in the way they were feeling. In this regard, the participants were able to express themselves through sharing work stress experiences in therapy, which significantly improved work motivation.

Reg demonstrated that it's not always easy to set boundaries; however, she was of the view that sometimes it has to be done. She had mentioned her stressors, such as *her job never ends,* and she had experienced work stress as *not being able to switch off.* When asked about her coping, she mentioned that for her *"...it's being comfortable about being uncomfortable*". She narrated how she just watches Netflix with her son, knowing that there is so much work to do, further explaining that if she does not switch off from her work, then she never will, so being comfortable to spend time with her son meant the experience of some discomfort, such as not covering the work that needs to get done. But nevertheless, she would at times choose spending her time with her son over work tasks. Along the same lines, Rashi commented that

coping for her was forcing herself to shut off from work and putting everything away (such as packing her laptop away). The passage below demonstrates her coping strategy:

> *"I tried switching off on weekends as much as it was very difficult during the lockdown to switch off on weekends because we often got [work] requests on a Saturday or Sunday from the Deans".* (**Rashi).**

The participants in the study all demonstrated that they do have some coping strategy that helps them manage their work stress. Participants were also able to suggest what institutional systems may support them to cope better, such as employing more staff members. Generally, participants are likely to maintain coping strategies to support and improve their psychological well-being.

4.5 Summary of the themes

During the interviews, the participants shared their experiences and knowledge of work stress and work stressors. Although their experiences varied, there were some common points that came to the fore as having adverse effect on their psychological well-being. In this regard, most alluded to *deadlines, poor interpersonal relationships*, and *remote working*. When providing examples, the participants described physical and emotional responses that resulted from the work stressors. Physical responses included *fatigue* and *sleeplessness*, while emotional responses included *feeling overwhelmed, brain freeze, anxiety, panic attack*, *depressive symptoms*, and *burnout*. Participants mentioned how they stay awake at night thinking about work and how to solve problems at work. This contributed to exhaustion and a general drop in performance. Other participants reflected on how the Covid-19 lockdown had exacerbated their experience of work stress, leading to poor mental health, such as feelings of losing one's mind, numbness, and having a mental block. Participants also mentioned how work stress negatively impacts on their family life.

These findings were discussed in terms of the four themes that emerged during the study. These findings also include employees' experiences of the impact of work stress on psychological well-being; how academic staff members cope with work stress; and how they improve their psychological well-being and mental health.

The participants identified various factors contributing to their experience of work stress. '*Work pressure'* was a significant finding, which embodied various types of pressures, such as personal pressures for one to maintain ethics when lecturing. Another pressure was that of '*producing*', such as maintaining a growing research profile and publishing. '*High workload'* was a common factor that also contributed to academics experiencing work pressure, this includes marking and having large numbers of students. Pressure was also caused by other factors such as student protests. Participants often felt that protest actions limited their time for lecturing; hence, catching up when students are back on campus was experienced as work pressure.

Conversely, in some cases, work stress was experienced as *eustress.* In other words, challenging work tasks contributed positively as some participants reported career growth due managing difficult tasks at work. Furthermore, participants also demonstrated how they switch to solution mode, thereby experiencing increased productivity. Other participants mentioned how work stress forces them to exercise (engage in physical activities), while other participants cited their love for academia and how that passion motivated them even more to face the challenges of work stress. Some employees described how they had learnt to be more strategic which in turn contributed to their academic growth.

Various coping mechanisms were employed, such as engaging support systems, creating boundaries, for example planning, organising, and time management and some participants used internal locus of control (personal motivation),

In line with the transactional theory of work stress undergirding this study, it is evident that participants' work environment has a direct impact on their experience of stress. This is supported by the data which shows that work pressure, limited resources, high workload, and deadlines adversely impact employees' well-being. The transactional theory was applicable in exploring the ways in which the participants' lived experiences are shaped which took place during the interview process (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). The participants were from different employment levels, such as junior lecturers, senior lecturers, and heads of departments. The evidence reflects that these different levels provide unique experiences that relate to each level.

4.6 Conclusion

The current chapter discussed the findings of the study in terms of the four themes that emerged from the data analysis. The four themes that emerged were presented in two categories, namely: '*work stress*' and '*psychological well-being*'. The four themes were: Personal knowledge of work stress (Theme 1); Factors leading to work stress (Theme 2); Impact of work stress on psychological well-being (Theme 3); and Coping strategies (Theme 4). Factors contributing to work stress, employees' distinct ways of coping, and their current understandings of work stress and work stressors were also explored.

The final chapter that follows next summarises the main findings of the study; provides recommendations based on the insights obtained from the research; acknowledges the limitations that were encountered along the way, and then concludes the study with some final remarks.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter provides a discussion and summary of the study's findings, along with a description of the limitations that were encountered; the significance of the study; recommendations directed at various target audiences; and a final conclusion.

The study aimed to investigate academic employees' experiences of work stress and the impact thereof on their mental health. To achieve this aim, the study made use of semi-structured interviews to explore employees' experiences of work stress and mental health at a HEI.

The findings revealed the adverse impact of work stress on psychological well-being. It also provided insight into how academic staff members' cope with work stress and improve their psychological well-being and mental health. In sum, a strong negative association was found between work stress and mental health. It can also be concluded that some employees understand the meaning of work stress and understand the implications on productivity and their relationships with colleagues and families. The impact of work stress on mental health also seems to be high regardless of major demographic factors such as gender, age, years of experience in the academic setting, and whether employees were employed on contract or a permanent basis. However, the coping strategies employed by academic employees vary according to a number of factors, including number of years at work, and religion.

The study successfully addressed the purpose and the objectives, thereby answering the research questions.

To recap, the purpose of the study, as indicated in Chapter 1, was to *investigate employees' experiences of work stress and the impact thereof on their mental health.*

The research questions that were formulated to guide this study were as follows:

1) How do academic employees understand work stress?
2) What are the perceived factors that lead to work stress?
3) How does work stress impact on psychological well-being?
4) How do employees cope with work stress and what improves their psychological well-being?

The objectives of this study were; firstly, to determine how academic employees understand work stress. Secondly, to identify factors that lead to work stress, thirdly to Investigate the impact of work stress on psychological well-being. Finally, to explore how employees cope with work stress and what improves their psychological well-being.

This chapter will show how the aim of the study was achieved, research questions were answered, and objectives were achieved.

The findings will be discussed below in relation to the study's objectives.

5.2 Discussion and summary of findings

Objective 1, which sought to explore how academic employees understand work stress, revealed that employees have knowledge of work stress as they were able to define it from their own experiences and perspectives. The participants in the study demonstrated their knowledge of work stress as a harmful physical and emotional response, which included symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and depression, having an adverse impact on job satisfaction and employee well-being (Karadzinska-bislimovska et al., 2014).

Objective 2 attempted to discover the perceived factors that lead to wok stress. In this regard, employees were able to provide evidence of factors leading to work stress from their experiences. These factors included low control of one's job, such as not having the ability to

make decisions about the way they work; high job demands in the form of high workloads; low supportive relationships, particularly from management; and lack of resources, such as having poor Internet access to facilitate working from home (Cheng et al., 2000).

Objective 3 explored how work stress impacts on psychological well-being. Employees were able to identify the impact of work stress on their psychological well-being. Such work stress was understood as having a detrimental impact as it leads to poor health for employees, both psychologically and physically, as cited in the findings.

Finally, **Objective 4** explored how employees cope with work stress and what improves psychological well-being. Employees were able to identify and suggest ways of coping with work stress and improving their mental well-being. Through the study, we understand that HEIs require robust interventions to support the coping of employees. Hence, the ability of the workplace to prevent CMD's and promote well-being is a priority. According to Ernst et al., (2004), the ability for employees to cope and improve their psychological well-being becomes essential to enhance job satisfaction and improve productivity. Another significant point that came to the fore was that employees formulate various coping strategies to enhance their well-being. These included the creation of boundaries, such as planning work and family time, organising and having a structure on time management. The ability to cope with work stress was evident during the study as contributing to mentally resilient employees. Participants demonstrated in their responses that improved mental health contributed to having good cognitive and executive abilities, such as improved problem solving and decision making at work. Such employees also reported having an ability to maintain positive interpersonal relationship with other colleagues.

In addition, and linked to transactional theory on how employee evaluate stress, such as whether a situation is considered significant and whether there is available coping, the findings of this study indicate growing evidence that employees experience work stress due to

high stress environments within HEIs and employees exhibit minimal coping strategies. The HEI under study is one of the universities in the South African context that has been exposed to high stress working environments due to work stressors such as student protest actions, high student admission with limited staffing, and more recently, Covid-19 lockdown regulations. The participants demonstrated how change and transformation may be facilitated, such as employing more staff, so as to enhance the capacity of attending to a large student population. Other participants suggested the importance of getting administrative assistance from support services, especially during student registration period in the beginning of each semester. These suggestions by employees are intended to decrease work stress and thus improve mental health in the workplace.

It is widely known that the effects of poor mental health, such as experiencing symptoms of depression, for example, disturbed sleep, fatigue, and lack of motivation, contribute to decreased productivity within the workplace, as revealed by the research findings. Hence, addressing the mental health of employees becomes critical and essential for sustaining the development of the HE environment. Depression has been noted as an epidemic in the world of work as more and more employees grapple with the illness. Depression is particularly the most evidential CMD experienced by employees in the workplace as a result of work stress. It was also evident in the study that burnout symptoms are equally on the rise. The study also confirmed that employees are constantly overwhelmed by high workloads, leading to burnout symptoms, such as feeling numb and irritable. Burnout symptoms occur as a result of work stress in individual employees with no prior historical records of experiencing any common mental illnesses (Cleary, 2010). The common symptoms of burnout are depersonalisation, fatigue, and decreased personal achievement.

The study verifies that the effect of work stress on mental health has high financial implications for organisation's due to increased absenteeism (sick leave) and frequent visits to

health practitioners, as observed by the participants, such as attending therapy with a psychologist. The costs are also as a consequence of reported impaired performance and decreasing job commitment leading to decreased productivity amongst the participants. Through the study, one is able to recognise that the financial implication of work stress may be on the rise due to the current working environment posed by Covid-19 lockdown restrictions during the year 2020 (Thatcher et al., 2020). South Africa and the world at large have had to impose lockdown restrictions that have dramatically changed the nature of service delivery, directly affecting the local academic environment. In addition, the study reveals that HEIs have had to adapt to these new working conditions. Employees now work from home amidst family responsibilities, such as home- schooling children, which takes up to three hours a day. Moreover, it has been reported that most employees experience poor interpersonal relations as a result of the current working conditions, which dehumanise and depersonalise the work environment, removing all face-to-face contact with colleagues.

This study was unique, in that it used a qualitative approach to provide knowledge and evidence on how local academic staff experience the impact of work stress on psychological well-being and mental health. Previous studies, such as the one by Hanisch et al., (2016), utilised quantitative methods that do not focus on the lived experiences and perceptions of employees regarding the effects of work stress on their mental health. This study, therefore, contributed to the existing body of knowledge by determining employees' experiences of work stress first-hand, and the impact thereof on their mental health. This understanding and knowledge of work stress and its impact on mental health helped to identify how to better support staff members at HEIs. The findings of the study are expected to inform efforts on improving HE legislation on mental health for employees and other related policies, such as the provision of programmes aimed at identifying work stressors and managing work stress. Mental health programmes known to be effective include workplace support groups and group

therapy. Building on these insights, HEIs can reflect of the study's findings to inform their decisions when seeking to improve the mental wellness of employees.

5.3 Limitations of the study

This section acknowledges the limitations of the study. Firstly, it was a challenge convincing some of the participants to take part in a study of this nature, especially during lockdown, whilst almost everyone moved with difficulty into the 'new normal'. Follow up emails had to be sent since there were a lot of movements due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Secondly, the Microsoft Teams online platform was not always reliable, as some participants had network problems. This led to some interviews being slightly disrupted, which could have influenced their responses. Participants may also have rushed their responses because of irritation. Thirdly, another limitation was that the study focused on a small selection of academic employees based at single HEI in the Western Cape, potentially limiting what could be known about work stress and the impact thereof on mental health. Fourthly, in addition, based on the preceding limitation, whilst the findings of this study may not be completely generalizable, there are some aspects of it that may be relevant to other HEIs or contexts. Finally, I also think that the lockdown regulations affected the potential process of triangulation and analysis of the study. People were not allowed to visit each other due to lockdown restrictions. Triangulation using additional researchers could have improved the coding process and formation of themes.

Based on the insights of this study, the follows recommendations are made.

5.4 Recommendations

The recommendations of this study are directed at the following target groups:

5.4.1 Recommendations for HEIs

It is recommended that HEIs revisit the factors this study identified as contributing to employee work stress, namely: low control of one's job (employee having less abilities to make decisions about the way they work); high job demands, i.e., high workloads; low supportive relationships, especially from management; and lack of resources, such as the Internet, which is needed to effectively work from home during the ongoing pandemic.

5.4.2 Recommendations for academic staff/employees

Based on the insights of this study, it is suggested that employees make use of existing coping strategies to help alleviate and cope with their experienced work stress. Approaches may include wellness management or employee assistance programmes. The other recommendation is to focus on decreasing job demands and increasing job resources and coping mechanisms. Employees can also be taught how to evaluate their work stress using transactional theory.

5.4.3 Recommendations for policy/legislation

Whilst mental health is integrated in the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation of South Africa, work stress remains undocumented in the OHS legislation. The documentation of work stress is therefore recommended to support employees in HEIs.

5.4.4 Recommendations for future research

Considering that the findings revealed a significant impact of work stress on psychological well-being and mental health, future studies may focus on workplace mental health and how employees may cope with work stress. This may be helpful in addressing work related mental ill-heath conditions experienced by academic employees. A quantitative research approach, cross-sectional correlation design, may be utilised to capture the extent of the relationship between work stress and psychological well-being in HEIs. Similar studies conducted at other HEIs are recommended to expand the existing body of knowledge. Case

studies and comparison studies can also be conducted to determine the differences between employees' experiences of workplace related stress in different contexts and even regions. It may also be necessary to look into available interventions employed by other HEIs to curb the adverse effects of work stress on academic staff. Additionally, future studies should examine the efficacy of existing wellness programmes for improving the mental health of academics.

5.5 Significance of the study

This study is significant in a number of ways for both the psychological work and human resources practice. The following noteworthy points are worth mentioning:

1. Academic employees interviewed showed knowledge of work stress as a harmful physical and emotional response that include symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and depression. The also acknowledged the adverse impact work stress has on job satisfaction and employee well-being.
2. This study brought to light the following issues to improve working conditions impacting on work related stress: Institutions need to look or relook at factors such as low control of one's job (employee having less abilities to make decisions about the way they work); high job demands in the form of high workloads; low supportive relationships, particularly from management; and lack of resources, such as having poor Internet access to facilitate working from home, especially during the Covid-19 lockdown period.
3. Employees should attempt the use of already existing coping strategies in relation to the nature of work or stressors. This is also significant in relation to the transactional theory that provides stages of evaluation used by employees.

5.6 Conclusion

This study offered a gateway into understanding academic employees' experiences of work stress and the impact thereof on their well-being at a HEI in the Western Cape. This research contributes to the body of knowledge of work stress in the South African context, an under-researched area. It is hoped that the insights obtained herein will inform future research, policies, and practice, and that employees themselves will benefit from obtaining a deeper understanding of themselves and the phenomenon investigated.

I would like to close with the following profound quote:

"When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure".

– Peter Marshall (n.d.)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview schedule

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Interview guide

This study is conducted during a national disaster (Covid-19 pandemic) declared by the South African President as at 15th March 2020. This makes it an unusual time to conduct this study. The result of this interview is expected to have reflections by the interviewee on the current pandemic.

This study is not for records or any part of my current employment and does not form part on any records of the University in the case study, however, it is the work of UCT as part of my qualification towards the MA Clinical Psychology degree.

Section A: Demographic Information:

- Can you please tell me about yourself?
    - Age
    - Department
    - First Language
    - Profession
    - Qualification

- Years of employment

Section B: Background questions regarding work

1) Please describe your current job.

Section C: Questions on work stress and coping

2) Can you describe your general experiences as an academic staff member?
3) Can you describe what you believe is work stress for you?
4) Can you describe factors that lead to work stress described above?
5) Can you describe how the work stress described in point 3 impact your psychological well-being?
6) Can you suggest what you believe may improve your coping on work stress and improve your psychological well-being.

Conclusion of the interview: This is the end of the interview; is there anything you would like to add or share at this time?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B: Ethics clearance from UCT

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa
Telephone (021) 650 3417
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

01 June 2020

Samukelisiwe Mbambo
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Samukelisiwe

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Employee perceptions on the association of workplace stressors and mental health in an academic environment: A case study of Cape Peninsula University of Technology*. The reference number is PSY2020-016.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

Signed by candidate

Catherine Ward
Professor
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

Appendix C: Invitation to participate

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Invitation to participate:

You are invited to participate in a research project titled '*Employee perspective on the association of work stress and mental health at an Institution of Higher Learning in South Africa'*

Who can participate?

This project seeks to recruit academic staff members who are employed by the university in the case study and based at any of its campuses. This includes those employed on part-time basis.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to investigate the experiences of academic employees regarding the effects of work stress on mental health in the workplace.

Procedure

Individual semi-structured online interviews will be conducted, and will last between 45 and 60 minutes. Please note that these interviews will be recorded using an audio-recording device, and later transcribed and analyzed, following which it will be written up for the research report.

Benefits and risks

Participating in this study may pose some risk to you as the questions focus on your personal experiences on how work stress impact your mental health. A list of resources for accessing

professional psychosocial services will be made available. Should you feel distressed at any point as a result of the study, you are encouraged to access support from the list of services. The study has no direct benefits to you and there will be no compensation for participating in this study. The study will contribute to what we know about mental health in the workplace and we also hope that you will find this opportunity useful to voice any challenges and frustrations you might be experiencing as an academic staff member in the institution.

Protection of information

All names and identifiable information will be removed and pseudonyms will be used when reporting, this will ensure that the data remains anonymous. The audio-recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password-locked folder and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in this study. Any hardcopies produced including the signed consent forms will be kept in a lockable compartment that only the researcher and supervisor will have access to. You have the right to withdraw your participation from this study at any point without any negative consequences. Should you choose to do so, any data you have already provided will be destroyed and will not be used for the study.

Contact details

Should you be interested in participating in this study or have any questions about this project, please contact the researcher, Samukelisiwe Mbambo (Psychology, UCT) at mbmsam002@myuct.ac.za. Alternatively, for any information on your rights as the participant, contact Rosalind Adams (Psychology, UCT) at Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za or on 021 650 3417

YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL BE HIGHLY APPRECIATED!!!

Appendix D: Informed Consent form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in the research project titled '*Employee perspective on the association of work stress and mental health in an academic environment: A case study of Higher Education Institution in South Africa'*

The data that is collected is not for the University in the case study and also not for any records of my employment position, however, all the data is collected in my capacity as a student at the University of Cape Town.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the experiences of employees regarding the impact of work stress on mental health. Your participation in this study will involve an individual online interview that is expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes. Each interview will be recorded using an audio-recording device, and will be later transcribed, analyzed and written up for a research report.

Protection of information

All names and identifiable information will be removed and pseudonyms will be used in order to ensure that the data remains anonymous. All audio-recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password-locked folder and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in this study. Any hardcopies produced including the signed consent forms will be kept in a lockable compartment that only the researcher and supervisor will have access to. A transcriber will be employed and will sign a confidentiality agreement to assure that the information is protected. Your relationship with your employer will not be affected, whether you choose to participate or not; the information you provide will not be retained in any files associated with the workplace, and will be kept confidential from your employer. You have the right to withdraw your participation from this study at any point without any negative consequences. Should you choose to do so, any data you have already provided will be destroyed and will not be used for the study.

Benefits and risks

This study may pose emotional harm to you as the questions draw sensitive information about your personal experiences on how work stress impact your mental health. Should you feel distressed at any point as a result of the study, kindly note that a list of resources is provided for you to conveniently access professional psychological services. There will be no compensation for participating in this study. The study has no direct benefits to you, but will contribute to what we know about mental health in the workplace. We also hope that you will find this opportunity useful to voice any challenges and frustrations you might be experiencing as an academic staff member in the Higher Education institution.

Contact details

Should you have any questions after this interview, please contact the researcher Miss Samukelisiwe Mbambo at mbmsam002@myuct.ac.za, or the research supervisor Dr. Mandisa Malinga at mandisa.malinga@uct.az.za. Alternatively, for any information concerning your rights as a study participant, you may contact Rosalind Adams (Psychology, UCT) at Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za or on 021 650 3417.

Consent

I …..…… confirm that the above study has been explained to me and all questions have been answered by the researcher. I fully understand the implications of my participation, and am aware that I can withdraw from this study at any point should I no longer wish to participate. I hereby confirm that I agree to participate in this study, and give my consent for the information I share to be used in any publication for this project without the disclosure of any information that will make me identifiable by others.

Signature…… Date……

(Participant)

I also give my consent to be recorded using an audio-recording device during the online interview.

Signature…… Date……

(Participant)

Signature…… Date……

(Researcher)

I also give my consent the transcriber employed for this research project may gain access to the recorded online interview for purposes of transcribing only.

Signature…… Date……

(Participant)

Signature…… Date……

(Researcher)

Appendix E: Referral list

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Referral List

Participating in this study may pose some risk of emotional distress. What may pose minimum or no emotional harm to some, might be more distressing for others. As such, we would like you to make use of the list of resources provided to access professional psychological assistance. Kindly note that, while most of these facilities offer free and telephonic assistance, some may have a minimal charge (often a donation).

There may be limitations to access some services during the presidential declaration to Covid-19 as a national disaster as at March 2020. During this time, social distancing is paramount to curbing the spread, hence, services such as face to face sessions may be replaced with online sessions which include WhatsApp, Zoom or Skype. Therapists are available telephonically and online.

- SADAG (24-hour helpline): **0800 12 13 14**
- Cape Mental Health: 021 447 9040
- Good Hope Psychological Service: **021 887 7913**
- Lifeline: 021 461 1113
- Hope House: 021 715 0424
- FAMSA Western Cape: 021 447 7951

Appendix F: Editor's letter

PROOF-READING

DR. LEE-ANNE ROUX

EDITOR | PROOFREADER

+27 82 825 7325
leeanne@proof-reading.co.za
www.proof-reading.co.za

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15 February 2021

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: LANGUAGE EDITING

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the thesis titled:

Employee perspectives on the association of work stress and mental health at an institution of higher learning in the Western Cape Province, Southern Africa

By

Samukelisiwe Mbambo

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Lee-Anne Roux