



Characteristics of organizational culture, stressors and wellbeing

OC, stressors and wellbeing

The case of Taiwanese organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to explore prevalent characteristics of organizational culture (OC) and common sources of work stress in a Taiwanese work context. The authors also aimed to analyze how characteristics of OC may be linked to stressors.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative methodology of focus group discussions was adopted.

Findings – Four characteristics of OC were identified, including: family-kin, informal work obligations, organizational loyalty and subgroup involvement. Job characteristics, home-work interface, interpersonal relationships and career development were identified as common sources of work stress. Content analysis revealed that characteristics of OC could either alleviate or aggravate stress, depending on employees' perception and attribution. Double-coding analysis indicated that stressors related to job characteristics seem particularly linked to informal work obligation but not to organizational loyalty as characteristics of OC.

Research limitations/implications – The exclusive reliance on qualitative methodology is a limitation of the present study. However, the results have both theoretical and practical implications. The authors note that Western findings regarding OC may not generalize completely to a different culture and the Taiwanese context supports distinctive features of OC and work stressors. Consequently, any effective corporate stress interventions should be formulated taking the core cultural values and practices into account.

Originality/value – The in-depth and culture-sensitive nature is a major thrust of the present study, and the focus on the link between OC and stress is a rare effort in the Pan-Chinese cultural context.

Keywords Organizational culture, Qualitative methods, Stress, China

Paper type Research paper

Stress is a prevalent problem in modern life. Both individuals and organizations have been aware of the threats posed by excessive stress. Individuals who experience high levels of perceived stress often report poor physical health, depression, and insufficient job satisfaction (Smith, 2002; Tweed *et al.*, 2004). For organizations, reduced productivity, high turnover, frequent tardiness and absenteeism are common consequences of workplace stressors (Williams and Cooper, 1998; Elfering *et al.*, 2005).

Recent studies of organizational management have addressed the significance of organizational culture (OC) on stress formation, since sources of stress can depend on the characteristics of the culture existed in organizations (see Katwyk *et al.*, 2000; Shahar *et al.*, 2004). These studies found an association linking stress and characteristics of OC, such as communication styles and levels of organizational



commitment. These studies also confirmed OC's influence on stress formation and its relevance in developing stress interventions. Yet, given the significance of OC, OC-stress research did not attract much attention in Chinese societies (for exceptions see studies by Lu, 1997; Lu *et al.*, 1999 conducted in Taiwan). Therefore, this study aimed to further analyze how Taiwanese employees perceive the characteristics OC and how are they linked to stressors and employees' wellbeing.

After reviewing decades of work stress research, a group of influential scholars (Cooper *et al.*, 2001, p.22) questioned "how appropriate are current methodologies?" They observed that the bulk of existing work stress research use structured questionnaires and interviews to test hypothesis, conduct statistical analysis, make context-free predictions and suggestions. Quantitative methods as such are undoubtedly useful, but the totality of the stress experience is often missed, including the context where stress arises and how people perceive, attribute, and evaluate such a context in relation to their wellbeing. Such crucial information can be discovered through qualitative methods. The above cited authors went on to appeal for more use of alternative methodologies, e.g. qualitative methods. The current study responded to this appeal by the use of a qualitative method-focus group discussion, aiming to unravel the complexities of work stress process.

Organizational culture and stress in a Pan-Chinese cultural context – Taiwan as an example

Organizational culture is analogous to the personality of an organization and can be seen as being comprised of the shared beliefs, values, norms and tangible signs (e.g. slogans and logos) of the organizations. Sonnenfeld (1995) described OC as fundamental assumptions that people share about and organization's values, norms, symbols, language, rituals and myths – all of the expressive elements that give meaning to organizational membership and are accepted as guides to behavior.

Some researchers (Cameron and Quinn, 1998; Whetten *et al.*, 1998) have emphasized specific characteristics of OC and their possible relations with work stress. However, the vast majority of studies on OC and stress have been performed in Western societies, the validity of these findings have to be established through the process of repeated verification with heterogeneous populations of people, time, and culture. The Pan-Chinese cultural context can provide a fertile test field for the OC and stress models originated in the West, owing to differences in individualism-collectivism (I-C) values upheld by their society members. I-C is a construct well researched in cross-cultural organizational studies (Hofstede, 1994; House *et al.*, 2004). The core of cultural individualism is the supremacy of individual goals (Triandis, 1995), emphasizing personal independence and autonomy (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, the core of cultural collectivism is the priority of group goals over individual preferences (Triandis, 1995), emphasizing interpersonal connectedness and role obligations (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Taiwan, with a deep-rooted Chinese cultural heritage, has been found to consistently exhibit higher C and lower I compared to her Western counterparts (Oyserman *et al.*, 2002). Reflecting such societal values, we would expect that Taiwanese organizations may possess some distinctive features of OC, such as strong emphases on harmonious interpersonal relationships, group belongingness, loyalty to the organization, and differential treatment of people according to their statuses, background, and connections. These phenomena are all

well-documented in the general social conduct of cultural Chinese people, especially the Taiwanese (Lu, 2003; Yang, 1997). OC, stressors and wellbeing

As for the OC-stress connection, we concur with other researchers that characteristics of OC not only reflect organizational uniqueness but also may become potential sources of stress. Our postulation is tentatively supported by several recent studies. To begin with, Katwyk *et al.* (2000) found that OC is often regarded as an invisible principle to organizational members (i.e. a collective value indicating how people are supposed to behave within the organization). When the personal value matches a collective value, the legitimacy of such value is committed. However, when the personal value is incongruent with the collective value, conflict will occur and provoke a sense of pressure. Lu (2006) conceptualized such value congruence between the individual and collective levels as “cultural fit”, and further demonstrated that lack of such fit had detrimental effects on personal wellbeing. In the organizational context, Shahar *et al.* (2004) revealed that dictatorial communication style and excessive demands of organizational commitment served as stress accumulators, as employees neither committed to nor accepted these imposed values.

Secondly, ignoring cultural influences does not help us to adequately understand the meaning making mechanism inherent in the work stress process (Hobfoll, 2004). Work stress does not occur in vacuum; rather, work is deeply embedded in the specific political, economic, and social realities (Lu *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the experience of stressful work events can only be understood in the context of social and cultural backgrounds where the individual functions. For instance, the above mentioned researchers found at a refined sub-cultural level, that different sources of work stress became salient contributors to wellbeing outcomes in both mainland China and Taiwan. These differences reflect the diverse political, social, and economic characteristics of the two Chinese societies.

Thirdly, different social structure and historical contexts nurture and sanction different values, ethics and social norms, which can drastically alter the work stress phenomenon prevalent in different societies. This could mean that a stressor may be widespread in one social context and being rarely recognized in another (Hobfoll, 2004). Culture could also assert indirect influences though altering the effectiveness of stress moderators. For example, the buffering effect of social support may vary between societies in a way which results in people receiving different degrees of support when implementing their strategies to deal with pressure (Folkman, 1997). Lu *et al.* (2000) noted that internal locus of control became a vulnerability factor for Chinese managers working in the prevailing autocratic organizational climate.

Existing research on work stress and wellbeing in Taiwan

While work stress research in the West has mushroomed over the recent decades, such research in Pan-Chinese societies are still gathering momentum. Specifically, studies looking at the link between OC and work stress are non-existent in Taiwan. To get a broad idea of work stress-related research in the country, a search of journal paper abstracts reported in the Social Science Citation Index was undertaken, resulting in fifteen publications being elicited. These publications covered a variety of issues, and mostly used quantitative methodologies and standardized instruments. Main results of these studies are presented in Table I, and instruments used are listed in the footnote. A conceptual analysis methodology (Mertens, 1998) was used to examine the findings of

these studies. Two coders calculated the stressors and stress consequences by frequency of occurrence; this extracted six main stressors and three main stress consequences. The agreement between the two coders was 89.66 percent, on the basis of Holsti's formula for inter-rater reliability (Weber, 1990).

The six main stressors found were: relationship management; factors intrinsic to the job; organizational characteristics; individual career expectations; home-work boundary; and role in the organization. In addition, three main stress consequences were identified; physical health (e.g. insomnia, ulcers and hypertension), mental health (e.g. nervousness, depression and anxiety) and performance at work (e.g. high labor turnover, reduced productivity and low job satisfaction). Essentially, both stressors and stress consequences extracted here corroborates largely with Western findings (e.g. Shahar *et al.*, 2004; Elfering *et al.*, 2005).

These published work have provided considerable information on the origins and consequences of work stress in Taiwan, a cultural Chinese society, however, they were not focused on the OC-stress relation. Across these 15 studies, only two (Lu, 1997; Lu *et al.*, 1999) addressed the mediational effect of OC (e.g. management and communication styles) on wellbeing outcomes, i.e. mental health of employees. The scarcity of such research needs to be rectified.

The current study

The first purpose of the current study was to contextually describe prevalent characteristics of OC and common stressors in Taiwanese organizations. Secondly, we focused on exploring the potential link between OC and work stress. Such rich contextual evidence will hopefully help to unveil the dynamics of OC and work stress in a Taiwan-Chinese cultural context.

As both OC and work stress are vast, varied, complex areas, and not much research has been done in Taiwan, we opted for a qualitative methodology. In essence, quantitative surveys provide efficient summaries of issues related to wellbeing of employees, however, quantitative surveys may somewhat simplify the results, as people's views have to be compressed into categories that probably do not do them full justice. In contrast, a qualitative approach is better equipped to describe the depth and subtlety of cultural influences and more truthfully convey the views and opinions of individuals.

Method

Design

The current study adopted a Focus-Group (FG) methodology to collect data. FG involves organized discussions with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences on a topic. The benefit of a FG methodology is that it allows the researcher to gain insights into people's shared understandings of a topic and the ways in which others influence them in a group situation (Neuendorf, 2002). Another benefit is the group dynamics, *i.e.* a group member's viewpoints may spark experiences as well as ideas from others (Mertens, 1998). This also opens up pathways to new topics during the discussion, where the group leader (*i.e.* researchers) is free to probe and explore some of the responses made by the members. Once the differences between group members' appraisal of a stress issue are detected, the researchers can further explore the factors underlying that issue and gather information on the severity

or frequency of the issue. These benefits help to yield more insights into the complexities of the OC-Stress relationship.

Sample

To ensure the appropriateness and legitimacy of the sample, we referred to the Taiwanese government's annual bulletin (Taiwan Economic Bureau, 2004) and selected the top ten occupations, which had substantial contributions to the economic development of Taiwan during the 2003 fiscal year. They were; chemistry industry, traveling agency, commercial bank, restaurant, electronics industry, insurance industry, OEM/ODM industry, hygiene industry, import business and transportation industry. One organization in each occupation was selected through researchers' personal network. We asked personnel managers to recruit potential participants knowing that they would be paid a nominal fee for their participation. Pay-for-participation is a common practice in Taiwanese academia circle and there is no evidence showing its adverse effects on motivation of the participants or validity of the information solicited.

A total of forty-seven participants joined our research project. They were randomly assigned into one of the eight focus-groups (5-7 persons), with a policy that people from the same organization were separated. This policy contributes to the content validity of data collection and offers all group members freedom to reveal genuine opinions (Mertens, 1998), though we may lose the opportunity of verifying the authenticity of specific information about a particular organization. Demographic details are as follows: educational levels (postgraduate = 12.76 percent, graduate = 70.21 percent, high schools = 17.02 percent), age ($M = 33.98$, $SD = 8.10$), gender (male = 29.79 percent, female = 70.21 percent) and marital status (single = 42.55 percent, married = 53.19, others = 4.26 percent).

Procedure

Each focus group discussion was initiated and facilitated by a group leader (i.e. researcher) and finished within an average of 90 minutes. All dialogues were tape recorded with the participants' consent. At the beginning of the discussion, the leader briefly introduces the concept of stress at work, and encouraged group members to freely talk about their experiences. Three themes were explored: stressors; characteristics of OC; and stressors related to OC. If a specific issue was detected during the discussion, the group leader would explore it further, trying to uncover how it operated and what consequences (or influences) it had.

After the discussion, each group member received a nominal fee, a debriefing letter and a feedback questionnaire. The debriefing letter explained the general aim of the research, mentioning the confidentiality of their discussion, and thanking them for their participation. Returned feedback questionnaires indicated that participants felt comfortable to describe their own experiences. Expressing views about OCs and exchanging ideas with other members were also pleasant. This served as a good sign for subsequent analysis as the data collected were genuine and credible.

Data analysis

A content analysis (Mertens, 1998) was adopted to refine the data extracted from the focus-group discussion, which examines words or phrases within a wide range of texts.

Content analysis helps to clarify whether a certain event occurs in the organization and how often it appears. Verbatim quotes were also used to convey the exact tenor of group members' comments so that reliability of the data would not be jeopardized (Neuendorf, 2002). Two coders first analyzed the data independently, inconsistencies were then discussed and consensus was reached. Agreement between two coders was 80.10 percent, on the basis of Holsti's formula for inter-rater reliability (Weber, 1990). In addition, a double-coding analysis (Bardin, 1977) was conducted to examine raw data, which helps clarify the associations linking OC and stressors. This methodology consists of counting the simultaneous presence of occurrence in two different themes appearing in a corpus and so permits to analyze how themes are linked in a discourse. Agreement between two analyzers was 91.33 percent.

Results

Group discussion produced a considerable amount of data, which was classified into stressors and characteristics of OC. The former was further categorized into two levels (job versus. personal), whilst the latter was categorized into four characteristics. These categorizations are manifested in Table II. The details follow.

Stressors: job level

In this category, stressors were either related to job characteristics, or resulted from the home-work interface.

Job characteristics. Stressors resulting from job characteristics were frequently mentioned and varied in forms; such as inadequate working conditions, job challenges, and work overload. One participant took charge of total gross sales in Taiwan. He attributed his work tension to the supervision of the salesmen's performance.

If the selling figures were acceptable and headquarter felt satisfied, the work tension would not exist; otherwise, the tension would make me stressed (male, 41, traveling agency).

Hereafter, participants' demographics are arrayed in a standardized format, i.e. gender, age, occupation.

Another participant stated that internal or external barriers to selling caused pressure. Internal barriers were salesmen's low working morale and lacking organization commitment, whereas external ones were vague government policies and unpredictable variations of market demands. In addition, task complexity and departmental transfers were also associated with pressure.

I need to coordinate with staff from different divisions. More often than not, I feel that coordinating a meeting with all staff is quite problematic, since all these divisions come from different locations and have different working times. When dealing with this, I feel nervous, stressed and vulnerable to headache (female, 27, insurance).

Although I attended a training session beforehand, I still feel unfamiliar with administrative rules. Sometimes I cannot find anyone to solve my problems, which causes me emotional tension and an intention to quit job (male, 24, commercial bank).

Cost variation was a potential source of pressure. Cost variation resulted from unpredictable import-export rate, US\$/NT\$ currency variation, and limitation of paralleled quota trades, which generated significant impact on organizational profit. One participant's duty was to alleviate such impact.

Table II.
Findings elicited from the
focus-group discussions
(*n* = 47)

| Stressors | Sub-category of stressors | Identified frequency ^a | Percentage within the sub-category | Percentage within all stressors | |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>Job level</i> Job characteristics | Inadequate working conditions | 6 | 21.43 | | |
| | Job challenges | 5 | 17.86 | | |
| | Work overloaded | 5 | 17.86 | | |
| | Staff shortage | 4 | 14.29 | | |
| | Position transfer | 4 | 14.29 | | |
| | Cost variation | 4 | 14.29 | | |
| | Subtotal | 28 | | 26.92 | |
| | Home-work interface | Dearth of time | 10 | 24.39 | |
| | | Energy | 9 | 21.95 | |
| | | Ability | 8 | 19.51 | |
| | | Lack of partner support | 5 | 12.20 | |
| | | Unusual shift or working pattern | 5 | 12.20 | |
| | | Frequent business traveling | 4 | 9.76 | |
| Subtotal | | 41 | | 39.42 | |
| <i>Personal level</i> Interpersonal relationships | Relationship with superiors | 8 | 47.06 | | |
| | Relationship with colleagues | 5 | 29.41 | | |
| | Management inconsistency | 4 | 23.53 | | |
| | Subtotal | 17 | | 16.35 | |
| Career development | Personal ambition obstacle | 5 | 27.78 | | |
| | Salary gap | 5 | 27.78 | | |
| | Unfair promotion system | 4 | 22.22 | | |
| | Unfair appraisal | 4 | 22.22 | | |
| | Subtotal | 18 | | 17.31 | |
| Characteristics of OCs | Family-kin | 6 | 30.00 | | |
| | Informal work obligations | 5 | 25.00 | | |
| | Organizational loyalty | 5 | 25.00 | | |
| | Subgroup involvement | 4 | 20.00 | | |

Notes: ^aFor the sake of clarity, the items with smaller frequency (below four) are omitted

Under these complicated variations, making a precise decision within a very short time is really challenging. If the decision was inappropriate, I felt more stressed as well as frustrated. Cost variation may lead to serious outcomes. I have to resign if the loss causing by my decision is irrevocable (female, 38, import business).

Home-work interface. Home-work disharmony was another group of stressors. Discussions revealed that stress was associated with scarcity of time and inability to juggle with home duty and work.

Before going to work, I need to send my son to school. If I come to the office late, my salary will be deducted, which really annoys me and affects my mood (female, 32, hygiene industry).

In general, married women in Taiwan are expected to take care of housework irrespective of their employment status. They often reported that performing both roles, i.e. worker and homemaker, was exhausting. If their partners were reluctant to share the burden, the home-work relationship becomes unbalanced and makes them stressed. A second example of this interface disharmony is manifested through the unusual working pattern, e.g. alternate night-shift work every half a month, which strains the relationship of one participant with his flatmates.

I share a flat with several flatmates. When I finish my night-shift work, I usually come back home about 7 a.m. You know what? 7 a.m. is just the time my flatmates are getting up, and the noise they make always disturbs me and prevents me from sleeping well. The stress from such discordance would not disappear until I returned to day-shift work (male, 23, chemistry industry).

The third example of this interface disharmony is related to frequent business travel. During business travel, people have to adapt to new work environments and accommodation arrangements, which provoke a sense of insecurity and discomfort. Business travel also affects family relationships.

I realized that the self-family gap became larger and larger. Because of frequent business traveling, I have few chances to take care of my wife and children. I feel guilty as well as stressed, particularly when my family needs me, but I can't be at their side (male, 37, OEM/ODM industry).

Stressors: personal level

At the personal level, stress was related to either interpersonal relationships or individual career development.

Interpersonal relationships. Dissonant relationships with superiors and colleagues were salient stressors, but inharmonious relationships with subordinates did not lead to salient pressure. Further, we found that stress caused by dissonant colleague relationships seems even more severe than that caused by dissonant superior relationships.

If I had poor relationships with my superiors, I could communicate with them via email or telephone to avoid direct interactions. However, such strategy cannot apply to my colleagues, since my colleagues and I share the same workplace (female, 25, transportation industry).

Dissonant relationship with superiors may be caused by certain communication styles. Some participants complained that their superiors communicated with them in a mandatory manner and made them feel uncomfortable or even scared. Individual working habits may be another factor that affects interpersonal relationships at work.

For example, one participant needed to cooperate with her colleagues for formulating monthly-market-strategy. As she was the kind of a person running things punctually and meticulously, her colleagues sometimes did not accept her formulaic style and came into conflict with her. She felt that her poor interpersonal relationships frustrated and stressed her. Inconsistency in management styles from different superiors was also stressful, often leaving employees bewildered and not knowing how to cope.

My Canadian manager emphasizes efficiency and sometimes over-monitors the execution process, while my Taiwanese manager pays more attention to the final result. I feel it really difficult to find a compromise, since the two supervisors have such different management styles (female, 29, electronics industry).

In addition, many participants stated that, in non-Taiwanese-managed organizations, work efficiency seemed more valued and the atmosphere there was more challenging. A participant who worked in a Taiwanese company before her present job (French-managed division), recognized that the management style there was more friendly and harmonious, and there was no competition between colleagues. She said,

Although the salary and welfare system in my previous company were inferior to my present job, I prefer to work under that type of management style. The reason I left my previous company was that I got married and then moved to another city with my husband (female, 26, restaurant).

Career development. When the prospect of individual career development was restricted, e.g. frustrated aspirations of being a shareholder or founding one's own business, pressure may arise.

I feel confident and satisfied with my current position (senior manager), but I still aspire to set up my own business. Working for others forever is not very meaningful, as the boss is seldom pleased with whatever efforts employees have contributed (female, 36, traveling agency).

I am not young any more, already 46 years old. The life left is not that much. If I could not pursue my dream in time, i.e. set up my own business, it would be too late. Actually, listening to those bossy complaints and working with stupid colleagues just ruin my life (male, 46, restaurant).

In addition, the wage inequality between internal staff (e.g. secretaries, administrative manager, liaison officer and coordinator) and external counterparts (e.g. salesmen, salesman supervisor, branch supervisor and marketing manager) led to pressure. We found that, even when both types of staff had the same length of job tenure, an internal staff usually had a lower salary, at about the ratio of 1:1.5. The longer the job tenure, the larger the difference is. Worse still, unlike external staff, internal staff does not enjoy bonus rewards. One participant who worked for eight years had recently been promoted to senior administrative manager (internal staff), but felt displeased with her salary, comparing with marketing managers (external staff).

Discussions also revealed that unfair evaluation or promotion practices led to pressure:

I found that the promotion policy is not fair. I had worked here for seven years but just been promoted to a division manager. I don't feel satisfied with this position, since my colleague who had the same tenure achieved similar position two years ago (male, 35, hygiene industry).

I think I should be promoted but the company neglected my effort and contribution. I don't really care about the differences between myself and the person who got promoted; however, I hate the gossip and can not tolerate colleagues talking about these differences at my back (female, 30, transportation industry).

Characteristics of OC

Data revealed that four characteristics of OC were prevalent in Taiwanese organizations. They were not necessarily sources of stress; rather, they could either alleviate or aggravate stress, depending on participants' perception and attribution, which were found to be associated with their previous occupational experiences. An in-depth analysis of each characteristic of OC follows:

Family-kin as a characteristic of OC. In Taiwanese society, a very important distinction is made between blood family (kin-ship) and family by marriage (family-ship). Here, stress was associated with the influences of family or kin. If individuals work in a company owned by their immediate relatives, they may feel more stressed than other employees. One participant felt that, because of his family involvement, his superiors and colleagues treated him in an unusually-friendly way.

Although I hate such unusually-friendly way, I cannot change anything at all. In my opinion, I should be treated as normally as others, but the actual situation is completely different (male, 28, import business).

Another participant wanted to leave his family company and establish his own business. His family did not allow him to do so, as he was expected to succeed as the company head.

Because of my specific status, I feel that people pay too close attention to me at work, which always makes me uneasy. I just feel like a monkey in the cage (= Taiwanese adage, meaning that people do not trust you, deride or question your ability). Actually, I was rarely interested in my family business, and the gap between reality and my plans upsets me as well as stresses me (male, 31, OEM/ODM industry).

The vague line between company and family caused unpleasant feelings and stress. A participant worked as a secretary in her father's company and said:

My father has high expectations for me and gives me lots of challenges. Since I am their only child, my parents wish me to take over the power in the future. However I often question whether I am capable of managing it (female, 34, commercial bank).

I serve as an assistant to my elder brother (boss), but my actual job often involves more and I have to work overtime frequently. When the boss is on business traveling, I probably have to make decisions for him. I feel I am the cheapest labor since my brother never pays me extra money for overtime (male, 28, transportation industry).

In essence, the family-kin network is like a two-edged sword. On the one hand, care from the family-kin network may help individuals deal with stress and provide substantial assistance, e.g. money and accommodation. On the other hand, however, excessive care and assistance may become an actual source of pressure, as people may feel over-watched and unconfident of themselves. Some of them even felt that they owe to the family because they have done so much for them.

Informal work obligations as a characteristic of OC. Employees in Taiwan generally value a sense of obligation in the workplace. Discussions revealed that subordinates

often accompanied the superiors to meet important customers in restaurants (or clubs) and built a private relationship with customers there. It is believed that a good private relationship contributes to a good business relationship. Such meetings though may affect the employees' private life and result in pressure.

When finishing this kind of meeting, I usually arrive home very late and feel too exhausted to do anything else. I sometimes have a terrible hangover and cannot turn in a good work performance next day (male, 30, import business).

Another participant mentioned that her company often held outdoor activities on holidays, such as hiking and mountain climbing. Although these activities were not compulsory, for the sake of group coherence, she often persuaded herself to turn up. She confessed that she was anxious about whether the company and colleagues see her differently if she was absent from group activities. Moreover, sources of pressure were related to specific occasions, such as wedding ceremonies, birthday parties or funerals. In Taiwanese society, the more people participate in these occasions, the more proud the host feels. For this reason, some informal work obligations set in. For example:

My supervisor once persuaded me to attend someone's funeral. Actually I was really reluctant to attend such occasion, but I felt embarrassed and difficult to reject my supervisor's request (female, 29, insurance industry).

My manager requested me to serve as a driver on her daughter's wedding ceremony. I had already made an appointment with my friends beforehand, due to my manager's request, I had to postpone it. I did feel so sorry to my friends; nonetheless, I felt I should not reject my manager's request (male, 25, OEM/ODM industry).

These findings clearly conveyed a message that subordinates may feel stressed and worried about their relationships with superiors if they failed to fulfill these covert informal work obligations.

Organizational loyalty as a characteristic of OC. Organizational loyalty can be seen as an affective feeling of attachment, a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals, and a willingness of self-sacrifice, which binds individuals to the organization. Many participants believed that highly committed employees have unshaken loyalty and high productivity, and are willing to assume more responsibility. Yet, demanding unquestioning and unwavering loyalty of employees may result in stress. One participant complained that, every day except Wednesday, all staff had to do morning exercises and recite slogans, e.g. time first, action fast and service best, at 8.45 a.m. in the company plaza. Her company believed that these exercises and slogan chanting contributed to higher organizational commitment, better work performance, and enhanced employees' loyalty to the company. Interestingly, she possessed an opposite view:

To join these activities, I have to come to the company earlier and cannot eat breakfast. After the activities, I need to spend extra time to re-apply cosmetics. These activities led to an unpleasant, inconvenient, and stressful working mood (female, 31, hygiene industry).

Discussions also revealed that Taiwanese workplaces often included a strong sense of administrative ethics, obedience and respect to superiors. If subordinates had an opinion that differed from their superiors, they should still obey the superiors' instructions and avoid questioning superiors in public. Nevertheless, discussions

revealed that people felt stressed when they confronted with the following two situations: OC, stressors and wellbeing

- (1) they still had to follow the superiors' opinions, although they possessed opposite opinions; and
- (2) they believed that their opinions were right/better, but, for the sake of obedience, they did not dare expressing these opinions.

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Stated differently, anti-hierarchical behavior is not allowed in Taiwanese workplaces. One participant reminisced that she made a suggestion to a superior who had two ranks higher than her immediate supervisor. Such behavior greatly impacted her interpersonal relationships and caused her lots of stress.

After this anti-hierarchical behavior, my immediate superior felt disappointed with me and kept a distance from me and my colleagues seemed reluctant to talk to me. This bad situation did not improve until several months later (female, 24, commercial bank).

In addition, superiors in high organizational commitment workplaces emphasized the employee-organization linkage and treated subordinates like family members. Superiors may probe into subordinates private lives to show that they care. Several participants stated that they actually disliked such intrusive behavior.

When my superior queries me about non job-related affairs, e.g. when I plan to get married, I feel weird and insecure. Certainly, I can avoid her questions, but I wonder if no-replying may be sort of impolite, and perhaps make my superior feel embarrassed (male, 32, traveling agency).

In short, high demand for organizational loyalty may lead to certain phenomena, such as excessive care or monitored atmosphere, which embarrass individuals and becomes stressors.

Subgroup involvement as a characteristic of OC. The subgroup reported here is not an official or well structured group, but more like a small informal team, whose members share the same characteristics, e.g. like to talk cosmetics, office gossips and star news. Subgroup involvement pressure often occurred when the majority of the staff in a division was female. One participant confessed that she was a person who preferred to be independent. She disliked gathering with people for gossips and did not join any subgroups, although she sometimes felt isolated.

Especially when discussing projects with my colleagues in routine meetings, I can sense that my female colleagues tend to ignore my comments or suggestions. These situations make me disappointed as well as frustrated (female, 26, chemistry industry).

Notably, people who are in subgroups may also experience pressure, especially when they are tied to a certain subgroup, *i.e.* being stereotyped. Once an individual is being stereotyped, it becomes difficult to switch from the original subgroup to another. An individual who intends to leave the original subgroup without a legitimate reason (e.g. promotion, relocation) may be seen as an unreliable colleague or even a betrayer. During the discussions, three female participants reminisced that they personally experienced such pressure when they left their original subgroups, which led to complicated and stressful transitions. Consequently, two of them left the original companies and the other one established a new subgroup and stayed in the original company.

Links between characteristics of OC and stressors

A simple analysis of the occurrences in each of the themes reveals that from all the stressors listed, H-W interface (39.42 percent) and job characteristic problems (26.92 percent) were the most frequently cited. In terms of OC characteristics, all four were well represented (20-30 percent).

To further clarify links between characteristics of OC and stressors, a double-coding analysis (Bardin, 1977) was conducted. As aforementioned, double-coding analysis consists of counting concomitant occurrence in two different themes and permits evaluating how those two themes may or may not be linked. Therefore, in our case, two analyzers conducted a double-coding analysis, by counting the simultaneous occurrences of each sources of pressure and specific organizational cultures. Agreement between these two analyzers was 91.33 percent, on the basis of Holsti's formula for inter-rater reliability (Weber, 1990). A summary of this analysis is presented in Table III.

Results in Table III indicated that certain stressors were more frequently cited along with certain characteristics of OC. When participants described family-kin as a characteristic of OC, they also talked about H-W interface problems (36.36 percent), job characteristics (27.27 percent), and interpersonal relationships (22.73 percent), indicating that these four themes were interwoven and simultaneously present in some organizations. Although these themes were different in nature, they were all related to family and relationship issues and may serve as stress moderators (as aforementioned).

Regarding informal work obligation as a characteristic of OC, two relevant themes appear simultaneously: job characteristics (52.38 percent) and H-W interface (38.10 percent). This finding is consistent with previous content analysis, as participants reported that they were obliged to help their superiors outside the work (e.g. attend funeral) or accompany their customers to restaurants (e.g. building good business relationships). These activities may lead to certain consequences, such as coming home late, hangover, and poor relationships with family members.

Regarding organizational loyalty as a characteristic of OC, stressors were rarely cited (10 times in total). In other words, these two themes did not seem to share a strong association.

Regarding subgroup involvement as a characteristic of OC, interpersonal relationships problems (38.10 percent) and H-W interface (33.33 percent) were the most frequently cited, indicating that those stressors were concomitant to this

| Characteristics of OCs | Stressors | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| | Job characteristics | H-W interface | Interpersonal relationships | Career development |
| Family-kin | 6 | 8 | 5 | 3 |
| Informal work obligation | 11 | 8 | 1 | 1 |
| Organizational loyalty | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Subgroup involvement | 5 | 7 | 8 | 1 |

Note: The number in the column indicates an index of the association linking two correspondent themes. Higher numbers represent a stronger association between two corresponding themes (Bardin, 1977)

Table III.
Double-coding analysis
linking characteristics of
OCs and stressors
(n = 47)

characteristic of OC. Interestingly, previous content analysis found similar phenomena that many female workers valued such subgroup culture (e.g. identifying inner or outer members) and subgroup functions (e.g. helping inter members, against outer members). On the other hand, however, career development stressor came up only once.

Discussion

The current study identified two major sources of stressors and four characteristics of OC, which have shown to be associated with work stress and employees' wellbeing. If only looking at names of the stressors identified, one would get an impression that they broadly corroborate with Western findings (e.g. Shahar *et al.*, 2004) and existing Taiwanese stress studies (e.g. Lu *et al.*, 2001; Siu *et al.*, 1999). However, our vast amount of group discussion verbatim has provided rich contexts underlying those abstract stress terms, and brought out the vivid, lived human experiences of OC and work stress, which are unfortunately lacking in the existing literature dominated by quantitative methods. After all, experience-near understanding of the human mind and behavior is a pivotal goal of psychology. The typology of stressors is like a skeleton to support a rigorous program of quantitative research; however, our qualitative exploration is like adding fresh and blood onto this skeleton to bring it alive. Our effort is an answer to Cooper *et al.*'s (2001, p.249) appeal for "a greater triangulation of research methodologies", aimed to enhance our ability to obtain comprehensive and generalizable findings. Hence, identification of generic categories of stressors using qualitative method converged with previous findings should further strengthen our confidence in understanding the complex work stress phenomenon. In addition, this study distinguished itself from previous research through its focus on the link between OC and stress in the Taiwanese work context. These findings and implications are discussed below.

Characteristics of the organizational culture

Researchers in the West claimed that organizational culture may have subtle influences on stress formation (Katwyk *et al.*, 2000; Shahar *et al.*, 2004). In line with this claim, we discovered four characteristics of OC in Taiwanese worksites that influenced stress perception: family-kin; informal work obligations; organizational loyalty; and subgroup involvement. These characteristics of culture were not always seen as sources of stress; rather, they generated subtle influences on the entire stress process. Whether such influence became a stressor was often subject to the individual's perception and attribution. As aforementioned, some participants assumed that their work stress was a result of some characteristics of OC they experienced in the organization, which they disliked and did not identify with. Some even opted for leaving the job to alleviate the stress.

In general, our participants recognize that the prevailing Chinese family-kin network provided emotional and practical support when a family member was suffering from stress. However, they also pointed out that when family members interfered too much, the excessive eagerness actually became a stressor. Another example is that participants had an equivocal attitude regarding joining subgroups. On the one hand, they believed that subgroups provided considerable support for their needs at work. On the other hand, they were anxious that their words and deeds would

be constrained if they were tied to a particular subgroup (e.g. being stereotyped), which led to discomfort and hassles.

In sum, various characteristics of OC did generate impacts on individuals and cause a variety of feelings, e.g. tension and worries of being stereotyped. When these feelings accumulated beyond the individual's tolerance, stress set in. It is also likely that these characteristics of OC function as stress moderators and induce either alleviation- or aggravation-effects on stress, which is operated via cognition, i.e. perception, attribution and evaluation.

Organizational cultures and social support

Overall, four characteristics of OC relating to stressors were identified: family-kin; informal work obligation; organizational loyalty; and subgroup involvement. The content analysis showed that these four characteristics of culture can be interpreted as variant aspects of social support. Cohen and Wills (1985) described social support as a feeling that a person perceives of being cared for, loved, valued and held in esteem by his or her partner, family members, friends or other groups of social contacts, such as hospitals, churches and stable employment relationships. Social support also reflects an individual's involvement in a network of communication and mutual obligations (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999).

Based on the content analysis and findings from previous empirical studies, the present study proposes that these four characteristics of OC and social support are similar in conceptualization, for the following reasons:

- (1) family-kin can be seen as a social network connecting people, family, and relatives;
- (2) informal work obligations can also be seen as an extended social network connecting customers, superiors, and colleagues outside of the workplace;
- (3) organizational loyalty and demand can be seen as reflecting the social network connecting all employees inside the workplaces; and
- (4) subgroup involvement can also be seen as relevant to a social network connecting individuals both inside and outside the workplace.

On the one hand, these four characteristics of culture are very similar to conceptions of social support, as all of them emphasize the dynamics (e.g. formation, process and influences) of interpersonal relationships, both in and out of the workplace. On the other hand, however, it should not be concluded that the presence of these characteristics of OC would automatically reap the benefits of social support. The benefits of social support will be affirmative only when people endorse these values. If people disagree, even well-intended social support may become a stressor as a conflict of values may be solicited, *i.e.* personal values in conflict with cultural values (Lu, 2006). Lu found that when individual values and beliefs went into conflict with those held by other people in the larger society, personal wellbeing (happiness) suffered.

Characteristics of organizational culture and stressors

As presented in Table III, the double-coding analysis highlighted the potential connection between characteristics of OC and stressors, linking specific kinds of stressors with specific characteristics of OC. As aforementioned, OC serves as guidelines to behaviors, and have been found to exert a role of supporting people

during stressful times. Nevertheless, this link can work in the reversed direction, *i.e.* culture exists in a context and possesses certain characteristics that can themselves become the very sources of stress. In other words, cultures that value human relations may help people alleviate stress by providing them with a social support network; however, it is also likely that these human relations are over-emphasized and then turn into potential sources of stress (*e.g.* family-kin culture, or subgroup involvement culture). Likely, the culture of informal work obligation can be regarded as another form of work constraint and subtly construes a work environment over which the employees have little control.

In addition, characteristics of OC also affect the way people cope with stress. Tweed *et al.* (2004) indicated that Asian cultures tend to prefer internally targeted control strategies (*i.e.* attempts to control the self) over externally targeted control strategies (*i.e.* attempts to control the environment), which fits better with high-power distance cultures, effectively manages negative emotions of the self (*i.e.* emotion focused coping) and preserves relational harmony. Congruent with these prior findings, the content analysis corroborates the preference of stress-coping strategies in Asian cultures. Moreover, the data also highlighted the link between different sources of stress and characteristics of OC. This suggests that OC may provide a context not only for sources of stress but also ways to cope with stress.

Limitation and suggestions

While using qualitative methods for exploratory purposes is highly justifiable, relying solely on the focus group method has its drawbacks. Group dynamics in this method are a double-edged sword, which has to be reflected upon seriously. The role each participant played in each focus group is an integral part of the data generation and interpretation process. Although the data were content analyzed by two coders, more elaborate methods of triangulation should be adopted (Mertens, 1998) to improve the quality of research. For instance, drawing from the group discussion verbatim, questionnaires and scales regarding stressors and characteristics of OC may be developed, using the employees' real words and experiences. This will provide an opportunity for truly combining the inductive (qualitative) with deductive (quantitative) methods, to capitalize on advantages of both.

The influences of OC shall be further explored in future studies. The prevalence and strength of perceived characteristics of OC can be explored using quantitative techniques basing on our qualitative discovery. Both individual attribution and evaluation (*e.g.* like/dislike, agree/disagree) of these characteristics of OC need systematic examination. After all, work stress does not disappear in vacuum, understanding the complex OC-stressor link may be one way to better appreciate its context and process. Hopefully such knowledge will help us formulating more effective stress intervention strategies.

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