"Personality and Resources: Basic Ingredients for Adapting and Coping in the Hospitality Industries"

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Abstract

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of individual and organizational resources especially in the hospitality industries. Furthermore the role of moderating variables in organizational stress is discussed. Additionally conclusions for training and curricula in higher education for the hospitality industries are sketched.*

Design/methodology/approach: *Empirical research, cross-sectional questionnaire analysis and conceptual approach concerning training and selection issues.*

Findings: *Shows moderate to strong correlations between personality and measures of strain as well as moderate to strong correlations between organizational resources and personality factors. Achievement motivation could be identified as a moderator between stressors and strain, high scores in achievement motivation enhanced the impact of stressors. Training, educational and selection issues are discussed. Argues for a competency based approach to selection and training.*

Research limitations/implications: *Low sample size, method biases (single method), cross sectional questionnaire design. Subjective measures of strain and psychological well-being. Uses very brief measures of personality factors. Implies that more data are needed to further strengthen or reject the current findings and argues for a longitudinal approach.*

Practical implications. *Findings suggest realistic job preview for institutions of higher education and the hospitality industries and competency based training designs on the basis of real life scenarios and behaviourally anchored ratings.*

Originality/value: *Combines empirical findings with questions of curricula and training issues within an institution of higher education. Shows relationship of personality and organizational variables, identifies moderator effects in stress research.*

Key words: *Adapting, competencies, coping, hospitality industries, occupational stress, personality.*

Paper type: *Empirical study*

Introduction

Employees and decision makers in the hospitality industries face a lot of challenges regarding their everyday work. For instance client centeredness, service orientation and frequent contact with clients or guests are paramount per definition. For employees this includes behavioural aspects like friendliness, quick responses concerning the needs of guests, the creation of a good atmosphere and so on. This kind of service orientation can be very stressful, thus exhausting personal and organizational resources. This is one reason why hospitality leaders and employees need a special set of competencies (Chung-Herrera, Enz & Lankau, 2003). One is for instance the necessity to stay calm and friendly in front of an upset client even if one doesn't feel like displaying friendliness. Hochschild (1983) called this 'emotional labour'. Other researchers have identified adapting and coping as a competency which is of great importance for a large number of job branches and which is related to emotional stability (Baron, Bartram & Kurz, 2003). For the sake of conceptual clarification we will call negative job related influences which cause a stress reaction *stressors* whereas the individual, subjective side will be called strain (e.g. irritability, nervousness etc., see Furnham, 2005, p. 358). We think that it is useful for both educators and students or trainees to know something about the nature of coping competencies at an early stage of job socialization.

At the our University of Applied Sciences we offer study programs like hotel and tourism management and management in health tourism. In both fields of work especially novices are likely to experience strain because a lot of job related action programs are not yet fully automated. Thus a higher level of action regulation is needed which may directly lead to strain in case of time pressure and/or uncertainty (Hacker, 2005). Yet some of our students might be prone to job stress more than others. On the basis of this background our basic research questions were:

- *Is there a relationship between personality and strain regarding students of hotel and tourism management?*
- *What kind of coping resources are needed for future leaders in the hospitality industries?*
- *Can our conclusions be used to train competencies in higher education?*

Before we can answer these questions on the basis of detailed hypothesis we shall outline some more theoretical aspects.

Competencies can be considered underlying characteristics "of an individual that [are] causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation." (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 9). In part they consist of personality traits, motives and capabilities. The latter can be trained; the first mentioned aspect cannot be easily changed.

Although differently in effect size, the Big Five factors of personality (Costa & McCrea, 1992a) play an important role in predicting job performance (Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002; Salgado, Anderson, Modcoso, Bertua & de Fruyt, 2003), thus it is useful to take them into consideration. We will briefly introduce the factors and sketch some behavioral indicators (in parenthesis): emotional stability (not worried, calm, not easily upset), conscientiousness (keeps deadlines, works with persistence, keeps orders), openness for change (curious, creative, open minded), agreeableness (friendly, social, caring) and extraversion (likes people around, outgoing, likes to communicate). Especially emotional stability is a good predictor of stress resistance (Bolger & Schilling, 1991) and extraversion correlates with job performance over a quite broad range of job branches (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Thus we can regard both personality factors individual resources.

Further personality variables are crucial for job success in general and in terms of coping with stress. Self efficacy – the firm belief in a positive self initiated action outcome – is an important predictor of academic and non-academic performance (Pajares, 1996; Göbel & Frese, 1999). It also proved to function as a buffer variable between stressors and strain (Grau, Salanova & Peiro, 2001). It can be measured on a specific and on a general level.

Achievement motivation is another key success variable as it refers to motivational aspects of job behaviour (Modik, 1977). People who score high on achievement motivation set high and difficult but achievable goals; they tend to energize themselves and are active. Achievement motivation has a positive and a negative side. On one hand it is important to have employees who set high goals and strive to achieve more than others and to make things better. On the other hand we know that high goals can be a burden for instance if one sets high goals but does not know how to get there. Another challenge is to have high goals, to know how to get there but to be hindered to achieve them (by time pressure etc.). In this case "overachievers" should be in trouble because important goals cannot be reached and thus the self-esteem may suffer severely (Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2003). Our students are mostly novices in the field of hospitality, thus the way to reach or achieve high goals should in many cases be blocked either by a lack of job competencies or structural aspects (e.g. lack of organizational support).

Structural aspects refer for instance to organizational resources like support by supervisors or co-workers which play an important role as buffers against stressors (Frese, 1999; Furnham, 2005). Furthermore there is ample evidence that decision latitude is one of the most powerful stress reducing variables in organizations (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Based upon the aforementioned theoretical approach the following hypothesis can be defined:

Hypothesis 1

Work stressors correlate substantially with measures of strain (especially error strain, Rybowiak et al., 1999)

Hypothesis 2

Personal and organizational resources correlate negatively with strain (Karasek and Theorell, 1979; Schwarzer, 1992; Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Muck et al., 2007)

Hypothesis 3

Achievement motivation moderates the relationship between stressors and strain, thus enhancing the negative impact of stressors (Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2003)

Background of our College

The privately owned College is a fully accredited University of Applied Sciences in Northern Germany. We offer three different study programs on a Bachelor level: hotel and tourism management, management in health tourism, and general management. It is a small College with roughly 250 students from all over Germany. Students pay a monthly fee of about 435 € to 485 € (approx. 630 USD). Students can chose between two study modes, a so called 'direct' and a 'dual' mode: The 'direct' mode includes vocational trainings besides studies to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree. The 'dual' mode refers to a twofold approach: students obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree and a state certified hotel management qualification supervised by the German Board of Trade (*Industrie- und Handelskammer*). Usually, 'dual students' spent more time concerning practical issues and training than 'direct students'. At least both modes encompass a study program of seven semesters.

Empirical study

Method

We conducted two paper-pencil based cross sectional studies in 2009 and 2010. The study was in part guided by hypothesis and in part of explorative nature.

Sample

62 students of our College took part in this survey. Students attended classes of the second and third semester. Both sets combined consisted of 42 female, and 20 male students with an average age of 21 years (SD = 2,11). 29 students chose the "dual" and 33 the "direct" system. 53 participants were enrolled in the hotel and tourism program whereas 9 chose management in health tourism.

Setting

The study was conducted at our College during the semester in December 2009 and January 2010. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of lectures held by the first author.

Research instrument

The paper-pencil questionnaire consisted of 7 pages in 2009 and 8 pages in 2010. It started with a short briefing (purpose, confidentiality etc.) and demographic variables such as gender, study programs etc. Then the following psychometric scales were introduced (for statistical parameters see table 2 below). Table 1 shows the scales in use.

Table 1: Scales in use, sources and answer modes. Item examples translated by first author

Scales/item cluster	Item example	Source	Answer Mode
Work stressors (single items)	Heat, bad odours, time pressure	Weinert (2004)	Five point Likert scale (very rarely – very often/always)
Decision latitude and complexity	Can you plan your work on your own?	Semmer (1984)	Five Point Likert scale (very rarely – very often/always)
Support by supervisors/ colleagues	If get into trouble at work because of difficult guests, I can rely on my supervisor / colleagues.	Own scale	Five point Likert scale (doesn't apply – apply at all – fully applies)
Uncertainness and responsibility	How often do you get unclear instructions?	Semmer (1984)	Five point scale (very rarely – very often/ always)
Irritability and strain	Even at home I have to think about work related problems.	Mohr (1986)	Seven point Likert scale (doesn't apply apply at all – fully applies)
Achievement motivation	I find it important to perform better than others.	Modik (1977)	Six point Likert scale (doesn't apply at all – fully applies)
Self-efficacy (work related, study 1)	If I want something, I usually get along with it.	Schwarzer (1992)	Four point Likert scale (not true – exactly true)
Self-efficacy (study related, study 2)	I know exactly what to do to obtain good grades [at the University].	Schiefele & Moschner (1997)	Four point Likert scale (doesn't apply – exactly applies)
Error Strain	I often fear to make mistakes.	Rybowiak et al. (1999)	Five point Likert scale (doesn't apply at all – fully applies)
Big-Five-Factor Scale (study 2)	Two items (with different word clusters) for each factor	(Muck, Hell & Gosling, 2007)	Seven point Likert scale (doesn't apply – fully applies)

Results

Table 2 shows the parameters of the psychometric scales in use. As we can see, all scales show reasonable or good reliability indices, with the exception to work related self-efficacy. We consider at least three reasons for this: first, for novices in the field of work, self-efficacy is still developing - thus it may be hard to self- rate this variable for newcomers. Secondly, this result may occur due to the specific sample, thirdly it could be a mixture of both. Additionally construct related validity of the scales in use can be deduced by the hypothesized correlations as shown below (table 3 + 4).

Table 2: Parameters of the psychometric scales in use

Scales	α	M	SD	Range
Decision latitude and complexity[2)]	.80	2.77	.91	1-5
Support by supervisors[2)]	.86	3.32	.94	1-5
Support by colleagues[2)]	.70	3.70	.74	1-5
Uncertainness and responsibility[2)]	.85	2.70	.81	1-5
Irritability and strain[2)]	.84	3.29	1.29	1-7
Achievement motivation[2)]	.69	4.38	.67	1-6
Self-efficacy (work related, study 1, N=29)	.50	3.13	.37	1-4
Self-efficacy (study related, study 2)[1)]	.75	3.11	.32	1-4
Error Strain[2)]	.88	2.95	.97	1-5
Big-Five-Factor Scale Emotional Stability[1)]	.72	4.89	1.27	1-7
Big-Five-Factor Scale Extraversion[1)]	.82	4.70	1.57	1-7

Note: 1) N = 32, 2) N = 59-62, α = Cronbach's Alpha, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that work stressors correlate substantially with measures of strain. To check this assumption we calculated partial correlations of the variables as table 3 shows, controlling for study program, type of study mode, and point in time.

Table 3: Partial Correlations between work stressors and measures of strain (combined data, controlled for study program, type of study mode, and cohort)

Work stressors	General strain (α = .84)	Error strain (α = .88)
Uncertainness and Responsibility (α=.85)	.55**	.51**
Tense relationship to supervisor (single item)	.29*	.35**
Unpleasant odours (single item)	.43**	.22+
Heat (single item)	.37**	.39**
Unclear instructions (single item)	.36**	.36**

Note: N = 57, ** = p < 0.01; * = p < 0.05; + = p < 0.10; α = Cronbach's Alpha.

All work stressors correlate negatively and substantially with measures of strain. The strongest correlations can be found between uncertainness and responsibility and measures of strain. We chose physical stressors as well because our students have to cope with them during their internships (which they absolve parallel to the academic studies). As we can see physical as well as psychological measures clearly show the expected relationship with self reported strain. Thus hypothesis 1 is fully supported.

Hypothesis 2: Personal and organizational resources correlate negatively with strain (Karasek, 1979; Schwarzer, 1992; Bolger & Schilling, 1991). Support by supervisors as well as work related self-efficacy and emotional stability show the expected negative relationships with measures of strain (table 4). One correlation regarding self-efficacy misses the necessary level of significance, we will discuss this later. No substantial and/or significant correlation could be found between support by colleagues and decision latitude and measures of strain although in case of support by colleagues the correlations show the expected direction. Here we can conclude that hypothesis 2 was only supported in part.

Table 4: Correlations of organizational and personal resources with measures of strain (controlled for cohort)

Organizational and personal resources	General strain (α = .84)	Error strain (α = .88)
Support by supervisor (α=.86)	-.38** (N=57)	-.31* (N=57)
Supp. by colleagues (α=.70)	-.19 (n. s. N=56)	-.13 (n. s., N=56)
Decision latitude (α=.80)	.13 (n. s., N=59)	.04 (n. s., N=59)
Work related self-efficacy (α=.50)	-.27 (n. s., N=29)	-.36+ (N=29)
Emotional stability (α=.72)	-.61** (N=29)	-.59 (N=29)
Extraversion	-.31* (N=32)	-.27 (n.s., N=32)

Note: ** = p < 0.01; * = p<0.05; + = p < 0.10; n.s. = not significant; α = Cronbach's Alpha.

Hypothesis 3 predicted achievement motivation to function as a moderator between the relationship of stressors and strain. Thus we calculated a moderated regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991, Diehl & Staufenbiel, 2007) to see whether there is a significant interaction of achievement motivation and uncertainness/responsibility. Figure 1 shows the idea of the moderating effect of the achievement motivation.

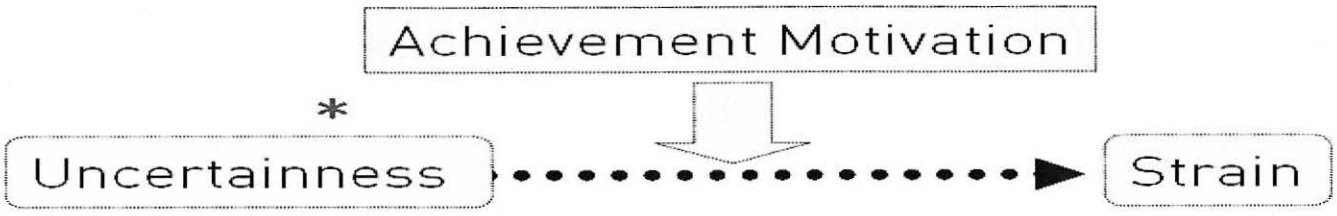

Figure 1: Achievement motivation as a moderator between stress and strain

We found indeed a significant interaction of both variables [1], table 4 shows the results.

[1] We tackled the problem of multi-colinearity which occurred at first by centring the variables, thus obtaining acceptable VIF-scores (Diehl & Staufenbiehl, 2007).

Table 4: Main parameters of the moderated regression analysis

Predictors	B	SE	ß
Uncertainness/Responsibility	-.158	.356	.099
Interaction term	.233	.073	.718**

Notes: N = 62, corrected R^2 = .38, B = non-standardised B-Weight; SE = standard-error, β = standardised B-Weight * p < .05, ** p < .01. Dependent variable: Strain. Predictors: Uncertainness/Responsibility, and interaction term with achievement motivation.

All variables explain 38% of the criterion variable. The interaction term uncertainness/ responsibility times achievement motivation is significant. We can see that those students who score high on achievement motivation report more strain in case of uncertainness and responsibility (which proved to be a stressor as we have seen above). Hypothesis 3 was thus supported.

Gender and type of study mode

Of general interest were also possible gender differences with regard to the focused variables. Furthermore we had also a closer look upon the role of the type of study (dual versus direct). To summarise the findings we can say that only in case of error strain we found gender differences. Males reported less strain (two tailed t-test; male = 2,61, SD = 1,05; female = 3,11, SD = 0,89; p<.10; five point Likert-scale). The type of study had no significant impact on predictor or criterion variables (checked via analysis of variance).

Post-Ex-Analysis: some "tragic" findings

We also calculated an ex-post-analysis of organizational variables and personality which revealed some interesting findings: Extraversion correlates with support by supervisor (r=.56, p<.01, N=32), emotional stability correlates with support by supervisor (r=.36, p<.05, N=32) and there is a relationship between emotional stability and support by colleagues (r=.31, p<.10, N=30). We call this a "tragic" finding because obviously students who score low on emotional stability are much more in need for support either by colleagues or supervisors. Yet we see that in our sample it is just the other way around: Those who report more extraversion and emotional stability report more support by colleagues and supervisors. We will discuss these findings in the next section.

Discussion

As we can see, all scales show reasonable or good reliability indices, with the exception of work related self-efficacy. The latter may be due to a sample bias, in other samples the indices may improve. Another explanation may be the simple fact that work related self-efficacy is not yet fully developed, because our students do not yet have a lot of working experience. We must not forget that self-efficacy is not a trait variable per se but a personality variable which develops (or not) over time (Schwarzer, 1992). All measured work stressors in this study correlate substantially with measures of strain as hypothesis 1 predicted. We can at least interpret this finding as an indicator for the construct validity of the stressor scales in use.

Most of the personal and organizational resources correlate negatively with strain as hypothesis 2 predicted. Especially support by supervisors as an organisational resource seems to be key variable here. The same holds true for emotional stability, a personality factor which predicts job success over a relatively large range of job branches (Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002). Correlations between support by colleagues and decision latitude and measures of strain were weak and/or not significant although in case of support by colleagues the correlation shows the expected direction. On one hand in the case of self-efficacy this may be caused by a lack of reliability and stability as mentioned above. On the other hand support by colleagues may only have a positive impact on novices who show a high degree of emotional stability, an idea which is at least in part supported by our post-ex-analysis as we will see soon. The near-zero-correlations of decision latitude and measures of strain need some explanation because decision latitude plays a crucial role as an organisational variable because it can buffer the impact of stressors (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Novices may not have a lot of decision latitude due to their lack of work experience. The may even regard too much decision latitude as a burden or it is simply not granted by their supervisors. Students reported a quite low amount of decision latitude which supports the mentioned explanation (see table 2).

Achievement motivation functions as a moderator between stressors and strain as hypothesis 3 predicted. Students who score high on achievement motivation report more strain than others. This could in part be due to a lack of work experience. We measured uncertainness and responsibility on the stressor side – a variable that should change over time. Yet it seems reasonable for employees who set very high goals and who are willing "to go the extra-mile" to carefully use their resources.

We found gender differences in favour of men only regarding error strain, males reported less strain. Because of the subjective measures we cannot say for sure whether females objectively show more strain than men. It could also be that in our sample men show more social desirability and/or women are more honest. Additionally we did actually not capture sex roles. More sophisticated approaches show for example that high scores in femininity are associated with a decreased risk in coronary heart diseases (Hunt, Lewars, Emslie & Batty, 2007).

In our ex-post-analysis we found that extraversion and emotional stability correlates with support by supervisors. Furthermore it could be shown that emotional stability correlates with support by colleagues. Employees with low levels of emotional stability are probably not supported as much as those who are more stable. This result is understandable from the colleague's or supervisor's point of view, yet it is a "tragic" finding. It may be much more difficult to deal with employees who are not as emotional stable as others – and yet it might be worth doing so: just imagine an intelligent, innovative, conscientious and caring novice with a lack of stress resistance. A suchlike person can be very precious for a company if a job type can be found where he or she fits in well.

Finally our research questions can be answered:

Is there a relationship between personality and strain regarding students of hotel and tourism management? Yes, there is. Important individual variables have been identified, for instance emotional stability and extraversion as well as self-efficacy are positively related to health – if we accept the notion that a lack of strain is considered an indicator of health.

What kind of coping resources are needed for future leaders in the hospitality industries? Besides the mentioned individual variables we found that support by supervisors and colleagues are positively related with health. Those who score high on achievement motivation should be careful with their own resources and be aware of their vulnerability.

Can our conclusions be used to train competencies in higher education?

From an HR perspective it is important to teach adequate coping mechanisms and to enable self-selection at a very early stage of job socialization. In Germany it is possible to integrate the teaching of job competencies into so called dual study programs. In suchlike programs students learn on an academic and on a very practical level as we have mentioned before. If it is true that the competitiveness of tomorrows industries relies much on the identification of future skills and competencies we must regularly monitor the development of suchlike competencies (Chung-Herrera, Enz & Lankau, 2003). We need to gather data on a regular basis and to implement our findings into our curricula. By doing so, students are encouraged to find their own personal-job "fit index" (Harrison, 1978), and companies will benefit from well-trained newcomers who self-select their work environment, and thus enhancing the chance of a healthy and effective job career. Our conclusion is that educational programs and trainings in the field of hospitality management should take the aforementioned research findings into account. As we have seen, stressors and strain are interrelated in special ways. Personality plays an important role as well as organizational aspects (both things are hard to change). What we can and should do is to train adapting and coping with stressors such as the communication with difficult guests or clients in a "safe" and yet helpful environment via role plays. At the our College we use role plays on the basis of critical job events (Flanagan, 1954). In doing so, we also contribute to the early development of job competencies on an operational level in the hospitality industries (Chapman & Lovell, 2006; Hughes, 2008; Weber, Finley, Crawford & Rivera, 2009). Additionally we do video feedback training based upon behavioural anchored rating scales, thus giving students concise information concerning relevant job behaviour (Bildat, 2010). Future research should as well address desirable long term effects of vocational trainings by longitudinal control group designs.

The limitations like type of study, sample size, and some shortcomings concerning scales have already been mentioned above. We emphasize the use of further longitudinal studies focusing the changes over time in crucial variables such as work-related self-efficacy.

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