

Methods of Coping and Response of Vulnerable Personnel to the Mistreatment Experienced in the Labor Market

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Abstract. *The paper addresses the stress experienced after discriminatory practices faced by vulnerable personnel in the labor market. The specialized literature focuses primarily on vulnerable groups and situations of discrimination, the types of vulnerabilities or methods by which these vulnerable categories are discriminated against, and too little on the coping mechanisms they use. The research method was a questionnaire survey using a quantitative methodology. It consists of several sections and was administered to a sample of 82 respondents aged over 18 years, aimed to reach vulnerable categories. The research questions aim to reveal how vulnerable personnel manifest after experiencing discrimination and what types of coping methods they use. After the application of the questionnaire, the data was interpreted by the authors, and it emerged that the coping methods or techniques they use are complex and often combined, using both healthy and harmful coping mechanisms. The aim was to quantify and expose the effects of harmful practices of the employers that promote practices that are considered unethical, illegal, or discriminatory, and the repercussions on the individual, and the company in which they work, which lead to negative financial impact and health problems.*

Keywords: mistreatment, coping methods, vulnerable personnel discrimination, labor market.

Introduction

While working in the labor market, vulnerable groups experience a variety of types of discrimination (Deselnicu D., et al., 2024). The discriminations that these personnel experience affect, first of all, the individual who has been subjected to them by creating psychological suffering, affecting his/her family, friends, workplace, and last but not least, the society in which he/she lives. We can therefore admit that, someone or something is vulnerable if they are under a threat that could affect them negatively in any way, or is exposed to certain types of physical or emotional attacks (Misztal B.A., 2011).

This paper aims to explore the ways in which discriminated personnel react to experiencing mistreatment at work and to try to quantify the ways in which they adapt, both during the performance of their work duties and in their private lives.

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As a result of experiencing discrimination while working in the labor market, vulnerable personnel are affected both physically and psychologically. They tend to internalize the stress caused by such discrimination, which reflects on them individually, on the teams in which they work and on the company in which they work (Deselnicu D., et al., 2024; Noor et al., 2023).

Because of the types of questions that may be sensitive for respondents, they tend to be reluctant to participate in the study or tend not to answer certain questions in the questionnaire. Because of this, there were challenges in reaching these vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, these types of personnel often do not want to be identified as a vulnerable group, and many of the respondents in this study tend to disassociate themselves from this type of categorization (Deselnicu D., et al., 2024). Given all of this, it could be argued that surveying vulnerable people poses specific research challenges, such as special rules that should be applied in the survey methodology conducted.

Literature review

Research on stress in the workplace is well documented. The effects of work-related stress, which impact employee health, operate physiologically, cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally. The effects of workplace stress can be "(1) *physical (sleep disturbances, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, etc.)*, (2) *emotional (anxiety and depression)*, (3) *intellectual (loss of concentration and lack of motivation)*, and (4) *behavioral*" (Bowen P., et al., 2014). Workplace stress has significant effects and is correlated with sexuality and cumulates psychological effects, physical effects, and social effects. In addition, stress is significantly correlated with a person's inability to exercise self-control over alcohol consumption. The negative impact of excessive alcohol consumption on a person's ability to function well at work. Impacts: "(1) *feeling tense at work*; (2) *feeling angry at work*; (3) *disrupted sleep patterns*; (4) *headaches*; (5) *difficulty relaxing after hours*; and (6) *strained family life*" (Bowen P., et al., 2014).

The *coping mechanisms* are defined as being composed of „ *the thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations*" (Folkman S., Moskowitz J.T., 2004).

Types of coping techniques and coping mechanisms

There are healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms to alleviate accumulated stress. Among the healthy ones we could list: exercise, such as going to the gym, jogging, martial arts, archery, archery, surfing and water sports, yoga, shooting or spending time with family and friends, traveling, meditation and prayer, fishing, hiking and camping, golf, gardening, attending a psychologist or a health professional, etc. (Van Berk R., et al., 2017), and among the unhealthy stress response strategies, we could list: eating more than usual, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, using illegal substances, gambling, cyberloafing, etc. (Pindek S., et al., 2018).

The coping mechanisms that can be encountered are many, among which the most relevant are cognitive reappraisal (Wilkins J., 2014), Humor (Gaab J., et al., 2005), appeal to religious concepts and practices, planning, acceptance (Murray P. A. and Ali F., 2016, Dewi, R., et al., 2022), problem-focused coping, (Serec, et al. 2018; Tang T. L-P, 2011), coping based on problem avoidance (Boumans N.P.G. & Landeweerd J.A., 1992), cyberloafing (Pindek S., et al., 2018).

Coping resources

Ito and Brotheridge (2003), found that social support from coworkers was positively associated with problem-centered coping strategies, and supervisor support was negatively related to emotion-

centered coping strategies. They found evidence that coping resources play an important role in predicting coping strategies.

In the figure below, it is shown how lack of administrative support leads to hostility and poor job performance (Figure 1):

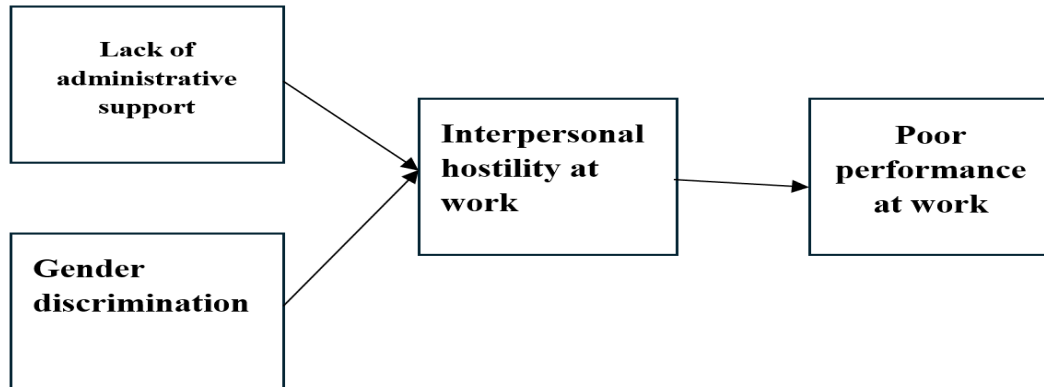


Figure 1. How lack of administrative support leads to an increase in workplace hostility and consequently low job performance. Conceptual framework.

Source: (Noor et al., 2023).

Van Berk et al., (2017), mentioned there are studies that men experience stress differently from women, and that coping mechanisms in the face of stress are reinforced and occur throughout life.

Research Methodology

Formulation of the research problem

The problem of the present research emerges from the practices of some employers in the labor market and the questions applied in this research try to reach these premises, underlying the discriminations that have been revealed in scientific literature regarding coping mechanisms of the vulnerable personnel that are used in the labor market in which they activate. The research problem can be defined as follows: *"Establishing the factual situation of how vulnerable personnel reacts to discriminatory situations they encounter, in the process of entering the labor market or while performing their duties about the service they provide."*

The research problem generates subsequent research questions:

- *What are the ways of coping mechanisms of the vulnerable personnel subjected to these discriminatory situations?*
- *How frequently are coping methods used by vulnerable personnel?*

The study was designed as an integrated quantitative, predominantly exploratory, and descriptive approach. The main research method used was a questionnaire survey.

The research method

The research method was the questionnaire survey, using quantitative methodology. The research instrument (the developed questionnaire) included 63 questions. It was distributed electronically via Google Forms to a sample of 82 respondents aged over 18 years old, aimed to reach categories of vulnerable people who work in the labor market.

The questionnaire was divided into 10 sections, referring to: A - The demographic background, B - Respondents' occupation, C – Recruitment situations, D – workplace training and

promotion, E – Dismissal/Layoffs, F - Wages, G – Workplace equality of treatment, H - Workplace mistreatment and abuse, I - Coping mechanisms, J – Vulnerable personnel/categories.

To facilitate the interpretation of the results, the authors used open or closed-ended questions (predetermined answers), with either a single-question option or a five-point Likert scale, from "0 - Not at all" to "5 - Very much". Other closed-ended questions used other five-point Likert scale options, such as "0 – Unfriendly" to "5 - Very good". For some questions, the mixed answer system was used, giving the respondents the option to freely answer the questions through the "Other" answer option.

Data collection was conducted over approximately eight calendar months, namely November 2022 - May 2023 and October-November 2024, on a sample of 82 people, with the same research instruments applied to respondents. One questionnaire was invalidated because the respondent did not complete the questionnaire sufficiently to allow us to collect information from it, leaving 81 valid responses.

Description of the analyzed sample

The sample included 82 people questioned. Given the special characteristics of the analyzed, it was not possible to carry out a scientific sampling, but an empirical one. The sampling used in the study, employed common sampling methods such as convenience and snowball sampling (Hair, et al., 2011). It was considered that data validation was not necessary, as the article used descriptive statistics.

The questionnaire reached the following *vulnerable personnel categories*: young personnel, elderly personnel, female personnel, Roma personnel, adults with disabilities, people at risk of poverty, young workers, migrant workers, and working mothers, working mothers.

In regards to the *gender of the respondents*, 35.4% declared themselves as male and 64.6% declared themselves as female, as presented in (Figure 2). The gender of the analyzed sample is mostly female, representing about 2/3 of the whole sample. Their *age* varied, majority of the respondents (38.3%) were aged between 36-45 years, a percentage of 24.7% were aged between 26-35 years, a percentage of 14.8% were aged between 46-55 years, a percentage of 9.9% were aged between 18-25 years, a percentage of 8.6% were aged between 56-65 years, and only 3.7% were aged above 66 years (Figure 3):

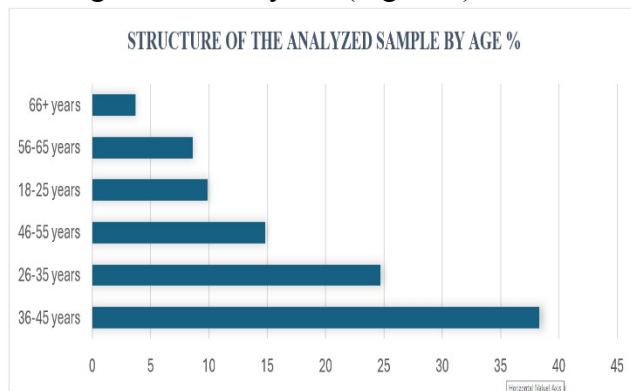


Figure 2. Structure of the analyzed sample according to gender

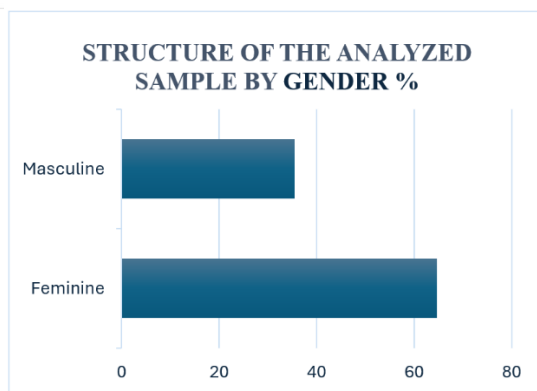


Figure 3. Structure of the analyzed sample according to age

Source: Authors' own research.

Regarding *education level*, most of the respondents (50%) have completed some form of university education. A percentage of 24.4% have postgraduate education, one of 18.3% have high school education (high school diploma), 6.1% of them have only secondary education, and just 1.2% have post-secondary education. The majority of the sample had university and postgraduate education (Figure 4):

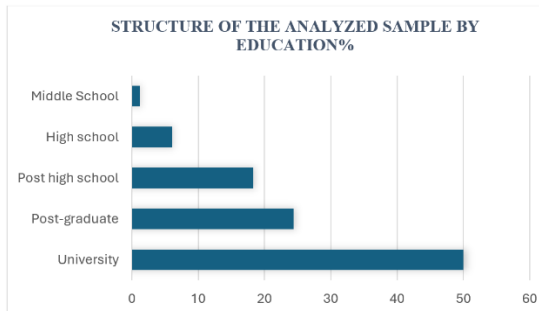


Figure 4. Structure of the analyzed sample according to education level

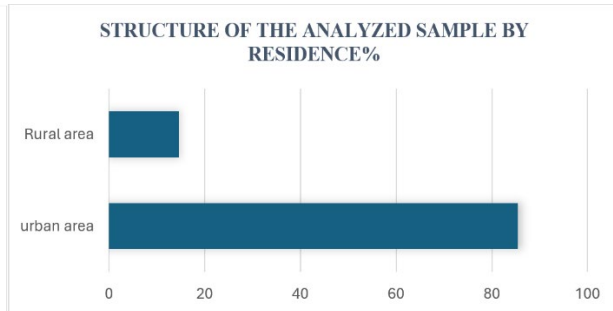


Figure 5. Structure of the analyzed sample according to the place of residence

Source: Authors' own research.

Regarding the respondents' *place of residence*, the vast majority of them (85.4%) live in urban areas and (14.6%) in rural areas (Figure. 5). Regarding the *position held*, a percentage of 76.3% of the respondents hold executive positions, and only 23.7% of them hold managerial positions.

Data analysis and results interpretation

Through the present study, we tried to highlight their experiences during the recruitment process and their workplaces and observe the repercussions after experiencing discriminatory situations that they encounter in the labor market. The vulnerable personnel resort to different coping mechanisms with stress at work. They use both healthy and unhealthy methods at the same time, often combining several of them.

How vulnerable personnel cope with the mistreatment situations they encounter

Out of the sample respondents analyzed in this study, the majority of the respondents actively participated in recruitment processes, represented by a percentage of 85%.

Upon completion of the recruitment process, the majority of the respondents (65.5%) who were rejected from the interview stated that they did not receive a response from the employer as to why they were eliminated from the process, a practice that discourages workers from participating in recruitment processes in the future.

Following the layoff, the majority of respondents (64.3%), stated that the layoff was legal and they did not turn to anyone to turn the outcome around or seek support, in a percentage of 50% of respondents. Another percentage of 40% turned to their managers for support and only 10% of the respondents considered the layoff as normal (Figure 6):

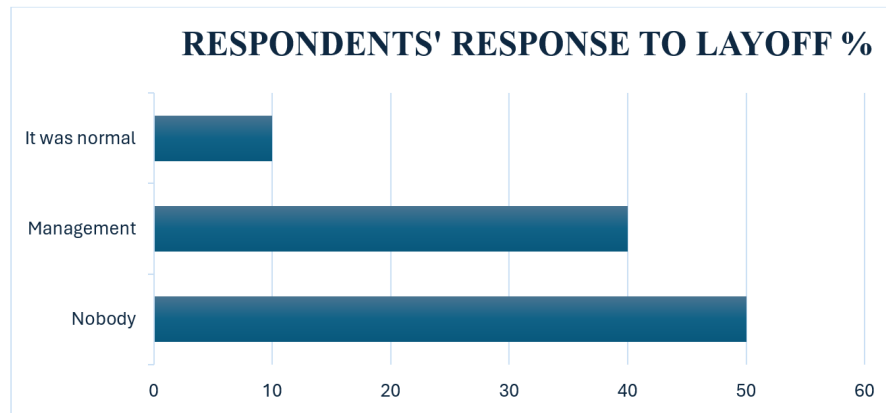


Figure 6. Respondent's response to layoff

Source Authors' own research.

Regarding mistreatment in the workplace, only 12.8% of respondents claimed to have experienced mistreatment. The mistreatment that was experienced consisted of: comments about private life or marital status (33.3%), the employer refusing to give assignments because of the employee's gender, a percentage of 8.3%, suggestions or opinions were disregarded because of gender in a percentage of 25%, insults directed to make the employee feel less competent (8.3%), and (25%) of the respondents admitted that they received comments that were made about their physical appearance.

The personnel's reaction to mistreatment often manifests itself by suppressing and bottling up the feelings that arise from experiencing mistreatment. A percentage of (68.9%) regarding those who directly or indirectly experienced some type of mistreatment responded that they did not tell anyone about the situation.

Therefore, the proportion of those who do not react to the impact of such mistreatment is in the majority, and most of the time, they try to deal with the problems they encounter on their own or do not turn to any person or authority for fear of rejection from management or coworkers.

The data showed a poor personnel response to the mistreatment they encounter in the workplace. A percentage of (54.7%) did not tell anyone about the mistreatment because they felt they had to deal with the problem themselves, and only 18.9% discussed it with family members, friends or superiors. The reasons why they do not report the situations they encounter are varied and have to do with the way they cooperate with the state on a case-by-case, individual basis. Of these, a percentage of 23.3% were afraid of losing their job just 10% mentioned that they were ashamed and 26% of respondents appealed to managers, family members, or friends (Figure 7):

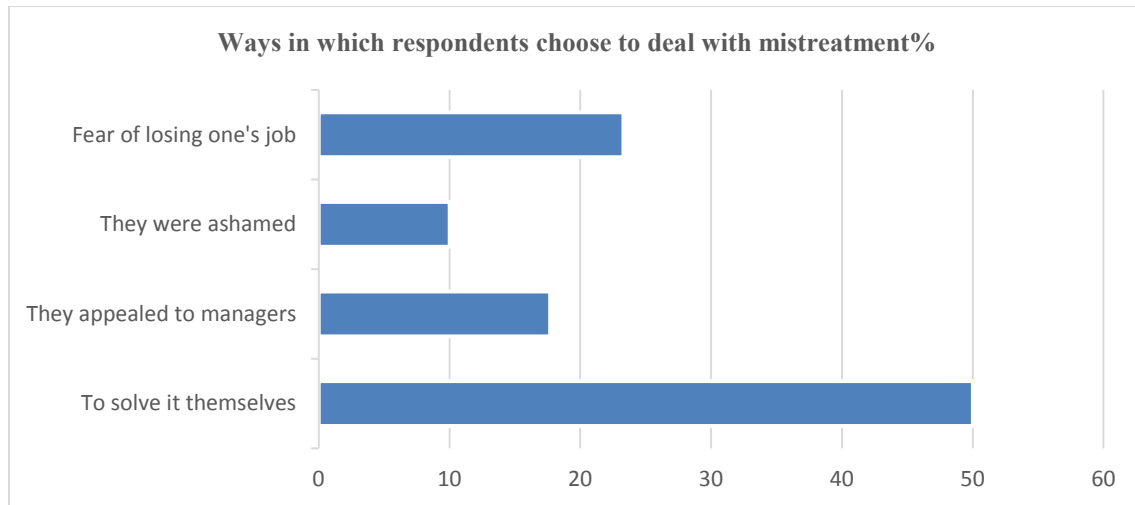


Figure 7. Ways in which respondents choose to deal with mistreatment

Source: Authors' own research.

Thus, a percentage of 54.7% of the respondents stated that they do not react to such discrimination, the reasons given were the fear of losing their job or because they were ashamed. This way of reacting is characteristic of coping by avoiding the problem.

An important aspect that the present study showed was the low trust that the respondents placed in public institutions. Only 1.3% of the respondents answered that they would turn to a public institution if they experienced some type of mistreatment at work.

Respondents who have not experienced this kind of behavior at work, consider that the actions they would take in relation to this kind of behavior would be: 28% of respondents would seek help from managers, 30.7% of them would try to manage on their own, 16% said they would quit their job, a percentage of 22.7% do not know what they would do in this situation, only 2.9% would turn to a public institution (Figure. 8):



Figure 8. How respondents who have not experienced mistreatment would react

Source: Authors' own research.

As in the case of many researchers, the data of the present study also show that, when subjected to some form of mistreatment at work, personnel tend to try to solve the problems they

are involved in on their own, and do not want to turn to outside entities. Low reactions of respondents who have experienced mistreatment react.

It is clear that the effect of mistreatment has quite far-reaching repercussions at the psychological level and acts as an engine of intimidation of personnel.

Coping methods

The data of the present study showed that, in terms of coping methods, the majority (85%) of the personnel surveyed opted for healthy coping methods such as hobbies (reading, hiking, etc.), playing a sport (cycling, jogging, combat sports, fishing/hunting, etc.), socializing, going out, dating, gardening, spending time with family.

A percentage of 38% of respondents said they also resort to harmful forms of relaxation such as cyberloafing, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or hallucinogenic substances. Of the harmful substances, cigarettes, and alcohol are the most consumed, with 47.4% of respondents consuming these substances. Among those who consume harmful substances, most of them consume them daily (40%), a percentage of 27.5% consume them only once a day and 12.5% consume them 2-4 times a week (Figure 9). Most respondents (54.4%), stated that they practice their hobbies or sports sessions about once a week, a percentage of 29.8% practice them 2-4 times a week and just 15.8% stated that they practice these hobbies daily (Figure 10):

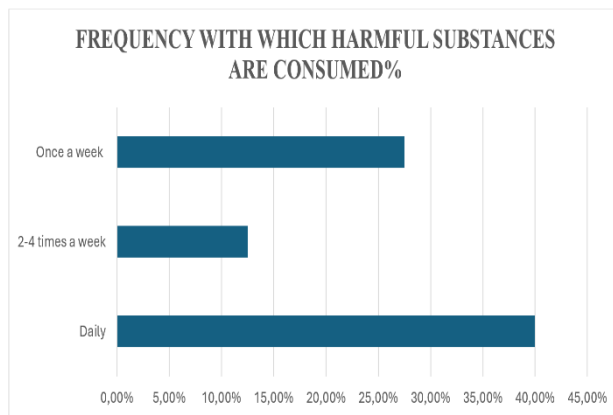


Figure 9. Frequency of substance use

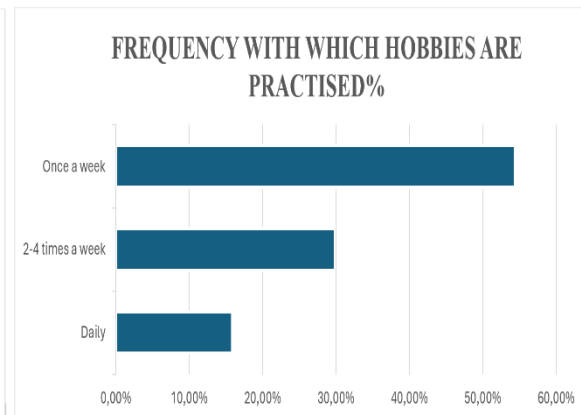


Figure 10. The frequency with which respondents practice certain hobbies

Source: Authors' own research.

The attitudes that vulnerable personnel adopt are generally to avoid the problems they face or to solve them on their own. Lack of trust in the authorities and the lack of involvement of the companies in which they work, particularly in these situations, tend to give a disempowering dimension to the discriminatory situations they face. Moreover, the ideologies propagated by the social culture and the culture of the organizational environment of the companies in which this vulnerable personnel carries out its activity, are entrenched in the way of life of the personnel in such a way that they tend to affect the enforcement of the law or internal procedures of the companies;

Table 1. Vulnerable categories with which the interviewed personnel identified themselves

49.4% - said they were not part of any vulnerable group
14.8% - said they were part of the group of elderly over 50 years of age
13.6% - said they were part of the group of mother and child
2.5% - people at risk of poverty
3.7% - people with disabilities
3.7% - pregnant women
1.2% - young personnel
1.2% - young workers in difficulty
1.2% - ethnic minorities
1.2% - migrant personnel

Source: Authors' own research.

As anticipated, the staff surveyed tend not to associate themselves with certain categories of vulnerable staff. As presented above, in (Table 1), shows the vulnerable categories with which the surveyed staff identified themselves.

Discussions

Effects of discrimination - Stress and its effects

As a result of stress experienced at work, personnel resort to different ways of coping with it.

Individuals have a limited amount of resources through which they can regulate their behavior through personal resources: attention, energy, etc. (Beal et al., 2005). Of the many negative effects of discrimination, the most important for a person, *per se*, is the occurrence of long-term stress and its effects can take a variety of forms. Dr. Hans Selye (cited in Beh L.- S. and Loo L.-H., 2012), a pioneer in stress research defined stress as "the body's non-specific response to any demand", study on stress, where he introduced the *General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model* which consists of resistance to mental fatigue According to the same authors, anxiety operates only in the emotional and psychological spheres, whereas stress operates in both and also in the physiological sphere.

Beh L.- S. and Loo L.-H., (2012) mentioned that stress can be accompanied by anxiety, but the two should not be evaluated in the same way. The same researchers mentioned that extreme levels of stress can affect workplace performance, and it will be beneficial for the company in which they work to manage the levels of stress because some amounts of stress tend to increase work productivity.

Psychological effects of stress

Studies of the effects of stress arising from the workplace have reported the following psychological effects: tension at work, personnel feeling upset about work-related problems, feeling unhappy and/or depressed, feeling depressed about their circumstances, and lost self-confidence (Bowen P., et al., 2014). Thus, many negative repercussions of discrimination at work are documented. Personnel report post-traumatic stress-like symptoms, thus, clearly, mistreatment is too harmful for personnel to ignore (Wood S. K., and Bhatnagar S., 2015).

The physiological effects of stress seem to indicate that stress interferes with the affected person's usual sleep habits or patterns, and unexplained symptoms of nausea or stomach upset and headaches also occur. In addition, those affected have reported having difficulty concentrating for an extended period, feeling frustrated or misunderstood in their communications with work

colleagues, and finding it difficult to relax after working hours (Bowen P., et al., 2014). We reiterate that stress is a normal part of everyday life and affects all living beings. Stress causes our performance to deteriorate, our normal bodily functioning to be disrupted, and our response, whether physiological, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral, to become maladaptive (Beh L.- S, and Loo L.-H., 2012).

Lagrosen, S., and Lagrosen, Y., (2022) stated that occupational ill health is a major social problem, and in correlation to increased sick leave may be a direct effect of a harmful workplace, and at the same time, the same author stated that the lack of sick leave may indicate a problem, especially in cases where vulnerable personnel tend to come to work sick.

Ito K. Celeste and Brotheridge M., (2003) specifically found that participation in decision-making, autonomy, and task complexity was positively correlated with problem-centered coping strategies (problem-solving, working harder, seeking advice and assistance), whereas task complexity and supervisory support were negatively correlated with emotion-centered coping strategies.

Noor et al. (2023) found in their studies that many of the employee experiences that consisted of violence and verbal abuse went unreported to the management since the personnel felt that it would be futile to take action. Often, personnel who lack job security tend to tolerate mistreatment more (Oris, et al., 2016). These reports are consistent with the results of the study, which showed that half of the respondents do not turn to other people or institutions.

Maggiori et al. (2013) mention that job insecurity affects the coping resources and well-being of the employee, they are vulnerable, with fewer personal resources to advance in their career or to cope and cope with professional challenges. The same researcher emphasizes that the analyses carried out that people subjected to stress related to job insecurity felt a negative impact on individual and professional well-being, and in terms of stress accumulated at work, it had a negative impact on job satisfaction or the health of the individual.

Regulating one's behavior (goal-focusing, concentrating attention) requires the use of such resources and therefore decreases the amount of resources a person has for subsequent job tasks, thus, when the personnel is distracted from their work tasks, they tend to have a much poorer quality of work (Walker et al., 2021).

In terms of identification with certain categories of vulnerable personnel, the results are based on analyzing the available information, even if some of the respondents belonged to these vulnerable categories, they do not want to declare themselves as vulnerable. This refusal to identify with vulnerable groups often derives from the fear of association with them because of the stigma that vulnerable groups have in society.

Conclusions

This paper aims to find out the coping methods that vulnerable personnel use to deal with these discriminatory situations as well as their response to these stressors. The coping methods they use are varied and are practiced at regular intervals, depending on the adaptability of each individual.

The investigated vulnerable personnel use healthy coping methods, such as hobbies, hiking, fishing/hunting, as well as unhealthy coping methods, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. Among the many coping methods that vulnerable personnel chose to resort to were psychological coping methods based on problem avoidance, and in the vast majority of them, while experiencing mistreatment or other unpleasant situations, they avoided discussing the problems they encountered.

The repercussions of these discriminatory practices harm the individual subjected to them, harm the company in which they work, harm the employee's family environment in that the employee feels stress, and prolonged stress can affect family relations, affect relations with their friends for the same reason, and, last but not least, negatively affect the society in which the employee lives, through lack of integration into society or through illness, affecting the public health system.

Furthermore, the poor response of vulnerable personnel to the assaults they encounter in the labor market should be taken into account, as this may be an indicator of a lack of trust in public authorities, the application of legislation designed to protect them, or a lack of confidence in the internal processes of the companies in which they work.

At the same time, we believe that this situation creates distrust in the team in which he/she works, in his/her colleagues, in the companies, and last but not least in the public authorities and institutions.

We would like to bring to attention the importance of adopting policies or procedures at the administrative level, aimed at improving the working environment by informing personnel about these situations, by appropriately amending the discriminatory situations that have arisen, and by creating a working environment that can benefit both the company and the personnel.

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