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Stress Among Priest and Religious: A Cognitive Understanding

I. Joe Sanjay

Abstract:

Priests and religious go through stress unique to their profession. This study examined the stress factor among the priests and religious in India. It is a qualitative analysis which analyses the cognitive element involved in the various stress factors. Additionally the stress level of priests and religious were measured using the Perceived Stress Scale of Sheldon Cohen. Six (6) priests and religious were interviewed and twelve (12) priests and religious responded to the perceived stress scale and the qualitative questionnaire. The study had found out the stressors pertaining to priests and religious can be handled by altering the cognitive element. This study will be helpful to the congregations and dioceses to evolve programmes pertaining to stress management both for those under formation and ongoing formation

Stress is a common experience that everyone goes through. But some roles which people play have specific sources and levels of stress. The phenomenon of burnout occurs most often in the helping professions such as teachers, police officers, doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, and clergy. The role of a priest has unusual stressors because his role is usually unbounded and sometimes ill-defined. Moreover the role of the priest today has expanded beyond spiritual teacher and counsellor to include administrator of services and supervisor of lay staff (Zickar, Balzer, Aziz, & Wryobeck, 2008). A priest is expected to be available at any time, seven days a week, so he cannot clearly demarcate work time from leisure, work space from private space.

The concept of stress is complex and multifaceted. Stress is a specific response the body makes to all non specific demands (Patel, 1991). It is an arousal reaction to some stimulus, event object or person. This reaction is characterized by heightened arousal of physiological and psychological processes (Girdano, Everly, & Dusek, 1990). Sutherland and Cooper define stress as a physical or psychological stimuli which, when impinging upon an individual produces strain of disequilibrium (Irvine, 1997). Both the environment and the individual's internal state play a vital role in creating stress. A certain environmental condition may be stressful for one but not for the other. All investigators agree that stress is dynamic, rising and falling over time depending on experiences and conditions. Another recurrent research finding is that individuals can learn to cope with stressors through training and experience. Thus older and more experienced persons on average are able to manage their stress levels better (Raj, & Dean, 2005).

The individual's judgment of the existence of a stressful situation is important in initiating a stress response. Without this appraisal there is no stress in the person's psychological schema. Even though the situation appears as threatening if the individual feels that he could cope up adequately he may not feel stressed. Thus the individual's perception plays a vital role in the individual's stress appraisal. In general the balance resulting from the interaction of these four components- external demands, internal needs and values, personal coping resources and

external resources or support- determines whether a particular situation will be stressful or not. When the situation is perceived to be frustrating it will engender a comprehensive physiological response which has mental, emotional, physical and behavioural components. When the demand perceived exceeds the resources we think we have, the body and mind are aroused and all systems are geared up either to fight the challenge or flee from that situation (Patel, 1991).

When there is too little stress there is insufficient challenge to achieve a sense of personal accomplishment. If skills are underutilized it leads to boredom. There is a lack of purpose or meaning in life. When there is optimum stress, life is balanced and despite ups and downs, perfectly manageable. Job satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment enable the person to cruise through daily work without much difficulty and to be pleasantly tired at the end of the day. But where there is too much stress, there is a constant feeling of having too much to do every day. Despite emotional and physical exhaustion the person is unable to take time off to rest and play. He experiences permanent overtiredness but not achieving results as expected. If the person continues his efforts he may develop chronic neurotic tendencies or one of several psychosomatic illnesses. Excess stress may show up in excessive drinking or smoking or reliance on tranquilizers. He may encounter tension at work place and may also cause relationship problem. If the individual continues his efforts despite exhaustion, he is likely to have a mental or physical breakdown (Patel, 1991).

Stress is much related to the individual's schema. Schema is the knowledge structure one uses for understanding. This schema involves default assumptions and embedded abstractions (Medin, Ross, & Markman, 2005). Very often the ill-conceived schemas regarding the demands of the environment give way to excess stress. Thoughts refer to all complex interactions and transformations performed on the information taken in from the environment. Thought requires a store of information on the self, the environment, and the interaction between the two. Thought process can be found in both the conscious awareness mode and the non conscious awareness

mode. To avoid thought overload, mind reverts back to habitual responses rather than thinking logically. We adopt “thinking shortcuts” when we respond to stressful situations (Girdano, Everly, & Dusek, 1990).

Beliefs are enduring thought patterns. Most beliefs are learned earlier in life from parents, relatives, peers and authority figures. Belief is a solid idea that governs our day-to-day thoughts and actions. Once incorporated beliefs are forgotten but they continue to operate. We develop a strong belief system about ourselves, the environment and the resources available. These thoughts and belief system act as guidance system for the flow of life. When there is a conflict, the flow is distorted and this distortion may lead to acute and chronic tension (Girdano, Everly, & Dusek, 1990). These thoughts and beliefs play a vital role in the cognitive perception of self and the environment around. The cognitive process is identified in two locations. First, in the form of expectation regarding the environmental demands; and second, in the form of appraisals that accompany the demands (Kendall, & Hollon, 1979). If one could effectively handle and channelize one’s thoughts and belief systems, one can reduce the level of stress in one’s life. There are several models proposed for handling stress. One of the contemporary models which are popular is the McGrath’s process model. This model is chosen because of the cognitive element involved in the model. This model has four stages. In the first stage the situation is perceived via cognitive appraisal process. When the situation is appraised the individual makes decisions about how they will respond to the stressor. When the decision is made, the individual then engages in some form of overt behaviour as a response to the stressful situation (Jex, 2002).

There were many studies conducted on stress among clergymen by different researchers at different occasions. The survey by Mills and Koval (1971) on Catholic priests and protestant clergymen suggested a few factors that cause clergy stress. This is due to lack of leadership from those in authority, disappointment with church’s stand on certain moral and social issues, the slow pace of change after Vatican II, loneliness and lack of support and encouragement from

fellow priests. They also found that young clergy are more stressed than the older clergy. Kennedy and Heckler (1972) and National Opinion Research Centre(1972) conducted a research on catholic priests, and the stressors they propose are- the way authority is exercised in the church, difficulty of really reaching people today, loneliness of priestly life, relationships with superiors and pastors, and the vow of Celibacy. Hall and Schneider (1973) found young priests are more stressed because of their unchallenging jobs with too little autonomy and excessive authority of pastors. The study in 1982 focused on occupational factors suggested that priest's lack of participation in decisions, perceived lack of organizational social support, ambiguity about job of priests, and excess work overload creates organizational stress. (Hoge, & Shields, J. J., 1993) These stressors appear to be globally common.

The physical effects of stress that are commonly found among priests and religious are headaches, stomach problems, muscle aches and pains, chronic mild illnesses, ulcer and constipation. A survey by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reported 69% of its ministers as being overweight, 64% as having high blood pressure, and 13% as taking prescription antidepressants. The psychological effects of stress on priests and religious are forgetfulness, unhappiness, anger, frustration, anxiety disorders, irritability, depression and feeling powerless. Various psychosomatic diseases such asthma, eczema, heart disease hives, hypertension, migraine and tension headaches, skin disorders and ulcers have a genetic and physiological etiology but often stress is an aggravating factor. The common behavioural response of stress are increased aggression, giving up, withdrawal, addiction to alcohol or cigarettes, frequent use of sleeping pills, impaired task performance, problems with workers and parishioners, over and under eating, sleep disturbances overworking, becoming unduly concerned about possessions, withdrawing from fellow priests and people and exhibiting negative and cynical attitude towards life ('Stress and Burnout Endanger Clergy Health', 2011).

The research described above addressed mostly the catholic priests and the clergy in the United States. This research is about stress among Indian priests and religious. This research was conducted with the hypothesis that the individual's ill conceived perception and understanding of the environment leads one to stress.

Method

Participants

Six individuals were interviewed and among them two were religious priests, two secular priests and two religious brothers from India. And questionnaire was administered to 12 (four secular priests, four religious priests and four religious). Of those who were interviewed all the four priests are parish priests (2 assistants) and the two religious were holding the office of procurator. Among those to whom questionnaire was administered, all the four secular priests are parish priests, among the four religious priests three are parish priests and one is a rector in seminary. Among the religious brothers, two are procurators and two are administrators. The secular parish priests belong to the Diocese of Kumbakonam, India and the religious priests and brothers belong to the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor, India.

Research Design

Mixed methods research was employed in this research. Case study method was employed to qualitatively understand the variables related to stress and survey questionnaire was used to quantitatively measure the level of stress.

Measures

Items were chosen based on the interview and literary sources, and qualitative questionnaire was formed. This questionnaire along with the Perceived Stress Scale of Sheldon Cohen was circulated among twelve persons (4 religious priest, 4 secular priests and 4 religious brothers in India) through e-mail and results were obtained. The qualitative questionnaire is a 10

item questionnaire of which 2 items pertain to the role, 3 items pertaining to vows, the other items are about self esteem, loneliness, prayer life, community life and idealism. Perceived Stress Scale of Sheldon Cohen is composed of 10 items which is answered through a five-point Likert scale that measures the individual's perceived stress level. According to the perceived stress scale of Sheldon Cohen, the scores ranging from 0-13 would be considered low stress, scores ranging from 14-26 would be considered moderate stress and scores ranging from 27-40 would be considered high perceived stress.

Procedure

The research was conducted in two levels. One is through personal interview and the other through questionnaire circulation. The interview was conducted through Skype and the questionnaire was circulated through email and the results were obtained.

Results

This research is about stress among Indian priests and religious. This research was conducted with the hypothesis that the individual's ill conceived perception and understanding of the environment leads one to stress. Among the 4 secular priests 3 have moderate stress level (24, 26, 26) and 1 has a low stress level (13). Among the religious priests 3 priests have moderate stress level (20, 20, 21) and 1 has low stress level (11). Among the religious brothers all have a moderate stress level (17, 19, 21, 26).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variable.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Upset	2.0000	.73855	12
Lack control	1.8333	.57735	12
Nervous	2.0000	.85280	12
Confident	2.0833	.66856	12
Going your way	2.0000	.73855	12
Cope up	1.9167	.66856	12

Irritation	2.2500	.86603	12
Top of things	1.7500	.75378	12
Anger	2.4167	.51493	12
Difficulty level	2.0833	.66856	12

Cronbach's Alpha was .877.

Role overload arises when the demands are more than what one could accomplish and role monotony arises when there is a constant demand for repetition (Jex, 2002). Indian priests complain excess work overload and monotony. As a priest the job of the ministering person is never finished; the priest cannot always tell if his work is having any results; the work of ministry is repetitive; the minister is constantly confronted with people's expectations about priests; and the ministering person must serve the same people year in and year out. In the Indian context, a priest is expected to play multiple roles. He is the pastor of the church, correspondent of the school, supervisor of the church paddy field, part-time counselors and sometimes secretary at the office. Apart from this they have to celebrate the regular mass and the sacraments and be available to schools for retreats and camps. Sometimes it sounds unreasonable and impractical. This role overload, monotony and ambiguity create excess stress.

Perceived control is manifested through job autonomy. In India, there are parishes where the parish council has the last word and not the priest. There were occasions where the priest who is the president of the parish council is instructed by the members regarding decisions. In case the priest refuses to co-operate, the parishioners do not hesitate to complain to the bishop accusing the priest with false charges that are normally associated with money or women. Whether the priest succumbs to such threats or not, he feels a sense of low control of the situation and that generates stress.

A priest or a religious is called to be faithful and obedient to their bishops and superiors. Ideological and personal clashes with the authorities which results in non-allocation of funds for developmental activities, reduction of subsidy, undue transfer and even removal from posts. The

young priest who serve as assistants to parish priest feel tensed because they are offered minimal autonomy in execution of ministries and constant clashes with the authority. This misunderstanding with the authority creates a sense of restlessness and frustration.

Emotional labor refers to the need for the suppression of one's true emotional state and to appear good and presentable while dealing with people (Jex, 2002). Emotional Labor is another prominent stressor among priests and religious. Priests and religious are expected to be kind, gentle and pleasant, and not expected to get angry or irritated. The priest is expected to put on this mask of 'gentleness' throughout the day no matter what emotional issue he goes through. This emotional labor results in restlessness and anxiety.

Another important stressor unique for priests is loneliness and meaninglessness of life. As the priest grows old in his priesthood he experiences loneliness and a vague feeling of disenchantment. Gradually, he becomes aware that there seems to be something missing in his life. He experiences a growing sense of loneliness and emptiness. His ministry no longer provides him with adequate satisfaction or meaning. In the Indian context there are many parishes in the provinces where the priest is secluded from the people. He naturally experiences loneliness and meaninglessness of life. In relationship with this issue, priests experience frustration in handling the vow of celibacy. There is a natural longing for companionship. Since they stay in the provinces there is no possibility of visiting other priests regularly. This loneliness and celibacy add up to their stress level.

Priests experience stress because of low self-esteem too. They feel inadequate and incompetent to perform their duties. This arises normally when people compare and comment on his performance with that of his predecessors or when priest themselves compare their performance with the other co-priests. Priests manifest this by withdrawing and removing themselves to a situation that they feel safer. When they begin to withdraw and assume a less

involved and more passive role, they often invite more criticism and harsh judgment. It results in greater frustration.

Idealism brings frustration too. People who are more likely to burnout are idealists, perfectionists, and compulsives. Most priests enter into their ministry with high ideals, enormous optimism, and a strong commitment to help people and they experience burnout as they strive to reach their ideals. The wish to be perfect in everything they do and this perfectionism is motivated by a fear of failure and a sense of duty. They strive to be first in all their endeavors and their accomplishments.

Discussion

Anything is not stressful unless it is perceived or appraised as stressful. Cognitive psychologists have developed techniques that replace negative cognitions with positive and empowering thoughts. Most of our stress factors could be handled if we develop the right cognition, acquisition of certain skills and systemic planning. Role overload is experienced by priests and religious because the external demands are more and internal coping resources is low. There is a common notion among priests and religious that they are solely responsible for functioning of the church or congregation when they accept a portfolio and hence they are prone to accept all ministries that are requested from them. Assessing one's limitation and availability they can accept and perform duties. They should try to change the schema 'I run the church or the convent' by schemas like 'I am a partaker of the ministry, I have my limitations, I need not accept all ministry, I need time for my personal self etc.'" It is the same with the case of emotional labor too. There should be a change in the schema "I have to be always gentle and kind." This can be replaced by "I am human, I can get angry or upset...it is ok...I need not be in the good books of others always...etc.'" Idealism or perfectionism brings in enormous amount of trouble. Not being able to do something perfectly can end up not doing it at all. One needs to become aware of this faulty thinking and accept one's limitations. Moreover one needs to replace

“I need to be perfect” by “Even if I fail I am not worthless. I will practice until I get it right” (Freeman, & Dewolf, 1989). One’s thoughts and belief system plays a vital role in the individual’s self esteem. It seems to be a part of human nature to forget all the good things once a single bad thing comes along. One forgets all the solid accomplishments one has achieved. It is due to the wrong understanding of one’s worth and abilities. This decreases one’s self esteem. One’s visual imagery has a great influence in one’s thinking and behavior. One needs to have a positive imagery of the self and the environment (Markham, 1992). Since low self -esteem arises due to the individual’s negative perception of themselves, priests and religious should be helped to focus in their strengths and build a healthy self esteem. The control and authority factor is related to the individual’s self esteem. If the individual has a low self concept then he would succumb to any threat and dominance. By building a healthy self concept he can be assertive, adapt values and principles, take stand and face consequences. By being assertive and prepared to face the consequences for the sake of value one hold enhances one’s self concept and reduces stress. Regarding loneliness and meaninglessness, one has to accept the fact that loneliness is part of the priesthood or religious life and meaninglessness in the long run is common to all helping ministry. This acceptance greatly reduces the stress involved. One must try to evolve support group of priests or religious or lay people who could offer encouragement and support when one is drained.

The other findings that were inferred from the analysis were that the secular priests suffer more stress than the religious priests. The level of stress among the secular priests was moderate but relatively high when compared with the stress level of religious priests. The secular priests attribute this stress to job overload, monotony and loneliness. Whereas the religious priests experience lower level of stress because the community shares their workload and apart from the pastoral work they have their own specialized ministry. Community prayer, meal and recreation together help them to handle stressful situations better. The secular priests themselves mentioned

that they experienced less stress when they lived with other priests. Among the religious, priests are stressed more when compared to the religious brothers. It may be because the brother religious have only their specific ministry and no pastoral commitment. Among the secular and religious priests, six (youngsters) have moderate level of stress and the rest two (seniors) have low stress. This confirms the idea that stress reduces as one grows old. The level of satisfaction in the ministry, commitment to the call, and faithfulness to prayer have a lot to do about the stress level, too. Those who have a sense of commitment and satisfaction experience less burnout and those who are serious about their spiritual duties like personal prayer and meditation seem to be experiencing less stress. Regarding vows the old priests appear to have fewer issues but the youngsters have difficulty regarding the vow of chastity and obedience. They seem to have problem in integrating their sexuality. They also have relatively more misunderstanding with authority. Most of the youngsters find a sense of contradiction between ideal priesthood / religious life and real priesthood / religious life. This reminds of the need for personal integration and acceptance.

They should learn conflict management techniques where they could effectively handle conflicting issues and personalities in their ministry. By careful and systematic execution one can easily reduce the level of stress. Any human being would become sick if he works too long at a high sustained pace. The possible strategy is to prioritize work and reduce the style of overtime work. If the priests are able distinguish between the urgent and important issues and activities couple with the art of task and time management they can certainly reduce the stress level. Emphasis should be given to the priest's personal time where he could take care of his own self. They lack basic self care. They should be taught how to create a space for themselves in spite of heavy work schedules. They should go for retreats, seminars, and spiritual workshops where they energize themselves. They need to take a break from their regular work schedule and opt some ministry that breaks the regular ministry routine. Emotional tension is part of the

current world scenario. Priests and religious learn to effectively handle emotions rather than becoming a prey to it. To cater to this purpose seminaries should not only give importance to academic formation but also emotional formation.

There are limitations to this study. It is a qualitative analysis which involves the responses of 18 individuals. The secular priests are from a particular region and the religious were from a particular congregation. Hence, the generalizability of the facts cannot be drawn from the study. The perceived stress scale is a western concept of stress perception. It may not be applicable to the Indian context where they have their own understanding of stress.

Since this study is a qualitative analysis, an extensive quantitative research would be of great help to the catholic clergy in India. If the study is focused on the young priests and their stress related issues, it would benefit the dioceses and congregations to incorporate the strategies and proposals in their formation program. Since the secular priests seem to experience stress, a detailed comparative study between religious and secular priests could be done to identify the predominant stressors. Another comparative study could be done between the religious priests and religious brothers, and their respective ministries.

Stress is beneficial. It is stress that brings the best out of the person. But it becomes harmful only when it crosses the optimal level. Priests and religious are prone to stress because of the style of work they do. It is my wish and desire that if they use their faculty of cognition they can approach the stress issue healthily and maintain physical, psychological and spiritual well being.

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Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling *how often* you felt or thought a certain way.

0 = Never 1 = Almost Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Fairly Often 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?..... 0 1 2 3 4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life? 0 1 2 3 4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”? ... 0 1 2 3 4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? 0 1 2 3 4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?..... 0 1 2 3 4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do? 0 1 2 3 4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?..... 0 1 2 3 4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things? 0 1 2 3 4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?..... 0 1 2 3 4
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? 0 1 2 3 4

Answer the questions in detail based on your experience as a priest/religious

1. Do you sense your role as a priest/ religious is insufficient or fulfilling or demanding? If yes why?; if no why?
2. Do you experience role clarity and autonomy in your ministry? If no what hinders role clarity and autonomy?

3. Do you struggle with the Vow of obedience and dealing with authority? Can u explain them?
4. Is vow of poverty relevant to you? Do you have any difficulty with it? Elucidate them...
5. Are you comfortable with your sexuality? Is celibacy troubling you? Why?
6. Do you experience low self esteem in your ministry? If yes, Which are the occasions that pave way for that?
7. Have you ever experienced loneliness and meaninglessness in life? When? What lead you to that?
8. How is your community and individual prayer life? Does it help in our ministry? How? How many minutes do you spend every day in prayer?
9. Does Community life help you to live your vocation? Why do you say so?
10. Were you disturbed seeing the disparity between the ideal priesthood/religious life and real priesthood/religious life? Are you troubled by that? Why? Why not?

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
	.877	10

Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	35.00	1	8.3	8.3	8.3
	38.00	1	8.3	8.3	16.7
	39.00	1	8.3	8.3	25.0
	40.00	2	16.7	16.7	41.7
	42.00	1	8.3	8.3	50.0
	45.00	1	8.3	8.3	58.3
	46.00	1	8.3	8.3	66.7
	52.00	1	8.3	8.3	75.0
	54.00	1	8.3	8.3	83.3
	68.00	1	8.3	8.3	91.7
	71.00	1	8.3	8.3	100.0
Total		12	100.0	100.0	