The investigation of Relation between Occupational Stress and Career Plateau

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Abstract
Career plateau to many employees, is like a shock and it has a direct negative effect on job satisfaction, motivation and performance; so, it is needed to identify the factors which might to lead to career plateau. Occupational stress is one that is the perception of a discrepancy between environmental demands and individual capacities to fulfill these demands. The aim of this research is investigation of relation between occupational stress and career plateau in Azad university of Kerman branch, Iran. The results show that there is a significant and direct relationship between occupational stress and all career plateau variables. The conclusion shows despite the many negative consequences associated with plateaus, the findings exist regarding stress as a factor to plateauing.

Keywords: Stress, Occupational Stress, Career Plateau, Hierarchical Plateau, Job Content Plateau

Introduction
Career plateau is not a new phenomenon; however, the issue of concern is the rate at which it is becoming widespread in many organizations (Ongori&Agolla, 2009). Research on career plateau has taken place for about three decades. The pioneers in career plateau are Ference, Stoner and Warren (1977) who define career plateau as ‘the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical and horizontal promotion is low’. It is later realized that this traditional definition of career plateau is too narrow due to the fact that it is far from unanimous agreement on the negative impact of career plateau (Tremblay et al. 1995).

As organizational structures become more horizontal, recently career advancement in terms of vertical promotion has become competitive and difficult (Jung & Talk, 2008). Also, career plateau has the potential to cause discomfort among the employees because lack of continued upward progression is considered as a yardstick to measure employee’s performance. Thus career plateau leads to poor performance (Lee, 2003), and it is needed to identify the factors which might to lead to career plateau. There are various factors, but occupational stress is one that had little research about it.

Occupational stress has become one of the most serious health issues in the modern world (Lu, et al. 2003). Steers (1981) indicate that occupational stress has become an important topic for study of organizational behavior for several reasons:

1. Stress has harmful psychological and physiological effects on employees,
2. Stress is a major cause of employee turnover and absenteeism,
3. Stress experienced by one employee can affect the safety of other employees,
4. By controlling dysfunctional stress, individual and organization can be managed more effectively (Jayashree, 2010).
When the occupational stress occurs, it will directly affect the performance of worker and managers to the organization. Mostly, the occupational stress comes from the job that they are doing. Many people not aware of occupational stress that occur in the organization and they did not care about the occupational stress. They assume that the occupational stress will only affect their performance of work but also affect their health like heart attack, migraine that can lead to death. If people not were aware about job stress, it will become worst such as suicide (Yahaya, 2010).

The current study is an example of a growing awareness that occupational stress and career plateau is multidimensional and multifaceted. Therefore, we will try to familiar them; then we will survey effect of occupational stress on career plateau.

**Career Plateau**

Starting in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, researchers started identifying and defining a new construct, termed career plateau, in the organizational behavior literature (Veiga, 1981). Career plateau is defined in several ways. In terms of conceptualization, previous research defined career plateau in terms of job tenure, using arbitrarily defined cut-off points. This is consistent with the duality of career, internal and external career. However, career experience could also be interpreted from the perspective of the employees, which is termed the subjective or internal dimension (Hall and Lawrence, 1989). Near (1980) represents plateauism in terms of the length of time in a job position.

Career plateau to many employees, is like a shock and it has a direct negative effect on job satisfaction, motivation and performance (Yamamoto, 2006). Also, career plateau is defined as the point in one’s career at which the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low or impossible (Ongori & Angolla, 2009). Ference et al. (1977) defined career plateau as the point where the employee’s likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion becomes very unlikely. This definition gave a narrow view of career advancement since only movement up the organizational structure was considered career success. Harvey and Schultz (1987) define plateauing as the career point at which an employee is unlikely to receive a promotion, unless he or she changes organizations. Feldman and Weitz (1988) address a career plateau in terms of the likelihood of receiving assignments of increased responsibility.

Beside above, the main cause of career plateau in organizations is due to business re-engineering, downsizing and spin-off-activities which make further advancement within organization becomes more unlikely and employees have to face the fact that they have to serve in the same position longer than expected (Burke and Mikkelsen, 2006).

There are many types of career plateaus experienced by employees in organizations. Bardwick (1986) identified two types of career plateauing: (a) structural (hierarchical) plateauing and (b) content (job content) plateauing. Hierarchical plateauing results when there is little chance of further vertical movement within an organization whereas job content plateauing occurs when individuals are no longer challenged by their job or job responsibilities, and there is overall staleness of the job itself.

So, Burke and Mikkelsen (2006) distinguished 3 types of career plateauing; structural, content and life plateaus. The structural plateauing results from the end of promotions due to pyramidal structure of organizations while content plateauing results when individuals know their jobs too
Many studies proposed that career plateau and professional plateau are related to three work outcomes: career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. But, it has not always unfavorable. Sometimes, career plateau is a chance to change:

- Career plateaus give you time to learn: Sometimes to make it to the next great position, you need additional training. Career plateaus are great for that time in your life. Knowing your job inside and out means you have extra energy and mental space, which you can easily put towards online and weekend classes that will help you get the knowledge you need to take your career to the next level.

- Career plateaus give you time to develop your business: If you’ve always dreamed of owning your own business or starting a side venture, but you don’t have a million-dollar nest egg to help you do so, a career plateau can be your new best friend. It gives you the stability of a regular paycheck and health insurance, and also the mental freedom to start cultivating your hobby, freelance career, or budding business on the side (Rozny, 2012).

**Occupational stress**

The concept of stress, introduced by Hans Selye (1976), has had many connotations, and occupational stress research can be seen as a natural extension of this classical concept to a specific form of human activity, namely work (Appley & Trumbull, 1986). Cooper and Marshall’s five sources of stress, with examples of the components of these sources given for each, are:

1. Intrinsic to the job, including factors such as poor physical working conditions, work overload or time pressures;
2. Role in the organization, including role ambiguity and role conflict;
3. Career development, including lack of job security and under/over promotion;
4. Relationships at work, including poor relationships with your boss or colleagues, an extreme component of which is bullying in the workplace; and
5. Organizational structure and climate, including little involvement in decision-making and office politics (Beheshtifar, et al. 2011).

Occupational stress is an increasingly important occupational health problem. However it may also cause subtle manifestation of morbidity that can affect personal well-being and productivity (Jayashree, 2010). Several studies have shown that occupational stress can lead to various negative consequences for the individual and the workplace (Oginska-Bulik, 2006).

In terms of the concept of occupational stress, there exist many definitions (Sun, 2007). Occupational stress is also defined as the perception of a discrepancy between environmental demands (stressors) and individual capacities to fulfill these demands (Topper, 2007). Occupational stressors are aspects of the work environment that cause strains, poor psychological health or well-being of the individual (Beehr, 1995).

With regard to occupational stress theory, Karasek (1979) advocated JDC (Job Demands-Control/Decision Latitude) Model, which involved two features in work context, i.e. job demand and job control. Job demand is usually defined as psychological stressor, such as short work time, more and difficult task. Also, Job control (or job decision latitude) includes two dimensions: skill discretion and decision authority. Cooper, Sloan and Williams (1988) further
demonstrated OSI (occupational Stress Indicator) Model. Afterwards, researchers added Social Support dimension into JDC Model, and put forward JDCS (Job Demand-Control-Support) Model (Isabel, et al. 2001).

Also, Cartwright and Cooper (2002) developed a model which includes occupational stressors, strain (ill-health) and organizational commitment. Seven occupational stressors are distinguished, namely, work relationships (i.e. poor or unsupportive relationships with colleagues and/or superiors, isolation and unfair treatment), work-life imbalance (i.e. when work interferes with the personal and home life of individuals), overload (i.e. unmanageable workloads and time pressures), job security (i.e. fear of job loss or obsolescence), control (i.e. lack of influence in the way work is organized and performed), resources and communication (i.e. having the appropriate training, equipment and resources), pay and benefits (i.e. the financial rewards that work brings) and aspects of the job (i.e. sources of stress related to the fundamental nature of the job itself) are sources of stress. Commitment (including the individual's commitment to the organization and the organization's commitment to the individual) refers to an effect of stress. Poor health is an outcome of stress, which can be used to ascertain if workplace pressures have positive and motivating or negative and damaging effects. However, poor health may not necessarily be indicative of workplace stress. Individuals may, for example, be unwell because they choose not to lead a healthy lifestyle or may be unaware of how to do so (Jackson & Rothmann, 2006).

Meanwhile, Burke (1988 in Lu et al., 2003) grouped job stressors into the following six categories: physical environment, role stressors, organizational structure and job characteristics, relationships with others, career development, and work-family conflict, while Copper et al. (1988 in Lu et al., 2003) identified six sources of stress at work: factors intrinsic to the job, management role, relationship with others, career and achievement, organizational structure and climate, and home/work interface.

**Conceptual framework**

The occupational stressors the dependent variable consists on (a) role ambiguity, (b) role insufficiency, (c) role overload, (d) role boundary, and (e) physical environment. Career plateau as the independent variable consists on hierarchical plateauing and job content plateauing. The conceptual framework of research is depicted in Figure 1.

One of the basic premises the role theory is that various occupational roles that individuals engage in may be stressful regardless of their actual occupation, suggesting that stress found in various work roles may be stressful for all workers. Osipow and Spokane (1987) described six work roles that they felt were stressful regardless of an individual’s actual vocational choice. These six roles were also utilized in the revised version of the OSI and include: (a) role ambiguity, (b) role insufficiency, (c) role overload, (d) role boundary, (e) responsibility, and (e) physical environment (Layne, 2001), that the responsibility dimension is omitted.

- **Role Overload:** Role Overload “measures the extent to which job demands exceed resources (personal and workplace) and the extent to which the individual is able to accomplish workloads” (Osipow, 1998, p. 2).
- **Role Insufficiency:** Role Insufficiency “measures the extent to which the individual’s training, education, skills, and experience are appropriate to job requirements” (Osipow, 1998, p. 2).
• Role Ambiguity: Role Ambiguity “measures the extent to which priorities, expectations, and evaluation criteria are clear to the individual” (Osipow, 1998, p. 2).

• Role Boundary: Role Boundary (RB) “measures the extent to which the individual is experiencing conflicting role demands and loyalties in the work setting” (Osipow, 1998, p. 2).

• Physical Environment: Physical Environment (PE) “measures the extent to which the individual is exposed to high levels of environmental toxins or extreme physical conditions” (Osipow, 1998, p. 2).

Bardwick (1986) identified two types of career plateauing: (a) structural (hierarchical) plateauing and (b) content (job content) plateauing. Structural plateau, because of organizational dynamics and the inability of the individual to influence on it, may be the most challenging form of plateau to resolve. Bardwick (1986) suggests that the solution is to redefine success. Content plateau is defined as an event which occurs when individuals know their jobs too well, there is nothing new to learn and, as it no longer offers a challenge, they consequently become bored (Bardwick, 1986). It results from the content of the job itself rather than an inability to move upward in the organization. If an individual’s job remains constant over time offering little opportunity for the learning of new skills the potential for content plateau is high (Cable, 1999).

Within the structural/content framework, Joseph (1996) proposes a further analysis acknowledging the attitude of the individual. Much of the subject literature views career plateau as something happening to the individual. Also likely to occur is the situation in which career plateau is something that is initiated by the individual. Joseph suggests that voluntary career plateau occurs when the individual makes a personal choice to plateau for any of a variety of reasons including family and the desire to avoid stress or responsibility. An individual’s life balance orientation may therefore be such that a career plateau is acceptable and desired because it allows, for example through increased availability of time, that individual to pursue other non-work interests without the pressure or stress of having to perform at ever-increasing levels in an organization (Cable, 1999).

According to theoretical framework, the model (figure 1) and research hypothesis design as following:

1. There is a significant relationship between employees’ occupational stress and career plateau
2. There is a significant relationship between employees’ occupational stress and hierarchical plateau
3. There is a significant relationship between employees’ occupational stress and job content plateau
Method
This study is used descriptive method with sort of correlation in 2012. The statistical population of this research consists of all employees of Azad university of Kerman Branch. According to Cochrane formula (N: statistical population 364; Z: 1.96; d: estimate error 0.06) were selected about 154 employees as samples in simple random.

To collect data, it was used 2 questionnaires: occupational stress questionnaire (consist of 5 dimensions: role ambiguity, role insufficiency, role overload, role boundary, and physical environment; and career plateau questionnaire (consist of 2 dimensions: hierarchical plateau and job content plateau). Any question consists of 5 choice (5=completely agree, 4= agree, 3= don’t agree, 2= disagree, 1=completely disagree). Scoring the questionnaires is computed in Table 1. The questionnaires’ validity was evaluated 0.99 and 0.98 and the questionnaires’ reliability was evaluated 0.89 and 0.81 by Cronbach Alpha Test, respectively. To analysis data, it was used Frequency Tables, Pearson and Spearman Correlation and Regression Analysis by SPSS Software.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choices of occupational Stress questionnaire</th>
<th>Very high</th>
<th>high</th>
<th>average</th>
<th>low</th>
<th>Very low</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Scoring</td>
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<td>Choices of career plateau questionnaire</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
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Results
Results of demographic variables show that 748.7% employees were males and 751.3% were females. Mean of employees’ age was about 40 years old and mean of seniority was 10-20. About 742.8% had diploma, 42.2% had bachelor degree, 713.0% had MA degree, and 71.9 had Ph.D. degree.

To evaluate relation between occupational stress and career plateau, Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficient obtained 0.448 and 0.305 that showed a significant and direct relation. Also, to evaluate relationship between occupational stress and dimensions of career plateau (hierarchical plateau and job content plateau), Pearson and spearman correlation coefficient
obtained 0.391, 0.042 and 0.353 for hierarchical plateau and 0.404 and 0.263 for job content plateau, respectively. These results exhibit in table 2 in which show the significant and direct relationship between variables.

<table>
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<th>Career plateau And its dimensions</th>
<th>Pearson correlation</th>
<th>Spearman correlation</th>
<th>P-value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career plateau</td>
<td>0.448</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hierarchical plateau</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.353</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job content plateau</td>
<td>0.404</td>
<td>0.263</td>
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Results of Regression test show that two variables of role insufficiency and role boundary have more effect on career plateau.

**Discussion**
Results of this study indicate that there is a significant relation between occupational stress and career plateau. The negative effects of occupational stress include impaired performance or a reduction in productivity, diminishing levels of customer service, absenteeism, turnover, accidents, alcohol and drug use and purposefully destructive behaviors (Quick, et al. 1997), such as career plateau. Various studies have showed that workers suffering from stress exhibit decreased higher number accidents, lower morale and greater interpersonal conflict with colleagues and superiors (Cranwell and Alyssa, 2005).
Occupational stress, in particular, is the inability to cope with the pressures in a job, because of a poor fit between someone’s abilities and his/her work requirements and conditions (Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005). Data collected from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that employees who are highly stressed or anxious tend to take more time off (Cosio, et al. 2011). A study shows that stress levels appear to dip after the initial adjustment to teaching, but after five years of teaching in the school stress levels tend to increase and more or less plateau thereafter (Darmody & Smyth, 1993).

An occupational stress is a condition where the employees especially will feel undesirable and being threat. According to Marisa (2008), some people use the term stress to refer to a bad boss or unpleasant situation that they were exposed to. Sometimes, they will become unsafe in their work in the organization because of the condition (Yahaya, 2010). So, occupational stress should not only be considered as a problem of the individual, but as a serious consideration in organization. And it is caused to career plateau.
Despite the many negative consequences associated with plateaus (McCleese et al., 2007), findings exist regarding stress as a factor to plateauing. Hurst and Eby (2010) argue that
individuals’ experiences of stress as a result of plateauing may depend on their appraisals of the situation. Therefore, it is expected to being control role ambiguity, role insufficiency, role overload, role boundary, and to creating a proper physical environment as dimensions of occupational stress causes to decrease career plateau.

Results of this study indicate that there is a significant relation between occupational stress with hierarchical and job content plateau. It is now generally accepted that prolonged or intense stress can have a negative impact on the individual (Cooper, et al. 2001). When the occupational stress is promoted (Layne, 2001), hierarchical plateau may occur and there is little chance to individuals for further vertical movement within an organization; and job content plateau may occur and individuals are no longer challenged by their job or job responsibilities, and there is overall staleness of the job itself.

Allen, Poteet & Russell (1998) found that hierarchical plateaus were linked to higher stress among employees but job content plateaus were not, whereas McCleese (2007) found that both types of plateaus were reported as stressful. Therefore, occupational stress causes to create hierarchical plateau in ways of limited promotion, less tendency to move up, and no chance to develop and growth among plateaued employees. Also, it occupational stress leads to create job content plateau in ways of unchallengeable job, less opportunity to learning, routine duties, limited responsibilities, loss of high skills to perform duties among plateaued employees.

**Conclusion**

Many scholars on organizational careers’ have suggested that plateau is fast becoming a critical managerial and organizational issue which needs to be managed properly to avoid employee’s discontent (Tremblay and Roger, 2004). Career plateau has been used as antecedent to many undesirable work outcomes such as low satisfaction, high stress, poor performance, withdrawal symptoms, low organizational commitment and increased turnover intention (Heilmann, Holt & Rilovick, 2008). To avoid these outcomes, it is needed to decrease stress and occupational stress within organizations.

Work related stress is a feature which most individuals suffer at times and to different extents (Kumar & Pragadeeswaran, 2011). Occupational stress has been of great concern to the management, employees, and other stakeholders of organizations. Occupational stress researchers agree that stress is a serious problem (Ornelas & Kleiner 2003). Hence, the management must take several initiatives in helping their employees to overcome its disastrous effect.

There are some suggestions to managers: avoiding hierarchical, job-content plateau by transforming or enriching jobs is a key which can prevents plateaued employees from becoming dissatisfied and demotivated; take adequate steps to redesign jobs, which are taxing to employees’ abilities and capacities; undertake stress audit at all levels in the organization to identify stress area improving conditions of job and alleviating job stress.

Finally, there is need to conduct further research which will give a holistic view on the true nature, complex sources and effects of occupational stress on career plateau. This research will motivate managers to develop appropriate coping mechanisms to manage stress and career plateau.
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References


