

Grit and Sense of Duty: Understanding the Lives of Indian Civil Servants During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Despite the challenging times faced by the country during the Covid pandemic, there were some sections that were continuously pushing forward to keep the country running and one of them were the officers of the Indian Civil Services. This study seeks to understand, qualitatively and quantitatively, stress and other related variables such as age, changes in life, physical presence, etc. affecting the participants. To quantify the stress levels, an adapted version of the Perceived Stress Scale by Cohen et al. (1983) known as PSS-10-c, and for the qualitative portion, certain short and long questions were administered. Variables of age and physical presence proved to be significant beyond 0.01 and 0.10 levels, respectively. The statistical difference reflects that the stress levels are significantly higher for those who are 49 years or older and for officers who were physically present for their duty more than 5 days a week. Results clearly depicted how these individuals showed a sense of duty and resilience which led to lower levels of stress during a pandemic period.

Keywords: COVID-19, Indian Civil Servants, stress, sense of duty, motivation

Introduction

The world was plagued by the novel coronavirus when the first few cases were identified in Wuhan, China on 31st December 2019. Since then, life as we know it has not been the same. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown manifested themselves in various forms for people across

the world. In India, the multiple lockdowns brought the lives of most people to a standstill. Although, this was not the case for certain sections of the workforce like the medical and non-medical essential workers, migrant labourers etc. The challenges faced by these sections have been well-documented and researched in the past year. However, a particular section of the workforce has largely been left out of the research front. Employees of the Indian Civil Services often termed as “civil servants” or “public servants” constitute this section. The study refrains from using the term “bureaucrat” to address civil servants due to the negative connotation associated with the word.

These employees make up a significant portion of the public sector workforce. Consisting of a multitude of job profiles, some civil servants were included under the title “frontline workers”. The Indian Ministry of Healthcare and Family Welfare define frontline workers as, “Personnel from State & Central Police organisations, Armed Forces, Home Guards, prison staff, disaster management volunteers, Civil Defence organisations, Municipal Workers and revenue officials engaged in surveillance and containment activities”. The title of being a ‘frontline’ worker does not come in isolation, with it comes social respect, recognition, respect, monetary allowances and opportunities like getting oneself vaccinated before the general population. Unfortunately, a large section of the Indian Civil Services were left out of this bracket, specifically those who were associated with administrative government duties at the state and centre levels. A majority of them were expected to be physically present at their workplaces through the deadly first and second pandemic waves. For a certain section of employees, this meant direct contact with patients or people potentially infected by the coronavirus, medical staff, multiple workspaces and the general public. For others, it meant months of extended working hours in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus while trying to keep up with the inadequacy of the medical infrastructure and dearth of essential requirements like oxygen. Needless to mention that all these individuals were still carrying out routine work on top of the added stressors. The pandemic put civil servants in a quandary about whether to protect themselves or perform their services and duties (Møller,2021).

The present study aims to understand the lived realities of civil servants working with the Government of India to manage people and work during the pandemic from a qualitative as well as quantitative perspective.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 19), “psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being”. The pandemic has been a stressful period with various stressors acting together, specifically in the lives of civil servants. According to a study by Ishak, Razak & Jamaludin (2021), “mental health issues are more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on public organizations and public servants more severe while rendering their social services”.

There are certain well-researched factors that add to the perceived stress levels. Gender, as a variable, has proved to be a contributor to stress, (Wiegner, Hange, Björkelund et al, 2015) females are said to be more vulnerable to perceived stress levels.

Additionally, individuals living with families have diverse stressors such as income, job security, young children and an overall sense of responsibility. Studies have proven parental or family-related stress has increased during the pandemic because of exposure and the loss of a routine, (Chung, Lanier and Wong, 2020). On the flip side, Calvano, Engelke, Di Bella et al. (2021) have pointed towards reduced stress levels because of quality time spent with family.

A very important factor considered in this study is age. Different studies assess the role of age in perceived stress differently, however, many studies establish a reduction in stress level with increasing age due to job security, financial independence and other incentives, (Bruine de Bruin, 2020 & Nelson and Bergeman, 2021). There were certain other studies that established an increase in stress with an increase in age due to rising cortisol levels (Lavretsky and Newhouse (2012) or disruption in daily routine (Mroczek and Almeida, 2004).

The current study aims to understand different factors that have contributed to how civil servants have functioned during a crucial pandemic period. It’s no secret that everyone’s life has changed but this study wishes to give officers their due credit to portray psychological resilience during tough times.

Material and Method

Objective

The objective of the present study is to understand the stress levels and motivational factors involved in making the Indian civil servants perform their duties fearlessly during the difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper also aims to study the levels of stress experienced by them and their association with age and the duration of exposure to the outside (high probability of Covid) environment.

Participants

Individuals who are employed by the Indian government i.e., are a part of the civil services of the Government of India were eligible to participate in the study. A total of 97 civil servants consented to be a part of the study and responded to the form. Out of the total 97 participants, 71 people identified as males and 26 as females. The sampling method used for the study is convenient purposive sampling. The age range of participants was 29-58 (mean age = 45.75).

Material

A modified version of the Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10-c) for the COVID-19 pandemic was used in the study. The original PSS developed by Cohen et al. (1983) had 14 self-reported items, which were reduced to 10 items in a shorter version developed later. The PSS-10-c has demonstrated high reliability and validity with a Cronbach alpha of .86 (Campo-Arias et al., 2020). A qualitative questionnaire formulated by the authors was also used to illustrate the workplace challenges faced by civil servants during the pandemic.

Data Collection

The PSS-10-c along with the qualitative questionnaire were administered via Google forms in the online mode.

Scoring

The PSS-10-c is a 5-point Likert scale with 10 items. Out of the 10 items, items 4, 5, 7 and 8 are reverse-scored. The norms depict that scores above 27 lie in the high perceived stress category.

Procedure

The study sought participants who were actively serving in the Indian civil services during the pandemic. The questionnaire was prepared and then circulated to as many contacts as possible through WhatsApp. All the respondents were approached through personal contacts who were a part of the Indian civil services. Data of the individuals who consented to participate in the study was collected through a secure Google form via quantitative and qualitative means. Post the collection of responses, data was analysed to find the factors that contributed to stress or reduced stress.

Data

A total of 97 individuals participated in the study, out of which 71 identified as males and 26 as females. The participants hailed from a multitude of cities across India ranging from cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata to Jaipur, Ambala, Hyderabad etc. The age of the participants ranged from 29 to 55 years of age with a peak of 47-51 years of age.

From the responses in the qualitative section, it was found that 52.58% of the participants (51 participants) physically went to their place of work for more than 5 days a week, whereas 43.30% of the participants (42 participants) physically went to their place of work for 3-5 days a week and only 4.12% of the participants (4 participants) went to their place of work for less than three days a week.

About 76.28% of participants (74 participants) worked for more than 6 hours a day, 18.56% (18 participants) worked for 5-6 hours each day and only 5.15% (5 participants) worked for 3-4 hours a day.

Results

Table 1

Distribution of Scores Based on PSS-10-c

S. no.	Stress category	Male	% of Males	Female	% of Females	Total	% of total
1.	Low Stress (<13)	20	28.2	13	50	33	34
2.	Moderate Stress (14-26)	46	64.8	12	46.2	58	59.8
3.	High Stress (>27)	5	7	1	3.8	6	6.2
Total		71		26		97	

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation, ANOVA calculated

S. No.	Physical Presence per week	Number of Participants	Mean	SD	F-value
1	0-2 day	4	23	4.7609	p<0.10
2	3-5 days	42	16.214	7.236	
3	More than 5 days	51	15.019	6.516	
Total		97			

Note. Table value of F at 0.10 (2,94) is 2.360

Calculated value is greater than F value, therefore F is significant

The results depict a significant difference between the three different groups that were physically present in the office in different frequencies.

Table 3

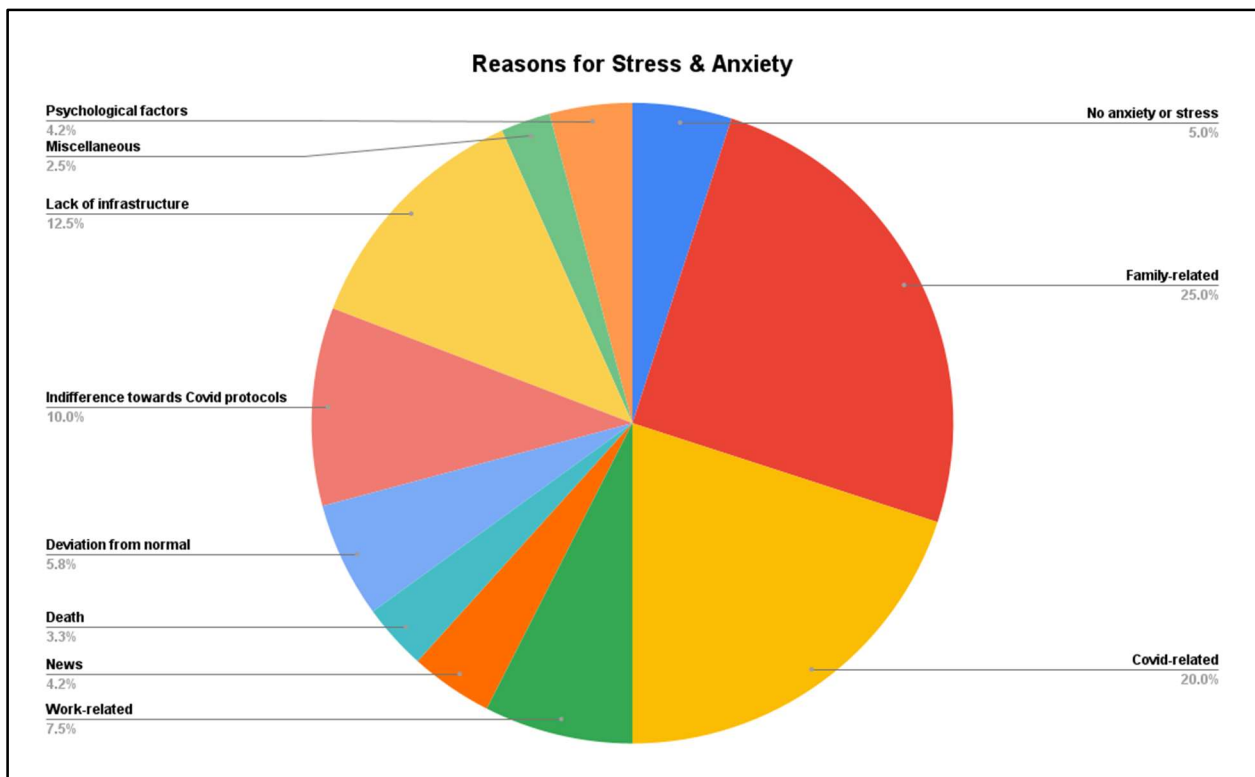
Mean, Standard Deviation, t-calculated

	Mean	SD	t
Less than or equal to 48 years	13.81	6.62	**2.757
More than or equal to 49 years	17.56	6.73	

****p<0.01**

Figure 1

Reasons for Increase in Stress and Anxiety Reported by the Participants



Note. The dominant reasons for stress and anxiety faced by participants are family-related concerns, Covid-related issues, lack of infrastructure and the indifference of others towards Covid-protocols. Others also reported psychological factors, news and the death of near and dear ones to be the reason. 5% of individuals also reported that they did not face any increase in stress or anxiety.

Discussion

Public servants have time and again proven to be a crucial aspect of the administrative setup of the country. Their value during the COVID-19 pandemic did not diminish. The objective of this study was to understand their stress levels and sense of duty. Thereafter, the study also aimed to comprehend the tangible reasons behind the stress and commitment.

The data is tilted towards the male population with approximately 73% participants who identify as males and the rest, as females. The sample was well spread out amongst the different states of India, metropolitan, countryside and others alike. Among the 97 respondents, there were officers from different ranks with varying responsibilities. This made the sample population highly heterogeneous and representative.

Despite a shift in responsibilities and dynamic changes in their personal and professional lives, a majority of the stress levels of the participants lie in the moderate-stress category i.e. approximately 60% followed by 34% in the low-stress category and the lowest in the high-stress category. For males, a maximum number of participants were in the moderate category followed by participants in the low-stress category. For females, maximum participants were in the low-stress category followed by the moderate category.

Variables that were taken into consideration while assessing stress and qualitative responses were gender, family size, age and physical presence that exposed them to the virus. Gender and family size did not prove to be a substantial factor but age and physical presence did give valid and significant results (tables 2 & 3).

The sample included individuals who belonged to different family sizes varying from living alone to living in a joint family with 18 members. Even though studies such as Sahithya, Kashyap & Roopesh (2020), Chung, Lanier, & Wong (2020) and Adams, Smith and Caccavale

(2020) report that there has been an increase in stress factors by virtue of being a parent, there is no significant difference in stress when it comes to family sizes or for those participants that are living with children. Nonetheless, the qualitative responses do not rule out the factor of family health. The well-being of friends and family was a prime contributing factor when it came to stress especially for those with young children and ageing parents. Even though gender establishes itself as a significant variable for stress (Wiegner, Hange, Björkelund, et al. 2015), there is no notable difference in the perceived stress levels of female and male civil officers in this study. This lack of difference could stem from the possibility that both genders have more or less faced equal obstacles and enjoy equal opportunities.

On the other hand, the factors of age and physical presence proved to be important aspects of varying stress levels. In terms of age, there was a significant difference ($p=0.01$) when it came to comparing individuals who were 48 years old or younger and 49 years old or older, as can be seen in table 3. Even though there is substantial literature in support of a decrease in stress level with age (Nelson and Bergeman, 2021; Barber and Kim, 2021), this study shows how perceived stress level was more for the older age group and lower for the younger group as mentioned in studies such as Lavretsky and Newhouse (2012) and Mroczek and Almeida (2008). Certain factors that may cause this stress are seniority-related responsibilities, risk of succumbing to the virus as an older adult or other added stressors due to the pandemic.

As mentioned before, officers were expected to be physically present at their workplace. This expectation varied for officers with different designations but was not absent for any of them. Certain individuals were expected to show up even during peak times, some tested positive and unfortunately, some also succumbed to the virus. Those who were present in the office work-space for more than five days faced the least amount of stress followed by those who were present for 3-5 days a week and highest levels by those who were present from 0-2 days a week. 47% of individuals who went to the office for 5 or more days a week, felt that work was always or sometimes threatening the well-being of their family and this percentage decreased as we move towards those individuals who go to work for less than 2 days a week. It can be said that going to work helped these officers become accustomed to stepping out during a pandemic situation and develop resources that helped them diminish the stress they perceived. Despite continuous

exposure and the belief that their work threatened the well-being of their near and dear ones, stress levels were not proportional to physical presence.

Other than what was assessed by the quantitative responses, prime factors that were reported to contribute to stress were a general atmosphere of uncertainty, insecurity and the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, an extreme dearth of essential resources (like oxygen and medications), and the collapsing health infrastructure of the country. An additional factor included the indifference of the general public with respect to SOPs laid out by the government and a sense of loneliness and helplessness among the respondents. Lack of social contact, frightening Covid-19 related coverage in the media and news manifested themselves in the form of both physiological and psychological effects including stress, anxiety and body aches. In totality, a deviation from the normal and the “general morbid atmosphere”, as summed up by a respondent, contributed greatly to the increasing stress levels.

What shone through most of the qualitative responses was an evident sense of duty. Even though there were respondents who believed that they had not been given adequate incentives by the government of India or their respective state governments, there were also those who felt motivated to work. Those who believed that the incentives given were sufficient categorised work from home opportunities, job security and a stable salary as their incentives. A large number of responses like, “I think it's a chance for us to do something for the country and for public health... So no need for incentives” highlighted a sense of duty, responsibility and intrinsic motivation that allowed the respondents to work passionately and responsibly even in the absence of any additional incentives during such trying times. Given that in the Indian scenario there was significant insecurity around employment and a lot of people lost their jobs, a positive aspect that contributed to civil officers facing low levels of perceived stress could be their job security and adequate pay. As stated by Bruine de Bruin (2020), the loss of job and financial issues are contributing factors, however, these did not prove to be stress-inducing factors for this sample. Despite not having the incentives enjoyed by frontline workers, there was a clear sense of satisfaction in the responses of these officers.

A large section of responses to the question of a change in life spheres have confirmed that the regular spheres of life have been severely affected. One of the frequently reported changes is

in the sphere of social life. Individuals report that they are unable to meet any of their relatives or friends and have to rethink their decision to step out even for routine tasks. On the flip side, participants also reported that they are able to relish the relationships they have and bond with their families in a meaningful manner which can considerably reduce the amount of stress an individual faces, (Adam, Smith, Caccavale, 2020). Life, altogether, has acquired a new meaning. Respondents are adopting “covid appropriate behaviour” while dealing with emotional stress caused by unpredictability, death and a constant feeling of fear and at the same time are able to cope with it effectively.

Disturbance of daily routine life is also a repercussion of the pandemic that the participants reported. The lack of a proper structure or routine debilitates the organisation of one’s life thus proving to be a major source of distress (Cherry, 2020). The respondents belong to a demographic section that was forced to go about continuing their daily professional lives with an added risk factor. 42 out of 97 individuals reported feeling as though their daily routine hadn’t been disturbed whereas, others felt the need to go back to the pre-corona ‘normal’. Routine things such as going to the shops, going for walks, physical exercise in gyms indicated the lack of social and physical movement for the participants. Some also reported disturbances in sleep, travel and their social lives. A portion of individuals also had extreme answers to the question of routine and normalcy by saying that there is a “total collapse of normal lifestyle and routine, coupled with the movement and other restrictions”. Additionally, another dominant answer was the inability of others to follow and adopt proper COVID precautions such as sanitising, wearing masks, social distancing and more. This wide array of answers supported the subjectivity of perceived stress and how individuals learn to adapt and cope despite the hardships.

The study had certain limitations as well. Since the study involves certain controversial questions, participants could have responded in a socially desirable manner. The study was also conducted in the online mode which did not allow the authors to observe any non-verbal cues.

Conclusion

The study aimed to trace the lives of civil servants during the COVID-19 pandemic through qualitative and quantitative methods. Throughout the study, the authors attempt to understand the

factors contributing to the participants' stress, their motivation to work and the sense of duty that they display. By collecting data of 97 civil servants with varying backgrounds, family sizes, genders, ages and designations, the results were quite fascinating. It was seen how these officers were ready to cope with difficulties posed by the pandemic efficiently because of their sense of duty towards their country in the time of need. Their ability to acknowledge the importance of their contributions during this time led to lower levels of stress.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

PSS-10-c (2020)

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7680058/table/tbl0005/?report=objectonly>

Appendix B

t-score Calculations

$$\begin{aligned} \bar{X}_1 &\approx 13.8182 \\ \bar{X}_2 &\approx 17.566 \\ S_{X_1}^2 &= \frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^n (X_{1i} - \bar{X}_1)^2 \approx 42.8306 \\ S_{X_2}^2 &= \frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^n (X_{2i} - \bar{X}_2)^2 \approx 44.5475 \\ S_{X_1 X_2} &= \sqrt{\frac{(n_1 - 1)S_{X_1}^2 + (n_2 - 1)S_{X_2}^2}{n_1 + n_2 - 2}} \approx 6.6159 \end{aligned}$$

After substituting these values into the formula for t we have:

$$t = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{S_{X_1 X_2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{n}{2}}} = \frac{13.8182 - 17.566}{6.6159 \cdot \sqrt{2}} \approx -2.7776$$

The degrees of freedom is:

$$d. o. f = n_1 + n_2 - 2 = 44 + 53 - 2 = 95$$

ANOVA Calculations

Analysis of Variance Results

F-statistic value = 2.65668
 P-value = 0.07545

Data Summary				
Groups	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Group 1	4	23	4.761	2.3805
Group 2	42	16.2143	7.2365	1.1166
Group 3	51	15.0196	6.5161	0.9124

ANOVA Summary					
Source	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-Stat	P-Value
	DF	SS	MS		
Between Groups	2	245.207	122.6035	2.6567	0.0754
Within Groups	94	4338.0235	46.1492		
Total:	96	4583.2306			