

Research Paper

Perception and Expression of Stress: A Study on Stress, Mental Health and Defense Style Mostly Used by Commercial Sex Workers of Suiri, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to explore the perception of stress, its effect on their mental health and the defense mechanisms employed to deal with it, of females, aged 18 to 40 years who have been working as commercial sex workers for a period of no less than two years. They are compared with women, aged 18 to 40 years who have been married for a period of at least two years with no apparent history of separation or divorce. Their perception of stress, mental health and the defense mechanism is assessed. The results indicated that stress along with anxiety, depression and social dysfunction is significantly higher in commercial sex workers. The defense mechanisms mostly employed by commercial sex workers were acting out, devaluation, autistic thinking, splitting and humor in contrast to the comparative group.

Keywords: Perception, Expression of Stress, Mental Health, Defense Style, Commercial Sex Workers

Commercial Sex is the exchange of money and goods for sexual services. (Overs et al 2002). Commercial Sex workers are marginalized part of the society. They are viewed as an epidemic, used as a commodity and labeled as 'dirty' for they are part of the 'dirty work', concept introduced by Hughes in 1951 (Huges et al 1951). The nature of the work can not only be categorized as controversial but is apparently viewed as disturbance in the society. The work is usually undertaken for economic compensation such as money or drugs and in most cases for security of life and threat. These individuals are used, labialized as well as disposed by the whims and wishes of the society.

Stress can be explained as the degree to which one feels overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that are unmanageable, and stressors can be any physiological or psychological event or object that leads to the release of one's stress hormones. Commercial sex workers experience a variety of stressors.

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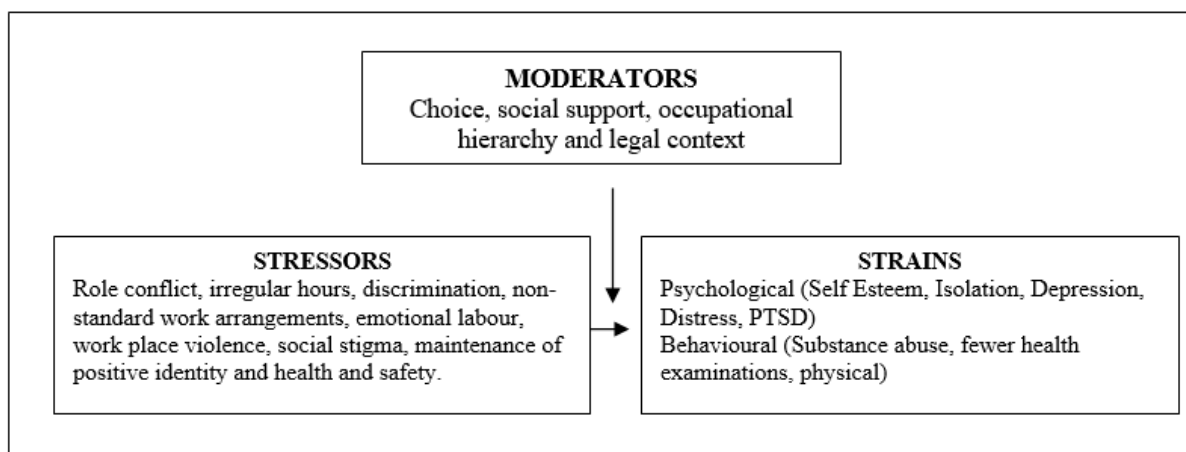


Fig. 1 Conceptual Model of Occupational Stress in Prostitution (Kara et al.)

They are usually at the receiving end of high rates of violence from the brothel owners, their clients as well as the law enforcers. Violence amongst sex workers is a common occurrence, (Yung, et al 2008, 2010, Sherwood et al 2015). Several studies have documented the high prevalence of violence amongst sex workers and its association with mental illness. (Romans et al 2001).

Exposure to violence is associated with poor mental health (Coker et al 2002) (Patel et al 2015) (Landon et al 2008) (McCombe et al 2009). A survey in India in India found depression rates of 39% amongst Female Sex Workers (n=1986). (Patel et al. 2015).

The researches in relation to commercial sex workers, mental health and the defense style mostly employed by them have been very limited in India. The objective of the study was to understand the stress perceived by them in their everyday life, which affects their mental health and the defense mechanism mostly employed by them to deal with the difficulties which are repercussions of the situations they have to face on a daily basis. They have been compared with a group of women who have been married for a period of at least two years with no past history of divorce or separation. The intent is to analyze the difference in the perception and expression of stress between women who are viewed in two different lights by the society. The cultural impact, stereotype and stigma associated with the apparent expected functioning of women creates a strain between the individual and the society. The individuals viewed differently, mostly have different impact of their perception on others which are dealt in different ways by different individuals.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

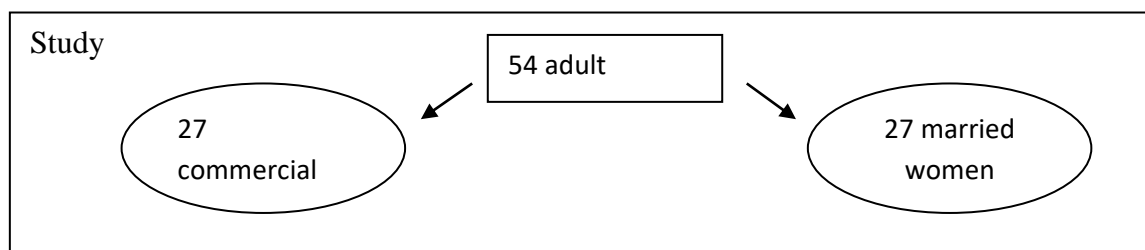
Objective

- To study and compare the stress experienced between women working as commercial sex workers and the comparative group.
- To study and compare anxiety, depression, somatic concern and social dysfunction between women working as commercial sex workers and the comparative group.
- To study and compare the defense mechanisms mostly employed between women working as commercial sex workers and the comparative group.

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Methodology

The study was conducted in Suiiri, West Bengal. A case control design is used along with purposive sampling. The number of participants that were approached for the study were 40, however, 27 agreed to participate in the study. Females, aged 18-40 years, who have been working for a period of at least 2 years, were included in the study. The study aimed to explore the differences in the perception of stress and the defense mechanism among commercial sex workers and women who were married for a period of at least two years and reported to have sexual relations only with their husbands.



Tools used

- 1. General Health Questionnaire-28 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988):** The General Health Questionnaire is a self-administering screening test, which is sensitive to the presence of psychiatric disorders in individuals present in primary care settings and non-psychiatric clinical settings. It provides a measure of overall psychological health or wellness. In order to assess this, the GHQ focuses on two major groups of phenomena (1) Inability to continue or carry out normal 'healthy' functions and (2) Symptoms of distressing nature. The GHQ-28 is a 28-item measure of emotional distress in medical settings. Through factor analysis, the GHQ-28 has been divided into four subscales. Somatic symptoms (items 1-7), Anxiety/insomnia (item 8-14), Social dysfunction (item 15-21), and Severe depression (item 22-35). Scoring was done by GHQ method (0-0-1-1) as suggested by Goldberg and Williams (1988). Total score ranges from 0 to 28.
- 2. Stress Questionnaire (International Stress Management Association UK):** Stress Questionnaire is a self-administering questionnaire which provides an overview of the stress perceived by one. It has 25 questions, which are answered by a binominal fashion of yes and no.
- 3. Defense style Questionnaire-40 (Andrews, Sing and Bond 1993):** The Defense Style Questionnaire-40 is a forty item self-report questionnaire, which measures twenty individual defense mechanisms grouped on a tripartite hierarchy. The hierarchy is broken down into three factors, mature defense style, immature defense style and neurotic defense style. Individuals were asked to rate their responses to forty statements about personal attitudes on a nine point, Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scores for each item were added which reflected the individual's propensity towards twenty individual defense mechanisms and his/her use of immature, neurotic and mature defense factors. Reliability/validity: The DSQ-40 appears to be an internally reliable instrument that has demonstrated adequate construct validity. The 40-item DSQ has proved to be a valid and reliable instrument with moderate to high Cronbach α values, split-half reliability, test-retest reliability and item-scale correlations and has been used in a range of studies (Carvalho et al., 2013). Watson and Sinha (1998) report relatively high internal reliability estimate with Cronbach's alpha equalling .801 and a split half reliability of $r=.706$.

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Statistical Analysis

The scales and questionnaires used in the study were analyzed following standard method and after that Statistical analysis was used for the obtained data. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 25) was used to analyze the data. As the groups were not homogeneous with respect to their socio-demographic variables, non-parametric statistics (Mann-Whitney U Test) was used to compare the groups with respect to their stress, mental health and defense mechanism.

RESULTS

Table 1: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for stress experienced between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
STRESS	A	18.59	6.547	33.50	202.500	.005**
	B	14.11	2.391	21.50		

Table 2: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for general health between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
GHQ	A	18.59	6.54	32.67	225.000	0.015*
	B	14.11	2.391	22.33		

Graphical Representation of the Means Attained from the Different Domains of Both the Groups

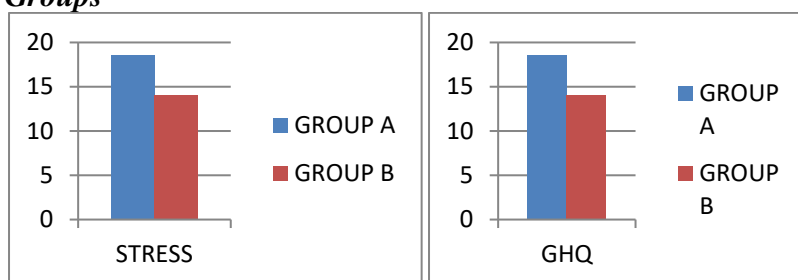


Table 3: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for anxiety, depression, somatic concern and social dysfunction between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
Somatic Concern	A	4.889	1.948	31.23	262.500	0.073*
	B	3.963	1.675	23.72		
Anxiety	A	4.556	2.651	27.35	360.500	0.944
	B	4.963	1.765	27.65		
Social Dysfunction	A	4.111	1.281	35.37	152.000	0.000***
	B	2.630	1.245	19.63		
Depression	A	5.037	2.377	35.33	153.000	0.000***
	B	2.556	2.556	19.67		

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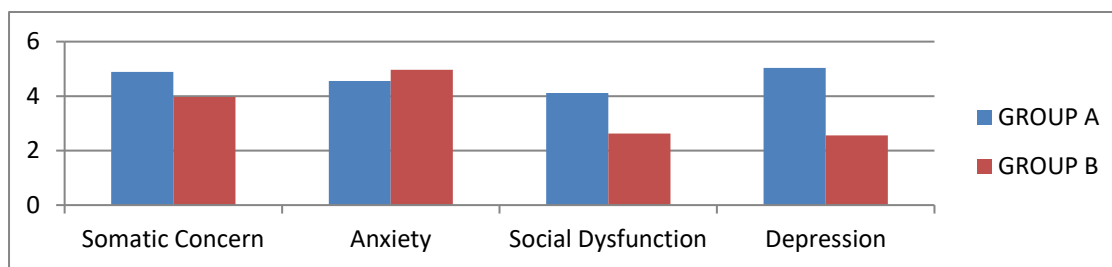
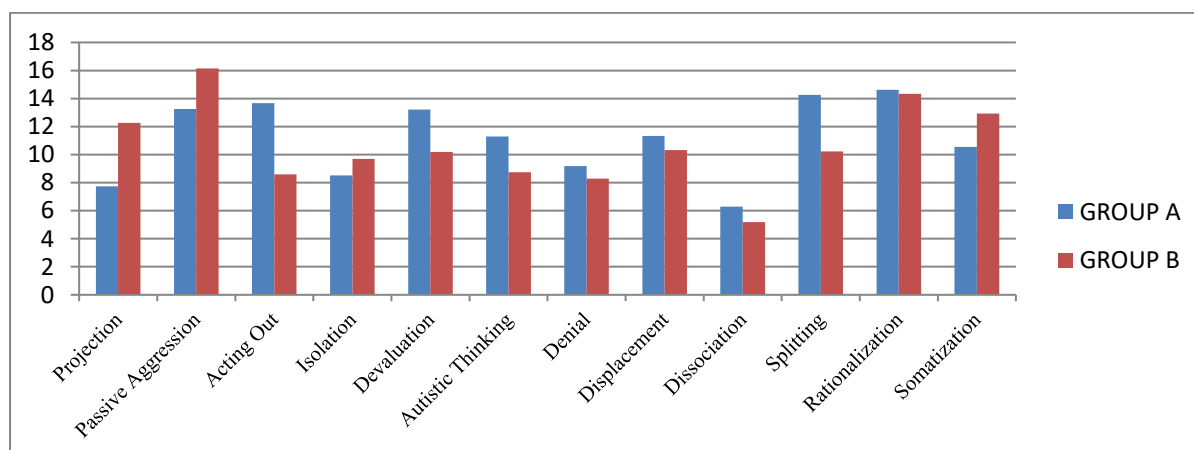


Table 4: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for the (Immature) Defense style used between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
Projection	A	7.741	3.768	20.89	186.000	0.002
	B	12.26	5.149	34.11		
Passive Aggression	A	13.26	5.119	20.89	249.000	0.043
	B	16.15	1.812	34.11		
Acting Out	A	13.67	4.123	36.56	120.000	0.000
	B	8.593	2.925	18.44		
Isolation	A	8.519	3.490	24.67	288.000	0.183
	B	9.704	3.495	30.33		
Devaluation	A	13.22	3.401	33.96	189.500	0.002
	B	10.19	3.453	21.02		
Autistic Thinking	A	11.30	3.086	33.46	203.500	0.005
	B	8.741	2.877	21.54		
Denial	A	9.185	3.711	29.07	322.000	0.456
	B	8.296	2.785	25.93		
Displacement	A	11.33	5.442	29.48	311.000	0.351
	B	10.33	4.867	25.52		
Dissociation	A	6.296	4.065	29.313	320.500	0.443
	B	5.185	2.788	25.87		
Splitting	A	14.26	4.101	35.13	158.500	0.000
	B	10.22	4.191	19.87		
Rationalization	A	14.63	3.963	28.57	335.500	0.612
	B	14.33	3.873	26.43		
Somatization	A	10.56	3.796	22.98	242.500	0.034
	B	12.93	4.196	32.02		



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Table 5: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for the (Neurotic) Defense style used between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
UNDOING	A	5.704	3.172	28.00	351.000	0.814
	B	5.407	2.763	27.00		
PSEUDO ALTRUISM	A	12.74	3.799	31.20	264.500	0.082
	B	10.41	5.161	23.80		
IDEALIZATION	A	12.37	5.138	28.80	329.500	0.540
	B	11.70	5.098	26.20		
REACTION FORMATION	A	12.81	3.606	23.09	245.500	0.038
	B	14.74	2.850	31.91		

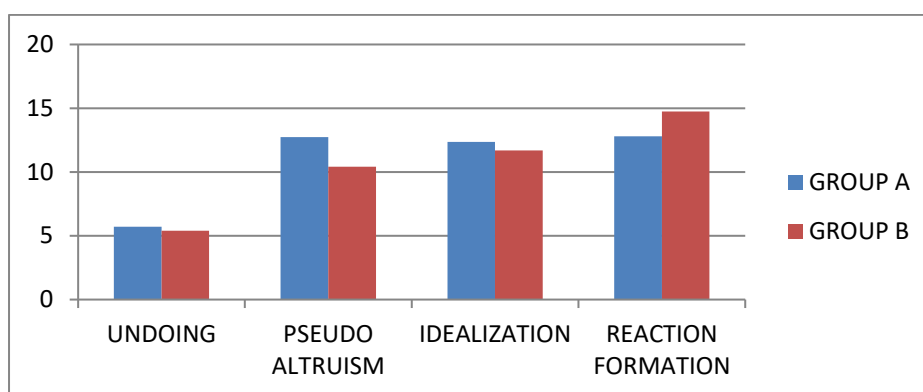


Table 6: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for the (Mature) Defense style used between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
Sublimation	A	9.741	4.082	29.37	314.000	0.379
	B	8.778	3.876	25.63		
Humor	A	9.333	3.952	32.93	218.000	0.011
	B	6.667	2.935	22.07		
Anticipation	A	8.667	10.15	24.39	280.500	0.143
	B	4.010	3.949	30.61		
Suppression	A	12.59	4.236	27.46	363.500	0.986
	B	12.85	3.676	27.54		

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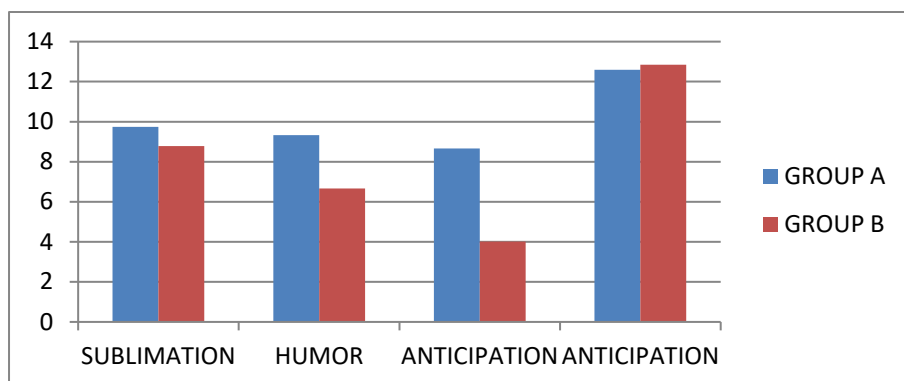
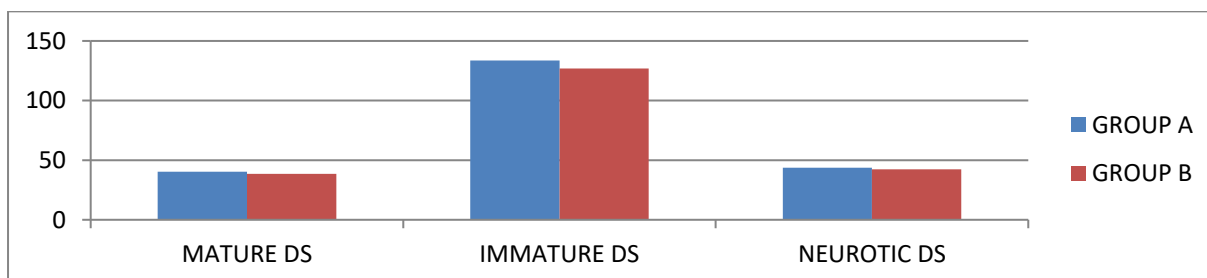


Table 7: Comparison of Mean, Standard Deviation, Mean Rank, Mann-Whitney scores and p values for the Defense style used between group A (women working as commercial sex workers) and group B (the comparative group).

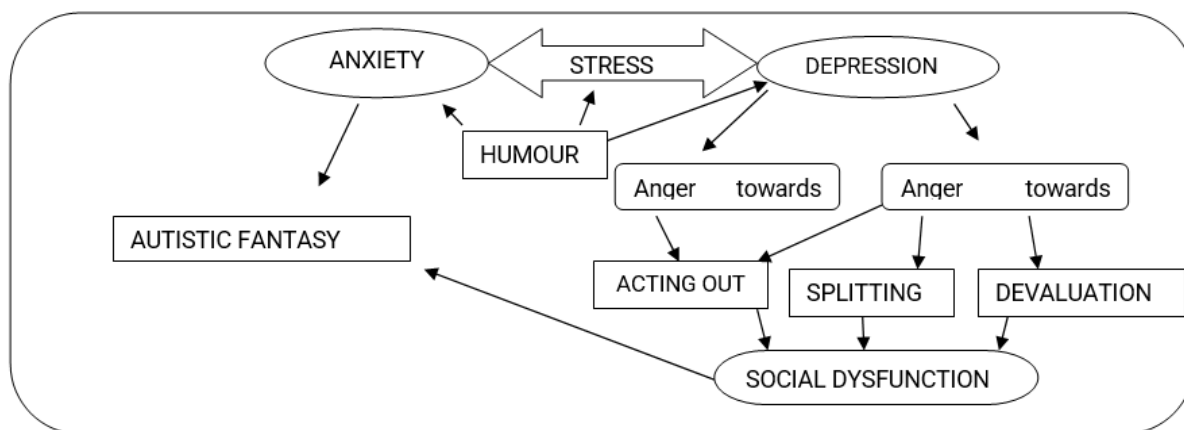
Domain	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Rank	Mann Whitney Value	P-Value
Mature Defense Style	A	40.33	9.523	29.41	313.000	0.372
	B	38.44	6.477	25.59		
Immature Defense Style	A	133.6	19.17	31.04	269.000	0.098
	B	126.9	15.16	23.96		
Neurotic Defense Style	A	43.639	3.606	29.04	323.000	0.472
	B	42.259	2.850	25.96		



DISCUSSION

Analysis of the results reveal that the stress experienced by the women working as commercial sex workers is higher when compared with the comparative group. Their experience of sustained stress could be leading to their increased feelings of anxiety and depression. Depression which is viewed as anger turned inwards could be generating anger not only towards self but also towards others, both of which might be leading to their adoption of Acting Out as one of their most frequently utilized defense mechanism. Their anger towards others could be the reason their expression of stress takes the form of Splitting and Devaluation which in turn along with their frequently employed defense mechanism of Acting Out also increases their social dysfunction. Their inability to cope with the anxieties of daily stress along with their strained social relations could be leading to their defense style of Autistic Fantasy. The study revealed, Humour was the only mature defense mechanism which was significantly more used by the commercial sex workers in contrast to the comparative group, which might be helping them to sustain themselves during the challenging times.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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