Perceived Stress, Performance Appraisal Discomfort and Core Self-evaluation in a non-Western context (CP)

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ABSTRACT

The study is an exploratory investigation of the relationship among perceived stress, performance evaluation discomfort and beliefs, and employee's self-evaluation – specifically core self-evaluation. Little has been done exploring perceived stress as a possible consequence of the discomfort experienced by appraisers and this study attempts to fill this gap.

This cross-sectional survey obtained usable data from 167 public and private sector employees in Gaborone, Botswana, with about 81% from the public sector. Respondents were 51.5% males, 45% unmarried and 54% having over 10 years work experience. Respondents were well educated with 70% possessing basic university degree or higher and over 65% earned over $1500.00 monthly indicating a fairly well paid African sample. Data were collected using structured questionnaires with 47 standardised items from four scales (perceived stress – 10, performance appraisal discomfort – 20, performance appraisal beliefs – 5 and core self-evaluation – 12). Data was analysed using Pearson's coefficient correlation multiple regression (stepwise).

The result indicated direct but insignificant correlation between performance appraisal discomfort and performance appraisal belief; inverse relationship between performance appraisal discomfort and perceived stress; inverse relationship between performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation. All these results though in the predicted direction were non-significant. A significant and direct relationship was however found between perceived stress and core self-evaluation. This is perhaps indicative of a strong link between how a person sees, views and values self as a possible reflection of the state of the individual's perceived stress. Also core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort emerged as predictor variables for perceived stress, with the former being the stronger predictor and together explaining about 7% of the variance.

Limitations and future research direction include: the small number of predictor variables explored; a need for cross-cultural and multi-cultural investigation of the variables to enhance and enrich our understanding of the constructs; and a sampling limitation imposed by a somewhat self-selecting organisational sample used. Managerial implications include: albeit performance appraisals are infrequently done, the importance attached to it by managers and organisations makes discomforts with it critical as issues such as individual advancement, reward obtainable and disciplinary issues are all associated with it. Similarly core self-evaluation may be a key to high levels of individual performance. These issues may impact on perceived and actual stress experienced by individuals hence the need to direct more attention to the investigation of this linkage – a process that this study attempts to promote.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature of organisationally induced work stress has been well detailed (Conner and Douglas 2005). Stress has been shown to affect the employees psychologically (Barnett and Brennan 1995; Friedman 1995); physiologically (Davidson et al. 1990; Cooper et al. 2001); and behaviourally (Cohen and Williamson 1988; Cooper et al. 2001; Bacharach et al. 2002). All of these have been associated with lower job performance, which is invariably a negative outcome for the organisation (Longenecker et al. 1999; Nelson and Burke 2000). While the importance, problems and benefits of performance appraisal/evaluation in organisation have never been lost on both practitioners and researchers of HRM, the appraisal process itself may leave both the appraisee (Grote 1996; Roberts 1998) and appraiser (Fred et al. 1992) unhappy. Could this in any way be linked to a higher perception of stress for both parties? In this study we explore the latter link by measuring performance appraisal discomfort.

Core self-evaluation is a basic, fundamental appraisal of one's worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person (Judge et al. 2003). We wonder if core self-evaluation (positive self-regard) – a strong psychological trait encompassing self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control – is directly linked with both performance appraisal discomfort and perceived stress. We believe that a high individual self-worth and self-confidence should correlate strongly with comfort with performance appraisal and a reduced perception of stress. This in our view is a three-way relationship in which the causal-order might take a series of investigations as well as a comprehensive and sophisticated data analysis to determine. We therefore do not pretend being able to establish this causal order in the present study. However, since we were unable to identify studies that have investigated these three key psychological

concepts simultaneously, we hope this study will commence the process of filling this rather useful gap for a better understanding of this all important linkage in organisational behaviour and human resource management.

Perceived Stress

The experience of workplace stress has been subject to a large amount of research and interest in the topic shows no sign of waning (Johnson et al. 2005). Stress has become an issue of contemporary importance with the media mentioning it almost daily and relating stories of stress-related illnesses, family break-up and at its most extreme, work-related suicide (Fotinatos and Cooper 2005). The attention being devoted to stress will perhaps remain for as long as there is work and life and this attention has indeed not spared non-Western and developing countries, albeit much of the scientific investigations reported and indeed much of what we know today has come directly from the West.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful (Cohen et al. 1983; Cohen and Williamson 1988). Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded respondents find their lives (Cohen and Williamson 1988). The PSS was designed for use in community samples with at least junior high school education. The PSS was argued as providing a conceptually clearer (better) measure of appraised stress (Cohen 1986).

Performance Appraisal Discomfort and Belief

Much as performance appraisal may seem a rather simple and straightforward activity – depending on the observer's participation status – experiences in organisations with the process,

the format, the assessor, and the employee being assessed does not authenticate this view. Indeed, Bernardin (2003) noted that it is one of, if not the, most problematic areas in human resource management. The issues that arise from the assessors' problems are closely related to the problems of performance appraisal process. The evaluator's criticisms develop because the evaluator has a high level of stress put on him or her to serve in this role and represent the organisation (Roberts 1998). Other performance appraisal problems are well detailed in the literature (e.g. Kane and Kane 1992; Grote 1996; Roberts 1998). Significant however with respect to the evaluator is the fact that evaluators may feel they are placed in conflicting roles by having to be a coach and a judge of subordinate performance (Grote 1996).

The belief in performance appraisal itself seem highly contributory to its success in any organisation, hence the inclusion of performance appraisal belief in our conceptual model. Smith et al. (2000) indicated that the extent to which the organisation values its performance appraisal system is communicated in how appraisals are carried out, for example, the degree of diligence required, rater accountability, frequency etc. and how the rating outcomes are used. The degree of commitment to performance appraisal (hence belief in it) varies significantly from one organisation to the other, from those who are significantly committed to it on one end of the continuum to those other organisation who – pay lip service to it and hardly use it beyond documentation and routine ritualistic purposes.

Giving performance feedbacks by supervisors to subordinates, especially if the subordinates have performed poorly is usually never a palatable activity and thus many supervisors will avoid doing it if they have a choice Fried et al. (1992). The impact of such feedbacks is however not restricted to the subordinates and the relationship between the duo, it could also be a source of

psychological pressure on some supervising officers. To what extent could such pressure impact on the perceived stress or self confidence/esteem (self-evaluation) of the performance evaluators? It is also possible that performance evaluators may for the same reasons, and perhaps others, want to avoid potentially aversive situations while enhancing interpersonal relationships by inflating scores of their subordinates especially in situations that would require a face-to-face feedback to the subordinate evaluated (Fisher 1989; Landy and Farr 1983; Latham 1986; Longenecker et al. 1987).

Whereas Smith et al. (2000) identified the raters' belief about the importance of performance appraisals in his/her organisation as important predictor of performance appraisal discomfort suggesting that performance appraisal discussions are likely to produce discomfort to the extent that the appraisal is associated with important outcomes. Villanova et al. (1992) reported that raters reporting higher levels of discomfort tended to give more lenient ratings of subordinates than raters reporting lower levels of discomfort. In sum, albeit performance appraisal is uncomfortable for many raters, little is known about performance appraisal discomfort (PAD) (Smith et al. 2000). While Villanova et al. (1992) reported some of PAD consequences to include giving more lenient subordinate ratings and being less likely to distinguish among subordinates. Presumably, by giving uniformly high appraisals, they can avoid the potential consequences of assigning high ratings to some subordinates and low ratings to others (Tziner et al. 2002). Smith et al. (2000) on the other hand reported the antecedents of PAD to include: performance appraisal beliefs and communication reticence, but not length of rater-ratee relationship. This study attempts to explore some of the possible correlates of performance appraisal discomfort and beliefs and anticipates that performance appraisal discomfort would be associated with the

perceived stress and core self-evaluation of employees and thus seeks to investigate this relationship.

Core Self-evaluation

Judge et al. (1997) introduced the core self-evaluation concept in an effort to provide a useful predictor of job satisfaction and other applied criteria. Core self-evaluation is a broad, latent, higher-order trait indicated by four well-established traits in the personality literature: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control. The commonality of these traits is that core self-evaluation is a basic, fundamental appraisal of one's worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person (Judge et al. 1997). The importance of these four core self-evaluation traits has been well reference in the literature (Judge et al. 2003). In several studies, (Erez and Judge 2001; Judge et al. 2000; 1998a and 1998b) the four core traits have not only been shown to load on a single factor, they also share conceptual similarity (Judge and Bono 2001) all buttressing the argument that they are all indicators of a common core (Judge et al. 2003).

In several studies, core self-evaluations have been linked with job satisfaction and job characteristics (Judge et al. 1998b; Judge et al. 2000; Judge and Bono 2001); job performance (Judge and Bono 2001); motivation and performance (Erez and Judge 2001). However, in many of these studies core self-evaluation has been measured indirectly; and Judge et al. (2003) noted this is a serious limitation. In the present study we measure the concept directly using the 12-item CSES (Judge et al. 2003) and we anticipate that the concept with show strong relationship with both perceived stress and performance appraisal discomfort.

The present study aims to investigate the relationship among performance evaluation discomfort, perceived stress and employee's self-evaluation. The specific hypotheses emerging from the foregoing discourse and tested are enumerated below.

Hypotheses

H1: Performance appraisal discomfort is directly correlated with performance appraisal beliefs

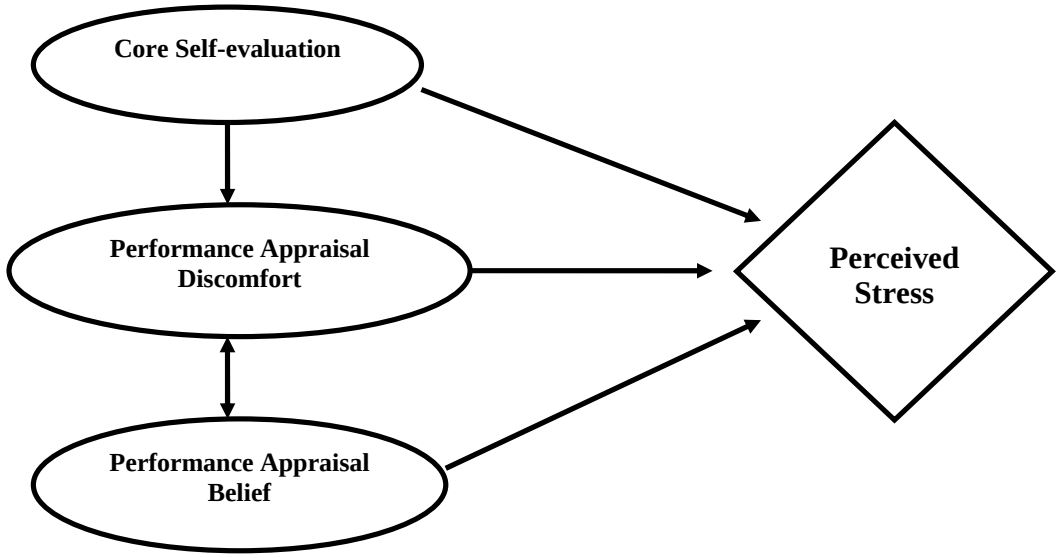
H2: Performance appraisal discomfort is inversely correlated with perceived stress

H3: Performance appraisal discomfort is inversely correlated with core self-evaluation

H4: Perceived stress is directly correlated with core self-evaluation

H5: Performance appraisal discomfort and beliefs, and core self-evaluation will together significantly predict perceived stress

Figure I: Performance Appraisal Discomfort, Beliefs, Core Self-evaluation & Perceived Stress – A Conceptual Model



THE METHOD

The study is a cross-sectional design and data was collected from a sample of managers across several industries in Botswana – Southern Africa.

Sample

Data was sought from a sample of 300 public and private sector employees in Gaborone, Botswana. Participating organisations were self-selected from a number of organisations across private and public sector invited to participate. Prior data collection in Botswana has shown this to be a most effective way to obtain the active cooperation and participation in survey researches.

All participating organisation were visited and the human resources department, through a designated officer, served as the collection point for returned questionnaires in sealed envelopes. A total of 167 usable questionnaires representing about 55.7 percent response rate, from 18 public and private sector organisations, formed the basis of data analysis.

Respondents were largely from the public sector employees in government departments/ministries, parastatals and higher educational institutions representing about 81 percent, while the remaining respondents were from the private sector. About 51.5 percent of respondents were males while about 45 percent were unmarried. Also about 48 percent falls within the age bracket of 31-40 years. About 54 percent have worked for over 10 years, while 27.5 percent have worked for 6-10 years. Most of the respondents were well educated with 70 percent possessing a basic university degree or higher. Over 65 percent earned more than $1500.00 monthly indicating a fairly well paid sample for the African continent.

Measures

The measures used for the study variables, their sources, and the number of items are reported in Table 1.

Performance Appraisal Discomfort: this was measured with the 19-item measure of Smith et al. (2000), and an additional item also used by Smith et al. and deemed relevant and appropriate in this sample - "Telling an employee that you will not tolerate his or her taking extended breaks". All the responses were anchored on a five-point scale with 1 representing 'High Discomfort' and 5 representing 'No Discomfort'. A high score on this scale indicates a low degree of performance

appraisal discomfort. Smith et al. (2000) reported a coefficient alpha of 0.90, while the coefficient alpha obtained for our study was 0.92.

Performance Appraisal Beliefs: this was measured with a 5-item measure also of Smith el al. (2000). Responses were provided on a five-point scale from 1 representing 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 representing 'Strongly Agree'. A high score on this scale indicated strong belief that the organisation's performance appraisal system affected organisational decisions. Whereas Smith et al. (2000) reported a coefficient alpha of 0.69 for this scale. We obtained an alpha of 0.63 in our sample.

Perceived Stress: was measured with the popular 10-item scale of Cohen et al. (1983) and Cohen and Williamson (1988). For this scale we obtained an alpha of 0.70 in our sample.

Core Self-Evaluation: was measured with the 12-item scale of Judge et al. (2003). Responses were also provided on a five-point scale from 1 representing 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 representing 'Strongly Agree'. Six of the items were reverse scored and Judge et al. (2003) reported reliability coefficients from 0.81 to 0.87. For the present sample in this study we obtained reliability coefficient alphas of 0.78.

Demographic Characteristics: the demographic variables included in the study are gender, marital status, age, education, work experience, type of organisation and income.

Table I: Measures for Study Variables

Study Variables	**No. of Items**	**Source of Scale**
Performance Appraisal Discomfort	20	Smith et al. (2000)
Performance Appraisal Beliefs	5	Smith et al. (2000)
Perceived Stress	10	Cohen et al. (1983) & Cohen and Williamson (1988)
Core Self-Evaluation	12	Judge et al. (2003)

Table 2: Summary of Sample Characteristics (n = 167)

Demographic Variables	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	86	51.5
Female	81	48.5
Marital Status		
Married	92	55.1
Unmarried	75	44.9
Age		
Below 20	5	3.0
21 – 30	29	17.4
31 – 40	80	47.9
41 – 50	40	24.0
51 – 60	13	7.8
Over 60	0	0
Work Experience		
Under 1 year	12	7.2
1 – 5	21	12.6
6 – 10	46	27.5
11 – 15	34	20.4
16 – 20	23	13.8
Over 20	31	18.6
Type of Organisation		
Public Sector	136	81.4
Private sector	31	18.6
Education		
Below University Education	50	29.9
Basic university degree and Higher	117	70.1
Income (Monthly)		
Less than P5000 monthly (About $1000 US)	32	20.9
P5001 – P8000	22	13.2
P8001 – P12000	62	37.1
P12000 – P15000	21	12.6
Over P15000	25	15.0
Missing	2	1.2

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship among performance appraisal discomfort and belief, core self-evaluation and perceived stress. The means, standard deviations, Pearson's intercorrelation coefficients for the study variables presenting the general results of the study and are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations among Study Variables

	Study Variables	1	2	3	4	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Performance Appraisal Discomfort	**(0.92)**	.04	-.15	-.07	83.09	14.63
2	Performance Appraisal Belief		**(0.63)**	-.06	-.15	18.41	3.29
3	Perceived Stress			**(0.70)**	.25****	31.42	4.65
4	Core Self-evaluation				**(0.78)**	40.47	4.30

Note: n = 167; **** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Reliabilities (Cronbach Alphas coefficients) are reported in parenthesis along diagonal axis (boldface)

The intercorrelation matrix mainly shows direct but insignificant correlation between performance appraisal discomfort and performance appraisal belief. Even though the direction of the relationship predicted by the Hypothesis 1 was confirmed, it was not statistically significant. Similarly, the inverse relationship predicted between performance appraisal discomfort and perceived stress in our Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed but again this was not statistically significant. Our finding also confirms the inverse relationship between Performance appraisal discomfort and Core self-evaluation, predicted in Hypothesis 3, which was again not statistically significant. For Hypothesis 4, however, a significant and direct relationship was found between perceived stress and core self-evaluation at $p < 0.01$. It would thus appear that the higher the perceived stress the higher the core self evaluation; which is again indicative of a strong link

between how a person sees, views and places value on self as a possibly reflection of the state of perceived stress for the individual.

Table 4: Results of Regression Analysis for Perceived Stress (148)

S/N	Predictor Variables	Perceived Stress		
		Beta	t	Sig.
1	Core Self-evaluation	0.236	2.943**	0.004
2	Performance Appraisal Discomfort	-0.159	-1.992*	0.048
3	Performance Appraisal Belief	-0.029	-0.358	0.721
	R	0.301		
	R^2	0.091		
	Adjusted R^2	0.072		
	N; (df)	148; (3, 145)		
	F	4.820**		.003

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Multiple regression analysis was also performed to test hypothesis 5, specifically in order to disentangle the bivariate effects and to determine the relative importance of the independent variables. With perceived stress as our dependent variable, using the stepwise regression method, all the other study variables were entered into the regression equation. A significant model emerged with core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort as predictor variables ($F_{3, 145}$ = 4.820; p < 0.003; Adjusted R square = 0.072). While both variables emerged strong predictors of perceived stress, the standardised regression coefficient show that core self-evaluation (t = 2.943) is the stronger predictor than performance appraisal discomfort (t = -1.992). Together, they however explain only about 7 percent of the variance in perceived stress.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study offers opportunity for exploratory investigation of some of the concepts of our interest (perceived stress, performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation) in an area relatively under-explored in behavioural research – the developing world – nay Africa. Our results, albeit tentative, also provide a comparable picture for studies from the West. In the main, the result indicates a strong and direct association between only perceived stress and core self-evaluation implying that the higher the core self-evaluation (a basic, fundamental appraisal of one's worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person) then the higher the individual perceived stress. This would seem to comply with common beliefs because an individual who scores high in core self-evaluation is probably someone who is well adjusted, positive, self-confident, efficacious, and believes in his or her own agency and it is this broad core that is manifested in high levels of self-esteem, emotional stability, and general self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control (Judge et al. 2003). Such individuals would almost always put themselves under a great deal of stress striving to meet and perhaps exceeding targets and deadlines in line with the present findings, thus confirming our hypothesis 4.

We set out in the present study to investigate the relationship among perceived stress, core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort; and a major finding of the study is the emergence of core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort as significant predictors of perceived stress collectively explaining about 7 percent of the variation in perceived stress and again confirming our hypothesis 5. It would therefore appear that these are yet another two constructs adding to the ever increasing predictors of perceived stress among individuals, which given the exploratory nature of the study may require further investigations. Given what we already know about the two constructs – core self-evaluation and performance appraisal

discomfort – it should not be surprise that they are related with perceived stress or that they predict it. Individuals who experience a high level of performance appraisal discomfort and who also have a low core self-evaluation would be expected to be unhappy with both situations and thus possibly experience internal self-strain and perhaps a higher perception of stress.

On the other hand, we found that performance appraisal discomfort is directly correlated with performance appraisal beliefs while it is inversely correlated with perceived stress and core self-evaluation. Albeit our findings confirm these relationships in the direction predicted, they were not statistically significant in our sample. Our finding adds to the body of knowledge suggesting the importance of adding yet another set of variables as possible sources of stress experienced by workpeople. When individuals experience a great deal of discomfort in the assessment of their subordinates (or sometimes peers) they may also experience a greater personal stress as a result. While one may argue that performance appraisal are infrequently done, seasonal as it were, and thus should not constitute a significant source of stress to individuals. The reality of today's work environment may be different especially as a result of radical transformation in the appraisal systems and performance management strategies of many organisations, which may require constant monitoring, evaluation and constant feedback to employees to minimise the long-term effect of errors that may have become too costly to the organisation if left unattended.

Similarly, the likely strong linkage between the discomfort that may be experienced from performance appraisals processes and the potential effect on the individual's self-evaluation including their self esteem, mood and morale should also be a source of concern to the HR manager. There is now a need to urgently bring on board and incorporate these likely

performance hindering factors when packaging HR activities on performance management, and stress reduction and other employee wellness programmes.

Although we did not find studies that have investigated these relationships (performance appraisal discomfort, beliefs, core self-evaluation and perceived stress) simultaneously in the literature, but our preliminary findings portend useful managerial implications for a better understanding of managerial anxiety. They indicate that more attention need to be focused on the individual manager's response to performance assessments, especially in terms of how a changing behavioural disposition like the ones under investigation here may be indicative of anxiety related symptoms which may effectively reflect in lower performance levels. It also raises the question of how differences in performance evaluation and the individual managers' response to it across international businesses could constitute a gap in comparative assessment of managers.

Limitations of this research and Future Research Direction

As in many other studies, several potential limitations are inherent in this study. First, the number of predictor variables was few and possible additional relevant predictor variables could be used in a research of this nature. Although the literature reports a number of predictor variables for perceived stress yet much less has been reported along the lines of the variables investigated here (performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation). A lot could still be done to enhance managerial understanding of these much less explored variables. It would therefore be more useful to explore other behavioural predictor variables in subsequent efforts, as this will enhance the robustness of the model in the regression equation. Indeed it would be useful to verify what variables would be predictive of both performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation.

Secondly, a cross-cultural as well as multi-cultural investigation of the constructs – performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation – across a number of culturally dissimilar countries would prove useful in furthering our understanding of the constructs. This would have a significant benefit for international business and its managerial applications in today's global and competitive environment.

Thirdly, a self-selecting sample of organisation is a potential impediment for generalization despite the reasonable sample size, given the small population of Botswana. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study renders it difficult to draw conclusions about the relationships among the various study variables. Even though one significant correlation was reported, cross-sectional research does not explain why such exist or what other external factors might have caused the observed significant correlation. Nevertheless, this study provides a foundation for further examinations in our quest to better understand how these relatively explored behavioural variables (performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation) relate to perceived stress.

Fourthly, related to the limitation above is the heavy titling of the obtained data (respondents) from the public sector (81 percent), which however is largely a reflection of the workforce in Botswana like most African countries where the private sector is relatively poorly developed. It is hoped that future studies will attempt a more radical balance of the two sectors for more comparable data and hence a stronger generalisation opportunity. Indeed a strong private sector focus would be beneficial to international business.

Finally, demographic profiles of respondents were statistically unexplored in this study as they relate to the each of the three main variables of the research namely: perceived stress, performance appraisal discomfort and core self-evaluation and this would be a useful area for future study.

CONCLUSIONS

Human behaviour is complex and complicated, hence understanding and manipulating it for effective organisational results requires going beyond the mastery of rhetoric and untested concepts. The present study investigated the relationship among perceived stress, performance appraisal discomfort and beliefs, and core self-evaluation. It also attempted to verify to what extent these the other variables are predictors of perceived stress. A single country study and data rarely have much strength in international business studies since it allows little opportunity for comparison or generalisation. However, as much less research results do come out of Africa compared with the West and perhaps the rest of the world, it is hoped that findings from these preliminary exploratory effort would kindle enough interest for a more global expansion of the concepts explored here.

In sum, we found a strong positive relationship between perceived stress and core self-evaluation, we also found that core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort were significant predictors of perceived stress with the former being a stronger predictor than the later. At a tactical level, the study's findings have raised awareness and redirected attention to the need for more attention to be focused on these two variables – core self-evaluation and performance appraisal discomfort – if managerial understanding of sources of perceived stress were to become more robust, albeit the findings need further investigation. When designing training and

development programmes aimed at preparing managers and subordinates for all forms of performance evaluation, it is critical to ensure that individual discomforts arising from such evaluations are thoroughly addressed and that organisations become more interested in nourishing a highly confident employee with significant self-belief and the appropriate environment.

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