Original Article

Identifying Factors Affecting Job Stress among Operational Staff of the Iranian Red Crescent Society: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Rescue and relief workers are routinely exposed to stressful conditions and job demands that exceed their capacities, negatively impacting their physical, mental, and social well-being. Identifying the factors contributing to job stress in these workers is therefore crucial. This study aimed to determine the factors influencing job stress among rescue and relief workers in the Iranian Red Crescent Society.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a thematic content analysis approach. The participants were 26 operational staff members from five provinces—East Azerbaijan, Isfahan, Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, and Fars—selected through purposive and random sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews until data saturation was achieved. The analysis followed Graneheim and Lundman's qualitative content analysis method.

Results: Two primary themes emerged from the analysis: organizational factors (with five subcategories: managerial, structural, job-related, perceptual, and compensation-related factors) and personality traits (with seven subcategories: conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, altruism, resilience, and emotional intelligence).

Conclusion: The findings suggest that organizational and personality factors significantly affect the job stress of relief and rescue personnel. It is recommended that these factors be considered when selecting Red Crescent Society volunteers and designing their training programs.

Keywords: Job stress, Rescue and relief workers, Qualitative research

Introduction

Workplace stress is a common issue that affects employees across all levels and sectors. Job stress occurs when the perceived demands of a job exceed an individual's capacity to manage them effectively (1). The intensity of stress can range from mild to severe, depending on the nature of the job and the individual's physiological, psychological, and social conditions (2). Research consistently highlights the significant impact of job stress on both employees and employers, as stressful work environments are closely linked to emotional well-being, physical health, and job performance (3).

Experts identify a wide range of factors contributing to job stress, including discrimination, job insecurity, lack of authority, organizational policies and structure, physical working conditions, job requirements, role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload. These are among the most frequently cited stressors (4). Additionally, stress can

arise when workers feel unsupported by their supervisors or colleagues, lack control over their tasks, or find that their efforts are not adequately rewarded (5).

Rescue work, by its very nature, is particularly prone to stress-inducing factors. Relief and rescue workers are regularly confronted with high-risk situations, physical and psychological injuries, and urgent demands that can lead to significant job stress. They provide essential services to the community 24 hours a day, seven days a week, often in extreme weather conditions. Whether responding to fires in scorching heat or emergencies on frigid nights, these workers remain on call at all times (6). They deliver aid without regard to religion or race, and these responsibilities can intensify stress (7).

Key sources of stress for relief and rescue workers include work overload, interpersonal conflicts, shift work, encounters with death and mortality, lack of psychological support, conflicts with managers, and unclear levels of

authority (8). Research by Zeb Khattak and Qureshi (7) identified several factors affecting the stress levels of rescue workers in Pakistan, such as job role, role ambiguity, workload, and the support they receive from supervisors, family, and colleagues. Similarly, Sepidarkish et al (9) found that high workloads, long shifts, and insufficient rest contribute to job stress in Tehran firefighters.

Given the high levels of stress and demands placed on rescue workers, which can compromise their physical, mental, and social well-being and increase their susceptibility to health risks (10), it is essential to identify the factors contributing to their job stress and develop strategies for effective stress management.

The objective of this study was to identify the factors affecting job stress among relief and rescue workers of the Iranian Red Crescent Society. To date, no qualitative research has been conducted on this topic in Iran, and the few existing studies on job stress in this population are primarily descriptive and correlational (8,11-13). This study is therefore the first one to explore the factors influencing job stress among relief and rescue workers in the Iranian Red Crescent Society using a qualitative approach. Job stress in relief environments is a complex phenomenon and, cannot be fully understood through quantitative data and standardized questionnaires alone. Qualitative methods are essential for exploring the nuanced layers and complex interactions among various stressors. Furthermore, qualitative research can uncover novel and unanticipated stressors not previously identified through quantitative studies, while also allowing participants to articulate their unique experiences in their own words.

Methods

The present study employed a qualitative research design using thematic content analysis. The study's target population consisted of all operational staff (relief and rescue workers) of the Red Crescent Society across Iran who was actively serving in 2024. In the initial phase, purposive sampling was applied, with the selection criteria including the vastness of the region, the presence of key industrial, military, religious, and nuclear centers, major transportation routes, and the likelihood of natural and man-made incidents. Based on these criteria, the provinces of East Azerbaijan, Isfahan, Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, and Fars were identified as the study locations.

In the second phase, for in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in the Red Crescent Societies of the five provinces. Given the large geographical distribution of the participants, interviews were conducted by phone between July and September 2024, with full consent obtained to record each conversation. Depending on the participants' availability and willingness, the interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes, and continued until no new information emerged. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is typically determined by data saturation, which was reached after 20 interviews in this study. However, interviews were extended to 26 participants to ensure comprehensive coverage.

The data were analyzed following Graneheim and Lundman's conventional content analysis methodology (14). To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers adhered to the criteria outlined by Guba and Lincoln (15), including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured by sharing the processed interview data and initial codes with the participants for verification. Dependability was confirmed by having three qualitative research experts review the texts to ensure accurate data processing and analysis. Confirmability was verified by maintaining all research documents and audio files throughout the study, while also incorporating feedback from two expert faculty members. The inter-rater reliability of the coding process was measured using Cohen's kappa coefficient, yielding a value of 0.87. Transferability was enhanced through purposive sampling, with direct quotes from participants provided to facilitate the application of findings in other contexts.

Results

The participants in this study were 26 operational staff members from the Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their mean age was 39.42 ± 6.38 years, and their mean work experience was 18.69 ± 5.35 years. The youngest participant was 26, and the oldest was 51. Similarly, the participants' work experience ranged from 8 to 30 years. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the participants.

This qualitative study employed thematic content analysis. This method minimizes interpretation, focusing primarily on identifying and grouping themes. The researcher's personal feelings and thoughts about the themes are not considered, and thus, interpretation and explanation of their meanings are avoided. Themes are only briefly described in the conclusion (16). The following steps, illustrated with an interview excerpt, were used to extract themes. The remaining interviews were analyzed using the same process.

Step 1: Before analysis, the interviews were transcribed, and sections related to factors affecting employee job stress were isolated.

Step 2: The transcripts were reviewed and edited for grammar and sentence structure.

Step 3: After the initial review, important concepts were highlighted, and each distinct semantic unit was identified. For example, in the following interview excerpt, semantic units are underlined:

"Our main stress is management systems; managers shouldn't make decisions based on hearsay, sudden decisions,

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Province of service	Participant's code	Age	Work experience	Gender	Education	Employment status
East Azerbaijan	1	47	20	Male	Master's	Permanent
	2	51	18	Male	Bachelor's	Fixed-term contract
	3	34	12	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	4	38	15	Male	Master's	Permanent
	5	34	20	Female	Master's	Contractual
	6	38	20	Female	Bachelor's	Contractual
Isfahan	7	38	15	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	8	51	29	Male	Master's	Permanent
	9	35	18	Male	Master's	Permanent
	10	26	8	Male	Bachelor's	Contractual
	11	42	20	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
Tehran	12	39	21	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	13	32	12	Male	Bachelor's	Contractual
	14	39	22	Male	Bachelor's	Contractual
	15	32	16	Male	Bachelor's	Fixed-term contract
	16	36	20	Male	Master's	Contractual
Khorasan Razavi	17	50	21	Male	General physician	Permanent
	18	38	20	Male	Master's	Fixed-term contract
	19	37	21	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	20	39	12	Male	Master's	Permanent
	21	38	15	Male	Bachelor's	Contractual
Fars	22	34	13	Male	Bachelor's	Contractual
	23	47	30	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	24	47	16	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	25	45	27	Male	Bachelor's	Permanent
	26	38	25	Male	Master's	Permanent

decisions that please others, and this wears us out.»

Step 4: The highlighted units were condensed for clarity.

Step 5: Similar condensed units were grouped.

Step 6: The grouped semantic units were reviewed and labeled. The most appropriate concept reflecting the grouped units was assigned as a label, forming a sub-component.

Step 7: Similar sub-components were combined, and an overarching title encompassing all sub-components in the set was assigned.

Step 8: All semantic units within each category were reviewed, and categories were revised as needed.

Step 9: After several days, the original interview transcripts and the categorized text were reread without focusing on semantic units or initial categorizations to ensure comprehensiveness. Any new themes observed were added to the categorization.

Step 10: The semantic units and categorizations from the first round were reviewed for completeness.

Step 11: The categories were reviewed holistically to assess goal achievement.

Step 12: The final categorization was submitted to the supervisor for review and feedback, which was then incorporated.

Step 13: Finally, data analysis identified 80 open codes, which were grouped into two main themes: organizational factors and personality factors. Organizational factors were further divided into five categories: managerial factors, structural factors, job-related factors, perceptual factors, and factors related to the inefficiency of the compensation system. Personality factors were categorized into seven subcategories: conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, altruism, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Table 2 outlines the subcategories, categories, and main themes identified from the data, which are explained below.

Organizational factors

The analysis revealed that organizational factors significantly influence the job stress experienced by operational staff. These factors, identified during the interviews, include managerial factors, structural factors, job-related factors, perceptual factors, and issues related to the inefficiency of the compensation system.

Table 2. Subcategories, categories, and main themes of factors affecting job stress

Main themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Organizational factors	Managerial factors	Managers' decision-making influenced by personal relationships, impulsive and subjective decisions, appointment of non-experts due to nepotism, managers' lack of awareness of organizational issues, lack of perceived support from senior management, poor managerial skills, middle managers' cautious behavior driven by job insecurity, disregard for administrative hierarchy in managerial appointments
	Structural factors	Delayed payments of mission allowances and overtime, inadequate training and crisis management skills, shortage and obsolescence of necessary equipment, lack of organizational support for specialized training (e.g., diving, mountaineering, helicopter operations), absence of documented operational plans for each incident, lack of consideration for job difficulty and early retirement, time-consuming recruitment processes for volunteers, insufficient operational support for missions outside the province, lower mission allowances and overtime pay compared to similar professions, assignment of relief tasks outside staff expertise, absence of a meritocracy system, prevalence of nepotism, favoritism, and cliques in mission assignments, job insecurity, unequal services and benefits for permanent and informal employees
	Job-related factors	Long working hours, shift work, unpredictable incidents, inability to take leave, even on official holidays, high levels of alertness and sensitivity, sleep deprivation and fatigue from being on constant standby, mental and physical exhaustion caused by job-related psychological stress
	Perceptual factors	Perception of unfair pay compared to similar jobs, organizational culture of backstabbing, gossip, and rumors, no distinction between hardworking and non-performing employees, unwarranted interference by colleagues and managers in areas beyond their expertise.
	Inefficiency of the compensation system	Lack of organizational recognition for high performers, focus on punishment rather than encouragement, absence of a performance-based reward system, lack of appealing rewards (e.g., non-cash rewards, incentive leave), disregard for the welfare of operational staff, low salaries, salary disparities between employees and those in similar agencies
Personality factors	Conscientiousness	Sense of duty, responsibility, work commitment, proactivity, speed and initiative in action.
	Extraversion	Building friendly relationships, energetic and active, sensation-seeking.
	Emotional stability	Ability to maintain composure and avoid haste, resilience against negative emotions and pessimism, avoiding impulsive reactions, remaining composed under stress
	Self-efficacy	Self-confidence, trust in one's abilities, self-reliance.
	Altruism	Compassion and empathy, enjoyment in helping others, helping others without seeking personal gain, courage and selflessness, belief in a just world.
	Resilience	Flexibility and adaptability to crisis situations, capacity to overcome difficulties and unfavorable conditions.
	Emotional intelligence	Self-management, emotion control, particularly in crisis, teamwork skills.

Managerial factors

"Managerial factors" refer to elements stemming from managers' attitudes toward the organization and its employees. These factors, through their impact on managerial behavior and organizational approach, are considered the primary source of occupational stress for employees. Most participants believed that a significant portion of their stress was imposed by the organization's management. For example, one participant noted: *"Our primary source of stress is the managers. They don't understand the conditions, and they make decisions to please others. A manager should know how to manage and not make decisions based on hearsay or gossip"* (Participant 1). Another commented: *"One hundred percent of our stress comes from management; the managerial perspective is crucial"* (Participant 9). Others shared similar concerns, such as: *"We expect support from our managers, but we don't get it"* (Participant 10).

Structural factors

"Structural factors" are elements embedded in organizational mechanisms that result in behavioral consequences, leading to job stress among employees. Participants identified structural issues as significant sources of stress. For instance: *"The most stress happens when we don't have the necessary tools for operations"* (Participant 2), *"Sometimes, transfers within the organization aren't based on position; when everyone is in their proper place, the work gets done right"* (Participant 2), *"Mission allowances and overtime pay are unfair, and this causes stress"* (Participant 3), and *"What's the difference between us and the permanent staff? They tell us we're contract workers—no extra bonuses, no welfare benefits. The permanent employees don't work as much as we do"* (Participant 6).

Job-related factors

"Job-related factors" refer to the nature and content of the tasks associated with the job. From the participants' perspective, the inherent stress of rescue work is rooted in the job itself. For example, participants noted: *"The main source of stress in search and rescue is the long shifts"* (Participants 4 and 5), *"Overall, this job is stressful. Coordinating personnel on-site is our responsibility, and ensuring that everyone returns safely adds to our stress"* (Participants 5 and 8), *"The workload is heavy, and we are both physically and mentally exhausted"* (Participants 5 and 20), and *"When the phone rings, I get stressed. We can't turn off our phones; we have no peace and must always stay alert"* (Participants 4 and 11).

Perceptual factors

Regardless of how fair, precise, and merit-based an organizational system may be, employees' perceptions of

injustice or discrimination within the structure can cause job stress. For example: *"In this organization, there's no distinction between those who work hard and those who don't; in fact, those who work less are often more rewarded"* (Participants 3 and 12), *"There's discrimination between permanent and contract staff. Permanent employees are under less pressure"* (Participant 14), *"Some people feel threatened by our work ethic, and that leads to a lot of undermining within the organization"* (Participants 4 and 20), and *"Our salaries are lower than those in emergency services or firefighting"* (Participant 22).

Factors related to inefficiencies in the compensation system

Participants expressed that the compensation system in the organization is inadequate, and that delays or insufficient payments create psychological pressure on employees. For example: *"In this organization, employees aren't valued, and there's no appreciation"* (Participant 1), *"Given our salary, the work just isn't worth it. Our pay situation isn't good—we don't get vacation benefits, there's no hotel arrangement, and we have no welfare benefits"* (Participants 10 and 17), and *"We aren't financially secure. Our minds are constantly occupied with concerns because costs have gone up"* (Participant 19).

Personality factors

Numerous studies indicate that individuals bring their personality traits into the workplace, influencing how they perceive and respond to their environment. Participants in this study identified several key personality traits that are crucial for rescue workers in high-stress situations, including:

Conscientiousness

Participants emphasized that in crisis situations, rescue workers need to demonstrate a high degree of conscientiousness, characterized by traits such as trustworthiness, responsibility, diligence, and precision. For example, some noted: *"A rescue worker must possess strong work ethics"* (Participants 2 and 3), *"I feel responsible for the equipment and tools under my care, but new recruits don't handle the department's equipment with the same level of responsibility"* (Participant 3). Other participants added: *"An operational team must be active and dynamic"* (Participant 9), *"Rescue workers need to be highly committed to their work and passionate about their job"* (Participant 10), and *"A rescue worker should act quickly and take initiative"* (Participant 23).

Extraversion

Participants highlighted that, due to the nature of the job and frequent interaction with the public, rescue workers need to have high levels of extraversion to mitigate stress during crises. This includes being sociable, warm, assertive, and enthusiastic. For instance: *"This job is exciting, and people are drawn to it because of personal interest and a desire for excitement"* (Participant 12). *"In this role, some people may be hostile towards rescue workers, sometimes even physically aggressive, but a rescue worker must remain people-oriented"* (Participants 10 and 24). Another participant added: *"A rescue worker should maintain friendly relationships with others"* (Participant 16).

Emotional stability

Individuals with low emotional stability are more prone to anxiety, depression, and insecurity. According to participants, maintaining calmness and composure in crisis situations is essential for rescue workers. For example: *"An operational force must stay calm and avoid acting hastily"* (Participants 4 and 8). Another participant remarked: *"Someone who becomes distressed and faints at the scene of an incident is not suited for this job"* (Participant 8), while others emphasized: *"A rescue worker must have a high tolerance threshold and exhibit patience, especially in road accidents and natural disasters"* (Participants 12 and 23).

Self-efficacy

Participants also noted the importance of self-efficacy, defined as confidence in one's ability to handle stress during crisis situations. For example: *"As operational staff, we must prove ourselves during incidents and perform at our best"* (Participant 1). Another participant added: *"I have the skills to perform well, even if I were in a different organization"* (Participant 3). Several participants noted: *"Most personnel are self-reliant and have undergone extensive training"* (Participant 25).

Altruism

Many participants mentioned that altruism—compassion, empathy, and a willingness to help others without seeking personal gain—plays a crucial role in reducing stress for rescue workers. For instance: *"Everyone has a belief, and I believe that helping others brings positive results; it impacts my life"* (Participant 3). Others shared: *"People should be committed to the organization, not just focused on money"* (Participant 3), *"Helping others gives me a sense of fulfillment"* (Participants 6 and 25), and *"A rescue worker must be willing to face danger and be self-sacrificing"* (Participant 9). Additionally, one participant noted: *"Helping others should not be motivated by personal benefit, especially for volunteers"* (Participant 16).

Resilience

Resilience, or the ability to successfully cope with challenging situations, natural disasters, and traumatic experiences, was identified as a key trait for rescue workers. As some participants explained: *"People who can't withstand the conditions are not suitable for rescue work"* (Participant 4). *"In this job, we must accept and

deal with the reality of mortality" (Participant 4). Others added: *"Because we love our work, we've adapted to the conditions"* (Participants 5 and 6), and *"A rescue worker must have a strong spirit and the ability to adapt to crises"* (Participant 13).

Emotional intelligence

Participants also cited emotional intelligence—the ability to manage emotions and practice self-regulation—as an important factor in reducing occupational stress. For example: *"I try to practice self-management, such as reducing stress through coffee, recreation, and exercise"* (Participant 6). Another participant noted: *"I control stressful situations as much as I can"* (Participant 7), while others stated: *"A rescue worker should avoid acting emotionally in crises and must control their feelings"* (Participant 12), and *"This job involves a lot of variety, and tasks are carried out in teams"* (Participant 13).

Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to identify the factors influencing job stress among operational staff (relief and rescue workers) in the Iranian Red Crescent Society. Through a thematic content analysis, two main themes were identified: organizational factors (with five components and 53 sub-components) and personality factors (with seven components and 27 sub-components). A review of the literature reveals that previous studies have explored the relationship between some of these variables and job stress among employees, including organizational factors (17-19), the Big Five personality traits (20-23), self-efficacy (24,25), altruism (26,27), resilience (28), and emotional intelligence (25).

According to Keefe (17), employees are highly sensitive to managerial decisions that affect them directly. Employees require support from top-level managers to facilitate their activities and to reward efforts that contribute to organizational goals (18). When employees perceive greater organizational support, they not only become more motivated and work harder, but they also perceive fewer threats and stressors, as they view the organization as a supporter capable of managing adverse conditions (29).

Furthermore, the absence of merit-based systems—resulting from poor management practices and insufficient planning, such as hiring based on nepotism rather than merit—was identified as a significant source of stress for operational staff. Employees who are uncertain about their future employment status and lack assurance regarding future benefits, such as retirement insurance, experience chronic anxiety. This anxiety can negatively affect their work performance and reduce productivity. Consequently, job insecurity exacerbates tension and anxiety, diminishing employees' mental health and well-being (30).

Another concern for human resource managers is the presence of employees with different employment statuses but identical job responsibilities. Disparities in earnings, performance evaluations, promotions, and other tangible and intangible factors are among the primary contributors to job stress. Additionally, non-regular employees face the challenge of being excluded from the organization's welfare services, unlike regular employees. Since many benefits are tied to organizational membership (31), differentiating between regular and non-regular employees inevitably increases tension between these groups.

A sense of inequality and injustice within the organization can severely undermine team morale. When employees perceive that their rewards are not aligned with their performance, or when they feel that their contributions are undervalued by management or that they receive inadequate compensation, it leads to psychological distress (32).

Moreover, research indicates that personality traits significantly influence how individuals respond to daily stressors. People with low emotional stability are more likely to feel overwhelmed when facing job demands, struggle to maintain focus, and experience helplessness in stressful situations (33). Extraverted individuals, on the other hand, tend to cope more effectively with adversity, as they are more likely to seek and receive social support (22). Conscientious individuals, known for their diligence and goal-oriented nature, typically experience lower stress levels because of their strong motivation to achieve (33). Additionally, self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in determining the level of stress and anxiety during challenging tasks (34). Individuals with high self-efficacy view difficult tasks as opportunities rather than threats, approach them with confidence, and believe they can control the situation. This positive and confident outlook fosters personal success, reduces stress, and lowers the risk of depression (25).

Emotional intelligence also significantly influences the level of job stress experienced by emergency responders. In crisis situations, individuals lacking self-awareness often become easily frustrated and angered, leading to difficulties in personal and professional relationships and even aggressive behavior. Emergency responders must be attuned to the needs of others and the existing challenges, which require a high degree of emotional awareness and sensitivity. Furthermore, some studies show that strengthening psychological traits, such as resilience and adaptability, can enhance coping mechanisms in difficult and traumatic situations (28). Resilience, defined as the ability to adapt to disasters and stressors, overcome them, and even grow stronger through these experiences, is supported by inner strength, social skills, and interactions with the environment. This trait manifests as a positive coping mechanism (35).

Additionally, in the workplace, altruistic tendencies serve as an effective coping strategy, enabling employees to manage job stress more effectively and reduce the desire to leave their jobs. Altruism can be viewed as a form of self-regulation (36), helping individuals cope better with stress and maintain job satisfaction.

A limitation of this study was the inability to conduct in-person interviews due to the geographically dispersed nature of the participant population. Consequently, all interviews were conducted by telephone. Furthermore, since participants were from various cities, it was not possible to examine the effects of cultural-geographic contexts, subcultures, and ethnic differences.

Given the significance of job stress in the Iranian Red Crescent Society, the following recommendations are proposed:
1. Job stress among operational staff should be periodically assessed, and efforts should be made to manage it through the enhancement of psychological capacities, training in stress management, emotional regulation, positive thinking, self-efficacy, and resilience skills.
2. Psychosocial support systems should be established, including individual and group counseling, along with group sessions for sharing stressful experiences and emotional release after intense operations.
3. To balance work and family life and prevent fatigue and burnout from long shifts, flexible working hours and diverse options should be offered to employees.
4. Organizational communication should be improved by creating more effective channels between management and staff and encouraging participation in decision-making processes.
5. In addition to salaries and wages, managers should offer incentives such as better working conditions, recognition for achievements, and fostering a sense of belonging to motivate employees and encourage engagement.

Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that among the factors affecting job stress of rescue and relief personnel in the Red Crescent Society are managerial factors, structural factors, job-related factors, and perceptual factors, factors related to the inefficiency of the compensation system, personality factors including conscientiousness, extroversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, altruism, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Therefore, it is recommended to emphasize these factors in the selection of Red Crescent Society volunteers, and also in training courses.

Authors' Contribution
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Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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