

Ambition, Inequity and Systemic Stress: Causes and Consequences in Modern Society

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Systemic stress, a pervasive challenge in modern society, stems from structural forces rooted in greed, dishonesty, and inequity, which undermine morality, ethics, and compassion. This integrative review synthesizes Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model, the Job Demands-Resources Model, and the Family Stress Model to explore the causes of stress across family, workplace, and societal domains, emphasizing ambition-driven competition, undemocratic practices, and social inequities. Key stressors include economic hardship, health issues, job instability, frequent policy changes, workplace politics, undemocratic decision-making, societal competition, cultural disparities, misbehaviour, and corruption, all of which erode trust and ethical conduct. These stressors disrupt coping mechanisms, elevate cortisol levels, and contribute to mental and physical health problems, as evidenced by peer-reviewed studies (1956–2023) cited in this study. The article underscores the need for a moral shift toward honesty, compassion, and democratic values to counteract greed-driven policies and foster equitable societies. Proposed interventions include ethical leadership to promote integrity, democratic workplace reforms to enhance fairness, equitable policies to ensure access to resources, and practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and AI-driven mental health tools to support well-being. By prioritizing morality, honesty, and collective responsibility, these strategies aim to dismantle competitive, unethical cultures and create healthier, morally stronger societies where compassion and democratic principles thrive, thereby reducing systemic stress and its societal toll.

Keywords: systemic stress, undemocratic practices, job demands-resources model, transactional model of stress, ethical leadership, social inequity, greed and ambition, stress interventions

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1. Introduction

Stress, defined as mental or emotional strain from adverse circumstances, is a universal challenge with profound implications for health and societal functioning [1]. Hans Selye distinguished between eustress and distress, with the latter dominating modern life [2]. This article argues that stress is a systemic outcome of socioeconomic, political, and institutional arrangements driven by greed, dishonesty, ambition, and inequity, disproportionately affecting broader populations. This study integrates Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model and the JD-R Model to analyze stress causation, highlighting stressors such as: uncertainties in life, unexpected/unprecedented incidents, fear, economic problems, health issues, frequent changes in job assignment, job instability, inability to cope due to age or family/health issues, workplace and societal politics, decision-makers' ambitions, corporate greed, undemocratic practices, misbehaviour in family and workplace, excessive workloads, unreasonable targets, societal corruption, social and cultural stressors, economic stress due to price hikes and profit-driven practices, frequent curriculum changes in the academic sector, forced extracurricular participation of students, academic exploitation, intense competition for academic admissions, and healthcare workplace pressures. Systemic interventions, including yoga, physical/mental exercises, AI tools, equitable policies, and ethical leadership, are proposed to address these stressors and their societal impacts.

2. Methodology

This integrative review synthesizes literature from psychology, sociology, and public health to examine systemic causes and consequences of stress. Sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals, books, and reputable reports published between 1956 and 2023. Databases searched included PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using terms like "systemic stress," "social inequity," "workplace stress," "stress interventions," "academic competition," and "healthcare stress." Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed studies in English addressing stress causation or interventions; non-peer-reviewed or non-English sources were excluded. A number of studies were reviewed, integrating theoretical models (Transactional Model, JD-R Model, Family Stress Model) with empirical

evidence for a holistic analysis. No primary data were collected, and thus no ethical approval was required.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

This model posits that stress arises from interactions between individuals and their environment, mediated by cognitive appraisals [1]. Primary appraisal evaluates a stressor's threat, while secondary appraisal assesses coping resources. For example, uncertainty in job roles or competitive academic admissions is perceived as threatening with limited resources. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) measures stress perception [3].

3.2 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R Model categorizes workplace conditions into demands (e.g., workload, target, task changes, patient care responsibilities) and resources (e.g., autonomy, support, infrastructure etc.) [4]. High demands with low resources lead to stress. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) assesses these dynamics [5]. For example, curriculum changes, competitive academic pressures, and healthcare workplace demands increase stress [6].

3.3 Family Stress Model

Conger and Elder's Family Stress Model explains how economic pressures, such as poverty or job loss, trigger a cascade of stressors within families [7]. Economic hardship leads to parental distress (e.g., anxiety, depression), which disrupts parenting behaviours, such as reduced warmth or increased conflict, ultimately affecting child outcomes like behavioural problems or academic underperformance [7]. For instance, post-2008 recession studies showed that financial strain increased parental stress, leading to higher rates of family conflict and child anxiety in low-income households [8]. The model highlights how systemic inequities, such as greed-driven economic policies or wage stagnation, exacerbate family stress by limiting resources for coping [7, 8].

4. Causes of Stress

4.1 Uncertainties in Life

Life uncertainties, such as job insecurity or societal

changes, are major stressors, with studies showing correlations with elevated cortisol and mental health issues [9]. Lazarus and Folkman's model highlights how ambiguity triggers anxiety [1].

4.2 Unexpected or Unprecedented Incidents

Unexpected events, like natural disasters or layoffs, disrupt coping mechanisms, causing acute stress and post-traumatic stress symptoms [10]. The JD-R Model notes that unpredictable demands overwhelm resources [4].

4.3 Fear of Anything

Fear of failure, rejection, or instability amplifies stress, framed as a perceived threat in cognitive appraisals [1]. Workplace fears, such as competitiveness, failures, new challenges/benchmarks, improper decisions/judgements, or legal repercussions in healthcare, increase burnout [11].

4.4 Economic Problems

Economic hardship, driven by inequality or corporate greed, disrupts family dynamics [7]. The 2008 financial crisis exemplifies economic instability's stress effects [8].

4.5 Health Problems

Personal or familial health issues create a cycle of physical and psychological strain, amplified by greedy healthcare systems [8, 12].

4.6 Frequent Changes in Job Assignments

Frequent task changes disrupt routines, increasing stress due to role ambiguity, a high demand in the JD-R Model [4, 13].

4.7 Inability to Cope Due to Age, Family Problems, and Health Issues

Aging, family conflicts, or health issues reduce coping capacity, intensifying stress when resources are inadequate [1, 14].

4.8 Repeated Change of Syllabus/Curriculum in Academics

Frequent curriculum changes burden teachers with preparation demands, disrupting pedagogical continuity and increasing burnout [4, 5, 15].

4.9 Academic Exploitation

Students might face stress from forced extra-curricular and faculty-driven tasks

(e.g., organizing seminars, research work), prioritizing faculty promotion over student development, leading to burnout, anxiety, and, in extreme cases, severe mental health issues like depression and suicide [4, 16, 17, 18, 19].

4.10 Competitive Academic Admissions

Students face intense stress due to competition for limited seats in higher education, with pressure to secure admission to prestigious courses or institutions. This competition, starting post-school and persisting through higher studies, is linked to severe mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicide [18, 19]. The Transactional Model highlights how the perceived threat of failure and limited coping resources amplify stress [1].

4.11 Healthcare Workplace Pressures

Doctors and healthcare staff experience significant stress due to the demands of managing critically ill patients and the fear of being blamed, sued, or attacked by patients' families if outcomes are unfavourable. These pressures, coupled with high workloads and emotional exhaustion, contribute to burnout and mental health challenges, as explained by the JD-R Model [4, 20].

4.12 Workplace and Societal Politics

Excessive politics fosters toxic environments, with ambition-driven competition undermining trust and increasing stress [21]. Political turmoil is a major societal stressor [22].

4.13 Ambition-Driven Stressors

Leaders' and colleagues' ambitions increase workloads and insecurity of employees across all sectors. In academia, prestige-driven policies and "publish or perish" mandates burden faculty and students [23]. Higher Education Institutions' pressures to meet regulatory benchmarks (e.g., events, research, outreach) exacerbate stress, often tied to rankings or accreditation [24]. Competitive cultures, in all sectors, foster rivalry, undermining collaboration [21].

4.14 Corporate Greed and Societal Corruption

Profit-driven strategies and corruption increase job insecurity, workloads, and economic instability, with ripple effects from events like the 2008 financial crisis [8, 25].

4.15 Inhuman and Undemocratic Practices

Undemocratic structures in workplaces and families foster alienation and distress, while participatory democracy reduces stress [26, 27].

4.16 Misbehaviour in Family and Workplace

Abusive or dishonest conduct creates chronic stress and erodes trust [28, 29].

4.17 Excessive Workloads and Unreasonable Targets

High workloads and unrealistic targets, common in corporate settings, deplete resources and increase burnout [4].

4.18 Social and Cultural Stressors

Cultural norms, such as individualistic pressures in Western societies or collectivist expectations in Eastern contexts, shape stress perception and coping [30]. Gender disparities, including workplace discrimination and caregiving burdens, disproportionately stress women and marginalized genders, exacerbating inequities [31, 32].

4.19 Economic Stress Due to Price Hikes and Profit-Driven Practices

Economic stress arises from price hikes, unreasonable pricing, and profit-driven practices by traders, often unchecked by regulatory controls. Reduction in interest rates on savings schemes further strains financial security, increasing stress, particularly for low- and middle-income households [7, 21].

4.20 Stress Due to Cultural Mismatch, Change, or Incompatibility

Cultural transitions, such as migration or globalization-driven changes, create stress through cultural mismatch or incompatibility. Individuals navigating unfamiliar cultural norms, or facing pressure to assimilate, experience heightened anxiety and identity-related stress [30].

Table 1: Systemic Stressors Across Domains

Category	Stressors	Description	References
Economic	Economic hardship, price hikes, corporate greed, profit-driven practices	Financial instability, unchecked price increases, and greed-driven policies disrupt family and personal well-being	[7, 8]
Workplace	Job instability, frequent task changes, excessive workloads, workplace politics, unreasonable targets	Role ambiguity, high demands, and toxic competitive environments increase burnout	[4, 5, 13, 21]
Academic	Frequent curriculum changes, forced extra-curricular jobs, academic exploitation, competitive admissions	Curriculum shifts, faculty-driven tasks, and intense competition for seats cause burnout and anxiety	[4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19]
Societal/Cultural	Undemocratic practices, societal corruption, cultural mismatches, gender disparities, political turmoil	Alienation, mistrust, cultural transitions, and discrimination exacerbate stress	[22, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32]

5. Biological Effects of Stress

Chronic stress activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevating cortisol and increasing risks of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and depression [33]. It suppresses immune function [34], induces neuroplastic changes (e.g., reduced hippocampal volume) [35], and accelerates telomere shortening, increasing disease risk [36]. Stress elevates reactive oxygen species (ROS), causing oxidative stress [37], and disrupts the gut microbiome, exacerbating mental health issues [38].

6. Societal Effects of Stress

Chronic stress reduces productivity, increases healthcare costs, and erodes social cohesion, amplifying systemic inequities [39].

7. Interventions and Recommendations

7.1 Individual Interventions

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) manage stress [40].

Yoga practices (asanas, pranayama, meditation) reduce cortisol and enhance resilience [41]. Physical exercises (aerobics, strength training) and mental exercises (journaling) improve coping [42].

7.2 Technological Interventions

AI-driven mental health apps deliver CBT-based guidance, while wearables monitor stress indicators (e.g., heart rate variability) for real-time interventions [43]. AI analytics can optimize academic and healthcare workloads and detect exploitative practices, reducing stress [44]. Virtual reality platforms provide immersive relaxation experiences [45].

7.3 Organizational Interventions

Reduce workloads, promote workplace democracy, and limit curriculum changes (in academic sectors) with adequate preparation time [5, 24]. Policies preventing unethical exploitation of staff and students and ensuring gender equity in workplaces mitigate stress [16, 31].

7.4 Societal Interventions

Equitable policies, anti-corruption measures, and mental health campaigns address systemic stressors [46]. Cultural sensitivity training can reduce stress from cultural and gender disparities [30].

7.5 Policy Reforms

Align policies with well-being, ensuring resources match demands and prioritizing equity [24].

7.6 Ethical Leadership

Training to curb greed-driven stress and foster collegial harmony [47].

8. Conclusion

This review makes it clear that stress in today's world is not just an individual problem but is deeply rooted in the structures and systems of society. Greed, dishonesty, inequity, and undemocratic practices create environments where stress becomes chronic and widespread. The theoretical models discussed – the Transactional Model, the Job Demands-Resources Model, and the Family Stress Model – show how ambition and exploitation in family life, workplaces, academic institutions, and society as a whole lead to significant stress, affecting people's health, emotional well-being, and social relationships.

Research shows that stress has serious biological impacts, including weakening of the immune system, changes in the brain, and faster cellular ageing. Tackling this problem requires more than individual-level solutions. While practices like yoga, mindfulness, and AI-based mental health tools can help people cope, they do not address the root causes. What is needed is a shift in how society operates. Leaders must act with integrity, workplaces must become fairer and more democratic, and policies must focus on equity and human dignity. At the core, society needs to move away from greed and intense competition towards honesty, empathy, and collective responsibility. Only by making these deep changes can we hope to reduce stress at its source and build a healthier, more just, and more compassionate society.

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