

The career psychological experiences of academic department chairpersons at a South African university

Frans Cilliers & J.W. Pienaar

ABSTRACT

The existing research on the academic department chairperson focuses on the structure of the position more than on the role in terms of career, psychological functioning, coping and well-being of the incumbent. The objective of this research was to describe the career psychological experiences of academic department chairpersons (ADC) in their organisational role. A qualitative and descriptive research design was chosen for a case study of 24 chairpersons. Data were gathered using a focus group followed by thematic analysis. The manifesting themes were crossing the boundary into the career of an ADC, relationships, experienced conflict and loss in the role, personal well-being and future career as an ADC. A psychological profile was constructed, and the data were interpreted on the basis of various stress coping models. It was concluded that these ADCs did not cope well psychologically, which significantly influenced their work performance. Research on the depth psychology role analysis of the ADC was recommended, followed by an inter-university investigation into the career dilemmas experienced, resulting in their lack of work satisfaction and productivity.

Key words: career, task, role, boundaries, conflict, loss, work stress, non-coping, job demands, role identity

Introduction

The dynamic nature of the new economy and the post-modern world of work is characterised by constant change, conflict, competition, chaos, paradox and limited

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resources (Kets de Vries 2014; Meyer & Boninelli 2007) and requires management and leadership to cope with ever-increasing technical, interpersonal and systemic organisational complexity (Clutterbuck 2003). Coping with these demands is associated with proactive career management (Bergh & Theron 2009; Coetzee & Schreuder 2011), the competence to tap into various growth-stimulating job and personal resources (Tremblay & Messervey 2011) and the demonstration of effective servant, authentic, ethical and transformation leadership (Mahembe & Engelbrecht 2013). Conversely, non-coping is associated with facing career dilemmas (Pienaar 2005) manifesting as work dissatisfaction, stress, anxiety, feelings of disorientation, doubt, vulnerability and ineffective work relationships (Gumani, Fourie & Terre Blanche 2013; Young, Koortzen & Oosthuizen 2012). These literature references conclude that managers and leaders who cope in their roles will be successful and flourish in their work and their relationships, while those who do not cope will experience distress and be unable to add successfully to their organisation's bottom line and human interactions. It is therefore important to address the psychological experiences of managers and leaders in taking up their organisational roles so as to create successful and authentic organisations (Kets de Vries 2010; 2014).

Against this background, this research focused on the psychological experiences of a group of academic department chairpersons (ADCs) in coping with their career demands.

The position of ADC is described as a paradox (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch & Tucker 1999), a balancing act (Gmelch 2004) and as neither "fish nor fowl" (Moodie 2002), based on the debate whether the incumbent should be an academic involved in management, or a manager involved in academia. As a solution, most previous research recommended mechanistic interventions such as needs analysis, structural change in terms of the duality debate (Floyd & Dimmock 2011; Reiter 2008), human resources inputs such as scientific selection, job and management training (Flavell, Jones & Ladyshevsky 2008) and performance assessment (London 2011; Middendorf 2009; Olson 2008). More recent literature sees leadership development as an added extension of the role of the ADC (Drew, Ehrich & Hansford 2008; Foster 2010), which adds to the role complexity. Although most studies agree that this unique duality causes negative work and psychological experiences among ADCs (Floyd 2012; Gmelch & Miskin 1993; Whitsett 2007), especially high levels of stress and burnout (Mirvis, Graney, Ingram, Jun Tang & Osborn Kilpatrick 2006; Wolverson, Gmelch, Wolverson & Sarros 1999), relatively little research has studied the manifesting dynamic psychological experiences (Wolverson, Ackerman & Holt 2005). Therefore, the present research does not investigate the structural aspects of

the position, but rather sees these as the broad context within which the intense and dynamic psychological and coping experiences can be described.

Literature review

The role of the academic department chairperson

The ADC's career path typically starts as a postgraduate student in a subject field and academic department, and subsequent appointment as a professor and eventually as chairperson (Wescott 2000). Worldwide on average, new male ADCs are aged in their upper 40s, and females are slightly younger; both genders stay in the position for about six years (Buller 2009).

The role is described as a chair (in relationship to the dean at a more senior level) and a head (in relationship to more junior staff members) (Smith 2005) – another example of duality. The content of the ADC role has been analysed extensively (Berdrow 2010; Carroll & Wolverton 2004; Graham & Benoit 2004) and is generally described as follows: curriculum/programme development and management (tuition, research, service), departmental governance (mission, goals, policies, climate), office management (supervision), faculty matters (work load, committee work, staff development/performance), student matters (advice, counselling), liaison with the external public (educational/professional associations, alumni, business), financial and facilities management (budget, funding), data management, and institutional support and advancement. With some variation, researchers (Buller 2009; Hecht et al. 1999; Potgieter & Coetzee 2010) mention the ADC's role competencies to include intelligence, interpersonal communication, consensus building, staff motivation, administration, financial skills and implementation of university policy and directives.

Thus, the ADC role includes being an academic, a manager and a leader. Being an academic requires an above-average record of scholarship and publication, acting as a professional role model, figurehead and advocate (Potgieter, Basson & Coetzee 2011). Being a manager requires dealing effectively with the general middle management responsibilities (Hancock & Hellawell 2003) of planning, organising, conflict and time management, identifying and understanding training needs, and control matters (Aziz, Mullins, Balzer, Grauer, Burnfield, Lodato & Cohen-Powless 2005; Nguyen, 2012; Schwinghammer, Rodriguez, Weinstein, Sorofman, Bosso, Kerr & Haden 2012; Sotirakou 2004; Stanley & Algert 2007).

The leadership role of the ADC is not yet explicitly defined in terms of expectations within the academic context. Although it is agreed that ADCs participate in activities to involve, influence, coordinate and guide people's organisational activities willingly

and responsibly towards attaining positive goals and outcomes (as a general definition of leadership – Avolio 2007; Bennis 2007), it is believed that ADCs are employed as middle management and that they are not involved in the higher and abstract levels of organisational activities such as strategy and systemic goal setting (Amzat 2011). It could be hypothesised that having to function at this middle level of management and decision-making could be experienced as frustrating and de-authorising (Hirschhorn 1997) to academics who are used to intelligent and high-level strategic thinking in their subject fields at national and international levels.

Theoretically, almost all known corporate leadership models are applied to the role, such as democratic, situational, strategic (Kola 2006), transactional, transformational and positive psychology leadership (Bennett 1983; Buller 2009; Gittens 2009; Hecht et al. 1999; Klar 2012; Mathews 2007; Sarros, Gmelch & Tanewski 1997). In practice ADCs struggle with supervision and management, and even more with leadership in which they have limited training or exposure at best. This leads to inner conflict and being de-authorised in taking up the expected leadership role (Whitsett 2007).

Dynamically, the ADC's relationships imply a boundary position (Gmelch 2004) between the outside and the inside of the academic department. Towards the outside, the ADC reports to a wide variety of stakeholders (Eulau 1998) – upwards in the line function to the dean and the principal, sideways in the staff function to administrative specialists (such as human resources, finance, marketing, safety), as well as to their subject societies, professions and the sponsors/parents of students (Graham & Benoit 2004). Most literature describes these outside contacts in transactional terms where the ADC executes policy on behalf of the institution and acts as spokesperson with limited authority for decision-making (Carroll & Wolverson 2004). Towards the inside, the ADC manages colleagues and administrative staff in a direct reporting relationship, and students (indirectly) on academic activities (tuition and research) (Foster 2010). Ironically, ADCs report (Drew et al. 2008) spending most of their time and energy outside of the boundary on activities they are not trained for, and which they experience as de-authorising. They spend significantly less time on activities and relationships inside the departmental boundary where their abstract reasoning, intellectual insight and academic supervision are valued.

The psychological challenges inherent in the ADC role

Taking up the role of an ADC is described as a major career transition (Addison, 2008; Bergh & Theron 2009; Sandford 2010). As an academic, one's interest in and loyalty to the discipline and subject grows into a specialist role with relative independence, freedom and authority in terms of content and time to build and

share knowledge with and among like-minded colleagues and students (Floyd 2012; Hecht 1999). Next, the individual moves (through choice or experienced force) into a middle management and quasi-leadership position without academic or in-service training, competency assessment or feedback about the person–job fit. This implies a generalist role dependent on the application of pre-determined policies and rules, with logical, mechanistic and limited authorised decision-making (Hecht et al. 1999; Kogan & Teichler 2007; Rowley & Sherman 2003; Wescott 2000). Next, the individual is expected to transition into a leadership role which requires insight into and skill in the complexity of the university's business and organisational strategy and goals, linked with the manifesting human relations, without training, development or the realisation that leadership may be linked to personality style. Often university management (who also started out their careers as academics) do not understand the leadership dynamics and complexity themselves, yet such understanding is expected from a new academic without background, training or competence in leadership (Hecht 1999). The absence of behavioural boundaries and benchmarks that is experienced makes the ADC vulnerable to criticism from authority figures and colleagues. ADCs seem to be thrown into the proverbial 'deep end' where many sink, and swimming depends on the strength of the individual's ego, resilience (Kotzé & Nel 2013) and synergistic awareness (Mirvis et al. 2006).

Non-coping and coping in the role

The international literature offers strong evidence that ADCs do not cope well psychologically with their role demands (Abbassi 2008; Czech & Forward 2010; Drew et al. 2008; Keith & Buckley 2011; Wilson 2006). This leads to experiences of being disempowered, unhappy and, in terms of work behaviour, inefficient and non-productive. The existing literature has not yet explored the ADC's experiences in terms of relevant coping models.

Non-coping is linked to work and occupational stress (Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua & Hapuararchi 2002), which is described as the experienced discrepancy between one's perceived work environment threats, over one's available internal intellectual, emotional, motivational and interpersonal resources to cope with the threats (Rothmann, Jackson & Kruger 2003). This process manifests in physical, psychological and behavioural reactions such as psychosomatic illnesses, work fatigue, burnout and depression (Houkes, Janssen, De Jonge & Nijhuis 2001; Mirvis et al. 2006). Conversely, coping is defined as one's growth towards optimal human functioning (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn 2003), manifesting as the integration of one's potential. This refers to how one can mobilise positive responses to perceived

external and internal stressors by managing or regulating one's cognitive, emotional and behavioural resources (Lazarus & Folkman 1984).

In South Africa, research by Schreuder and Coetzee (2010) showed that coping is one of the most-cited constructs used to describe organisational functioning. It has been described in its relatedness to stress (Coetzee & Cilliers 2001) and studied among various populations, mostly in the police service. This includes police officers' stress (Koortzen 1996; Louw & Viviers 2011), suicide tendencies (Pienaar 2002; Rothmann & Strijdom 2002), burnout, engagement (Storm 2002; Storm & Rothmann 2003; Wiese, Rothmann & Storm 2003) and inner strengths (Gumani et al. 2013). Young et al. (2012) studied coping with trauma among members of the police service from a systems psychodynamic perspective. These studies indicated low levels of coping manifesting in the police service, because of the high level of stress involved in their day-to-day work. Coping among nursing staff (Cilliers 2003; Van der Colff & Rothmann 2009) also indicated lower than average coping. In comparison, hospital pharmacists (Rothmann & Malan 2011) and corporate pharmaceutical staff (Storm & Rothmann 2003) reported higher coping levels than police and nursing staff. Coping in organisations in general (Rothmann, Jorgensen & Hill 2011), and among leaders (Kossuth & Cilliers 2002) and managers (Spangenberg & Orpen-Lyall 2000), is low to medium. In education, coping among unemployed African graduates (Coetzee & Esterhuizen 2010) is low, while it is slightly higher among school educators (Jackson, Rothmann & Van de Vijver 2006) and academic staff in general (Barkhuizen & Rothmann 2008). No data about coping behaviour among academic department chairpersons could be found. From the literature and research results discussed, it could be expected that their levels of experienced stress will be high, which will result in low levels of coping with their role demands.

Many models exist to study work-related well-being. Luthans (2002) offers a macro perspective on positive organisational behaviour, while the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli 2001) specifies behaviours linked to non-coping and coping behaviours. Job demands are seen as those physical, social and organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs, such as workload, role conflict and ambiguity (Bedrow 2010). Job resources are described as the organisational aspects of a job that are instrumental in achieving work goals, which may also reduce job demands. These include social support (supervisory and collegial), job enhancement opportunities (increased power and autonomy), participation in decision-making processes, reinforcement contingencies, recognition and individual contribution, opportunities for advancement and career growth, and financial or non-financial

rewards (Rothmann 2002). High emotional demands need sufficient emotional resources, without which the result is the absence of psychological and physical well-being.

More specific behavioural constructs are studied in Salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1987) and Fortigenesis (Strümpfer 1995) with their focus on the origins of health and wellness, the location, awareness and optimisation of strengths, personal and social resources, and adaptive tendencies to select appropriate strategies to deal with confronting stressors and anxieties. This includes Sense of Coherence (SOC) (Antonovsky 1993) (one's pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of coherence manifesting as comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) and many other so-called positive psychological (Snyder & Lopez 2009) behaviours such as engagement, resilience, flow, flourishing, mindfulness, positive emotions and authentic happiness.

Problem statement

The review of international research confirms the inherent complexity and confused identity of the ADC role. Incumbents seem to struggle with the career demands (Coetzee & Schreuder 2011) in terms of their understanding of the relevant economic and business matters as well as the accompanying interpersonal dynamics. Similar South African research on management competencies (Potgieter et al. 2011), strategic planning (Kola 2006), leadership boundaries (Lyons 2008) and female ADCs' construction of what management and leadership means for them (Zulu 2011) confirm the international results. In spite of many recommendations in these studies about the nature and re-structuring of the position (thus addressing the matter on a mechanistic level), many ADCs are not coping with the psychological demands of the role. Although this field of research has not yet been explored in depth, the evidence suggests that stress, its symptoms and an inability to cope play a major role. In the absence of such experienced data, university management, human resources departments and colleagues will not understand, and organisational psychologists will not be in a position to consult with respect to their situation.

Objective of the research

The objective of this research was to describe the career psychological experiences of academic department chairpersons in their organisational role.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

Qualitative and descriptive research was chosen (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont 2002) using the hermeneutic interpretive approach (Clarke & Hoggett 2009). The strategy involved a single case study (Breverton & Millward 2004), which was used intrinsically (to interpret and understand the data) and instrumentally (as feedback to the management of the institution) (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

Setting, sampling and participants

In the research setting in a South African university, convenient and opportunistic sampling was used (Terre Blanche, Painter & Durrheim 2006), consisting of 24 ADCs (14 male and 10 female), representing 24% of the ADC population.

Research procedure

All chairs of academic departments on campus were invited by e-mail to a morning event to which 30 responded, six of whom were unable to attend. The task was framed as “to reflect on your role as academic departmental chairperson”. For practical reasons they were divided into two groups – one Afrikaans and the other English speaking. As the unit of analysis was the group, the two subgroups were treated as a single case study (Terre Blanche et al. 2006).

Data collection, analysis and academic rigour

Data were collected by means of a two-hour focus group (Litosseliti 2003) (two hours for each language group); the content was tape recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley 2003). Simple hermeneutics was applied to understand the participants’ meaning and the identification of the themes, and double hermeneutics to interpret the data from various relevant psychological theories, constructs and psychological coping models.

Scientific rigour was attended to by following Loh’s (2013) guidelines for trustworthiness. Credibility was ensured through a relatively long research engagement, the authorised involvement of all parties (Hirschhorn 1997) and member checks (asking participants for feedback on the themes). The thick and detailed data description of the experiences served the purpose of transferring the meaning to different and yet similar contexts. Dependability was ensured in the

process of enquiry and especially in the scientific rigour applied in the planning and execution of the research project. Confirmability was established through the attempt of the authors (as psychologists) to examine the product in order to attest that the findings, interpretations and recommendations were supported by the theoretical data. Ethicality referred to informed consent and anonymity negotiated with all participants during the data-gathering (see De Vos et al. 2002).

Findings

The five themes that manifested are discussed in the following sub-sections.

Crossing the boundary into the career of an ADC

Participants described the start of their careers as ADCs with passion. They experienced their selection and appointment as ADC as positive (“something that made me feel good”; “which I thought was a good thing”), it illustrated “trust”, academic and professional “honour”, and bestowed “status” on them by various authority figures (such as the university, their colleagues and their academic subject).

To be appointed, “only our academic expertise” and “research output” were considered, “not our management training” or “interpersonal competence” (“for example, I have no idea how to deal with the stirrers” or “the grapevine people”). Only a vague job description was available, framed as managing the balance between academic tasks (“tuition and research”), and the management of people and university systems. “There was no induction programme”, explanation of systems, “training” or “mentoring”. Although “a succession plan was discussed recently”, it has not been implemented.

During the first few months in their new careers they challenged themselves to sort out the “real content” of the role. They experienced high levels of uncertainty about not understanding tasks, authority boundaries, their place in the larger university system and performance standards (“which are still not clear”). They were overwhelmed by the vagueness in the academic administration, finances and human resources, “not knowing about all the systems” and “how they work” (“I am still finding out what they are”). They were alarmed about the rate of (sometimes irrational) change. Their expected personal accountability was “scary – to realise that the buck stops with me”. The amount of administration was overwhelming (“there is just so much to do – organise, create structures”; “administration is taking up so much time”; “I have changed into an admin clerk”; “instead of the system serving me, I have become a slave and server of the system”; “the chair of department has become the cash on delivery – we just deliver and perform all the time”).

They experienced disappointed in the university system for its lack of support (“I was put in the deep end”; “I knew nothing about how academia works and there was no-one to help” or “empower me”; “I was elected to head of department and I was told to just manage”; “I was told: hello, congratulations, sort out your department’s finances now!”). They felt cheated by “a very unfair” system (“I wanted assistance and there was no-one who was prepared to speak with you and take me through the systems and how to do this and the functions around this”).

Participants were confused in their role between their expectation and the experienced reality in different ways – (1) being a subject specialist, good researcher and manager of academic matters versus something more fit for “a trained manager with a MBA”; (2) looking forward to the role’s promotion, financial reward and autonomy in decision-making versus “the extra money is not worth the time, effort and loss of academic freedom and research opportunities”, and (3) expecting a clear job description, guidelines, reporting lines within a set structure, “emotional support” and “empowerment” versus being “accountable to all and everyone” and being “called upon from all over instead of through the line structures”.

Participants experienced intense loneliness (being “on an island” or “in solo flight”), accompanied by isolation (“I am on my own”, “if you hit the storm, there is no-one to help you”, “you cannot discuss it with anybody”) and emotional pain (“I bleed and no one sees the blood”; “when I fell no one picked me up”; “I was thrown in at the deep end and I am expected to swim”; “you just have to internalise” your “pain and frustration”).

Relationships

Participants experienced the university’s management systems and administration as “distant”, “impersonal”, “confusing”, “frustrating”, “non-supportive”, “ineffective”, “not value adding” and in need of “streamlining” (“they are not in contact with what we do”; “how we cope”; “how many students we have”). The content of the above related to staff appointments, performance management, financial management, student matters and emotional coping. Meetings are seen as counterproductive (“spending up to seven hours on the same topic in meeting after meeting”, “involving up to 14 adults sitting bored, wasting their time while only two or three people talk endlessly” while “driving their own agenda”). The management reporting structures are confusing and frustrating (“a student can go to the principal”, which is followed by “a phone call from above causing us to immediately jump around for a day or two on something unnecessary”; “people expect me to make serious decisions” and

“when you do that, someone from the top tells you that you are not allowed to”; “you sit in a position with an immense amount of responsibilities, without any power”).

Their self-management was experienced as problematic in that they were “pressurised” to cope with the “tremendous” and “incredibly difficult” demands with respect to task, time and support boundaries. Task boundaries include voluminous management versus academic issues (“on top of the administration”; “you’re still expected to be a high-performing academic”; “attending to teaching, let alone trying to do research”). Time boundaries were mentioned throughout the conversation and were always linked to “losing control” over aspects of their lives (“I’ve lost all personal time” and “structure in my life”; “administration and meetings have taken over my life”). It was as if they were victimised by time as a strong force (“I can’t plan my day anymore”; there is no “respect for your time”; “we don’t have the time for all the things we need to do”; “all planning is gone”). Support aspects referred to their experienced lack of effective secretarial and administrative support (in “a very strong performance culture ... it is strange that the administrative support is so poor”; “without an effective secretary, I need to do it myself”; “my day is taken up by phone calls”; “colleagues are constantly in my office, students, parents”). It was acknowledged that “you need to look after yourself” to survive, but “after seven years I am now looking after the department and not after myself at all”.

Top management is experienced as unsupportive, disrespectful (including “issues of confidentiality”), uninformed (“about what we have to do”; “extremely critical”; “not listening to us”; “we are being cut off at the knees”) and political (some “faculties are favoured above others”). Their line management (at the level of dean) is experienced as rigid in their demands, appearing busy and under pressure, and therefore not experienced as sympathetic and supportive. While some participants reported that they got along well with their deans, others gave evidence of being afraid, angry and avoiding them for not being respected in terms of their busy schedule and demanding role.

Participants’ relationships with departmental colleagues are often filled with frustration and conflict – for example when “unpopular decisions need to be made” about work load and promotion criteria; “colleagues are also friends”; “older and more established academics than me”; “they want to stay in their comfort zones”; “we avoid conflict” – “then I feel like the pig in the story”. They found it difficult “to motivate staff to do research”, because “I also struggle; I’m a victim of that system myself”. They experienced disrespect from colleagues (“clever people acting like children – they gossip, rival and compete all the time”).

Participants’ relationships with emotionally dependent students created stress – “especially the sick, lame and lazy”; “you seldom see the good student”. This gets

exacerbated when the parents step in because of communication or discipline issues between student and parent (“here also the top management is unsupportive”).

Experienced conflict and loss in the role of ADC

The duality of the role (academic and manager) created conflict. ADCs framed their academic role positively (research first and tuition second) as their first loyalty (“what I came to the university for”; “what I do for me and my subject”). They framed their management role negatively as the main stressor in their lives (“something I need to do to survive”; what “we do for others” and “for the love of the matter because you are not rewarded for it”). Furthermore, the management task frustrates their need for “academic stimulation”, “decision-making freedom”, “autonomy” and “to be involved in research outputs”. It was as if the administrative task took over their lives (“when I have not done admin, it feels as if you have not done your work”; “people walk in and out of my office continuously”; “I can’t do research on campus”; “I need to go away/ work on weekends/ deep into the night, if I want to work on an article”. When working on an academic task, “my mind wonders – should I not be busy with some admin”, then “I feel guilty for abandoning” the administrative tasks as well as colleagues, “who then have to do the paper work” – “when I return to my office I have to catch up anyway”.

Participants described how the ADC role “that I saw as hopefully an advantage to the department” “became a disadvantage to myself”; “it damaged my academic career severely” – “it has put me back five to six years”; “I have wasted so much time”; “for ten years I was fighting fires and I now realise that my (research) career has come to a standstill”; “I have stagnated in my research”; “I have lost my research status in my field”; “I have become very negative about doing research”; “if I were not the ADC, I could have published a lot” so that “I would have been a NRF-rated researcher by now” (i.e. with a rating from the National Research Foundation); and realising that “there’s no way in which I’m going to get promoted unless I get NRF”; “I have lost my passion for my subject and research”; and “I was a sucker to take this on”.

One participant said that the university is missing the goal (in Afrikaans: “hulle sit die pot mis”) by “appointing top researchers ... in this position”. Their experiences were that “good researchers could be rotten managers – that is not acknowledged here at all”. “I don’t understand why they feel that the person who runs a department should have a specific academic and research qualification and standing.”

Most participants experienced being caught up in the confusion and feeling stuck. They referred to “not giving up on being an academic” while in the position of

ADC, because “that was my choice”; “I want to write” and “I did not ask to become the ADC and therefore I will not stop being an academic”. “I do all my meetings in the mornings, I am always available on my cell phone and e-mail, and I spend two to three days per week at home – I got my NRF rating – although it is the lowest”. “An ADC can only provide an example through publishing”. “I cope by not managing processes but outcomes according to my key performance areas”. “I will not be prescribed about what my office hours should be” – “although I may get into trouble”.

Personal well-being

Participants were personally severely influenced by the inherent stressors of the ADC role – “one really gets sick from this work”. They reported on general stress (manifesting as fear about deadlines, poor performance), work fatigue (called “burnout”) (“difficulty to keep my appointments”, not coping with the pressure of “time deadlines”), lack of work–life balance (the role “has taken over my whole life” – “I am heading for disaster”; “I have panic attacks”), irregular sleep patterns (“waking up remembering what I still need to do”; “I can’t switch off”; “I get no rest during sleep”) and emotional exhaustion caused by conflicts (“I fight with the system”, “with colleagues”, “students”, “parents”). Some mentioned paranoid feelings (“I wonder what lies behind all of this”; it is as if “the system is against us”) and some showed signs of hopelessness and helplessness (not knowing what the purpose and meaning of the role is, should be and what to do about that). These factors influenced participants’ relationships with colleagues (“it is difficult to hear the bad news all the time – in which case I tend to not listen to them”) and family (“as a single mother I feel overwhelmed – I can’t do it all”). When on leave, the work gets priority and the guilt about not publishing remains in the mind. The only way to cope is to “jump ship”.

Future career as an ADC

Participants expressed negative sentiments about taking on this career, for example, “it makes little sense to become and stay an ADC”; “there are very few financial or emotional rewards”; “it drains your emotional life”; “it ruins your academic career”; “colleagues see that as not being worthwhile”; “the high expectations placed on academics” lately led to “no-one being willing to take over from me”, “which made me feel guilty and that is why I continued for another term”. Eventually “only those interested in the status” will do this work. “Come to think about this, I doubt if

there is any status involved”. If there *is* status involved, “it becomes an obstacle when juniors in the department avoid you”.

Discussion

The objective of this research was to describe the career psychological experiences of ADCs in their organisational role.

From the data, the following profile of the ADC was constructed. Although their cognitive coping seemed intact, physically, emotionally, motivationally and interpersonally they were overwhelmed by the role demands up to the point where their psychological well-being was under attack. *Physically*, they were tired and fatigued. *Cognitively*, they coped relatively well. Some ADCs took a while to fully understand the management context, its systems and the financial matters. All ADCs relied on their high levels of intelligence, logic and problem-solving skills to cope with and perform the mechanistic and intellectual parts of their role. They experienced these demands to be on a much lower level of complexity and abstraction (to the point of being boring) than their academic and research activities. This finding corresponds with research by Berdrow (2010). *Emotionally*, the ADCs experienced the role as extremely challenging characterised by the full range of feelings categorised (Kets De Vries 2010): as glad (hope, excitement, optimism, appreciation), mad (confusion, ‘stuckness’, uncertainty, insecurity, conflict, stagnation, frustration, anger, boredom, hurt), sad (stressed, being overwhelmed, confusion, out of control, disappointment, disillusionment, exhaustion, depression) and bad (fatigue, guilt, shame). They were emotionally fatigued and many manifested with a variety of psychosomatic, stress, histrionic and paranoid symptoms. *Motivationally*, the ADCs were depleted and experienced a lack of energy to engage with their tasks and the demands of their role. *Interpersonally*, the ADCs experienced conflict between being respected and appreciated in some circumstances versus being disrespected, invaded, exploited and humiliated in others. The ADC’s experiences lead to isolation and loneliness. *Work wise*, the ADCs reported that their work performance and productivity were negatively influenced by the psychological factors. They experienced a lack of challenge, inspiration, enthusiasm, drive, vigour, resilience and willingness to invest effort in their work followed by a flight response to quit the role (albeit it the mind).

Although a fair amount of these behaviours were reported in previous research (Benson 2012; Chang & Tseng 2009; Johnson 2010), the data in the present study seemed to be of a greater intensity in terms of the symptoms of non-coping and being depleted.

Using Luthans' (2002) positive organisational behaviour as a model of optimal behaviour, the following interpretations were made. The ADCs experienced a low sense of coherence – their variety of confused feelings indicated a low level of meaningfulness, while their experiences of being overwhelmed and out of control indicated low manageability. They experienced low levels of positive psychological functioning (Biswas-Diener 2010; Linley & Joseph 2004; Peterson & Seligman 2004; Rothmann 2002; Sheldon, Kashdan & Steger 2011; Strümpfer, Eiselen, Meiring & Phalatse 2010; Van Der Colff & Rothmann 2009; Van Zyl, Deacon & Rothmann 2010). This manifested in low emotional intelligence, as evident in their confusion and lack of willingness to explore their own and others' needs and feelings and to make meaningful humane connections (Bar-On 2010; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2008). They struggled to recognise and manage positive emotions (Fredrickson 2001; Kashdan 2009), exercise emotional risk-taking, cope with difficult emotions, and experience excitement, joy and happiness. In terms of work engagement they did not exhibit high levels of vigorous energy or enthusiasm and inspiration to form meaningful relationships for the sake of the self and the other. In terms of psychological wellness (Peterson 2000; Ryan & Deci 2000), they showed low optimism and average resilience (Kotzé & Nel 2013), social support and self-care. In terms of psychological and character strengths (Snyder & Lopez 2009), they showed low mindfulness and curiosity and a reluctance to investigate their own emotional experiences (Kashdan 2009). They also struggled to self-authorise (Hirchhorn 1997).

Their low functioning on the positive psychological constructs indicated their relatively high levels of occupational stress and strain (Wolverton et al. 1999), which manifested as work exhaustion (Rothmann et al. 2003). Their experiences indicated fatigue, depleted energy, psychosomatic symptoms and signs of giving up (Mirvis et al. 2006). The evidence suggested that they struggled to integrate their cognitive, emotional and behavioural resources (Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Schaufeli & Bakker 2001).

In terms of work behaviour, their lowered personal resources and negative perception of their work situation led to diminished levels of competence and effectiveness (see Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Ebbinghaus 2002). They experienced an imbalance between effort and rewards (Van Vegchel, De Jonge, Bosma & Schaufeli 2005). There is evidence of a person–environment misfit, especially where they refer to the work not fitting their academic profile. It seemed that their experiences of deficiencies (Cameron et al. 2003) diminished their levels of competence, effectiveness and outcomes because of their inhibited personal resources and negative perception of the situation. There was evidence of their compassion fatigue inhibiting their compassion satisfaction (Tremblay & Messervey 2011). The

data reflected how difficult it was for the ADCs to identify their talents and strengths so as to experience meaningfulness and pride in their task, and output or productivity. In terms of their job demands-resources (Demerouti et al. 2001), their psychological costs, such as workload, role conflict and ambiguity, overshadowed their sense of meaning and purpose. This was intensified by their sense of not experiencing social support (supervisory and collegial), job enhancement opportunities (increased authority and autonomy – Hirshhorn 1997), participation in decision-making processes and reinforcement contingencies, recognition and individual contribution, opportunities for advancement and career growth, and financial or non-financial rewards (Rothmann 2002). They experienced conflict between their role demands, resources and outcomes. Because of their relatively low emotional resources, they struggled to live up to the high emotional demands, which explained their poor psychological well-being, exhaustion and psychosomatic symptoms.

In terms of leadership, the data suggest that the ADCs would default to a transactional style which excludes transformational (Goleman et al. 2008), servant, authentic and ethical leadership (Mahembe & Engelbrecht 2013) as the preferred styles in modern business thinking. Thus, their relationships would be based on logic, rational interaction and pacesetting, demanding high standards for performance by driving numbers and micro management. This excludes motivation of the self and others through awareness and sensitivity (manifesting as empathy) and establishing a contained and authorised work climate and culture (Drew et al. 2008) to serve the university's business imperatives.

The ADCs experiences were interpreted as being confronted by career dilemmas (Pienaar 2005) in terms of their lowered organisational commitment, physical and psychological functioning, and problematic interpersonal relationships and diminished work performance.

For the researchers it was interesting and surprising to hear how unhappy, de-authorised and trapped a group of highly intelligent and diligent academics were, as if this was natural and nothing could be done about their situation.

Limitations

Although the chosen theory on career and coping behaviour gave the researchers a satisfactory interpretive stance, different psychological models could have elicited different findings. The present research focus on the psychology of the role of ADC excluded reportage on the economic and business factors influencing the ADC's work performance.

Conclusions and recommendations

It was concluded that this group of ADCs were experiencing severe difficulties with the career psychological demands of their role, which significantly influenced their psychological well-being, work performance and contribution towards the university as a business.

The present sample found the focus group meaningful in terms of being listened to and doing introspection, which lead to some processing and understanding. This experience could be extended through the recommendation that ADCs receive individual and/or team coaching and/or career counselling or guidance (as cited in Coetzee & Roythorne-Jacobs 2012) to cope with their career and role demands.

It was also recommended that quantitative research be done to assess levels of positive psychological functioning (and burnout or depression) and their relationship with work performance. It is further recommended that, instead of the traditional human resources mechanistic inputs of restructuring systems, structures, jobs and moving people around, a depth psychology study needs to be performed to establish the unconscious role dynamics (conflicts, boundaries, identity) manifesting amongst ADCs. For example, the present data suggested that the role represents an object being seduced to contain some institutional anxiety as the middle point between management and students. The shadow side of this is that intelligent academics are set up for failure, away from their passion, in a dual role where they struggle with a sense of poor performance and damage to their academic status and progression.

On a macro level, it was recommended that the South African inter-university human resources fraternity strategically rethink the ADC role and explore ways to address the career dilemmas they are facing in situation and context (Pienaar 2005). This could include how universities are caught up in old business models and uneconomical practices.

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