

INTRODUCTION

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Knowledge about stress at work has been with us for some time. Since the early writings of Walter Cannon (1) and the later works of Hans Selye (2, 3), stress has become an acknowledged component of medical science, particularly since Selye's summation (2) that stress is part of the etiology of all diseases. Yet stress has not necessarily become an acknowledged part of employees' experience at work, and there are still substantive groups who virtually deny the existence of work-related stress. For example, while many regions now compensate workers for this condition (e.g., the West Coast of the United States and Britain, Canada, and Australia), other regions (e.g., the East Coast of the United States) do not easily acknowledge the legitimacy of the condition. In addition, it is still relatively recently that compensation has been awarded in many countries.

However, both official figures on compensation and anecdotal stories attest to the experience of work-related stress. Work stress literature of the 1970s and 1980s focused on identifying the different stressors at work and the strength of their effects on employees, and it made important inroads into the psychophysiology of stress. However, in the late 1980s and 1990s the industrial and commercial landscape was changing, introducing a relatively new type of organizational and management style that was to spread rapidly through internationalization and globalization. There was a need in the stress literature to refocus on new and emerging issues, in particular the effects of managerialism on work organization and stress. In this developing world of work, principles of rational economic management had taken root and much of the emphasis of management and organization practice turned to emphasizing the fiscal role and accountability of management and professionals, downsizing and rationalizing work organizations, outsourcing work, and directing public administration towards privatization. Downsizing increased, and unions played a less predominant role.

In the context of these rapid changes in organizational management and the predominance of a managerial ethos, this book has a number of aims. First, it aims to provide readers with an international perspective on the causes of stress. Second, it provides perspectives on workload and work demand and stress and

discusses their usefulness in analyzing the causes of stress. Third, it presents case studies that demonstrate the application of stress analyses in a number of different settings. Finally, few books on work stress have seriously examined stress in the context of older workers, transitions into retirement, and other important life roles. The experience of being a caregiver and decisions to retire are looked at within the framework of work stress.

As we show in the book, the major developed countries are facing many similar problems in relation to stress at work. Downsizing has had considerable effects on all occupational levels, yet more research needs to be conducted to determine appropriate methods for dealing with changing market demands other than simply shedding labor. Downsizing can have particularly stressful consequences and does not necessarily lead to increased productivity and market value for companies; it is one contributor to the wave of increased work intensification. Downsizing needs to be conducted carefully, in a planned and transparent manner, if it is to avoid posing longer-term health, morale, and productivity problems.

The moves towards privatization in the public sector in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia, for example, have also had important effects on the way work is carried out, on job security, and on psychosocial and other health consequences. Privatization has brought with it downsizing and rationalization of work processes to fit the demands of an open marketplace and has overridden some of the protective work regulations previously in place.

It is the effects on stress of these types of work changes that require more study in order to determine the extent to which a changing environment itself precipitates high levels of stress. One commonly reads reports on employees citing too much effort required for the job, too many tasks to perform in short time periods, and an imbalance between work demands and domestic and rest-of-life responsibilities. These pressures and other economic exigencies have forced older employees in some industries to deal with increased stress in the workplace, exacerbated by the demands made by new, increasingly complex technologies. They have also led many employees to retire earlier and to face the relatively new phenomenon of dealing at a younger age with the stresses associated with retirement.

STAKEHOLDERS IN WORK STRESS

While there is still debate among individual employees, unions, management, and government over the extent to which stress needs to be prioritized, the issues have been quite focused in stress research. We have evidence of the causes of stress, the links between stress and psychological and physical ill-health, and some tested ways of best dealing with stress. Individual employees and unions face the issue of the degree to which employees are still blamed for being victims of stress, as well as important issues of personal health and well-being and the extent to which the individual pays for the consequences of stress through

pressures on domestic and community relations. Increasing numbers of studies are now looking at the effects of work stress on the rest of life (e.g., 4, 5).

Management needs to acknowledge that stress is occurring and is a concern. Best-practice models are needed for reorganizing work and work relations to deal effectively with stress. The lack of available models poses a problem, although a large body of work focuses on issues such as lack of control as central to understanding causes of much stress. What is needed is a greater effort in developing and testing best-practice models for the management of stress (6). Additional focus needs to be given to the relationship between stress reduction and associated morale and productivity increases, both in the short and long term, and management's role in promoting healthy workplaces.

Government needs to increase its focus on national profiles on stress. Stress has identifiable morbidity and mortality consequences and as such is an important public health issue deserving of more attention by the State. There are hidden community costs of stress (7) in terms of medical service utilization and community service resources, and these need to be accounted for as costs of stress at work.

One important priority that is not well addressed is the extent to which current occupational health and safety programs provide a sufficient "safety net" for employees who experience stress. Employees who are stressed often find themselves in counseling programs or, worse, simply exiting the organization, as the resources to support them are not available. An important reform in dealing with stress at work would seek to provide effective support networks within the organization before employees with stress become victims. This may take the form of trained negotiators or the like who could provide that "safety net." In working towards these types of solutions, increased union, management, and government cooperation is essential.

ISSUES IN THE FUTURE

Developments in technology and positive economic conditions promised an easier worklife. In particular, proponents of new technology presented it as liberating workers from meaningless tasks and from many of the burdens of work. However, new technology, including information technology, the Internet, and other advanced technological developments, has failed to deliver on that promise. In many cases work has become much more difficult, with a reduction in job opportunities in some work sectors (notably blue-collar work).

Some of the challenges for the early 21st century are to provide continued work opportunities for those affected by technological developments and to provide a management style that accounts for human needs in the context of regular downsizing and privatization. The effects of work changes are starting to become evident in human and organizational costs. The sooner management, unions, and government come to terms with some of the complexities in dealing

effectively with change in a rapidly altering work environment, the sooner emerging problems will be confronted. That is, the work experience can be more positive and productive, challenges for productivity better addressed, and the community, social, and personal costs of a rapidly changing work environment better dealt with.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into four sections. The first section investigates international perspectives and experiences in work-related stress, from the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. Chris Peterson (Chapter 2) discusses the role that rational economic management practices and policies have played in workplace changes during the last decade and a half in Australia. He discusses the trends towards managerialism and work-intensification practices and outlines current practices and frameworks for researching stress and work, arguing that few studies have reported the effects of workplace change on stress experienced at work. He presents results from the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey to show the nature of stress in Australia in the mid-1990s and looks at the effects of self-reports on changes that took place in the 12 months preceding the survey. Four types of change are important predictors of stress. Changes in influence and support, which are related to control, and changes in workplace and effort were the two strongest predictors of stress, more so than work factors measured at a static point in time, such as job security and effort expended on the job. As Peterson concludes, an understanding of the effects of changes in key work practices is important if we are to appreciate some of the stronger causes of work stress. This also has implications for change-management programs.

John Chandler, Elisabeth Berg, and Jim Barry (Chapter 3) present an overview of the major trends in stress experienced in the United Kingdom, adopting a sociological explanation for the emergence of stress in a number of different work areas across the country. Stress is prevalent to a high degree in the United Kingdom and recently has been especially affecting managerial employees. Although British workers have been seen as idle, they have the longest working week in the European Union. The U.K. labor market has changed in recent years, with part-time and casual work becoming more common, and there has been an increase in performance-based systems for work. This has had particular effects on management. Chandler and coauthors discuss the extent to which British managers are now working longer hours, and the reasons for this. They also discuss how work roles have been changing and the changed identity among many U.K. workers in terms of the work they perform. A section of the chapter is devoted to discussing how public sector work has changed throughout the United Kingdom; this also includes groups such as school teachers. The authors also pose a number of explanations for the relatively lower levels of stress found among U.K. part-time employees.

Lawrence Murphy and Lewis Pepper (Chapter 4) evaluate the effects of downsizing and restructuring on stress in North American companies. Much downsizing has taken place without accounting for the health costs to employees and companies or the organizational consequences. In fact, downsizing has been related to deteriorating health and well-being of employees. The authors conducted a study comparing the effects of downsizing on employees and organizations in two types of settings: an organization with repeated episodes of downsizing and an organizations with a single episode of downsizing. The study focused on outcomes such as survivor's syndrome and stress symptoms, as well as physical health. Significant downsizing outcomes were evident on stress, job security, health, and coping in both settings. Downsizing history affected health, stress, and job security, regardless of how downsizing was undertaken. Murphy and Pepper also found that positive changes in the work environment after downsizing can lead to beneficial effects for survivors. If downsizing is planned and implemented fairly with honest and open communication, the negative effects can be somewhat minimized.

Jane Ferrie (Chapter 5) examines the relationship between labor market change, job insecurity, and health, in investigating downsizing and privatization in the United Kingdom. In the last two decades, the U.K. labor market has undergone considerable change. Ferrie focuses on a civil service agency, the civil service traditionally being protected from marketplace pressures. Civil service privatization was introduced in 1984, and by the end of the century most private utilities had been privatized or opened to competition. Ferrie examines the privatization process and related job insecurity in the selected agency. Her study reports on the Whitehall II studies as applied to the selected civil service department. The outcome measures included self-rated health, longstanding illness, recent symptomatology, health problems in the last year, cardiovascular measures, and responses to a mental health questionnaire. Before privatization, job insecurity had some modest effects on poor health; after privatization, there was poorer health among those in less favorable employment. Also, morbidity was greater for those in insecure employment than for those securely reemployed. Ferrie found that the study supports the relationship between unemployment and health effects. She also found that social support at work, normally considered a buffer for stress and ill-health, suffered as a result of privatization, and that reemployment may be experienced as unsatisfactory.

Wendy Macdonald presents both chapters in the section on work demands. In Chapter 6 she examines the concept and measurement of workload and adopts an ergonomic perspective to argue for the efficacy of workload measurement. She associates a number of attempts to improve work performance with the intensification of work. Macdonald maintains that the relationship between workload and stress is not well understood, in that high workload on its own does not necessarily ensure high levels of stress. She presents a comprehensive picture of the ergonomics view of workload and examines its various aspects and

determinants; she also presents a model of the multidimensional aspects of workload, from an ergonomic perspective. Macdonald then takes on the task of relating workload to work demand, presenting a number of different arguments to explain the relationships. She finally works with a comprehensive model to discuss the relationship between workload and stress and the types of stressors that are related to the determinants of workload. The chapter concludes with a helpful discussion on the utility of the workload construct as applied in practical situations.

In Chapter 7 Wendy Macdonald investigates the nature of work demands and stress in blue-collar work. The chapter focuses on workload as a contributing factor to work efficiency and work stress. It draws on data from a recent research project, which aimed to evaluate formal and informal methods of setting work rates in a sample of Australian companies, focusing on how much control employees had over pace as opposed to being paced by external factors. Production targets, external pacing by a production process, and having to meet deadlines and orders had a greater effect than whether formal or informal methods were used in setting work rates. In addition, stress scores were higher where the timing of the production process and operating time of the machine influenced the work rate. Employees engaged in difficult work were more likely to rate the task as too fast, but with simple work, working to deadlines appeared to be a challenge. Overall, stress was higher where general satisfaction scores were lower.

Beginning the section on occupational case studies, John McCormick (Chapter 8) reviews the experience of work-related stress among the professions. The serving professions are characterized by vocation or calling and can have some psychic rewards. However, the work may be associated with some violence in client/professional contact and some failure—for example, for doctors, when patients die. Dentists and teachers may not have that extreme of stress but nonetheless are subject to testing relationships with clients. Professionals also have a problematic relationship with the bureaucracies within which they work—bureaucratization, for example, can lead to work becoming deprofessionalized. McCormick discusses all these relationships, as well as the nature of social change vis-à-vis the changing status of professions and societal changes that affect a professional's work. He presents an “attribution for responsibility for stress” model for dealing with professional stress in bureaucratic organizations. For professionals, much stress and burnout can be associated with idealistic and unrealistic work expectations. One way of dealing with stress created in bureaucracies is to reduce the distance between professionals and the bureaucracies within which they work.

Chris Peterson (Chapter 9) discusses stress among blue-collar workers. He begins by outlining a significant reduction in the number of jobs, some of which is attributable to downsizing due to automation and technological change. In many studies conducted on this occupational group, control over work is a central feature. Peterson analyzes the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations

Survey and makes connections with some of the results presented in Chapter 2. Blue-collar workers reported being less secure than either white-collar workers or management and professional employees. However, fewer blue-collar workers reported changes in workplace organization and management, and while they put a lot of effort into their jobs, a smaller proportion did so than in white-collar and management/professional groups. As was found for the sample of employees reported in Chapter 2, changes at work were the most significant predictors of stress for blue-collar workers, with a change in influence and support (related to control) the most important determinant. Although stress levels for blue-collar employees do not seem to have risen at the same rate as for other occupational groups, these workers are also subject to the effects of work intensification and the rational economic style of management that dominated in the 1990s. Evidence from other studies shows the difficulty for blue-collar workers in coping with the demands of a stressful job and the effects, on family and the rest of life. In this sense, blue-collar workers continue to be disadvantaged in the workplace in relation to stress.

Claire Mayhew (Chapter 10) investigates the links between stress and precarious employment. She begins by describing the causes of stress and stress-related illnesses and demonstrates that a lack of control at work is an important cause of stress. The problems associated with precarious employment relate to financial hardships, unemployment, and threats of redundancy. Central to her argument on the relationship between precarious employment and stress is that economic insecurity, control at work, and work demands place undue pressure on employees. Mayhew examines ten Australian studies of precarious employment based on data collected through face-to-face interviews, for subjects ranging from long-haul transport drivers to precariously employed outworkers in the clothing industry. Most precariously employed workers spent long hours on the job and reported fatigue. They lacked control over their length of employment, their pay, and the work process, and distress for these workers is inevitable. For example, more than 15 percent of long-haul transport drivers reported clinically significant levels of a measure of psychiatric morbidity, and the most precariously employed truck drivers reported the highest morbidity scores. Mayhew concludes that precariously employed workers have a disproportionately high level of ill-health, injury, and economically induced stress.

The final section of the book addresses the relationship between stress and older workers, retirement, and the role of caregivers. David de Vaus and Yvonne Wells provide both chapters. Chapter 11 looks at the relationship between work and home and discusses work stress and caregiver stress. Recently, attention has been paid to the caregiving role at home for older workers—that is, to the extent that caregivers find the work and home interface produces stress. The authors use data from the Australian Healthy Retirement Project. More than 10 percent of the sample defined themselves as caregivers, providing for parents, spouses, or disabled children. Wells and de Vaus found that caregiving might interrupt

performance at work, but caregivers were not likely to report higher work stress than noncaregivers. However, controlling for the effects of working long hours, caregivers were more likely to report higher job stress. There were no differences in job satisfaction, work commitment, or work ethic between caregivers and noncaregivers. Overall, caregivers were less likely to be happy and healthy, and this was true for both women and men. But work stress did not have a more negative effect on the nonwork activities of caregivers compared with noncaregivers.

In Chapter 12 de Vaus and Wells investigate stress and retirement. Little is known about the transition of older workers into retirement. This chapter focuses on the extent to which older workers find their work environment stressful; the degree to which retirement itself is stressful; and whether workers who experience work stress also have a stressful retirement. The authors again use data from the Australian Healthy Retirement Project. Men have been leaving the workforce earlier, and more women have been staying longer. However, policies have been developed to increase labor force participation; for older workers this means remaining in work that is often less secure. De Vaus and Wells provide models to explain the nature of stress for older workers. They find that only a minority of older workers found work highly stressful. However, a number of older workers felt they were not appreciated at work. High stress was related to low job satisfaction, a view of the workplace as unpleasant, and a feeling of lack of appreciation and support. Those who had retired from work thought all stages of retirement were fairly easy; relatively few found themselves more stressed following retirement. The authors conclude that more research is needed to identify the ways of best coping with retirement, rather than struggling: this will aid people to make successful transitions into their retirement years.

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