
1 Editors' Overview: Sources of Work Stress

In one way or another, the questions of the causes or sources of work stress have attracted considerable empirical attention and public fascination for several decades. This interest has coalesced around several fundamental questions: Are some jobs inherently more stressful than others? Are some individuals more prone to stress than others? In this first section of this handbook, the contributors identify and discuss different sources of work stress.

Terry Beehr and Sharon Glazer's chapter starts this section with their focus on one of the most widely studied stressors, namely organizational role stressors. Research on role stressors has been conducted for at least 40 years (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964) with two meta-analyses having been published two decades ago (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Beehr and Glazer, therefore, summarize some 40 years of research in their chapter. Gina Bellavia and Mike Frone address the work-family conflict, an issue that has also attracted much scientific and lay interest for several decades because of the widespread assumption that balancing the oft-conflicting demands of work and family must surely be stressful.

To some extent at least—and in some cases to a great extent—the rest of the chapters in this section confront something of a different challenge. Specifically, the authors of the remaining chapters have all addressed topics of considerable interest to organizations and employees alike that have not yet been addressed adequately from a “work stress perspective.” Some topics have yet to receive any sustained empirical attention. A prime example of this is Michelle Inness and Julian Barling's focus on terrorism. It is reasonable to assume that prior to the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, not many people (at least in North America) would have been concerned about terrorism coming to the workplace; since then, it is doubtful that this assumption holds. Inness and Barling speculate theoretically on the reasons the fear of terrorism is experienced as a significant workplace stressor.

The topics of the remaining chapters have all been addressed in the organizational psychology/behavior and management literatures, but they have not yet received sustained empirical attention from a stress perspective. Some of the issues covered are widespread: For example, technology is ubiquitous

in today's workplaces, and Michael Coover, Lori Foster Thompson, and Philip Craiger provide a model for understanding why technology is experienced as a work stressor. In a similar vein, very few people working in an organizational context would be immune from experiencing workplace politics, and Ken Harris and Micki Kacmar provide a conceptual template for understanding the stressors inherent in workplace politics. Although most people will gladly tell horror stories about poor leadership and its personal or organizational effects, it too has yet to be cast conceptually within a work stress framework. Kevin Kelloway, Niro Sivanathan, Lori Francis, and Julian Barling provide a framework in which poor leadership can be seen as a workplace stress issue. Although there is widespread concern about the financial strain resulting from layoffs, job insecurity, and underemployment, there has not been a sustained empirical focus on this issue. Tahira Probst integrates these different areas in providing a model of the stressful experience of economic stressors. Last, there is an extensive focus on the issue of harassment at work, both in general and to some extent from a stress perspective. Kathleen Rospenda and Judith Richman extend this by incorporating the experience of discrimination, thereby providing a stress-based framework for integrating workplace harassment and discrimination.

Two chapters in this first section on the sources of work stress deal with substantive issues that have generated a substantial level of general interest in the management and organizational psychology/behavior literatures. Russell Cropanzano, Barry Goldman, and Lehman Benson III take the vast literature on workplace injustice and provide a framework for understanding just why it could be experienced as stressful. There is a large body of literature on the predictors of workplace aggression (and much less on the psychological consequences); Aaron Schat and Kevin Kelloway provide a work stress perspective for understanding workplace aggression.

The remaining issues covered in this section have attracted empirical attention in the past but in areas other than organizational psychology/behavior or management in general. Peter Totterdell reviews the voluminous research literature on work schedules, not all of which emanates from a psychological or behavioral basis, and provides an understanding of the psychological nature and effects on work scheduling. Workplace safety has typically been conceptualized as an outcome variable more likely to have been studied in areas such as ergonomics, industrial relations, and the law; Leanne Barlow and Rick Iverson show how workplace safety can be conceptualized as a psychological workplace stressor with its own unique outcomes. Similarly, there has been scant attention to the stressful nature of industrial relations for both management and employees—a bona fide field of interest, despite the few studies that have pointed to the potentially stressful experience, for example, of labor disputes and strikes. Drawing from the literature on industrial relations, Lori Francis and Kevin Kelloway generate a model of the stressful experience of labor relations. Last, most theories of job design and work stress largely ignore the role of physical working

conditions (e.g., Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Sauter, Murphy, & Hurrell, 1990). Yet recent research shows how physical working conditions and subjective work experiences and stressors interact (e.g., Melamed, Fried, & Froom, 2001), and Janetta Mitchell McCoy and Gary Evans relate what is known about physical working conditions to workplace stress.

Consistent across the chapters are discussions by the authors of the nature of stress pertaining to their specific focus and methodological issues in the area, as well as questions that can be asked to direct future research.

References

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