

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

Phuah Ling Mei

Help College of Arts and Technology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Occupational Stress: A New Perspective of Stress Management Strategic
b0901855@hict.edu.my

Rashad Yazdanifard

Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia
Occupational Stress: A New Perspective of Stress Management Strategic
rashadyazdanifard@yahoo.com

-Abstract-

A review study of dealing with occupational stress with a new perspective of stress management strategic, that to prevent and cure the negative aspects of work stress. Whereas research studies on occupational stress suffers from two pivotal shortcomings, such as medico-psychological approach and organizational theory approach. Besides that, a new strategic of stress management is as denoting all activities aimed at reducing the negative impact of stress on individuals' health and well-being and on resources and competencies constituting competitive advantage. Based on part of discussion, the problem of occupational stress has been highlighted and extensively studied by representatives of the medico-psychological field of research, organizational theorists have not sufficiently formulated how stress is related to quality of job and occupation performance. In this research paper, the methodologies used are based on secondary data and online research technique. The aim for this study case is to give me an opportunity to interpret a practical overview of dealing with occupational stress with a new perspective of stress management.

Key Words: *Occupational stress, Stress Management*

Jel Classification: M1

1. INTRODUCTION

The experience of stress is widely developed in contemporary society and it is a major impediment toward sustainable competitive advantage and quality of job life. A wide range of workers is exposed to various forms of work conditions

experienced as stressful. Nevertheless, the research on occupational stress suffers from two pivotal shortcomings.

1. First, there is too narrow a focus on what we refer to as the medico-psychological aspects of occupational stress. When stress is conceptualized primarily as being more or less detached from organizational settings, socio-cultural aspects of stress are underrated.

2. Second, organizational studies within the field of HRM and strategic management have not directed much research toward stress, and do not sufficiently acknowledge the human body as the locus of experience of stress. Research on stress is thus under socialized and disembodied at the same time. The study of stress in organizations must be more pronounced in terms of the individual human being as the primary site of stress. It suggests to a new approach that mediates the two previous existing perspectives on stress wherein stress is embodied, yet socially embedded, and conceived of as a strategic priority. It is widely claimed that the world is changing at an increasingly faster pace that stated by Minzberg[15] and Aveni[3] said that companies being successful in the future have to continuously adapt to these changes to maintain and reinforce their competitive advantages. In addition, “knowledge and other form of invisible and intellectual resources have been pinpointed as being the key source to competitive advantage” which claimed by Nonaka and Takeushi[16]. Consequently, there has been much research efforts directed toward knowledge-intense industries that serve very much as best-practice case companies today. In an ever-changing market environment, the demands on employees and management might increase to the level where dysfunctional effects are produced. For instance, Elera Weatherley[6]; Manning, Jackson and Fusilier [12] have said that, the experience of stress in occupation is today a widely acknowledged problem in organizations. Stress does not only entail individual and societal problems but also implies an organizational or managerial problem since a great share of organizational resources and capabilities derived from what Polanyi[18] has called personal knowledge, that is, knowledge that reside within individuals and that cannot easily be formalized and disseminated. Stress is inextricably entangled with the fast-paced, knowledge intense society. However, there have not been very much attention to stress from a managerial point of view. For instance, Jex writes that “compared to other areas in the organizational sciences, the study of occupational stress is really in its infancy”. [8] Organization theory has very much left the problem of stress to medico-psychological domain of research. This paper seek to problematic how stress is conceptualized and studied within organization theory

and suggests that the study of the experience of stress must align the focus on the individual human body with the overarching organizational setting. Rather than seeing the individual employee as existing in a void, detached from day-to-day activities and routines, the study of stress in occupational must seeks to unconcealed the mechanisms that produce stress among employees. The paper is structured as follows:

First, we discuss previous research on the experience of occupational stress in organizations and its deficiencies in terms of examining stress in its setting.

Secondly, we discuss how stress in occupation can be thought of as an issue of competitive advantage, and point out how the study of stress is not only beneficial for the individual and society, but also in terms of competitiveness. Finally, we discuss the implications from this research programmer.

2. METHODOLOGY

This case study philosophically falls under interpretive class, undertaken research approach is elaborately and research strategy is literature review. Consequently this study used secondary data and qualitative analysis techniques. International articles as well as proceedings are dug up through international well-recognized databases like Proquest, Ebsco and Springerlink, Oxford as well as IEEEExplore. Papers were collected over a two month period and reviewed jointly with authors over a one month period. The arrangement of literature survey was planned to be started with reviewing the concept of dealing with occupational stress and elaborating the concepts of new strategic of stress management to be further used by employer, researchers and other practitioners involve in training of stress management.

3. OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

“In job life research, there is a long tradition in quality to study different facts of the experience of stress and its impacts for individuals”, that stated by Brannon and Feist[1]. Nevertheless, Jex claims that “much progress has given clear for made toward interpret occupational stress while this tremendous given arise in research activity. Unfortunately, our interpreting of occupational stress is still rather limited, with largely to the complexity of the circumstances under study. Due to that despite vast improvements over the years, there is still much occupational stress research is appear from serious methodological limitations” [8]. Even though a considerable amount of research resources has been directed

toward an understanding of occupational stress, much remain unknown. There are two schools of stress studies: the medico-psychological and the organization theory approach to the study of stress.

2.1. The medico-psychological approach

The study of stress has been primarily undertaken within what we refer to as the medico-psychological realm. These fields of research operational stress in terms of measurement of various parameters that are postulated to determine or give effects the quality of working life and individual well-being. The medico-psychological studies of stress works within a positivistic, quantitative, clinical research tradition derived from natural science and medical research. The human body is conceived of as a set of mechanisms and fluids that are hypothesized to operate in stable and predictable ways. Deviations from these bodily standards are identified as indications of stress on the individual level. Applying to a set of methodologies, techniques, and practices enables the identification of physical and psychological malaises that causes individual sufferings. The medico-psychological field of scientific inquiry has been very successful in formulating adequate measures of stress and in establishing technologies for evaluation of existing organizational systems. In short, the medico-psychological approach to stress operates firstly on the level of symptom anthology. For example, Mason[13] was said, “it consists of a set of tools for identification and evaluation of the impact of stress such as various forms of individual malfunctioning”. The medico-psychological approach to stress does however demonstrate some deficiencies.

(a) First, it operates stress in terms of its effects, not in terms of its causes. Stress is identified in terms of what it has already caused, for example individual nervous problems.

(b) Second, stress is conceptualized as being solely residing inside the individual human body. In medical research, scholars deal with micro-organisms and bacteria that produce physical effects on the human body. In these cases, medical attention is used to eliminate the bacteria. Here the human body is very much examined from a system perspective; the human body is a closed system whose malfunctions can be sought from within that system.

(c) Socio-cultural theories on stress suggest, on the other hand, that stress is an outcome from a complex network of mechanisms and practices that emanates from outside the individual human body. Stress is in this perspective conceived of

as a set of interrelated processes that rather evolves around the human body than existing within it. Therefore, stress can never be reduced to the level of the individual if the causes of stress are to be fruitfully examined.

(d) To conclude, the medico-psychological approach to stress operates from the perspective of treatment ex post facto rather than being an ex ante approach where in the social complexity of everyday organizational life is highlighted. The analysis of stress in occupational can never be removed from its social embedded without reducing a rich and multi-faceted phenomenon to a pursuit of mere treatment of already existing problems.

2.2. The organizational theory approach

“Organizational studies comprise a broad variety of perspectives on activities undertaken within and in-between various organizations” which was claimed by Scott[20]. In general, studies of organizations have favored the use of fairly abstract and interpersonal notions such as corporate culture, empowerment, attitudes, and so forth.

(a) There have been extensive researches on the use of human resources and capabilities, both under the almost all-encompassing heading of Human Resource Management, for example they are Keenoy[9] and Townley[21] and within Strategic Management in the RBV literature wrote by Peteraf[17]; McGrath, MacMillan and Venkataraman[14].

(b) The most widely formulated criticisms on the use of these concepts and notions are that they are only weakly connected to day-to-day experiences and routines in organizations. Within the domain of organization theory and management studies there is a continuous production of what Laclau[10] has called empty signifiers, that is, concepts that are detached from existing practices but still serve a purpose in society in terms of labeling desired outcomes.

(c) For instance, Foster and Hoggert[7] have claimed that: “ The proclivity toward the use of highly elusive concepts entails a problem in terms of providing a body of theory on organizational activities without any human being present. The notion of empowerment transcends most everyday operations that causes human beings face the risk of being reduced at best as a variable in the totality of management. The contributions of concepts such as organizational culture are numerous but the more abstract a concept, the more the structure will be favored at the expense of the actor. Organizational theory often operates on the structure

level, removed from individual human beings and day-to-day activities. In order to reduce the risk of formulating an organizational theory on stress that lacks its prime entity, the individual employee, the human body is taken back into the field of inquiry. The human body is given very little attention in a paradigm wherein abstract notions are favored.”

(d) Organizational theory still suffers from the inability to reconcile the mind-body dissolution established by Cartesian philosophy who is Ryle[19]. The mind has been the favored “object” of analysis. Consequently, embodied organizational theory is crude and remains entangled with common sense thinking. For instance, common sense suggests that the activities of the body are fully controlled and closely regulated, that is, to speak with Husserl, we are expected to have intimate ruler ship over our bodies which stated by Turner. To support control over the body remain a basic and generic ability in modern society; without the intimate ruler ship over the body, manifested by disciplined, well ordered, and predictable movements and bodily activities, much of what we refer to as manners and accepted behavior would be at stake. The study of stress in occupation must mediate the mind-body dissolution in terms of both acknowledging stress as an embodied phenomenon and it is a socially derived problem. Stress is manifested as bodily malfunctions and psychological effects simultaneously.

(e) However, the phenomena of stress must be theorized “on the surface,” that is to examine the effects on the human body. Stress is not below the surface but is highly visible, corporal, and physically experienced although attitudes and beliefs are affected as well. Common sense suggests that human beings should be able to determine the actions and activities of our bodies, yet a multiplicity of human beings experience stress and stressful situations on everyday basis in their working life. An embodied organizational theory on stress promises to reintegrate the realm of corporeality into organizational theory.

(f) In sum, according to Collins[2] said that the medico-psychological approach to occupational stress is under socialized since it examines the effects of stress detached from organizational and managerial routines and practices, while on the other hand, socio-cultural approaches to occupational stress are disembodied in terms of the absence of human bodies as a locus of the experience of stress. To bridge the gap between these two traditions, the human body is taken back into organizational studies, but with an awareness of the risks of succumbing to operate stress as a set of symptoms identified by standardized (corroborated) techniques and methodologies. Thus, the study of occupational stress should aim

at focusing on the experience of the individual human being but simultaneously acknowledging the embedded of social activities.

4. A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

From the medico-psychological study of stress we learn that human bodies can be affected by various unfavorable work conditions. From organization theory, we learn a great deal about how organizations change and function. In stress research, there is very little attention towards how undesirable bodily effects on the workforce could be reduced through organizational change. Such a research program would represent an embodied theory of organizational change wherein work conditions are pointed out as a strategic priority. We refer to such a program as a strategic stress management programmer.

1. According to Lazarus and Folkman[11], claimed that “stress is a highly subjective experience. Several factors lead to the experience of stress such as the individual biography and previous experiences, demands and requirements at the job performances, the family situation and others.

2. Based to Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend[5] said that a stressful person will show specific phenomenon as considerably without any seemingly objective reasons. In short, stress is complicated to conceptualize as being an objective phenomenon. For instance, it is methodologically challenging to compare the degree of stress across individuals. The study of stress has to facilitate, therefore the notion of experience of stress is recognized. The trap of wrongly claiming has to prevent that enable to identify and present impeccable objective figures on stress measurement, stress can be defined in terms of the experience of stress in a specific situation. Experience is also a complicated concept as compare to it renders priority to the individual human being’s subjective attitudes and ideas. However, the notion of experience does use which enable a fruitful discussion on the consequences of stress in organizations. If we do not primarily want to find out what effects and causes of stress but rather seek to understand its consequences, both on individual and organizational level, experiences become the key to the understanding of stress. Therefore, stress is conceived of a being a bodily rather than an attitudinal experience. Stress is primarily infested in the human body. The human body is the centre around which the very idea of stress evolves. The concept of stress management has been used to denote various activities aimed at mediating the impact of stress in occupation. The notion of stress management underlines the possibility of managing such an abstract, diverse, and subjectively grounded experience as stress. According to the stress

management literature, there are a set of skills and interventions that can be apply to human in order to reduce the impact of stress.

3. The stress management perspective does not put forth the focal organization as a primary stakeholder in terms of enjoying benefits from the reduction of stress. Stress management is not put forth as a strategic issue related to competitive advantage. In the emerging strategic literature on intra-organizational resources and capabilities. Based to Barney and Hesterly[22] have claimed that, “competitive advantage is conceived of as an effect from the ability of the organization to produce and make use of firm-specific competencies”. Williamsson[23] also said as opposed to organization economics such as transaction cost theory, Eisenhardt[24] explained the agency theory, and industrial organization theory, the theory seeks to develop an internal perspective on organizations wherein resources are seen as the prime mover for competitiveness.

(a) According to Dierickx and Cool[4] emphasize that, in this perspective, it is complicated to disentangle a web of interrelated resources without losing the insight into synergetic effects emerging across a field of resources. In an economic paradigm where knowledge, skills, and specific competencies are claimed to the key source of competitive advantage, organizations are view as be able to handle and manage highly abstract and complex resources whose internal relationships are complicated to illustrate in cause effect diagrams and in formalized documents; knowledge, experience, and skills are very often personal and cannot easily be shared between individuals in formal documents. Thus individual human beings and their skills appear to be a key explanatory factor behind the notion of competitive advantage and consequently the concept of stress management should be seen in the light of strategic issues.

(b) Therefore, we suggest the concept of strategic stress management as denoting all activities aimed at reducing the negative impact of stress on individuals’ health and well-being and on resources and competencies constituting competitive advantage. When organizations become successful because of the use of a number of interrelated skills and capabilities that are primarily personal, it is a key objective to minimize the impact of absenteeism, health problems, and burnout effects caused by unsatisfactory working conditions. In a strategic stress management perspective, the negative impact of stress is very much an organizational problem that in its consequences is risk in eroding the core competencies and the competitive advantage of the organization. Dealing with stress will therefore become a major managerial objective in the next decade. To conclude, the strategic stress management perspective underscores the alignment

of individual, embodied experiences and competitive advantage from the perspective of strategic management and organization theory.

5. DISCUSSION

The medico-psychological and the socio-cultural approaches to the analysis of stress do hold the two epistemological end-positions; the medico-psychological approach focus extensively on the effects on the individual human body and its psychological attributes, but do not sufficiently acknowledge the social embedded of stress. On the other hand, the organizational theory approach to stress primarily conceives of stress as being an abstract or “impersonal” problem transcending everyday life experience. Stress is thus conceived to belong to the same category of notions such as organizational culture or power and is thus taken away from the domain of everyday life activities. Consequently, the very idea of stress, its causes and effects, its symptoms, and the experiences it renders is very much overlooked. To avoid these two end positions, stress has to be examined as being a socially determined phenomenon primarily experienced by individuals in their everyday life work experiences. Stress is manifested in the thoughts, emotions and movements of individual human beings. These human beings experience stress as a fact. The study of stress must acknowledge the double-sided quality of stress; it is simultaneously personal and social; it is caused or “given” from social relationships, yet it is expressed as a highly subjective experience; it comes from “above”, yet it is experienced “from within”. Stress is a complex, multifaceted phenomena and deserves a multifaceted set of theories and methodologies to be studied. Moreover, stress cannot be fully formulated or theorized as being an objective phenomenon. Stress can never be “for itself” but primarily “for us.” Even though the medico-psychological approach to stress has directed much effort toward the identification on verifiable and generally accepted symptoms of stress, these symptoms are no more than representations of underlying psychological and physiological malfunctions of the human body. Nevertheless, we can direct our attention toward how to mediate the personal and organizational problems related to the experience of stress. Therefore, the research question on stress should not be expressed in terms of “what is stress?” but rather “what can we do to reduce the negative effects of stress?” Thus the analysis of stress should departure from an ontological and epistemological position based upon realistic assumptions that postulate that we have a potential for a successful identification of the very kernel of stress. Taking a pragmatist or post-metaphysical epistemological position would direct the research issues towards practical effects beneficial for individuals, employers and society. Previous research on stress has not sufficiently problematic stress in terms of its epistemological and methodological

assumptions. The consequences for practice are that organizations that seek to sustain their competitive advantage have to address quality of work life issues as a strategic activity, and to deal with stress and burnout effects as a structural problem. Literature and research on occupational stress suggest that stress is primarily seen as an individual or personal problem. Therefore, proactive stress management programmers focus what individuals can do to handle their stressful work life activities and events. It is desirable that the perspective on stress and burnout in organizations is widened outside the Yoga and relaxing training courses previously used to reduce effects of stress and that new paths are used in order to rethink stress.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed at problematic the study of dealing occupational stress with a new perspective of stress management theory. Whereas the problem of stress has been highlighted and extensively studied by representatives of the medico-psychological field of research, organizational theorists have not sufficiently formulated how stress is related to quality of job life and occupational performance. Organization theorists favor abstract notion at the expense of the study of direct bodily effects on human beings in organizations. We suggest that the phenomena of stress should be studied as being a socially grounded problem whose effects operate on the individual body. The study of stress therefore provides a fruitful arena for reconciling the actor-structure problem prominent in most domains of social science. The most severe malfunctioning of stress always affects the personal well-being. Organizational effects such as loss of competencies and knowledge, and later on, the competitive advantage of the organization emerges as an outcome from personal stress. Thus the notion of strategic stress management, underscoring the importance for being able to support and reproduce personal, tacit knowledge, is put forth as a key occupational health and quality of work life objective of the future.

REFERENCES

- Barney, J.B. & Hesterly, W., (1999), "Organizational Economics", London: Sage.
- Eisenhardt, K., (1989), "Agency theory", 14(1), P. 57-74
- Brannon, L. and Feist, J, (1992), Health Psychology: An Introduction to Behavior and Health, Pacific Grove: California.
- Collins, D, (1998), Organizational Change, London: Routledge.

D'Aveni, R.A., (1994), *Hyper competition*, New York: Free Press.

Dierickx, I. & Cool, K.,(1999) "Asset Stock Accumulation and Sustainability of Competitive Advantage", *Management Science*, 1504-1511,P. 34-35

Dohrenwend, B.S. and Dohrenwend, B. P, (1974), *Stressful life events: Their nature and effects*, New York, Wiley.

EreraWeatherley, P.I., (1996), "Coping with Stress: Public Welfare Supervisors Doing Their Best, *Human Relations*", 49(2), P.157-160

Foster, D. and Hoggett, P, (1999), 'Change in the Benefit Agency: Empowering the Exhausted Worker in Work, *Employment & Society*, 13(1), P.19-23

Jex, S.M., (1998), *Stress and Job Performance*, London: Sage, P.91-95

Keenoy, M., (1999), 'HRM as Hologram: A Polemic, *Journal of Management*, 36(1), P.1-24.

Laclau, E., (1996), *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso.

Lazarus, R.S. and Folkman, S., (1984), *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Manning, M.R., Jackson, C.N. & Fusilier, M.R, (1996), *Occupational Stress, Social Support, and the Costs of Health Care*, *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(3), P. 738-750.

Mason, J.W., (1971), "A re-evaluation of the concept of non-specify in stress theory". *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 8(3), P. 323-333.

McGrath, R.G., MacMillan, I.C., Venkataraman, S., (1995), "Defining and Developing Competence: A Strategic Process Paradigm, *Strategic Management Journal*, 16(5), P. 251-275.

Mintzberg, H., (1994), "The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning," Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Nonaka, I., and Takeuchi, H., (1995), "The Knowledge-Creating Company", Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peteraf, M. A., (1993), "The Cornerstones of Competitive Advantage", Strategic Management Journal, 14(1), P. 179-191.

Polanyi, M., (1958), Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ryle, G., (1949), "The Concept of Mind", Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Scott, W.R., (1992), "Organization: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems", Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Townley, B., (1993), "Foucault, Power/Knowledge, and Its Relevance for Human Resource Management," Academy of Management Review, 18(3), P. 518-545.

Williamson, O.E., (1975), "Market and Hierarchies", New York: Free Press.