



Work Stress:

Conceptualisations and Implications for Research Methodology and Workplace Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines different conceptualisations of work stress, and the implication of these for research methodology and workplace intervention. Prominence was given to the Demand-Control/Support (DC/S) model, because of its dominance in the work stress literature, and its continued ability to account for health and productivity outcomes. This model emphasises the role of the work environment (in contrast to the individual), specifically the combination of high demands, low control and low support in the development of occupational strain.

In response to a real life problem, a study was undertaken to ascertain levels and sources of occupational strain for Correctional Officers (COs). As far as possible a participative methodology was used in the study. A multi-factorial model of work stress was proposed including the following key risk factors: shift work, length of service, financial worries, job classification, trait anxiety, work environment, and coping styles. The DC/S model showed some limitations in accounting for high levels of strain within the organisation compared to other occupations. Follow up analyses showed a high degree of utilisation of results and recommendations, especially in the area of support services for COs.

Further, specific theoretical tests of the DC/S model were undertaken to assess its relevance in accounting for differences in levels of strain and well-being, between occupations, within occupations, and at the individual case level. The DC/S model showed some utility in accounting for different levels of well-being and strain between two occupations (COs, $N=419$ and nurses, $N=109$). Two further studies provided support for the utility of the model in predicting with-in occupational differences in level of strain and well-being. Using hierarchical regression analysis, and controlling for a range of confounding measures (including trait anxiety), strong support for an additive DC/S model was found in the CO data; modest support for an interactive Demand-Control model was found in nurses ($N=65$) using both cross-sectional and prospective data (taken one year later) after further control for initial strain levels. Finally, a case analysis of COs ($N=8$) showed that compared to occupation level data (COs, $N=419$), levels of strain and well-being could be predicted in individual cases by the kind of job they occupied as per DC/S theory.

The thesis concludes by reconsidering DC/S theory in the context of the results of the studies, and broader paradigm shifts in conceptualisations about health and work. Future directions for psychologists in the area are proposed.