Dealing With Organizational Stress: Toward a Strategic Stress Management Perspective

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SALTSA is a collaboration programme for occupational research in Europe. The National Institute for Working Life in Sweden and the Swedish confederations of trade unions SACO (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations), LO (the Swedish Trade Union Confederation) and TCO (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) take part in the programme. Many problems and issues relating to working life are common to most European countries, and the purpose of the programme is to pave the way for joint research on these matters from a European perspective.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that long-term solutions must be based on experience in and research on matters relating to working life. SALTSA conducts problem-oriented research in the areas labour market, employment, organisation of work and work environment and health.

SALTSA collaborates with international research institutes and has close contacts with industry, institutions and organisations in Europe, thus linking its research to practical working conditions.

Abstract

The experience of stress is widely spread in contemporary society and is a major impediment toward sustainable competitive advantage and quality of working life. A wide range of workers is exposed to various forms of work conditions experienced as stressful. Nevertheless, the research on organizational stress suffers from two pivotal shortcomings. First, there is too narrow a focus on what we refer to as the medico-psychological aspects of organizational stress. When stress is conceptualized primarily as being more or less detached from organizational settings, socio-cultural aspects of stress are underrated. 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 undersocialized 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. This paper aims at problematizing the experience of stress within organizational theory. It suggests to a new approach that mediates the two previous existing perspectives on stress wherein stress is (1) embodied, yet socially embedded, and (2) conceived of as a strategic priority.

Key Words: Stress, Stress Management, Work life

Contents

Introduction

It is widely claimed that the world is changing at an increasingly faster pace (see e.g., Minzberg, 1994; Bettis and Hitt, 1995) and that companies being successful in the future have to continuously adapt to these changes to maintain and reinforce their competitive advantages (D'Aveni, 1994, Hammer and Champy, 1993; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1998). In addition, knowledge and other form of invisible and intellectual resources have been pinpointed as being the key source to competitive advantage (Itami, 1987; Nonaka and Takeushi, 1995; Zander and Kogut, 1995). Consequently, there have 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, the experience of stress in organizations is today a widely acknowledged problem in organizations (Astrachan, 1995: Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Manning, Jackson and Fusilier, 1996). 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 (1958) has called *personal knowledge*, that is, knowledge that reside within individuals and that cannot easily be formalized and disseminated. Stress is unextricably 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" (Jex, 1998: 91). Organization theory has very much left the problem of stress to medico-psychological domain of research. This paper seek to problematize 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 organizations must seekss to unconceal the mechanisms that produce stress among employees.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we discuss previous research on the experience of stress in organizations and its deficiencies in terms of examining stress in its setting. Secondly, we discuss how stress in organization 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 programme.

Stress in Organizations: Previous research approaches

There is a long tradition in quality if working life research to study various facets of the experience of stress and its consequences for individuals (Brannon and Feist, 1992) Nevertheless, Jex (1998) claims that "given this tremendous increase in research activity, it is clear that much progress has been made toward understanding occupational stress. Unfortunately, however, our understanding of occupational stress is still rather limited, due largely to the complexity of the phenomenon under study and also due to the fact that, despite vast improvements over the years, much occupational stress research still suffers from serious methodological limitations" (Jex, 1998: 2). 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 medio-psychological and the organization theory approach to the study of stress.

The medico-psychological approach
The study of stress has been primarily undertaken within what we refer to as the medico-psychological realm. This field of research operationalizes stress in terms of measurement of various parameters that are postulated to determine or effect 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 *symptomatology*, it consists of a set of tools for identification and evaluation of the *effects* of stress such as various forms of individual malfunctionings (cf. Mason, 1971). The medico-psychological approach to stress do however demonstrate some deficiencies. First, it operationalizes 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. 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. 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 (as, for instance, in the case of bacteriology). Therefore, stress can never be reduced to the level of the individual if the causes of stress are to be fruitfully examined. To conclude, the medico-psychological approach to stress operates from the perspective of treatment *ex post facto* rather than being an *ex ante* approach wherein the social complexity of everyday organizational life is highlighted. The analysis of stress in organizations can never be removed from its social embeddedness without reducing a rich and multi-faceted phenomenon to a pursuit of mere treatment of already existing problems.

The organizational theory approach

Organizational studies comprise a broad variety of perspectives on activities undertaken within and in-between various organizations (cf. Scott, 1992). In general, studies of organizations have favoured the use of fairly abstract and interpersonal notions such as *corporate culture*, *empowerment*, *attitudes*, and so forth. There have been extensive research on the use of human resources and capabilities, both under the almost all-encompassing heading of Human Resource Management (Keenoy, 1999; DuGay, 1996; Townley, 1993; Watson, 1994), and within Strategic Management in the RBV literature (Peteraf, 1993; McGrath, MacMillan and Venkataraman,1995; Collis and Montgomery, 1995). 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 (1996) has called *empty signifiers*, that is, concepts that are detached from existing practices but still serve a purpose in society in terms of labelling desired outcomes. For instance, the notion of empowerment transcends most everyday operations (Foster and Hoggert, 1999; Harley, 1999; Hales, 1999). The proclivity toward the use of buzzwords and highly elusive concepts entails a problem in terms of providing a body of theory on organizational activities without any human being present. Human being run 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 favoured 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 favoured.

The notion of the human body has been very much neglected in social and organizational theory. Barry and Hazen write: "do you, take your body to work? If you are a laborer, build houses, or pour concrete, you are probably well aware of your body at work. If you are an artist, a policeman walking a beat, or a professional athlete, you probably listen to your body's voice, are alert to your gut reactions, and respond to variations in vibration and rhythms. If you are a manager in a corporation, you may attend to these as well. But mainstream management and organization theories tend to ignore such practices and, to the extent that they acknowledge the human body at all, stress conformance to organizational dictates and constraints. (Barry and Hazen, 1996: 140). The body is absent in most mainstream management. In most cases, abstract notions such as culture have been favoured. Broadhurst addresses the proclivity towards *linguistic* interpretations of social phenomena (*non-linguistic* phenomena), and writes that "this has a double effect. It makes the body a secondary phenomenon and reduces the fundamental temporality of meaning" (Broadhurst, 1999: 27). Still, there is a trend toward conceptualizing organizational activities in terms of humans. Gergen and Whitney claims that "building structures, communication systems, and organizational products are replaced by human beings—and more significantly, the psychological states of human being—as the dominant metaphor of organizational essence" (Gergen and Whitney, 1996: 343). Thus, the human being is primarily invoked in terms of various psychological qualities and not with corporeality; when human beings are brought into organizational theory it is primarily as a set of mental constituents that either provides new fruitful metaphors to organizational theory, or conceives of human beings as solely constituted by a number of attitudes, ideas, and preferences detached from bodily movements and activities. In short, as Barry and Hazen put it, "the corporate body is an instrument controlled by the head, which is also expected to represent the body" (Barry and Hazen, 1996: 147).

Organizational theory still suffers from the inability to reconcile the mind-body dissolution established by Cartesian philosophy (cf. Ryle, 1949).[1] The mind has been the favoured "object" of analysis. Consequently, embodied organizational theory is crude and remain entangled with common sense thinking. For instance, common sense suggests that the activities of the body are fully con-

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[1] There are some evidence of a movement in social theory away from Cartesian philosophy. For instance, the philosophy of Deleuze draws heavily from Spinoza's (1994) criticism on the Cartesian mind-body distinction (Deleuze, 1990; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Buchanan, 1997), and gender theory has problematized the human body as being performative rather than grounded in essence (Butler, 1993, Irigaray, 1981; Braidotti, 1997, Trethewey, 1999, Olkowski, 1999).

trolled and closely regulated, that is, to speak with Husserl, we are expected to have *intimate rulership* over our bodies (Turner, 1999). Turner writes that "a person cannot be excused by saying 'my body did it' because we are thought to have intimate rulership . . . over our bodies." (Turner, 1996: 81). To support control over the body remain a basic and generic ability in modern society; without the intimate rulership over the body, manifested by disciplined, well-ordered, and predictable movements and bodily activities, much of what we refer to as manners and accepted behaviour would be at stake. Nevertheless, Turner claims that "to talk about our phenomenological rulership of our bodies is to miss the crucial sociological point, namely the regulation of the body in the interest of public health, economy, and political order" (Turner, 1996: 81). The control over the body is always defined in terms of socially embedded values and norms. For instance, the malfunctions of the body are defined in terms of legitimate and non-legitimate behaviour. Thus, "the discovery of a new disease is not . . . epistemo-logically equivalent to discovering a new butterfly; a new disease is the product of a shift in explanatory frameworks or the identification of a new niche" (Turner, 1996: 200). Bodily malfunctions are therefore always socially embedded and must be interpreted in terms of dominating norms and values at a specific point of time. Turner exemplifies with the notion of anorexia: "Anorexia is the product of contradictory social pressures on women of affluent families an anxiety directed at the surface of the body in a system organized around narcis-sistic consumption. Only a social system based on mass consumption can afford the luxury of slimming" (Turner, 1996: 109).

The study of stress in organizations must mediate the mind-body dissolution in terms of both acknowledging stress as an embodied phenomenon and a socially derived problem. Stress is manifested as bodily malfunctions and psychological effects simultaneously. However, the phenomena of stress must be theoretized "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 situa-tions on everyday basis in their working life. An embodied organizational theory on stress promises to reintegrate the realm of corporeality into organizational theory.

In sum, the medico-psychological approach to organizational stress is *under-socialized* (cf. Collins, 1998) since it examines the effects of stress detached from organizational and managerial routines and practices, while on the other hand, socio-cultural approaches to organizational 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 operationalizing stress as a set of symptoms identified by standardized (corroborated) techniques and methodologies. Thus, the study of organizational stress should aim at focusing on the experience of the individual human being but simultaneously acknowledging the embeddedness of social activities.

The strategic management of stress

From the medico-psychological study of stress we learn that human bodies can be affected by various unfavourable work conditions (even though this body of research does not aim at highlighting these 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 programme would represent an embodied theory of organizational change where-in work conditions are pointed out as a strategic priority. We refer to such a programme as a *strategic stress management* programme.

Stress is a highly subjective experience (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) What determines the experience of stress is an outcome from numerous factors such as the individual biography and previous experiences, demands and requirements at the workplace, the family situation, etc. (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend, 1974; Cox and Ferguson, 1991) Specific situations can appear as considerably more stressful to one person than to another without any seemingly objective reasons. In short, stress is complicated to conceptualize as being an objective phenomenon. It is for instance methodologically challenging to compare the degree of stress across individuals. To facilitate the study of stress, the notion of *experience of stress* is introduced. To avoid the trap of falsely claiming to be able to identify and present impeccable objective figures on stress measurement, stress can be conceived of in terms of the experience of stress in a specific situation. Experience is also a complicated concept inasmuch as it renders priority to the individual human being's subjective attitudes and ideas. Using the notion of experience does however enable a fruitful discussion on the consequences of stress in organizations. If we do not primarily want to find out what stress "really is" 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; the human body is the centre around which the very idea of stress evolves. Stress *is*, and it is primarily infested in the human body.

The concept of stress management has been used to denote various activities aimed at mediating the impact of stress in organizations (Newman and Beehr, 1979). 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 techniques and interventions that can be undertaken in order to reduce the impact of stress. 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 intraorganizational resources and capabilities (referred to as the Resource-Based View on strategy, or, more handy, as RBV), competitive advantage is conceived of as an effect from the ability of the organization to produce and make use of firm-specific competencies (Barney and Hesterly, 1999; Conner, 1991). As opposed to organization economics such as transaction cost theory (Williamsson, 1975), agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), and industrial organization theory (Porter, 1980), RBV theory seeks to develop an internal perspective on organizations wherein resources are seen as the prime mover for competitiveness. RBV suggests that resources could arise from socially complex relationships between individual resources (Amit and Shoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991) or emerge from causal ambiguities between a set of resources (Dierickx and Cool, 1989; Reed and DeFilippi, 1990; Peteraf, 1993). In this perspective, it is complicated to disentangle a web of interrelated resources without loosing 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 expected to 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; 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 burn-out 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 risking to erode 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.

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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 embedd-edness of stress. On the other hand, the organizational theory approach to stress primarily conceives of stress as being an abstract or "unpersonal" 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 sub-jective 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 can not 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 both individuals, employers and society. Previous research on stress has not sufficiently problematized stress in terms of its epistemological and methodo-logical 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 organizational stress suggest that stress is primarily seen as an individual or personal problem. Therefore, proactive stress management programmes 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.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed at problematizing the study of stress in organizational 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 work life and organizational performance. Organization theorists favour 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 malfunctionings 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.

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