

ADAPTATIONS TO WORK AND STRESS

By John F. Sherry, Jr.*

Invoking the influential work of Freud and Selye, Bernard (1968) notes that stress is typically envisioned as harmful to health. Recent studies (Ursin *et al.*, 1978) have reaffirmed traditional wisdom that challenge and stress may be necessary to health, and that their absence may cause disease; underload may be as crucial a factor as overload in regard to pathology. Bernard (1968) has proposed the division of stress into two categories to denote both health-damaging and health-enhancing potential in recognition of the tendency of individuals to seek stress voluntarily. The relevance of a complementary conception of stress to the domain of work is explored below.

From an ecological viewpoint, demands are made upon an individual which he/she routinely meets. Various adaptive strategies are employed in meeting these demands. Demands on an individual originate in the external physical environment, the internal physical environment, the psychological environment and the sociocultural milieu (Scott and Howard 1970:270). However, the individual's evaluation of the stimuli determines the character of the response to the demand. Clearly, the effects on health of stressors depend upon the individual's experience of the situation (Ursin *et al.*, 1978:6; 223). Cox and Mackay (Cox 1978:18-25) have proposed an ecological-transactional model which describes stress in terms of the imbalance between an individual's perception of a demand and perception of his/her capability of meeting that demand; this cognitive appraisal of a situation supercedes both actual demand and actual capability, and is accompanied by the "subjective" experience of stress. A psychophysiological response results, from which certain perceived consequences eventuate. Feedback occurs at each phase of the stress system, and facilitates flexible adaptation. Ineffective or inappropriate response strategies prolong and increase stress, thereby increasing an individual's susceptibility to disease. Longterm unrelieved stress can result in the debilitating psychosocial condition known as burnout (Veninga and Spradley 1981). Demands perceived as requiring either a heightening or restriction of ordinary levels of functioning may result in stress (Scott and Howard 1970:270). Csikszentmihalyi (1975:44-56) has explored the mediation of two stress factors - anxiety and boredom - in just such terms. When an individual perceives opportunities for action to exceed his/her abilities, anxiety is experienced. When opportunities for action are perceived to be less than abilities, boredom results. When opportunities for action and abilities are perceived to be commensurate, an individual may achieve an experiential state of flow. This model has been applied to the blue collar ethos of the Quad Cities, and has been used to facilitate interpretation of local drinking behavior (Sherry 1980).

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The investigation of blue collar worldview has produced a variety of salient tenets. A social order based on restricted access to power, an emphasis on maintaining a living standard rather than on a continuous advancement of consumption norms, a present orientation and a belief in the efficacy of collective purposive action in protecting group interests have been attributed to workers (Goldthorpe et al., 1969:118-119). The division of time into domains of work and leisure and the dynamics of maintaining this distinction are similarly diagnostic. Work experience impinges directly upon conceptions and uses of leisure. Orientations to work vary on a continuum from instrumental to expressive (Watson 1980:23); reward is extrinsic to the job in the former case, and intrinsic in the latter. While these orientations are frequently situational, Quad Cities workers appear to assume a more instrumental than affective posture toward work. This perspective is thought to reflect a "fatalistic contentment" (Archer 1977) on the part of the worker, and is an accommodation which both mediates and produces stress. Kornhauser's theory of incongruity (1965:272) illuminates behavior on this continuum by attributing the quality of a worker's adjustment to the individual variance in personal goals, needs and structural opportunities for gratification. Clearly, conceptions of "winner" and "loser" are relative.

While every study of job satisfaction has resulted in overall positive majority ratings, research on dissatisfaction, work stress and alienation has demonstrated a relationship between workplace coping skills and mental health (Kasl 1977). Baldamus (1961) sees conflict as normative in industrial settings, with labor (which incurs cost in the form of deprivations inherent in effort) and management (which incurs cost in the form of wages) each seeking to achieve wage disparity in its favor. This adversarial relationship is evident in the Quad Cities (Sherry 1980). Blauner (1964) has investigated alienation in terms of powerlessness, meaningless, normlessness and self-estrangement as experienced by the worker; Seeman (1975) has recently enlarged on these findings to include cultural estrangement and social isolation. Yates (1979) has synthesized a model of work stress which recognizes several sources: intrinsic factors, role in the organization, career development, relationships at work, and organizational structure and climate can engender a range of stress. Trice and Roman (1978:31; 119) in particular have identified structural opportunities and pressures which contribute to abusive drinking. Absence of clearly defined standards of performance evaluation, freedom to set work hours, work addiction, occupational obsolescence and mobility, severe role stress, competitive pressure, worksite availability of alcohol and low social visibility are among the most prominent they cite. Shostak (1980) reiterates many of these stress factors in his discussion of the blue collar "blues," but his attention to union-based stressors is especially relevant. Union officials relieve and induce stress through the managing of five variables: conflict, collaboration, "heartache," elections and dissent (Shostak (1980:73-74). Union influence extends beyond the shop floor. Finally, high labor force participation rates, rising under- and unemployment rates, an absence of competing labor markets (Sherry 1980) and the current downturn in economic conditions combine to make the Quad Cities an impacted habitat. Perceived freedom of movement is low, and effective coping patterns are declining.

Individual work orientation and personal style - a combination of attitude and opportunity resulting in performance - influence an individual's ability to manage work stress. These two variables largely govern access to

the status of "winner." A winner may act to attain a minimal level of satisfaction or to avoid some maximum degree of dissatisfaction, given either an instrumental or affective orientation (Locke 1975:461). A worker may gear his/her performance to match personal canons of adequate compensation. An instrumental worker lowers his/her emotional investment in work by focusing on extrinsic - frequently leisure based - reward (Watson 1980:134). A set of perceived stresses attaching to the domain of leisure in the Quad Cities which are shaped by, and in turn shape conceptions of work, is discussed by Sherry (1980). Alcohol functions as both an anaesthetic and as a stimulant in this regard. If intrinsic satisfaction (flow, and not mere traction) is infrequent or unattainable, but still valued, a worker may adjust to perceived deprivations by developing distancing (Scheff 1979) or disengaging (Kasl 1977:98) techniques which permit detachment from the specific task and absorption in another activity. Nonperformance and covert counterproduction are common stress-seeking responses. Activity complementing or superceding immediate production may include fantasizing, rhetorical complaining, indulging in games or rituals, engaging in joking relationships or informal competitions, and elaborating various job control strategies (Sherry 1980, Watson 1980); such creative behaviors are both a result of and response to perceptions of stress. Union activism, wildcat striking and tactical absenteeism are each employed effectively by Quad Cities workers. The use of alcohol and other drugs is an adaptive strategy with immediate functional but long-term dysfunctional results adopted by many workers. Resignation, in the sense of accepting conditions or of quitting altogether, is perhaps the ultimate response to work stress.

Several community-based organizational approaches to enhancing the efficacy of workers' coping skills may be suggested. Corporations might explore methods for incorporating more intrinsically rewarding behavior into the workplace. Job enrichment and restructuring are viable options. Seminars on stress management might be conducted in conjunction with routine training given to hourly employees. Local labor unions could offer similar seminars to members, as well as providing organization-specific training in burnout prevention. Civic groups might combine efforts to publicize existing recreative possibilities and to create new opportunities for constructive leisure pursuit within the community. Local mental health facilities are perhaps in the best position to catalyze each of these potential programs, and may undertake such activity through their consultative branches.

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COMMUNITY APPROACHES TO PROBLEM DRINKING AND ALCOHOLISM

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