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Social Science & Medicine

Volume 75, Issue 5, September 2012, Pages 784-794

Review

Formulation of work stress in 1960–2000: Analysis of scientific works from the perspective of historical sociology

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.04.014>

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Abstract

During the latter part of the 20th century, work stress became an important societal issue and a huge amount of scientific attention went to studying it. This paper examines the process of formulating and defining the concept of work stress in the occupational health sciences and in industrial and organizational psychology from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. The empirical material of the study encompasses 108 scientific articles, books, book chapters, “state of the art”™ reviews, book reviews, and written conference presentations. The data are analysed in the frameworks of historical sociology, critical psychology, and the anthropology of knowledge. We argue that work stress as a life-structuring concept gained ground in psychosocial and occupational health sciences (and also in lay understanding) in the 1960s simultaneously with the rise

of social reformist movements that called for fundamental changes emphasizing democratic and human-orientated work organizations and socially responsible values. With the passing of time, however, the focus on structural improvement of work life waned and the emphasis shifted towards the apolitical occupational health aspects of work stress. Researchers with a psychological orientation emphasized micro-level characteristics as factors affecting work stress, whereas stress-orientated epidemiologists turned to the study of specific occupational stress models and/or risk factors. The emergence and development of work stress research can be seen as a chain of attempts to define and identify new risks and experiences occurring in work life. The process, driven by a gradual shift from industrial environments towards organizational frameworks characterized by social and psychological dimensions, reflected the overall shift towards modern democratic work life and the information society in which employees' emotions and well-being became an issue.

Highlights

• Early work in the field of stress research often focused on social reform and/or social psychological frameworks. • After the 1970s, a rapid increase in research on work stress took place, and mental health at work became a major issue. • The increase in work stress research corresponded with the rise of non-authoritarian, psychosocially defined work environments. • Work stress publications can be seen as legitimized attempts to analyse the mental life of the new stress-prone employee. • The recognition of work stress reflects the societal processes of democratization, individualization, and psychologization.



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Keywords

Work stress; Occupational stress; Occupational health; History; Work life; Democratization; Scientific knowledge; Historical sociology; Mental health; Employment

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