Psychology in society (PINS), 1993, 17, 51-58

INTERPRETING THE STRESS OF WORK

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INTRODUCTION.

The study of the psychosocial work environment has burgeoned over the last two decades, much of which has been concerned with the detrimental effects of the work place on physical and mental health. It has also been recognized as one of the most important sites of social and psychological well-being (Johnson & Johansson, 1991).

The use of interpretative methods in understanding the complex relationships between worker and work settings has seldom been employed, either as a research strategy, or as way of developing a participatory agenda between researcher and subject. This paper reflects the use of an interpretative methodology in understanding the work environment of union organizers and its place in developing a model for participatory research.

THE PREMISE OF INTERPRETATIVE METHODS.

A basic premise in the use of an interpretative approach is that the subjective elements of individuals' lives are given meaning through a process of valuing

certain interpretations over others (Denzin, 1989). This is clearly a radical departure from the positivist assumption that knowledge exists independent of the actor and which awaits discovery. In using an interpretative method, it becomes possible to illuminate the meaning of work and work related conditions of stress through the way it is constructed by the primary actors.

By formulating the research act in this manner, two purposes may be served. The first is that it helps reduce problems of communication between the researcher and the actor. This is accomplished by illuminating the actions of the actor in his/her context and thereby facilitating dialogue and communication between interested parties (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Second, interpretative methods may influence the way in which individual actors comprehend themselves and their situations. "Although life is not a narrative, people make sense of their lives and the lives of others through narrative constructions" (Richardson, 1990, p10).

In adopting an interpretative stance, the positivist-empirical viewpoint that creates a split between the subject and the object is eschewed in favor of allowing the characteristics of the relationships between the union organizers and the researchers to establish itself as an important part of the process of interpretative methodologies (Armistead, 1974; Ingleby, 1981).

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH.

Participatory research has as its basic premise the idea that the production of knowledge should at least be in part accredited to those on whose behalf it presumes to speak. Control of the production of knowledge is unlikely to pass from the hands of the scientific elite without attempts at restructuring such relationships. Specifically, traditional notions of research continue to perceive the "subject" as a source of error variance, with prediction and control as its watchwords. A collaborative research process has the promise of creating competencies within the system to engage in the cyclical process of diagnosing and analyzing problems, and planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions aimed at meeting identified needs. It is potentially an empowering process, through which members of an organization gain increased control over their own lives (see Kieffer, 1984 for an example of participatory research as an empowering process).

The purpose of this study is to understand how "stress" is experienced by union organizers. In keeping with the stated goal of interpretative methods, the nature of what constitutes stress for these workers was not predetermined. Instead, it was allowed to emerge in the ongoing relationship between the organizers and the researchers. In general, however, stress is conceptualized

as a process that encompasses the interaction between person and environment. This relationship is a complex one that includes the influence of moderating factors such as social support, participation in and control over decision-making, control over time spent at work, well-defined job descriptions, the function of recreation and interpersonal relationships in work and non-work situations. Thus, multiple factors need to be incorporated in understanding such relationships (see Israel, Schurman, & House, 1991 for a full development of this theme).

METHOD.

Participants.

The participants included four male organizers and one female organizer, all of whom were employed by the same union. They ranged in age between 26 and 38 years old, with a mean of 30.8 years. One had completed a high school education while the remainder had tertiary education (range: Standard 8 - Masters degree). Two respondents were single, one was married, and two were divorced. Only those who had married had children; on average 3 children each. While two of the respondents lived with their children, the children of one of the participants lived with their paternal grandmother. In respect of living arrangements, two of the participants lived with their immediate family, two lived alone and one lived in a commune. Three of them considered their accommodation to be unsuitable. Two of the five had shop steward experience prior to joining the union as organizers.

Procedure.

The nature and broad content of the research process was negotiated with union officials who had invited the authors to investigate the problem of stress among their organizers. After obtaining the consent of each of the organizers to participate in the study, each participant was interviewed twice. On the first occasion the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire and an open ended questionnaire were employed. Respondents were given the opportunity to restructure questions and add any they believed were important to ask. On the basis of responses to these instruments, a draft report was written. A second interview was initiated to determine the reliability of the recording process at the level of shared meaning. The initial responses were read to each respondent who was asked if the information was recorded as intended. Participants were also given an opportunity to comment on the composite report. This procedure elicited further information which was then incorporated into this report. This procedure is consistent with the ethnographic methods suggested by Armistead (1974), Denzin (1989) and others.

Materials.

The Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire was used to measure social support. However, the living arrangements of the various participants precluded any meaningful conclusions from being drawn from this assessment device. Thus, an organizer may indicate a significant network of people from whom social support is available, but nevertheless reports low levels of social support. This was related to the fact that some workers live great distances from their families who may be living in a rural area. Contact between the organizer and his social network on a reasonably frequent basis was then impractical.

Instead of developing an interview schedule that we would then use to frame our questions, we chose to develop a questionnaire that would focus on what the organizers perceived as relevant to their experience. While we provided a basic structure for the type of questions that we thought would be important, the participants had an opportunity to add comments and questions which they felt were important to understanding the nature of work related stress. Such an approach also has the advantage of tapping into the culture of the context. We assumed a model that focused not only on work settings, but also the transactions that flow between non-work and work settings.

The work of Erickson (1986) was instrumental in helping us initially structure the questions that we wanted to address. These are briefly reviewed here to give the reader some understanding of our motivation in including these particular questions. All references to settings are specific to the ones that union organizers are likely to find themselves in, but clearly, these questions can have applicability to a wider range of settings.

1. What is happening in the settings?
2. What is the meaning of the events (happenings) for the people involved in them?
3. How are these events organized in patterns of social organization and learned cultural principles in the conduct of everyday life?
4. How are the events at the level of this setting related to events at other system levels outside (personal relationships, friendships, family life) and inside the setting (worker relations, accountability to workers, to the leadership of the union).

There are substantial advantages to employing this method as; 1) it helps define the problem both for the researcher and the participants in terms of local conditions; 2) it initiates a democratic process of collaborating and participation; 3) it establishes processes that will remain after the research process is completed; 4) the short and long-term effects of the proposed intervention can be continually evaluated to meet changing needs; 5) it helps

ease future relationships with both worker leadership and workers for the purpose of retraining in learning alternative coping strategies; 6) it demystifies the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

The average number of people per network was seven (range 2-10). In terms of the composite scores for the three components of social support used in the Norbeck (i.e. affect, affirmation, and aid), the respondents scored on average 3.59 (on a 5 point scale). This suggests at least moderate levels of social support.

Work stress.

In view of the inherent stressors of working in a predominantly black union in South Africa, we considered it important to illuminate the reasons organizers provided for working for this particular union. Not surprisingly, all of them gave ideological (political) reasons for joining the union. However, it became apparent that for some it also meant the availability of a job at the time. While working within an environment that is ideologically consonant with one's own beliefs may help to ameliorate work stressors, it is also likely that being able to work had just as much significance, if not more so.

Of the various dimensions addressed in this study, the long hours of work and a lack of control over the time spent on work-related events was universally interpreted as having a negative impact on their lives. On average, the organizers worked 10 hours per day. The work hours were irregular and frequently included working over weekends. While the long work hours were claimed to negatively effect both work and non-work life, the effects of irregular work hours appeared to have a more pronounced negative effect. All workers reported increased irritability, decreased sensitivity to the needs of others, and lowered levels of efficiency at the work place. Significantly, none of the organizers felt that they had no control over their lives, though they often felt pushed and pulled in many different directions.

Other work pressures included the lack of an adequate job description which, when considered in relation to the long hours of work, meant that some organizers felt uncertain about the work they had to do. An added issue was the lack of training in legal issues regarding worker rights. All of the organizers believed that further training was important in instilling greater confidence in themselves in negotiating with management officials. The perceived lack of adequate training was considered to be an important stressor because it could lead to a failure to adequately represent the interests of workers in negotiations. Additionally, the fewer "victories" won on behalf of workers may diminish the sense of accomplishment for organizers.

Interestingly, interpersonal relationships in the work place were perceived as being positive and supportive, in part because they all felt the pressure similarly, but also because of non-hierarchical working relationships among the organizers. Conflicts that arose in the work place were then seldom related to interpersonal difficulties, but were more the result of ideological differences.

Non-work stress.
The effects of long and irregular hours also meant that few activities could be planned with families and friends. All of the respondents reported a decrease in social interactions either as a function of being tired or simply being unable to allocate specific time for interacting with friends and family. Inevitably, the lack of attention paid to interpersonal development produced tensions among the married individuals and aroused feelings of suspicion among partners of the single organizers. In addition the number of demands made upon organizers in respect of the large number of meetings they had to prepare for and attend added considerably to feeling stressed.

Possible coping strategies.
At the level of the individual organizer, it would appear that increased control over time spent on various projects (as in time management); the number of hours worked in a day; more well-defined descriptions of the work to be completed; the number of meetings attended in any particular day; and the frequency and intervals of vacations in a given period; may help considerably in ameliorating the effects of work stress. In addition, there is a need to secure adequate and affordable accommodation closer to the work place.

One of the ways in which some of the organizers dealt with irregular hours was to negotiate more fixed times, though this could lead to resentment among others. Alternatively, deliberately setting aside times for specific activities such as interacting with children and making this known to all the other organizers appeared to have a reasonable prospect for succeeding. However, it also became apparent that more rigid time schedules would fail to meet the less structured time needs of the workers and union members. In addition, complaints of the long hours by the organizers may be misconstrued as being uncomradely or shirking ones duty.

While the organizers appeared to have a number of structures that helped them cope with stressors, there appear to be times when these mechanisms fail to provide a sufficient buffer against a stressful work environment as evidenced by one organizer being hospitalized and another wishing to quit.

CONCLUSION.

In adopting an interpretative approach to the problem of stress among union organizers, the quality of the information that we shared with them rested not so much on the questions that we asked of them, but more on their willingness to share interpretations of their lived reality. By allowing the participants to structure the events in their lives around the notion of "stress", their actions could be understood not only in respect of their conscious intentions but also their social context. The elaboration of valued meaning then becomes possible without prefiguring it.

In recognizing that every human situation is novel, emergent and filled with multiple, often conflicting, meanings and interpretations, the development of rapport and a trusting relationship was facilitated. Moreover, it was assumed that the language of ordinary people could be used to explicate their experiences. Thus, the organizers felt comfortable in complaining about union bureaucracy and in one instance openly discussing the effect of work on the marital relationship.

The collaborative nature of this study served to underscore the idea of " ... creating partnerships and linkages between social scientists and citizens (which) can improve the quality of social science research, enhance the potential for the utilization of research, encourage public support for social science, and help people help themselves" (Chavis, Stucky, & Wandersman , 1983, p424). As a consequence of this study, the respondents (as a collective) undertook to use the report to create a healthier working environment.

This approach does raise the issue of generalizability of findings. It may be tempting to argue that the small sample size precludes generalizing the findings of this study. However, it is because we deliberately sought to develop thick descriptions of lived experience that we have a limited sample which permits a reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured (Denzin, 1989). Through this process the reader can naturalistically generalize his or her experiences to those that have been captured (Stake, 1978). It creates verisimilitude.

Note: This paper is the product of a collaborative effort. There is no primary author.

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