



Reconciling Organizational Stress, Cultural Differences and Quality of Working Life

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Work Stress and Culture

It has been argued that organizational stress can best be understood in the context of an individual's cultural values (Sawang, Oei, and Goh, 2006) (p. 216). Thus Lakshmi, Menon, and Spector (1999) concluded from their research that, whereas work overload and lack of autonomy were the main sources of stress and strain in the United States, lack of role clarity was the key issue for workers in India. Research based in Taiwan concluded that lack of managerial role clarity and poor recognition by managers were the two main sources of stress, whilst relationships, organizational climate, whereas personal responsibility appeared to be key source of stress and strain in the UK (Lu, Kao, Cooper, and Spector, 2000). Györkös et al. (2012) propose that the relationship between stress and strain is broadly common to various cultures, but suggest that sources of work stress differ across cultures.

Hofstede (1981, p. 24) defined culture as "the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values." Triandis (1995)

distinguished between individualists and collectivists, wherein the former are more likely to draw from their own attitudes rather

than the group's normative behaviors, and the latter tend to value the priorities of their group more highly than their own. Thus, Western Europe and the United States can be seen as generally individualist cultures, while China and Japan are considered more collectivist. While there have been differences in opinion as to the nature of such cultural differences (Realo and Allik, 2009), the greater context in which organizational stress can be considered can be seen as key to developing an understanding of the causes and consequences of stress in different work settings.

A drive to identify the indirect rather than simply the direct causes of organizational stress has also been fueled by concerns about the low success rates (and poor quality of research into) stress management interventions (see, for example; Giga et al., 2003, Shiralkar et al., 2013) and as research consistently identifies links between stress, strain and a range of other factors both within and without the working environment. Reynolds and Briner (1994), for example, criticised stress management interventions for being unduly reliant on over-simplistic

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theorization. Burke (1993) suggested that stress management programs which focused on helping individuals manage demands and/or distress were unlikely to be effective in the absence of attention to chronic, organizational level stress and strain.

Endeavours to tackle stress at work in isolation and without taking into account the broader context, may therefore explain the limited success of interventions (Dieleman, Gerretsen, & van der Wilt, 2009). Thus, findings from evaluation of a worksite stress management/health promotion program showed benefits on some physical and behavioural measures, but no effects for job-related measures, such as absenteeism and job satisfaction (Peters and Carlson 1999).

The attractions of focussing on one aspect of work experience which grabs attention and which is familiar to both workers and managers has perhaps meant that stress can sometimes be seen as a unidimensional problem, something that can be fixed without the need to understand the wider context. This exclusive focus may also in part reflect availability of measures and research designs which demonstrate short term benefit, but not long-term or persistent change. It can be argued that consideration of this wider context, including culture, is necessary for a full and proper understanding of the situation in which employees experience stress and distress. Consequently, a full consideration of the relationships between the key issues and factors affecting workers may be required if effective and therefore efficient interventions in the workplace are to be generated.

The broadest context in which a person evaluates or considers their personal situation has been termed their quality of life (Felce & Perry, 1995). The 'quality of working life' (QoWL) of an individual, is therefore the broadest context in which an employee evaluates their work experience (Elizur & Shye, 1990). An individual's quality of working life is affected by factors such as stress and job satisfaction and these in turn are affected

by the cultural context in which work occurs (Ellis and Pompli, 2002; Borooah, 2009; Zhang, Lan & Chen, 2011; Greenan, Kalugina & Walkowiak, 2013)

One of the earliest references to the concept of quality of working life occurs in the work of Mayo (1960), following which there have been many attempts at definition, drawing upon various combinations of factors with some exploration through empirical research. Thus, Hackman and Oldham (1974) saw psychological growth needs such as task identity and significance, autonomy and feedback as key contributors to someone's QoWL. Walton (1975) saw factors such as adequate and fair compensation, safe and healthy working conditions, opportunities for growth, development, and advancement and work-life balance as relevant, while Taylor, Cooper, and Mumford (1979) distinguished between the influence on QoWL of extrinsic factors such as wages and intrinsic factors associated with the nature of the work itself, and referred to other factors such as fairness and social support.

Whilst early conceptualisations of QoWL sought to identify global definitions and create all-encompassing models, Taylor et al. (1979) were among the first to suggest that QoWL might vary between organisations and employee groups. It was perhaps because researchers sought to understand QoWL in various professions, countries and cultures that an ever-growing list of possible sub-factors were identified, including, for example; equal employment opportunities, work role ambiguity, turnover intentions, supervision, job enrichment, integrated socio-technical systems, job security, work design, work content, and work world (e.g., Scobel (1975), Katzell (1983), Mirvis and Lawler (1984), Heckscher (1984), Cunningham and Eberle (1990), Baba and Jamal (1991), Havlovic (1991), and Brooks and Anderson (2005)).

Other researchers sought to circumvent the problem of identifying all the possible factors affecting QoWL by proposing that it could be seen as a

dynamic entity (Lau & May, 1998) or a process wherein organizations respond to the needs of employees (Robbins, 1989).

Martel and Dupuis (2006) have argued that there have been four main models underpinning the various endeavours to define and understand the concept of QoWL. The first of these, the Transfer Model or Spillover Effect model (Kavanagh & Halpern, 1977), focuses on the association between work and non-work areas of life and how problems or successes in one area, affect or 'spillover' to the other area (Schmitt & Bedeian, 1982; George & Brief, 1990). However, the idea that the Transfer Model can be applied to all jobs has been challenged on the premise that jobs with unusual characteristics (e.g., high levels of isolation or physical demand) could be better understood in terms of what has been described as a Compensation Model (Staines, 1980; Rousseau, 1978). The Compensation Model draws upon the proposal that dissatisfaction with work will lead to compensatory behaviour outside work (Schmitt & Mellon, 1980; Staines, 1980).

The implied inverse relationship between job satisfaction and non-work satisfaction in the compensatory model led George and Brief (1990) and Martin and Schermerhorn (1983) to promote a Segmentation Model, which hypothesises that work and home-life do not substantially affect each other. The resultant emphasis on boundaries between work and non-work aspects contrasted with a fourth, 'Accommodation' model, wherein an individual actively varied investment in work and home in order to balance demands, and was seen as key to understanding someone's experience (Lambert, 1990).

The development of models of quality of working life has led to focussed research on factors specific to each theory, but other researchers have continued to explore the broader concepts of QoWL in the applied setting, exploring more complex relationships between selected factors, mediators and outcomes (e.g. work by

Denvir, Hillage, Cox, Sinclair, and Pearmain, 2008, for the Institute for Employment Studies). More recently, Gayathiri et al., (2013) have focussed primarily on the Indian academic literature relating to identification of the key dimensions of QoWL in various employee groups. They highlighted the wide range of opinion as to just what those key dimensions might be and how many there are, and identified models with up to 14 components (Saraji & Dargahi, 2006), and concluded that there were potentially even more facets of QoWL.

Across cultures, there has been little agreement in what makes up the key aspects of an individual's quality of working life. Thus, Zhang, Xie & Lan (2013) identified 7 factors which contributed to 60.1% of the total variance in their study of school teachers, Rastegari et al., (2010) proposed 12 dimensions of QoWL on the basis of their research with nurses in Iran; Patil & Prabhuswamy (2013) concluded that 6 key dimensions existed in their sample of 100 employees from companies in Bangalore and Nasik. A six factor model also featured in the work of Almalki, FitzGerald & Clark (2012) in a study of primary health care nurses in Saudi Arabia, while a Chinese version of a Quality of Nursing Work Life used seven subscales (Lee et al., 2013).

Scales based on half a dozen factors have been proposed as appropriate for various cultures and work groups. The development of a measure of QoWL initially based on UK samples, but subsequently used in more than 30 countries has generated a similar model. Shukla, Shahane and D'Souza (2017), in a study of 132 employees of a corporate hospital in Pune, India using a Marathi version of the scale, concluded that the WRQoL was "highly reliable with high content, construct and predictive validity" (p. 4). The measure, the 'Work-related Quality of Life scale' is described below, and findings from research using the scale will then be reviewed in relation to the impact of culture on QoWL.

The Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale

The Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale was initially developed as part of a number of large staff surveys for the UK

National Health Service (NHS). Analysis of data from 953 NHS employees led to a 23 item scale (see Table 1), based on six factors (Van Laar, Edwards and Easton, 2007).

Table 1. The Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale

Question number	WRQoL Question text
1.	I have a clear set of goals and aims to enable me to do my job
2.	I feel able to voice opinions and influence changes in my area of work
3.	I have the opportunity to use my abilities at work
4.	I feel well at the moment
5.	My employer provides adequate facilities and flexibility for me to fit work in and around my family life
6.	My current working hours / patterns suit my personal circumstances
7.	I often feel under pressure at work
8.	When I have done a good job it is acknowledged by my line manager
9.	Recently, I have been feeling unhappy and depressed
10.	I am satisfied with my life
11.	I am encouraged to develop new skills
12.	I am involved in decisions that affect me in my own area of work
13.	My employer provides me with what I need to do my job effectively
14.	My line manager actively promotes flexible working hours / patterns
15.	In most ways my life is close to ideal
16.	I work in a safe environment
17.	Generally things work out well for me
18.	I am satisfied with the career opportunities available for me here
19.	I often feel excessive levels of stress at work
20.	I am satisfied with the training I receive in order to perform my present job
21.	Recently, I have been feeling reasonably happy all things considered
22.	The working conditions are satisfactory
23.	I am involved in decisions that affect members of the public in my own area of work

The resulting WRQoL scale was shown to have good sub-scale reliabilities (see Table 2), as well as good convergent, discriminant validity and test-retest

reliability and the scale has gone on to be widely used in many countries. The six factors are described below (Easton and Van Laar, 2012).

Table 2. Sub-scale and overall reliability scores for the WRQoL scale

Factor	Cronbach's Alpha
Job and Career Satisfaction (JCS)	0.86
General Well-being (GWB)	0.89
Home-work interface (HWI)	0.82
Stress at Work (SAW)	0.81
Control at Work (CAW)	0.81
Working Conditions (WCS)	0.75
Overall scale (23 items)	0.91

The Job and Career Satisfaction (JCS) factor is based on 6 items, with a sub-scale reliability of 0.86 and includes questions relating to satisfaction with job and career aspects, such as “I am satisfied with the career opportunities available for me here”. The Job and Career Satisfaction (JCS) factor seeks to measure the level to which a respondent feels their workplace provides sense of achievement, high self-esteem and fulfilment of potential. The factor correlates highly with other measures of job satisfaction (i.e., $r = .87$ with the Warr Job Satisfaction scale. See Mullarkey, 1999; Easton and Van Laar, 2012).

The General Well-Being (GWB) factor has a subscale reliability of 0.89 based on its 6 questions which assess respondents' general feelings of happiness and life satisfaction. An individual's sense of GWB is conceived as being influenced by both home and work. The GWB factor includes questions about psychological well-being and general physical health, and is highly correlated with measures of general well-being ($r = .57$ with the General Health Questionnaire; Goldberg, 1978; Easton and Van Laar, 2012).

The Home-Work Interface (HWI) factor addresses issues relating to work-life balance and the extent to which an employer is perceived to support someone's home life. The HWI factor has a sub-scale reliability of .82. The WRQoL Home-Work Interface factor mirrors what is also referred to as Work-Family Conflict, and picks up on the importance of balancing home and work demands (Dorsey, Jarjoura & Rutecki, 2003).

The extent to which an individual perceives they have excessive pressures and/or feel undue levels of stress at work is assessed by the **Stress at Work (SAW)**. This factor is represented by two items related to demands and has a sub-scale reliability of 0.81. There is evidence that people who perceive their work demands to be reasonable tend to report higher levels of job satisfaction (Freeborn, 2001).

Three items assess **Control at Work (CAW)** factor, which has a subscale reliability of 0.81. A significant positive association between personal control and job satisfaction has been shown (Spector, 1986), and a greater sense of control at work is strongly linked to employees' health and well-being (Spector, 2002).

Finally, a **Working Conditions (WCS)** factor, which has a sub-scale reliability of 0.79, assesses the extent to which someone is satisfied with their working conditions, security at work and level of available resources. While the JCS factor assesses the degree to which a workplace provides the best things at work, the WCS factor reflects the degree to which someone might perceive that their place of work meets their basic requirements, and their dissatisfaction with the physical work environment. In studies of physicians, quality of their work environment has been shown to impact career satisfaction (Leigh et al., 2002; Deshpande & Deshpande, 2011).

These subscales are used within the WRQoL scale to assess what were, for most people in the studies and analyses undertaken, the aspects of their experience of work that had the greatest influence on employees' quality of working life (Easton and Van Laar, 2012). For any one individual at any one time there may be relevant factors that are not assessed by the WRQoL, just as there may be cultural factors that need to be considered for any group of individuals. The WRQoL offers a snapshot of overall quality of working life and key underlying factors as a basis for a comprehensive analysis, and potentially offers a means by which an analysis of the cultural context can be undertaken.

The Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale in Different Settings

The WRQoL has been used in a variety of cultural settings, and translated in to more than 11 languages (e.g, Mazloumi et al., 2014; Duyan et al., 2013; Opollo, Gray, & Spies, 2014; Chen et al., 2014). Sirisawasd et al., (2014) reported high construct validity between a Thai

translation of the WRQoL and the original English version.

The concept of QoWL was developed within the Western literature (e.g., Martel and Dupuis, 2006), and so there have been concerns as to the relevance of occidental, English language focussed theories and models to other countries. There have also been indications of differences within the Western cultures, wherein for example Haire, Ghiselli and Porter (1966) reported that in the USA an evaluation of motivations for USA-based managers closely matched Maslow's (1954) model of hierarchy of needs, other nationality groups did not necessarily fit so well with that model.

Hofstede (1980; 1984) has suggested that cultural differences in attitudes to and experience of work can be substantial. He identified what he saw as four key dimensions: power distance (acceptance or rejection of hierarchies of power); individualism (vs collectivism; the assumed focus of commitment); masculinity (focus on material success/assertiveness as opposed to interpersonal relationships and caring for the weak) and uncertainty avoidance (tendency towards avoidance of the unpredictable vs acceptance of personal risk). Given the variation in these dimensions between cultures, Hofstede proposed that any endeavour to improve quality of work life would risk failure unless culture specific differences were taken into account. Hofstede had previously concluded that occupational differences could lead to differences in work-values, and suggested that an emphasis on content of jobs among professionals and managers might be distinct from a focus on social context common among other workers (Hofstede, 1972). Thus, the experience of occupational groups may be dependent on specific rather than common influence to greater or lesser degree, and universal measures of work experience may need to be adapted to each subject group.

Inevitably, generalisations about culture and work have been challenged, and Schwartz (2004) offered an alternative set of seven culture level value types:

1. Conservatism (the degree to which a culture or society places importance on the maintenance of the status-quo).
2. Intellectual autonomy (the degree to which individuals are seen as entitled to pursue their own intellectual interests and desires).
3. Affective autonomy (attitude towards the pursuit of hedonism, personal interests and desires, for example).
4. Hierarchy (the degree to which hierarchical structures and roles are legitimised).
5. Mastery (attitude towards concepts such as mastery of the social environment and focus on promoting competition between individuals).
6. Egalitarian commitment (attitude towards self-interest).
7. Harmony (attitude towards harmony with nature).

Schwartz has emphasised elements of culture that are not central to Hofstede's conceptualisation of values (Steenkamp, 2001; Ng, Lee and Soutar, 2007), but there is a degree of commonality among such models, as, for example, individualism-collectivism has widely studied because of its relationship with psychological differences across cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995; Matsumoto & Triandis, 2001; Haar et al., 2014; Brougham, Haar & Roche, 2015).

By way of illustration, Duyan et al., (2013) looked at quality of working life of managers in Turkey. Their statistical analysis indicated that an adapted 20 item, 6 factor version of the WRQoL offered acceptable to good fit indices according to CFA results. The Turkish study confirmed previous indications of a relatively weak correlation between relationship between

the Stress at Work (SAW) subscale and other WRQoL factors (Van Laar et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2009). The relationship between stress at work and the broader concept of quality of working life appears complex, and it is to this end that exploration of moderation models, taking into account management responsibility is ongoing. Thus, there is some indication that higher satisfaction with Home-Work Interface tends to be significantly related to the perceived absence of Stress at Work, as measured by the SAW subscale of the WRQoL, working conditions, job and career satisfaction and influence/control at work may not be significantly related to the absence of stress at work, which latter factor, tends in turn to be significantly related to reported General Well-being.

Assessment of QoWL with Individuals

Experience in the applied setting has led to the development of applications and an on-line version of the WRQoL to facilitate self-assessment by individuals and use of the measure for assessment, monitoring of progress and evaluation of change by consultants. The measure can be used to contribute to initial assessments in the coaching or stress management counselling session, as consultants seek to help clients explore and understand the relationships between facets of the work experience with a view to identifying appropriate interventions. The use of the WRQoL pre and post interventions then contributes to evaluation of change, offering a broader picture of someone's experience and opportunity to check for any unforeseen consequences of action. The measure can also be used to inform annual appraisals, as it offers information on key aspects of an employee's experience relevant to their performance at

work, and provides a baseline against which the impact of change can be measured.

A freely available online version of the WRQoL scale provides a detailed personal profile report which can be used to inform assessments of an individual's work experience with a view to planning and implementing targeted interventions. The WRQoL scale has also been developed as an application for Android devices in a form which provides a record of initial and most recent WRQoL profiles; this format can be used by individuals, mentors, counsellors or managers to monitor the effects of change in work practice or environments over time. For further details and access to all versions of the WRQoL scale, go to <http://www.qowl.co.uk/>.

Overview

Evaluation of QoWL provides the necessary context for understanding stress and strain, and so facilitates selection of interventions that address the most relevant factors affecting any individual's personal and unique experience of work. Whilst the core factors underpinning QoWL may be largely universal, it may be that key factors for various cultures differ, and/or there may be additional factors that play an important role in certain groups. Further work in a range of settings might lead to refinement of a core measure, or it may lead to development of culture specific versions of measures of QoWL. For the present, the WRQoL has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure in western culture studies, and as QoWL is explored in other cultures, a clearer picture will emerge as to whether or how measures such as the WRQoL may need to be adapted for specific groups of workers.

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