

Need for resource recovery: Revision to traditional occupational stress process

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ABSTRACT

A revised occupational stress process model is presented that incorporates a person's need for resource recovery (NFRR), or state of cognitive, emotional, and energy-related resource drain. This model offers a more measurable construct that addresses several limitations stemming from the traditional stressor—strain model. The theoretical and conceptual development of the NFRR construct is summarized and its implications for theory and application are discussed.

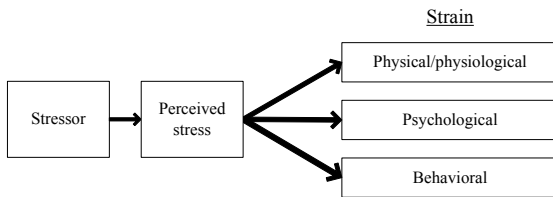
BACKGROUND

Consider the following question:

Why do we spend so much time and effort labeling the degree of "stress" present in a person's environment, when what would really help workers and work organizations is explaining and understanding how demands placed on a person (i.e., stressors) impact his/her health, wellbeing, and ability to perform at an optimal level?

- Most occupational stress research has focused on identifying external conditions that contribute to a person's feelings of stress.
- Even more effort has been devoted to identifying possible impacts of this stress on employee and organization health and well-being.
- Remaining gaps in our ability to explain:
 - (a) What allows some individuals to better handle stress all the time
 - (b) Why people may handle stress well one day, but fail to do the same a few days later

Most occupational stress studies have conformed to a single paradigm:



• **What would happen if this paradigm were modified?**

This traditional model is limiting:

- Emphasizes stressor exposure and perception
- Sidesteps fact that many stressors cannot (and should not) be removed from work environs.
- Suggests the effects of stress extend directly from feeling “stressed” – not always true
- Ignores important intermediate, more proximate psychological and physiological states that may better predict strains than traditional, more distal predictors
- Cannot explain inconsistent impact of stressor exposure (e.g., challenge vs. hindrance/threat)

- Targeting experienced stress is intuitive, but *is this really the optimal focal point?*
- How can we explain individual differences in perception?
- Some static personality characteristics may moderate the effects of stressor exposure (e.g., Jex et al., 2002; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997; Strelau, 1995)
 - Theories and observed effect sizes for these relationships have been inconsistent
 - Focusing on relatively unchangeable individual characteristics has not expanded our options for improving workers’ abilities to cope with stressors

STRESS & RESOURCES

- We need to remember the importance of person characteristics (e.g., Appley & Trumbull, 1986) and situational appraisals (e.g., Lazarus, 1967, 1995; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987)
- At least one “black box” construct is missing from traditional stress process model
- Perhaps this missing construct is an individual’s resource-based capacity for handling or coping with stress
- Resources include the objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies that a person depends on when dealing with potentially challenging or threatening stressors in day-to-day life (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2002)

- Without resources, a person will eventually develop strain due to an inability to effectively cope with present stressors.
- With sufficient resources, the effects of any given stressor are less likely to be automatically detrimental to the individual.
- Thus, personal resource levels are critically important, yet understudied individual-level characteristic that could influence the impact of occupational stressors on a particular person.
 - Lack of attention to personal resource levels is like taking a road trip without paying attention to the car's fuel gauge

Two explanatory resource-related theories provide some guidance, but do not fully integrate a person's state of need for resource recovery into the stress process model:

1) Effort-Recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998)

- Effort spent responding to stressors (e.g., work demands) results in short-term physical and psychological costs or depletion of a person's available resources
- Without recovery costs accumulate and can develop into serious physical and psychological strains
- With recovery, spent resources can be recouped. Full recovery = return to a balanced/homeostatic state in which no demands are present

2) Conservation of Resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001)

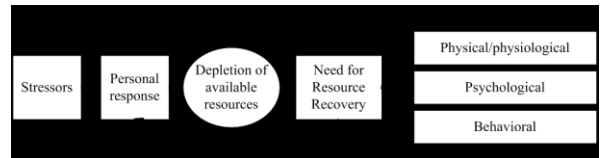
- Resources are objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies that a person uses in response to stressors
- People are motivated to minimize the loss of resources
- When loss is not imminent (i.e., absent stressors), people will strive to increase stock of resources
- Depletion of resources reduces person's capacity for effective response to stressors across life domains

NEED FOR RESOURCE RECOVERY

- COR and Effort-Recovery theories can be integrated when considering a person's resource recovery needs and efforts
- The missing link may be the person's state of resource depletion
- Need for resource recovery connects exposure to stressors, reliance on personal resources, and recovery needs
- Need for resource recovery can be expected to develop at the point where available psychosocial resources begin to be outstripped by the demand for those resources
- It is an intervening psycho-physical state arising between perceiving of stressors and experiencing of strain (cf., work with physical fatigue by Sluiter et al., 2001)

- High need for resource recovery reflects more than physical fatigue (need to recover spent energy-related resources)
 - Need to regain attentional, cognitive, behavioral, and social resources in preparation for impending challenges
- Need for resource recovery can be more clearly defined and measured than ambiguous “experienced stress”
- Revised model shifts emphasis away from appraisal of stressors and experienced stress and onto a person’s need for resource recovery, a more proximate indicator of developing susceptibility to psychological, physical, and behavioral strains

Revised Stress Process Model



Propositions

- 1) A person’s need for resource recovery will increase as resources are expended when coping with work-related demands or other stressors.
- 2) High need for resource recovery represents more than basic fatigue.

- 2) Need for resource recovery is a pre-strain condition, developing before more intense outcomes such as burnout (e.g., Maslach, 2006; Shirom, 2003).
- 3) Need for resource recovery can be assessed using self-reported feelings and perceptions, and physiological markers.
- 4) An individual with low (vs. high) need for resource recovery will be more likely to address stressors as challenging rather than threatening or insurmountable.
- 5) An individual with a low (vs. high) level of need for resource recovery is less likely to be negatively affected by a stressful work environment.

Research & Practice Implications

- This revised occupational stress model shifts our focus to a more personal stress experience from a generalized impact of stressor exposure
 - Frees us from focusing too much on occupation-specific constellations of potentially stress-inducing factors
- When reduction of stressors is not feasible, the next best strategy may be to ensure workers can regularly recover spent resources
 - Need for resource recovery can be used as a marker of early strain development

- Many promising avenues for applied assessment and intervention:
 - Training of workers to more accurately recognize their own recovery needs
 - Screening workers for resource recovery needs with a brief measure (e.g., Cunningham, 2008)
 - Repeated need for resource recovery measurements as means of demonstrating effectiveness of stress and recovery interventions