Overview of Occupational Health Psychology

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Objectives
- OHP Background & History
- Overview of the field
- Why is this so important?
- Suggestions for getting involved
- Suggested readings

What is OHP?
- Occupational Health Psychology
- Multi-disciplinary research and practice focused on improving working lives of individuals, families, communities, and work organizations
- Within psychology, these goals can be addressed by combining clinical, industrial-organizational (I-O), and health psychological principles to these challenges (Quick, 1999; Schneider et al., 1999)

Introducing OHP
- Applying psychological principles to manage stress and health within work organizations
- Multi-disciplinary research and practice
- Extension of WHO model:
  Wellness > absence of symptoms

Why OHP is Relevant to You
- Creating and maintaining healthy and safe work environments requires attention to multiple factors:
  - Physical/biological
  - Social
  - Psychological
- Interdisciplinary efforts should involve professionals with psychological training

OHP Emphases
- Prevention*
  - of negative effects of workplace exposures
- Promotion*
  - of healthy personal and organizational actions and behaviors
- Response
  - to workplace exposures or crises when they occur, in a timely fashion
Challenge of OHP
- Limited governmental involvement
  - Especially in the U.S.
- Health and well-being is a relatively new target for psychologists and other professionals in organizations
- Professional resources are growing though
  - SOHP, NIOSH
  - EA-OHP, I-WHO
  - ICG-OHP

Challenge of Occupational Health
- Difficult to enhance + maintain occ. health
- For lasting positive change, OHP professionals often work collaboratively with specialists in:
  - Industrial safety/hygiene
  - Ergonomics
  - Epidemiology
  - Public health
  - Labor organizations
  - Medicine
  - Law

OHP Concepts You Should Know
- Stressor exposure
  - Workload
  - Constraints
  - Work-nonwork role challenges
  - Incivility
- Psychosocial Resources
- Work-Related Strains
- Intervention options

Common OHP-Related Issues
- Work Stress
  - Healthy workplaces
  - Work Safety
  - Worker Incivility
  - Work-family/nonwork issues
  - Multi-level concerns
  - Aging population
  - Ethnic diversity
  - Fast-paced and continuous work

We have all been “stressed”...
...but why does this matter at work?

So, what is stress?
- Psychologically and physiologically we seek a balanced resting state
  - Homeostasis
- Stressors are stimuli that disturb this state
- Stress is the experience of arousal in response to stressors and in preparation for a response
- Strain is what develops if the stress process continues without interruption
Traditional Stress Process Model

Stressor → Perceived stress → Strain
- Physical/physiological
- Psychological
- Behavioral

Is stress at work “bad”? It depends

Stressors at Work
- Ambiguity, lack of resources, amount/speed/quality demands, interpersonal conflicts...
- Especially problematic because:
  - Limited response options
  - Cumulative effects
  - Individual differences
  - Potentially “toxic” environments

Stress is Triggered by Many Work-Related Experiences (i.e., combinations of stressors)

Physiological Reactions to Stress
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Increased metabolic rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Dilation of pupils
- Tensing of muscles
- Secretion of endorphins and stress hormones
- Release of extra sugar from the liver

Body goes into “overdrive”

Psychological Reactions to Stress
- Anxiety
- Anger and aggression
- Apathy and depression
- Cognitive impairment
  - Narrowing of attention, focus

Mind steps out for awhile
“Bad” (threatening) stress can...

- ...impair cognitive functioning
- ...lead to cardiovascular health problems
- ...damage immune and nervous systems
- ...contribute to other physical/psychological strains
  - Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)
  - Depression, anxiety, frustration
- ...reduce worker effectiveness

Stress at work may be good if it...

- ...motivates (challenges)
- ...forces necessary adaptation
- ...is not a permanent environmental feature
- ...is handled appropriately by the worker and the organization

So why does this matter?

Work/Job/Occupational Stress

Stressor → Experience & Exposure → Health & Safety

Workplace Issues

- 25-40% of workers regularly report their jobs as very or extremely stressful
  - Chronic is “bad” in this case
- Worker well-being and performance are interdependent
  - Financially & psychologically healthy workplaces require both
- Basic personal needs at work matter
  - Turnover, commitment, morale, satisfaction

Contagious diseases have declined. Stress-related ones have not.
**Tangible Costs of Chronic Work Stress**
- Increased occupational disability
- Longer absences
  - > all other work-related injuries + illnesses
  - Average stress-related absence is 20 days
- Health care costs
  - 50+% greater for high- vs. low-risk (i.e., stressed) employees

  **Employer, employee*, and society carry a major burden**

**How to Help**
- Help employees do what they naturally do well:
  - Reduce impediments/constraints
  - Creatively reinforce to maximize positive emotions, attitudes, and behaviors at work
  - Support employee efforts to manage work and nonwork stress

**Stress Management Interventions**
- Three levels:
  * Primary (alter source of stress)
  * Secondary (reduce severity of stress symptoms)
  * Tertiary (treat effects of stress)
- Focus tends to be on improving workers’ ability to manage stress
- Few interventions actually target organization-level change

**Stress Management Interventions**
- Increasingly prevalent in organizations
- Tend to focus on modifying stressors or employee perceptions/responses to stressors
- Wide variety, and most seem to work
  - Most effective = Cognitive-behavioral
    - Still room for improvement in effectiveness
  - Other popular forms:
    - Relaxation enhancement
    - Meditation

**Where Should I Start?**
- OHP research and practice opportunities are largely built on goals of NIOSH
- Start with guidance from NIOSH: the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA)
- You can find the newest form of this through NIOSH’s main website
  - http://www.cdc.gov/niosh
- Cunningham (2007), *Getting involved with OHP: A student’s perspective*. Online at,
  - http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/

**I’m interested...now what?**
Where Should I Start?

- Most OHP challenges require collaborative efforts with professionals in other related fields such as: epidemiology, public health, ergonomics, and industrial hygiene
- Apply for a small grant to support your OHP-related research in a field setting.
  - Organizations will be more likely to partner when you have money
  - Experience with grants can really set you on the path to greatness in research

Concrete Start-up Suggestions

- How can your interests in psychology be applied to or informed by ongoing OHP research and practice?
- Push yourself to work with others with different backgrounds/skill sets. Work through any tension that may result in these relationships – this will help you in future collaborations.
- Educate yourself in OHP-related disciplines
  - Take courses outside your specialty area, do research with non-psychologists, read broadly
  - Know thyself – Understand your psychology-related strengths and where your knowledge and expertise is weaker.
  - Will help you identify when collaboration will be helpful

Where can I go for more info?

- [http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/)
- [http://www.sohp-online.org](http://www.sohp-online.org)
Suggested Readings


Questions/Comments?

If you think of any questions or have any comments, please contact me:

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