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PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Personality and Individual Differences 38 (2005) 569–578

www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Managers' occupational stress in China: the role of self-efficacy

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Received 10 September 2003; received in revised form 31 March 2004; accepted 6 May 2004

Available online 5 August 2004

Abstract

The role of self-efficacy, an individual difference variable, in occupational stress research is seldom discussed, and is even rarely examined in Chinese societies. This study investigates the relationships between stressors, managerial self-efficacy (MSE) and job strains (job satisfaction, physical strain, and psychological strain). A total of 450 enterprise managers in eight cities of the People's Republic of China completed a battery of structured questionnaires. The results of the study generally support that total stressors was positively related to physical and psychological strains. Related to the moderating effects of MSE on the stressor–strain relationship, only a significant moderating effect was found in predicting physical strain.

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Keywords: Occupational stress; Manager; Self-efficacy; China

1. Introduction

Occupational stress in the workplace can have deleterious effects on individuals' well-being as well as negative effects on organizational outcomes such as performance and turnover. It has been argued that almost all occupational stress research and theories were developed and empirically tested in Western industrialized countries (Siu, 2002; Xie, 1996). However, the problem of occupational stress is also particularly relevant for the People's Republic of China (PRC) which is undergoing enormous economic and social changes. As the PRC has entered the World Trade

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Organization (WTO), employees in the PRC are becoming more exposed to stressful industrialized work situations. It is therefore important to conduct occupational stress research in Chinese societies, which will give theoretical and practical suggestions to stress management for both individuals and organizations.

Stress does not always directly result from the source of pressure itself, but rather from the perception of that pressure. Therefore, individual difference variables that might relate to perceptions should be given more attention in occupational stress research. One general class of individual difference variables that has been examined over the years is self-belief. These studies have provided some support for the idea that stressors are less detrimental when individuals have more positive self-perceptions. The dominant theory in most of the past studies is the job demands-control model which focuses on the role of perceived job control in the stress process (Karasek, 1979). Litt (1988) suggested that self-efficacy is critical because it affects an individual's ability and willingness to exercise control. Some authors have also suggested that perceived self-efficacy must be added to the demands-control model of occupational stress in order to improve its predictability (e.g., Schaubroeck et al., 2000; Schaubroeck and Merritt, 1997). High job demands with opportunity to exercise control over various facets of the work environment leaves jobholders with high levels of perceived self-efficacy unperturbed, but is more stressful to those of low perceived self-efficacy. For this reason, any efforts to reduce occupational stress by increasing job control without raising efficacy to manage the increasing responsibilities will do more harm than good (Schaubroeck and Merritt, 1997).

Self-efficacy is a critical component of social cognitive theory, which is a primary influence on human thought, motivation, and action. Bandura (1986) defined perceived self-efficacy as a construct, which is concerned with people's beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute designated courses of action. According to the above definition, self-efficacy is not concerned with the skills or abilities one possesses, but rather the judgment of what one can do with these. Essentially, self-efficacy refers to a sense of competence to have control over one's environment. It is logical to conclude that stressors would be much more threatening to those who have low confidence in performing their job tasks. Presumably then, self-efficacy impacts stressor-strain relationships because individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to believe they can maintain high levels of job performance despite the presence of challenging job-related stressors. Another way that self-efficacy may impact stressor-strain relationships is how to cope with stressors in the workplace (Leiter, 1992). It has been shown that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to use problem-focused or active coping strategies, whereas the coping strategies of those with low self-efficacy tend to be more emotion-focused or avoidant, and they have a greater tendency to worry about job-related stressors. In a review provided by Semmer (2003), people who have the tendency to employ problem-focused coping tend to report less physical and psychological strains. Some authors have found that self-efficacy does not only directly impact on individuals' strains (O'Neill and Mone, 1998; Saks, 1994), but also has a moderating effect on stressor-strain relationships (Jex and Gudanowski, 1992; Schaubroeck and Merritt, 1997).

Despite the intuitive appeal of self-efficacy as a moderator of stressor-strain relations, there have been few empirical tests of this moderating effect. Furthermore, the results have been mixed. For example, Jex and Gudanowski (1992) found little evidence that self-efficacy moderated relations between stressors and strains. More recently, some authors have found that self-efficacy

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