The Demands of Working Life: Re-contextualising Old Models

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Some Context

‘Workers across the OECD have been exposed to changes in working conditions as a result of structural adjustments in the past decades, raising the question whether these developments might worsen the mental health of workers’ (OECD 2012. Sick on the Job? Myths and Realities about Mental Health and Work)

‘For those who fail in the regulation of boundaries, work is likely to invade life. The result may be work-life conflicts, a constant lack of recovery, and the accompanying stress and health consequences‘ (Allvin 2011:238)
Prominent Models

Demand-Control Model (Karasek 1979) [Organizational Studies]
- High/Low Job Demands and Decision Latitude

Person Environment Fit (Caplan 1987) [Industrial & Org Psychology]
- Discrepancy in match between conditions and characteristics

Effort-Reward Imbalance (Siegrist 1996) [Occupational Health Psychology]
- Imbalance/lack of reciprocity between high efforts + low rewards = strain. Also concept of ‘status control’

Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti 2007) [Managerial Psychology]
- Differing job based demands & resources, dual process; demand-strain but resource-motivation
Ireland and Denmark by Karasek Quadrants

Working Conditions by all 4 Karasek Quadrants. Source: European Working Conditions Survey 2010
Ireland and Denmark: Experience of Stress by D-C

% experiencing stress in work ‘Always’ or ‘Most of the Time’ by Karasek Quadrants, EWCS 2010

% experiencing stress in work ‘Always’ or ‘Most of the Time’ by Karasek Quadrants. Source: European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 2010
Ireland and Denmark: Gendered Experience of Stress by D-C

% experiencing stress in work ‘Always’ or ‘Most of the Time’ by Karasek Quadrants. Source: European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 2010
Autonomy as Threat?

- ‘Project Time’ (Shih 2004)
- ‘Autonomy Paradox’ (van Echtelt et al 2006) (over-employment)
- ‘Fusion of self and work’ (Wharton 1999 on emotional labour literature)
- Nordic ‘boundarylessness’ literature (Allvin 2008; Kamp et al 2010)
'The problem is not that you get too much influence or too much autonomy... it is more the associations with the demands at work. I mean for [the] knowledge work process it is more the problem with the endless demands... you have influence on how to fulfil the task but not necessarily on the amounts of tasks and not necessarily on the deadlines... *It is often set by other institutions*... So you are not independently working with your own autonomy. The autonomy is more of a question of the complexity of a larger group of people... *it is not possible to increase the influence or autonomy to the level that can match those very high demands*'

Re-conceptualised Framework

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

institutional shaping of workplace

institutional resources – worker capabilities (status control mechanisms)

ORG/WORKPLACE FEATURES

INDIVIDUAL MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES
Denmark: A Sociotechnical Samfund?

• Institutional contexts translate modern demands of economic life into the micro level capabilities.
  – High Levels of autonomy in traditionally low occupations
  – Regulation of Ambitions (tax, decentralised collective agreements, influence of unions, workplace rep in law, WEA regulates PWE and stress, culture...)
    ‘They [collective agreements] are where you are attached from the employees' point of view, you are not attached to a particular company. You work for a particular company but when it comes to your social rights you are covered by the collective agreement and that secures your rights...' (Respondent, Employer Federation Rep, Nov 2013)
  – Institutional contexts provide workers with more autonomy beyond work; more opportunities for ‘status control’
However...‘the compromise is weakening’

• According to the OECD (2013:30) sickness absence is systematically higher in Denmark than EU average.

• Also according to the OECD, Denmark has the second highest rate of antidepressant consumption (behind Iceland).

• Loosening of regulations e.g. shop opening hours only liberalised in 2012, teaching hours strike re: demands made to be more flexible

• Increasing focus on standardisation, measuring productivity and increasing control, measurement and management of traditionally highly autonomous Danish workers - may erode levels of autonomy; ‘We have seen a development within the last ten years in Denmark towards much more control and elevation of productivity and of some degree also of quality, particularly within the public sector. So in parallel with the more autonomy, then there has been much more focus on control, I mean control from above, meaning how much to produce and how well it is done...’ (Respondent, Work Research Psychologist  Nov 2013)

• Polarising of Flexicurity model: strengthening of flexibility alongside weakening of social security; ‘...the compromise is weakening’ (Respondent, Professor, Nov 2013)
Conclusion: A Re-contextualisation Required

• Sociological re-conceptualisation of key models
  – Using alienated experiences to expand Karasek’s ‘job strain’
  – Account for high autonomy as a potential threat in modern working world (overcommitment, anomie)
  – Broadening of status control (re: experience of security).
  – Institutional context of workers – capabilities not sourced in work but important in dealing with demands of working life.

• Framework which accounts for different paths/outcomes – not just ‘strain’

• Moving forward: semi-structured interviews, observation of workers in three sectors (ICT, Retail, Health) in DK and IE
EXTRA SLIDES
PhD Overview

**MACRO**
- Networked production
- Institut of org flexibility
- Shareholder value
- Technological progress
- Service Industry expansion
- Union density decline

**MESO**
- Insecure employment
- Flexible, intensified work
- ‘Responsible’ autonomy
- Individualism
- Increased Teamwork
- Reinvented Bureaucracy

**MICRO**
- Work-Life Balance
- Meaning of Work
- Physical/Mental Wellbeing

• Broad Research Objective: Analyse the experience of structurally shaped conditions of working life, and the multilayered path through which they may impact on the mental health of service industry workers in Ireland and Denmark.

• Linking societal and organisational factors to individual outcomes through a focus on **autonomy**, **intensity** and **uncertainty** as conditions of working life.
Trends in the proportion of workers in the job-strain quadrant, by country, based on the 2010 threshold

Source: OECD calculations based on European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 1990-2010.
People in higher-level jobs report significantly more job-related anxiety - experience combination of more anxiety and more enthusiasm.
High demands linked more to unhappiness in terms of axis 2 (raised anxiety) then in terms of axis 3 (from depression to enthusiasm).
Depression to enthusiasm (axis 3) linked to a desire to move toward something that is wanted but currently lacking (e.g. opportunity to use your skills, autonomy over tasks).
AD (Additional Decrement): (1) opportunity for personal control (2) opportunity for skill use (3) externally generated goals (4) variety (5) environmental clarity (6) contact with others

CE (Constant Effect): (7) availability of money (8) physical security, and (9) valued social position

Environments calling for unremitting control (1) through difficult decision making and sustained personal responsibility, or that demand continuous use of extremely complex skills (2), can give rise to overload problems as very high demands exceed personal capabilities.

“opportunity” becomes “unavoidable requirement” at very high levels; behaviour is then coerced rather than encouraged or facilitated.
Siegrist (1996) ERI Model

Demands / Obligations

Effort

Motivation (Overcommitment)

Imbalance maintained ...
- if no alternative choice available
- if accepted for strategic reasons
- if motivational pattern present (i.e. overcommitment)

Reward

Motivation (Overcommitment)

- Wage, salary
- Esteem
- Promotion, security
Karasek (1979) D-C Model

Figure 1. Job strain model.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discretionary Learning</th>
<th>Lean</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Taylorist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• High autonomy</td>
<td>• Below average autonomy</td>
<td>• Low autonomy</td>
<td>• Low autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High learning opportunities</td>
<td>• High teamwork/job rotation</td>
<td>• Least learning opportunities</td>
<td>• Low learning opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High responsibility</td>
<td>• High quality norms</td>
<td>• Least complex problems</td>
<td>• Low wage &amp; educational requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complex tasks and problem solving</td>
<td>• High responsibility</td>
<td>• Individualistic</td>
<td>• Low responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low constraints</td>
<td>• Bureaucratic constraints</td>
<td>• Service orientated</td>
<td>• Highly constrained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Netherlands</td>
<td>• UK</td>
<td>• Greece</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Denmark</td>
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Firm – Decentralisation of Autonomy

Flexible working conditions: high discretion, low constraints, high responsibility, deadline dictated...

Flexible employment structures: marketisation of demands, ICT augmented bureaucracy, downsizing, outsourcing...

Employment Control: ideology of individualism, insecurity

Numerical Flexibility

Organisational Control

Firm – Concentration of Control

Functional Flexibility

Flexibility: High Autonomy = Concentrated Control?
Siegrist (1996) ERI Model

Figure 1. The effort–reward imbalance model at work.
Ireland and Denmark by Karasek Quadrants

IE & DK Female Kara Quads, EWCS 2010

IE & DK Male Kara Quads, EWCS 2010

Working Conditions by all 4 Karasek Quadrants. Source: European Working Conditions Survey 2010