

Working Conditions and the Conditions of Workers: Old Models in a New Context

John-Paul Byrne

Department of Sociology/NIRSA

NUI Maynooth

SAI PG Conference 8th March 2014

PhD

- IRC funded doctoral research
- 15 months in; literature & conceptual framework, initial descriptive analysis of EWCS data, one piece of fieldwork – 16 expert interviews in Cop.
- New Deals in the New Economy: ERC funded study of the political economy of work, production, employment regimes, and the changing worlds of capitalism.
 - Quantitative analysis of European trends
 - Ireland and Denmark as case study countries
 - 3 service sectors: IT, Retail, Health

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*)

‘...we were at an engineering company and there they had a very, very advanced policy relating to stress but also very, very individualised...they were working really, really hard, very high intensity, very long working hours, and many were going down with stress. And then they had a policy, a very clear policy, ok we can give you support from psychologists. After five days we phone you and involve you again and you can start slowly up and things like that. But it was so individualised and it has no relation to working conditions...actually the only way out of this stressed work was to be ill...It is much easier for employers to make an arrangement with a psychologist for instance and to give therapy or be aware of the signs of stress and then make individual support very quick. But to change the working situation is much more complicated’
(Respondent, Professor, Nov 2013).

Aims & Objectives

MACRO

Networked production
Instituted 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 working conditions and the mental health outcomes 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.
- Focusing on the subjective side of these structural transformations my research will investigate the multilayered path through which these transformations shape;
 - (i) the conditions of working life; and
 - (ii) the mental health of workers.

Three Prominent Models

- MH has multiple influences but sociological and psychological literature converge on point that working conditions can contribute to, and cause, psychological distress. Key here is identifying how working conditions **contribute to** negative mental health outcomes.
 - 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
 - Concept of ‘low status control’

Karasek (1979) D-C Model

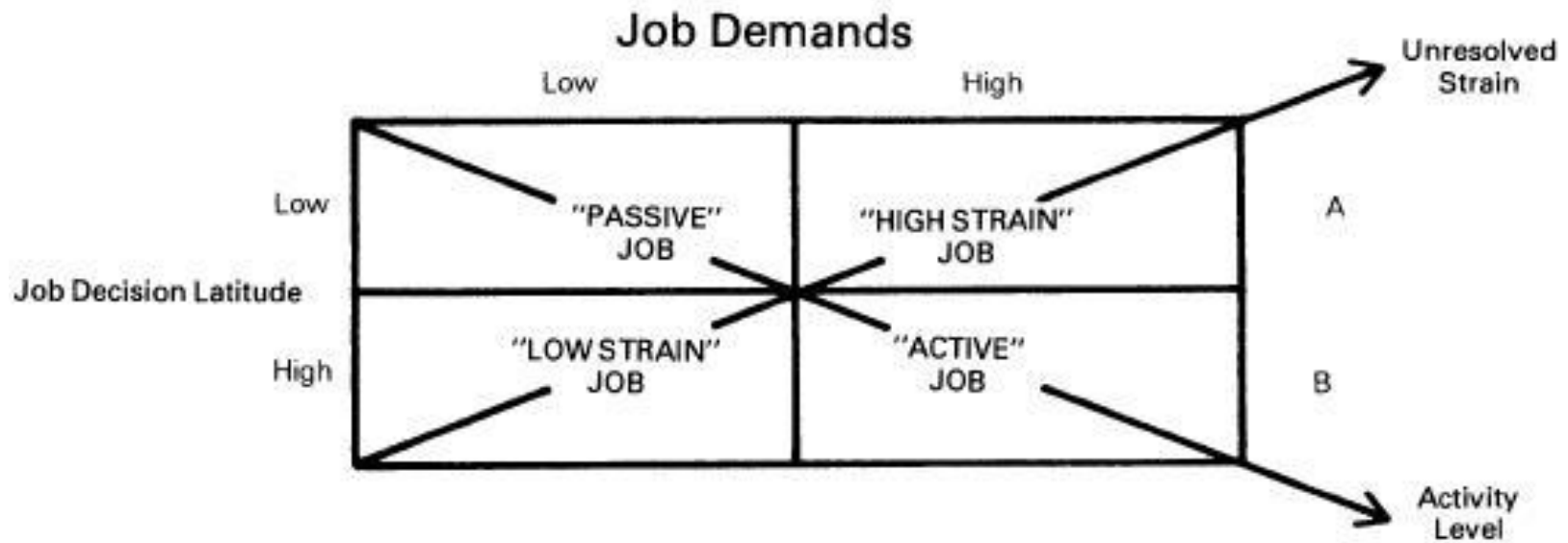
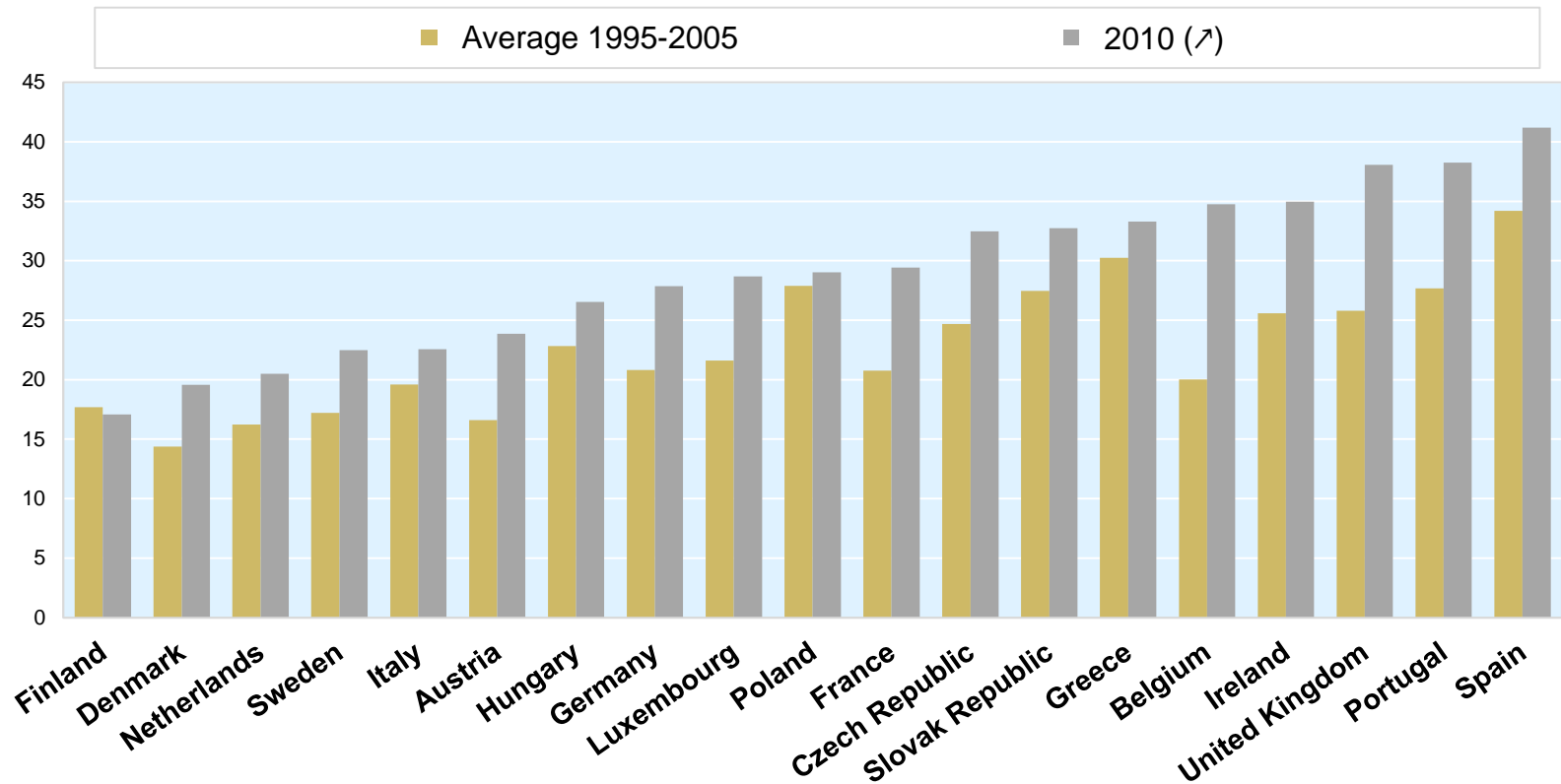


Figure 1. Job strain model.

OECD 2012 Figures on Job Strain

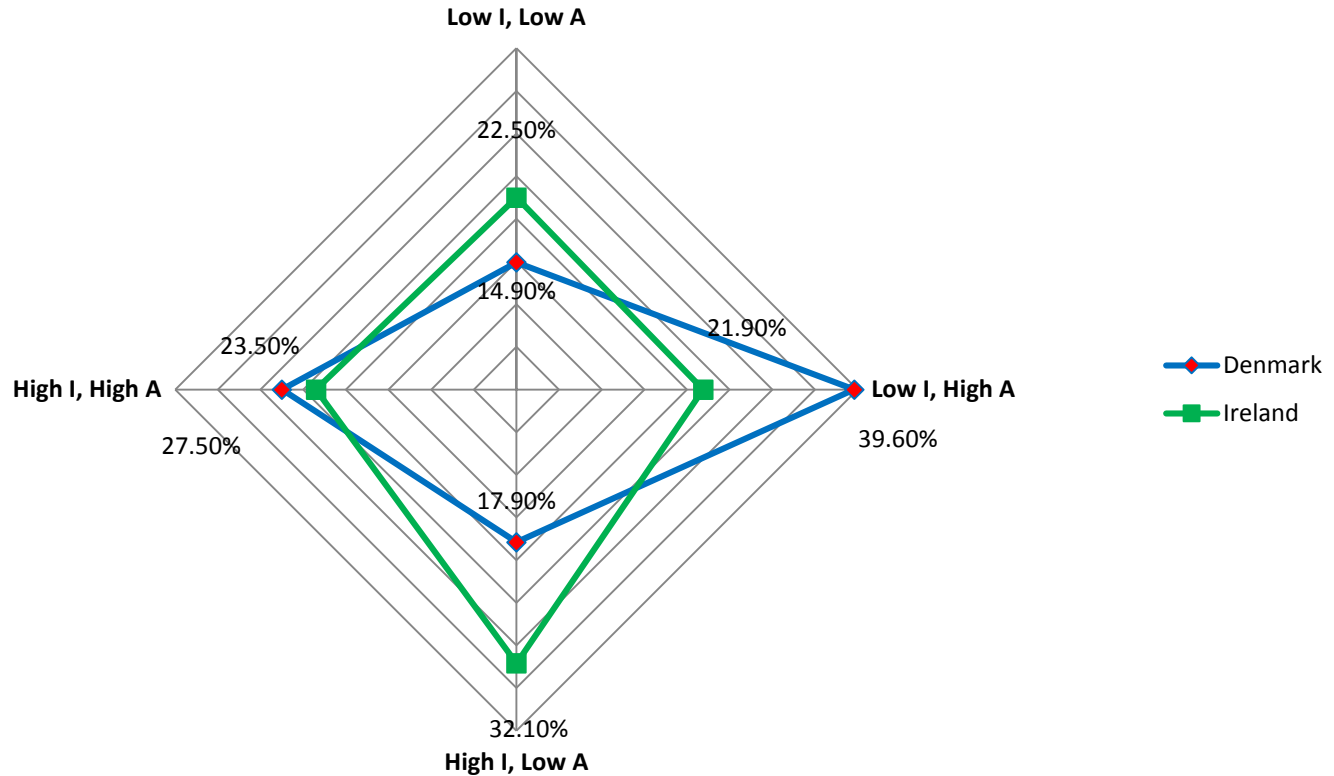


Trends in the proportion of workers in the job-strain quadrant, by country, based on the 2010 threshold

Source: OECD calculations based on European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 1990-2010.

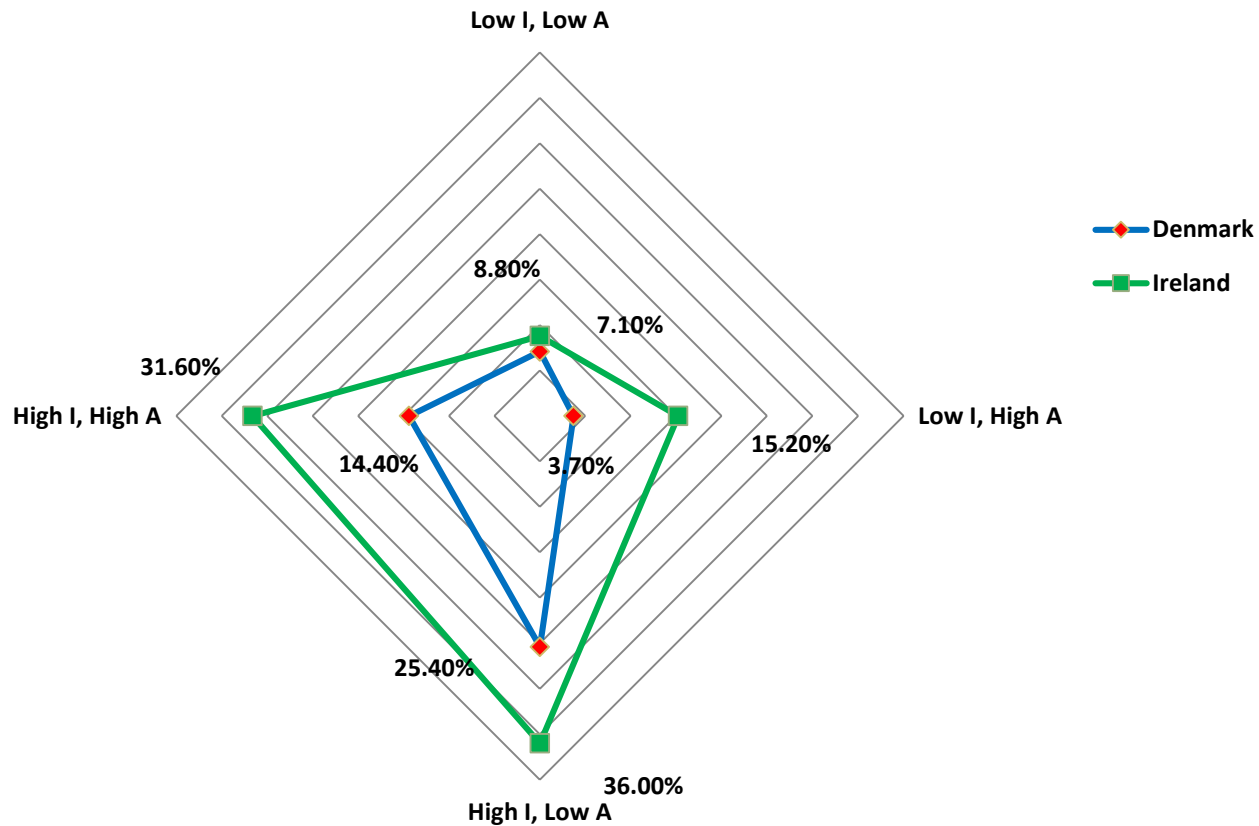
Note: Model results are based on all countries covered in the survey.

Ireland and Denmark by Karasek Quadrants



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

Ireland and Denmark by Karasek Quadrants

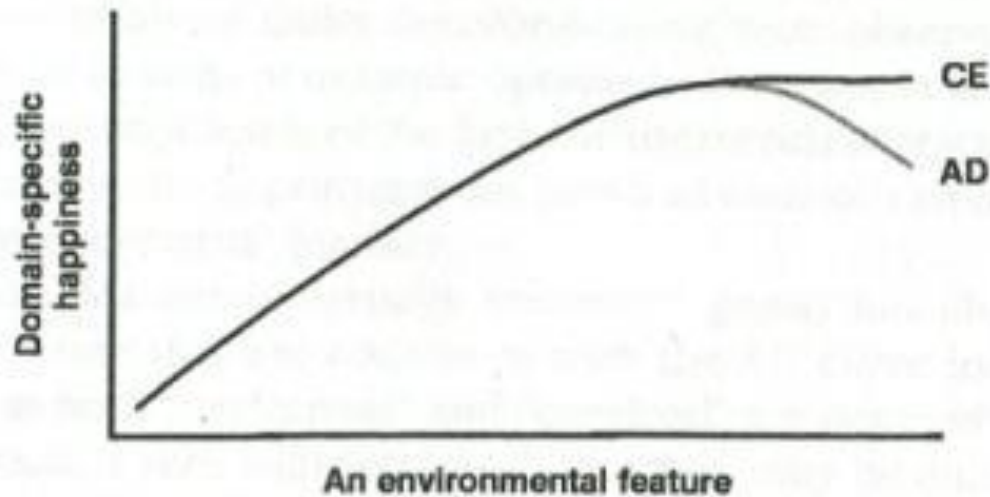


% experiencing stress in work 'Always' or 'Most of the Time' by Karasek Quadrants. Source: European Working Conditions Survey 2010

Autonomy as Threat?

- 'Project Time' (Shih 2004)
- 'Autonomy Paradox' (van Echtelt et al 2006) (over-employment)
- 'Fusion of self and work' (Wharton 1999) (emotional labour lit.)
- Nordic boundarylessness literature (Allvin 2008)

Warr 2007: Vitamin Analogy



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.

Qualitative Evidence from Denmark

'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 can do it better and you can do more and more...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'

(Respondent, Work Research Psychologist, 2013).

Warr 2007: MH Dimensions

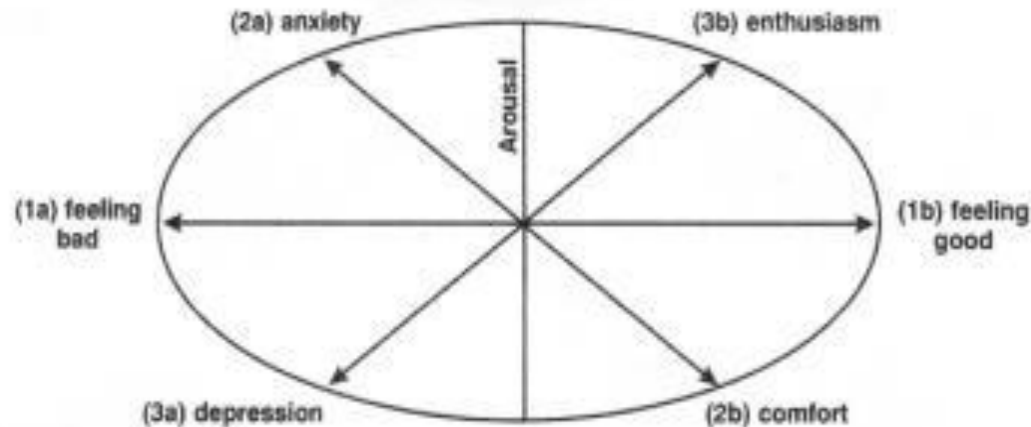
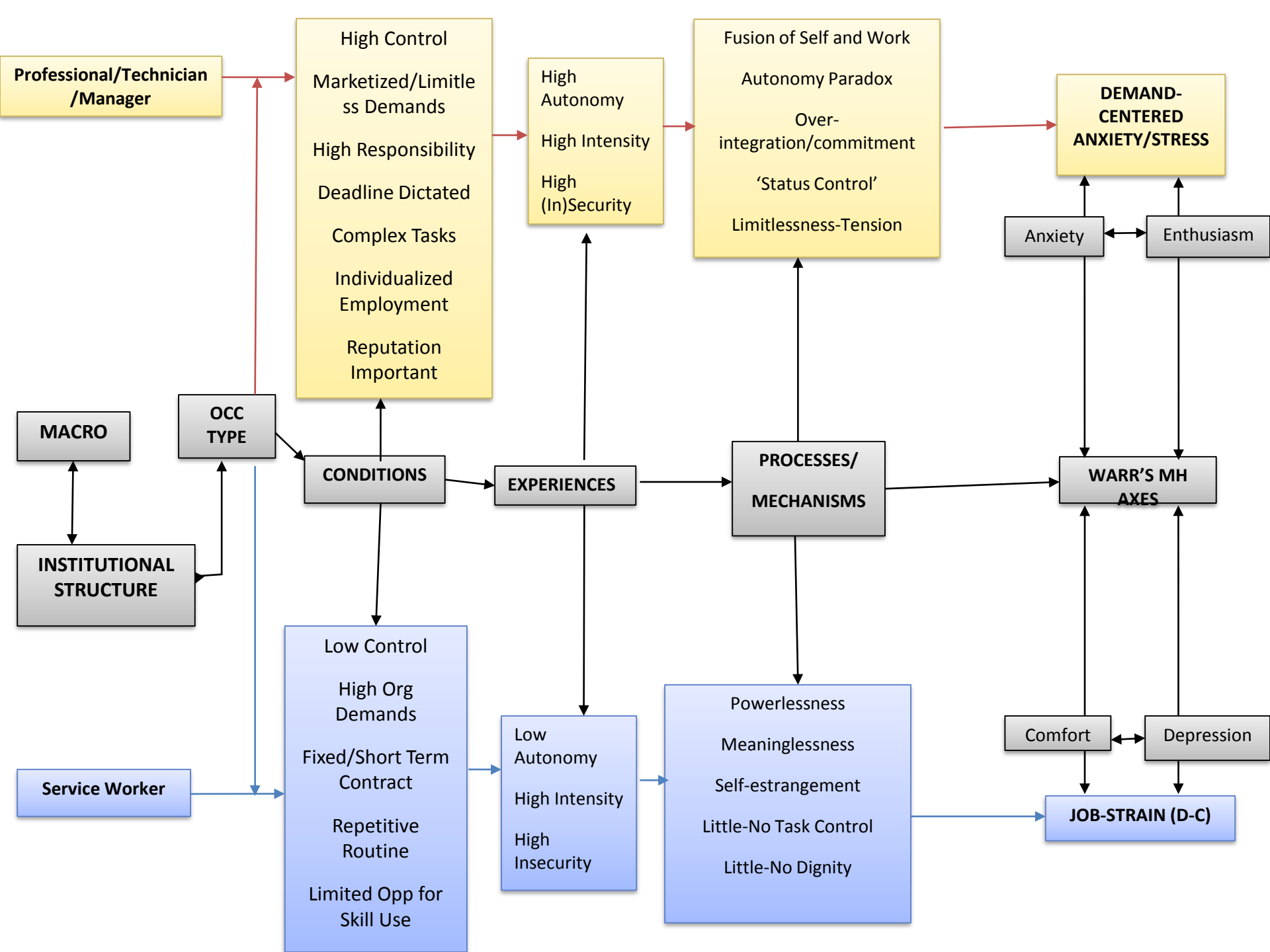


Figure 2.2. Three axes for the measurement of subjective well-being.

- 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) than 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)



Denmark: A Sociotechnical Samfund?

- Key role of institutional structures (resources) in translating the modern demands of economic life into the micro level circumstances of working life.
 - **High Levels of autonomy in traditionally low occupations**
 - **Regulation of Ambitions (decentralised collective agreements set boundaries re: wages, hours, 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, even though you might change from one company to another of course within the same field of activity...’
(Respondent, Employer Federation Rep, Nov 2013)
 - **Autonomy from work (institutional, cultural, regulatory)** ‘...their citizens enjoy generous, publicly-provided welfare provisions that render them less sensitive to the fate of the companies in which they work’ (Pontusson, 2009:25).

Are Things Changing?

- According to the OECD (2013:30) sickness absence is systematically higher in Denmark than in the 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 measuring productivity and on 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)

Thinking through...

- Sample: By high & low autonomy occupations.
 - One sector or three?
- Positive-v-Negative cases
 - Worker interviews - accessing survivors only?
- Gender – role, responsibilities, impacts
- Contingent generalization
- Moving forward: worker interviews in three sectors in DK and IE

Pushing Things Forward...Hopefully...

- Sociological expansion of occ psych models
 - Avoids conflation of structures and stressors
 - The institutional context of individual: affordances or resources used by workers that are not sourced in work but are important in dealing with the demands of working life
 - Concepts enable multiple paths (not just strain/stress)
- When do 'job strain' conditions result in experience of strain? Qual approach closer to outcomes of interest?
- Job control literature only focuses on the positive aspects of control
- Relocate Karasek's model in the Nordic 'boundaryless' literature : fluid boundaries between work and life
 - Under what conditions does autonomy transform from protection to threat - beyond a certain threshold.
 - LME v CME