Multiperspective Qualitative Research Methodology for Researching Work Stress

Roland Ferenc Szilas

Abstract- **Research on work stress is on the rise as evidence is mounting about the negative health consequences and economic losses associated with the phenomenon. Mainstream work stress research utilizes large samples and quantitative, positivist research methodologies. An important alternative research approach complementing these efforts is provided by case-study based and qualitative research methodologies. In this paper, the author proposes a multiperspective qualitative research methodology, bringing together the critical research perspective with an emphasis on deep social structures and the postmodern perspective with an emphasis on the role of language and discourse. The arguments for a multiperspective, qualitative approach for researching work stress are supported by the results of an exemplary case-study based research carried out in a Hungarian manufacturing plant.**

Index Terms— **multiperspective research approach, research methodology, qualitative research, work stress**

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic interest and research just as popular media attention and self-help literature is growing around the phenomenon of work stress. The reasons for this flourishing research field are most likely rooted in the serious health concerns and obvious negative economic consequences. Influential international organizations like the United Nations, World Health Organization, International Labour Organization and the European Union are sponsoring massive research projects on work related stress and voice their recommendations strongly. Despite these efforts and recent significant legislative changes and improvements in corporate attitudes and practices the situation of work stress continues to be extremely severe and is considered as one of the growing, global epidemics of our postmodern world.

The importance of work stress goes beyond health related and economic consequences as the legitimate discourse on work stress is often an indication of deep societal tensions and can provide a better understanding of the suffering and coping that many people go through in their private and work life in both developing and more developed societies. Thus, multiperspective, qualitative research methodologies on work stress can provide a valuable source of information also for scholars in various fields of social and political sciences.

A. Statement of the study

Multiperspective, qualitative research methodology can uncover the deep social structures and discourse contributing

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to the development of work stress. This understanding is a key addition to traditional quantitative work stress research and provides the necessary basis and support for designing individual, corporate or societal level interventions targeting work stress.

B. Purpose of the study

The overwhelming majority of work stress research is using positivist, quantitative research methodologies which provide us with highly important information, however they rarely serve as effective starting points for successful interventions. The purpose of this study is to draw the interest of researchers towards multiperspective and qualitative research approaches and demonstrate the applicability of this methodology through an exemplary research. The author aims to support more effective work stress interventions with the help of spreading good practices of multiperspective, qualitative stress research.

C. Research Questions

1. How could the current practices of work stress research be improved to develop a better basis for individual, corporate or societal level interventions?
2. How and why is work stress developed in the case of a Hungarian manufacturing plant (Factory M) and what could be done to increase the efficiency of coping with it?

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conventional Work Stress Research

During the latest decades of stress research, numerous models were developed to specifically describe work-related stress. These models shared a common feature which was the measurability of factors through positivist research instruments and thus have been validated on large sample questionnaire based quantitative research. The most significant models of this conventional work stress research include the demand-control model of Karasek [1], the effort-reward imbalance model of Siegrist [2], the cybernetic model of Edwards [3] and the person-environment fit model of Dawis [4].

One of the most frequently applied models for work stress research models was developed by Karasek [1] which is also known as the job strain-control [5] or demand-control [6] model.
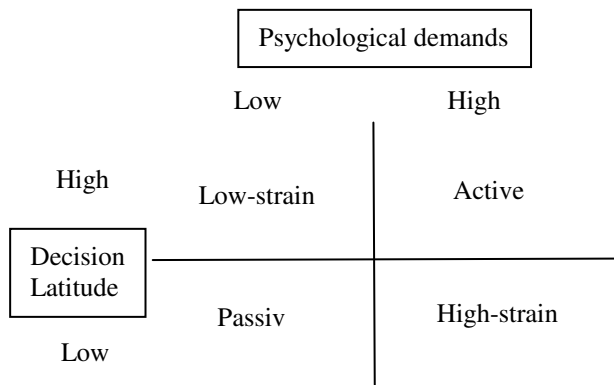
Figure 1 Types of jobs according to the demand-control model of Karasek [6]

The contribution of Karasek's demand-control model [1] to the work stress field was that instead of examining the effect of different characteristics of work in themselves, he also took into consideration their relationships between these factors [6], [5]. The model assumes that work stress is generated by the relative strength of two basic characteristics of work (demand and control). Accordingly, work-related factors were classified into two groups: *(1) Job strain/psychological demand, (2) Autonomy, control (decision latitude)* [6].

The demand-control model suggests that the level of work stress depends on the connection and interaction between these two distinct groups of work-related factors. Subsequently, different combinations of low and high values of these factors contribute to the development of four distinctive working situations, as depicted in Figure 1 [6]. The four possible work situations can be described as following: *(1.) High strain, (2.) Active, (3.) Low strain, (4.) Passive.* The model outlined by Karasek [1] has inspired and still inspires a lot of studies in work-related stress research. The most important supplement to the model was added by Johnson and Hall [7] by introducing a new variable, social support at work.

Another very influential and widely used model is the Effort-Reward Imbalance model developed by Siegrist that emerged in the 1990's [2]. According to this model, work related-stress is the result of situations where the ratio of efforts made at work and rewards received are perceived as being incommensurate by employees. This lack of reciprocity or non-compliance with social norms and expectation is then the reason for increased levels of work stress [8]. The model created by Siegrist [2] contains three factors. The factor of *effort* and *reward* refer to the organizational and employment situation, while the factor of *over-commitment* concerns the personality of the individual. The effort component of the model includes work characteristics (such as like time pressure, responsibility, overtime work and physical effort), while the three potential sources of organizational rewards in the model are monetary compensation, recognition and career promotion. The third factor (that is, the dimension of over-commitment) reflects the employees' personality and attitudes manifested in work situations. The tendency to over-commitment is a specific personal pattern of coping with the demands of work [9].
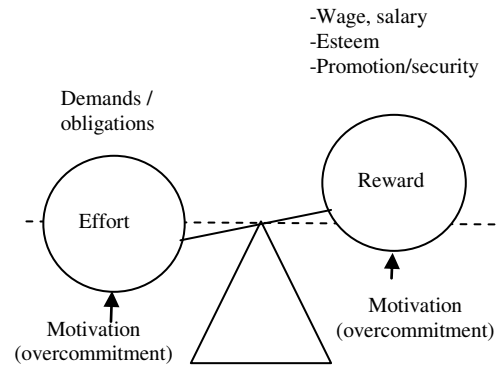

Figure 2 Effort-Reward Imbalance Model of Work Stress [2]

Employees have several strategic choices for resolving the effort-reward imbalance described in this model. (e.g. decreasing efforts, and/or maximizing rewards), but if the imbalance persists for a longer time then under certain conditions (e.g. lack of alternative employment opportunities during an economic crisis, low levels of qualifications) chronic stress may develop [6].

B. Qualitative Methodologies in Work Stress Research

The application of qualitative methodologies has only gained limited ground in the work stress research field, although researchers have been warning for almost 20 years about the weaknesses of objectivist work stress studies which are primarily designed to examine causal relationships. Consequently, they call for the implementation of more thorough qualitative research [10], [11]. This new approach in work stress research should concentrate on the dynamic interpretation and meaning giving process that is embedded in a specific organizational, social, political and cultural context [12], [13], [8]. The objective of this kind of work stress research is not the discovery of casual relationships or the development of general theories and models. These studies aim to uncover and understand better the influence of social relationships, communications, power dynamics and deep structures in the development of work stress.

Two qualitative studies from recent years have been leading the way for scholars aiming to carry out qualitative work stress research. In the research of Harkness, Long, Bermbach, Patterson, Jordan and Kahn [14] the authors used focus group interviews to ask 22 Canadian female clerical-workers about work stress. These discussions and personal interpretations of work stress were later analyzed with the help of discourse analysis. The researchers concluded that talking about work stress is a socially accepted form of expressing disappointment, struggle and frustration, however even in these discussions it is not acceptable to talk about failing to effectively cope with stress. The female clerical-workers expressed a sense of helplessness which lacked the recognition of key external factors or power dynamics in their organizations. Kinman and Jones [15] have used semi-structured deep interviews to ask 45 employees in different jobs about their interpretation on work stress, its causes, consequences and possible solutions to it. The interviews showed great differences in lay representations of work stress and thematic content analysis was used to

determine the dominant factors. The interviewees have perceived the source of work stress being mainly organizational although a great variety of organizational factors was mentioned. Concerning the effects of work stress primarily individual consequences were emphasized and line managers and subordinates disagreed on the responsibility for the development and coping with stress. The previously described qualitative studies on work stress both indicate the importance of social relationships and interpretations, power structures and dynamics in the field of work stress, which can be effectively addressed by qualitative research approaches

C. *Multiperspective Qualitative Research Methodologies*

A significant improvement for qualitative research methodologies in the field of work stress is made possible through the implementation of multiperspective approaches. Research carried out this way does not conflict the argument of Burrell and Morgan [16] against the possibility of a synthesis between paradigms in social studies, since multiperspective studies do not work with mutually exclusive assumptions in the two perspectives. In this case we are handling two different research perspectives, but not two different research paradigms and these multiperspective approaches can be identified as an integrationist or pluralist research approach according to Hassard and Kelemen [17]. To gain an improved understanding of the work stress phenomenon it must be investigated qualitatively from multiple perspectives in a way that allow these perspectives to communicate with each other [18]. It is indeed through the integration provided by multiperspective qualitative research methodologies that we can reflect on different facets of complex social phenomenon like work stress [17].

The multiperspective qualitative research methodology that I use for demonstration integrates a critical and a postmodern/communicative perspective. The critical perspective concentrates on the social structures and relations that lead to the sufferings of employees, and target conclusions that can be helpful in unveiling suppressing social systems and deep social structures. In the postmodern perspective I explore how the members of an organization create and maintain their social reality through their individual and collective meaning-giving and discourses [8].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. *Research field*

This study has focused on a Hungarian manufacturing plant, as an exemplary case-study field for better understanding the phenomenon of work stress. From previous studies conducted in this industry researchers have been aware of serious problems and distress at this location. The researched factory is a smaller unit with under 100 employees, it is in foreign ownership and operates in an industry that is highly sensitive to economic recession. This factory was chosen because of its small size, the existing problems and support received from both company management and labor union. The name of the company must be kept confidential, therefore in this study we refer to the unit always as Factory M.

B. *Data collection methods*

To support a multiperspective qualitative research on work stress two types of data collection methods have been chosen. Firstly, focus group interviews have been used because they are particularly suitable to explore interpretations, social relations, communication patterns and organizational discourses. As a second data collection method personal in-depth interviews were conducted with factory leadership, line managers and workers. This method has the strength of focusing on the topics that the interviewees find most important and relevant for the topic. Also interviews made it possible to express the most personal and confidential concerns and gave the researcher the opportunity to develop the interview questions from one interview to the other. Both the focus group and in-depth interviews were semi-structured, continuously developed during the research and have targeted the understanding of major factors in the development of work stress in Factory M.

C. *Data analysis methods*

This multiperspective qualitative study has used NVIVO software for the coding and analysis of focus group and interview transcripts. For the two perspectives two research readings have been adopted, both supporting by a distinctive and well-developed data analysis method. The critical perspective of the research was utilizing Alvesson and Sköldberg's intensive critical interpretation model [19], on the other side the postmodern, communicative perspective of the research was applying the methods of Pearce's coordinated management of meaning [20].

IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

A. *Results of the critical perspective*

The critical perspective concentrates on the deep social structures and power relations that lead to the development of work stress in Factory M. One of the major factors that the workers of the factory have indicated as a major stress factor was the establishment of the work shift order, which has led to a series of negative individual and organizational consequences. The interpretations of the interviewees and focus group participants have been analyzed with the help of Alvesson and Sköldberg's method of intensive critical interpretation [19].
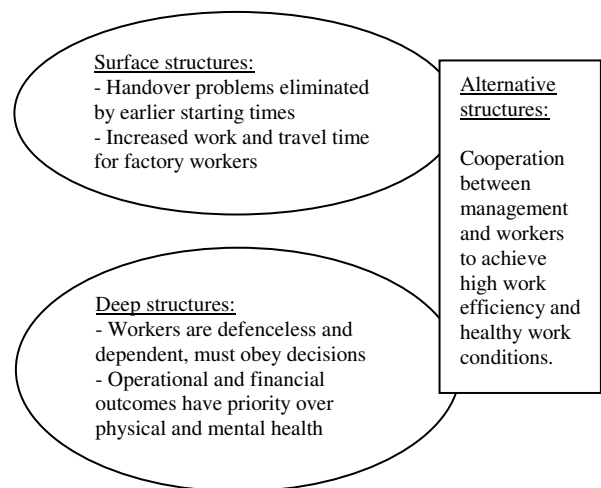

Figure 3 Surface, deep and alternative structures from the critical perspective in Factory M. [19]

According to the surface structures we find a problem oriented behavior which aims to eliminate an inefficient organizational solution through changed shift times which increase the amount of time workers spend in work and travel to work. It is only through the analysis of the deep structures that we can uncover how this solution becomes the answer because of the dependent position of the workers in the power structures and because of the low priority their physical and mental health has in the social and organizational culture. From this critical perspective we can better understand why the alternative structure of cooperation between management and works does not realize in the existence of the dominant deep structures.

B. Results of the postmodern perspective

In the postmodern perspective I explore how the members of an organization create and maintain their social reality through their individual and collective meaning-giving and discourses. Within this perspective an emphasis is given to the communicative aspect and how work stress develops in the local reality of Factory M. The interpretations of the interviewees and focus group participants have been analyzed with the help of Pearce's method of the Coordinated Management of Meaning [20].

Through the postmodern, communicative perspective we can identify those contextual and prefigurative forces that most strongly influence the series of communicative actions management and workers take in the case of Factory M.
Their meaning giving and what they communicate is driven by somewhat different forces, however these are always embedded in a culture that is dominated by power distance, mutual distrust and their identities are strengthened through enforcing discipline (management) and obedience because of feeling dependent (workers). The potential of moving toward more constructive anticipated events, trustful relationships, cooperative cultures and healthier self-concepts remains unused because of the dominant behavioral pattern of always looking back to preceding events and trying to respond to these.
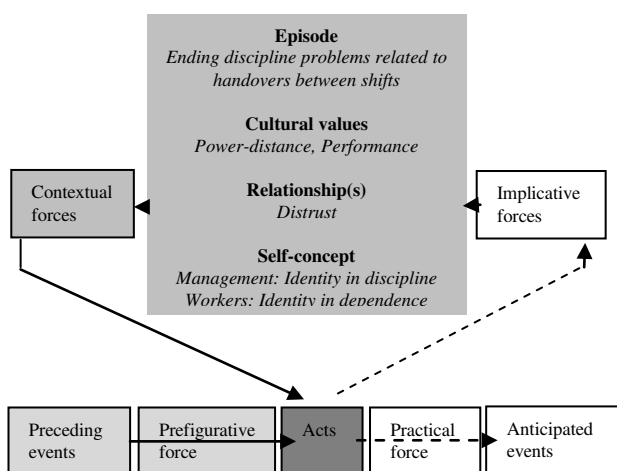

Figure 4 CMM's postmodern perspective explaining the development of work stress in Factory M. [20]

V. CONCLUSION

The multiperspective research results about work stress in Factory M according to the critical and postmodern perspectives help us better understand how this phenomenon is both an outcome of deep social and power structures and the result of the local meaning giving, interpretation and communication between members of the organization.

It is through understanding both perspectives of work stress in this factory that we can design more effective interventions for improvement. From the critical perspective we understand the significance of deep structures and can conclude that societal interventions are necessary in Hungary to reduce the dependence of workers and to increase the value given to physical and mental health. From the postmodern perspective we can recognize the process of the local work stress perception, and how this is taking place in a series of local communicative events between organizational members. This communication pattern and discourse can be directed towards positive, mutually beneficial anticipated events only if society level economic and power structures and developing cultural value systems are supporting it.

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- Primecz Henriett, Toarniczky Andrea, Kiss Csaba, Csillag Sára, Szilas Roland Ferenc, Milassin Anda, Bácsi Katalin (2016): ICT's Impact on Work–life Interference: Cases of 'Employee-friendly Organizations' INTERSECTIONS: EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIETY AND POLITICS 2:(3) pp. 61-83.

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