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# How does work affect psychological well-being? A little evidence and quite a lot of speculation

**Professor Rob Briner**

Before discussing how work may affect psychological well-being it is important to consider two key features of the link between work and well-being. First, in general terms, working is very good for people’s psychological well-being. Compare the mental health of those in work and those who are unemployed and the evidence is clear. Second, in much of the more developed world, work is much safer for people’s psychological and physical well-being than it ever has been. Consider, for example, the physical dangers of factory work in the industrial revolution or the effects of very long shifts engaged in highly repetitive manual work. This is not to say that more could not or should not be done to improve work conditions but such improvements need to take account of the generally beneficial and improving relationship between work and well-being.

Over the past couple of decades, the stress management industry and the many psychologists, counsellors and others involved in it have presented the workplace and working as something that is intrinsically psychologically harmful and dangerous. While this has perhaps been useful in helping to focus employers’ attention on the more harmful aspects of work it has also had some very negative consequences. First, many of both the popular and more academic claims made about what ‘stress’ is and its effects on individuals and organizations are not strongly supported by evidence. The stress management industry, like all industries, has much to gain by exaggerating the role of the problem it’s designed to fix.

A second negative consequence of the focus on the negative effects of stress is that some researchers seem to be more concerned that their research is used to protect and help employees rather than actually advance knowledge through conducting good quality research which tells us something of scientific and underdeveloped both in terms of data showing how work conditions are causally related to psychological well-being and also in terms of good explanations of how such conditions may affect well-being. This limited knowledge means that much of what can be said about how work affects how people feel is quite speculative.

Third, the popularity of the stress concept means we have tended to focus almost exclusively on the negative aspects of work. For this reason, we know little about how work contributes positively to well-being and, equally importantly, how work can at the same time contribute in both negative and positive ways to well-being.

So what are the alternatives? If we to some extent dismiss ‘stress’ as an unhelpful idea and recognize the claims of the stress management industry as exaggerated and mostly unfounded what should we focus on instead in our quest to understand how work affects psychological well-being?

In fact, there are many other ways of thinking about how work affects how people feel. Most important is that we recognize the links between work and well-being as a process and that the links, where they exist, are specific. Work does not generally make us feel good or bad but rather it produces specific and particular emotions and moods.

Consider the following hypothetical example:

* Our line-manager asks us to do a very difficult additional task - we feel valued and a bit daunted
* We judge that the line manager must believe we are competent and we feel proud and respected
* We undertake the task and also feel anxious about being able to do it and then think it’s OK to feel anxious as it is difficult as we’ve never done it before
* The task turns out to be even harder than we anticipated –– but we keep working on it –– and put in lots of extra hours
* We complete the task to deadline and feel exhausted but also quite proud
* We believe we must be in the right kind of job/organization and feel affection for organization and look forward to getting feedback
* We tell boss the task is completed
* The boss says “thanks” but gives no praise or feedback - instead they point out a very trivial mistake in the work and then ignore us
* We feel angry and that we’re right to be angry and feel exploited
* We tell others how angry we are and see if other people see it in the same way
* We decide that we’ll never put ourselves out or make extra effort again for the linemanager/organization
* We take a day off when we have a slight hint of flu symptoms
* We still feel resentful and angry and start to wonder if we are in the right job
* We resign from the Christmas party committee
* We hope the boss will eventually realise what a great job we did –– but they still don’t mention it
* We start to see lots of other faults with the line-manager/job/organization
* We think about what other jobs and organizations would be like
* We update our CV and look at job advertisements and ruminate about the content of our resignation letter

What is the best way of explaining the many moods, emotions and other reaction this person has to their work situation? Why is work having these effects? While there are several kinds of explanations here I will focus on just one: The psychological contract.

The psychological contract (PC) refers to the beliefs employees hold about the exchange or the deal between themselves and their employer. We all think that if we behave in particular ways at work then certain outcomes will be more or less likely. We may believe, for example, that if we perform exceptionally well on a project we will, in return, be given more challenging and interesting work next time. What about going that extra mile or helping co-workers? We may believe that by doing so our employer will be more relaxed if an assignment we’re working on comes in slightly behind schedule.

The key difference between the PC and the employment contract is that PCs, as the name suggests, are subjective or in the eye of the beholder. They are not explicit, not written down, and certainly not legally binding. In spite of this they can exert a strong influence on behaviour and feelings and well-being precisely because they capture the real deal –– what employers really believe they will get in return for what they give.

Perhaps the most dramatic outcome of any kind of deal happens when the deal is broken. In the case of the PC, when employees feel the employer has broken promises or violated the contract, employee reactions range from irritation and anger and sadness to withdrawing effort and good-will to actually quitting. PC beliefs may be strong and may shape behaviour over a long time period and so when an employee discovers that what they felt had been promised to them will not materialize not only may they feel cheated but also that they have wasted much time and effort.

Conversely, when employees feel that the deal or relationship is working well and it is fair they are likely to experience a range of positive feelings and emotions and be more prepared to stick with the organization and make extra effort to help the organization.

The psychological contract is just one of many alternative ways of thinking about how work affects psychological well-being. The stress concept has become increasingly unhelpful as a means of understanding work and well-being or intervening in the workplace. The next time you feel ‘stressed’ ask yourself how you’re really feeling and what the real cause might be. You might find, as I have, that ‘stress’ neither helps to answer these questions nor suggest any useful solutions.

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**For more details of his work please go to: http://www.bbk.ac.uk/manop/orgpsychology/staff/briner/briner.shtml**

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