

Editorial

Job Stress and Mental Health among Workers in Asia and the World

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Research on psychosocial factors at work, such as job stress and mental health among workers, has been rapidly growing. The Journal of Occupational Health (JOH) has received an increased number of submissions of manuscripts on this topic from Asian countries, as well as from other areas of the world. A brief review of these reports in the JOH might contribute to improving the quality of research and clarifying a new direction of research in this field.

While a number of studies in Europe have consistently indicated that the imbalance between effort and reward at work (ERI) is associated with coronary heart disease (CHD), no study in Asia had reported this association until a recent case-control study from China proved that ERI, as well as its components, effort and reward at work, were significantly associated with CHD diagnosed by coronary angiography, although the study has a limitation because of its retrospective assessment of ERI¹. Standardized measures of job strain and ERI are now available in Asian countries such as Thailand². Exploring psychophysiological mechanisms linking psychosocial factors at work and CHD, as well as its ethnic and cultural differences, is a promising research area³.

Recent studies have focused on “high-risk” groups in terms of psychosocial risks at work. Social class in a working population is also being paid more attentions in the current economic situation. While there are not many studies which have proved poor health conditions among non-regular employees, a prospective study from the Netherlands has shown that a downward change (from permanent employment to temporary employment) is associated with deterioration in health status⁴. Employees

of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may be disadvantaged by receiving fewer benefits from occupational health service, as well as greater job stressors⁵.

The other target of psychosocial research is health care workers, such as physicians and nurses^{6, 7}. These occupations have been recognized as stressful occupations in both developed and developing countries, like Yemen⁸. A nationwide survey in Norway reported a striking evidence of a high prevalence of suicide attempts among ambulance personnel⁹. This is partly because health care workers are more likely to be exposed to violence at work, as shown by quickly accumulating evidence^{10–15}. Among other professionals, lawyers have been found to have high levels of burnout¹⁶. Research on job stress and mental health among such special occupations might be interesting.

In addition to job strain and ERI which are often picked up by “traditional” research, work-family interference has become a major topic in the field^{17–19}. It is particularly interesting and important that job demands may affect the mental health of partners of workers exposed to them¹⁷. Interpersonal relationships have been shown to be prospectively associated with depression²⁰. Research also has focused on a new dimension of psychosocial factors at work, organizational justice²¹.

Intervention studies to reduce job stressors and improve the mental health of workers are particularly important to bring the theories and the research findings from observational studies into occupational health practice in real life. A study recently published in the JOH indicated that a worker-participatory approach to improve the psychosocial work environment was effective in reducing job stressors and improving the mental health of workers²². For this type of approach, a new tool for the improvement of the work environment was proposed²³. The other approach, individual-oriented skill

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training, also improved perceived social support and psychological distress among workers in a before-after comparison²⁴). Furthermore, a controlled trial showed that an individual-oriented six-session stress management course improved not only mental health but also work performance, if the participants attended all six sessions²⁵). There is also evidence from a randomized controlled trial that a computer-based tailored intervention effectively improved sleep quality²⁶). A meta-analysis showed that taking a vacation may be good for the mental health of workers²⁷). While there have been intervention studies, research in this area is promising.

Particularly in the field of psychosocial factors at work, research needs to be theory-based. This does not necessarily mean that studies should follow existing job stress theories; rather, studies should have a clear and specific hypothesis, rationally formed by the author(s) after relevant literature review, showing its position related to already accumulated knowledge in the world. Studies could be useful if they address new dimensions of psychosocial factors at work, psychophysiological mechanisms, high-risk occupations or mental health among employees in SMEs. Prospective studies are strongly desired, while cross-sectional and case-control studies may still provide useful information, if they are well designed. Furthermore, research in the field should shift to intervention studies with controlled trials and randomized controlled trial designs. However, a sentinel case study which addresses a really new topic might contribute to further development in this field, even though the quality is moderate.

Key words: Epidemiology, Intervention studies, Psychosocial factors at work

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