Point/Counterpoint

Objective versus subjective approaches to the study of job stress

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Most research on job stress has viewed the process as reflecting an individual’s response to the objective work environment. Concerned about biases and method variance, the field has made increased use of non-incumbent ‘objective’ measures. In the present Point/Counterpoint exchange, Pamela Perrewe and Kelly Zellars note limitations of that approach, advocating instead a focus on incumbent subjective appraisal. Two counterpoint papers, written by three job stress researchers, take an opposing view. Both John Schaubroeck in his response, and Michael Frese and Dieter Zapf in their response, defend our emphasis on the objective environment.

The exchange begins with Perrewe and Zellars’ call for a redirected focus on appraisal in the study of job stress. Drawing on Richard Lazarus’ transactional theory, they note that it is an individual’s interpretation of the environment that is crucial in the stress process, rather than the objective environment itself. Furthermore, they integrate attributions and emotions in developing a job stress model. This model notes a role for emotions of guilt and shame that have received little attention.

Schaubroeck defends the present focus on the objective environment, noting that exposure to certain events is potentially harmful. An understanding of how such exposure affects people is an important goal of job stress research. Although he agrees that subjective factors are important, he disagrees that their study should be the major objective. He further takes exception to the focus on attributions and cognitive processes, and argues that many such mental processes are intractable for job stress researchers.

Frese and Zapf also argue for the importance of the objective environment. They also acknowledge the importance of subjective experience, but state that where we should focus attention is on determining how objective environments lead to perceptions. They discuss evidence that objective features of jobs are important for health. Furthermore, although prior studies might seem to suggest that subjective features are more important than objective in that they produce stronger correlations, much of this is likely due to biases and method variance.

As a group, these experienced job stress researchers agree that the job stress process involves both objective and subjective aspects. The major disagreement is on where the major emphasis should be in future research. Perrewe and Zellars would have us study appraisal, and how it leads to emotions and job strains. Our counterpointers feel the present emphasis on the objective environment is more appropriate. Undoubtedly, progress will be made in this domain by paying attention to both objective and subjective factors, so that we can better understand how the environment affects people’s health and well-being.