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Work in the Balance

Influences on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Civil Servants

Vicky Cattell
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FOREWORD

The Whitehall II study set out to examine the role of psychosocial influences in health and health inequalities. The unstated assumption was that the material problems of life, and associated ill-health, had been ‘solved’ in contemporary Britain. Causes of ill-health were likely to act through the mind, influencing behaviour and stress pathways.

The second part is correct; causes of ill-health *are* likely to act through the mind. But the material problems of life have not been ‘solved’. For example, with Friends of the Earth the Institute of Health Equity, in February 2024, released a report on cold homes, ‘Left Out in the Cold’. We reported that, in the UK, 9.6 million households, a third of the total, can’t afford a decent standard of living and are in poorly insulated homes that are expensive to heat. Living in a cold home will damage physical and mental health of children and adults.

Along the same lines, in late 2023, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published their report into Destitution in the UK. Destitution was defined as doing without two or more of six essentials: housing, heat, light, food, clothing, toiletries. In 2022, 3.8 million people, 1 million of whom were children, were in a state of destitution. Health will suffer as a result.

This book is a welcome reminder that we need to be focussed on material needs, of course, but psychological and social needs are of vital importance, too. I do not take the view of a hierarchy of needs. We need to deal with physical essentials and social and psychological needs at the same time.

This qualitative study of the lives of civil servants illustrates the many reasons why people go to work. One basic reason is money. As I write this, one man in his ninth decade is competing with another only four years

younger to be the next President of the United States. They are not doing it for the money, although the younger man may be doing it because the White House is preferable to prison. Work provides other rewards—personal fulfilment, respect from others, satisfaction at making a contribution, social relationships, a social role. We tried to capture these different aspects in our quantitative studies of psychosocial influences on mental and physical illness in the Whitehall II study of British civil servants. The success of these efforts was shown in the results on the effects on health of stress in the workplace.

A qualitative study such as this present one provides nuance and insight beyond that available in our epidemiological research. It is worth keeping these nuances in mind when listening to what the government has in mind for the public sector. In the March 2024 Budget [prior to the change of Government in July], the British Chancellor (finance minister) cut national insurance payments—essentially a tax cut—thus reducing the revenue that the government receives. These cuts notionally are to be paid for by ‘efficiencies’ in the public sector. Assuming for the moment that these ‘efficiencies’ are not phantasies, one wonders what the government has in mind.

Reading the experiences reported here, it is highly likely that efficiencies would make everyone’s experiences at work a good deal worse. The higher grade civil servants appreciate the importance and variety of the work, but not when they feel out of control. Efficiencies, essentially cuts, foisted on them without adequate thought and planning are likely to reduce agency and associated job satisfaction. Increased risk of ill-health will be the result.

The lower grades appear not to gain much satisfaction from routine work tasks, but gain a great deal from their social relations in the workplace. What would cuts do to that? The middle grades appreciated the work-life balance. That, too, would be a casualty of thoughtless ‘efficiency savings’.

The importance of this study is the rich understanding it conveys of the different life experiences of people at different levels of the social hierarchy in British society. The lives of low grade civil servants are more restricted than those above them in the hierarchy, partly a result of less education and lower incomes, but also the nature of the work. Routine office-based tasks will always be less interesting than that of higher grade civil servants. But surely it is possible to design work in such a way that it is life enhancing not something that would harm health were it not for the presence of

social supports. Given that such supports are necessary, work should be designed to foster those, too.

Such hierarchies at work are unlikely to be confined to the public sector. But, it is the case, that the public sector has been devalued by successive governments as part of their lack of regard for the public good. The British economy as a whole has been marked by lack of improvement in productivity, worse than in other rich countries. Improvements are needed. They will not be achieved by foisting cuts, in the name of productivity, on the public sector. The insight of this study is that great damage may be done.

To improve health and reduce health inequalities society needs to address the material disadvantages that still scar Britain today and lead to a shameful toll of preventable ill-health. We need more: living and working conditions that meet the needs mentioned above—self-fulfilment, respect, social purpose, good social relations. The present study provides us with just the kind of insight that is necessary to inform the arrangements of work and society necessary for better health and narrower health inequalities. The gains could not be more important: improvements in the conditions in which people live and work, giving people the conditions under which to fashion lives of meaning, purpose, and satisfaction.

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2024

Sir Michael Marmot

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethical approval for the Whitehall II study was obtained from the University College London Medical School committee on the effects of human research. Ethical guidelines produced by academic and professional bodies such as the Social Research Association and the British Sociological Association were also consulted.

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Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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Introduction

Abstract Discussion on the role of work for the twenty-first century has focused on both benefits and harmful effects of the working environment. The Whitehall II Stress and Health studies have shown the many disbenefits of employment to be unevenly distributed between social groups. Yet we suspected that the quantitative differences identified in these studies may not provide the whole picture, the effects of pathways linking features such as work characteristics and material factors to common mental disorders or to positive aspects of well-being could be expected to be conveyed through the meaning of stressors for example, or mediated through individual perceptions of work. Based on a qualitative research project, this book examines and illustrates ways in which a wide range of stressors, mitigators, and resources are not only socially distributed and experienced but also interpreted and understood by men and women in different civil service grades. Adopting a holistic and sociological approach to the research helps us to understand why some people and not others in given circumstances feel out of control or become anxious or depressed.

Keywords Work • Civil servants • Stress • Depression • Meanings • Orientations • Work characteristics • Insecurity • inequalities • Qualitative

The role and value of work for the twenty-first century has become a prominent focus of interest. Some of the issues raised are especially apposite for a post pandemic world and a society in which we face increasingly precarious employment, a fragmented workforce, and less steady career progression (see, e.g., Sennett, 1998; Castells, 1996). Findlay and Thompson (2017), in mapping the changing nature of employment, have highlighted issues around insecurity, increased demands, performance management, problems concerning work/life balance, and engagement or disengagement with work. Gaillie et al. (2017) argue that while research on job insecurity has focused on job loss, status insecurity, which they define as valued features of the job, has been neglected.

Questions are now being asked about whether we need work (Taylor, 2021), whether technological advances will render much work unnecessary (Cruddas, 2021; Mason, 2016; Skidelsky & Glassman, 2013), about the role of A.I., and about the desirability of a society in which our lives no longer revolve around the drudgery and loss of autonomy associated with work (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Whether a world without work is something to fear or to welcome as liberating from unsatisfying tasks, the future of work, as Michael Sandel (2018b) recognises, is something we, and political parties, will have to get to grips with along with the *meaning* of work and its place in a good life. A ‘good life’, for the purposes of our own research, would be one at low risk from mental illness and poor well-being.

As well as an improved income, the potentially positive benefits to health of being in work as opposed to experiencing unemployment—such as the opportunities work offers to develop skills, gain self-esteem, recognition, self-respect, identity, dignity, belonging, status, and integration, to pursue regular activity and bestow a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives—are many (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Budd, 2011; Cruddas, 2021; Jahoda, 1982; Mandemakers & Monden, 2013; Siegrist, 1996). Nonetheless, official statistics and academic research demonstrate that the work environment can also harm us. Health and Safety Executive figures show an increase in work-related stress, anxiety, and depression in recent years: these accounted for 51% of all work-related ill health cases in the year 2019/20. Mental ill health is more prevalent in certain sectors, public administration—the focus of our study—included (Health and Safety Executive, 2020). Work can negatively affect people’s lives through, for example, a spill-over of work responsibilities into home time, through encountering discrimination, by producing feelings of insecurity, or

upsetting work/life balance (Bhui et al., 2005; Ferrie et al., 2003; McNamara et al., 2013; Schnall et al., 2009; Stansfeld et al., 2004).

WORK CHARACTERISTICS

Especially detrimental effects involve the impact on mental health and well-being of certain work characteristics, and which can be experienced as feelings of stress. Prolonged stress can result in anxiety, burnout, and depression (see, e.g., Dobson & Schnall, 2009). Burnout, a less familiar term than depression or anxiety perhaps, has been defined as emotional exhaustion, cynicism (negative feelings about work and distancing from others), and a lack of accomplishment (Dobson & Schnall, 2009). Work characteristics which have been shown to increase the risk of common mental disorders (anxiety and depression) include such features as job strain, effort/reward imbalance, high work demands, long working hours, intensification, shift work, bullying, organisational injustice, management style, racial discrimination, and job insecurity (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Ferrie et al., 2003; Gordon & Schnall, 2009; Stansfeld & Candy, 2006). Respondents to a Health and Safety Executive survey identified workload pressure involving tight deadlines, too much responsibility, and a lack of managerial support (HSE, 2020) as particularly damaging influences on work-related stress, depression, or anxiety. A quite shocking example of the effects of post-Taylorism and Scientific Management adopted in the public sector, found that ‘lean’ working, that is, a focus on narrow, single tasks, along with lack of control of the work process, contributed to mental fatigue, stress, and headaches amongst clerical workers exposed to it (Carter et al., 2013). Some of the strongest epidemiological evidence relates to features of the work task and ways in which work is organised: low decision authority/latitude (or job control); high job demands (work pace and conflicting demands); and a perceived effort/reward imbalance, for example (Siegrist, 1996). Job strain occurs when high demands are combined with low control (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Stansfeld & Candy, 2006). Work characteristics like these have been shown to predict psychiatric disorder (Stansfeld et al., 1999).

Changes in the working environment in recent decades include many considered to have a largely detrimental effect on the quality of jobs and the well-being of those in work (Carter et al., 2013). Researchers have described work as being in a state of ‘crisis’. Contemporary forms of work, it is argued, create problems for human capabilities and well-being