

The Positive Side of Occupational Health Psychology

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Editors

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 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-319-66780-5 ISBN 978-3-319-66781-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66781-2>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017954466

This is translated into the English language, enhanced and heavily revised from the Norwegian *Arbeidshelsepsykologi på norsk*, published by Fagbokforlaget in 2015. Authors: Per Øystein Saksvik & Marit Christensen. This translation has been published with the financial support of NORLA.

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

The aim of this book is to present the positive side of occupational health psychology. Research within the field of occupational health psychology has traditionally focused on investigating risk factors like job demands and stressors in the workplace and the resulting health impairment process. However, it is difficult to understand the dynamics behind the factors promoting well-being, health and meaning through studies of illness, dissatisfaction and suffering. A positive focus provides new and interesting approaches to challenges and opportunities in today's work life. Positive occupational health psychology has been influenced by positive psychology, positive organizational behaviour and positive occupational scholarship, which contribute to complement occupational health psychology. The positive occupational health movement promotes an integrated and comprehensive approach that we are discussing in several of the chapters in this book. This requires a perspective where we understand and promote positive factors at work, while continuing to investigate risk factors and occupational ill health (Bakker & Derks, 2010).

The world of work is continuously changing, and change is often described as the only stable factor in organizations. This imposes high demands on employees not only in the form of high workload and time pressure but also in the form of more psychological demands as to how to cope with the social and technical innovations. In times of insecurity regarding professional future and the growth of the global economy, the importance of occupational health issues becomes even more significant. Organizations are also increasingly more aware of how the quantity and quality of employee contributions are essential business matters. Modern organizations have therefore begun to have more focus on how to manage human capital rather than an emphasis on control and cost reduction. Positive occupational health psychology has a lot to offer regarding well-being and health of employees, and a focus on obtaining and promoting job resources can also ensure sustainable performance and productivity.

Most of the authors of this book have a background in the Scandinavian context, where they have conducted most of their research. The history of occupational health psychology highlights a key role for the Nordic countries (mainly Norway,

Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland), with pioneering research on the alienation of work and the dangers of Taylorism and a broader concern for the impact of work on health and alternative ways of work organization. This can be traced back to the Nordic model of work organization (Gustavsen, 2011; Hasle & Sorensen, 2013), which emerged in the 1930s and

“was based on the idea of reducing conflicts in working life though pooling the measures available to, respectively, the employers, the unions and the government resulting in substantial packages covering a broad range of measures and institutions. With less conflicts productivity would increase, making room for wage increases, reduction in working time, and welfare programs” (Gustavsen, 2011, pp. 466).

We would like to use the foreword to discuss positive occupational health psychology in relation to the Nordic model and to argue that it might add some new insights in addition to what we already know. We seek to demonstrate how work and health and the discipline of occupational health psychology can be understood from the more positive and collectively oriented Nordic perspective, with the aim of promoting good work and yielding healthy, stimulating and productive work environments.

Although the Nordic model and Taylorism have shared the same aim of maximizing productivity at work and rebuilding collapsed post-war economies, the two traditions were in stark contrast in terms of the process by which this could happen. The Nordic model has, at its core, “a cooperation between organized labour market parties, and between these parties on the one hand and the state/the public on the other” (Gustavsen, 2011, p. 464) and defines the elements of good work such as autonomy, variety, learning and participation in decisions. Taylorism, on the other hand, advocated specialization and rationalization of work. Alternatives have emerged, including the human relations movement, the quality of working life movement and the lean enterprise movement (Gustavsen, 2011), resulting in a substantial number of research and national initiatives that have played a crucial role in setting a course or direction in work organization. Distinguished figures have emerged, most notably from Norway (e.g., the work of Lysgård in the 1960s; Thorsrud and Emery in the 1970s; and Ursin in 1970s; see also Emery and Thorsrud (1976); Thorsrud & Emery, 1970) and Sweden (e.g., the work of Theorell, Gardell and Levi separately in the 1970s), whereas in Finland the first occupational health psychologist was appointed at Kymmene paper mill in 1974, and in Sweden we had the first scientific studies of ‘alienation’ of workers, monotony and participation (by Gardell in the 1970s).¹ This tradition is also reflected in the European social model which combines the aims of economic growth with the aims of good working conditions and living standards, and the 1989 European Framework Directive (89/391/EEC, <https://osha.europa.eu/el/legislation/directives/the-osh-framework-directive/1>) which was transposed into national law by 1992 by European Member States. A number of cultural, social and economic characteristics

¹For a broader overview of the history of occupational health psychology, please see Schonfeld and Chang (2017), *Occupational Health Psychology: Work, Stress, and Health*. Springer.

have been linked to the Nordic model, underlined by a belief that individuals have the ability to take control of their own future (social constructivism; Gustavsen, 2011). With variations within the Nordic countries group, these contextual characteristics have been institutionalized as shared attitudes towards work, the responsibility of organizations towards employees and the focus on worker health and productivity. The benefits are tangible: “So far, this has placed the Nordic countries in the lead in making the idea of good work come real. In fact, in practically all types of international comparisons—ranging from economy to health and well-being—the Nordic countries come out with high scores, and if a broad range of such studies are combined, they come out on top as a group of their own” (Gustavsen, 2011, p. 479). Correspondingly, research also reflects a widespread agreement on good work and essential principles such as autonomy, variety, ownership and participation, learning and positive work relationships.

The question then becomes whether and how we could implement these principles outside of the unique context from which they emerged. At the broader level, this tradition has counterparts in, but has not necessarily directly influenced, a range of practical mechanisms and tools. Examples are the tripartite model of social dialogue, social innovation and more specifically, workplace innovation and local examples of organizations explicitly built on the principles of employee participation and workplace democracy. Notable examples are Semco in Brazil, Sekem in Egypt, SMUD in the USA and Vaude in Germany (Bal & de Jong, 2016). Although the Nordic countries are leading on new work organization (e.g. shorter work week, participation), it is possible for organizations and perhaps other countries to apply elements of the Nordic model of work organization without going through the same process of social construction, as these example organizations demonstrate. This book is inspired by the Nordic model and built on the positive, comprehensive and collective perspective, which also underlies the movement of positive occupational health psychology.

In conclusion, there is a growing movement among researchers and practitioners in occupational health psychology to have more integrated and comprehensive approach to workplace health. This approach aims to have a balance between prevention of illness at work and promotion of well-being and health by enhancement of strengths, resources and optimal functioning in the workplace. We hope this book will contribute to build a bridge between knowledge and practice because an evidence-based approach to positive occupational health could contribute to psychologically healthy workplace practices that foster employees’ health and well-being while enhancing organizational performance. This book offers some lessons aimed for researchers, organizations, employees and HR-professionals and seeks to show how work and health and the discipline of occupational health psychology can be understood from the more positive and collectively oriented perspective inspired by the Nordic model.

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Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful for the support and feedback from colleagues when writing this book. Our special thanks go to Øystein Indergård and Karianne Kvalheim for your invaluable feedback and contributions regarding proof reading. We would also like to thank Edona Zilkiqi for working with the translation of the book. This translation has been published with the financial support of NORLA.

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