

Work Stress and Coping: Setting the Scene

This book is about coping. More particularly, it is about coping with work stress. For over 50 years, researchers have been interested in coping. Over that time the 'dramatic proliferation' of research (Folkman & Moskowitz 2004), while, at times, producing debate and disappointment about progress, has maintained such a momentum that it is now probably one of the most extensively explored subjects in contemporary psychology (Somerfield & McCrae 2000). This sustained interest could be explained in terms of coping's relevance to people (Aldwin 2000) and to society more generally (Snyder 1999), or because understanding how people cope is in itself intrinsically appealing. However, it is more likely to reflect the fact that the better we understand coping, the better we understand stress and how to manage it. Its allure is not just as an important explanatory variable (Folkman & Moskowitz 2000) but because it is fundamental to our understanding of the stress process.

Coping, as Zeidner and Saklofske (1996) point out, is more than simple adjustment. Its meaning extends beyond issues of basic survival to express the very essence of individual growth and development, allowing us to thrive in an ever-changing world. It is at the very heart of the human change process (Snyder 1999) and inextricably linked to the quality of our lives. Nevertheless, despite the fundamental importance of coping, the 'boundless enthusiasm' for coping research (Somerfield & McCrae 2000) and the fact that coping as a topic has been explored by a substantial number of researchers from an array of fields (Snyder 1999), coping research is not without its controversies, disappointments and questioning

of what progress has been made (Dewe & Cooper 2007) and where research may have fallen short of expectations (Burke 2002). However, even researchers who have been critical of coping research (such as Coyne 1997) have suggested ways to move forward. The aim of this book is to critically review the issues surrounding work stress and coping research, explore what may be needed to sustain coping research over the next decade and to identify possible strategic pathways that not only require a change from, and challenge, traditional conventions, procedures and methods but also capture the resourcefulness and creativity of those working in the field.

This chapter provides the context for the chapters that follow. It begins by briefly reviewing traditional approaches to defining stress and explores whether more contemporary definitions of stress provide the field with an 'organizing concept' for the future. Liddle describes an organizing concept as one with 'sufficient logic and emotional resonance to yield systematic theoretical and research enquiry that will make a lasting solution' (1994, p. 167). The chapter then outlines the costs to the individual, organizations and society of stress, looking particularly at stress-related absenteeism, turnover and presenteeism before exploring more general issues of mental health at work. The chapter ends with a review of the causes of work stress, extending the analysis to explore the changing nature of work. These changes and the challenges and tensions they create between the way we work, the way we want to work and the way we want to live our lives provide an opportunity to explore new and emerging causes of work stress and a context for better understanding coping. An understanding of coping processes will be of substantial benefit in the development of effective approaches for managing life's challenges, and helping people to enhance their lives generally (Snyder 1999).

The Term 'Stress'

Towards the end of the 1950s, stress was recognized as a legitimate topic for academic research (Newton 1995). Even then, doubts were being expressed as to whether the term, indeed the entire subject, was just another fad. At that time, the paucity of scientific evidence to validate it suggested it did not merit the amount of enthusiasm it was attracting (Haward 1960). The term 'stress' has of course survived and, as Jones and Bright (2001) suggest, taken such a hold on our society that it is likely to be with us for a long time yet. Concerns still linger, however, but more around stress as

a label rather than stress ‘the concept’ and more around the inconsistencies and looseness with which the term has been used and the multitude of meanings the term has come to assume. So giving careful consideration to how stress is defined is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which concerns the obligations we have to those whose working lives we study. Failure to capture the essence of the stress experience will simply trivialize encounters that have an adverse impact on people’s psychological well-being (Brief & George 1991).

Traditionally, stress has been defined as a stimulus, response or interaction between the two. These definitions now have a historical as well as an empirical value, as they embody a sense of time, of why certain ideas prevailed and provide an understanding of why different research approaches have been adopted, why particular research questions have been asked, the knowledge that has accumulated, the debates that have emerged around the findings and questions about the future directions the study of work stress may take. A considerable body of data has emerged when these definitions have been used to frame research. However, there still remains, when these definitions are reviewed, a sense that while structurally we now have a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of the different components in the stress process and how they interact, such definitions have not been helpful in facilitating an understanding of the stress process itself (Cooper, Dewe & O’Driscoll 2001; Dewe 2001). The significance of these traditional approaches to defining stress must now be evaluated, less in terms of the information and knowledge they have provided and more in terms of whether, considering our present state of knowledge, they have the power to take forward and support a theory of stress (Lazarus 1990).

In the future, as Kaplan (1996) suggests, if researchers pay greater attention to the processes accompanying stress and the sequence of events which culminate in stressful experiences, rather than only exploring simple relationships between stressors and strains, a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying stressful encounters will be achieved. This suggestion lies at the heart of the transactional framework (Lazarus 2000), which explores stress in relational terms, where the emphasis is on the nature of the relationship, those processes that link the individual to the environment and on describing the manner in which the transaction occurs (Aldwin 2000). So, the authority of the transactional approach lies in the fact that it draws attention to, and has at its heart, those processes that bind the person and the environment, or as Lazarus describes ‘the *relational meaning* that an individual constructs from the person–environment

relationship' (2000, p. 665). These 'relational meanings' are captured through the process of appraisal. Stress therefore arises from the appraisal that particular environmental demands are about to tax individual resources, thus threatening well-being (Holroyd & Lazarus 1982).

Lazarus (1990) identifies two types of appraisal. The first he describes as 'primary appraisal'. Primary appraisals are where the individual evaluates and gives personal meaning to events and considers the significance of 'what is at stake' in terms of harm, threat or challenge. The individual constructs these meanings from the events themselves (Lazarus 2001). In essence, it is the recognition that the events involve something of significance to the individual. It is, as Parker and De Cotiis (1983) suggest, a level of appreciation that in the experience of the individual there is some impact on normal functioning. However, primary appraisal is not by itself sufficient to decide the significance of an event. 'Secondary appraisal' further refines the meaning surrounding the event and addresses the question 'What can I do about it?'. It is where the individual evaluates the availability of coping resources to deal with the appraisal of harm, threat or challenge (Lazarus 2001).

Coping is central to this appraisal and is utilized to manage and deal with demanding events (Lazarus 1990). The distinction between primary and secondary appraisal is more one of content than of timing (Lazarus 1999), as each is part of a dynamic process where the two are engaged in a complex interchange. These two appraisal processes shape and give meaning to environmental events. Because they shift the focus to exploring and investigating what people actually think and do in a stressful encounter, they represent a process-oriented approach that captures 'the changing person-environment relationship' and offers a way of understanding the 'stress of the stress process' (Lazarus 1990, p. 4). Failing to explore the explanatory power of these appraisal processes and those relational meanings that bind the stress process together (Dewe 2001) ignores the importance of developing a theoretical framework which encapsulates critical dimensions of the stress process.

It is clear that *conceptually* stress should now be thought of in transactional terms, with the appraisal process providing a causal pathway between the individual and the environment that is absent from more traditional definitions of stress. Yet despite these advances in conceptualizing and defining stress and the 'rigor and intellectual precision' (Harris 1991, p. 28) that accompanies the transactional approach, we are still left with the troublesome *word* 'stress' and what it means. Much has been written

on what has been described as the 'discourse of stress' (Newton 1995; Wainwright & Calnan 2002) and, while the word has become part of our everyday language, it is important to consider from time to time whether the way in which we currently represent stress actually reflects what it is that individuals are experiencing (Newton 1995). We approach this 'representation' issue in two ways: first by looking at the work on lay representations of stress and whether lay ideas about stress parallel in some way those in the academic literature and, secondly, by suggesting that stress is not simply an emotional reaction, but rather that emotion is at the heart of the stress experience (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash 2001). Emotions experienced in the work setting better reveal the dynamics of the individual's transaction with organizational life (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash 2001) and so it is emotions rather than stress that should become the common language of the researcher.

Lay theories refer to those common-sense ways that people describe concepts like stress (Furnham 1988). The importance of understanding these lay ideas lies in the 'profound impact' that such ideas can have on how individuals interpret what goes on at work, how they may react and the health consequences that may follow (Kinman & Jones 2005). It has been possible from this research to identify parallels between lay accounts of stress and those defined in the literature. However, the overriding sense from this work is that there is little in the way of a consensus about how work stress should be interpreted, with multiple definitions of the concept available (Kinman & Jones 2005). It would appear that the lack of consistency in lay representations of stress in many ways mirrors the lack of consistency among stress researchers themselves. Nevertheless, as Kinman and Jones concede, this makes it even more important to continue to explore lay meanings using a range of methods simply because the term is generally used without reference to the meanings it may have for individuals.

When it comes to thinking in terms of emotions, it is as if two research literatures have developed, 'one centred on stress the other on emotion which, given their interdependence, is illogical and counterproductive' (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash 2001, p. 52). Stress always implies emotion and should therefore be viewed as a key element of emotional states (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash 2001). Understanding discrete emotions will yield a better representation of people's efforts to adapt to their life circumstances than simply examining levels of reported stress. It is clear that the more we focus our research, the less reliant we have to be on the concept of stress

(Kasl 1983). Two points emerge from this: the need to continue to ask whether our representations of stress actually reflect what individuals are experiencing; and whether it is now time to represent stress through discrete emotions as these emotions provide valuable information on the outcomes of people's efforts to adapt to their environment.

These points are important not just because of the difficulties surrounding the word 'stress' but also because they require researchers to review whether the methodologies we use to research stress have become so divorced from the phenomena they are purporting to measure that we must now question the structured reality imposed by such approaches (Dewe 2000). Researchers need now to consider just what is being measured when we measure stress, whose reality is it, where are current methodologies taking us and what can alternative methodologies provide (Van Maanen 1979)? The challenge, as Newton (1995) suggests, is to move towards a language of stress that captures those issues that reflect and shape individual stressful experiences – themes that we will, without doubt, return to later in this book.

The Costs of Stress

When raising the question of 'why study stress', Bartlett (1998) argues not only that stress represents a fundamentally important element of health psychology but also that the concept itself brings together knowledge about overall human functioning. In this integrated knowledge stress, health, work and well-being have become inexplicably linked. The stress paradigm is now the most frequently used framework for understanding employee health and well-being (Tetrick 2002), and it is through this lens that attempts have been made to understand the 'costs of stress' to employees, employers and society. Government's policies too recognize as 'important in its own right' the quality of the work experience and the need to make work 'fulfilling' (Brown *et al.* 2006). The recent Black (2008) report entitled *Working for a healthier tomorrow* states that there is now a compelling case 'to act decisively in order to improve the health and well-being of the working age population [with] employers and employees recognising not only the importance of preventing ill-health but also the key role the workplace can play in promoting health and well-being' (p. 10).

Stress at work is widely recognized as a global challenge. Data from a number of national surveys capture the impact of work on health and well-

being. One theme to emerge from the different surveys is the impact on health and well-being of working long hours. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's 2003 *Living to work?* survey found that 25% of employees surveyed reported some sort of negative health impact from working long hours. Long hours were reported by 40% of the sample as having a negative impact on their domestic relationships, with most reporting that they had a negative effect on their job performance as well. Results from the Work Foundation's survey entitled *The joy of work?* (Isles 2005) identifies three main reasons why those sampled worked long hours. They were 'to speed up getting promoted' (60%), 'because they were scared of losing their job' (39%) and 'because of the volume of work' (25%).

This culture of long hours is reported to result in more stress at work, growing difficulties in combining work with family and social life and a sense that achieving some sort of work-life balance is increasingly improbable (Crompton & Lyonette 2007). Data from the 2004 *British Social Attitude* survey (Bell & Bryson 2005) express the impact of working long hours when 54% of those surveyed reported that they come home from work 'too tired' to do everything they need to do. These findings led the Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) to comment that 'the way we work no longer fits the changing world we live in; as we look to the future it looks increasingly unsustainable' (p. 13).

When it comes to work stress, the data are clear and worrying. Data from the Health and Safety Executive (2007a) indicate that 420,000 employees in Britain believed they were experiencing stress, depression or anxiety at levels that were making them ill. During 2006, stress, depression and anxiety accounted for 195,000 new cases. The prevalence rate of stress, depression and anxiety by then was around double the level of the 1990s. The *Psychosocial Working Conditions* (Health and Safety Executive 2005) surveys indicate that around 1 in 6 of all working individuals thought their job was very or extremely stressful. In addition, 63,000 employees (Health and Safety Executive 2006) reported work-related heart disease, ascribing their illness to work stress. From these data, the Health and Safety Executive (2007b) concluded that the most widespread workplace hazard is stress at work. Further data analysis by the Health and Safety Executive (2007a) identified a number of occupational groupings (teaching and research, protective services, health and social welfare, customer services, corporate managers, business and public services) where work-related illness was significantly higher than the overall rate. Economic analysis of future employment patterns by Oxford Economics suggests that 'we may expect

to see a gradual rise in reports of stress, depression and anxiety over the coming years, as employment shifts towards professional and service occupations where the prevalence of stress, depression and anxiety is reportedly higher' (2007, p. 15).

Measuring stress by the extent to which employees worry about work outside of working hours, the *Workplace Employment Relations Survey* (WERS) 2004 data showed an increase over the period 1998 to 2004 of 2.5% or around 675,000 employees, with 27% of all employees in 2004 agreeing or strongly agreeing that they worried a lot about work outside of office hours (Brown *et al.* 2006). The WERS data also showed that over the period 1998 to 2004 the percentage of employees who agreed or strongly agreed that 'their job required them to work hard' and 'they never have enough time to get work done' remained high at 76% and 40% of those surveyed (Brown *et al.* 2006). These figures are, of course, of concern to government agencies. The impact of work-related stress can be felt in all corners of society. The extent of the problem can be judged by the fact that if the targets set by government to 'inspire action' to reduce the incidence and effects of work-related stress are met, then by 2010 the actions taken and the strategies put in place could save society between £8.6 and £21.8 billion (Health & Safety Commission 2000).

Sickness Absence

The stark reality of the costs of work stress become even clearer when the emphasis shifts to exploring issues like sickness absence, turnover and presenteeism (see Cooper & Dewe 2008). We begin by exploring these three issues and then conclude this section on the costs of work stress by exploring mental health at work more generally. We turn first to sickness absence. The principal data source for sickness absence is the annual survey of self-reported work-related illness (SWI) produced by the Health and Safety Executive (2007c). These data are comprehensive and suggest an increasing trend in SWI. The figures for 2006/07 show that for that year 29.96 million working days were lost because of work-related illness. A closer examination shows that work-related illnesses described in terms of stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 13.76 million days lost or 46% of all reported illnesses, making this the single largest cause of all absences attributable to work-related illness. Set against the previous year (10.54 million), the number of days lost in terms of work-related stress, depres-

sion or anxiety in 2006/07 grew by 3.22 million days, or 30.6%. Viewed over the last five years, work-related stress, depression or anxiety remains for each year the single most reported complaint (Cooper & Dewe 2008).

Employers have become increasingly concerned about levels of sickness absence among employees (Bevan 2003). Data reviewed by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007a) suggest that different sources of information provide comparable data on sickness absence, and that the average rate of employee absence due to sickness is around seven days per year. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health's report suggests that the proportion of sickness absence that can be attributable directly to mental health problems is approximately 40%, or 2.8 days per year. Put another way, for the United Kingdom's working population this means around 175 million working days are lost each year because of sickness absence, with around 70 million days lost (40%) to mental health problems generally (see Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a; Cooper & Dewe 2008). If, as indicated earlier, the Health and Safety Executive's 2006/07 sickness absence figures suggest the days lost due to work-related causes (stress, depression or anxiety) are 13.7 million, then work-related causes represent around 20% of those 70 million days lost as a result of mental health problems.

What then is the cost if 13.7 million days are lost each year to work-related sickness absence? The different data sources on cost come, of course, with their own strengths and weaknesses, and although 'no single source can therefore be considered wholly reliable' (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a, p. 8) each provides a basis for considering the cost of sickness absence. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's report entitled *Absence management* calculates a figure of £659 per employee per year but adds the proviso that 'less than half [45%] of organizations [in their sample] actually monitor the cost of absence' (2007a, p.15). The CBI/AXA (Confederation of British Industry 2007) in their *Attending to absence* report identify a direct cost of £537 per employee per year for 2006, but in terms of indirect costs add that 'very few respondents were able to provide an estimate, but those who did report it added £270 per employee per year' (2007, p. 14).

Notwithstanding that these two reports indicate that absence costs showed noticeable variation across sectors, both reports agree that efforts to monitor and reduce the costs of absence will yield considerable benefits for employers (Confederation of British Industry 2007). The worry remains, however, that many organizations still do not have the systems in place to assess and monitor their absence problems (Bevan 2003). The costs

calculated in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the CBI/AXA reports are based on all causes of sickness absence. Taking the figure of 40% as reflecting the proportion of sickness absence that can be attributable to mental health generally, this alone would represent an annual cost of £8.1 billion. As 20% of sickness absence can be attributable to work causes (stress, depression or anxiety), the cost to employees for work-related causes would be around £1.6 billion a year.

Labour Turnover

While the social, psychological and economic impact of labour turnover seems apparent to all commentators, a commonly-agreed model of reasons for leaving jobs has not been developed (Morrell, Loan-Clarke & Wilkinson 2001). Measuring the costs of labour turnover is therefore far from straightforward, with 'the great majority of UK employers not [well] informed about the overall costs of staff turnover' (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a, p. 16). Perhaps a less contentious measurement is the calculation of the rate of turnover. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007b) reports a median employee turnover rate of 18.1% for 2006. The CBI/AXA's (2007) survey reports for the same year an average turnover rate of 14.7%. There was considerable variation in turnover rates between different sectors, although with some consistency across the two surveys as to those sectors where high rates were reported. These figures describe a 'raw quit rate' because no allowance is made for the characteristics of the workforce or for the type of turnover. Nevertheless, the way in which *all* turnover is managed remains an important organizational issue, particularly when set against the finding that 71% of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development respondents reported that the effects of employee departure on business performance range from minor to serious (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2007b).

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (2007b) survey explored the costs associated with employee turnover. While 39% of those surveyed reported an increase in turnover and 52% said they would want to reduce turnover, only 10% reported actually calculating a range of costs associated with turnover, with 66% giving as a reason for not calculating the cost of labour turnover that the organization does not require such information. Other reasons for not calculating turnover costs included 'too

time consuming, 'too complicated' and 'too costly' (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2007b). For those who do calculate a broad range of costs associated with turnover, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007b) places the estimated overall cost of turnover per employee at £7750. While this cost covered, for example, training and induction costs, the more difficult turnover cost to calculate is the time needed for a replacement employee to reach the productivity level of the previously employed employee (Cooper & Dewe 2008). In all probability, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's figure represents a fairly conservative estimate of what the costs of turnover may be (see also the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a).

Respondents in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (2007b) survey were also asked to list the key reasons for employee turnover. While respondents could give multiple responses, 14% cited 'stress of job/role' and 13% cited 'ill-health other than stress' as the key reasons for employee turnover, while potential stress-related problems such as 'level of working hours' and 'level of workload' were cited by 12% and 11% respectively as further reasons for turnover. The proportion of turnover attributable to stress is 'almost certainly lower' than the percentages quoted above, for no other reason, as the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007a) point out, than there is a range of other more commonly mentioned causes of turnover. Refining its arguments still further, the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health suggests a 'reasonable estimate might be that, at most mental health problems including stress account for five percent of total stress turnover' (2007a, p. 16). On this estimate, assuming a conservative turnover rate of 14% of which 5% is attributable to stress and mental health, the overall annual cost of employee turnover attributable to stress and mental health could be in the region of around £1.35 billion.

Presenteeism

Up until now, we have been exploring how work impacts on employee health and well-being. Presenteeism, on the other hand, is defined in terms of lost productivity that occurs when employees come to work ill and perform below par because of that illness. Hemp (2004) argues that presenteeism can be more costly for productivity than absenteeism, although its direct impact is not always immediately apparent. It is clear when an employee doesn't come into work, but it is plainly more complicated to

tell when and in what way performance is hindered by employees coming to work ill. 'When people don't feel good,' Hemp adds, 'they simply don't do their best work' (p. 55). As the interest in the relationship between employee health and productivity has developed so too has the need to develop ways to assess the productivity losses due to ill health (Lofland, Pizzi & Frick 2004).

While researchers acknowledge there is still more development work to be done, they make clear that there is merit in 'describing what is known so far', not just to identify 'needs for future investigations' but also to determine 'when and where' to use such measures (Goetzel *et al.* 2004, p. 411), what guidance to provide employers as to how to choose an appropriate measure (Ozminkowski *et al.* 2004) and that evidence exists supporting the validity of the measures and that 'soundly based comparisons can be made' across a 'range of jobs' (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a, p. 11). The common feature of these instruments is that they are designed to measure the scale and cost of presenteeism by assessing the notion of workplace productivity losses as affected by health or the effects of a particular health condition (Cooper & Dewe 2008). Depending on how these data are expressed, the findings that emerge point to the sheer scale of the problem. Most of the presenteeism research comes from the United States, Canada and Australia, with little published UK data to draw on.

As an example of the nature of the problem, the Chartered Management Institute's (2007) research on managers' health shows, for example, that while 30% of managers sampled reported experiencing stress at work only 9% with these symptoms took any time off. Similarly, for common illnesses like colds and headaches 55% and 46% reported experiencing such symptoms but only 17% and 3% reported taking time off. A range of health-related conditions that affect the ability to work and are costly to employers has been explored, of which depression is a major contributor (Stewart *et al.* 2003). A study by Medibank (2007), for example, reports that depression accounted for around one-fifth of the overall productivity loss through presenteeism, while Goetzel and his colleagues (2004) note that, among the 10 conditions they measured, depression-sadness-mental illness reported one of the largest presenteeism losses. Stewart concludes that 'a majority of the lost productive time costs that employers face from employee depression is invisible and explained by reduced performance while at work' (2003, p. 3135).

These data need to be treated cautiously, as measuring productivity is still quite difficult particularly when set against the sensitivities around the

productivity requirements of different industries and the measurement strategies adopted by the different instruments. However, from the various studies there would appear to be general agreement that lost productive time from health-related presenteeism is costly for employers and may have a greater negative impact than absenteeism on employee performance (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a). Reworking data from US research, the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007a) arrived at a figure for the UK that implies that presenteeism may be up to twice as important as absenteeism in cost-effectiveness terms. Whatever the ratio, two points are clear: (a) health-related presenteeism has, relative to absence, the larger effect and (b) mental ill-health may manifest itself more frequently in presenteeism than absenteeism (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a).

Work and Mental Health Generally

For many the workplace can be a source of stress, depression and anxiety, and it is the relationship between work and stress that has captured the attention of many researchers. However, the scale of mental health problems at work cannot be understood or measured through work-related causes alone. Common mental health problems stem from an array of causes, many unrelated to work, and for the most part those with such problems are as likely to be working as anyone else is. Mental health problems 'are almost as common in the workplace as they are anywhere else' (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007a, p. 6) so clearly the impact of mental ill-health at work is far greater than generally acknowledged and extends beyond just work-related causes. From the Office of National Statistics (Singleton *et al.* 2001) the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health pointed to data that showed that 22.3% of all people in paid employment have some kind of mental health problem (15.4% if alcohol and drug dependency are excluded). 'In other words,' the Sainsbury Centre concludes, 'employers should expect to find on average that nearly 1 in 6 of their workforce is affected by depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions ... or around 1 in 5 if alcohol and drug dependency are included' (2007a, p. 6).

The concern is that these levels of mental ill-health in the workplace are just not recognized by employers. Research tends to confirm this concern. Work by the Shaw Trust suggests that while respondents were

able to identify stress and depression when asked ‘What specific disorders do you think of when you hear the term “mental ill-health in the workplace”?, over a third couldn’t give an answer to this question. Similarly, when asked ‘What percentage of employees do you think will have a mental health problem at some point during their working life?’, 6% of respondents didn’t feel they could even hazard a guess, 45% said none and a further 26% indicated 5% or less, leaving, of the remaining respondents, only around 17% who were able ‘to estimate the magnitude of the impact of mental health to any accurate degree’ (Shaw Trust 2006a, p. 16). The Shaw Trust (2006b, p. 1) concludes that ‘employers seriously underestimate the extent to which employees and fellow managers are experiencing stress, anxiety, depression and other forms of mental ill-health’, along with the damaging impact that mental ill-health may be having on their business.

In terms of policy awareness and understanding the Shaw Trust’s (2006b) research found that 80% of its sample of 550 senior managers did not, to their knowledge, have a formal policy on stress and mental health in the workplace and of those who did only 14% said it was effective and only 16% felt it was well understood. Few employers have had experience in dealing with or recruiting applicants with mental health problems (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2008; Shaw Trust 2006a). Perhaps because of this inexperience and because employers ‘want to do the right thing’ and recognize that they need more support to deal with mental health problems in the workplace (Shaw Trust 2006a), employers reveal a sense of discomfort and hesitancy when confronted with issues around mental illness and mental ill-health in the workplace. There is clearly a need for more education and a continuing need to raise awareness. The Shaw Trust (2006a) concludes that government and industry need to collaborate in the development of support and structures to address mental health problems at work.

Because, as Rolfe, Foreman and Tylee (2006) suggest, the relationship between stress and mental health is not well understood and because employers are, perhaps, somewhat concerned to draw a distinction between the two, stress is seen as more of a key issue and mental health less so. Perhaps employers are more comfortable with the term ‘well-being’. Drawing on the themes that emerge from its 2007 surveys, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in its *Barometer of HR trends and prospects* (2008) indicates that 44% of organizations had a well-being strategy or similar initiative and that 42% of respondents also planned to

increase spending on well-being measures in 2008. Nevertheless, despite identifying a number of commonly provided well-being measures, 40% of respondents to the 2008 survey reported that their organization's communication strategy was poor and only 11% believed that employees fully appreciated what was spent on well-being benefits.

There is no doubt that workplaces can do much to enhance individual workers' health and well-being (Black 2008), and that good health is good business. After reviewing evidence on this issue, Waddell and Burton (2006) confirm that there is 'a strong evidence base showing that work is generally good for physical and mental health and well-being' (p. 38). The review by Rolfe, Foreman and Tylee (2006) makes it clear that, in terms of stress and mental health, the role of the manager is crucial in responding to and managing stressful events. In dealing with mental issues at work, the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2007b) went a step further and made the point that changing how mental health is managed must now be the responsibility not just of managers but also of all health professionals. The Centre suggested that by working together, and sharing expertise and training, all concerned professionals would benefit in terms of better understanding the relationship between work and health.

The Changing Work Context and Work Stressors

Snyder (1999) argues that coping with the demands of work will influence the goals which workers set themselves. There is no doubt that over the last four decades there has been profound change across all aspects of society. There is now general agreement (see Dewe & Kompier 2008) that the landscape of work and society generally will be influenced by three prevailing forces. The first – internationalization and global competition – includes the growing importance of the economies of China and India, the continued accelerated flow of capital, a more mobile labour market, the reduction of trade barriers and an increase in the use of 'resource-based strategies' that emphasize the importance of competing through people. The second – technological innovation and the increased utilization of ICT – will see technological advances influencing the rate of knowledge transfer, how capital and labour markets are organized and where they are located, the growth of, and demand for, 'knowledge intensive' skills leading to a higher skilled workforce with more flexibility in terms of how work is organized and how organizations are structured and an economy where

intangible characteristics such as human intelligence, creativity and even personal warmth take on increasing value (Coyle & Quah 2002).

The third force – demographic shifts in the workforce – will see the ageing of the workforce, which may be the most significant demographic change over the next 15–20 years (Madouros 2006). These demographic shifts are coupled with workforce generational differences in aspirations and values, including the importance of the role of women in the workforce, with significant change coming from identifying those aspects of the gender gap and using them as drivers for economic change, and an increasing trend towards a more culturally diverse workforce, influenced by patterns of immigration. All these forces will influence, and be influenced by, issues surrounding climate change, the demands for eco-friendly management techniques, ethical leadership that fosters sustainability, fair trade innovations and work patterns and structures that reflect high-efficiency/low-carbon initiatives.

It is not difficult to trace the impact that these forces are having and will continue to have on working arrangements and the structure of organizations. The ‘vertical disaggregation’ of organizations resulting in the outsourcing of non-core functions, flatter structures and the redefinition of working relationships has ushered in increasingly familiar management techniques that focus on performance-related issues, smart working, just-in-time deadlines, cost-effectiveness strategies and lean organizational practices. These changes also mean that working relationships become more demanding as organizations attempt to maximize the use of their ‘human capital’ through competency-based initiatives, resource-based strategies, multi-skilled role requirements, team working, talent management, continuous improvement and a compulsive drive towards the use of new technology and continuous technological development. As a result of these changes, work is becoming more intense, taking on more of an emotional quality and producing more complex working patterns and interpersonal relationships. Longer working hours have become the norm; combining work with family and social life is becoming increasingly difficult, adding to the social cost of work, and work practices are now clearly at odds with the way people want to live (Equal Opportunities Commission 2007).

‘Work–life balance considerations clearly matter a great deal to a significant proportion of employees’ (Bell & Bryson 2005, p. 51), increasing the demand for flexible working arrangements. Yet despite this demand and the development of common flexible working practices, changes to working

arrangements are not happening fast enough, or in the right way, to deliver what people and organizations want (Equal Opportunities Commission 2007). All these issues clearly have an impact on the health and well-being of employees. Employees want more control over their working lives and in terms of their satisfaction and development want jobs to be interesting and meaningful, that allow them to express their talents, utilize their skills and provide opportunities for achievement and scope for development.

How employees experience work and the satisfaction they derive from it is a key indicator of well-being. Policy strategies that recognize the quality of the work experience represent significant steps in meeting the aim of making employment a more fulfilling experience (Brown *et al.* 2006). Yet the changes to work and organizations and the complexity of working arrangements continue to tax the well-being and resources of employees. It is as important to monitor those work events that have the potential to cause stress as it is to provide employees with the resources to cope and flourish. Changes to work and working life inevitably bring new potential sources of stress and alter the nature of those traditionally identified. It is to these events that we now turn our attention.

Work Stressors: Some Issues

In their seminal work on work stress, employee well-being and health, Beehr and Newman (1978) make the point that as most people spend more than half their waking lives at work it is highly likely that work issues will significantly influence how they feel. There is, in work stress research, a long and rich history of identifying those work factors that have the potential to cause stress. The identification by Kahn and his colleagues (1964) of role conflict and role ambiguity quickly followed by role overload introduced researchers to the 'costly ideology of bureaucratic conformity', 'identity destroying' and 'emotional turmoil' (Cooper & Dewe 2004; Kahn *et al.* 1964, p. 6) caused by work and ushered in the first set of work stressors that continue, even today, to capture the attention of many researchers. Since the original work by Kahn and his colleagues, the types of work stressors have continued to expand, prompted by significant economic, social and political change, to include, in addition to the role requirements of the job, demands intrinsic to the job, career development issues, relationships at work and organizational structure and culture issues (Beehr & Newman 1978; Cooper & Marshall 1976) followed by work-life conflicts,

mergers and acquisitions, organizational change and transition, retrenchment, redundancies and outsourcing (Sulsky & Smith 2005).

The importance of this brief historical review is to draw attention to the fact that while instruments for measuring many of these work stressors have long been available and continue to be used this should not mean we ignore our responsibility to better our understanding of the evolving nature of these stressors. The considerable economic and social change that has occurred since many stressor measures were first developed has meant that these measures may now be prone to an 'inherent bias', where we overemphasize the importance of some stressor events, ignore others and fail to consider the significance of such stressors to the individual (Brief & Atieh 1987; Glowinkowski & Cooper 1985). When it comes to measuring work stressors, the question must become one of relevance, where the measures being used capture those stressors and those events that reflect the individual's experience. The value of continually developing our understanding of different stressors must be seen, at any one time, to lie more in their ability to describe particular experiences rather than to define them. Accepting uncritically the a priori labelling of a stressor as always reflecting the same events, or expressing the same meaning or events always falling within a particularly category, is to ignore the evolving nature of stressors and the influence of social, economic and organizational change.

Organizations, whatever their size, and work relationships, however structured, are not immune from economic and social turmoil, government initiatives and regulations, management styles and practices and employee expectations and needs. These factors help shape work stressors and point towards the types of work stressors that may be encountered in the future. These factors have something of a dual role in that at one time they may influence the nature of work stressors and at another become work stressors themselves, so that change and stressors are interrelated with each helping to shape the other. From the many issues that may emerge from this economic, social and political change three capture the way work is transforming and signal what may yet be experienced in terms of work stressors. These three issues are job insecurity, the increasing emotional qualities of work and work-life balance where 'the way we work no longer fits the changing world we live in' (Equal Opportunities Commission 2007, p. 7).

When the banking crisis of 2008 hit – 'possibly the largest financial crisis of its kind in human history' (Hayman 2008, p. 1) – job losses were predicted, for the United Kingdom alone, to be 60,000 per month during the

consequent downturn. Feelings of job insecurity heightened by memories of past recessions and fuelled by an incredible sensitivity to the vagaries of market and economic trends are again a reality but this time a reality across all sectors of the economy. Fears of job insecurity spread throughout the 1990s, resulting in a deterioration in physical and mental health (Burchell *et al.* 1999). Job insecurity also comes with feelings of work intensification. The demands on employees in terms of efficiencies and greater productivity are associated with changes in the way work is allocated, organized, controlled, performed and rewarded, thereby intensifying the work experience. Considerable numbers of employees indicate that they work longer than their basic working hours, feel that speed of work and the effort they put into their jobs have increased and believe that their current staffing levels are inadequate or very inadequate (see Burchell *et al.* 1999, pp. 2–3). With employees feeling they are working harder with fewer resources in increasingly competitive and uncertain markets where performance is controlled through financial incentives, despite the benefits that flow from performance-related techniques the work environment is becoming increasingly stressful for many workers (Equal Opportunities Commission 2007).

Because the service sector currently represents around 81% of the total workforce and because of the widening spread of job insecurity fears, the continuing uncertainties in the global economy, increasing competitive pressures, slowdowns in the rate of economic growth and concerns around domestic inflation, the impact on the health and well-being of workers in this sector simply because of the numbers employed is potentially enormous. Job insecurity fears coupled with work intensification – concerns about resources, loss of valued aspects of the job, increased responsibilities and fewer opportunities for development (Burchell *et al.* 1999) – must increase the likelihood of stress. What distinguishes this sector from other sectors of the workforce is that it is made up of many occupations where the job roles require such an intensity of ‘client’ interaction that work assumes much more of an emotional quality. Researchers are familiar with the effects of emotional labour and job-related burnout. For many service workers their work leaves them feeling emotionally exhausted with a need at times to distance themselves from what is going on around them. These feelings may also help to explain why, in recent surveys, the majority of respondents described themselves as disengaged or only moderately engaged (Towers Perrin 2006). There is, as the report points out, a considerable difference between being willing and being engaged. While terms

like 'emotional capital' and 'emotional competencies' have now joined the management lexicon, they nevertheless 'shed light on a once hidden aspect of service work' and there is no ignoring the fact that 'many organizations today see the ability of their frontline staff to manage their feelings as well as those of the customer as key to competitive success' (Payne 2006, p. 5).

The demand for change in the organization and structure of work – stemming from global competition and technological change, the transformation of the labour market with more women in paid employment, a changing age structure with a need to sustain the employability of older workers and the importance of caring responsibilities – has led to policies which promote mechanisms for employees to more effectively combine their paid work with other aspects of their lives (Bell & Bryson 2005). It is clear that many employees have difficulty balancing work and home life, illustrated by on the one hand coming home too tired and running out of time to complete jobs at home, while on the other finding it difficult to concentrate at work because of family responsibilities (Bell & Bryson 2005). The overwhelming desire to have more time for family, friends and leisure, coupled with meeting the demands of work, has heightened the difficulties associated with combining paid employment with family and social life (Crompton & Lyonette 2007). The way we work, argues the Equal Opportunities Commission, 'is not responding fast enough to the challenges presented by changes in the world around us' (2007, p. 16), making this another factor that will help shape work stressors.

Changing Work Stressors

Against this backdrop of social, economic and political change, we identify a number of work stressors that provide a context for better understanding the changing nature of work and changing work stressors. It is within this context that coping takes place. It is clear that many of the work stressors traditionally identified will continue to have an impact on employee health and well-being. What is important is to accept that the characteristics and boundaries of these stressors continue to change and evolve and that in capturing this change we are better equipped to understand the work environment and the issues facing those who have to cope with it. The most frequently measured work stressors are without doubt overload, conflict and ambiguity. Researchers have for some time distinguished between quantitative and qualitative overload, but it is clear that we are witnessing

a change in the nature of these stressors. Quantitative overload will continue to reflect the amount of work and its time dimension, but these elements may, through the intensification of work, include efficiency and quality-performance issues, responsibility but without the necessary control or the appropriate resources, continually working to targets and the urgency of maximizing workloads set against job insecurity and uncertain economic times.

The qualitative dimensions of overload that reflect the more 'cognitive' aspects of the job will see greater demands in terms of skill requirements, continual learning, working with complexity of procedures, policies and technology and the continual requirements for career and professional development and 'upskilling'. It could be that qualitative overload may include elements of what has been described as 'techno-stress' (O'Driscoll & O'Driscoll 2008), including concerns about being able to learn and use new technological techniques, problems owing to limitations or expectations about what different technological platforms can do and the eroding of social relationships at work as a result of how different applications change the way we work and the way we interrelate with colleagues. It is also clear that the boundaries between different role stressors will become blurred as conflicts and ambiguities begin to reflect lack of opportunities in terms of growth and development, feelings of career stagnation coupled with the wearing away of those aspects of the job that give value, meaningfulness, social worth and satisfaction. Conflicts may also emerge in terms of personal goals, ethics, values and job demands and the need to perform under conditions of uncertainty that extend beyond role requirements to tenure and survival.

We are already witnessing a greater array of complex human resource rules and regulations. Not only is there a greater urgency to engage in resource-based strategies where economic advantage is best achieved by competing through people, but relationships within the organization are becoming more complex. This contributes to increasingly reported incidents and growing concerns around harassing, bullying, fear and violent behaviours at work. Behaviours like bullying are complex and sometimes cross a fine line between appropriate forms of management and inappropriate interpersonal styles (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2005). Bullies are often unaware of their actions on others, but the cost of bullying in the United Kingdom is estimated to reach beyond £2 million, taking up around 450 days of management time a year, creating profound distress for victims that extends beyond the effects of more

common workplace stressors (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2005).

Workplace violence is also on the increase and becoming widespread across all sectors of the workforce. As over 80% of the workforce work in occupations where 'client contact' is central to the job, for some occupations forms of violence have reached epidemic proportions. Retail industry research reports that every minute of the working day a shop worker is verbally abused, threatened with violence or physically attacked (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers 2007). The *Workplace Health and Safety Survey* indicates that over a third of those who have experienced threats, abuse or attacks thought the risk of such behaviours would increase (Hodgson *et al.* 2006). The Health and Safety Executive's *Violence at work* report (2007a), using estimates from the British Crime Survey, indicates that for 2004/05 there were around 339,000 threats of violence and 317,000 physical assaults by members of the public on workers. The costs of workplace violence and other threatening behaviours like harassment and bullying 'can cause unimaginable levels of occupational stress', leaving the question of just 'how you begin to estimate the true human cost' (UNISON 2005, p.7) hanging.

Organizational restructuring, process re-engineering, the drive for efficiency and performance and the importance given to 'people management' strategies have led to issues concerning the levels of control employees have over their work, their flexibility to manage their work arrangements, the challenges they get from work and the spillover from work to home life. The stressors that emerge express the tensions in terms of how people want to work, how they have to work and the satisfactions they get from work. These tensions are heightened when set against the changing nature of the workforce, the competing demands of home and work, the flattening of organizational hierarchies, the blurring of demarcation lines between jobs, the intensification of work and the loss of valued job features like control and flexibility (Burchell *et al.* 1999). The sustainability of contemporary work practices and the competition between job demands and worker expectations have worrying implications for employees, their families and management alike, and cause considerable stress.

The stressors discussed above are not meant to be a definitive list but are mentioned to illustrate how they change and evolve over time. Stressors emerge from the complexities of the social, economic and working environment. They interact with each other and the existence of one stressor will, more than likely, lead to a vulnerability to others. It is clear from those

discussed that they will spill over into other aspects of work and life and will themselves be influenced and changed by these and other events. Inevitably, stressors should be viewed as moulded by the past, expressing the present yet tempered by the future. They are discussed here to provide a context for understanding coping research, the way our knowledge of coping has developed and why it has, at times, taken different directions and focused on different issues. Understanding coping is not just about stressors; it is also about how we define stress, how we capture that experience in our research, what measures we use, whose reality those measures express, how researchers interpret their results and how this knowledge contributes to theory, practice and those whose working lives we study. Coping research needs to be understood within this complex and changing context, a complexity that determines not only how people cope but also how effective their coping is and what this means for their health and well-being. It is this complexity and these changes that also influence how researchers go, and have gone, about investigating the coping process and it is to these issues that we now turn our attention.