Self-esteem and threat to self-esteem

A positive self-evaluation, and a positive evaluation by others, are strong motives for most people (Epstein, 1998; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). People strive to protect their self-worth, which, as used here, may refer to self-esteem in the sense of one's own self-evaluation, or to self-esteem, which refers to the regard or respect received from others (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994; De Cremer, van Knippenberg, van Dijke, & Bos, 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Accordingly, many people go to great pains to protect, or enhance, their self-worth (e.g., Baumeister, 1996; Crocker & Park, 2004). A few examples illustrating this point are (1) people's reaction to negative feedback (e.g., Ilgen & Davis, 2000), including (2) the tendency to avoid negative feedback (Ashford, Blatt, & Vandewalle, 2003), (3) the tendency to devalue others if their success is threatening to one's own self-esteem (Tesser, 1988), or the tendency to avoid social support if admitting a problem might convey the impression of weakness or incompetence (e.g., Deelstra, Peeters, Schaufeli, Stroebe, Zijlstra, & van Doornen, 2003).

Given that it is so important for most people to preserve a positive self-worth, it is plausible to expect that threats to self-esteem play a major role for the experience of stress, a point emphasized by Lazarus (e.g., 1999). Surprisingly, however, this issue has not played a prominent role in (occupational) stress research. Typically, self-esteem is either investigated as a resource that attenuates the effects of stressful situations or as a dependent variable in that stress may impede self-esteem (e.g., Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Mohr, 1986; Semmer, 2003). It is rarely investigated as a core element of the stress experience itself. Hobfoll's (e.g., 2001) Conservation of Resources theory is an exception, in that stress is seen as a threat to resources, and self-esteem is regarded as a core resource. Still, self-esteem is one resource among many in this approach, and there is no special emphasis on threats to self-esteem. Nor does the positive side, that is, the support of self-esteem through experiences of success and recognition, get much attention in Hobfoll's theory or in occupational health psychology in general.

All this is the more surprising because social support does play a prominent role in (occupational) stress research. And it is widely recognized that "the essence
of social support is likely to be the "feeling that one is worthwhile, capable, and a valued member of a group of individuals" (Sarason, Sarason, Brock, & Pierce, 1996, p. 21). At the same time, research shows that social support may have negative effects if it threatens self-esteem, for instance, because one worries about appearing weak or incompetent if one admits having a problem and needing help (Deelstra et al., 2003; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982).

**Threat to self in models of occupational stress**

One reason why threats to the self are not more prominent in occupational stress research probably lies in the fact that the field has been dominated by two models for a long time, both of which do not pay much attention to this issue. The first of these is the Michigan Role Stress model (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). It emphasizes role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. The second one is the Job-Demands-Control model by Karasek and Theorell (1990; Theorell & Karasek, 1996), which concentrates on the stressful nature of job demands, on the beneficial nature of job control, and on their interaction in the sense that demands are viewed as beneficial when combined with high control, but as damaging when combined with low control. Both models were groundbreaking and pioneering, both have inspired a great amount of research and helped to advance the field tremendously. On the other hand, one implication of the great impact of these models was the relative neglect of variables not specified by them. Among those aspects that did not get that much attention are social stressors (Spector & Jex, 1998), although the positive side of social experiences, that is, social support, has been added to the Job-Demands-Control model (cf. Johnson, Hall, & Theorell, 1989; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Theorell & Karasek, 1996).

A major breakthrough in terms of a broader perspective has been achieved with the Effort-Reward-Imbalance model by Siegrist and associates (e.g., Siegrist, 2002). By focusing on not only demands, or effort, but also on rewards one receives for investing effort (such as pay, security, recognition, and support), the model emphasizes that stress occurs within a social context, which influences its meaning. Until then, stress research has mainly asked, how high demands, or stressors, were in relation to one's resources, which amounts to the question: "Is it bearable?". The social exchange perspective adds another question: "Is it worth bearing?". The model has an impressive empirical record, most notably with regard to cardiovascular disease (Siegrist, 2002). Schaufeli and his co-workers have developed a rather similar model, focusing on burnout in the context of equity (e.g., Schaufeli, 2006; Taris, Peeters, Le Blanc, Schreurs & Schaufeli, 2001), also backed by good empirical evidence.

Reciprocity plays a key role in these models. Reciprocity can be seen as an issue of fairness. These models, and the research associated with them, therefore implies that the issue of organizational justices or fairness (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005) deserves more attention in occupational stress research. Fair outcomes (distributive justice), fair procedures (procedural justice) and adequate interpersonal treatment (interactional justice) communicate respect and appreciation, while unfair behaviour signals disrespect.

What is especially important for the concept of "Stress as Offense to Self" is that fairness, or justice, is an important determinant of self-esteem (Miller, 2001; Taylor, 2001). Research, both in the laboratory and the field, shows all three forms of injustice to be associated with diminished self-esteem (e.g., De Cremer, 2002; De Cremer, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Mullenders, & Stinglhamber, 2005).

The two fields of occupational stress research on the one hand, and organizational justice on the other hand have, however, developed quite independently, and their interrelatedness has just begun to be emphasized (cf. Cropanzano, Goldman, & Benson, III., 2005). Apart from Siegrist's and Schaufeli's research, which emphasize reciprocity, and thus are clearly related to issues of justice, there are not many empirical studies that focus on these issues (e.g., Ellovainio, Kivimäki, & Helkama, 2001; Ellovainio, van den Bos, Linna, Kivimäki, Ala-Mursula, Pentti, & Vahtera, 2005; Kivimäki, Ferrie, Brunner, Head, Shipley, Vahtera, & Marmot, 2005; van der Hulst & Geurts 2001; Zohar, 1995).

**The concept of “stress as offense to self”**

The concept of "Stress as Offense to Self" (SOS) starts with the assumption that stress has to do with a threat to important goals (Lazarus, 1999). It further assumes that preserving one's self-worth is an important goal, drawing on the research on self-esteem cited above. Furthermore, it draws on research and theorizing on fairness and reciprocity as described above. However, its starting point is self-esteem, and the importance of lack of fairness and reciprocity is derived from its property to thwart people's self-esteem (see Semmer, McGrath, & Beehr, 2005; Semmer & Jacobshagen, 2003; Semmer, Jacobshagen, & Meier, 2006).

The SOS-approach is not a theory in the strict sense of the word. Rather, it is a broader theoretical framework that has threats to the self as a starting point, tries to integrate existing research, and elaborates the implication of its central premises for the development of new concepts.

Furthermore, although the concept originates in stress research, we try not to focus on negative experiences alone. Rather, the concept implies that boosts to self-esteem are powerful resources, and should be focused as much as threats to self-esteem.

As outlined above, threats to self can refer (1) to one's personal self-evaluation, which we will refer to as "personal self-esteem", and/or (2) to the evaluation by other people, which we will refer to as "social esteem". Of course, as research
on self-esteem has shown, the two are not independent, and evaluations by others are likely to affect personal self-esteem (De Cremer et al., 2004; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). Nevertheless, personal self-esteem may be threatened even in the absence of social devaluation (e.g., by personal failure experiences, see below), and social deprecation may be ward ed off, thus avoiding an effect on personal self-esteem (cf. Tracy & Robins, 2004). In the following, we will discuss the two basic components in more detail.

**Threats and boosts to personal self-esteem**

Personal self-esteem is threatened when people experience failure that they attribute internally, for instance, to a lack of competence, to a lack of moral strength, or the like - in other words, when they feel they have failed to live up to "some actual or ideal self-representation" (Tracey & Robins, 2004, p. 105). In our model, we call this "Stress through Insufficiency" (SIN). On the positive side, pride results from internal attributions of success (Tracy & Robins, 2004; 2007; cf. Lazarus, 1999; Pekrun & Frese, 1992).

Of course, there are many subtleties involved in the specifics of these emotions (Tracey & Robins, 2004), which cannot be dealt with in the context of this chapter. What is important here is that experiences of failure as a source of stress, and success as a source of positive emotional reactions, have, somewhat surprisingly, not played a prominent role in research on occupational health. We maintain that pride - or the like - in other words, self-esteem - is an important motive (Leary, 1999).

**Threats and boosts to social esteem**

Threats to social esteem

It is widely accepted that the need to belong - to be accepted and respected by significant others, to derive social identity from belonging to a given group - is an important motive (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Accordingly, behaviour of others that signals a lack of appreciation and respect constitutes a threat to one's social esteem. We speak of "Stress as Disrespect" ("SAD"). Lack of respect can be expressed directly or in a more indirect way.

(1) A very direct way of showing disrespect can be seen in behaviours like attacking others, ridiculing them, making them lose face in the presence of others, giving rude and inconsiderate feedback, taking credit for their ideas or successes, etc. Such behaviours have traditionally been investigated under the rubric of social stressors, which involve "nasty behaviours" (Spector & Jex, 1998, p. 360; cf. Frese & Zapf, 1987). They are an important element of social conflict (De Dreu, van Dierendonck, & de Best-Waldhofer, 2003). However, as stated above, social stressors have received rather little attention in comparison to "classic" stressors such as role stressors (see Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Spector & Jex, 1998). In our model, we call these behaviours "illegitimate behaviours".

(2) A more indirect way of showing disrespect can be seen in acts (or failure to act) that contributes to someone's stress. These acts need not be intentionally directed against that person, it rather reflects a lack of consideration for his or her interests. Examples would be causing additional work for somebody by not doing one's own part properly, not informing people well enough so that they cannot prepare for difficult situations, and the like. In our model, we speak of "illegitimate stressors", that is, stressors that are caused by, or aggravated by, behaviour that is perceived as inconsiderate. The attribution of a stressful situation to "illegitimate" causes is the main ingredient from the recipient's point of view (see Folger & Cropanzano, 2001).

Note that, in contrast to directly illegitimate behaviours, the concept of illegitimate stressors is less obviously tied to social interaction. Nor does the stressor itself have to be social. The breakdown of computers is an example. It tends to be stressful in itself as it hinders task completion. Whether or not it is considered "illegitimate" depends on the attribution involved. If the breakdown is attributed to a "natural" tendency of computers to break down from time to time, no illegitimacy is involved. If, however, it is attributed to the management not investing enough in proper equipment, or good maintenance, it becomes illegitimate. This illegitimacy renders a special, and social, context to an otherwise technical problem.

(3) A third, usually indirect, way of expressing disrespect is through "illegitimate tasks". Illegitimate tasks refer to task assignments that are perceived as either unreasonable or unnecessary. The starting point for the development of the concept of illegitimate tasks was the observation that stressors "that are typical for a profession - such as overload for the secretaries and dealing with victims of accidents for policemen - are appraised as least 'significant'... Apparently, employees expect that some stressors are indissolubly connected with their profession, and as a result of this they do not perceive them to be very significant." (Peeters, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1995, p. 471). What Peeters et al. refer to as "typical" can, in our view, better be described as "affirming one's core role", and thus one's professional identity. All professions imply elements that are potentially stressful, but if they define the very nature of the profession these elements may be very satisfying, constituting an intrinsic reward. Thus, if a physician has to spend many hours to save a patient's life, she is affirming her core role identity, and is not likely to complain about long hours. If, however, she is asked to fill in forms for the insurance company, this is not perceived as a core element of her profession, it is "not what I studied medicine for". Therefore, this task is much more likely to be resented. Similarly, interviews with nurses have shown, time and again, that going out of their way in order to support the healing process of a seriously ill patient - e.g., running back and forth between that patient and other patients, repeatedly checking the patient's condition, helping the patient to the bathroom, and
the like - was not considered particularly stressful. The typical reason given was that it was "part of the job". The very same demands, however, from patients who were not considered seriously ill were considered part of another profession's duty, that is, service. And the nurses strongly resented being treated "like a maid" (Semmer, 2000). Nurses even have a term for this type of activities: They are called "non-nursing activities" (Sabo, 1990). These demands, therefore, are considered unreasonable; they should be done by someone else. A variant of such an "unreasonable" task may refer not to one's professional role per se, but to one's experience and status within that role. Thus, a young, inexperienced physician may consider it unreasonable to be responsible for a big ward during the night, with no experienced physician around to support him. Conversely, an experienced person may expect that certain activities are carried out by the novice, and would be offended if they expected her to do them herself. A second form of illegitimate tasks refers to unnecessary demands. Thus, having to transfer information from one computer system to another one by typing it again, because the two systems are incompatible, may be resented because it is regarded as unnecessary. It could have been avoided if the management asserted a policy with regard to the compatibility of computer systems (thus fulfilling the conditions of "would", "could", and "should" as specified by Fairness Theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001)).

Of course, these three categories of "illegitimate behaviours", "illegitimate stressors", and "illegitimate tasks" are not completely independent and are likely to overlap. Nevertheless, we expect them not to be completely redundant, and we show empirically that they do explain unique variance in indicators of well-being. The three categories of illegitimacy have been part of research so far to a differing degree. "Illegitimate behaviours" are not a new concept. They have been investigated in the context of stress research as "social stressors" (Frese & Zapf, 1987), although they have not received the attention they deserve. Bullying/mobbing as an extreme social stressor has been investigated quite frequently, but typically as a stressor in its own right and not with a strong connection to the field of occupational stress in general (Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2002; Zapf & Leymann, 1996).

What is new in our concept is that we derive the importance of social stressors from the consideration that social stressors are especially prone to threaten the social esteem. Illegitimate stressors also include some familiar aspects: Negative events that are attributed to acts (or failure to act) by others elicit strong negative reactions (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), among which anger and the desire for revenge are especially prominent (Bies & Tripp, 1996). However, in occupational stress research, this type of attribution has also not played a very prominent role. The third concept, illegitimate tasks, is a truly new development. Elements of illegitimate tasks have been mentioned in the literature, for instance, when Peeters et al. (1995) refer to stressors that are less significant when they are typical for a profession. Also, research on bullying (or mobbing) has noted the assignment of degrading tasks as an element of a bullying strategy (Hoel et al., 2002; Zapf & Leymann, 1996), but the concept has not been further elaborated, and it has been restricted to the very serious condition of bullying/mobbing. That "milder" (and often not intentional) forms of illegitimate tasks may be part of many people's daily experience has not been considered in this research.

Theoretically, the concepts discussed here all refer to fairness/justice (cf. Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). They all refer to violations of social norms, which are likely to be perceived as unfair. On account of all they imply a breach of the "psychological contract" (cf. Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2006; Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Guest, 2004).

So, one might ask why the wider perspective of "Stress as Offense to Self" is necessary. There are several reasons why we think our SOS concept is useful. First, our emphasis on the self, and on the threat to, or affirmation of, people's professional identity has led us to develop specific concepts, such as illegitimate tasks, that are not likely to evolve when one concentrates - as research on organizational justice does - on the fairness of decisions in general. Second, we regard the concept of threat to, or affirmation of, the self as the overarching principle. Fairness has positive affective consequences because it affirms one's professional identity, as many researchers in the field would agree (e.g., De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). This implies also that it has positive affective consequences only if the extent to which one does, indeed, affirm the self. There are rare occasions where it does not: When people receive feedback that is threatening to the self, because it is negative and implies failure, this feedback can induce a negative self-evaluation because it is fair, because its fairness implies that it is really the person himself or herself that is responsible for the outcome (Broekner & Wiesendif, 2005). Therefore, people may react more negatively to negative outcomes if these were based on fair procedures (Semmer et al., 2002; Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, & Dronkert, 1999). This reversal of the "fair process effect" can be explained only when one assumes that self-evaluation concerns take precedence over fair procedures. The third reason for suggesting a perspective that goes beyond justice/fairness lies in the positive side of the SOS concept, which regards boosts to (social) self-esteem as an important cause of well-being. As will be explained below, this effect cannot adequately be dealt with by theories of fairness/justice.

Boosts to social esteem

As stated by relational theories of justice, fairness signals a positive social standing. Fairness, however, is defined by conformity to certain rules (e.g., unbiased decisions). One could say that fairness relates predominantly to the absence of violations of such rules. Appreciation goes beyond this "lack of negativity". Appreciation implies recognition of one's individuality, achievements, and qualities. It implies praising someone, showing interest in one's concerns and in him or her...
that subjective success explained variance in well-being after controlling for job.

Coefficients were not very high, ranging between .20 and .26, but if one considers that experiences of success were gathered over two days only, these associations do not appear that small. Grebner, Elffering, Achermann, Knecht, and Semmer (2007) showed, with a newly developed instrument measuring subjective success, that subjective success explained variance in well-being after controlling for job- and person-related resources. Thus, success seems to be a promising predictor for well-being, although much more research is needed in this area. We expect research on failure experiences, which is ongoing, to be as promising.

Threats and boosts to social esteem

Our research so far has concentrated mainly on the issue of social esteem. We will report results on illegitimate tasks, and on illegitimate stressors on the negative side, on social support as a mixed blessing, depending on whether or not it affirms the self, and on appreciation as a positive factor.

Illegitimate tasks

We conducted interview studies in which people’s tasks and subtasks were listed, and participants were asked about illegitimate tasks (Jacobshagen, 2006; Semmer et al., 2006). The key terms were not used as such, since people might be offended if asked if they carry out “illegitimate”, “unreasonable”, or “unnecessary” tasks. Rather, the concept was circumscribed indirectly with questions like “Do you have work tasks that you believe should be done by someone else?” (unreasonable) or “...that make you wonder if they have to be done at all?” (unnecessary). Altogether, 159 participants reported more than 3500 different (sub-)tasks. About a third of them were perceived as illegitimate, which shows that the phenomenon is not negligible. In line with our theorizing about the affirmative quality of core tasks, the percentage of illegitimate tasks was only about 10% among core tasks (such as teaching) but reached almost two thirds for “secondary” tasks (such as filing reports).

On the basis of these interviews we developed the “Bem Illegitimate Tasks Scale” (BITS). The BITS shows good psychometric properties, and correlates negatively with indicators of well-being, as expected (Jacobshagen, 2006; Jacobshagen, Semmer, Gisler, & Elffering, 2007; Semmer, Jacobshagen & Meier, 2007). These results were obtained in various samples, involving, for instance, management, service, and teaching. The BITS shows the most consistent associations with resentments towards one’s own organization (Geurts, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1994). These associations are maintained when other stressors, such as work-related stressors, social stressors) as well as demographic variables are controlled for.

We can conclude, therefore, that illegitimate tasks are a stressor in their own right and not already contained in other stressor constructs. Rather, they explain unique variance over and above other stressors in indicators of well-being.

Illegitimacy of stressors

In two diary studies, people noted stressful situations over two work days, and they were asked a number of questions about these situations, among them questions about the perceived illegitimacy of the situation (Jacobshagen, Semmer, Meier, Kalin, & Elffering, 2007). In a multilevel analysis of study 1, illegitimacy

Research inspired by the SOS concept

SOS is not a theory in the strict sense of the term. Rather, it is a theoretical framework, a perspective that we feel helps to integrate existing research, and suggests a focus on variables that have not received much attention so far. Furthermore, however, it has guided the development of new concepts. All this has implications for research and leads to some testable hypotheses. In the following section, we will briefly present some research that we have conducted, and are conducting, that has been inspired by the SOS approach.

Threats and boosts to personal self-esteem: Success and failure

We have argued that success and failure should be important for well-being. Probably not many people would doubt that. However, research on success and failure in the domain of occupational stress is rare. It is interesting to note that three recent handbooks that are concerned with issues of stress and health (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005; Campbell, Quick & Tetrick, 2003; Schabracq, Winnubst, & Cooper, 2003) do not list the terms “failure” and “success” in their subject indices. Similarly, in handbooks on the wider field of work and organizational psychology, the terms are either not listed (e.g., Borman, Ilgen, & Klimoski, 2003; Dunnette & Hough, 1990-1992; Warr, 2002) or refer to issues of successful decision making, of success in leadership, in organizational change, or to individual differences in attributing success and failure (Anderson, Ones, Sinagil, & Viswesvaran, 2001-2002). They do not refer to experiences of success and failure as factors that influence well-being.

Therefore, it does seem important that Amstad, Jacobshagen and Semmer (2005), in a diary study on daily uplifts, find uplifts that were characterized by success (“experiencing success”, “reaching a goal”, “accomplishing something”), aggregated over two work days, to correlate with indicators of well-being. Coefficients were not very high, ranging between .20 and .26, but if one considers that experiences of success were gathered over two days only, these associations do not appear that small. Grebner, Elffering, Achermann, Knecht, and Semmer (2007) showed, with a newly developed instrument measuring subjective success, that subjective success explained variance in well-being after controlling for job.
explained variance in well-being indicators even when the stressfulness of the situation (level 1) as well as a number of stressors and resources, including the BfTS (level 2) were controlled for. In study 2, we asked for specific emotions. Illegitimacy of the situation (level 1) predicted perceived threat to social esteem (e.g., feeling offended as a person), thus confirming our assumptions that threats to the self are, indeed, involved. Sure enough, illegitimacy also predicted longings for revenge.

Helpful and “dysfunctional” social support

The assumption that care, understanding, and esteem are central elements of social support (Sarason et al., 1996) fits well with the SOS concept. Research has, however, concentrated on the issue of which type of support (e.g., emotional vs. instrumental) is most helpful under which circumstances (cf. Beehr, 1995; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). From the SOS perspective, however, we argue 1) that supportive behaviour may have multiple functions; more specifically, that instrumental ("tangible") support may carry emotional meaning (Barling, MacEwen, & Pratt, 1988) and (2) that the emotional meaning in terms of caring and esteem are important ingredients for support to be, indeed, perceived as supportive. Thus, we see the main issue not in the type of support but in the (lack of) appreciation that is communicated by behaving in a "supportive" way.

We carried out an interview study asking participants (N = 109) to remember a situation in which they were supported and to describe what the supporting person actually did (Semmer, Elfering, Jacobshagen, Perrot, & Boos, 2006). In addition, we asked them to describe why this was helpful. Both answers were coded as either emotional (caring, esteem) or instrumental (tangible, informational). We hypothesized that many instrumentally supportive behaviours would be described as helpful because of their emotional meaning. Results show that the majority of situations were described as instrumental (e.g., "He went shopping for me when I was ill"). The majority of those, however, were described as helpful in terms of their emotional meaning, with only emotional aspects mentioned in about half of the situations ("You know - he invested two hours of his time to do this for me"), and emotional aspects mentioned in addition to the instrumental aspect in another quarter of the situations. Thus, Sarason et al.'s assumption (1996, p. 21) that "the essence of social support is likely to be the feeling that one is worthwhile, capable, and a valued member of a group of individuals" gets empirical support.

If the communication of caring and esteem is, indeed, a core ingredient of social support, it follows that supportive intentions may be undermined if support is given in a way that fails to communicate care and esteem. The next step, therefore, was to look at instrumental support that is "dysfunctional" in the sense that it contains a degrading component -- for instance, because it is combined with reproaches ("I told you not to get involved in this project"), suggestions that come too quickly or imply that the problem can be solved in a very simple way, thus signalling that one is worrying about a "non-problem" ("you just have to..."), etc.

(Semmer, Amstad, Jacobshagen, Fasel, & Källin, 2007). A scale containing such items on "dysfunctional social support" shows satisfying psychometric properties. It correlates, as expected, negatively with "true" social support (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975) and positively with social stressors (Frese & Zapf, 1987). It also correlates with indicators of well-being. The latter associations are often, but not always, maintained when controlling for "true" social support and social stressors. Thus, although there is some overlap with social stressors and with "true" social support, these studies show that social support which is given in a way that fails to communicate appreciation may be damaging rather than supporting.

Appreciation

Our final example relates to directly communicating appreciation. We want to illustrate the positive effect of enhancing social esteem through appreciation with data from a longitudinal study with more than 400 young people who were at the end of vocational training when our investigation started (Semmer, Tschann, Elfering, Källin & Grebner, 2005; see also Elfering, Semmer, Tschann, Källin, & Bucher, 2007). The study is a longitudinal one, with four waves of measurement over five years. This enabled us to look at cumulative effects, that is, effects of being exposed to certain conditions over a short vs. long time. Specifically, we determined for each wave of measurement whether a participant reported being appreciated to an extent that was above the median or not. In that way, we could determine the effect of feeling highly appreciated at no, 1, 2, 3, or 4 measurement occasions.

Figure 1. Appreciation at work and job satisfaction cumulative effects (Source: Semmer, N., Elfering, A., Källin, W., Tschann, F. & Grebner, S. (2004). Von der Ausbildung in den Beruf. Panorama, 5, 27-29.)
Figure 1 shows the results of an analysis of covariance with job satisfaction in the last wave of measurement as the dependent variable, controlling for job satisfaction at time 1, as well as region (French vs. German part of Switzerland), gender, and occupation. As can be seen, job satisfaction is strongly influenced by feeling appreciated; the effect is statistically highly significant. Job satisfaction at the end of the study is about three quarters of a standard deviation higher for people that feel appreciated all the time, compared to those who never feel highly appreciated.

Implications

The basic tenet of our approach is that the experience of work will be strongly influenced by its implications for one’s self-esteem, both personal and social. These implications stem from experiences of success and failure, and from social behaviors within the organization, but also from the social implications of technical events (such as computer breakdowns). We feel that our results so far have yielded quite some support for this assumption, arguing for an approach that puts the self at the centre of theoretical considerations and empirical efforts in occupational stress research.

Many things we discussed are not new and have been postulated before (e.g., the importance of justice and reciprocity). Others are probably not surprising to anyone (e.g., the implications of success and failure) but have not been the focus of much research. Still others are new, such as the concept of illegitimate tasks. But we do feel that this perspective (1) helps to integrate existing research, which sometimes is scattered over different research traditions that are often not very well connected, (2) helps to focus on variables that deserve more attention, and (3) support the development of new concepts.

Much remains to be done. Thus, we have so far tested our assumptions about threats to the self being involved mainly indirectly, that is, by testing hypotheses that were derived from these assumptions. Only once we tested these assumptions directly (involving illegitimate stressors; see above), and more such direct tests are needed. Furthermore, there probably are many more implications of the SOS approach than we have investigated so far.

We also feel that our approach and our empirical results have some important practical implications, especially for supervisors and managers. Looking at job design with regard to the extent it supports experiences of success, looking at task assignments from the perspective of legitimacy, looking at the, often quite subtle, ways that one may undermine well-intended social support by failing to communicate care, understand, and esteem - such aspects of leadership and management deserve more attention. They are, of course, not entirely new, but they often are not deliberately focused. Furthermore, they may be known as general principles (“appreciation is important”), but the many ways they can be enacted (or undermined) often are not part of the repertoire of supervisors and managers.

Thus, to appreciate is more than to praise (although positive feedback certainly is necessary). It also may mean to show interest in someone’s work, to take problems seriously, to ask someone for advice, not to act defensively when advice is offered, to avoid patronizing when offering advice. To assign interesting tasks to someone also signals appreciation and esteem, and so does granting high autonomy (an aspect of autonomy that has not received much attention in the literature), whereas over-control signals a lack of trust. Again, many of these behaviors are very subtle. Thus many supervisors may not notice that a long delay, until they give feedback to a report, may be interpreted as a lack of interest and esteem, and that a simple explanation as to why it takes so long may eliminate, or attenuate, such an interpretation. Thus, the SOS approach has implications for training supervisors in social and leadership skills.

As a last remark, we want to point out a very basic implication of the SOS concept. It is not new and original, and we are not the first ones to point it out (see Cooper, Schabracq & Winnubst, 2003; and see Schaufeli, 2002). One question concerning our (work) experiences relates to whether they are enjoyable or aversive, stressful and frustrating. But in addition to these intrinsic qualities, the social meaning of these experiences is very important. To the extent that they make sense, to the extent they are perceived as legitimate - and this implies: to the extent that they do not threaten the self permanently -, many stressful experiences are likely to be accepted, and often mastered, sometimes to an astonishing degree.

Kohnhauser, in his famous book “Mental health of the industrial worker” (1965, p. 15) summarized this very eloquently:

“Mental health is not so much a matter of freedom from specific frustrations as it is an overall balanced relationship to the world which permits a person to maintain realistic, positive belief in himself and his purposeful activities. Insofar as his entire job and life situation facilitate and support such feelings of adequacy, inner security, and meaningfulness of his existence, it can be presumed that his mental health will tend to be good. What is important in a negative way is not any single characteristic of his situation but everything that deprives the person of purpose and zest, that leaves him with negative feelings about himself, with anxieties, tensions, a sense of lostness, emptiness, and futility.”

Put differently: Stress and well-being are to a considerable degree a matter of human dignity.

References


