Psychosocial Risks in Labor – How Occupational Workloads, Life Situations, and Coping Strategies Interact

Problem

In the current debate on the future and development of labor, maintaining workers' mental health is one of the most significant challenges. Yet, there is still little known about the dynamic interactions between occupational workloads, life situations, and individual coping strategies (Paulus 2018; Beck et al. 2012; Janetzke and Ertel 2016).

Theory

From the Subject's Standpoint (Markard 2000), we state the dynamic hypothesis that psychosocial risks arise when there are critical constellations of occupational workloads, life situations, and individual coping strategies. Furthermore, we promote that the frameworks of conditions, meanings, and grounds for action (Holzkamp 1984) and stress-strain (Rohmert 1984) need to be closed in feedback loops, where individuals' actions are feeding back on conditions. For example, Homer's "Burnout Cycles" model (Homer 1985) clearly shows how an individuals' coping strategy can endogenously lead to reoccurring burnout conditions. We hypothesize that feedback needs to be concerned in three areas: i) short-term energy level (as in Homer 1985); ii) long-term adjusting of individual goals; iii) how autonomous an individual is (and how effective an individual can apply that autonomy).

Dynamic Evolution of an Individuals' Capacity to Act – A Model in Progress

Working from existing theoretical frameworks, we synthesize the model "Dynamic Evolution of an Individuals' Capacity to Act." That model describes how individuals develop burnout under various conditions with respect to occupational workloads, life situations, and individual coping strategies. It, therefore, allows studying i) the structural conditions affecting an individual; ii) the meanings individuals ascribe to conditions (and to what extent those ascriptions restrict an individuals' capacity to act); iii) differing patterns in the way conditions and meanings become grounds for action.

The model is an effort to "derive new insights from established variables and concepts" (Repenning 2002). Through the mapping, in the form of a CLD, the circular dependencies become visible and thinkable (Richardson 1991, Sterman 2000). This allows social scientists to think about an individual's capacity to act as an evolving, circular, dynamic phenomenon. Furthermore, the CLD acts as a boundary object (Black 2013).

The model (figure 1) shows how an individuals' capacity to act evolves endogenously when confronted with an exogenous set of conditions. The upper part of the model (B1, R1) conceptualizes a short-term view (time unit: weeks). As in Homer's (1985) "Burnout Cycles", the individual balances its workload by regulating its engagement (B1). When workhours or -intensity is too high, the short-term energy level may decrease, eventually leading to burnout (R1). The lower part of the model (B2, R2) conceptualizes the accompanying longer-term view (time unit: months or years). The evolution of an individual's long-term work capacities (resources, competencies, career) allows an individual to build autonomy (R1). That autonomy may be used as a resource to stay productive. The same evolution also may induce new goals (B1) that higher (own) expectations.

With this in mind, we state that three policy links together form what we call an individual's coping strategy. The three links are i) how directly the workhours and intensity are regulated, when there is a gap between results and goals (orange link in B1; as in Homer 1985); ii) how good an individual is at using its autonomy to create a feeling of self-effectiveness (orange link in R2); iii) how strongly an Individual interprets its (role-based) goals as goals for its individual acting (orange link in B2).

At the current state of the model and project, we hypothesize that different combinations of the strength of those three links form different coping strategies and that i) burnout is possible for individuals of all coping strategies; ii) burnout may unfold differently for Individuals of different coping strategies; iii) different set of conditions and initializations are most risky for Individuals of different coping strategies.
An example: For a person with high autonomy (say a professor), it is vital to be good at using that autonomy to create a feeling of self-effectiveness (orange link in R2), whereas for a person with very-low autonomy (say a courier) the same coping mechanism may not be that important (because no autonomy can be used).

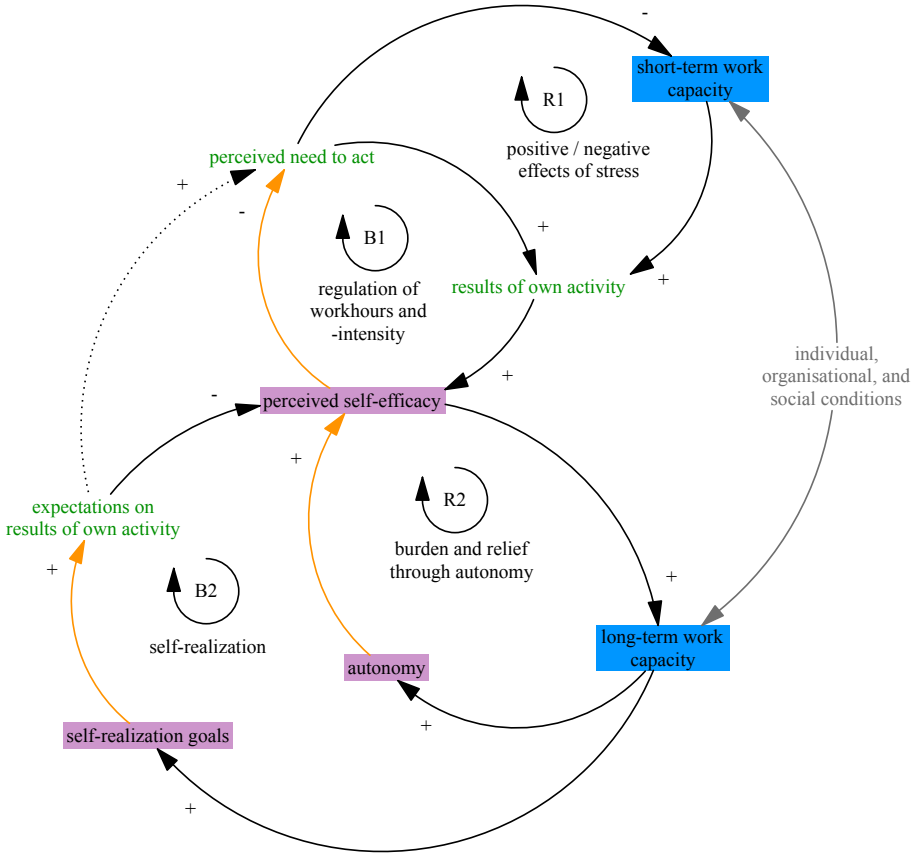

Figure 1: Dynamic Evolution of an Individuals' Capacity to Act – A Model in Progress

Targeted implications for Practice and Research

The intention of the model is i) to help identifying psychosocial risks early; ii) to serve as a "generative metaphor" (Schön 1979) when "designing a desirable future and inventing ways of bringing it about" (Ackoff 1979); iii) to foster (double loop) learning and feedback processes among scientists, practitioners and individual's concerned (Wolstenholme 1999, Sterman 1994, Argyris 1974). For all three purposes, the next step is to develop the model further into a simulation model. According to the three points above, we plan to use the simulation model then to:
i) connect varying (simulated) conditions with different coping strategies and the resulting evolution of an individual's capacity to act (eventually leading to a set of robust coping strategies in function of conditions and initializations); ii) apply those results to the design of future work environments and therapy settings (there are a few case study projects funded and planned in that direction); iii) use the model as a "boundary object" in teaching (e.g. social workers) or as a vehicle to sensitize professionals or even the general public for the interplay between conditions, coping strategies, and the development of an individual's capacity to work.
At the conference, we want to discuss the first draft of a simulation model triangulated with case study data.

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