



Do Workers with High Socio-Economic Status Experience Differential Levels of Stress at Work than Workers with Low Socio-Economic Status?

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It has been well established that higher-status jobs bring with them a host of benefits, including greater job authority, job control, job stability, and income as well as health benefits (Heaney, Israel, and House 1994; Karasek 1979; Marshall and Barnett 1992; Tausig 1999). However, more recent research finds that higher levels of stress may be an unexpected drawback of high-status work (Schieman and Reid 2009; Schieman et al. 2006; Schieman et al. 2009). This finding suggests a puzzle over whether (and, if so, why) high socio-economic status (SES) workers experience differential levels of stress at work than low SES workers?

Stress and High SES

Several times a day, participants received a prompt from an electronic device to report their perceived stress levels as well as their perceptions of their workplace in order to test the stress of higher-status work hypothesis. Using on-the-job reports, also known as ecological momentary assessments (EMAs), we were able to collect data on mood, stress levels (biological and self-reported), and workplace perceptions

Did You Know?

- A survey of a nationally representative sample of Canadians found that one-third of workers felt overwhelmed with work when on the job and 40% reported having too many tasks to complete (Schieman 2013).
- Our research finds that higher SES workers are significantly more stressed at work than low SES workers.

Related Articles

- Damaske, Sarah, Matthew J. Zawadzki, and Joshua M. Smyth. (2016). "[Stress at Work: Differential Experiences of High versus Low SES Workers.](#)" *Social Science & Medicine* 156:125–33.
- Damaske, Sarah, Joshua M. Smyth, and Matthew J. Zawadzki. (2014). "[Has Work Replaced Home as a Haven? Re-Examining Arlie Hochschild's Time Bind Proposition with Objective Stress Data.](#)" *Social Science & Medicine* 115:130–38.
- Damaske, Sarah, Matthew J. Zawadzki, Joshua M. Smyth. (2016). "[The Two Main Sources of Stress for High-Status Workers.](#)" *Harvard Business Review*, April 25, 2016.

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repeatedly throughout a worker's day for a three-day period (see Smyth & Heron 2013 for further discussion of EMAs). Overall, 122 people participated in the trial, and 115 of them are included in these analyses (the other seven had missing work data).

Our findings provide robust support for the stress of higher status hypothesis: high SES workers reported being significantly more stressed at work than low SES workers (we did not find similar support in cortisol levels). Additionally, high SES workers were less happy at work than were low SES workers.

Given established research on the benefits of high-status work, how can we explain these differences? We found that high SES workers reported less positive "momentary perceptions" of their workplace than low SES workers and that these momentary perceptions were also significantly related to levels of self-reported stress.

High SES workers said they were less able to meet their job demands than their low SES counterparts. They also reported having fewer resources with which to do their jobs compared to low SES workers. Finally, high SES workers were slightly more likely to say that their jobs were not positive than low SES workers.

In turn, these momentary perceptions were related to experiences of stress and unhappiness at work. Workers who felt they lacked resources reported feeling greater levels of stress and unhappiness. Workers who had less positive feelings about their workplace also reported greater levels of stress and unhappiness. Perhaps surprisingly, workers who said they did meet their job demands also reported greater stress and unhappiness. We think this may be related to feelings about lack of resources—if workers meet job demands without having the resources to support them in doing so, this situation may create greater feelings of stress and anxiety on the job.

Conclusion

In support of the hypothesis regarding the stress of higher-status work, our paper used ecologically valid data to show that high SES workers report greater stress and less happiness at work than low SES workers. Moreover, we extend prior research by connecting these experiences to momentary perceptions of the workplace. Our findings point to the importance of using real-time data collection to seek explanations for differing levels of stress. Workers' experience of insufficient resources, less positive work environments, and the inability to meet job demands helped explain the SES differences in stress.

Importantly, our findings should not lead one to conclude that low SES workers are somehow advantaged in the workplace; we can imagine that many of the stressors of low-income jobs (e.g., lack of income or job instability) may not emerge at work or may emerge through different biological responses. More research should be done to measure stress at home and at work and to explore the momentary perceptions of each space across SES.

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Suggested citation: Sarah Damaske. (2016). "Do Workers with High Socio-Economic Status Experience Differential Levels of Stress at Work than Workers with Low Socio-Economic Status?" *Spotlight: Research Brief*, July, 2016.

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PRI at Pennsylvania State University encourages, organizes, and supports innovative research and training in the population sciences. With the talents of more than 60 outstanding scholars, PRI provides a supportive and collegial environment to stimulate collaborative externally funded research. PRI is an NICHD-supported population center, *grant no. 2R24HD041025*.