

## **WORKERS IN GERMAN UB II JOB CENTERS—STRESS CAUSED BY NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Under the heading New Public Management (NPM), many countries have tried to streamline public administration aiming at optimizing efficiency. The existing NPM literature mainly focuses on the impact on organizations and tends to neglect the impact on employees. However, this public management reform can take its toll on employees. In our study, the aim is to examine the relationship between working conditions determined by NPM and stress on a level that could lead to adverse health effects for the employees. This study uses a quantitative method with an online survey including 4,500 employees of German job centers. The German labor administration is a branch of government that is designed strictly according to the principles of NPM: target agreements, controlling, and benchmarking are ubiquitous instruments in the daily routine of the employees. To examine the perceived stress of the employees we use the measurement of Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI), which is often applied in German research and was originally developed by Siegrist (1996). A high ERI-value means that the employee's perceived effort, that is, his/her perception of the effort he/she puts into the organization, is higher than the reward received. The ERI model directly refers to adverse health effects of stress. With our quantitative research we can present two important findings: (1) that the ERI of German job center employees is significantly higher than the German average; and (2) that working conditions under NPM are positively and highly significantly associated with ERI.

## INTRODUCTION

The neoliberal paradigm in economic policy has had an impact on public service through governance reforms such as New Public Management (NPM). Under this heading, many countries have tried to streamline public administration aiming at optimizing effectiveness and efficiency. The European NPM movement began in the late 1970s under the influence of a wave of financial crises. The pioneer in this movement was the United Kingdom under then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who identified the public service and its bureaucracy as part of the problem. Based on the same political orientation in many European countries, the public administration underwent similar reforms with typical components including budget cuts, competition, strategic planning, and others (Gruening, 2001).

The German NPM movement started in 1993 and originated in the public administration itself in the form of the Municipal Association for Administration Management (KGSt—Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle fuer Verwaltungsmanagement). By the late 1990s, more and more local administrations were restructuring according to this “New Steering Model” (“Neues Steuerungsmodell”) and several surveys evaluated the (output-) results for the organizations involved (see, e.g., Kuhlmann, Bogumil, & Grohs, 2008), but research on the consequences for employees is still rare. However, international studies suggest that NPM can cause strain for public service employees (Korunka et al., 2003). Our aim is to examine this suggestion with regard to the German case.

In this article we focus on a branch of administration that is designed strictly according to the principles of NPM/the New Steering Model: the German labor administration. We explore how the implementation of the new tax-based unemployment benefits system (UB II) affects the employees of German job centers. Under the new system, which was introduced into the German labor administration in 2005, the hierarchical bureaucracy has been transformed into client-oriented job centers with a decentralized scope of action. Due to the “Hartz-Reforms,” the German labor administration focuses on instruments like target agreements, controlling, and benchmarking. This represents a shift of focus from controlling the actions of employees and units (input orientation) to an output orientation. In private business, this concept and the increased freedom of action given to the employees to achieve the set goals showed positive results. In the public sector, the freedom of action for the workers is limited as their actions need to be compliant with legal regulations. It seems in theory at least that this must cause stress and as a final consequence deleterious effects. In this study, the aim is to find the relationship between working conditions, especially the working conditions determined by NPM, and stress on a level that could have adverse health effects for the employees. There is already evidence in preceding studies that the change itself puts stress on employees (Kuhlmann et al., 2008).

To examine this postulated effect, this article uses a quantitative method with an online survey involving 4,500 employees of German job centers. The

federal board of works committees of German UB II job centers supported us in addressing the online study to this satisfying number of job center employees. The orientation of the project toward federal and state job centers throughout the country and toward all fields of work in these centers means that the participating employees come from all over Germany and are working in all possible areas (reception, benefit administration, placement service, case management team assistance, general administration management, and others). The results of this study draw a good picture of the general working conditions in German job centers.

## **NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IN UB II JOB CENTERS**

### **New Public Management in Germany**

A hierarchical structure is characteristic of German public administration: it consists of the federal level, the state level, and the local level (Reichard, 2003). The German NPM movement originated in the public administration itself in the form of the Municipal Association for Administration Management (KGSt—Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle fuer Verwaltungsmanagement). The New Steering Model introduced in 1993 (KGSt, 1993) has been the most influential model, aiming at the optimization of performance by utilizing business controlling instruments (Holtmann, 2008).

Due to the NPM reforms, Management by Objectives (MbO), the delegation of authority, target agreements, and replacement of action control by output orientation are intended to improve results (Drucker, 1954). In particular, a professional management enabled with sufficient agency to act on the local level is required (Le Grand, 2003). In addition, performance standards related to commonly agreed targets and indicators are needed to realize a performance-oriented form of remuneration. This concept follows neoliberal approaches that also demand competitive structures (Schedler & Proeller, 2006). Besides managerialism, public choice theory, particularly transaction cost theory and principal agent theory, are further foundations for the concept of NPM (Hilbert, 2004; Holtkamp, 2008). Institutionalized information ensures control for the principal officers on the local operational level without their having to control every action of their subordinates (Vogel, 2006).

Beyond performance management, NPM aims at corporate culture and employee empowerment as well. The introduction of a modern, professional form of human resource management including performance-based compensation, target agreements, and personnel development with individual career opportunities (Holtmann, 2008; Vogel, 2006) as a new orientation of human resource management was aimed at strengthening loyalty and individual performance through the use of these incentives, including the introduction of more freedom by allowing latitude and controlling results instead of controlling actions (Kuhlmann et al., 2008).

But regarding employees, studies find hints that higher workloads and tighter regimes of management, measurement, and control are causing stress (Diefenbach, 2009). A first look at effects shows a diffuse result: it is not clear whether NPM-traits cause these effects or the changes itself, meeting a kind of structural conservatism among the employees (Kuhlmann et al., 2008). To eliminate the bias caused by the change process we limited the scope of the study to a type of unit that was established in 2005 from scratch according to the principles of NPM: the German UB II job center. The of introduction of NPM is assumed to be at the core of the employees' strain with effects on motivation and job satisfaction (Noblet & Rodwell, 2009).

### **New Governance of Labor Administration for the Long-Term Unemployed**

To illuminate the institutional background of the study, the context needs to be briefly described. The "Hartz-Reforms" in Germany strove to modernize the governance of the public labor administration and restructure the federal employment agency. Complementary to the older insurance-based unemployment benefit system (here: UB I), a new tax-based unemployment benefit system was introduced, replacing the former social benefit system for people capable of work. The main characteristic of the reform is the shift in social policy from a typical post-World War II welfare state toward a new enabling, activating workfare state, emphasizing the compliance of clients with their duty to seek jobs themselves (Dingeldey, 2007). Social benefits are now granted on a quid quo pro basis: benefits against cooperation and proof of effort to get out of poverty (Behrend, 2008), with individuals forced to accept work at any wage level, without a statutory minimum wage.

The reform aimed to transform a strict hierarchical bureaucracy into a system of client-oriented job centers with decentralized scope for action. This new form of governance involves a wide variety of units: local administrations, the federal employment agency (BA), the regional head offices of the BA, the state ministries of labor, and finally the federal ministry of labor and social affairs (Schedler & Proeller, 2006). Instead of disaggregation, the result is a complicated federal structure, supervised by the federal ministry of labor and social affairs, BA, and a variety of stakeholders who try to influence the objectives. Political interests at the federal and state level and within county councils' advisory boards interfere with the work of the job centers and paralyze the professional competency of job coaches and case managers.

The new system was designed to be based on management by objectives, yet this targeting, which is a novelty, has never been discussed or evaluated as has the impact of the reform on eligible unemployed persons (Konle-Seidl, 2008). Our study tries to bridge this gap. Due to benchmarking, the numbers or percentages of customers with successful job placement are published on the Internet to create a

culture of “learning from the best” (con\_sens, 2010). This data collection and comparison of units with similar regional labor market parameters is designed to imitate market structures (KGSt, 1993; Scheidemann, 2008), to address the control problem of asymmetrically distributed information and the control of more or less independent units (Gruening, 2001). Between the federal ministry of labor and social affairs and job centers across many hierarchical levels in a complex negotiation process, target agreements are fixed. Besides placement figures being provided, information about the frequency of workers’ interviews with clients is reported in this benchmarking system (BA, 2009). Within a vulnerable economy, this time-consuming top-down and bottom-up planning process leads to targets that are relevant for the evaluation but not for the intended outcome.

The problem of output-oriented planning and reporting for complex bureaucracies has been extensively discussed since the 1960s (Holtkamp, 2008). “There is an enormous disparity between the complexity of bureau operations and the limited information-absorbing capacity of any individual or small group. . . . They must make the requisite judgments on the basis of relative ignorance. . . . The entire budgeting process is structured to reduce the impact of such ignorance upon them by focusing their limited capacities so as to have maximum effect” (Downs, 1967: 248). The attempt to control large bureaucracies will end up in the formation of an additional expensive bureau instead of a reduction in the consumption of resources.

Downs analyzed controlling structures and did not find it reasonable to apply this concept to huge hierarchical bureaucracies—as in the system of UB II job centers. The controlling system is used to force compliance with the organizational goals, and the threat of punishment for failure encourages subordinates to reach these standards or at least to pretend to do so in obligatory reports: “However, if officials know that performance reports are never verified through independent information channels, the temptation to falsify these reports will become irresistible” (Downs, 1967: 146).

The controlling system focuses on input-output relations rather than on outcomes (Kissler, Greifenstein, & Wiechmann, 2008; Olejniczak, 2012). Outcome goals found in a political process, for example, increasing the employment rate of women or single parents, in part depend more on the infrastructure of child care units and on prevailing conditions than on the efforts of the employees. On the other hand, output targets are set up to control actions, such as the number of interviews carried out, as well as focusing on the quality of the process, efficiency, and clients’ or workers’ satisfaction. Critics, however, point to a lack of outcome orientation (Binderkrantz, Holm, & Korsager, 2011).

In opposition to this aim of enabling the local centers to take the initiative in performing a range of activities, the UB II job centers are faced by an incredible flood of specific directives from the head office of the BA, leaving no latitude for the local job centers (Oechsner, 2012). Downs expects staff to react to rigorous rules by scaling down performance, exhibiting dysfunctional rigidity in applying the rules while doing the job, and showing symptoms of stress. The emphasis on formal

regulations can also lead to reduced personal involvement (Downs, 1967). These long-known effects are ignored when a system of management by objectives is introduced *on top* of a rule-based control of action. Fixing compliance with complex foundations of law as an objective means at the same time control of action.

### **Effects of UB II Governance on the Individual Level**

The employees of UB II job centers are considered to be the personification of the shift of paradigm in social policy. Media interest is focused on individual cases of clients, describing monetary sanctions against people living on a subsistence level as a kind of cruelty. Even the respectable German newspapers (Friedrichs, 2013) paint a negative picture of the UB II job center employees, showing them as having low empathy with clients in a life crisis. This negative reputation might be a cause for stress and job dissatisfaction, together with a work situation characterized by the threat of violence by clients (DGUV, 2009). These disparities between the requirements of the control-driven system and the employees' own motivation to be useful to society in the spirit of public service must have a stress-inducing effect.

At the same time, a commonly accepted requirement in the key performance indicators used to achieve on an individual level is to be "SMART." This means that the objectives need to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time based (IRMA, 2010). The targets of attracting and retaining more people in employment only marginally depend on the quality of service and sustainability; it reduces the outcome to a quantitative factor. Such indicators are relevant, but not directly achievable by the work of the professionals. More output-related figures, such as the frequency of interviews with clients, are not really relevant although they are achievable. Depending on the resources of a client, a job placement might occur without any interview, and other clients are left without hope even though they attend interviews weekly. Targets for the total of benefits paid are almost disingenuous—if the applicants are entitled to benefits, it is a violation of law to reject their claim.

All this shows the systemic gaps in planning and targeting when it comes to the individual level. Professionals motivated by the meaningfulness of their job for society will be discouraged by (extrinsic) output targets which do not reflect their intrinsic values. In this case, extrinsic targeting can crowd out intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000).

Quantitatively oriented controlling is devoted to effectiveness and efficiency (BMAS, 2011), and categorizing clients according to more or less matching service programs (Schuetz, 2008) leads to selective provision of services. The focus on clients with less severe placement obstacles seems to be economically justified (Aust, 2006), but it involves a "cream skimming" that might not lead to optimal outcomes. Resources are spent on clients who would be successful in their search for jobs without using the job center's services (Hielscher & Ochs, 2009).

Pressure for effectiveness and efficiency is corrupting the idea of empowering less capable unemployed individuals and is making it impossible to bridge the gap between social and labor market policy (Seifert, 2007). The expectations of management and the comparisons with colleagues distract professionals from addressing the problems of the individual client (Bonvin, 2007). Besides this, the desire to see one's own work as successful is additional motivation for applying cream skimming (Lipsky, 2005). This can cause severe internal conflicts for employees.

Over all, the deficient adaptation of managerial ideas in NPM to this field of public administration categorizes the working conditions of employees in UB II job centers. The application of quasi market structures to the field of social policy is problematic, as unemployment is a result of market processes. The problems of inappropriate key performance indicators and social conflicts are passed on to the workers in UB II job centers. Our hypothesis is that this leads to harmful stress among the employees.

### **STRESS AND STRAIN FOR GERMAN UB II JOB CENTER EMPLOYEES**

The goal of this article is to examine possible consequences of the public management reform for employees in the public sector. In particular, advisors working in German job centers have to bridge the gap between client needs and the performance-related regulations of their organizations. This raises a question that has not yet been discussed sufficiently: what are the consequences of the NPM regarding elements of stress?

#### **Emotional Labor**

Emotional work, also called emotional labor if it concerns professional situations, involves the expectation in a professional context to control one's emotional responses. The original concept introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1983) states that in services, besides physical work and mental work, emotional work is a major part of the job. In professional interaction, the individual's emotional responses need to be managed (Kueppers & Weibler, 2005). From the point of view of clients, courtesy and kindness are elements of good service, and the extent of necessary emotional labor depends on the situation (Hochschild, 1983).

The challenge is not only to suppress feelings, but also to show the appropriate emotion in the professional situation. Unlike workers in service jobs as described by Hochschild, who need to control their emotions to show a cheerful face to their clients, the emotions that job center professionals show should be standardized according to the professional principle of equality and commitment to legal norms and to a set of less than clearly defined latent norms for emotions, or "social feeling rules" in the terminology of Hochschild. This is a very special kind of alienating work with deeper impact on the personality than physically alienating work (Hochschild, 1983).

For individuals performing emotional work there are three options to assist them in coping with emotional dissonances in their professional interaction. The first, a cognitive technique, is to reinterpret emotions in a particular situation, for example, by consciously remembering the professional responsibility as a counselor when the reactions of the client appear to be offensive. The second option is to control the display of emotions on a physical level in the situation, suppressing laughter, controlling the trembling of fingers, or faking empathy. Finally, the third option, the expressive technique, is for individuals to use gestures that are normally linked to the required emotion, hoping that as they use these gestures the emotion will follow (Hochschild, 1983).

Surveys show, depending on further conditions, that the feeling of inauthenticity, the emotional problems, and the damaged self-esteem can finally lead to burnout symptoms (Pugliesi, 1999). As job center workers experience a low degree of autonomy, complex work situations, and contradictory demands, the deleterious consequences of distress will become obvious among them (Pugliesi, 1999). Permanent emotional dissonances can result in burnout, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, negative attitudes toward the job, and drug or alcohol abuse (Kueppers & Weibler, 2005).

Besides individual strategies to cope with these emotions, organizational conditions can help the workers: for example, the provision of frequent breaks and “back stage areas,” where employees can communicate with each other and compensate for the emotional strain. A more costly strategy is the provision of external counselors to supervise the workers and help them with socially and psychologically challenging situations (Kueppers & Weibler, 2005).

### **Theoretical Aspects of Stress and Strain**

Alternative but not conflicting concepts are available with which to approach the phenomenon of employees' stress. Based on the Job Demand Control Model (DCM) introduced by Karasek (1979), distress in the work life due to specific working conditions can be explained. Karasek's approach considers low decision latitude or more generally low resources combined with high job demands as causing strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These variables reveal this theoretical approach as plausible. Still, these generalized variables must be operational in various occupational situations (Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). But strain does not depend on working conditions; it is also dependent on the individual. This suggests to us that we should follow theoretical constructs that are based on the principle of social exchange or equity theory (Adams, 1965; Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). The external, supposedly objective measures of decision latitude or job demands should be suspended, and individual judgment should replace them.

The individual might include in her/his evaluation process more aspects than the selection of demands used by the DCM approach. Using a self-estimation method for measurements instead of following the DCM, the individual component can be



considered. The Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping follows the direction of equity theory, and the examination of relevant situational traits is a part of the individual evaluation process. The discussion of the best model to explain job strain often ignores the problem that for object-related research an open approach should cover a large variety of job characteristics as well as organizational conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Korunka et al., 2003; Rodwell, Noblet, & Allisey, 2011).

Following Lazarus, environmental stimuli first undergo an appraisal by the individual, classifying them as challenging, threatening, or even damaging. As soon as the situation in a particular context is considered to be stressful, the individual applies strategies to reduce stress. Cognitive coping can involve a change in the relationship to the environment or a shift in the appraisal of this relationship. It might also include a different evaluation of the meaning of the relationship to the environment; here the organization may have some effect on the emotional level. The whole process is not only based on the traits of the situation but also depends on individual attitudes, expectations, and values, and on the perception of latitude and self-determination (Lazarus, 1998). The support of peers within the organization becomes increasingly important in times of stress. However, when the individual tries to compensate for this stress, the overall consequences for the organization may be low productivity, high level of sickness leave, low job satisfaction, and a high rate of turnover of personnel (Weinert, 1998).

Within industrial psychology, this stress model is extended and focuses more on resources, stressors, and individual risk factors. Resources used to cope with stress can be organizational resources like latitude and social support as well as individual resources, for example, individual competence and strategies to cope with problems. Risk factors are traits of situations that can lead to a high probability of stress reactions by a high probability. The rather epidemiological concentration on populations rather than on individual risk factors is crucial for evaluating management concepts, though (Bamberg et al., 2006).

### **Effort-Reward Imbalance and Overcommitment as Indicators**

It is complicated to measure processes in a questionnaire because these processes manifest themselves in specific situations as traits associated with the process. Several studies have shown a strong dependency on psychological distress and epidemiological scales for evaluating health risks on the job. Here the concept of Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) as an indicator for adverse psychological working conditions and deleterious effects has been well explored (e.g., Janzen et al., 2007). The ERI model was originally formulated by Johannes Siegrist (1996) and has become fairly standard in German health research. The model emphasizes the notion of social reciprocity in labor relations. The employee invests efforts and expects rewards. If the individual effort-reward ratio of the employee is negative, adverse health effects can be the consequence.

In addition to the situational background of working conditions, the individual's perception of an effort-reward imbalance is also influenced by her/his personal coping strategy. People who are characterized by an excessive work-related commitment ("overcommitment") tend to misjudge the individual effort-reward ratio (Preckel, 2005). Both concepts (ERI and overcommitment) suggest that the interdependencies of individual behavior, emotions, and cognitions and psychological working conditions as a social environment influence physical health. Critics who argue that the ERI refers only to gratification (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) ignore the fact that the effort component theoretically covers implicit dimensions of the DCM as well as aspects such as role conflicts or emotional work, demands, and obligations, which are also a part of the effort component.

The ERI model directly refers to adverse health effects of stress. The basic assumption is that work contracts often fail to compensate for efforts sufficiently in terms of money, esteem, career opportunities, and job security. This effect is enforced by lack of choice in the labor market. The lack of reciprocity leads to negative emotions and the probability of illness as a result of increasing strain reactions.

There is a clear distinction between extrinsic (situational) and intrinsic (personal) components of the model. The extrinsic components consist of efforts and rewards, while the intrinsic components include individual coping strategies. In a hypothetical example, the perceived efforts are higher than the perceived rewards. This situation leads to an effort-reward imbalance (symbolized by an ERI-value  $> 1$ ). This imbalance may be accepted if there is no alternative choice available, if a motivational pattern is present (i.e., overcommitment), or if strategic reasons suggest it (Siegrist et al., 2004; Stein, 2007).

Overcommitment has proved to be a good indicator for the risk of depression and anxiety, especially when it coincides with situations of high control (Bergin & Jimmieson, 2013). Here, what needs to be investigated is whether overcommitment is a specific individual phenomenon that might be dependent on the specific job commitment. As epidemiological surveys show clearer evidence for a relationship between ERI and deleterious effects of work, especially psychiatric diseases (Bosma et al., 1998; Rau et al., 2010), than the DCM concept does (Johnson & Hall, 1988), we have preferred the ERI scale for use in this survey as the main indicator for job strain. The ERI also focuses on a wider range of stressors than just job characteristics, also including macroeconomic aspects like the situation on the labor market (De Jonge et al., 2000).

### **Burdensome Factors for UB II Job Center Employees**

The specific working conditions determined by NPM-oriented governance for a field of public administration can be considered as a specific social environment with related effects on the health of workers in this field. In UB II job centers, the

employees are the representatives of a changed orientation of the welfare state, where they are asked to put pressure on unemployed individuals to work for poor wages as there is no minimum wage and no equal pay act for contract work as they do in other European countries. Working with clients in life-crisis situations is undoubtedly a distinctive form of emotional labor.

Conflicting expectations are presumably a heavy burden. Clients address their expectations to the job coaches and case managers, who also face the control system concerning statistical requirements and target agreements. These demands increase the pressure on the job coaches and case managers, and this directly influences their strain level. In this context especially, the pressure exerted by target agreements, the quality of the instruments that are given to them to reach these targets, and the expectations of clients define the situation, which can be burdensome because the workers often see themselves deviating from the targets. Within the social situation of the consulting process, these contrarities definitely produce emotional labor. Another major factor is the support of peers in coping with critical situations. As the system is not set up to provide emotional support by management, the risk of workers' losing their commitment and loyalty toward the organization is severe (Weinert, 1998), so these stressful working conditions can have a serious negative influence on performance.

The contradictory demands of clients who need help in a situation of personal crisis, the political demand for statistically provable success, the supervision and control by management, and the challenge of serving society are factors inducing stress in the work life of the professionals. Strict regulations limiting their latitude complete a scenario of increasing individual stress and strain. In addition, the requirement to reach the standards of given objectives and to achieve good results in benchmarking can be conflictual if a reasonable outcome in the case of a specific unemployed person will not count toward the statistics. Output targets not matching the most suitable outcome for a specific client or not depending on the performance of the employee increase the burden in the consultation process with clients, as the professionals cannot show helplessness when confronted with the critical situation of the client or demand that the client make efforts, knowing there is no chance for a successful outcome. Thus, unsuitable target figures maximize emotional labor for the employees.

Role conflicts, role ambiguity, and a lack of self-determination are typical individual stressors that seem to be ever-present in the work life of job coaches and case managers. The targets given to employees of job centers depend on situations, such as the state of the economy or the capabilities of unemployed people, on which they can have hardly any influence. Complex control structures, a management that ignores the conflicts between abstract outcome targets and the lack of resources to meet these requirements on the executive level as well as a negative organizational culture are added stressors at the organizational level. All these factors, together with a lack of consideration by management and the public can be expected to lead to a high ERI-value.

## THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Working conditions under NPM in the German labor administration are assumed to have deleterious effects on the perceived stress of individual employees. Our research has shown us that the influence of NPM in the German job centers can make itself felt in two ways: directly as a consequence of the instruments of NPM and indirectly as a consequence of the general working conditions under NPM. The data we used were collected within a broader research design focusing on working conditions, stress, person-organization fit, and job satisfaction, and for the purpose of the present article, we obtained a second view of the data by focusing more closely on the phenomenon of employee strain.

### The Online Survey

Because employers control the right to conduct employee surveys, data collection was a major challenge for this research. The first approaches to finding single job centers willing to take part in an employee survey failed for various reasons. Consequently, an alternative solution had to be created. With the strong support of the federal board of workers' committees of UB II, a Web-based survey could be conducted. Only the job centers run in cooperation by the federal agency (BA) and the municipalities are included in this board, but these represent in all about 55,000 employees. The survey was carried out using an online questionnaire from April 8 to April 15, 2013. Out of the total of about 55,000 employees, about 4,800 participated in this survey.

Due to selection biases influencing the results, we cannot consider the study to be representative, and our findings need to be confirmed by future research. To evaluate the quality of the data, we compared the values of the four quartiles based on the order of participation. As the number of cases within each of these quartiles is quite big (approximately  $N=1,200$ ), even small differences tend to be significant.

For evaluating a selection of the data in this context, chi square tests were applied. The results show that younger employees tended to send in the completed questionnaire earlier than older employees, but the time of response had no systematic effect on the results. Gender seems to be irrelevant in this context. Between the different fields of action, no differences in the response behavior were identified (except for receptionists).

### Operationalization of the Variables

**Working conditions.** The working conditions portion of the questionnaire contained general questions about the daily routine of the workplace and external circumstances. Three blocks of items containing questions and statements concerning the employees' work were answered on a seven-point psychometric Likert

scale to report individual perception predominantly regarding working conditions. The relevant items for this survey are listed in the Appendix.

With the help of an exploratory factor analysis, we identified three factors that represent working conditions. To determine the number of factors to extract, we used the scree plot and the “Kaisers eigenvalue greater than 1” rules. Both rules suggest the same three factors (see Figure 1).

- Factor 1—Stress regarding general working conditions. The results suggest a good fit to the data (NFI = .965; CFI = .966) and a good internal consistence (alpha = .71). This factor represents general working conditions that influence the perceived stress of the employees in UB II job centers. The set of items shows a very strong relationship to the theoretical concept of emotional labor. The direct link to this theoretical approach is obvious in items 2, 3, and 4; the feeling of being threatened (item 1) and the burden of changing legal and organizational fundamentals (item 5) are related to emotional work, as the employees need to disguise their feeling of being threatened and to be flexible to match the changing orientation of laws.
- Factor 2—Job Commitment. The results suggest a good fit to the data (NFI = .925; CFI = .925) and a good internal consistency (alpha = .79). The results reveal employees’ attitudes toward their personal job. Looking at the four items representing this factor, it is obvious that they stand for the latent variable of commitment to the job the employees have to do.
- Factor 3—Stress regarding instruments of NPM. The results suggest a good internal consistency (alpha = .75). This factor represents two main NPM instruments (target setting and controlling) that lead to an increased stress level. It is remarkable that the two items asking directly for the burden of NPM instruments were extracted as a separate factor.

#### **The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) Questionnaire and Overcommitment.**

As the ERI concept is close to standard in German research on work and life health risks, it was chosen for this study. For external comparisons, the Socio Economic Panel (SOEP) provided by the German Institute for Economic Research [DIW] provides longitudinal data for various vocations. For measuring the occupational health effects of the job as an indicator for deleterious effects, we decided to use the short form of the ERI questionnaire, consisting of 16 single items in three subscales. This questionnaire is not designed for individual diagnosis but for epidemiological surveys. Following the concept of self-report, individual effort, rewards received, and coping characteristics (“overcommitment”) are measured by psychometric five-point Likert scales.

The first two batteries measure the effort made by the worker doing the job on the one hand and the perceived rewards received on the other. From the two subresults, an effort-reward ratio is calculated, which shows the imbalance between effort and rewards. With a correction factor for the different number of items on each battery, the result “ $v = 1$ ” indicates a balance of effort and reward, a

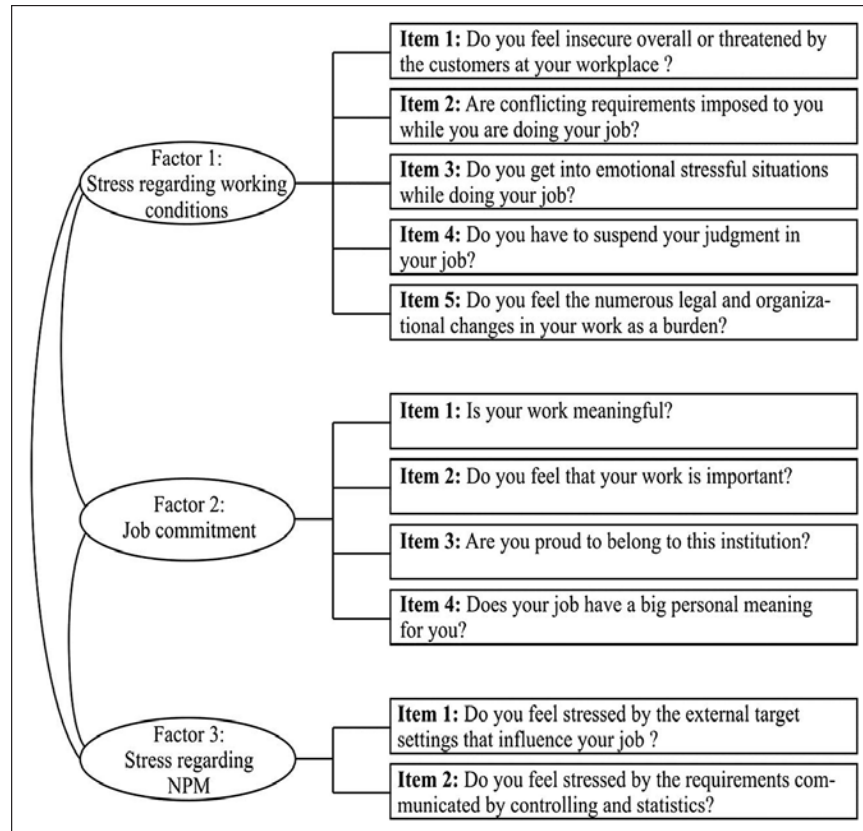


Figure 1. Factors derived from the working conditions items.

result of “ $v < 1$ ” indicates low effort compared to the rewards, and a value “ $v > 1$ ” shows a critical imbalance, with effort exceeding the perceived rewards.

A third block of items is intended to gather information on the individual coping strategy, forming the intrinsic (person-related) part of the ERI questionnaire (“overcommitment”). Siegrist (2012) suggests that people with high values of overcommitment tend to be at increased risk of poorer health. The tendency for self-exploitation to match expectations seems to be a strong indicator for health risks. The range of scores on this subscale varies from 6 to 24. Higher values show that overcommitment on the job is more probable. Because overcommitted people usually invest more effort in their work than others, they tend to perceive a situation as one of effort-reward imbalance. Consequently, overcommitment correlates positively with the ERI framework (Schult & Tobsch, 2012). The goal

of this article is to examine organizational working conditions as predictor for a perceived effort-reward imbalance. To avoid spurious correlations, we decided to treat overcommitment as a control variable. The questions regarding the ERI are listed in the Appendix.

**Control variables.** The questionnaire contains a couple of questions targeting demographic data. Besides the gender of the respondent, the age is asked for in intervals: up to 20 years, 21 to 30, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, and 51 years and older. Concerning the current employment relationship, the position or field of work and the duration of work in this position are asked for as well as the type of employment: part time or full time, temporary or permanent, and status as civil servants or employees with normal employment contracts.

Individual intrinsic motivation dimensions are examined as control variables. A perceived effort-reward imbalance could also find its cause in internal intrinsic factors. The dimension of overcommitment is part of the ERI questionnaire and normally one of the strongest predictors for a perceived imbalance (Siegrist et al., 2009). In addition to that, the job commitment factor is used as a control variable.

## RESULTS

This study examines the effects of the change in working conditions due to NPM on the perceived effort-reward imbalance of the employees working in German job centers. Before we focus on the results of regression analyses with ERI as the dependent variable, we need to examine Table 1, which shows the descriptive results of the single items involving working conditions separated by the different work fields in UB II job centers. Table 2 lists the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the variables, which are used in the regression analyses. The hypothesis that working conditions under NPM have deleterious effects on the perceived individual stress of the employees was tested by performing a multiple regression analysis using the ERI as the dependent variable and the working conditions, the demographic variables, and overcommitment as independent variables (see Table 3).

### Descriptive Results of Working Conditions and Fields of Work

As the perception of working conditions depends to a certain extent on the specific tasks that are to be performed (Noblet & Rodwell, 2009), the situational items were analyzed first using analyses of variance to find the differences between the special work fields in the job centers.

First, considered as a control variable, the field of work showed an effect, especially on the results of the items related to working conditions. On a second view, the differences were seen to be explained by the work content: there are fields of work with a direct link to the target figures (job placement, case management, benefit administration, and management) and others (reception,

Table 1. Descriptive Results of Working Conditions Separated by Fields of Work

	Jobs with NPM-Impact	Jobs without NPM-Impact	Significance <i>t</i> -test 2-tailed
1. Do you feel insecure overall or threatened by customers at your workplace?	2.92	2.63	<.01
2. Are conflicting requirements imposed on you while you are doing your job?	4.6	3.72	<.01
3. Do you get into emotionally stressful situations while doing your job?	4.57	4.02	<.01
4. Do you have a major influence on what you do in your job?	3.99	3.87	.08
5. Does your performance match the expectations placed on you?	4.92	5.4	<.01
6. Do you have clearly specified targets for your job?	4.84	4.83	.85
7. Do you have to suspend your judgment in your job?	4.88	4.61	<.01
8. Is your work meaningful?	5.19	5.52	<.01
9. Do you feel that your work is important?	5.22	5.38	.01
10. Are you proud to belong to this institution?	3.61	3.93	<.01
11. Do you experience the problems in your job as your own problems?	3.05	2.94	.07
12. Does your job have a big personal meaning for you?	4.25	4.29	.62
13. Do you feel the numerous legal and organizational changes in your work field as a burden?	5.35	4.63	<.01
14. The objectives have a strong impact on the selection of customers and measures I focus on.	3.93	3.34	<.01
15. For my job, exchange with peers is important.	6.25	5.96	<.01
16. Would you recommend to your friends that they should do the same job?	3.12	3.4	<.01

back office, general administration) without direct links to the instruments of NPM. But even if the jobs in reception, the back office, and general administration are not objects of targeting and controlling, the atmosphere within the organization must have an impact even on the employees performing these jobs.

Conflicting expectations (item 2, Table 1) and the occurrence of stressful situations (item 3) are quite strong in the core functions imposed by NPM, but so is having intense contact with clients while at the same time responsible for matching targets. The values for the use of exchange with peers (item 15) are outstandingly high compared to other findings. According to newer versions of the Job Demand Control Model, this is as a moderator variable easing the strain caused by high job



Table 2. Correlations between the Variables

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 ERI	1.11	.60	X							
2 Stress regarding general working conditions	4.35	1.03	.53***	X						
3 Stress regarding instruments of NPM	3.42	1.17	.36***	.43***	X					
4 Overcommitment	2.50	.57	.48***	.45***	.28***	X				
5 Job commitment	4.63	1.28	-.21***	-.31***	-.18***	-.04*	X			
6 Do you have a major influence on what you do in your job?	3.99	1.56	-.31***	-.30**	-.18***	-.22***	.21***	X		
7 Do you have clearly specified targets?	4.84	1.58	-.14***	-.13***	.04*	-.06***	.24***	.09**	X	
8 For my job, the exchange with peers is important.	6.20	1.15	.04*	.07***	.08***	.04*	.19***	.07***	.10***	X
9 Perceived health	6.98	2.76	-.25**	-.24***	-.14***	-.30***	.09***	.14***	.07***	.05***

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Note:** Variables 2, 5, 6, 7, 8: Likert scale 1–7; Variable 3: Likert scale 1–5; Variable 4: Likert scale 1–4; Variable 9: Likert scale: 1–11.

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Effort-Reward Imbalance

	Effort-Reward Imbalance	
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Demographic Variables</b>		.07
Age	-.04*	
Tenure	-.04**	
Gender	.03*	
Health	-.07***	
<b>Job Commitment</b>	-.05**	.03
<b>Overcommitment</b>	.27***	.18
<b>General Job Conditions</b>		.04
Influence on job	-.12***	
Specific targets	-.07***	
Exchange with peers	.03	
<b>Working Conditions under NPM</b>		.08
Stress regarding general working conditions	.27***	
Stress regarding instruments of NPM	.14***	
R <sup>2</sup>		.40

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

demands (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). For both categories (employees with jobs related to the target agreements of the unit and those with jobs unrelated to these agreements), the perception of clearly specified targets is on the same level (item 6), but the employees with jobs related to the target agreements of the unit feel much more strongly about not coming up to expectations. Item 13 is one aspect that indicates a quite high job demand by the governance of the UB II administration.

This first glance at the results already supports our hypothesis that NPM-oriented control structures have an influence on the perceived quality of working conditions. But still it is not clear what share of this effect is caused by NPM itself or by the emotional labor in these fields. Further statistical extractions are needed. Overall these results confirm that the effects are caused by job characteristic requirements and are not only influenced by the organization (Korunka et al., 2003).

### Descriptive Results of ERI and Fields of Work

The core variable of the survey is the ERI as the indicator for stress showing adverse health effects. Constructing their scale, Siegrist et al. (2004, 2009) found

values  $> 1$  as critical concerning adverse health effects in their epidemiological research. For the total of 4,070 persons completely answering all questions on this scale in our survey, the mean value is 1.11. As a comparison, we computed the mean for white collar workers in Germany from the SOEP panel data. Here the score of 0.66 is distinctly below the critical value of 1.

As the results for perceived working conditions differed according to fields of work, the result was also calculated for the grouped fields of work—job placement, case management, benefit administration, and management as fields of work affected by the NPM instruments and receptionists and employees in the back office and general administration as fields of work without direct links to targeting and controlling. The mean for the first group, employees subjected to NPM instruments, is 1.13 (N=3320); the mean result for the employees in fields of work not subjected directly to NPM instruments is 1.02 (N=746). The t-test showed a significance for the difference of  $p < .01$ , another significant pointer to stress caused by NPM instruments.

### **Correlations between the Variables**

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the variables used. The correlations are shown to highlight the pattern of relationships between the variables in general. The basic message of the extracted factors can be seen in the considerable number of significant correlations between the first three variables. In particular, the correlations support the assumption that the two generated factors (“stress regarding general working conditions” and “stress regarding instruments of NPM”) and the intrinsic part of the questionnaire (“over-commitment”) have the strongest impact on the ERI. The correlation between “stress regarding general working conditions” and “stress regarding instruments of NPM” also supports the assumption that controlling and target agreements enforce the intensity of emotional labor within the consultation process, as the inclusion of these agreements shifts the focus from the individual’s situation to the organization’s need to achieve certain set goals.

In addition to this, decision latitude (perceived influence on the job, as a single item) shows strong, negative, and significant correlations with the ERI. The lack of decision latitude is thus confirmed as a stress factor. The job commitment variable also confirms the assumed negative correlations with the ERI and the two stress-measures—the employees showing higher commitment show less negative effects of the ERI. For the factor “stress regarding general working conditions,” the correlation with job commitment is  $-.31$ , which is also strong and significant. Commitment as cognitive and emotional agreement to the job seems to be a kind of protection against the negative aspects of stress. This suggestion is also supported by the positive, high, and significant correlation between job commitment and the individual’s own influence on the execution of the job (.21). At the same time, influence on the execution of the job has high negative correlations with ERI

(-.31) and overcommitment (-.22). Additionally, clearly specified objectives (correlation: .24) as well as communication with peers (.19) seem to support job commitment. The more the employee perceives the objectives as clearly specified, the higher is the employee's commitment, and social support (communication with peers) also promotes job commitment as the correlation indicates (.21).

Our data also support the assumed interrelation between stress and perceived health as the strong correlation of the ERI with perceived health (-.25) shows. Overcommitment as the tendency toward self-exploitation shows a very high correlation with perceived health (-.30). This may suggest a high sensitivity for this scale.

The correlations also show a noteworthy strong, positive relationship between perceived specific targets on the one hand and job commitment (.24) and ERI (-.14) on the other. For the employer, this could be a signal of the need to make some adjustments in the direction of formulating clear objectives for the employees.

### Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 3 shows the results of one hierarchical regression analysis in which all variables are integrated. Blocks of independent variables were entered in this order: (1) demographical/control variables, (2) job commitment, (3) overcommitment, (4) general job conditions, and (5) working conditions under NPM. All the variables are integrated in one regression analysis, which also defines ERI as the dependent variable.

Step 1, which tested the control variables age, tenure, gender, and perceived health, accounted for only 7% of the variance in ERI. Only perceived health shows a strong significance. Step 2, which involved job commitment, accounts for an additional 3% of the variance. The regression weight is low but significant. The negative direction supports the assumption that job commitment can act as a kind of protection against a high ERI. As postulated by Siegrist et al. (2009), overcommitment (step 3) accounts for a relatively high percentage of the variance in ERI (an additional 18%). Individuals who are characterized by excessive work-related commitment ("overcommitment") tend to misjudge the individual effort-reward ratio. The general job conditions (step 4) account together for an additional 4% of the variance. Furthermore, the positive significant beta weight of "influence on job" and the negative significant beta weight of "specific targets" is worth mentioning. As assumed, step 5 (which tested the main variables regarding working conditions under NPM) is positively and highly significantly associated with ERI. Together, stress regarding general working conditions and stress regarding instruments of NPM accounted for an additional 9% of the variance in ERI. Due to the fact that the perceived working conditions are highly related to overcommitment (see Table 2), the explained variance of the working conditions is low but still noteworthy. Altogether, our model accounts for 40% of the variance in ERI.

Overall, the results of this study strongly support our theoretical assumption that the general working conditions under NPM, and especially the instruments of NPM, could cause stress and could finally lead to deleterious effects. The regression analysis clearly shows that an increase in stress regarding general working conditions under NPM and stress regarding instruments of NPM lead to an increase in Effort-Reward Imbalance. The perceived lack of reciprocity in the employee-employer relationship leads to negative emotions and increases the probability of illness.

Our results clearly highlight a major issue caused by working conditions in UB II job centers. On the one hand, the imbalance between efforts and rewards in the working relationship is critically high ( $ERI > 1$ ) and working conditions under NPM tend to increase this value. On the other hand, the significant beta weights of job commitment, specific targets, and especially influence on job show that an improvement in these values can decrease the ERI. The employer should be aware of these interdependences and should try to make the necessary adjustments.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the survey draws a picture of the UB II job centers as a stressful field of work for the employees. The measure used for deleterious stress, the ERI, shows a dramatically higher value than for German workers in general. The value of 1, considered as the threshold for a high risk of adverse health effects, is crossed by the participants in this study. The data support our assumption that the working conditions and instruments of NPM can cause stress and may finally lead to deleterious effects.

The data also show a strong relationship between perceived clear objectives and influence on the job on the one hand, and perceived health problems and ERI on the other (see Table 2). Especially for the public employer, these results should be interesting, not only because the government itself has introduced an initiative to fight against working conditions that lead to deleterious effects (Deutscher Bundestag, 2013). Given this initiative, it is the more surprising that there is a lack of surveys on stress in public administration as yet. Additional pressure by instruments of NPM has a negative effect on motivation and commitment to the organization. The instruments of NPM are obviously stress factors and there is a clear relation to the burden of general working conditions that are predominantly characterized as “emotional labor.”

The stress caused by targeting and controlling is confirmed by the data, and the influence of targets that are not clearly specified and conflicting requirements indicate a need to review the set goals. The current political goals break down on the operational level, which leads to employees being exposed to contrasting expectations in their work. The problem of deriving operational output targets from the outcome goals set at the political level, discussed earlier, explains our findings. The problem of objectives that are not shared at the operational level, as they

ignore qualitative aspects as well as the needs and desires of the employees, is not a new criticism (Levinson, 2003). The set objectives depend on environmental variables more than on the job performance of the employees. The system of key performance indicators and statistics should be checked for inconsistency between the outcome for the unemployed and the output-oriented figures, which are hardly at all related to the outcome goals on the labor market. The employees should not carry the burden of their superiors' desire for control at any cost and a reality not matching the controlling system. The results of our survey reveal the strong pressure placed on employees by conflicting challenges that are determined by the system and largely unavoidable.

The drive to manipulate information (Downs, 1967) must be very strong in the case of the UB II administration, as the controlling groups' political interest in good performance figures matches the interest in reporting success at lower levels of the hierarchical system. In June 2013, information on a confidential report by the Federal Court of Audit was leaked, showing exactly these effects for the UB I job centers. In the report, just this kind of manipulation of performance indicators and cream skimming exceeding the legal limits was criticized (Dahlkamp, Dettmer, & Tietz, 2013). Overall, the controlling system itself needs a detailed evaluation involving a cost benefit analysis to find ways to ameliorate the negative consequences.

There is an interaction between the factors "stress by NPM" and "stress by general working conditions." So only both variables together should be interpreted. The observed straining effects of these variables were expected with regard to the theoretical concepts of emotional labor and Lazarus' stress model and reflect the characteristics of work in this field. The consultation process, representing a new, rigid paradigm of social policy that has to be carried out by UB II employees, leads to an atmosphere fraught with tension in many cases that needs to be handled. There is evidence in this field of work that the perception of this burden is enforced by the perceived "stress by NPM instruments."

The relevant literature on emotional work points out the internal strategies of individuals that can be used to cope this burden. Training to deal with emotional conflicts, sympathetic supervision, and organizational conditions that include breaks used for interaction with peers can be helpful in avoiding negative health effects (Kueppers & Weibler, 2005). At present, the substantial requirements imposed on employees leave little space for social interaction between them. In the core functions of the job centers, the workers see an urgent need for social exchange with peers. The organizational structures should ensure that there is space enough for the employees to interact, even if it might appear unproductive to their controllers at first glance.

Our results also show a strong interaction between perceived stress and job commitment. Working conditions under NPM obviously fail to support a positive "psychological employment contract" by which the employees would see a balance between their contributions and the sum of the rewards they receive,

although the high degree of job security in the public sector is a source of gratification. The organization needs to modify the conditions to offer a potential for commitment not only for a minority of staff but for all. To improve the situation for the employees, the objectives need to be made clear and reasonable on the operational level to allow job commitment. Here again, social exchange between peers is a precondition for a strong job commitment.

The other side of the coin is the reward side of the ERI scale. Higher wages are not the core problem, as the results for the question on satisfaction with income show. One of the single ERI-scale items shows a big deficit in appreciation by management. Media reports of harsh measures taken against unemployed people produce a negative image of the job centers. This results in a lack of appreciation for the employees by society. The whole system of pressure and blame by public benchmarking makes matters worse. Public appreciation as a kind of gratification for the work is additionally reduced by public utterances by officials and politicians rejecting criticism of the system and placing the blame instead on individual employees. More honesty from officials and politicians and more recognition by them of the work of the job center employees would cost nothing and would be a step in the right direction.

## APPENDIX

### “Working Conditions” Items

Seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “always” on the left to “never” on the right:

- *Do you feel insecure overall or threatened by clients at your workplace?*
- *Are conflicting requirements imposed on you while you are doing your job?*
- *Do you get into emotionally stressful situations while doing your job?*
- *Do you have a major influence on what you do in your job?*
- *Does your performance match the expectations placed on you?*
- *Do you have clearly specified targets for your job?*
- *Do you have to suspend your judgment in your job?*

Seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “to a very high extent” on the left to “to a very low extent” on the right:

- *Is your work meaningful?*
- *Do you feel that your work is important?*
- *Are you proud to belong to this institution?*
- *Do you experience the problems in your job as your own problems?*
- *Does your job have a big personal meaning for you?*
- *Do you feel the numerous legal and organizational changes in your field of work as a burden?*

Seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “applies fully” on the left to “doesn’t apply at all” on the right:

- *The objectives have a strong impact on the selection of clients and measures I focus on.*
- *For my job, the exchange with peers is important.*
- *Would you recommend to your friends that they should do the same job?*

Two items concerning the perception of two specific NPM-instruments (target-setting and controlling) were placed within the ERI questionnaire:

- *Do you feel stressed by the external target settings that influence your job?*
- *Do you feel stressed by the requirements communicated by controlling and statistics?*

### **The Effort-Reward Imbalance Questionnaire (ERI) and Overcommitment**

*The following items refer to your present occupation. For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree:*

- ERI1* I am constantly under time pressure due to a heavy work load.
- ERI2* I am very often interrupted and disturbed while performing my job.
- ERI3* Over the past few years, my job has become more and more demanding.
- ERI4* I receive the respect I deserve from my superiors or a similarly relevant person.
- ERI5* My job promotion prospects are poor.
- ERI6* I have experienced or I expect to experience an undesirable change in my work situation.
- ERI7* My job security is poor.
- ERI8* Considering all my efforts and achievements, I receive the respect and prestige I deserve at work.
- ERI9* Considering all my efforts and achievements, my job promotion prospects are adequate.
- ERI10* Considering all my efforts and achievements, my salary/income is adequate.

- OC1* I easily get overwhelmed by time pressures at work.
- OC2* As soon as I get up in the morning, I start thinking about work problems.
- OC3* When I get home, I can easily relax and “switch off” work.
- OC4* People close to me say I sacrifice too much for my job.
- OC5* Work rarely lets me go; it is still on my mind when I go to bed.
- OC6* If I postpone something that I was supposed to do today, I’ll have trouble sleeping at night.

(Leineweber et al., 2010; Siegrist et al., 2009)



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