

CHAPTER 5

Factors that influence employee health and remedial action

5.1 Introduction

Forty informants gave their observations about employee health through in-depth interviews and these findings are detailed and analysed in this chapter. The analysis provides evidence for explaining second and third research questions which deal with factors that influence employee health and actions to improve employee health. A description of the informants is provided in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1: Description of informants

	Role holders	Employees
Number	13	27
Age	45years–mid 60s	34–64years
Length of service in organisation	Greater than 6 years	Greater than 15 years
Length of experience in tertiary education industry	Greater than 20 years	Greater than 15 years
Type of staff	8 academic staff 5 general staff	18 academic staff 9 general staff
Sex	8 male 5 female	14 male 13 female
Number of different academic and general departments represented by informants	13	25

The presentation of the results of this analysis is influenced firstly by Strauss and Corbin (1990:229) who suggest a sequence of broad parameters to use when presenting the results of the qualitative data which is:

- developing a clear analytical story
- writing on a conceptual level with description kept secondary to concepts and the analytical story
- specifying relationships among categories
- specifying the variations and relevant conditions and consequences among the categories.

The first two points of this sequence are followed in this chapter and the last two points involve the integration of the data in Chapter 6. Second, Charmaz (2000:526–528) encourages researchers to present the results of qualitative analysis in a manner that brings the reader into the informants' world so that the reader understands their experiences through narrative expositions. Third, Silverman (2000:240–249) suggests presenting the analytical story concept by concept. In Figure 1 a flowchart outlines the sequence of the emergence of these concepts in the findings of the qualitative data.

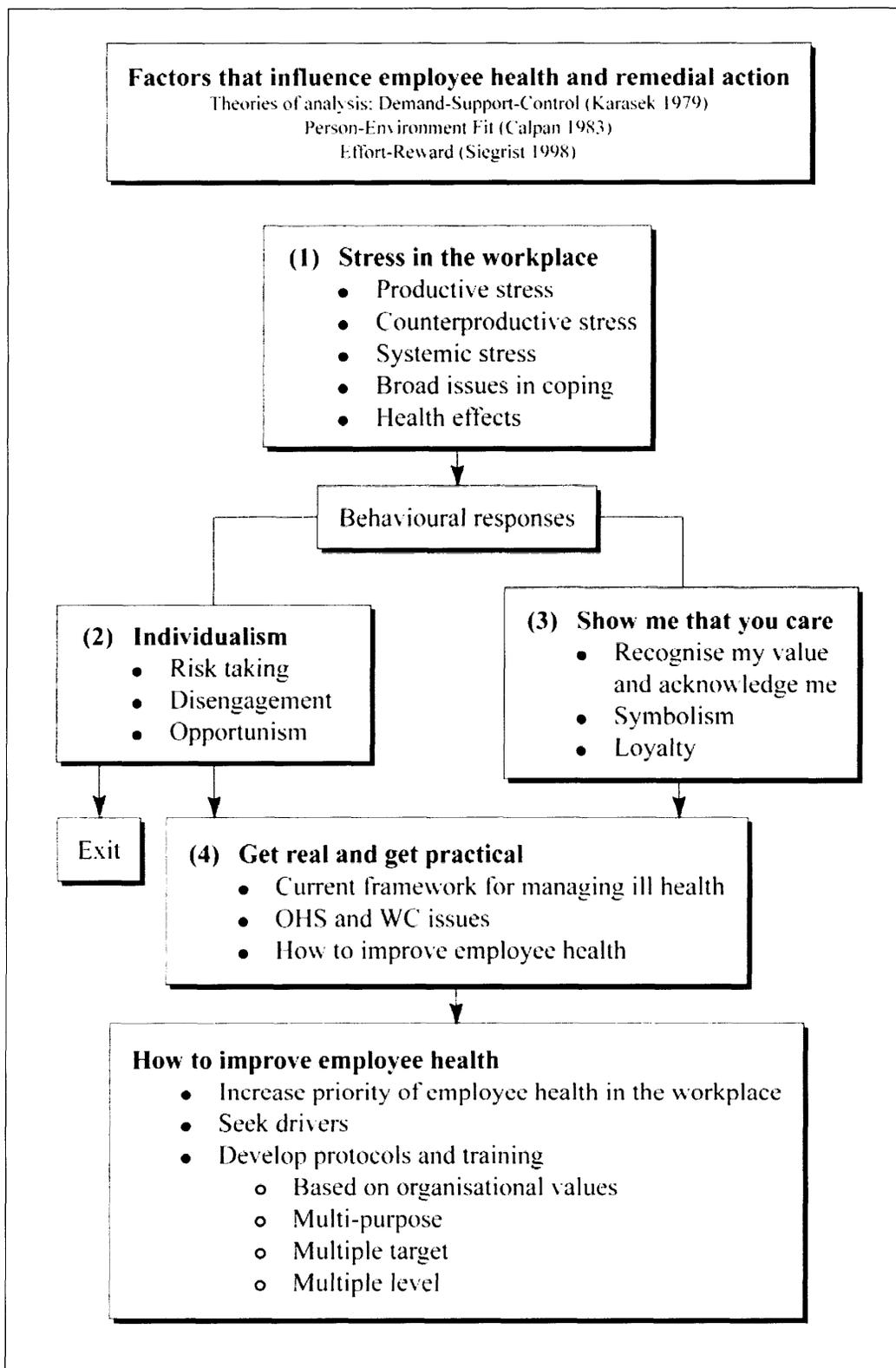


Figure 5-1: Flowchart of concepts in the qualitative data

The story of employee health developed from the analysis of the qualitative data and depicted in the schema in Figure 1, contains four main elements: (1) types of stress felt in the work environment and health responses to these different types of stress; (2) the behavioural response called *individualism* that employees show to workplace stress and is characterised by employees being more self reliant and opportunistic about their career; and (3) the behavioural response that employees show to workplace stress called *show me that you care*, and is characterised by employees being more actively focused on the workplace to improve it and to reduce or eliminate the stress; and (4) seeking improvements in the workplace through relationship changes. This sequence of concepts, from stress as a causative factor for some work-related health problems, through health responses, to employees' behavioural reactions and finally to preventive strategies, reflects the informants' responses to the interview questions.

5.2 Stress

Informants refer to three types of stress. The first two are (1) productive stress; and (2) counterproductive stress. Four issues that influence work and the employee and determine how work is experienced by employees are identified: the control the employee has over the work situation; the balance that exists overall in the employee's life; the perception of the effort put into work and the rewards received for that effort; and the relationships at work with fellow workers, supervisors and managers. In evaluating the workplace as providing productive stress or counterproductive stress, the informants compare their current experiences with past work experiences or with what they imagine occurs in other workplaces. Discussion of these two types of stress, which are not mutually exclusive, sheds light on the social system at the shop

level. Crozier (2003:91) describes this social system as having three main dimensions: the organisational givens, which are determined by technology and bureaucratic rules; formal authority relationships that are hierarchical and cultural; and the relationships between different functional and stratified groups.

The third stress is (3) systemic stress, so called in order to emphasise that it resides in the Crozier's dimensions within the social relationships of the different functional and stratified groups. This dimension is however, as yet undefined, and formless in the master narrative of employer–employee with its language of workload, control, support and hierarchies and conveys the assumptions of utilitarian individualism (See Chapter 2:2.2.2.–2.2.2.1). Although outside the recognised discourse of work, the informants 'discuss what is, and is not "happening between and" within the negotiated relations' of the workplace (Fine 1994:72), and therefore offer insights about this systemic stress.

Productive and counterproductive stress anchors the analysis with what is seen or particular, whereas system stress provides the background and the general perspective. The whole experience of workplace stress for the informants is enunciated in these three types.

5.2.1 Productive stress

Work is gratifying for many informants. It is an important part of their lives for a long period of the life span. For most informants a very rewarding aspect about the challenge of work is applying themselves to something worthwhile and feeling a sense of accomplishment. In

appraising work there is a relationship implied between the value of the task and satisfaction derived from it. The actual degree of effort involved in achieving tasks is of lesser importance.

5.2.1.1 Control

In talking about the factors that influence health in the workplace, Susan says:

I have found that over the years in fact hard work per se doesn't lead to ill health. I think that the more political things cause problems. I think that doing a lot of marking and doing a lot of teaching necessarily is stimulating and exciting (Susan, Extract 5.1).

About academic work in general, she goes on to say:

It was fairly stressful because you have to publish and you have to get these higher degrees, but it is a kind of good stress, if you see what I mean, because you know it is hard and it is good. You are focusing your mind on your passion and it is wonderful (Susan, Extract 5.2).

John also finds academic work satisfying:

They [academics] have the ultimate, the best life. We can really control our own work and control our own workplace to a much greater extent than most people can. If I want to work from home, I can work from home. If I need a mental health day then I can effectively take one without too much trouble (John, Extract 5.3).

Susan and John indicate what makes work good for them. For Susan the nature of the work is not a problem for her health, but both agree that control over the work process is important. They have control over what they do, how they do it and where they do it and the subsequent self-determination that they feel is crucial in making their stressful work life rewarding.

5.2.1.2 Fitting in

Bob's perspective of work adds a new dimension to the issue of control in the work environment. This new dimension relates to how he *fits* into the work environment. That fit allows him to achieve individually and also to achieve collectively. Bob is in his

sixties and at the end of a long career. He is finishing his working life with considerable satisfaction. In the Extract 5.4 he talks about the freedom to do his work, but that his work is interactive with other people's work. He feels part of something worthwhile that is bigger than himself. He says:

For the last twenty years that I have been here, I really loved my job. I loved the teaching. I loved the research. I didn't even mind the administration of the programs that I was doing, because I could see where they fitted into the overall scheme of things. But I also felt that I was very much a free agent when I was doing these things. Of course I had to negotiate with people through faculty committees and departmental committees, and I didn't always get my way, but I can see that other people had a point of view but I also had a goal for what I wanted to achieve throughout the time that I was employed. And I think, that in general, when you are up and eager to do things you don't let illness get in the way so to speak (Bob, Extract 5.4).

The robust nature of employees is seen in the last line of Extract 5.4. This insight from Bob is poignant because he had been treated for a life threatening illness when he was about thirty years of age and had been told that he had only a short time to live. He believes that his illness does not get in the way of what he wants to do because he is determined to enjoy a satisfying work life.

Nevertheless, the control employees have at work is not the only issue that determines whether work is perceived as stressful in a productive sense. What employees believe they get out of work for the efforts and what they put in are also influential.

5.2.1.3 Reward

John values being an educator in a profession, rather than a practising professional. He thinks university teaching 'was a better job'. The extrinsic rewards for working,

particularly money, are not as significant in enhancing his quality of life as other rewards like flexibility of hours to be with his family (Line 3 in Extract 5.3). He says:

People say that you make more money, you could do this and you could do that. But they are quite different jobs. They are not all the same. And professional life I just found unsatisfying and you had to work all those hours. You had to work too hard. And so having a family was going to be appalling. So it is not a question of trading something off. I don't want to be a practitioner. This is a much better job. I would rather be an educator (John, Extract 5.5).

John introduces the interaction of work with home life as a determining factor in employee quality of life. The informants offer insights about many aspects of the interface between work and the home domain and these insights are discussed in the following sections.

There are different rewards for employee efforts. Sid finds the variety of his work of assisting students on field trips fulfilling:

It can be also very rewarding. I mean if you get a good bunch of students, which is most of the time. You are seeing interesting places and you are having a change of scenery. It can actually be very rewarding (Sid, Extract 5.6).

And he also feels very positive about the physical environment of the workplace in the regional setting:

I find it a very, very pleasant place to live, and it is nice to be able to get to work fairly quickly without the commuting and all those sorts of things (Sid, Extract 5.7).

5.2.1.4 Balance

For both academic and general staff there is a philosophy of balancing what work requires them to give and what work offers life in return. When the balance is reasonable there is enjoyment in work. Work and what it offers is part of their life's package and for these informants the total package is good. Here R. George sums up his good life package:

I'm happy. I love my job. I live comfortably. I have three trips overseas a year. [I] go overseas and do consultancies. Now, I am working hard when I am away. But it is not like being in this office. And I find it relaxing and stimulating (R. George, Extract 5.8).

Jack is very clear about what he gets from work and what it costs him in return. For him the financial rewards from work are so considerable that feeling tired and stressed are to be expected:

I mean I get paid \$65000 a year, why shouldn't I be expected to work hard. Of course, I am tired at the end of the work and stressed. What are we supposed to be like after work? If you dig a ditch you are going to be exhausted after it. If you are going to do your job properly you will feel tired (Jack, Extract 5.9).

Jack also points out that pressures in his current job are not as exhausting as the pressures he had in his previous workplace.

Work, as a good experience, is also considered in the light of the pressures pulling the employee away from work and the forces drawing him/her towards work. These forces are usually relationships either at home or work. For some informants, who are without dependents or partners, the workplace 'is a very pleasant place to come to because the social fabric of this particular place is supportive' (Leonard, Extract 5.10). The social networks at work have particular importance at various times of personal difficulty for some employees, as Leonard's comments testify:

[Work] is an avenue of escape from the cares and concerns that have been caused by the breakup of my marriage, which is virtually what is happening... Therefore, while I say I mark till midnight and wake up the next day feeling heavy and dull, on the other side, it is a remarkably good escape from the other thoughts that sort of float around in your mind (Leonard, Extract 5.11).

In contrast, another informant who does not have dependents or a partner, finds living alone an advantage, allowing her to be more flexible with work arrangements and actually do more work than is required. For Carolyn, not being pressured by domestic commitments means that she can handle work stress more easily:

I work longer in the evenings...I work on weekends to catch up on things. So, I do not work a 35-hour week...I do not have a family so I have that freedom and time. I have my own time. I can set when I work. I don't have to fit in family things (Carolyn, Extract 5.12).

Carolyn uses her home circumstances to advantage in the work situation. She feels free to work extra hours at home, above what is required, to catch up on work and meet work deadlines. For R. William working from 7.30am to 6.30pm, five days a week and at least one day on the weekend in the office, is good because he likes the work he does. However, he seeks to control the workload by being involved in the changes that occur in the workplace:

I think that health, if I can put it in its broadest terms, depends in this work environment on how adaptable you are to change. And I am not sure how much control you have got over that, but I think that it is possibly a personality thing as much as anything else. I am quite good at adapting to change. It is not something that I would ever have to work at. I like change. I find it a challenge. And I find that the reason that I do not shirk from administrative responsibilities, or try to avoid them is that if change is going to be forced on me, I'd rather have a modicum of control over how it is directed (R. William, Extract 5.13).

Here, R. William discusses the active process of employees fitting into the changing work environment, and trying to exercise control in that active process. Earlier, Bob (Extract 5.4) also talked about this process of interaction for the employee in the 'overall scheme of things' of the work environment.

Work is a dynamic place, and employees' perspectives of it are dynamic too. Stuart (Extract 5.14) asserts that he 'wouldn't change that decision [to come to this workplace] despite the hard times that we have had on occasions'. The reason Stuart feels that the workplace 'is an

extraordinary good place to work in' is that, on balance, it offers him more than he would get elsewhere. He describes the situation in these terms:

I guess it is relative. I'm increasingly philosophical about what a lot of people complain about here. Open your eyes and go into the real world. It is everywhere. I mean managerialism is everywhere. Downsizing is everywhere. Look at the stats. I mean, the hours that people are working unpaid overtime, is increasing everywhere. That entire sort of stuff is not confined to here. But I go for a walk at lunchtime and I think. My God, this is such a beautiful environment to be working in. I sit in my office and I look out to a beautiful courtyard and I think: God, you know, this is the sort of view and office that you would kill for anywhere else (Stuart, Extract 5.15).

Bob (Extract 5.4) conveys his philosophical approach to work and this philosophical approach allows him to accentuate the positives rather than the negatives in the work situation as it does for Stuart. John, Sid and Jack all make their evaluations of their current quality of working lives based on their past experiences of working. In these comparisons, they find that their current work offers them better intellectual stimulation and accomplishment than their previous work and therefore work has positive associations.

5.2.2 Counterproductive stress

Counterproductive stress acts as a constraining force to the smooth process of obtaining satisfaction from work. Unlike the employees who experience work as productive and satisfying, employees who experience work stress as counterproductive cannot control the workload, feel that their work and personal lives are out of balance, and that the rewards they get from work are not congruent with the efforts they put in, and the relationships in the work environment are not supportive.

5.2.2.1 Changes in the tertiary education industry and university

Stuart (Extract 5.15) mentions in that downsizing or staff reductions are common in workplaces generally. On the other hand, Simon describes these changes in the tertiary education industry and the advent of corporate managerialism at the organisational level for study workplace specifically:

Pre-1989, universities were places where governments handed out cash, and governments negotiated with unions. There were not the same pressures. We did not have management because it was all done elsewhere. Now it is done at the enterprise level (Simon, Extract 5.16).

These 'harsh realities of the competitive higher education system' (R. Judy, Extract 5.17) mean restructuring, downsizing and rationalising services, which R. Simon sees as making the workplace:

become more efficient with all the hard decisions relating to things like closing engineering and Modern Greek, rationalising the way we handle our services, our facilities, [closing] the fire station, and of course enterprise bargaining (R. Simon, Extract 5.18).

R. Simon continues saying what downsizing really means for employees:

This university has had considerable financial pressure that has resulted in loss of jobs (R. Simon, Extract 5.19).

5.2.2.2 Organisational change

Stuart (Extract 5.20) refers to this downsizing as 'shedding staff'. All employees involved in the process of downsizing or shedding staff feel stress because of uncertainty. Those who lose their jobs and those who retain their jobs are both stressed by the process. Those who remain are stressed because of changes in work expectations placed on them. The following comments capture those sentiments:

The staff are being told that they are not expected to do more with less. But the reality is that that is exactly what they are doing and so, I have had people say that they actually go

home from work quite stressed at the end of the day. Because I suppose that they don't feel on top on things (R. Joan, Extract 5.21).

Every year there were fewer staff. Downsizing, restructuring, taking on more of other people's jobs. Doing more on top of everything else. The only way I could cope was to put in fifty hours a week (R. Joan, Extract 5.21).

Workload is a major factor that erodes the achievement of work satisfaction. The increase in quantity and quality of work is related to changes in funding and management in the tertiary education industry that have occurred over the last ten years in Australia and the subsequent organisational changes. Stuart's (Extract 5.22) comments convey the ongoing nature of organisational efficiency strategies.

5.2.2.3 Information and communication

In this climate of cost cutting, job insecurity is made worse, according to R. Irene, by 'people not being given the information about what was going on'. She thinks that this makes people 'really anxious'. She states that this anxiety can be replaced by constructive problem solving if employees know what is happening to them:

If they have the information even if it is bad news, they'd know what they are dealing with (R. Irene, Extract 5.23).

R. Mark regards work related stress as 'structural' because of the changing funding arrangements affecting staff work patterns. He declares his views about the relationship between workplace stress and employee health emphatically:

Anything that does not acknowledge that stress is a major influence on employee health will not be taken seriously (R. Mark, Extract 5.24).

R. Mark is defensive about his staff and points out that employees are stressed because it is impossible for them to do their work as well as they would like to. Staff want to meet the needs

of their students and superiors but simply cannot, because of the work demands and the time available:

I would consider ninety or ninety-five per cent of them to be conscientious enough so that they are bothered internally as a matter of conscience when they are not able to reach the legitimate expectations of their students and the colleagues and of the Head of School. So, it is not that there is a whip somewhere being shown, although as I say it is increasingly being shown. It is that they have a professional attitude towards their work and so there are more and more demands placed on them. For the most part it is the legitimate expectations and they don't have the time or the energy to comply with them as conscientiously as they would like. They find that stressful (R. Mark, Extract 5.25).

Julia (Extract 5.26) laments 'people are drained' because they never feel that they can get on top of all the things that have to be done at work. According to R. William (Extract 5.27), employees are 'not doing the jobs that they were trained for' because of changes in the industry. R. William is referring to the administrative tasks and decisions that academics now have to make.

One of the changes that affect the academic work routine is the amount of information that the university administration requires which results in heavier workloads and longer days. R. Mark pronounces it this way:

The workday has just become longer. The expectations of the university management, about how quickly the staff will respond to completely unanticipated requests for information about some activity, have got shorter (R. Mark, Extract 5.28).

Gary (Extract 5.29) talks about academics as 'increasingly helpless, out of control and unable to manage our work situation'. Gary supports R. Mark's view about the disruptive effect of electronic communication. Gary (Extract 5.30) is hobbled because he is 'almost plugged into a computer the whole time' to meet administrative demands, and this interferes with his accomplishing work tasks like teaching, writing and research.

Electronic communication often contributes to increased workload and also damages relationships at work because of the fragmentary information conveyed and the demand for quick responses. Email is not only disruptive of workflow but also adds to workload in an unpredictable manner that is often regarded as intrusive. Gary (Extract 5.31) declares that it is the 'cult of the instantaneous':

One of the worst things of all is the wretched bloody email and the fact that people send email and expect an instantaneous reply (Gary, Extract 5.32).

Gary links changes in the management of universities, work demands and communication as all contributing to workplace stress in the following comments:

The cult of the instantaneous has taken over universities and all organisations because I know from talking to people in the private sector that it is just as bad. I think that there is an attitude of managerial culture developed not particularly here, but one whereby time has become compressed and that people feel sending an email or sending out vast quantities of information as email attachments counts as dissemination, and you are supposed to read and absorb and respond to this and that will substitute for debate in a meeting or a faculty meeting or something of that nature. And I think that what we are doing is marginalising people through the managerial culture that has developed and through the technology of email and it is this concomitant instantaneous response sort of thing. And, therefore, a lot of people feel that they no longer count. Now I think that that can have a demoralising effect and that can be a major stressor in the workplace (Gary, Extract 5.33).

Changes in the tertiary education industry and the study workplace conspire to demoralise employees by making them feel that their work effort is worthless. One of the major structural and systemic factors that make employees feel worthless is the use of technology and specifically email as a means of communication throughout the organisation.

R. Simon (Extract 5.34), too, recognises that 'technological determinism' is making it difficult for individuals to 'manage their time' and 'do their job properly'. However, not only does the request for information affect the individual, information overload affects the

workgroup in general. R. Simon is concerned about its effect on the morale of the workplace:

I believe what is happening is that this technology and the way in which technology infrastructure now operates are providing so much more opportunity for communication that it exceeds our capacity to be able to respond to it accordingly and that puts pressure in the workplace. It impacts on morale (R. Simon, Extract 5.35).

5.2.2.4 No-win situation

Carolyn confirms R. Mark's view about the no-win situation that employees experience at work. In spite of their willingness to work and loyalty to the organisation, employees are frustrated because they cannot gain a sense of achievement no matter how hard they work:

The majority of academic and general staff at this university and other universities do really care about the institution. They will do things to better the institution. They will try to meet deadlines. They will try to do this, but the guidelines and the goal posts keep changing (Carolyn, Extract 5.36).

R. Jean uses similar terminology to describe this sense of futility in working. She believes that this difficult and frustrating working environment occurs throughout the industry:

It doesn't matter what you do, you know, the goal posts move. You are set a goal and you achieve that and then they want more or they want something different. It seems that success is impossible. I think that it is right across. It is not just at this university. The goal posts moving are a big concern for people (R. Jean, Extract 5.37).

Work is a burden when effort and intention can not bring about a sense of achievement. The industry changes and the organisational strategic responses to those changes are identified as causing increased workload and sense of frustration.

Stuart refers to what Carolyn (Extract 5.36) and R. Jean (Extract 5.37) talk about as 'change fatigue':

Change fatigue I think is what a lot of us are feeling. I mean everybody I think just wants things to stay so that you can consolidate and you can build on what you got...I know

that it is trite to say that the only thing that is going to stay the same is change. Dealing with it is very hard and problematic (Stuart, Extract 5.38).

The individual is affected by dealing with organisational change that is persistent and this compromises satisfaction from work.

5.2.3 Systemic stress

The nature and speed of organisational change and the capacity of Crozier's dimensions (2003:91) of the social system of the workplace to adapt to these changes are the driving forces for systemic stress. The particular values of the organisation and implementation of the policies and practices that reflect those values determine the nature and quality of the social relationships at work and hence that social capital (Putnam 2000:19–26) and community capacity (Norton et al. 2002:194–227) of the workgroup and the organisation. The concepts of social capital and community capacity contain the notion of group adaptability to change as discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.1.1. Employees' perception of systemic stress emanate from the changes in the social relationships in the work environment as the organisation responds internally to changes in the external environment.

5.2.3.1 From professional peer reliance to individual strategic behaviour

R. Dimetri (Extract 5.40) corroborates that the loss of cohesive collegiality is due to the 'loss of optimism in the culture of an academic school', and the adoption of rule based work allocations.

It is just a question of how desperate people are, rather than how happy. There is an increasing adoption of formulae for various things like workload allocation, and promotion. There is a move away from what I would regard as a more professional peer reliance approach to the management of academics and this creates the possibility for strategic behaviour by members of staff. So I don't think that the changes have sponsored

bad collegial relationships. They have created a context in which that can happen. So you see people emerge in schools who are regarded as loafers and opportunists. Not really members of a team. In effect, they are stealing something, whether it is effort or quality or whatever from their colleagues. [The move away from] the old professional safeguard against that, with group dynamics and optimistic climate in which one would be quite open about that sort of behaviour being unacceptable, has enabled it (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.41).

The 'professional coherent culture' with 'shared purpose and shared motivation' previously acted as a mentor and controller for staff (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.42). This fragmented and different work milieu has developed with social relationships of employees affected by the experience of persistent downsizing over the years. The less cohesive work environment is also confirmed by R. Jean. In addition, she emphasises the isolation of those who remain because they have the unenviable responsibility of getting the place to work post-restructuring:

This place is no longer expanding but contracting and this has resulted in a general feeling of insecurity and this has resulted in people building little silos and hiding. Then everything else becomes someone else's problem. So people who are ultimately responsible, or who personally feel responsible do carry loads, or are in positions where they have to carry loads. They have no choice. They can't hide under the desk. They are under huge stress. And no one else wants to do it. They want other people to solve the problems for them (R. Jean, Extract 5.43).

5.2.3.2 Management is not worth it

Stuart (Extract 5.44) admits that the management task is onerous and decides 'it is just not worth the bloody angst'. He observes (Extract 5.45) other employees get out of responsible positions arguing 'It was too bloody hard'. Taylor affirms the personal cost of managing:

I was pushed into a Head of School position because no one else wanted it. And that showed me that I really don't want that level of stress (Taylor, Extract 5.46).

R. Dimetri (Extract 5.43), R. Jean (Extract 5.44), Stuart and Taylor (Extract 5.46) provide different but related perspectives of the same phenomenon. Dimetri (Extract 5.41) mentions the loss of the social controls over employee behaviour in the organisation and the subsequent emergence of a different breed of employees whose behaviour is not committed to collegial

values but to organisational processes. Without social controls over employee behaviour, it is harder for the organisation to function. Work in an organisation is not just individuals doing individual tasks. Organisational productivity relies on group effort. R. Jean (Extract 5.43) reveals the extra burden of responsibility that falls to those who are obliged, because of their managerial positions, to make sure that at least the minimum group effort is delivered. In witnessing and experiencing this scenario both Stuart (Extract 5.44) and Taylor (Extract 5.46) deduce that the managerial responsibility of trying to get the place to work is not worth the personal effort.

Georgio insists that managers 'carry the bucket now in the university. They really get the worst possible jobs to do and such little support'. By 'carrying the bucket' Georgio means that the responsibility for the output of the various departments lies with the managers and that is an onerous responsibility without practical and emotional support. As a result he thinks that the chronicity of this stress in management positions 'burnt people out' (Extract 5.47). He is obviously referring to Maslach's burnout syndrome (1982:3; Maslach & Jackson 1981 quoted in Cooper 1991:253) which is characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced emotional accomplishment.

5.2.3.3 Framework of negativity

For Susan (Extract 5.48), the pervasive 'framework of negativity' and the 'constant feeling of oppression' bring her down and tire her out. She hates facing the workplace because of it, especially, because 'you spend such a long time at work'. Not only is the work environment not supportive, it is hostile on occasions. To R. Jean (Extract 5.49), the relationships between staff are frenzied and cannibalistic, driven by the absolute priority of self survival that she portrays

as: 'rats eating each other'. As the professional coherent culture erodes, some staff members leave and go elsewhere, not only because of this framework of negativity, but also because of reduced career paths in a contracting organisation.

The fragmentation of interpersonal relationships is felt in the lack of genuine support or teamwork. The lack of genuine support is experienced at two levels: the personal level; and the professional level. Peta has been at the workplace for seven years and in that time no one bothered to enquire about how she is going. She confesses:

Since I have been here nobody has ever asked me about what I am getting out of the job, or whether I like it, or whether it is taking me where I want to go. People just shut their doors and are not available and they are more interested in their own stuff, than the collective stuff (Peta, Extract 5.50).

From a professional point of view, Peta (Extract 5.54) understands that work is allocated 'in a black box'. By this she means that once the teaching responsibilities are distributed there is no further attention paid to the person doing the teaching, or to use Peta's phrase, the person carrying the black box.

5.2.3.4 Isolation

Peta is not the only staff member who feels isolated. Younger and new staff also experience the lack of mentoring as very difficult. June has the same problem:

I think that I definitely felt isolated, particularly in the university. It really worried and it bothered me that there hasn't been somebody keeping an eye on how it was going. Whether I was coming up with the goods or not coming up with the goods. Well fortunately it has been fine. But if I was someone who wasn't managing, then, moral support would be good. I was surprised how it was not there (June, Extract 5.51).

June's isolation is set against the backdrop of other people's work activity. Staff members are too interested in what they are doing individually to spend time with her:

They are so busy doing their own thing, that they didn't have time to spend with me and that I think is a fairly common problem (June, Extract 5.52).

'Academic life [is] a lonely pursuit' according to Georgio (Extract 5.53). He came from another industry into university work, and this is his first academic job. He regrets losing the socially integrated group that he enjoyed in his previous employment because it has been replaced by the loneliness of academic life:

I miss the people [that I used to work with]. Academic work can be a very 'precious' environment at times. I miss the down to earth nature of the people that I used to work with and particularly the humour and the camaraderie I think I miss most of all (Georgio, Extract 5.54).

He rationalises his present situation:

I think that the nature of the work is that you stand up in front of a class of students and you lecture to them. You sit in your office and you write lectures. You read, write or whatever the case may be. You are in your office working by yourself, generally speaking. You might interact to some degree with other people. But basically it is a very lonely game (Georgio, Extract 5.55).

Although he is successful in doing what is asked of him at work, Georgio (Extract 5.56) confides that the first few years were a 'bit of a nightmare', and thought about getting psychiatric help because he found aspects of his work very depressing.

5.2.3.5 Cumulative effects of fragmented social relationships

The fragmentation of interpersonal relationships at work has a cumulative effect on employee behaviour. If the workplace relationships are not attractive to employees they tend to stay away from them, and the relationships deteriorate further. This occurred in some areas so much so that the unused tea room was converted into office space, according to R Mark.

Many employees turn away from the organisation because the social support is not there for them. Some comments that convey these ideas are:

I don't engage really that much with it. I don't need to know too much. I don't need that level of involvement (Peta, Extract 5.57).

I try to ignore the politics going on around me. I bury my head in my work (Aga, Extract 5.58).

People used to have morning tea and lunch together, now nobody has lunch together. People are too busy working. People have morning tea and dash out again (Taylor, Extract 5.59).

The three types of stress, called productive stress, counterproductive stress and the systemic stress are not discrete entities. Hard work that is satisfying can become counterproductive stress if the workload is excessive. Excessive workloads that are sustained for all staff in the setting of organisational change eventually affect the way staff members interact with each other and systemic stress which in better times is relatively quiescent becomes dominant and difficulties in social relationships at work emerge.

5.2.4 Coping with workplace stress—broad issues

There are three broad issues concerning coping with workplace stress that are apparent in the data: (1) the tendency of employees to be active in dealing with stress; (2) different categories of staff approach workplace stress differently; (3) and the evolving experience of workplace stress.

5.2.4.1 Employees are active in coping with workplace stress

Employees are not passive recipients of workplace stress. Some staff are able to convert a burden of work into a challenge by extending some leverage through embracing organisational change. This conversion of bad stress into good stress relies on an appreciation of the issues that are forcing changes on the organisation. Doing so requires the employee to think and act beyond their basic job description or, as R. William instructs, beyond their 'core' work activities, because:

Those activities are so impinged upon, as they are these days, by the contexts in which you work (R. William, Extract 5.60).

For R. William, the employees who succumb to workplace stress are those people who do not have that sense of where their job fits into the overall scheme of things, 'beyond the school'. He characterises these employees in this way:

[They] lacked interest in a sense that you as a member of a faculty, as well as a member of a school. [They have] no sense of the institutional context in which you work (R. William, Extract 5.61).

By contrast, R. William, who professes to cope very well at work, explains:

I am interested in the institution. I am interested in the school, the faculty, the university and how it fits into the national and international context (R. William, Extract 5.62).

R. Mario (Extract 5.63) notes this same aspect of coping. He questions individuals or groups in the organisation who do not endorse the 'big picture' or recognise the need to 'create efficiencies'. He sees their behaviour as 'resistant to change':

The work practices in the past aren't necessarily the appropriate work practices for now. The tertiary education sector has changed and it is a quantum leap from what it was when most people started working. And there are some of them who are resistant to change. Some of them often question why things have to be done this way. They say, 'but we have always done it this way'. They were looking after themselves as opposed to looking after the university. They didn't work as a community (R. Mario, Extract 5.64).

R. Mario and R. William are alike—they think they cope reasonably well, and they locate opportunities for themselves in organisational changes. R. Mario immerses himself in the changes and understands why they happen. When talking about his various jobs in the organisation he explains:

I have chosen a number and a number were through restructuring or realigning staff within certain areas. I think that I have been relatively good at adapting and there have been very few that I haven't particularly liked. And most of the changes I understand why they have been made and I realise that it is part and parcel of the way we have to change. Hopefully, I am not as set in my ways as other people. And not all changes have been good. I understand the reasons behind them. I may not agree with them, but I understand the reasons behind them (R. Mario, Extract 5.65).

R. William and R. Mario (Extracts 5.61–65) discuss employees' responsibilities to ensure the survival of the organisation. The extracts also convey the inevitability of change and divide employees into two groups. These two groups are those that embrace change as they do, and those that oppose change. The former group is viewed positively as adaptable, interested, and insightful of the bigger picture, and the latter group is viewed negatively as resistant, oppositional and self-focused rather than being team players. Being active with workplace stress and being viewed positively by R. William and R. Mario has a great deal to do with assisting the organisation to survive.

5.2.4.2 Different categories of staff and coping

Different categories of staff approach workplace stress differently. Newcomers to academia, women, casual and part-time employees are particularly vulnerable to workplace stress. Managerial staff are not immune to stress. These categories of staff vary in their knowledge and

sensitivity of workplace stress and what to do about it. Older staff whose careers are established are less vulnerable to workplace stress.

5.2.4.2.1 Newcomers, women, contract, and part-time staff

Newcomers to academia, women and those on contracts and part-time staff are vulnerable to being overwhelmed with responsibilities of their new position because of the combined effect of work and home duties on their quality of life, and their desire for permanent employment. The reasons for their vulnerability overlap between these different categories.

For the first three years of his first ever academic appointment, Georgio (Extract 5.66) had a heavy workload ‘as a result of loss of so many staff over the intervening years’ from his discipline. He worked at night till ‘2 or 3 o’clock some nights’ and weekends to manage the workload. As a young married person with children, this process ‘changed my relationship with my partner’ and made him feel ‘frazzled mentally’ (Georgio, Extract 5.67). That period when he was a newcomer to academia was a ‘really horrible time’ that was personally very difficult:

I am a relatively junior academic. I am at the bottom of the rung. So I don’t have a lot of experience, but we are introducing new units, just myself and another junior colleague, so that involves writing brand new lectures, writing new unit material for online delivery which is stressful enough in itself. IT [Information Technology] is another level of complexity. At the same time, I won a major research grant, which is nice, but the thing is that you have actually got to do the research and keep trying to keep up with the progress on all this research as well as writing material giving lectures. Just trying to do all the other sort of administrative stuff that is associated with being an academic as well as having a young family, I just found incredibly stressful in the last few years (Georgio, Extract 5.68).

Although he ‘battled through’, his story does not have a good ending because either male bravado or his sense of how he should cope prevented him from seeking appropriate psychiatric help:

I actually thought of going to see a shrink. That is how bad it got. Probably my background says ‘well, you know, you don’t do that sort of thing’ (Georgio, Extract 5.69).

Karla is a new academic, a mother, on a contract, and she hates it. She hates working every weekend to get a further degree which is a prerequisite for permanent employment. She has young children and wants more time with her family. She is irate:

I don’t know if I want to keep working like this, to get tenure, to get permanency. I guess that it is a dilemma that I have had for a few years about whether I want to stay an academic. I don’t want to publish or perish. I don’t care about that. I just want to come to work and do a bit of teaching, and that is it. And go off home. I don’t care about research (Karla, Extract 5.70).

In fact after three years of academic life with the weekend work commitment she concludes:

I don’t like doing it. I hate it. Because I said to myself when I took this job that I would not let it interfere with my weekends. My weekends are for my family and so, it is a nightmare (Karla, Extract 5.71).

June is also a new academic, a mother, and works part-time on a contract, and she does not want to be a full-time academic because of her perception of the lifestyle:

A lot of the people I see who are full-time university lecturers are highly stressed and getting, as a result, high blood pressure and that sort of thing. I haven’t done enough teaching. I don’t want to be a full-time lecturer for that reason, but it is a real problem for some people. And also back-up and morale support for people. And not just for first-time employees who are entering a new job. I think that it is particularly important for them to have some kind of mentor who they can talk to and get feed back from that they are doing a good job, or a lousy job, or whether they could do better. That is often lacking in my experience, and it could make a big difference to people, and just a feeling of belonging to a place that you are working in. I think that is really important and it is often not there (June, Extract 5.72).

Roberta worked for six years in a casual capacity and eventually achieved a contract of employment. She finished her PhD in that time. With the full-time work she is entitled to maternity leave of three months full-time, so she was going to 'have a little bit of time for a rest' (Roberta, Extract 5.73) after she has her first baby. This is the first break that she has been able to have in the last six years because of the inconsistent money supply with casual work.

In contrast, Lily is employed on 'soft money' which means that the funds for her salary come from business groups outside the workplace. Therefore, she is employed on short-term contracts of employment which are usually for periods of two years. There is no maternity leave allowance in her contract. She has been on temporary contracts, working for the same facility for the last ten years. So when she is pregnant she cannot seek another contract. The process of her work life is:

I have to resign a position to have another child, and then I have had to reapply for a job to come back (Lily, Extract 5.74).

In her experience, short-term contracts are detrimental to women specifically, not only because of the lack of maternity leave, but also the insecurity of reapplying for positions in a competitive labour market. Short-term contracts are also detrimental to young people who are trying to establish their lives. Large financial undertakings, such as getting a housing loan, are difficult when they are on contract work because of the lack of income security:

[In the last pregnancy] I was coming up to the end of a contract and I had the choice of maybe going onto a half-time contract or choosing to do further study, so I choose to do further study which took me off my previous contract completely rather than continuing with a different one. But I was a student and I was no longer available for maternity leave in that case. So I think short-term contracts in that sense are detrimental for women in the work environment. I think that it must be very hard for young people moving somewhere to settle down to buy a house, when you know you have only got two to three years [work and therefore income] guaranteed (Lily, Extract 5.75).

Staff on contracts are vulnerable from the point of view of the conditions of the contract and also the renegotiation of contracts. Such contracts are considered to impact more adversely on women because maternity leave is precluded.

Employees who enter academia later in life have similar problems of establishing themselves professionally, financially and domestically in a particular area. Damien is 50 years of age and is trying to integrate all these areas of his life. He is not finding it easy, because although he has a 'tenured position and a nice place to live' (Damien, Extract 5.76), his wife cannot get work locally so she lives 1000 kilometers away and Damien looks after the children as well as working full-time. What he is particularly concerned about is the threat of losing his position because student numbers are dropping in his area. So he and his wife manage the insecurity of his employment by making sure that at least one of them has an income, even if that means living apart:

The big concern is that I have two children. They are fairly young. We have a house that we are paying off. I am sort of aware that, OK at fifty, it is not easy to change and even though you have lots of experience and qualifications it is still no guarantee that you get another job (Damien, Extract 5.77).

Different categories of staff cope with workplace stress differently because of their different financial resources and responsibilities at different points in the lifespan. Career development is pivotal to meeting financial and social needs and hence quality of life. Geogio, Karla, June, Roberta, Lily and Damien (Extracts 5.68–77) represent newcomers, women, contract and part-time employees who have different levels of disadvantage in achieving a balance between work responsibilities and home duties at various stages of their lifecycle.

5.2.4.2.2 Managers

Managers, too, experience workplace stress, although stress impacts on them for different reasons. Managers are responsible for getting the job done according to R. Mario:

They get paid to do the job until it is done. And there are certain times when those key deliverables take precedence over working conditions (R. Mario, Extract 5.78).

However, it is not just the responsibility of the job that affects this category of staff. Their perceived level of knowledge is inadequate to solve some workplace issues and this puts pressure on them. Having to manage workplace interpersonal conflict issues is also burdensome, and they believe that they are with little support when handling these issues.

One manager summarises dealing with a complex health issue concerning a staff member in this way:

It is extremely difficult to manage so that it has caused stress for me as a person, and for me as Head of School. It was something that I wasn't trained in or prepared for. I have never seen anything like this behaviour in my life, in any form of life, let alone in a professional university environment (R. Gus, Extract 5.79).

Managing this staff health problem overwhelms R. Gus and his own health is affected:

I guess from a personal issue, my own health [is affected]: I have sleepless nights; I get headaches; I worry about things. And that is the nature of the thing, and it is very different from the kind of work that I signed up to do. When I was young and signed up to write a PhD and be an academic, I wanted to research into various issues in my discipline and that is still what I want to do. So there is a sense that you get torn as Head of School between your discipline, that brought you into this university in the first place, and the need to deal with the people. I believe that when I became Head of School my primary purpose was to provide academic leadership. To lead by doing research, by developing research goals, contacts, networks, and all the things that I can do. But I have been substantially sidetracked from that role (R. Gus, Extract 5.80).

After trying to manage one very difficult employee health problem, R. George (Extract 5.81) has become 'much more sensitised to the issue' of workplace stress. He certainly feels, as R.

Gus does, that he is not trained or prepared for managing workplace stress issues. He grapples with it thus:

This stress related business [is something that] I find extraordinarily challenging. I don't feel skilled or capable. And I think that we are going to see a lot more of it. I reckon I can see incidences of it all over the place (R. George, Extract 5.82).

However, R. George (Extract 5.83) 'pushed the rules around dreadfully' in order to 'support people in a stressful environment' because he is orientated to the 'needs of the individual in terms of their life and physical health'.

5.2.4.2.3 Older employees

Older employees, without managerial responsibilities, who do not have the pressures of young children, and who are accustomed to the routines of academic life, are generally less affected by workplace stress. Georgio says offhandedly:

For a lot of the old blokes around the place, I mean it is 'go on as per normal' (Extract 5.84).

5.2.4.3 Evolving experience of workplace stress

The evolving experience of workplace stress is registered at several response levels in: the individual; the workgroup; and the organisational response level. At these three levels the response to workplace stress changes with time.

Individuals are at various stages in the coping process of dealing with workplace stress. Some employees are actively 'on top' of stress in the workplace, (for example, John (Extract 5.3) and Bob (Extract 5.4)), and are intellectually stimulated by work and not burdened by it. On the other hand, some employees, like Georgio (Extract 5.68-69) are struggling to cope, and others,

like Stuart (Extract 5.38), and the employees referred to by Dimetri (Extract 5.41) and those referred to by June (Extract 5.72), are overcome by it. Some employees in these latter two groups develop psychological and physical illnesses. The adjustment of employees to workplace stress continues through illness and into the recovery phase after these critical health events.

As well as the individual coping processes, there are the organisation's responses over time to the changes afoot in the education industry. Organisational change has been sustained in the workplace since 1989 when government funding changes required universities to seek 'efficiencies'. Efficiencies are mainly sought through reducing salary costs, as staffing is the greatest cost for teaching institutions. The nature of the university culture is changing as a result of these processes and social cohesion is dissipating and peer network influences are reduced. Therefore the workgroup is increasingly made up of individuals rather than team orientated employees (Extracts 5.52, 5.59). The nature and persistence of change act as stressors in the workplace.

5.2.5 Health effects of workplace stress

There are two clusters of health effects related to workplace stress: (1) the development of illnesses; and (2) changes in the employees' mental state that did not amount to overt illness but are sufficient to reduce the quality of their lives. These two clusters do not exist separately but are concurrent and cumulative in their effect on the individual and workgroup.

5.2.5.1 Minor and major illnesses

The health effects of workplace stress are often heralded by interruptions of sleep and minor physical and psychological disturbances. R. Gus (Extract 5.80) describes these minor physical and psychological responses to workplace stress. The relationship between workplace stress, poor sleeping, feeling run down and an increased susceptibility to colds and flu-like illnesses is often mentioned. However, several informants spoke of instances of severe depression requiring time off work and medical treatment, which is suffered as a result of workplace stress.

Gary (Extract 5.85) has been ‘struggling’ with depression in the workplace ‘for many years’, ‘feeling absolutely ratshit all the time’ and believing that his ‘working life was instrumental in causing many of these problems’. His work biography runs like this:

I will tell you for myself, you become physically very tired and physically run down and therefore, prone to more opportunistic infections and colds and things like that. [Several years ago] I basically had nine years without a break. It was like Seyle’s theory of stress, that the tank runs dry. I had absolutely nothing left to keep on going, and all of a sudden you realise that you are on empty and the stress builds up to an extent where my body physically started to crack up and I ended up with all sorts of things. In the end they came to the conclusion that I was suffering from depression and they put me on medication and that did the trick and I felt better very very quickly (Gary, Extract 5.86).

But full recovery for Gary took quite a while, and he ends his comments with this statement:

I would say that the university was central to blame for a lot of the exhaustion and physical illness that I felt. It has taken all this time. That was in ’94, and it is only now that I would say that I am on top of it (Gary, Extract 5.87).

Stuart’s experience is similar. During a prolonged period of restructuring in his area and with the threat of job loss, he developed clinical depression. He remembers:

At the time—I don’t know if it was co-incidental—I had clinical depression which made it particularly difficult. And there I was clearly not managing. I felt that I had given fourteen or fifteen years of my life to the institution and a fat lot of good and recognition

that meant. You sort of scratched your head and wondered, 'what was that all about'. It really counted for naught (Stuart, Extract 5.88).

Stuart survived the restructure and the depression but the last seven years of his recovery has not been easy. He found it particularly difficult 'coping with depression in the work environment' (Stuart, Extract 5.89). He reflects:

There is a real problem in terms of perception that people have. I mean if people perceive you as having a mental problem, it makes it that much more difficult, I think, of coping with depression in the workplace. The workplace might say that they are supportive but the reality of letting the cat out of the bag is different. No one in my work environment knows that I have had depression and whilst it is not a problem now, there were periods there, where it was hard going and I had to pretend. I think that one of the real burdens of depression is that you have to pretend that you haven't got depression when you are in the workplace (Stuart, Extract 5.90).

Georgio got depressed too. He was a new staff member and young academic and at that time 'had the heaviest workload in the entire school, by a country mile, according to the figures'. He did not find people 'harsh'. Rather he found them 'unable to do anything to help him' (Georgio, Extract 5.91). His individual difficulties pale into insignificance in comparison to the relentless demands of organisational productivity:

It feels at times that the institution here seems to keep grinding along in its well-trammeled tracks and the people who work here blend around it. My colleagues, like the Head of School, have always been supportive, very nice, understanding people, but there is a sense that you might be going through a hell of a time, and it is a bit of bad luck, but that is the way life is here, and there is not much you can do about it (Georgio, Extract 5.92).

Al suffered a heart attack after a lengthy period of intensive work and he recites the progress of events in the immediate prodromal period:

I came back from having taught a full semester. I came back into a week long residential school, 9am till 10pm some evenings, three evenings, in fact, that week. Absolutely full on! And I went straight from that into a post graduate residential week, and half way

through that I fell over. I was in intensive care for three days and I had angina (Al, Extract 5.93).

Gary, Stuart, Geogio and Al (Extracts 5.85–93) endured severe illnesses that they relate to conditions in the workplace. After these critical health events they reassess their working lives. All of them change their approach to work. They became less emotionally involved with work, and more self-protective. These responses to critical health events are discussed at length later in this chapter.

5.2.5.2 Employee quality of life

The employee's quality of life is reduced by the erosion of trust that occurs in the workplace as a result of persistent organisational change. This erosion of trust is characterised by suspiciousness of peers and authority, skepticism, and a sense of futility.

The health affects of the more pervasive 'systemic stress,' with its negativity in the social relationships between individuals and different functional stratified groups take hold more insidiously on the individual. With sustained organisational change that brings with it the, 'Have I got a job tomorrow type pressure?' (R. Simon, Extract 5.94) creates a sense of 'being under threat' and 'fighting for survival' (Susan, Extract 5.95). For Susan (Extract 5.96), a 'sense of paranoia seeps in' because 'we are kind of being watched'.

Susan is not alone with her sense of paranoia. Damien too, conveys a sense of the futility of work and the sinister nature of the work environment in this statement: 'we work generally very long hours; there is always the threat of the axe over your head' (Damien, Extract 5.97).

Damien continues with this line of thought by describing his workgroup as 'exposed'. By that he means that if the workgroup numbers are 'small groupings' they may be closed down as they may not be economically viable. So he amalgamates with other groups and begins teaching across disciplines in order to become more secure in his employment.

There is both collaboration and conflict between employees. Solidarity between groups of employees occurs as defensive strategies to maintain jobs, but that process affects their health:

It has been a very stressful few years fighting for our colleagues in Italian and Modern Greek and it was really tiring. In addition we are sure that our workloads have gone up considerably because of a reduction in staff across the board (Susan, Extract 5.98).

The perceived competition between staff to retain jobs creates conflict. This conflict shows itself in suspiciousness and lack of tolerance, with employees being grumpier and 'tetchy psychologically' (R. Mark, Extract 5.99). R. Dimetri captures this mood in these words:

There is less personal latitude I suppose by colleagues to others, more of a greater proneness to judge colleagues. Just greater watchfulness as to how often they are around. That kind of stuff. It is a more snakey environment. Less optimistic, less positive (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.100).

Conflict arising from the fragmentation of interpersonal relationships is experienced horizontally (between peers) as mentioned in R. Dimetri's last statement. It occurs vertically (between supervisors and employees) as well. R. William experiences conflict with employees in the organisation and this 'bad behaviour in the workplace' of subordinates causes him 'a great deal of stress' which disrupts his sleep (R. William, Extract 5.101). R. Gus (Extract 5.102) also develops 'sickness in the stomach', 'sleepless nights' and 'headaches' in response to interpersonal conflicts at work. Insomnia also affects R. George because he ruminates about

conflicts in the work environment and ‘thinks about it lying in bed at night’ (R. George, Extract 5.103).

The types of conflict in the qualitative data in the workplace vary from temporary small squabbles to major disruptions caused by sexual abuse and bullying. Rae covers the range of workplace conflict situations that she has been involved in as a negotiator or mediator:

They were just funny little interpersonal things, irritants. Some of them were huge, bullying in the workplace, or really broken down relationships that are beyond repair (Rae, Extract 5.104).

R. Irene (Extract 5.105) supports Rae about workplace harassment: ‘there was often quite a lot of what we call bullying going on, by supervisors of the people that they work with, or else by co-workers’. She observed that a recent workshop on bullying run by the Counselling Service of the university was booked out quickly and was fully attended.

Sid is aware of the seriousness of the health problems caused by workplace harassment because he is in a department where bullying behaviour of a senior academic towards a junior academic occurred:

[It was] absolutely catastrophic. The person on the receiving end had developed all sorts of pains and aches and couldn’t sleep and had panic attacks (Sid, Extract 5.106).

The senior academic treated the junior as a ‘technician virtually’.

5.2.5 Summary of Stress

The four issues that define and differentiate these types of stress are: the sense of control the employee have over the work situation; the balance that exists between the work and home

domains in the employees life; the perception of the effort put into work and the rewards received for that effort; and finally the relationships at work with fellow workers, supervisors and managers. The first three issues are more important to differentiate workplace stress as productive or counterproductive. Whereas the last issue, that is, relationships at work, is more significant for the pervasive and formless systemic stress that is felt at the level of the workgroup.

Productive workplace stress is associated with intellectual stimulation and accomplishment, and counterproductive workplace stress is associated with negative states such as limitation and burden. These individual perspectives of workplace stress are positivist representations of the 'reality' of the employer–employee relationship at work. Ways of thinking about workplace stress are culture bound in this relationship. However, recognising systemic stress challenges the limitations of this epistemology and ontology. The third type of workplace stress is more diffuse and is associated with lower levels of trust in the organisation and is a social reality rather than an individual reality. With social or post-modern relativism this additional and systemic stress is cultural bound, socially conditioned, historically relative and contextual; it is as Scheurich's (1997: 34) states 'a political struggle'. The broad issues involved in coping with workplace stress relate to the active response of employees to workplace stress, the different categories of staff affected and their evolving experience of the workplace operated at the level of the individual, workgroup and the organisation. The health effects of workplace stress are described as minor and major physical and mental illnesses affecting the individual and a more generalised reduction in the quality of employees' lives. Stress in the workplace is summarised in Figure 5-2 below.

Stress in the workplace

- **Productive stress**
 - stress is productive when there is the successful application of the individual employees abilities
 - work tasks are associated with intellectual stimulation and work is a challenge that is achievable
 - central issues for the individual are: a sense of control about how and when to do work; rewards are appropriate to efforts extended; the employee's skills are fit for the work duties
 - employment contract is mutually rewarding, characterised by trust
- **Counterproductive stress**
 - stress is counterproductive when work is a burden to endure because tasks constrain the employee and limit the sense of achievement
 - origin of counterproductive stress is quantitative and qualitative work overload
 - central issues for the individual are: decreased control and imbalance between effort extended and reward received
 - employment contract is not satisfactory to employees and they feel exploited
- **Systemic stress**
 - stress is systemic because it operates at the level of the workgroup and is associated with negativity in the social processes of the work environment
 - origins of systemic stress are competitive adjustments of organisations in market economies
 - employer-employee master narrative is positivist and acknowledges competition but does not acknowledge the impact of competition on social processes at work
 - work activities are made harder
 - central issues for the workgroup and organisation are the development of individualism and the fragmentation of social relationships
 - employment contract is strategically managed by both employers who want knowledge workers with flexibility, and employees who want continuous financial security though employment with one or a series of employers
- **Broad issues in coping**
 - employees are active in coping with workplace stress
 - different categories of staff react differently to stress
 - responses to workplace stress at different levels, that is, individuals, workgroups and organisations to workplace stress are dynamic, changing over time.
- **Health effects**
 - employees suffer minor and major physical and mental illness
 - reduced quality of life can occur

Figure 5-2: Stress in the Workplace

5.3 Individualism

The second concept in the analytical story of employee health is called *individualism* because it encompasses the notion that employees are responding to workplace stress in individual ways and in isolation rather than collectively. There are top-down and bottom-up forces that provoke individualistic behavioural responses from employees. Firstly, individualism is a business strategy of the organisation as it seeks more flexibility in employment arrangements, and this strategy is therefore imposed on employees, and secondly, individualism is a response by staff as they cope actively with a more insecure work environment and this affects social relationships in the work environment from the bottom up.

Simon mentions in Extract 5.18, the top down forces of individualism as a business strategy. For employees who are in precarious employment, like Karla, June and Lily, the difficulties of coping with workplace stress were discussed previously (Extracts 5.70-75).

In a bureaucratic workplace, individualism on the part of employees is a new and dynamic force in the workplace. Individualism as a reaction of employees to the work environment encompasses three different forms: (1) risk taking; (2) disengagement; and (3) opportunism.

5.3.1 Risk taking

Risk taking is a form of individualism because it opposes organisational conformity and in doing so, can incur negative consequences. Bureaucracies reward compliance rather than divergence in employees' behaviour. The employees who take risks in organisations are those

who feel immune to organisational policing. Risk taking often consists of altruistic behaviour by protected employees to improve the quality of life of vulnerable employees.

R. George (Extract 5.107) no longer seeks career progression and therefore feels safe because his 'career is determined', and he announces:

They can't do anything to me anymore (R. George, Extract 5.108).

Consequently, he takes risks and stretches the rules in order to 'make the place work' (R. George, Extract 5.109). He does this by relieving staff of workplace stress by taking risks on their behalf and facilitating work practices. For example, when a member of his staff was overwhelmed with stress, he specially arranged for them to take several small holidays over the course of the year rather than being forced to take four weeks recreation leave at one period of time. This arrangement was contrary to the organisational recreation leave policy. However, these smaller breaks throughout the year allowed the staff member to cope with his stressful work situation without getting overwhelmed by it.

Rae (Extract 5.110) is concerned about workplace bullying that 'damages people'. Gretchen is an employee who has been damaged by sustained conflict at work, and she communicates the corrosive effect of bullying on self-esteem thus:

It undermined my confidence to such an extent that I felt that I couldn't get a job anyplace else anyway (Gretchen, Extract 5.111).

Rae is prepared to stand up to bullies because she is older and confident. She has on 'several occasions spoken quite clearly to a manager that their behaviour is inappropriate in the workplace' (Rae, Extract 5.112). She explains her risk taking this way:

I don't have as much to lose...If I am 60 plus, I can tell someone who is about 40, and thinks that they are something special, that they are not, and that their behaviour is really inappropriate. And I think something about my age allows me to do that (Rae, Extract 5.113).

R. Jean, as a union representative, is stressed in her union work because:

It was serious business that you are talking about. It is not having a cup of tea with someone. It is about somebody's well being. It is someone's job. It is someone's career. So you are dealing with serious issues. It is a level of responsibility. It is not just a time issue (R. Jean, Extract 5.114).

There are risks involved in being a union representative. Although R. Jean stands up for employee rights, she acknowledges that 'a lot of people don't get involved in unions because they are concerned about being discriminated against because of it' (R. Jean, Extract 5.115).

But her personal experience is different:

I haven't been aware of it [discrimination] myself personally. I don't feel that I have been discriminated against (R. Jean, Extract 5.116).

Risk taking in a bureaucracy is not for the faint-hearted, or for the vulnerable. But within the workplace, there are some rule-benders and champions of the 'underdog'. R. George, Rae and R. Jean risk being censured themselves by the administrative apparatus of the organisation as they act altruistically to help more vulnerable employees with the effects of workplace stress. Taking risks as a form of individualism is not as common as the other forms of individualistic defensive behaviour because risk taking is overt and therefore, only those people who have authority and power and whose particular circumstances protect them are able to be individualistic in that way.

5.3.2. Disengagement

Disengagement is the form of individualism where employees develop a detached mental attitude to work in which they avoid interpersonal relationships and limit communication. Withdrawal occurs when there is sustained organisational change, or after critical health events, especially when those episodes of illness are regarded by the employee as related to work.

Detaching oneself from work is not easily or lightly done, because of the practical and emotional importance of work for employees' lives. R. Judy talks about this importance, and her evidence is the time spent in the work environment and the power of the relationships at work to impact on the individual:

People spend more time with the people in the workplace than with their own families. The relationship with colleagues and the acknowledgement by colleagues in the workgroup has enormous positive and negative impact in terms of how a person sees her or himself and feels acknowledged, and feels that they make a contribution (R. Judy, Extract 5.117).

Work not only provides the financial means of survival, it provides a means of self expression, self-worth and also social integration.

The following issues about Disengagement are presented and discussed: (1) withdrawal of employees from the work environment after critical health events; (2) the degrees of withdrawal that employees engage in; (3) the difference between women and men in disengaging; (4) flexible work arrangements used by employees to withdraw; and (5) a self-destructive types of disengagement.

5.3.2.1 Disengagement after critical health events

After critical health events, employees are particularly likely to reduce their engagement with the workplace. Gary, Stuart, Geogio and Al experienced severe illnesses that are described in Extracts 5.85–93. After they relate their health problems to the workplace they reassess their working lives. They become more defensive in their approach to work and are prepared to relinquish their attachment to work. On balance, work no longer gives them ‘enough good’ to outweigh the harm that they attribute to it.

Experiencing severe depression after a restructuring process, Stuart realigns his relationship and commitment to work:

I don't look for my self-worth and my challenges in the work domain as much as I once did. I don't have the same commitment to the institution that I once had. I have a life outside of here that fulfils a whole variety that I don't need to get from work. My ambition has tempered. I think that it is not worth the bloody angst (Stuart, Extract 5.118).

The self-worth that R. Judy depicts (Extract 5.117) emanates from relationships with colleagues and the acknowledgment by colleagues in the work environment. However, Stuart forsakes those relationships and now derives his self-worth from his life outside work because he feels that the work domain and the relationships involved impact negatively on his life. When those relationships are not positive, Stuart's angst reduces his desire for career progression, limits his commitment to work, and affects his relationships with colleagues in the workgroup.

Part of the process of withdrawal for the employee involves making a connection between the critical health event and work. The critical health event indicates that the workplace cannot be trusted to deliver what the employee thinks it should deliver to him. From Stuart's perspective,

(Extract 5.88) the bargain he had with the workplace was unfair: he gave fourteen or fifteen years of his life to the institution and he got clinical depression in return.

Ill health is taken as a 'wake up call' to review commitment to the workplace. Employees change their responses to the demands that are put on them. Withdrawal is seen as a conscious decision to change in order to preserve health. The process of modifying habitual work practices is apparent in Al's comments:

I have been trying to change my own response to the sorts of demands that are put on one in the workplace. I suppose that I take things less seriously than certainly managers would think that perhaps I should (Al, Extract 5.119).

Changing behaviour at work requires effort. After he suffered a depressive illness which he links to a sustained heavy workload, Gary wants to change his behaviour. His deliberations about cutting back are obvious in the following statement as he decides to do less work and let it fall to others:

I have to be strong enough to say 'No'. Although I could do it, and it would be helpful, and I would do it well, someone else can step into the breach (Gary, Extract 5.120).

Gary consciously and deliberately missed three deadlines:

in order to tell myself that the world would not stop if I missed a deadline, and that took the pressure off (Extract 5.121).

The effort of changing behaviour at work and withdrawing is taxing for him and is associated with overcoming his unrealistic fear about dire consequences at work if he is less conscientious to workplace demands.

5.3.2.2 Degrees of disengagement

Degrees of disengagement from the workplace fluctuate from just doing the minimum amount of work to 'retiring on the job' (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.121). R. Dimetri gives an account of the range of withdrawal responses to the deterioration in the employees' quality of working life:

I think that it is different for different people I guess. Sometimes for the individual, it doesn't actually amount to much. A lesser *joie de vivre*. It is not as much fun to go to work than it used to be. But otherwise, nothing dramatic happens. But for other people there are high levels of stress, which I suspect is bad for you in various dimensions. Or just abandonment of, if not the role, abandonment of the enthusiasm for the role. Sort of 'retiring on the job'. In a motivational sense, it is all bad news. It all threatens to depress the productivity or quality and it acts on the individual in a psychological way with relationships or just their happiness (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.122).

R. Dimetri's profile of the withdrawal process transmits the ideas that employees can stay in the workplace, yet be detached from it, for lengthy periods of time affecting social relationships around them negatively and decreasing productivity.

Withdrawal from the workplace affects career progression and the work/home interface. Taylor weighs up the stress that she is under and decides to withdraw even though she knows that she will not progress in her career as a result. However, she wants more out of her life:

The expectations are too high. I teach well, I do a bit of research, but I am not trying any more to do research. Now I am not going to be promoted but that is fine. I'd rather have the time and less promotion. But it is a balancing act. Providing that I am doing my job satisfactorily and well in what I am doing, I am not worried about doing so well that I would climb the ladder. I really don't want that level of stress. I want more out of life. I want to enjoy life and have a full life (Taylor, Extract 5.123).

Taylor's 'balancing act' refers to the congruity between her contribution to work and the inducements she receives from work and consequently the harmony she experiences between work and home domains. As she perceives the balance is not in her favour, she actively changes

her behaviour to restore the balance and get more out of life. For Taylor this means that she stopped doing research work that she could not fit into her workday and accepts that as a result she will not be promoted. However, in return she gets a better quality of life by being able to have more time for a fuller life outside of work.

It is easier for Aga to withdraw from workplace stress. He ignores the problems happening around him, and he just gets on with his job. Aga does not have the same anxiety about withdrawing as Gary does. Aga's naturally self-contained personality is accentuated as he withdraws further:

I try and concentrate on the actual work, and I try to ignore the politics going on around me. In a sense I am left alone to do my job and largely I have always been. So I get on with the job. I think that it is one less source of stress, if I don't worry about other people's problems. I am not saying that I am not interested in other people's problems. But I guess I have always been like this. But I can bury my head in my work (Aga, Extract 5.124).

This process of 'surviving' by ignoring workplace stress progressively isolates Aga from other people in the workplace.

Employee withdrawal may not be dramatic. Employees may simply not be prepared to give as much of themselves to work as they previously did. There is a subtle change in commitment and R. Dimetri recognises this when he begins to take time off during the week in lieu of working on weekends. His colleagues started doing this as well:

In the last few weeks I have seen people including me, who would normally discount to zero the fact that they were away teaching on the weekend, take time off the subsequent week. [They were] doing that for the first time (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.125).

5.3.2.3 Differences in the process of disengagement in women and men

The difference between women and men in withdrawing as a defensive strategy to workplace stress is marked, and depends on age and personal financial circumstances. June knows for certain that the juggling act with work and home commitments is too difficult, so she does not work full-time and she elects to ‘play second fiddle professionally’ to her husband (Extract 5.126). She believes that it is ‘harder and harder for people to function as family members and employees’. She follows up:

I think women find it much more difficult. It is more of a conflict for them. I think that it is harder for them. [Women] put more time into family and particularly children and it is more important to them. So in a way it is harder for them. Hopefully the next few generations will change that, but at the moment it is like that. The myth of the superwoman is a myth. It doesn’t work (June, Extract 5.127).

Peta (Extract 5.57) and June (Extract 5.127) agree with Una about it being harder for women to manage heavy work loads and family responsibilities. Una extends these thoughts about women coping with work stress and home tasks by introducing the concept of the impact of work stress on the emotional well being of those at home:

As soon as I get stressed my kids play up and home life falls apart, so that it is not worth it for me (Una, Extract 5.128).

Young married men with children do not withdraw from work because of career costs involved. They are in the stereotyped role of bread winner for the family and are under great stress with workloads as Geogio’s statements (Extracts 5.66–68, Section 5.3.1.4) already show.

5.3.2.4 Flexible work arrangements

Working from home is part of the flexible work arrangements of academics, and many academics do work from home. By using technology a lot of work can be completed regardless

of physical location. However, working from home also gets the employee away from the interruptions and political atmosphere of the office. General staff do not have these flexible work arrangements. For academics, time spent in the workplace varies. Working from home can be a strategy for physical detachment to limit the effect of the work environment on the individual, as witnessed in Taylor's comments:

I find if I come in and talk to people who are depressed, I get depressed. So, I prefer not to be here and get depressed. So, basically, I only come in to teach and attend meetings and do the things that I can't do at home (Taylor, Extract 5.129).

5.3.2.5 Self-destructive disengagement

Some forms of withdrawing from workplace stress are self destructive. Georgio can 'see how people become alcoholics' as a result of workplace stress becoming 'all encompassing' (Extract 5.130). Increased alcohol intake, with secretive drinking of alcohol at work, is something that Gary knows does occur by some people wanting get away from the pressures of work:

[I know of] one other employee who kept a bottle of vodka in his filing cabinet and that was his coping strategy (Gary, Extract 5.131).

5.3.3 Opportunism

Opportunism is an individualistic defensive strategy against workplace stress developed by employees when they decide that disengagement is not an effective way to give them the financial, personal and social benefits that they would like from work. As a defensive strategy, Opportunism involves actively seeking and planning choices about other future work. Opportunism is externally directed because the present workplace is unsatisfactory to meet their needs. It therefore incorporates the idea that this workplace is a temporary experience in the employee's life. A number of issues influence opportunism: (1) choices, age and type of work; (2) alternative employment; (3) commuting.

5.3.3.1 Choices, age and type of work

Opportunism is about being committed to one's own future and interpreting present circumstance in terms of how they will benefit that commitment rather than being committed to the organisation's future or some cause external to one's self. It takes different forms depending on choices available; age of employee; and the type of the employment. Younger employees tend to build options for themselves by gaining work experience and training applicable to other work situations, whereas older employees build options that suit their retirement plans.

Karla (Extract 5.70–71) is unhappy with the working life of an academic. In the following extract she speaks very clearly about why she is studying to get higher degrees as an academic:

I don't want to be an academic, and I don't want to study for the rest of my life. I couldn't think of anything worse. I want to do a quilting course, and I would like to play more sport and those things are important to me, not academic [things]. I couldn't really give a bugger about it. I am only doing it because I have to, because I may want to keep this job, but I may not. I don't know. I would like to keep my options open (Karla, Extract 5.132).

Karla wants choices about her future employment so she is using her present position to develop those opportunities for herself.

Some employees, towards the end of their careers, stay at work, in spite of not having any affinity with the workplace. Although R. Dimetri has 'very little incentive not to move' (Extract 5.133), the high quality of his non-working life sustains him at work. The quality of the non-working life for young and old employees is potentially good in regional areas because of the cheaper cost of housing, education and transport compared to the costs of these items in capital cities. These non-working factors tend to restrain dissatisfied employees from leaving. The

level of difficulty of finding other employment that would give the same financial returns also constrains dissatisfied employees from leaving.

Older dissatisfied employees consider building their options around retirement plans. After Al's illness, academic work is 'not worth it anymore'. He debates his future working choices:

[Academic work] is not interesting. It is frustrating. So I am quite happy to say goodbye to it. I mean every time our new year begins I know it will happen again in February. When the new academic year begins I think, 'Oh God, here we go again'. I am tired you know. It is just that I don't want to know. So I will be looking for incentives to leave before 65 but otherwise I will leave then. Financial incentives. I mean every now and again they offer them, but without that I will carry on. I have study leave next year and I will probably tack some long service leave onto it too. And I might just have it off, and that will be good (Extract 5.136).

Although Al is withdrawn from the work situation, he is prepared to stay at work until a financial incentive makes the option of leaving more attractive. The aging workforce has fewer opportunities to move away, because of the high costs of exiting from the region into employment in the capital cities, so they tend to seek their opportunities in terms of pre-retirement packages.

5.3.3.2 Alternative employment

For general staff there is no career progression possible within the appointed position. As well, some professionals in the general staff, for example, marketers, IT specialists and engineers, etc., are more highly paid in private enterprise. R. Mario is in touch with the difficulty general staff have accessing other employment and the costs for all staff to move into capital cities for different employment:

The working conditions and pay are high here. The opportunities if you want to stay in the area are difficult. They have to go to the capital city that is very expensive (R. Mario, Extract 5.134).

General staff also have difficulties about their skill development that limits their ability to get work elsewhere. Sid interprets this situation:

I know that a lot of technicians are skilled at doing something that no one else really needs. And that probably feels frustrating to them, especially, if their work or supervisor requires them to become even more highly skilled in that area. Whereas, they themselves might like to become more skilled in areas that would make them more marketable (Sid, Extract 5.135).

Although dissatisfaction with the work environment makes employees explore their options, it is not easy. The high differentiation of training for academics and some general staff, and the difficulty of access to alternative employment for general staff within the area, in which they live, makes option building difficult. Because of the obstacles involved, employees do not embark on building options lightly.

Academics have slow promotional prospects, through Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, and Associate Professor to Professor. Moving to another workplace is a means of speeding up the career progression because it is generally easier to achieve a promotion by applying for a post elsewhere rather than remaining at the current university. This mobility of academic staff has been part of the education industry for a long time, but with the changes in the academic labour process, employees have become more strategic about engineering better prospects for themselves.

Building options is a forward thinking strategy that necessitates a break from the workplace at some future point. Some employees deal with job insecurity by preparing to leave by scanning 'the big world out there for other things to do' (Damien, Extract 5.137). The process of scanning and making contingency plans requires a continual comparison between how bearable the present workplace is, what the alternatives are, and how easy it is to access those alternatives and the logistics of relocation.

5.3.3.3 Commuting

Some employment arrangements are attempts to overcome some of the difficulties of attracting staff into organisations in the tertiary education industry. Rejuvenation of the workforce is encouraged by offering contracts of employment and allowing commuting. Commuting in this context refers to the situation in which an employee's home and work domains are in different localities. In the workplace that is the context of this research, the commuting employee may retain a home and family 450 to 1000 kilometres from the workplace. By a variety of means of electronic communication and personal attendance the professional responsibilities in the workplace are met. However, the personal interaction with staff in the workplace is more difficult to maintain. When commuting, the employee moves between their principal home in which his/her partner usually lives, and the workplace. The amount of time that his/her physical presence at the workplace is required depends on the particular work situation.

5.3.3.3.1 Commuting and management

Usually, the employees who start their employment as commuters are employed because of their specific expertise and these arrangements suit the organisation because it can access

expertise that otherwise would not be available. Sometimes however, there is a perception by fellow workers of non-involvement as is implied in Stuart's comments (Extract 5.138). The employees taking on this role do so, usually knowing that this work experience is only temporary for them.

Stuart, who is not a commuter himself, regards the mobility of managers on short-term contracts, combined with their not living in the university town, problematic for the institution in the long-run. In his view these arrangements suit the individual's career needs more than it does the long-term needs of the organisation. He argues his case thus:

Well look at the senior management of this place. I mean they are here for five minutes. They are all ambitious people climbing ladders. There haven't been senior managers here that have lasted more than short periods. I mean it is a long period if you have been here five years. I mean they only start to get a feel for the place and feel for the culture. We have senior managers who don't even live here! That is not commitment to an institution, or a job in my view (Stuart, Extract 5.138).

The perception of commitment may be an important issue in organisational culture when considering management, commuting and short-term contracts.

5.3.3.3.2 Commuting and family life

Another type of commuting occurs when partners separate so that they can both obtain employment in different cities. One partner cares for the children. Both partners work and the year is organised around school holidays and visiting each other. This type of commuting is stressful and invariably ends in the partners opting out of their relationship with each other, or one of them finishing their relationship with their workplace. Much of the time in this commuting situation is spent trying to build options so that they can be together.

Damien's experience of being separated from his wife was introduced in Extracts 5.76–77. He lives apart for his wife so that they can both have work in case he loses his job. He is keeping his 'options open' and is applying for positions in the locality where his wife now works. He mentioned two other colleagues who are in a similar situation, one of whom resigned from his work and the other whose 'relationship is not going to last. It is going to finish' (Damien, Extract 5.139). These relationships are unable to be sustained when the partners live and work in different localities.

5.3.4. Summary of individualism

Individualism is both a result of the organisation seeking more flexibility in employment arrangements, and a defensive strategy of employees adapting to a more insecure work environment. Both aspects of individualism affect the individual employee and the work subculture. R. Dimetri in Extract 5.41 calls this self-reliant behaviour 'strategic behaviour'. This type of behaviour was previously controlled by peer pressure that fostered group functioning, but these controls are less effective when organisational change is sustained and the work environment is less cohesive. Individualism is an adopted strategy of employees who aspire to steer their careers through many organisational opportunities in different workplaces throughout their working lives.

The individualistic employee adopts strategies that have a complex interaction with the social networks and support in the work environment. Risk taking is overt and is used by safe employees to protect vulnerable employees from forms of workplace stress. Risk takers wield their organisational power in this context to assist others. Disengagement and opportunism are

covert and directed to find personal solutions for stress away from the current workplace.

Figure 3 summarises the concepts involved in *individualism*.

Individualism

- Risk Taking (altruistic individual acts opposing organisational conformity for the benefit of vulnerable employees)
 - risk taking may incur bad consequences from superiors because it is opposition to conformity and control that exists in and is characteristic of bureaucracies
 - employees who feel protected from bad consequences engage in risk taking
- Disengagement
 - disengagement is characterised by a detached mental attitude to work and occurs when the work environment is not cohesive and after critical health events
 - employees withdraw by avoiding interpersonal relationships and limiting communication and thus cause further fragmentation of workgroups and deterioration in social networks and social support
 - women and men are different in the process of disengagement
 - flexible work arrangements may assist disengagement
 - disengagement may decrease the quality of working life and limit of career progression
 - alcohol consumption that is excessive may be self destructive withdrawal
- Opportunism
 - opportunism is externally directed defensive planning by the employee to find opportunities and future employment
 - social networks are broken down and support is decreased in the work environment by the process of employee opportunism
 - choices for future employment vary with age and type of employment
 - ease of access to alternative employment determines how long the defensive planning operates as a negative force on social networks and support structures within the work environment
 - commuting is an employment strategy facilitated about by technology

Figure 5-3: Individualism

5.4 Show me that you care

The third concept, in the analytical story of employee health is titled *show me that you care* because it captures the personal desire of aggrieved informants to be valued and acknowledged personally in the workplace, and involves issues of symbolism and loyalty. Symbolism is important in the workplace because it communicates meaning about workplace relationships and loyalty refers to the reciprocal bonds in those relationships. These three issues, (1) being valued and known; (2) symbolism; and (3) loyalty are discussed.

5.4.1 Recognise my value and acknowledge me

The informants attach importance to being valued and known. Bob recently retired. When reflecting on his working life, Bob regards his coming to the organisation as ‘the best decision that I have ever made’ because it led to the ‘most wonderful life’ (Extract 5.140). Bob’s advice about the needs of staff stems from what he thinks is important in dealing with employees. He offers the wisdom of a lifetime of working:

Let them know how important their work is. Always make sure when they do a good job that you let them know that you value them (Bob, Extract 5.141).

Damien is clear about the nature of support that he believes employees need:

[We need] an assurance every now and again that we are going OK and doing a good job, that what you are doing is worth while (Damien, Extract 5.142).

Damien’s advice comes from his personal experience of not feeling valued as an employee and from his own very different management practice as an executive on the Board of Directors of a Not-For-Profit organisation. Damien works in this capacity as part of community service responsibilities while employed by the university.

Recognising my value operates at different levels. First, it operates at the level of human interactions. These interactions convey appreciation or the lack of it through communication. This demonstration of appreciation is fundamental in the work situation. One informant in the pilot study caught the significance of this appreciation as a binding force in the workplace with the words: ‘thanks is worth a thousand bucks.’ (Prentice, Extract 5.143). However the reality is far different. In the rush to downsize and not replace staff, employees feel unappreciated, ‘like disposable items’ (R.Jean, Extract 5.144).

Recognising my value operates at the industrial level as well as the personal level. When employees stand up for their rights in the workplace they are asserting their value. Jack puts his view plainly:

[I am] absolutely for standing up to management when they come the raw prawn about the basics of a workplace (Jack, Extract 5.145).

Jack also identifies the psychological strength that comes when employees’ self-esteem is high enough to demand appropriate recognition in interpersonal relations. His thoughts run on with his colourful but easily understood dialogue:

If you are gunna be a wimp and a wuss, then they [management] will walk all over you. But I think, having said that, taking a stand puts you in a healthier frame of mind (Jack, Extract 5.146).

The human interaction impacts on informants’ happiness and health. The relationship between happiness and health is discussed in terms of a continuum, with happiness and health at one end and unhappiness and ill health at the other end. R. Jean’s (Extract 5.147) shorthand for this concept is ‘unhappiness slash stress’, and justifies it like this:

I put them together because they lead, on the whole, to a feeling of unwellness, low energy levels, low motivation, and tiredness. And in some individuals I think that it leads to illness like mainly the flu like things. I think that people's immune systems are lowered by stress (R. Jean, Extract 5.148).

The tension created in the workplace by rationalising services and downsizing makes the task of valuing people particularly difficult. These changes produce distance between people and make the task of valuing them so much more problematic.

5.4.1.1 Random relationships

The distance between people in bureaucratic workplaces is responsible for employees feeling that they are impersonal workplaces. Informants talk about employer–employee relationships as if they are almost random events. They are random in the sense that people do not choose each other. Rae comments about selecting bosses:

I guess it is luck, in that; you don't go around selecting your boss most of the time. You kind of inherit somebody (Rae, Extract 149).

Gary looks at it from the boss's perspective and reaches similar conclusions about employees who make up the workgroup:

You don't get to pick your team. You are dealt whoever there is in the building (Gary, Extract 5.150).

Although employees are appointed to their positions with clear and rational bases, the changes that occur to incumbents in various positions with organisational restructures introduce a level of randomness between employers and employees as time goes on. These relationships between people 'in the building' exert powerful influences over the lives and health of employees. Supervisors and peers do not freely choose each other. But getting to know each other, according to R. Judy (Extract 5.151), is determined by 'spending time together without

an agenda'. By this she means spending time together that is not motivated and directed by business. Rather it is time to get acquainted, find out what is going on in their lives, what is important to them, and what they are doing. From Damien's point of view, employees who are already stressed are further demotivated when personal contact is not made between themselves, supervisors and peers.

But getting to know each other is not easy in a busy and stressed work environment. Some workgroups have morning teas as a social custom. They use this time to 'chit-chat' and to 'celebrate various events, arrivals and departures'. A 'warm and comforting staff room' provides the venue for this custom. This hub and the ritual of the regular morning teas makes that workgroup 'a very pleasant place to come to' for Leonard (Extract 5.10). But some informants like Taylor (Extract 5.59), mention that sharing coffee or lunch has decreased to the extent that it has become nearly non-existent over the last few years. Nowadays, the norm is having coffee and lunch in isolation in front of the computer, and only occasionally talking to a colleague in the corridor.

5.4.1.2 Buzz words instead of reality

In the workplace, this lack of talking between people and knowing each other results in 'what was happening down there' on the operational level not being known by supervisors (Carolyn, Extract 5.152). As a consequence, 'a feeling of not being listened to' (R. Joan, Extract 5.153), makes informants interpret interactions in the workplace with some skepticism. The lack of knowing each other and finding common ground ensures that when formal communication

occurs, it is seen to be made up of business ‘hype’ or ‘buzz words’ or ‘motherhood’ statements as R. Joan certifies them. R. Joan gives some examples of motherhood statements:

We are taking everyone’s interest into account; everyone will be looked after; we are listening to all the opinions that are raised here; it will all change for the better (R. Joan, Extract 5.154).

Nevertheless, R. Joan, who is union representative and is critical of these terms, subsequently declares: ‘the reality was that nothing changed at all’ (Extract 5.155).

As a manager and agent of organisational change, R. Reg found this skepticism an obstacle to progress in the workplace:

Workplace stress is a real issue for some people. But I mean after you assure them that they are not going to lose their jobs they still don’t want to believe you (R. Reg, Extract 5.156).

Not communicating in meaningful ways leaves a gap that people fill using their imagination of what this means and what is going on and this is vulnerable to collective paranoid interpretation. Skepticism of employees slows down work processes and there is a loss of productivity with employees who are not working at the optimal level. Although knowing a person is part of showing care, it is also a preliminary requirement to the fiduciary function in the workplace. Peta’s insights are instructive about the motivating effects of knowing employees personally and its encouraging and expansive potential:

I think that it is knowingness that enables, rather than a knowingness that stifles, or that controls. I mean it is a knowingness that looks at ways of developing people and offering opportunities (Peta, Extract 5.157).

5.4.2 Symbolism

Symbols are always important to people. At times of change they are especially important because they represent something that helps with managing the change. In the work situation

symbols are anchor points for employees experiencing change and uncertainty. Symbols contain shared points of view about something and the commonality of belief about what symbols represent that makes them so valuable to employees during organisational changes. Symbolism in the language of the informants carries their perception of reality. The informants identify workplace actions as having specific meanings. The need felt by informants to be shown care is as great as the symbols that confirm their viewpoints about that care.

5.4.2.1 Purpose and effect of symbolic language

Aggrieved informants use symbolic language to describe the social relationships at work from their point of view. Leonard uses the metaphor of a 'pawn', which is a chess piece that is easily sacrificed to preserve the more important pieces. He conveys in this symbolism that some staff feel 'mightily neglected and mightily undervalued' (Extract 5.158). The pawns/employees do not like to be sacrificed but 'bicker and fight and complain bitterly'. He goes on to say:

I think a lot of people would be a lot happier, if we were treated a little bit more than just pawns in their little game (Leonard, Extract 5.159).

Leonard's comment bears the message that employees are dehumanised in the work process. He is saying that employees resemble functional units rather than people. R Jean deploys similar notions (Extract 5.144) when she uses the metaphor of 'disposable items' as a descriptor for employees.

A sense of watchfulness and persecution is part and parcel of this dehumanised feeling. The language of job insecurity echoes the mood of war and the vigilance of soldiers in battle. One informant has her back to the wall 'fighting' for 'survival' and 'defending ourselves' (Susan,

Extract 5.160). Another reverberates with the helplessness and vulnerability of employees in the labour process: 'if you have only two or three staff members then you are exposed' (Damien, Extract 5.161). Small groupings are closely looked at for viability so amalgamation of several small staff groups is a defensive manoeuvre to improve job security. Symbolism of warfare tactics demonstrates how deeply alienated some informants are in the workplace. The language of informants helps them conceptualise what is happening. It integrates them, producing a feeling of solidarity.

The symbols, once established, unite the beliefs of employees. These beliefs function to bestow self-image, identity and status on the employee and to communicate meaning about workplace relationships. 'The goal post moving' used by Carolyn (Extract 5.36) and R. Jean (Extract 5.37) captures confusion of purpose and direction that they experience during prolonged organisational change that does not have intervening consolidation periods. It conveys uncertainty and unpredictability which induce systemic stress. The uniting force of the language and symbols is seen when different informants use similar terms. It is the nature of symbols to be teleological, and so, once established as representative of reality, these symbols take on the shape of reality itself. Stuart (Extract 5.38) simply said that it caused 'change fatigue'.

Workplace language also indicates employees' preferences. Academic leadership is considered by most informants to be the primary work of academics. Notwithstanding these views, changes in the management structure in the organisation require academics to attend to personnel issues as well. This devolution of management responsibilities down the line is a

common feature of modern public service organisations. But often this consists of devolution of management responsibilities without corresponding control or knowledge. The informants grapple with these changes with varying degrees of confidence and alacrity. For some academics, work that requires dealing with staff problems is referred to as 'dealing with trivial mundane human gripes' (R. Gus, Extract 5.162). Along the same line, the term 'administrivia' is used in referring to this type of work by both Georgio and Gary (Extract 5.163). In contrast, R. William (Extract 5.164) has a more corporate managerial approach to the academic role which he regards as 'actually embedded in the institution, and it isn't really just teaching and research'. The different language used to refer to managing people in the workplace polarises the different perspectives about assuming these new responsibilities. R. William and R. Mario (Extracts 5.61–65) both take on the mantle of managerialism and attend to managing employees as part of the new restructured university workplace.

5.4.2.2 Tension in symbols

Symbolism in language and action negotiates tension between values of an organisation and the upholding of those values in practice. The 'sense of community' is deliberately being created in the organisation as a value, and is the yardstick against which action is matched (R. Judy, Extract 5.165). Just as a sense of community in the workplace means acknowledgement, inclusiveness, and fulfillment for staff as R. Judy mentions (Extract 5.117), some workplace actions are considered as symbols on the path to achieving those values or as symbols of a deviation from that path. This tension is referred to by several informants as the difference between rhetoric and action (R. Joan, Georgio, Gary and Gretchen).

Some workplace actions are symbolic of care. R. William (Extract 5.166) closes the distance between rhetoric and action by 'walking around the office and talking to people'. However, he also installed a microwave in the tearoom, an action, 'that in the scheme of things seem so small, but actually make a difference to people in terms of how they will respond to the big things that you do' (R. William, Extract 5.167). The microwave is a tangible and permanent symbol of caring, and as a symbol, sustains meaning beyond its food preparation function. As a symbol, it functions to acknowledge and unite the community, or as R. Dimetri (Extract 5.168) puts it, '[It is] a call to the troops, to indicate we think that you are pretty good and we are on your side'.

However, some workplace actions are symbolic of not caring. Cleaning services have been cut back and therefore office bins are emptied once a fortnight. For R. Dimetri this is a daily reminder that he is not being cared for because he has to live in his office with his lunch waste and that depresses and annoys him. He says: 'the recurrent symbol of discovering yesterday's apple cores for lengthy periods was pretty crappy' (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.169).

Physical comfort and protection from the cold are basic to caring for humans. 'It is beyond the pale to not turn the heating on and have people freezing in the lab' (Jack, Extract 5.170). Installing air conditioners in offices for computers indicates that computers are considered to be important and possibly more so than staff who do not ordinarily get air conditioning. The prioritisation of machines, according to Gary really means 'the humans are expendable, bugger the humans', because:

After the last winter we had people sitting or standing there lecturing, in overcoats and students had scarves and gloves on (Gary, Extract 5.171).

Roberta and Peta make a point about the lack the temperature control in the workplace as well.

5.4.3 Loyalty

Loyalty is allegiance to the workgroup and the organisation, but it is essentially paradoxical because even though employees are stressed and not cared for, many stay in the organisation and are hopeful in trying to improve the situation. However, loyalty is not a pure or absolute emotion. It involves calculating how easy or not it is to switch loyalties to other employment, and also involves debates about individual and/or collective responsibility for the employee's health and well being. Three issues of loyalty: (1) the basis of loyalty; (2) the dynamic nature of loyalty and (3) hopefulness of loyalty, are presented and discussed.

5.4.3.1 Basis of loyalty

Stuart's loyalty to the organisation is part of a mutual bargain between the workplace and himself. He puts it simply:

I thought that I had something to give. I thought that it had things to give me (Stuart, Extract 5.172).

The bargain consists of all the explicit and implicit reciprocal arrangements in the employee–employer relationship. The intensity of the implicit exchanges in this bargain is seen in the degrees of commitment that employees have to their workplace.

5.4.3.2 The dynamic nature of loyalty

Loyalty is a complex notion. Loyal employees express their discontent in the hope of improvement. As informants experience discontent and try to improve things, there is an evolution in their allegiance to the workplace. Loyalty is not static and there are reasoned calculations in reevaluating and adjusting employee loyalty.

After a critical health event (see Extracts 85–93), Stuart’s loyalty changes because he perceives that the workplace has altered in relation to what it offers him. He states:

I am much more conscious that this institution doesn’t reward loyalty in the way that it once did (Stuart, Extract 5.173)

This new phase is based on his developing self-reliance that was discussed in relation to Extract 5.118. After accepting more limited ambitions for himself, he seeks satisfaction from non work-related activities instead:

I’m conscious of the fact that my ambition has tempered. I have a life outside of here that fulfils a whole variety of things that I don’t need to get from work (Stuart, Extract 5.174).

Loyalty exists as a preference for one workplace over another. Peta recounts the movement of staff in and out of the workplace, and the core of staff remaining and why they remain:

The vast majority of people that work here choose to live here and are committed to staying here. Some people will move away and we have certainly seen that over the time, a sequence of people coming and going. But the majority of people are stuck here (Peta, Extract 5.175).

The use of the word ‘stuck’ is in contrast to ‘choose’. This contrast highlights the fact for many, alternative employment is a matter of difficulty of access, rather than the absence of alternative employment. Lily combines the ideas of choice of employment and self-responsibility for health in the following comment:

I can see that people can get stuck by their circumstances and that it can be very hard to make changes. But I think that, ultimately, everybody has responsibility for their own well being and welfare. If they are not getting it where they are, then, [they] should vote with their feet (Lily, Extract 5.176).

Rather than argue between individual and collective responsibility for health, many informants view responsibility for health in the workplace as a synergy of action at the individual and workplace levels.

5.4.3.3 Hopefulness of loyalty

Within these debates about employment choice and responsibility for health, loyalty is primarily concerned with contributing to the workplace. After expressing annoyance that the computers are kept warm in winter rather than the humans, Gary goes on to say:

That is the kind of mindset that we have to turn around. I mean we have to see the key resource of this university as being the intellectual capital of the staff here (Gary, Extract 177).

However being loyal to the workplace and trying to improve employee well being from within is a difficult task especially when the organisation itself is changing. In the discussion about loyalty (Extracts 61–65), it is evident that R. William and R. Mario consider any negative comments about aspects of the organisation and attribute them to resistance to change rather than helpful viewpoints of a complex process.

5.4.4. Summary of *show me that you care*

In *show me that you care* employees identify problems in the interpersonal relationships at work that affect their social health—employees want the workplace to change from one that is stressful for them to one that is less stressful. When staff feel appreciated personally in the work environment a great deal of what is stressful in the workplace is ameliorated. The

meaning of workplace relationships and the bonds in those relationships are discussed under the headings of symbolism and loyalty. Symbolism in the workplace contributes to workplace culture, particularly the real workplace culture in contrast to the espoused or ideal culture, and loyalty is involved in complex issue of organisational commitment.

In this discussion about the bonds in workplace relationships loyalty is portrayed as a variable and conditional feature of the employer–employee relationship. It is not absolute, nor is it unchanging. Loyalty levels both reflect employee discontent and express that discontent constructively because of the hope for organisational improvements.

Show me that you care

- Recognise my value and know me
 - employees want their input to be recognised and this operates at the personal level and also at the industrial level of employee participation in organisational decisions
 - employees are attempting to reverse the effects of workplace stress by working to improve the organisation from within
 - showing care is done through supportive relationships with supervisors and peers and aligning talking with action
 - workplace relationships are random because bosses do not always chose subordinates and vice versa
 - buzz words that are used by managers often do not reflect reality of employees' experiences and this alienates employees
 - productivity losses occur when employees do not feel appreciated
- Symbols
 - symbols in language and action are used to represent something else and the purpose of symbols is to integrate experience into understandable categories for individuals groups and organisations
 - power of symbols resides in the unifying effect they have over employees who know what the symbols represent
 - tension in symbols occurs when they are used to express the distance between ideal and realised culture
- Loyalty
 - loyalty at work refers to allegiance to workgroup and organisation and is characterised by feelings of hopefulness towards the target of the loyalty
 - loyalty is paradoxical, it contains discontent but allows the employee to express discontent in the hope of improvement
 - basis of loyalty is the mutual bargain between employer and employee
 - loyalty is dynamic, and evolves with experiences

Figure 5-4: Show me that you care

5.5 Get real and get practical

The final concept emerging from the analytical story of employee health relates to seeking improvements in employee health through relationship changes in the workplace. This concept is titled. 'Get real and get practical', for two reasons. Firstly the informants want 'real' solutions to their workplace health problems, and secondly, they want action about these problems and not just talk about action. The informants' opinions about seeking improvements in employee health involve three issues: (1) the present framework for the management of ill health; (2) the approach to Occupational Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation systems; and (3) real knowledge about employee health problems.

5.5.1 Present framework for management of ill health in the workplace

Ill health is managed in the workplace as an individual misfortune that is restricted to the timeframe of sick leave provisions. The usual way of managing the workload when a staff member is ill is to reallocate work activities or to appoint casual staff for urgent matters, as R. Mark reports:

Sometimes we have to get someone in on a casual basis to look after things that aren't being done and that need to be done. Sometimes, we just delay doing some long-term things, but not urgent tasks that we may otherwise be able to do (R. Mark, Extract 5.178).

However, R. Mark's portrayal of the ordered manner of prioritising work activities does not always occur. R. Joan's experiences are very different. She questions this simplicity, because staff absences often mean shifting an extra workload onto staff who are at work and sometimes this is done suddenly because the unpredictable nature of sick leave:

And the effect that it had on the other people that worked with it, because it meant a fair amount of sick leave. And the fact that the area was stretched for resources already compounded it. There weren't huge numbers of people to call on to pick up

the workload that couldn't be covered. So less people did the same amount of work, if you like. And that was difficult. It was also difficult because it wasn't predictable (R. Joan, Extract 5.179).

At a practical level, replacing staff suddenly is problematic for R. Joan, and she corroborates her viewpoint:

I think that it is the nature of how we work that getting people in on a short-term basis; I think supervisors have to weigh up now. If I get someone in on the short-term, how much time is that going to take to train that person to do this piece of work? They have never been in the building before, never done this type of work. I am going to lose three days of my time telling that person how to do this job. Or would I be better off just using those three days doing that work. It is not always that easy just to get someone in, and sit them down, and say 'here you go' (R. Joan, Extract 5.180).

Flexible work arrangements are beneficial to accommodate work responsibilities and minor illnesses, and R. Reg (Extract 5.181), when referring to these flexible work arrangements, demonstrates the 'carry-on-regardless' approach when he says: '[employees] work their sickness around their classes and commitments'. R. Reg acknowledges that flexibility of working arrangements applies to academics and not general staff. He states:

I would fill in less sick leave forms for academic staff than general staff. That is because if they [academics] are sick, they just take a day out and I wouldn't know about it (R. Reg, Extract 5.182).

With significant ill health it is impossible to meet normal work responsibilities while ill. This present framework of managing ill health in the work environment is unreal and unpractical from two points of view: critical health events are not contained within the sick leave provisions; and the misfortune associated with ill health is not restricted to the individual who is ill.

5.5.1.1 Conceal the burden of ill health

Maria thinks that flexible work arrangements often conceal the degree to which ‘colleagues cover’ for each other. She states the issue very simply: ‘The compassion of colleagues carries the burden of work’ (Maria, Extract 5.183). Although humane at one level, this approach of shared burden and ‘quiet management’ in the workplace is naïve at another level. Maria continues:

There is very little understanding of the impact of ill health on the rest of the people in the school. They [management] don’t have an understanding that someone is going to have radiation for example. They don’t understand that that person is going to be sick for quite a while and they are just tired and will not be very productive (Maria, Extract 5.184).

In the workplace, fellow workers shoulder the extra workload during the deterioration phase in which the functioning of the worker is impaired prior to the diagnosis, during the sick leave period, and during recovery. With some conditions, functional impairment may be chronic, and there may be progressive deterioration which affects work capacity.

In Extracts 5.178–5.184 there is an increasing complexity in the health issues discussed, from an illness that requires an employee ‘to take a day off’ to a life-threatening illness that needs extensive treatment with radiation. The difficulty in the work situation is that the sick leave provisions for the employee who is ill and the work arrangements for the employees left in the workplace are the same regardless of the nature and duration of the ill health.

Those illnesses that are acute and familiar, for example, heart attacks, are managed more easily, because they are conceptualised and managed in the framework of sick leave, in

theory, if not in fact. Maria also found that illnesses that are prolonged, for example, multiple sclerosis, cancer, degenerative conditions and dementia are more problematic for the individual, the workgroup and the organisation. R. Joan explains that even more common illnesses, like asthma, with its unpredictability, are difficult to manage in the workplace because of limited resources and the resultant effect on the remaining staff.

Management of mental illness is particularly worrying in the workplace. When R. Gus had to manage an employee with a complex mental illness, not only did it take up a great deal of his time, but individual privacy and medical confidentiality augmented the management issues when other staff were involved and had to carry the workload. R. Gus' reaction to managing an employee with a mental illness was discussed in relation to Extracts 5.79–80. R. Gus was personally overwhelmed by the problems that were created by the severe mental illness of an employee. The burden of work that was placed on other employees for lengthy periods of time was less sympathetically born when the illness was a mental one. This created conflict between employees about the allocation of that work. Conflict arose between the employees carrying the extra workload and R. Gus who distributed the extra workload to them, and between R. Gus and the ill employee whose emotional state was variable. These conflicts were accentuated by partial information from the medical practitioner and R. Gus's multiple responsibilities to the organisation, the employees who were working, and the ill employee.

5.5.2 Occupational health and safety and workers' compensation issues

The Occupational Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation issues are divided into two groups: (1) technical problems that are traditionally located within the ambit of

Occupational Health and Safety, for example, ergonomic chairs, desks and lighting; (2) more complex issues in the workplace that involve stress, workload and the degree of comfort afforded to the employee; and (3) organisational incentives for prevention.

5.5.2.1 Technical problems

Generally, informants believe technical occupational health and safety (OHS) issues are handled routinely through the administrative systems of the workplace. R. George knows the process to deal with them, but he is challenged in dealing with workplace stress:

[The technical OHS issues] like RSI [Repetitive Strain Injury] or sore backs or something. They are more clear cut. They are more explicit. While they are very serious, there are procedures. You understand it. You know what my role is, and the process is clearer. You get clear advice. We ring [the OHS officer] and we do this, and we do that. [The OHS officer] says we have got to get a new chair we get a new chair. You must do it. There are realities there. It is much easier to manage. But this stress related business is extraordinarily challenging. And I don't feel skilled or capable (R. George, Extract 5.186).

There is a general attitude that the OHS issues are a legislative obligation so they are under control. Some employees, like Julia, had good experiences with safety management systems of the organisation. For example, when Julia first arrived at the organisation she needed a special type of workstation set up to accommodate her pre-existing back condition and she said: 'So they just came and measured me up and put it there' (Julia, Extract 5.187).

But sometimes even the technical OHS issues are not adequately handled. For Una it is too late for preventive action. She feels it is ridiculous sitting on a 'wonky chair', so she intends to contact the OHS officer to get some advice on what to do. It is apparent,

however, from the following statement that she may already have ‘computer overuse syndrome’: ‘My desk and computer set up is not right, so I have terrible shoulder problems’ (Una, Extract 5.188).

Una is not sure if the shoulder problem is entirely related to work. She is also aware that her neighbour, who has made a Workers’ Compensation claim, and had an awful experience with the ‘lawyers after him with meetings and hearings’ (Una, Extract 5.189). She is reluctant to ‘go through that for a few physio visits’ (Una, Extract 5.190). Una has not initiated a Workers’ Compensation claim because she does not know that she is entitled to do so on the basis of the injury being aggravated by the desk and computer set up at work. Also, for her, getting the treatment funded is not worth the Workers’ Compensation claim process.

None of the employees who had work-related illnesses (i.e. Gary, Stuart, Georgio, and Al: Extracts 85–93) initiated Workers’ Compensation claims. Lionel had suffered a near fatal workplace accident and is fortunately back at work. He is aware that: ‘it could have been a lot worse’ (Lionel, Extract 5.191). Several years after the accident, his Workers’ Compensation claim is still active. He has minor symptoms and is seeing a solicitor for advice. He is keen to institute risk assessments for tasks, so that accidents, like the one he experienced, can be prevented.

5.5.2.1.1 Liability and workplace deaths

R. Reg is the only informant to talk about employee health exclusively in terms of technical aspects of Occupational Health and Safety. For him, employee health involves

protection from four of the five categories of occupational risk, that is, biological, environmental, mechanical and physical hazards, and he does not include psychological hazards. His approach is to do risk analysis for work practices and equipment. If work practices or equipment are found to be unsafe, then they should be shut down. For R. Reg the argument is summed up like this:

Are you going to not shut down something so you can save a few hundred dollars, and yet expose yourself to hundreds of thousands of dollars in litigation (R. Reg, Extract 5.192)?

R. Reg's has some reservations about some employees' claims of work-related injury. He looks at Workers' Compensation claims in this way:

I also suspect that sometimes those injuries will occur at home, and then they are reported at work. But it is very difficult to prove. If someone walks in and says that I want to fill in an accident report. 'I was trying to lift something and I have strained my back'. You see them a couple of weeks later lifting trailers and throwing bits around. So it is difficult to actually prove the actual incident when the injury has occurred (R. Reg, Extract 5.193).

For R. Reg, health issues that are not related to technical hazards, are related to age progression and by implication those problems are the responsibility of the employee exclusively.

The thing is that people's health is intimately related to age progression and whether you start to develop arthritis or diabetes or heart problems. The problem is that they impact on the work. As the age of the workforce gets older you develop more of these problems, which compounds the issue. So the age profile needs to be managed, because it is not just reflecting on the academic and technical abilities, it reflects on their health as well (R. Reg, Extract 5.194).

Although R. Reg does not take psychological hazards in the workplace into account, he is the only informant to talk about workplace deaths. In a previous university he knew of,

two fellow employees died in workplace accidents and those experiences left their mark on him:

One of the chemical analysts died of a carcinogenic poisoning event and after I left another technician was blown up by washing up chemical bottles and so forth. A combination of detergents and what was residue in the bottles was explosive and blew him through the wall (R. Reg, Extract 5.195).

He is serious therefore, about developing policies and procedures in the organisation to protect employees from these technical and chemical hazards and he is also serious about trying to change employees' 'blasé attitudes' and make them more aware (Extract 5.196).

5.5.2.2 Comprehensive view of employee health and a balanced view of responsibilities

Other informants have a comprehensive view of Occupational Health and Safety and also a balanced view about the responsibilities for employee health being shared between the workplace and the employee. Roberta's insights about what factors influence employee health include the following:

A comfortable working space, a minimum amount of stress, good collegial relationships, sometimes collegial relationships contribute to stress, enjoyment of work that you do, access to resources, a secure healthy environment, adequate heating in the office. Those are the immediate factors that spring to mind (Roberta, Extract 5.197).

Sid's factors that influence employee health testify to the balance between employee's responsibility for their health and the workplace's responsibility towards the employee.

His list includes:

factors relating to personal lifestyle, which it is obvious to me that some people don't get enough exercise and have stressful home situations, smoke or drink to excess. That I think are the major contributions to people's health in this institution and anywhere else for that matter. But I think on top of that, you would have to say

that, there are individuals who find their work very stressful and perhaps with a combination of personal lifestyle problems that impinges fairly negatively on their health (Sid, Extract 5.198).

Karla has an inclusive approach to the factors that affect employee health and she mentions:

The type of work that you do, the hours that you work, the people that you work with, the sort of personal beliefs about health and work and lifestyle issues and choice, how career minded you are, or what you are striving to achieve in your employment, affects your health, what is going on in your life at times (Karla, Extract 5.199).

Gary sums up his three major stressors at work as:

The volume of work, and lack of control over work and at the micro scale, the working conditions in which the OHS type of things exist (Gary, Extract 5.200).

The micro scale working conditions in which OHS figures prominently according to Gary are: the ergonomic furniture; the lighting; and the working conditions which are 'unacceptably cold in winter, and unacceptably hot in summer, and no one seems to care a stuff about' (Gary, Extract 5.201).

John focuses on the sedentary life style and the catering on campus impacting on employee health, but he judges the choice of food available now as good. Several other informants bring up the need to exercise to combat the sedentary life style (Lily, Sid, Leonard, Stuart) and some use the sporting facilities that are available at the workplace (Aga, Mario).

Roberta, Sid and Karla (Extracts 5.197–199) exhibit a broad understanding of employee health covering all types of factors influencing health, extending from technical issues to

complex interpersonal issues. These extracts also show the interaction between personal responsibility for health and workplace's responsibility for employee health.

5.5.2.3 Organisational incentive for prevention

The framework for managing the costs of work-related ill health does not support a preventive approach. In spite of R. Reg's concern for productivity and costs, he 'wouldn't be game' to estimate the costs of workplace injuries and health problems in his area. (Extract 5.202). However, although the impact of ill health is registered with the personal experience of the informants, it is lost from the budgetary arrangements of the organisation, as R. Mark comments:

We don't have an accounting system that shows the costs that result from poor workplace arrangements. They don't get costed. The firm has no incentive to adjust its workplace practices to minimise health risks that are associated (R. Mark, Extract 5.203).

Occupational Health and Safety and Worker's Compensation systems exist in the workplace as legislative obligations. In practice, they are systems that have limited ability to prevent accidents and work-related illnesses. All the costs associated with work-related illness are not registered in the Workers' Compensation premiums of the workplace. The informants' perspective of employee health, as indicated by Roberta, Sid and Karla (Extracts 197-199), are broader than is the application of these systems in the workplace.

5.5.3 Real knowledge about employee health problems

The complex nature of employee health and how to improve it is a challenge for many informants. The following issues are discussed in this section: (1) seeking 'drivers' that

harm employee health; (2) lack of knowledge about managing people; and (3) training to address the deficits in knowledge and skills.

5.5.3.1 Seek the ‘drivers’ that undermine employee health

Although June is initially puzzled about how to overcome the problems of employee health she is optimistic in finding a solution with the help of others when she says:

I am not quite sure to tell you the truth, how to do it. There must be a way, because I am an optimist. There has got to be. It is just not good enough for people at the moment. But people talking to other people, that is a pretty good start (June, Extract 5.204).

The same approach is brought forward by Lily and Simon. Lily put this clearly:

Find out what problems there are health-wise, with the workers to start with, and then be proactive in preventing them, rather than, having work-related claims at a later date (Lily, Extract 5.205).

R. Simon’s orientation is the same and it is apparent in these instructions on how to proceed:

[We must] identify the drivers impacting negatively on employee health and therefore when we have enough information to build them into the strategies of the university. My intention is to talk to my colleagues about it. The first issue is that it has to be made a higher priority, then once that occurs, the identification of the drivers of those things that are impacting negatively on employee health, and as I say, my perspective is to limit those things that are driving employee health that way (R. Simon, Extract 5.206).

5.5.3.2 Lack of knowledge

One of the drivers impacting negatively on employee health is the informants’ lack of knowledge about health in the work environment and lack of human resource management skills to deal with employee health issues effectively. The lack of clarity and

certainty about what to do, or what could be done, is most obviously in the management of mental illness.

There is a commonly expressed dilemma about not knowing what to do, but caring about the individual and organisation in spite of that ignorance. R. Dimetri when faced with a serious mental health issue with an employee said kindly but apologetically: 'I very much made it up as I went along' (R. Dimetri, Extract 5.207). This, making it up as he goes along, is what R. Reg does, and he said: 'I managed it sympathetically' (R. Reg, Extract 5.208). However, for R. Gus sympathetic handling, without knowledge, led to an escalation of difficulties for him, the individual who was suffering ill health and the workgroup.

The dysfunction was now many times greater than any benefit that we would have for allowing that tolerance, because of the effect on so many people (R. Gus, Extract 5.209).

In spite of R. George's statement (Extract 5.186) that he is challenged and does not feel skilled or capable to manage complex employee health issues, he is aware of the impact that he has on employees. He recognises that employees and employers are enmeshed in each others lives and that complexity impacts on employee health:

I am part of their lifestyle, and their work environment is probably a very significant part of their lifestyle (R. George, Extract 5.210).

5.5.3.3 Training to address the deficit in knowledge and skills

Training is necessary according to Michael (Extract 5.211) to address this deficit in knowledge and skills, and he emphasises training in 'people skills'. Rae also believes that managers need training in 'interpersonal behaviour', so the work environment can be

managed more equitably and be seen to be managed more equitably. She states it simply as:

Bad business putting people out into powerful positions of authority over other people and not give them any training (Rae, Extract 5.212).

R. Simon is more specific about the type of training that will help improve employee health. His approach is to elevate employee health as an organisational priority, identify the drivers of employee health (R. Simon, Extract 5.204), develop appropriate protocols for each of these drivers and then institute appropriate training throughout the organisation. This approach is based on the core value of the organisation of mutual respect with which people should relate to each other in the work environment. He explains his remedy in these words:

[U]sing technology as an example. We recognise that although technology is good, while it is very effective, let us continue with it, but we must acknowledge that it is having some negative impact, and then look at strategies to set that off. Develop protocols about communication, and about effective communication. There would be a role for training about communication, so I think training would come out of this. This would relate to the way we help to make the environment [contain the values] of the respect that we have for each other (R. Simon, Extract 5.213).

It is R. Judy's initiative to have different training programs for all levels of staff that promote 'educational awareness of what is good for health' (R. Judy, Extract 5.214). She interweaves action with ideals by having training that is consistent with the organisational values of 'how people should relate to each other' (R. Judy, Extract 5.215). Communication and knowledge about interpersonal relationships form the administrative infrastructure that links core values of the organisation with day to day operations of the workplace.

5.5.4. Summary of ‘Get real and get practical’

The framework for managing ill health in the workplace does not accommodate the pressure that serious ill health places on fit employees who remain. The present legislative obligatory systems, namely the Occupational Health and Safety and Workers’ Compensation systems, do not recognise let alone prevent all work-related illness that occurs in the workplace. The informants advocate improving employee health by: elevating employee health as an organisational priority; seeking the drivers for employee health and being proactive about it; instituting multilevel training to address problems in communication and deficits in knowledge about employee health; and basing this training in the workplace on the core value of mutual respect with which people should relate to each other in the work environment.

The informants are optimistic in their ideas to improve employee health. The optimism pulls organisational values and action closer together with the aim of changing the social networks and social supports in the work subculture. The closer organisational core values are to the experience of employees, the greater the level of trust in the workplace. At a practical level this is achieved by training in communication and interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

Get real and get practical

- Current framework for managing ill health
 - current framework is inadequate because of the reality of ill health which can be sudden in onset, unpredictable, chronic, disabling and complex
 - burden carried by remaining staff at work
 - mental illness when known is difficult to manage, but more often is not declared
- Occupational Health and Safety and Worker's Compensation issues
 - technical safety problems at work are considered differently to complex psychosocial problems
 - employees sometimes suffer during the claims management process and some work-related illnesses are not claimed
 - workplace deaths and concern for liabilities provoke risk analysis
 - organisational incentive for prevention is low
 - comprehensive view of employee health and a balanced view of responsibilities is characteristic of many employees approaches to employee health
- Real knowledge about employee health problems
 - drivers that influence employee health should be sought
 - priority of employee health should be increased in the workplace
 - knowledge level about employee health and especially mental health is low
 - deficit in knowledge and skills can be addressed by training
 - protocols and training can be developed and should be:
 - based on organisational values
 - multi-purpose
 - multiple target
 - multiple level

Figure 5-5: Get real and get practical

5.6 Summary of concepts of the analytical story of employee health

The analytical story of employee health contains four major elements. These are: workplace stress and subsequent health problems; two different types of behavioural responses that employees show to workplace stress, one characterised by the employee being more individualistic about his/her career, and the other characterised by the employee being more actively focused on the workplace to improve it and reduce or eliminate the stress; and seeking improvements in the workplace through relationship changes.

Workplace stress impacts on and shapes employees' defensive strategies. *Individualism*, as a defensive strategy, assists employees to escape from the stressful work environment, and *show me that you care* sustains employees as they seek to change the workplace from within. Both these defensive strategies contribute to work subculture. The final concept contains the organisational strategies that currently exist to manage employee health, that is, the framework for ill health management, Occupational Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation systems. It also contains the employees' opinions about what should happen to improve employee health.

The interaction of the concepts of the analytical story of employee health is illustrated in Figure 6 below. The remedial action is seen as the circle in Figure 6, with multiple levels of training in communication and interpersonal relationships that would impact in a beneficial way on workplace stress, employee responses and the work subculture.

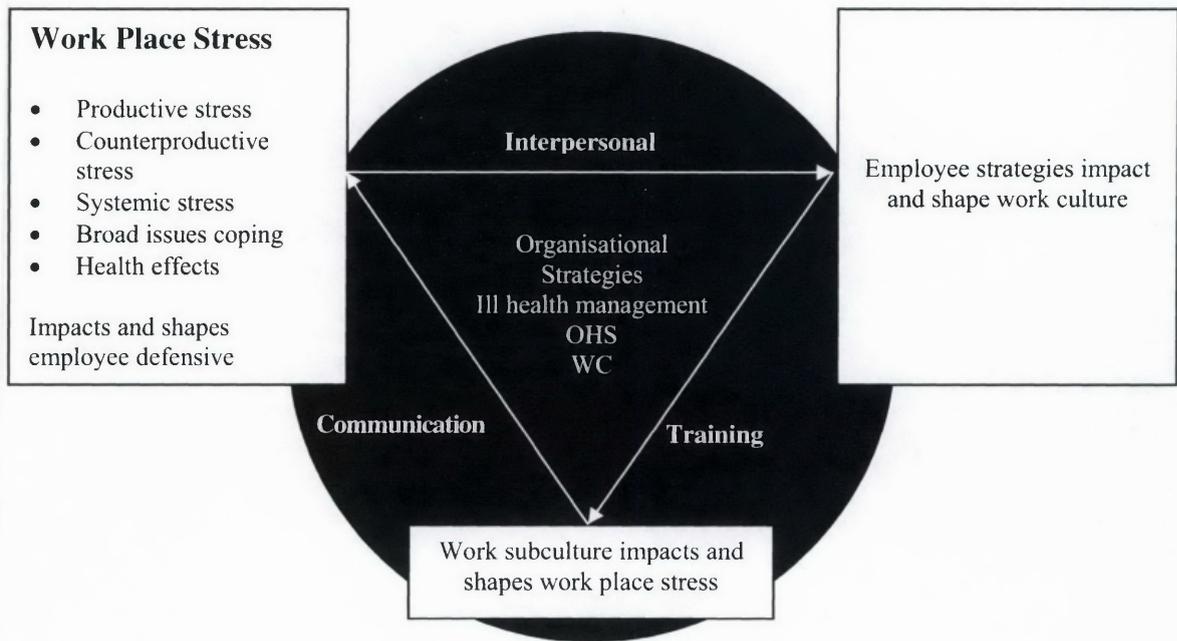


Figure 5-6: Conceptual framework for improving employee health

The analysis so far has presented individual informants' insights about factors that influence employee health in the workplace. The conceptual framework for improving employee health, derived from this analysis, is likely to change the situation for the better. However, this approach is somewhat simple and linear. Meeting human needs in the modern workplace is rarely if ever simple and linear because many people have competing needs. Denzin (1989:138) and Hamel, Dufour and Fortin (1993:42) being aware of this complexity, recommend that analysis should proceed to shed light on how society generates these problems rather than stop at the individual level of analysis.

Tying the four elements of the analytical story together are the social relationships embedded in the work subculture. Critical health events demonstrate the social connection between employer and employee that affects both health and productivity. Also, the contrasting behaviours associated with opportunism and loyalty are social responses to needs that are not met and needs that are hoped to be met in the employer–employee relationship. Another example of social relationships at work occurs in the management of severe illness. On the surface, sick leave provisions contain the problem, underneath, the healthy staff carry the extra burden. The employer is active in his/her inactivity in this situation (referred to by Maria in Extract 5:184 as ‘quiet management’), because the managerial response in this triangular social relationship has a humane outcome for the ill employee in the most economical manner for the organisation.

The social relationships in the context of the workplace are distinguished along the axis of individualism–collectivism. Individualism upholds the sacredness of the personal pursuits and collectivism esteems shared objectives. Individualism is recognised in the strategic behaviour of ‘loafers and opportunists’ (Extract 5:41), in contrast to the ‘professional coherent culture’ (Extract 5.42).

The dimension of individualism–collectivism is distinguished, according to Wagner (2002:301) by variations in utilitarianism and ontology. Utilitarian individualism–collectivism refers to the degree to which attention is paid to personal interests or shared interests of groups, and ontological individualism–collectivism is concerned about where fundamental social entity resides, in the individual or the group. Individualists prefer democratic participation and collectivists respond to authoritarian structures like corporate

managerialism. The university is an organisational hybrid being made up of individual professionals, who unlike doctors or lawyers, do not have the capacity to deliver degrees and research individually in the open market, but they must rely generally on the infrastructure provided largely by the public purse.

Many of the theories of organisational behaviour, for example, formal contracts of employment and psychological contracts reflect assumptions in utilitarian individualism. However, communal sharing and collective dependence is seen in Hirschman's theories of *exit, voice and loyalty* (1970) that are emphasised in the behavioural response of *show me that you care*. Finally, the dimension of individualism–collectivism has bearing on the definition of self, that is, how much is identity related to standing apart from others as a unique physical and personal identity, compared to merging with others in social categories with shared characteristics (see Extract 5:117–118).

The utilitarian and ontological variation in individualism–collectivism explains why this research shows that although employers and employee have different perspectives and demands on social relationships in the workplace, they are not diametrically opposed to each other. The qualitative data reveals (1) some mutuality of fulfillment exists (Extract 5:15); (2) all levels of employees are interviewed and they all view employee health as a public good so there is agreement about ideals; (3) as a public organisation all levels of employees are employees with some commonality of purpose to deliver education to students which is another public good; and (4) managers express similar concerns about work load demands and lack of support that employees express. Rather than being

diametrically opposed, in this analysis it is apparent that the employer–employee relationship is influenced by multiple levels of line managers in a public bureaucracy and the partial satisfaction of some needs for all parties.

Competing needs in social relationships at work are apparent also in the employee–employee relationship. This could not be more graphically described than by R Jean (Extract 5.49) as ‘rats eating each other’ but it is more commonly just avoidance of relationships between work colleagues. This horizontal competition is demonstrated by tensions that may not be incompatible or mutually exclusive: (1) the disengaging behaviour of some employees versus the struggle of others who are still playing the game in spite of frustration with not achieving; and (2) the division between employees who are aligned to corporate goals versus employees who are aligned to their discipline.

The informants are enmeshed in social relationships at work. A positivist approach to these relationships removes their social reality so that the dialogue oscillates between workload and control parameters. However, the imposition of change on the dimensions of Crozier’s (1994) static social system of the workplace brings to the fore the political nature of truth games about how people are arranged in relation to each other at work. For service industry employees, like those in universities and public service organisations, the contemporary social systems of the workplace generate conditions for better or worse employee health through the social relationships that the institution fosters.

There are three tasks remaining in the analysis of the data of this research project: (1) relating the results of the quantitative and qualitative data; (2); interpreting the results of

the quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the literature; and (3) analysing further the social relationships and structural practices that determine employee health in the workplace. This synthesis is undertaken in the following chapter.