Book review

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Work Stress and Health in a Globalized Economy: The Model of Effort–Reward Imbalance edited by Johannes Siegrist and Morten Wahrendorf. Cham (Switzerland): Springer International Publishing, 2016. 378 pages. ISBN 978-3-319-32935-2: (Price US$102.07)

As one of the most influential work stress models to date, the effort–reward imbalance (ERI) model has attracted, and still attracts, a lot of attention from occupational health researchers. The current volume intends to give an overview of the various ways this model has been applied in research so far. The book is divided in five parts and comprises 16 chapters, written by more than 20 international specialists (eg, Brisson, Dollard, Kivimäki, Siegrist, Theorell, and Tsutsumi). The first part mainly focuses on the ERI model and the measurement of its core constructs. The second addresses research on the link between ERI and (physical and psychological) health. The various chapters in part three are mostly devoted to research on the ERI model that has been conducted in non-Western countries. Part four focuses on extensions of the model beyond paid work (such as in household and family work), and part five closes with a discussion on interventions and policy implications. With this structure, in general, the book indeed provides a broad overview of relevant research themes related to the ERI model.

On a more specific note, I think the book includes both strong and relatively weaker features. In my opinion, these latter primarily manifest themselves in the first part of the book. That is, the first two chapters addressing, respectively, the ERI model and the measurement of its constructs, lack the profundity that one would hope for from chapters illustrating the (measurement of the) core theory of a book, and leave some – relevant – questions still unanswered. For example, in Chapter 1, the theoretical position of the personality trait overcommitment is addressed only rather superficially. Furthermore, Chapter 2 (which focuses on the measurement of the core constructs of the model) lacks the items of the questionnaire(s), which are used to measure the various components of the ERI model, and pays only limited attention to how imbalance is operationalized and computed in empirical research (although Chapter 9 does offer some insight regarding this latter aspect). This is unfortunate, as this information would have equipped the reader with a stronger background to interpret the findings that are discussed in the following sections of the book.

These limitations notwithstanding, I believe that the various authors generally provide an interesting and complete overview of research that has so far been conducted based on the ERI model. In my opinion, a notable contribution of the book is that it moves beyond the "traditional" focus of research on workers in Western countries and pays explicit attention to research that has been conducted in the non-Western world and outside paid work. Specifically, the book includes chapters focusing on ERI in Japan (Chapter 8), China (Chapter 10) and Latin America (Chapter 11), and addresses ERI experienced with respect to socially productive activities (such as caregiving activities, informal help, and voluntary work), close social relationships and school work (Chapter 12) and household and family work (Chapter 13).

Another asset is that the book addresses (inter) national policies that may affect the experience of ERI at work. By doing so, it acknowledges that ERI is not only affected by the specific work context of the worker, but also by processes that operate on a higher ecological level. For example, Chapter 16 shows that integrative policies on a national level (such as the amount of public expenditures devoted to promote reintegration into work, and lifelong learning) may protect against the higher ERI generally associated with lower educational levels. Together with a high quality chapter focusing on interventions (Chapter 15), this provides starting points for improving working life.

Reviewed by

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