Psychosocial issues

Kazutaka Kogi
Institute for Science of Labour, Kawasaki, Japan
Tsuyoshi Kawakami
Institute for Science of Labour, Kawasaki, Japan

Introduction
Psychosocial aspects of occupational health in the Asia-Pacific region are increasingly important as industrialization proceeds in many countries in the Asia-Pacific. A number of factors relating to occupational stress are arising requiring solutions in the local context. First, local people may find it difficult to adjust the traditional working life to the modernized job tasks which are often fragmented and machine-paced. New production technologies and work systems applied in newly emerging factories may cause stress for workers. Even a clean and orderly work environment may increase the stress of new workers who are used to the traditional life styles. Second, it has been widely known that newly introduced work schedules such as night and shift work and overtime work could adversely affect the family and social life of the workers. Third, the increasing operation of multinational companies has produced different cross-cultural work environments where people who have different cultures and norms work together. This is combined with the interaction of new production technologies with the psychological, stress-enhancing milieu of the local people. Research for establishing coping strategies workable as to cultural frictions in these cross-cultural work environments is thus urgently needed.

Stress
Chavalitakulchai et al. compared the psychosocial aspects of female workers in a textile factory and a pharmaceutical factory in Thailand[1]. The study showed that the pharmaceutical workers had encountered more monotony and isolation because of the work content, while the textile workers had more lack of control and self-realization. A multiple regression analysis revealed that the musculoskeletal discomforts of the two groups of workers were related to their psychosocial interactions such as work content, source of psycho-social rewards and home situations. Khaleque et al.[2] investigated the effects of polluted working conditions on the quality of life of workers in Bangladesh and found that the polluted work environment could increase the adverse psychological effects of workers’ views on their health and well-being of the workers. The study compared the psychological complaints between a polluted industry and a non-polluted industry. The results showed that the workers of the polluted industry suffered more from health problems and were less satisfied with their quality of life than those of the non-polluted industry.

Lam et al. studied the mental health and work stress in office workers in Hong Kong. Females were more dissatisfied with their work environment. They suggested that satisfactory work context and good work environment were more important for most males while vulnerability of coping abilities was more important for female workers.

The mass hysteria epidemic that occurred in Singapore in 1973 is of particular interest[4]. The outbreak occurred among some female workers in a large television assembly factory. Clinically, two types of cases were observed: "seizure": cases who went into a violent struggle, swinging the upper limbs and kicking about; and "frightened": cases who complained of dizziness, numbness and faintness and developed a state of anxiety. A similar epidemic was also known in Malaysia and Thailand. It is said that both cultural factors and occupational factors must play an important part in the cause of such mass hysteria. It should be noted that mass hysteria has occurred in assembly-line situations, where the work is monotonous and repetitive and should be different from the traditional work styles familiar to most of the workers. As preventive measures, the author stressed the importance of the employers’ attention to the psychological milieu of their workers in addition to physical or chemical factors of the work environment.

Overtime work and absenteeism
An important study on the relationship between overtime work and absenteeism was reported from the Klang Valley, Malaysia[5]. This research was aimed at examining the prevalence of sickness absenteeism among
governmental, semi-governmental and private companies. The results showed that the private companies had higher rates of absenteeism and significantly increased work lost-time percentages. Females also had significantly higher sickness absence rates in various workplaces. It was noted that overtime work was associated markedly with higher absenteeism in private companies.

Khai conducted a time-budget questionnaire study on male shift workers in a motorcycle factory in Thailand[6]. The research revealed that the overtime work and working on two continuous shifts were common among the studied workers. Compared with the day workers in the same workplace, complaints of these shift workers concerning the inconvenience of attending the social activities and the family-get-together, as well as irregular sleep and meal times, were higher.

### Cultural differences

Accelerated use of imported or transferred technologies needs increasing attention about the effects of cross-cultural differences when the local people apply these technologies[7]. It is possible that people having different cultural backgrounds may have a different understanding of the same signs and instructions in their workplaces. Courtney[8] studied the difference of the population colour stereotypes between Chinese and American people. The results showed that for concepts such as go, off and stop, the Chinese subjects did not yield such clear cut associations as those found with US subjects. Especially, the red colour for danger was not so clear for the Chinese people. He suggested that this might be because red for Chinese people means happiness and prosperity.

As many multi-national companies establish their factories in the Asia-Pacific, more attention should be paid to the psycho-social effects of the cross-cultural work environment emerging in the multi-nationals. Ohashi described cross-cultural frictions among Japanese and Filipino crew members on ocean-going “flag of convenience” vessels[9]. The same author noted the important roles of “playing-together” such as playing cards and sports, or holding birthday parties for easing the tension and breaking the psychological barriers in the cross-cultural work environment[10].

There are numerous other studies on psychological factors at work. It is important to learn from enterprise-level anti-stress programmes, including interventions by occupational health teams, and from various examples of coping strategies being undertaken by many workers.

### References