

Assessing Work Stress Through Life Experiences: A Systematic Literature Review of Qualitative Approaches

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Abstract—Occupational stress is a high-consequence construct, yet assessment practices still rely heavily on standardized instruments that produce snapshots of stress levels over a period of time. This approach is useful for comparison and estimation but is limited in explaining how workers interpret work events, relate them to prior experiences, assess available resources, and adjust their responses over time. Building on Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress, this study examines how an interview-based qualitative approach can explore occupational stress through lived experience. A systematic literature review was conducted using PRISMA 2020 on the 2016–2026 Scopus dataset. From 774 initial recordings, 773 unique recordings were screened, and 151 qualitative candidates were identified; after eligibility verification, 47 studies were included. The synthesis revealed six themes: stress as an accumulated experience; primary appraisals shaped by experience and commitment; secondary appraisals tied to institutional resources and trust; the body and domestic sphere as sites of stress; meaning and identity as drivers of tension; and reappraisal as a temporal process. Based on this synthesis, the Life-Experience Work Stress Assessment (LEWSA) framework was retained and refined as a four-layer in-depth interview architecture. This study's contribution is to offer a qualitative approach that does not replace quantitative measures but complements them by assessing how stress is experienced, interpreted, and managed within the context of workers' lives.

Keywords—job stress; transactional model of stress; life experiences; in-depth interviews; systematic literature review; PRISMA

I. INTRODUCTION

Job stress is widely researched, but assessment methods often reduce the experience to scores divorced from the context of workers' lives. Self-report instruments allow organizations to obtain easily comparable indicators, but they do not always explain why the same demands are perceived differently by different workers. From a lived-experience perspective, stress is not simply the presence of demands. Still, it is the process by which individuals interpret situations, determine what is at stake, assess their coping abilities, and respond based on available resources.

This perspective is consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress [1]. In this

model, stress arises through person-environment transactions involving a primary appraisal of a situation's meaning, a secondary appraisal of available resources and coping strategies, and reappraisal as the experience unfolds. Because the appraisal process is interpretive and temporal, an in-depth interview approach can capture mechanisms that are difficult to represent with aggregate scores. Qualitative literature also indicates that workers often attribute stress to interpersonal relationships, professional identity, organizational support, family, work meaning, and prior experiences.

Four questions guide this review. RQ1: What are the characteristics of interview-based qualitative occupational stress studies from 2016 to 2026? RQ2: How do these studies describe cognitive appraisal, coping, and reappraisal? RQ3: How do lived experiences, social contexts, and meanings shape the experience of occupational stress? RQ4: What qualitative assessment framework can be derived from this synthesis? This article's contribution is methodological: it compiles scattered qualitative evidence into a basis for developing a lived-experience-based occupational stress assessment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Transactional Model and Measurement Practices

The transactional model defines stress as a person-environment relationship that is perceived as taxing or exceeding a person's resources and endangering their well-being [1]. Three characteristics are crucial to appraisal. First, stress is evaluative: demands become stressful through the meanings individuals assign to them. Second, appraisals are influenced by personal and social resources formed from previous experiences. Third, appraisals are recursive: the meaning of a situation can change as individuals acquire new experiences, support, or coping strategies. The Job Demands–Resources framework also emphasizes that job demands and resources interact to shape strain and motivation [2]. However, these two perspectives do not, by themselves, determine how to explore workers' subjective experiences in depth.

B. Life Experience as an Assessment Resource

Phenomenological, interpretive, and narrative traditions provide this capacity. Studies in the corpus from 2016 to 2026 demonstrate the use of in-depth or semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of healthcare workers, academics, media

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workers, teachers, police officers, social workers, industrial workers, and other occupational groups. Phenomenology helps uncover the meaning of lived experiences, while narrative approaches provide a temporal structure for examining changes in meaning and turning points. However, the use of interviews in the literature is still more often directed at identifying stressors or coping strategies than at developing assessment procedures that explicitly follow the appraisal–coping–reappraisal sequence.

III. METHODOLOGY

The review followed PRISMA 2020 [3] and used thematic synthesis [4]. The analyzed Scopus dataset contained 774 records, with publications spanning 2016–2026. Eligibility criteria formulated using the SPIDER structure included adult workers in active work roles; phenomena of work stress, strain, burnout, work trauma, or appraisal and coping with work demands; qualitative or mixed-method designs with a qualitative strand; participant narratives about stress, appraisal, coping, meaning, embodiment, or trajectory as evaluation; and English-language empirical articles from the period 2016–2026. One duplicate record was removed, resulting in 773 records for screening. Metadata and abstract screening yielded 151 candidates relevant to work stress and qualitative or interview approaches. These candidates were then verified against eligibility and empirical relevance criteria, resulting in the inclusion of 47 studies in the final synthesis. The flow of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion is shown in Figure 1.

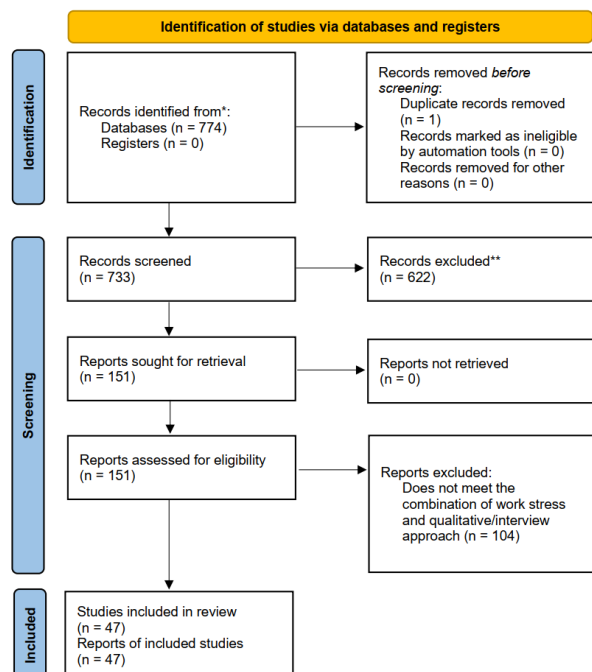


Figure 1.
PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ
2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

Quality assessment using CASP [5] was used to weigh the strength of evidence, not as the sole basis for exclusion. Synthesis followed coding, descriptive themes,

and analytical themes [4], then mapped back to the transactional model constructs.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Corpus Characteristics and Theoretical Engagement (RQ1–RQ2)

The final corpus consisted of 47 studies, all covering the period 2016–2026. Sixteen studies (34%) were published in 2016–2020, and 31 studies (66%) in 2021–2026. In-depth or semi-structured individual interviews were used in 45 studies (96%), while two studies employed additional methods that were not entirely interview based. The literature is dominated by healthcare as the single largest sector, but also includes education, corporate professions, high-risk occupations, social services, agriculture, media, and the informal sector. Geographically, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa comprise more than half of the corpus. This pattern suggests that research on work stress is increasingly conducted in non-Western contexts, but longitudinal and biographical designs remain limited.

B. Six Themes: Life Experience in Assessment (RQ3)

A synthesis of the 2016–2026 corpus yielded six analytical themes. First, stress emerges from accumulated experiences and cannot always be reduced to a single episode. Second, primary appraisals are influenced by prior experiences, commitments, identity, and what the worker deems important. Third, secondary appraisals relate to perceived available resources, including support from superiors, the organization, family, and social networks. Fourth, the body and the domestic sphere become sites where stress is recognized, and spillover occurs; some studies explicitly use somatic symptoms or work–home experiences as qualitative data. Fifth, the meaning of work, moral orientation, and identity influence the direction of stress and coping options. Sixth, experiences of stress change over time through reappraisal, so the results are more appropriately understood as trajectories rather than single scores. These six themes support the use of in-depth interviews to reconstruct the appraisal–coping–reappraisal process.

C. Methodological Gaps

Five methodological gaps explain why these qualitative insights have not yet been fully translated into stress assessment practice. First, the corpus is still heavily focused on healthcare, resulting in a relatively thin organizational and corporate context. Second, most studies use a single-point-in-time design, so reappraisal can only be captured retrospectively. Third, the concept of cognitive appraisal is often implicit in themes of experience or coping, rather than being a deliberately explored construct. Fourth, biographical and longitudinal designs are still rare. Fifth, few interview protocols can be reused as procedures for assessing stress based on lived experience. The weaknesses in reflexivity evident in the CASP assessment of the previous corpus also suggest that the researcher's positionality needs to be addressed in the interpretation process.

D. Work Stress Assessment Framework Based on Life Experience (LEWSA)

Based on this evidence, the LEWSA is maintained as a four-layer in-depth interview architecture. Layer 1 (Biographical Base) establishes the context of

experiences, work history, turning points, commitments, and beliefs before addressing stressors. Layer 2 (Appraisal Episode) explores at least one challenging work episode and one challenging but positive episode, in the following order: what happened, what was at stake, what was felt available, what was done, and what the outcome was. Layer 3 (Body and Domestic Signals) explores somatic experiences, rhythms of life, and the

spillover of work into the home. Layer 4 (Trajectories and Reappraisals) uses a timeline to track changes in meaning, resources, and coping strategies. The outcomes are not a single score, but rather a narrative profile, an appraisal-coping matrix, and a classification of trajectories of erosion, accommodation, or reconstruction.

Tabel I.
Mapping Transactional Constructs to Lewsa Layers

Lazarus Construct	Layer	Research focus	External analytics
Personal factors (commitment, belief)	Layer 1	Life and work history, turning points, obligations, beliefs about justice and control	Narrative profile; inventory of commitments
Primary assessment	Layer 2	What is at stake in negative and positive episodes	Classification of losses / threats / challenges / benefits
Secondary assessment	Layer 2 (institutional lens)	Resources assessed as available; trustworthiness of superiors and the organization	Resource maps and institutional gaps
Coping efforts	Layer 2-3	Actions taken include physical, spiritual, and family-based coping.	Culturally embedded coping typology
Tension and establishment	Layer 3	Somatic language, rhythm, domestic overflow	Body burden indicators and cross-domain spillovers
Reassessment	Layer 4	Changes in meaning over time; turning points	Trajectory classification: erosion / accommodation / reconstruction

The LEWSA is conducted in two sessions, with semi-structured guidelines that require four-layer coverage. Sample size is based on information sufficiency and phenomenological/interpretive objectives, not statistical targets. Because interviews are positioned as assessment instruments, quality requires documented reflexivity, a balance of positive and negative episodes, cultural sensitivity, participant confirmation, and a clear separation between the use of data for organizational diagnosis and employment processes. Biographical material should not be used for selection, performance appraisal, or termination.

E. Contributions and Limitations

The primary contribution of this study is shifting the focus from the question of "how stressed are workers?" to "how do workers experience, interpret, and respond to situations they perceive as stressful?" Theoretically, the LEWSA operationalizes parts of the Transactional Model that are difficult to capture with static measures. Methodologically, the LEWSA transforms in-depth interviews from an exploratory tool into a structured procedure for exploring appraisal, coping, and reappraisal. Practically, this approach can complement quantitative scales by explaining the mechanisms and context behind scores. Limitations include the use of Scopus as the sole source, the English language limitation, and the lack of empirical validation of the LEWSA. Further studies should test the LEWSA across different sectors, compare narrative results with standardized instruments using the same participants, and examine longitudinal change trajectories.

V. CONCLUSION

Work stress can be measured with scores, but the experience of stress cannot always be understood

through scores. A systematic review of 47 qualitative studies from 2016–2026 showed that workers consistently narrate stress in terms of context, prior experience, appraisal, resources, body, family, meaning of work, and change over time. This evidence supports the use of in-depth interviews as a complementary approach to assessing work stress. LEWSA translated these findings into a four-layered architecture linking biographical bases, appraisal episodes, bodily and domestic signals, and trajectories and reappraisals. The ultimate conclusion is not that quantitative measurement should be abandoned, but rather that experience-oriented assessments can illuminate the processes behind the numbers and help organizations determine what needs to change.

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