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ENVIRONMENTAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRESSES AND HEALTH,

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Abstract

Environmental and Organizational Stresses and Health

E. K. Eric Gunderson*

This report provides a review of research on environmental and organizational influences on health and describes a large-scale study in progress which involves questionnaires, interviews, on-site observations, medical data, and personnel and organizational records gathered in 23 naval organizations (20 combat ships and three shore stations) and three civilian organizations. Retest data were obtained for nine ships to provide evidence of stability or change in major dimensions studied. A general social systems model was developed for the study which encompasses a wide-range of environmental, organizational, and individual variables and provides a framework for analyzing relationships between the individual and his environment in an organizational context and also for evaluating the effectiveness of individuals, organizational units, and the organization as a whole in achieving organizational objectives.

The physical environment is viewed as an important component of the social system model. The environment has an impact at several levels of analysis and interacts with all other components to influence behavioral outcomes at individual and group levels. The environmental dimensions included in the current studies were: spatial size (crowding), temperature, ventilation, noise, illumination, color, cleanliness, odor, design of fixtures and furnishings, privacy, storage space, and safety factors. These dimensions can be used to characterize the organizational environment as a whole, or,

if significant variability is present, to differentiate among areas or spaces within the total organizational environment. Both the actual physical conditions and individual perceptions of those conditions are taken into account in assessing the effects of environment on illness. Sources of variance in environmental perceptions are separated into the following components: (a) physical aspects (objective physical conditions); (b) characteristics (perceived physical conditions on which individual raters show concensus), and (c) individual uniqueness (deviations of individual perceptions from the group mean). Finally, a difference effect can be computed (the difference between an objective measure and a characteristic or group mean). Using these separate components in predicting illness both increases prediction and helps explain why a relationship exists.

A large number of specific hypotheses pertaining to relationships between environmental and social stresses and health are tested. The results provide important new information concerning the determinants of health and effective work performance and, in addition, advances our theoretical understanding of the behavior of individuals in organizations in terms of explicating a broadly conceived social system model.

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UNCLASSIFIED

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER 76-11	2. GQVT ACCESSION NO. AD-A100 257	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Environmental and Organizational Stresses and Health		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Final
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) E. K. Eric Gunderson		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Health Research Center P.O. Box 85122 San Diego, CA 92138		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS MF51.524.002-5019
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Medical Research & Development Command National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, MD 20014		12. REPORT DATE January 1976
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 3 (Abstract)
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Department of the Navy Washington, DC 20372		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report) Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Presented at the International Congress of Psychology, Paris, France, 18-25 July 1976.		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) Organizational factors Social systems Crowding Morbidity Naval personnel		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) The report provides a review of research on environmental and organizational influences on health and describes a large-scale study in progress which involves questionnaires, interviews, on-site observations, medical data, and personnel and organizational records gather in 23 naval organizations and three civilian organizations.		

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