The stress of work and work of stress in Britain in the late twentieth century

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how stress was used as a means of explaining and understanding the changes that were taking place in large sections of Britain’s workforce during the 1980s and 1990s. By bringing together personal accounts of how people understood and explained the effects of these adjustments on their everyday lives with the popular discourse of stress in the media, I will show how stress became a key means of interpreting the significant social and economic change that was occurring. It also brought about change in both working practices and the ways in which work and well-being were understood by both individual workers and their employers. I will also examine how newspaper reporting of stress suffered by public sector workers, particularly in the NHS and education, revealed the tensions underlying reforms in these areas and will argue that by focusing on worker experience of stress, such reporting effectively drew attention away from the underlying structural changes causing that stress.

Introduction

In 1986 a television programme was broadcast on the newly-created Channel Four, entitled ‘How to survive the 9 to 5’, accompanied by a book of the same name and intended to specifically explore the symptoms and causes of stress in a wide range of jobs and to suggest ‘management practices, counselling and courses’ that might help viewers and readers. Interviewed for a Guardian article, the programme’s producer commented that, ‘Everyone we spoke to had at least one stressful symptom but few of them recognised it as stress’.1 His comment reflects the cultural time-lag between the public, media discussion of stress and the adoption and application of the concept to their own circumstances by ordinary people. Similarly, a 33-year-old woman teaching in a comprehensive school in the mid-1980s explained to the Mass Observation Project (MOP), ‘In the last month I have been prescribed mild tranquiliser [sic] as the doctor says I am suffering from “stress” … I do not normally feel ill and do not normally feel particularly stressed’.2 Her use of speech marks around the word ‘stress’ suggests that she was deploying terminology that was as unfamiliar to her as the experience it was labelling. Another MOP respondent reflected her awareness of the impact of this growing public discourse: ‘My job is very stressful and I must admit to feeling tense often and not
seeing how I can avoid it. Undoubtedly the media makes us more aware of our health and that is certainly true of myself now, whereas 5 years ago I never gave it a thought. Her comment is astute in identifying how the extensive media discussion about the apparently increasing incidence of stress in the 1980s and 1990s effectively became self-fulfilling.

In this article, I will argue that during this period the concept of stress became a ubiquitous explanation for people’s responses to specific societal changes, such as the pressures of changing work environments, worries about finance and fears of unemployment. Not only did stress become a pervasive label for such experiences, but its adoption effectively prompted changes in working practices as well as individual and organisational understandings of work and well-being. I will also suggest that the concept was deployed in newspaper reporting of public sector workers, particularly those in the National Health Service (NHS) and education, in a way that displaced concern about the structural changes and reforms affecting those areas by instead focusing on worker stress. By framing workers as either contributors to an inefficient and out of date system or victims of neo-liberal government reforms, such coverage illustrates the inherent tensions that arose between the application of government policy and the underlying popular support for institutions like the NHS and their workers.

As well as examining contemporary newspaper reporting, this paper draws on personal testimony from the MOP, which was a renewal of the original Mass Observation social research begun in the 1930s. The revived MOP began in 1981 and since then has issued two or three sets of questions, known as directives, each year to a panel of volunteer writers across Britain. Although the directives serve as prompts for topics to write about, the respondents are free to ignore them, digress or write about what they are interested in or think important. The writings that are discussed here are not statistically representative of all Britons but they do offer insight into the views and experiences of ‘ordinary’ people, and although ‘ordinariness’ can be understood itself as a historicised term with shifting meanings, the sense here is of people whose voices would not normally be heard in public life. By bringing together the dominant public narratives of stress with personal accounts of life in the 1980s and 1990s I will demonstrate how people understood and explained the effects of social, political and economic changes on their lives through the concept of stress.

**Stress**

Clues to why stress had become such a contemporary concern by the 1980s can be traced back to the increased funding for research into stress in the post-war period. In the first half of the century, the concept of stress did not exist, although many of the ideas now associated with it were being developed, such as Walter Cannon’s (1871–1945) ‘fight or flight’ theory, and the term was understood within the context of an expression such as the ‘stress and strain of war’. However, it was neither a recognised scientific concept nor did it exist as a medical diagnosis, and was not the label that an ordinary person might use to explain particular feelings of distress when under pressure. In such circumstances, if people did explain their feelings, they were more likely to talk about ‘strain’ or ‘nerves’. Although the scientific history of stress can be traced back to several figures, including Cannon before the Second World War and Harold Wolff (1898–1962), Stewart G Wolf...
(1914–2005), and Richard S. Lazarus (1922–2002) after it, Hans Selye (1907–1982) is most associated with the popularisation of the concept. He presented stress as an identifiable physiological reaction that could be seen in all organisms in response to environmental agents and represented the organism’s attempt to maintain balance or homoeostasis. Selye published widely on stress from the 1950s onwards, for both academic and popular audiences, producing an 800-page monograph in 1950 and a series of annual reports on stress between 1951–55 followed by a best-selling book, *The Stress of Life* in 1956. Whilst Selye’s concept was not universally accepted, Russell Viner has argued that his skill at self-publicising and his ability to draw on particular networks that were powerful in a Cold War, post-war consumer-driven society, proved serendipitous.

Selye's idea of stress as a way of understanding the body’s response to overwhelming external stressors seemed to offer the potential to fulfil the military’s desire for inexhaustible troops and industry’s wish to avoid hiring workers who would prove unable to sustain the pace of their work, and both sectors provided considerable funding for a range of research into stress in the post-war period. Thus the combination of Selye’s idea and his successful self-publicising and networking, and the desires of both industry and the military created a situation in which Selye and many other researchers could find willing funding for research into stress in fields ranging from the physiological and medical to the psychological and organisational.

It is significant that within these sometimes-competing fields of research stress was not necessarily defined and understood in the same way. Indeed by the early 1980s the US National Research Council was expressing concern over its ‘conceptual chaos’, and summarising the field of stress research in the late 1980s Lawrence Hinkle stated, ‘there is still today no generally agreed upon definition of “stress” … nevertheless, biological, social and behavioural scientists have continued to use the term’. Writing more recently, Mark Jackson noted, ‘despite our familiarity with the notion, stress remains an elusive concept’ and concluded that while we know when we are stressed, we do not have a consistent, precise definition and only partly understand how stress is created and its effects on our physical and mental health. This article will not offer a definition of stress but instead uses the term in the same vernacular way that has been deployed by journalists and ordinary people, most of whom have learned the vocabulary of stress from the ongoing public and popular discourse. Thus stress in this context refers to a potentially wide range of feelings and experiences that might include feeling under pressure, overwhelmed by work, anxious, depressed and unable to cope, but also takes in Cannon’s ‘flight or fight’ notion and the understanding that some life events are inherently stressful, an idea developed by Holmes and Rahe in the 1960s. This reflects both the way in which stress has operated and continues to operate within popular understanding and discourse and the mutability that has made it a critical and enduring concept across multiple disciplines.

The notion of stress as both a response to external stressors and a diagnostic category became deeply embedded within academic research from the late 1950s and also began to enter into popular media such as newspapers. In the US, Elizabeth Siegel Watkins has tracked how academic research on stress was taken up by the popular media, disseminating ideas in a more general and populist way, and translating the language of academia and medicine into a vernacular vocabulary of stress. As she points out, this process was not a simple linear one but was often reciprocal with popular understanding and
communication about stress feeding back into academic research. As I have discussed elsewhere, a similar pattern is evident in Britain in the post-war period, as newspapers widened their subject matter to include topics like mental health that had previously been considered taboo, as they fought to attract readers and compete with the growing influence of television. In desiring to draw readers in and maintain circulation figures newspapers increasingly featured health and health-scare stories that related to the lives of their readers and drew on academic ideas and research.

‘How to Survive the 9–5’ was based on academic research by Cary Cooper of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, whose work on stress in organisations in the 1980s provided a rich source of material for newspapers looking for stories that might capture their readers’ attention. The frequency with which Cooper’s work appeared in newspapers speaks not only to the development of organisational stress research and his success in publicising his work but also to how the subject matter could be co-opted into eye-catching headlines that spoke both to workers suffering stress and the employers whose profits were affected by the resulting sick leave. One such example is an article from the Sunday Times that appeared in February 1985, titled ‘Working can be a health hazard’, illustrated by a table showing ‘your place in the stress league’. This ranking of sixty occupations showed miners, police and construction workers at the top and nursery nurses, museum workers and librarians at the bottom. The majority of people would undoubtedly have acknowledged the stressfulness of a dangerous job like mining, although most miners or ex-miners might have found their more recent stress related to the year-long strike of 1984–5 and the divisions it brought about within their communities. However, it perhaps came as a surprise to nursery nurses, librarians and those working in museums to find that their occupations were deemed so lacking in stress. It is notable that many of those occupations were more likely to be held by women, revealing both the gendering of occupations as well as the related stress. While a role being ranked as low in stress might appear a positive attribute, there is a sense that it somehow also diminished its importance. Popular perceptions of stress rested on associations with danger and risk or with high-status roles such as business executives. This latter connection was largely a legacy of the historical diagnosis of neurasthenia developed in the nineteenth century that suggested that only the sensitive and educated who worked with their brains were susceptible to mental strain.

For the librarians, nursery nurses and museum workers, as well as others such as vicars, astronomers and beauty therapists whose occupations were also ranked at the bottom of the stress league table, such a classification appeared to deny the pressure of such work, and thus its value and importance. It also took little account of the growing awareness of the psychological toll of care work which was largely carried out by women. It is doubtful that this was Coopers’ intention, and to a great extent, the stress league table was simply a way of drawing readers into the article, which scarcely discussed the rankings, instead focusing on the risks that stress posed to Britain’s workforce, such as high blood pressure and depression. The article concluded with a warning that stress could often be a precursor of heavy drinking and wider mental illness. Much of the media coverage of stress drew attention to the need for British employers to introduce stress reduction programmes to relieve pressure on their employees and avoid the economic impact of increasing stress-related sickness absence. For the most part, such advice fell on deaf ears in mid-1980s Britain, as
few employers were yet to see the urgency of the issue or indeed, to recognise that it was their responsibility. However, what such media reporting does illustrate is both the way in which newspapers drew on research to create content that would appeal to a range of readers, but also how status (and thus gender) was embedded within popular understandings of stress.

The expansion of categories of people who were deemed vulnerable to stress beyond the cliché of the high-flying executive drew not only on academic research but also resulted partly from the impact of Health and Safety at work legislation. The Act of 1974 effectively extended the remit of legislation beyond physical health to include the much wider field of mental health, a field that encompassed a potentially huge range of experiences and interpretations. Such an expansion meant that organisations now had to consider the effects of work on mental health and adjust their policies and practices accordingly, though in many cases organisational responses to this were gradual. The Civil Service, one of the largest employers in Britain at the time with almost 700,000 staff, only introduced a single day course on managing stress at its training facility in 1984 and those running large commercial organisations could be sceptical about links between work and stress and were keen to position employee mental health problems as the responsibility of the individual, not the corporation.23 Coupled with the Health and Safety legislation was an increasing propensity more generally within society to interpret human experience using psychological frameworks, as Mathew Thomson has discussed.24 This refocused attitudes towards the effects of work on mental health, so that by the time ‘how to survive the 9 to 5’ was broadcast in 1986, stress was becoming a familiar label for workplace experiences.25

To some extent, the greater visibility of stress within public discourse meant that concern about the increase in stress cases effectively became self-fulfilling in the 1980s as people adopted the concept and terminology and applied it to themselves. In this way we can see how the concept was transforming understandings of work, health and well-being. Stress was something that people might suffer from, but it was also framing the way that they perceived the world, particularly the workplace. It was not just a question of a new diagnostic category creating an apparent rise in cases. It is evident that people in the 1980s did feel that life was more stressful, several respondents to the MOP volunteering this sentiment, such as this female agricultural worker in 1984: ‘Talking to people similar to myself I realise that at the present time there is more stress than I can ever remember’.26 As I have argued elsewhere, each generation tends to believe that the world is more complex and challenging compared to previous periods, often framing this concern around the threats engendered by ‘modern life’, particularly in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.27 Clearly, the subjective nature of such judgements makes comparisons largely pointless, and what is important is the perception and rationale behind such beliefs at the time. An examination of personal testimony from the MOP will illustrate why people felt the 1980s and 1990s to be a stressful era, however, I will begin by briefly examining the existing historiography that has framed the period as one of crisis, disaster, decline and anxiety.

**Crisis and disasters**

Both the 1980s and the preceding decade have been portrayed as periods of crisis and decline in Britain. The notion of the 1970s as a decade of crisis is not only common in the popular imagination but also forms the basis of much historical work, as Emily Robinson
et al point out in their article on the growth of individualism. The 1970s are most often seen as the pivotal period in the decline of the post-war consensus and rise of neo-liberal Thatcherism, and work such as Jennifer Crane’s research on pro-NHS activism in the 1980s situates such campaigning within exactly this context of the post-war consensus and welfare system coming under challenge as part of a larger ‘crisis’ resulting from Thatcherite policies. While work has been done to disrupt and destabilise this view (particularly of the 1970s), there remains a sense that the concept of crisis is useful in understanding the period, because it captures something of the scale, potential and drive for change that was occurring.

Feeding this sense of crisis was a sense of national decline often fuelled by the ‘near-apocalyptic mood of media crisis-mongers’ in the mid to late 1970s. Although Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite identify this focus on decline as an electoral tactic by the Conservatives to heighten the sense that Labour was failing, it was undoubtedly also contributing to a sense of malaise, tension and worry that by no means disappeared with Thatcher’s election in 1979. Against this background, Robinson et al have argued that the period was also marked by a growing desire for autonomy and self-determination and that the ‘popular individualism’ developing during these years fuelled frustration and anger against an ‘establishment’ that might appear to be thwarting it. The tensions between this growing desire for individualism within a societal and state structure that in many ways had traditionally been based around a much more collective model undoubtedly created a sense for some of crisis both national and personal. Certainly, amongst some of MOP’s respondents in the 1980s, there was an evident sense of this increasing individualism and disparity between different groups, with one middle-aged mother of an unemployed teenager commenting on Thatcher’s re-election in 1983 that she felt ‘... that the divide between the have and have-nots will widen beyond control’. One manifestation of this popular individualism was an increasing materialism reflected in attitudes captured by a Gallup poll in 1990 showing that over two-thirds of respondents believed that an ‘I’m alright Jack’ attitude was ‘in’ by the end of the 1980s.

While Stephen Brooke has argued that the idea of crisis is a useful starting point in examining the 1980s, he has also pointed to the period as a series of crises rather than a singular crisis. This sense of a sequence of crises or disasters is also apparent in understandings of the succession of domestic and international disasters that occurred during the period. Shane Ewen and Aaron Andrews refer to a ‘series of mass-casualty events’ that they argue came to define the 1980s and were embedded in popular culture according to Lucy Robinson’s research on charity singles. Events included the fire at Bradford football stadium, the sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry off Zeebrugge, shootings at Dunblane and Hungerford, the Kings Cross station fire, Piper Alpha oil rig explosion, crushing of fans at Hillsborough stadium and the extensive famine in North Africa that prompted the Live Aid events. These and other transport and industrial disasters and fires as well as the ongoing IRA mainland bombing campaign and continuing Cold War nuclear anxieties formed the media backdrop to the everyday lives of Britons in the 1980s. As such, a general and sometimes specific, sense of anxiety and stress might seem a reasonable response to ongoing events. Indeed, asked in early 1990 to look back and recall the 1980s as a decade, for several of MOP’s respondents such disasters were at the forefront of their recollection of the decade, framing their perceptions and the context for their more personal memories.
The 1980s can therefore be seen as a period of crisis or crises, of numerous disasters, in which the legacy of a sense of national decline was still strongly felt and as a decade in which increasing materialism and individualism were creating a competitive and individualised approach to life that was in contrast to earlier periods when for many, more cohesive class identities encouraged a wider sense of community. Although Lawrence’s work has challenged the simplified view that the latter part of the twentieth century was one in which individualism triumphed over community, he acknowledges that what constitutes community did change and that from the 1980s onwards people struggled to find a balance between individualism and community particularly against a backdrop that saw markets as the drivers of ‘public good’. While Brooke has queried whether understanding the 1980s through the notion of crisis had any ‘purchase in ordinary life’, the responses of writers for the MOP would seem to indicate that it did. Their testimony suggests that ordinary people framed not only the events and disasters reflected in everyday media as crises but also many of their individual, personal experiences. Such accounts combine the personal with the societal in a way that gives weight to the significance of both in the lives of ordinary Britons. People reported feelings of stress precisely because it offered a label for their response to this combination of wider societal, economic and political changes and disasters and their impact on specific, personal circumstances.

**Debt, unemployment and job security**

Key themes emerging from the writings of Mass Observers in this period include personal finance, fears about and experiences of unemployment, and concerns over changes to work and job security, all of which caused stress. Fuelling much of the increased materialism and individualism that historians of the period have identified, were significant changes to personal finance. Between the late 1960s and early 1980s, there were fundamental shifts in the availability of credit and public attitudes towards its use. While for many this enabled improved standards of living, it also brought with it increases in debt and the subsequent psychological and sometimes legal problems that could accrue. Amy Edwards has argued that Conservative campaigning in the 1980s linked homeownership to notions of citizenship and responsibility and was centred on the language of hard work and self-improvement coupled with ideas of social mobility that positioned it almost as a social obligation. A female clerical officer reported to MOP in 1984 ‘In the society we have today there is a tremendous pressure to “get on” or “better yourself” whatever that may mean, although sadly that appears to be acquiring more and more material goods etc’. While her sceptical tone in emphasising ‘get on’ and ‘better yourself’ suggests that she did not subscribe to this view, many Britons did. The Thatcherite economic ‘revolution’ increased share ownership, homeownership and the expansion of financial products targeted at the ‘ordinary’ citizen. This normalisation of ‘financial consumerism’ underpinned the alignment of Conservative Party ideology with personal finance and according to Edwards used the language of ordinariness as a ‘discursive strategy’ to link capital ownership to everyday consumer behaviours. The world of share buying and the stock market was made simple and accessible through share dealing services in high street banks such as the Cooperative Bank and the financial services arms of large stores such as Marks and Spencer. This notion of the ‘property-owning democracy’ publicly espoused
by Thatcher not only helped to drive forward the Conservative ideological agenda but also had the useful side effect of producing an electorate more likely to vote for those who had enabled the achievement of this aspiration.\textsuperscript{47}

Becoming a homeowner was clearly framed in 1980s Britain as one of the ways in which a person could ‘get on’ and many people took the opportunity afforded by the consumer credit boom to buy property. The ensuing boom was reflected in house prices which increased considerably over the period, from a nationwide average cost in 1980 of £16,823 to £59,534 in 1989.\textsuperscript{48} In some areas, such as the South-East, regional increases were even greater, although other more localised ‘boom’ areas flourished too. A Mass Observer living in Aberdeen reported that ‘In 1980 a four bedroomed, ranch style, timber framed house cost £45,750, by 1986 that same house was valued for insurance purposes at £86,900’.\textsuperscript{49} Such increases in value enabled many people to borrow money against the rapidly increasing value of their assets. In early 1987 total personal credit granted, but as yet unpaid, was more than £30,000 million while outstanding borrowings for house purchases were £153,666 million.\textsuperscript{50} Reductions in income tax in the 1988 budget taking the top rate from 60% to 40% and the standard rate to 25% only served to fuel the credit boom which in turn drove increasing inflation, from 7.8% in 1989 to 9.5% in 1990.\textsuperscript{51}

A significant factor in this apparent revolution was the change in attitudes towards personal debt. For while the use of credit mechanisms such as regularly pawning household goods had often been the only way to manage poverty or survive unemployment for the poorest workers throughout the century, it had been treated as a ‘necessary evil’ and its use largely disliked and even disapproved of. Use of credit had increased after the Second World War, but escalated rapidly from the late 1970s, thanks to changing attitudes. According to the National Consumer Council, these changed markedly and swiftly between 1970 when people had felt that the use of credit was undesirable, to the point in the 1980s where credit was simply regarded as part of everyday life.\textsuperscript{52} In the mid-1960s bank credit cards were largely unknown, but by 1988 approximately 22 million had been issued by Access and Barclaycard and there were believed to be about six million retail store cards in use.\textsuperscript{53}

The downside to the boom in consumer credit was that the value of assets could go down as well as up. House prices in the south-east of England fell by more than 35% between 1989 and 1992 and throughout the 1980s and early 1990s there were periodic adjustments in values across the country in response to economic conditions.\textsuperscript{54} Writing in late 1986 one woman described the effects in Aberdeen of an OPEC decision to reduce the price of oil which had disastrous results for the people and businesses that had developed as Aberdeen benefited from North Sea oil: ‘Many people who have been made redundant wish to move South to find work but are unable to sell their houses … there are 5,000 houses on the market … our house, insured for £86,900 is on the market for £75,000. We have had one enquiry since September.’\textsuperscript{55}

Many Britons who had willingly embraced the notion of the property-owning democracy and easily available credit, found that the volatility and frequent increases in interest rates that affected their monthly repayments had a detrimental effect on both their finances and their personal relationships and mental health. As one woman explained, ‘My health generally is good. My tensions are directly related to money worries’.\textsuperscript{56} Bank of England interest rates on which the banks and building societies set their rates, varied greatly across the decade reaching their lowest point at 8.56%
in 1984 and ending on a high of 14.88% in 1989.\textsuperscript{57} For borrowers, this volatility meant sudden rises in mortgage and debt repayments that for many were simply unmanageable. A man in his thirties told the MOP in 1987 of his experience of losing control of his credit card payments which ‘started off as being planned’ but ‘became chaotic when the plan was not kept’. Ultimately he was forced to sell his car to pay off the debts on two credit cards.\textsuperscript{58} Another observer who worked in a Citizen’s Advice Bureau reported that they had dealt with numerous cases of individuals tempted by the easy credit offered by credit cards and store cards even to those who were unemployed and clearly not in a position to easily repay any debt.\textsuperscript{59}

The stress of living in such a situation took its toll on people, indeed for many new property owners, the financial struggle was too much and they defaulted on their mortgages leading to a swathe of repossessions. Commenting on monthly mortgage repayments, Labour MP Tony Gould told the House of Commons in December 1989:

\[ \text{... average monthly repayments for the country as a whole since May 1988 have risen from £259 to £347, an increase of no less than £88 per month. In London, the figures are even worse, because they reflect a rise of £162 per month. Increases of that magnitude will have shattered even the most careful of household budgets and will have plunged thousands of families into the most desperate of financial plights.} \]

He went on to point out that there had been 6,350 building society repossessions in the first half of the year but that this was fewer than the previous year and did not reflect the true picture because not all mortgages were issued by building societies.\textsuperscript{60} Even those who did manage to hold on to their homes found the volatility of house values continued to cause them financial headaches as well as much personal heartache and in one Mass Observer’s case, poor mental health. She explained, ‘The depression is due to our current housing conditions (we have found that the house we bought two years ago is worth £4000 less than we paid for it despite having this amount spent on it). We can neither sell it (as this would leave us with a debt, nor can we leave for the same reason, nor can we afford to make it habitable—which will cost about £10,500+). We originally paid £14,000 ... at present there seems to be no way out of our problems, hence my health problems’.\textsuperscript{61}

Worries about mortgage and credit repayments were compounded by a similarly volatile job market. Unemployment and fear of unemployment became a significant cause of stress for many ordinary Britons, particularly in the early 1980s. Between 1979 and 1984 the unemployment rate rose from 5.4\% to 12.1\% and although it had reduced to 7.6\% by the time Thatcher resigned in 1990, it was soon on the rise again reaching almost 11\% by 1993.\textsuperscript{62} Unsurprisingly, the research organisation MORI consistently identified unemployment as the first choice of both men and women when asked to identify important issues during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{63} Job losses and redundancies became standard news broadcasting fodder while unemployment and stories of the unemployed were reflected in popular culture in television dramas such as Alan Bleasdale’s \textit{Boys from the Black stuff} about a group of jobless men in Liverpool, initially shown on BBC2 in the Autumn of 1982 and then repeated two months later on BBC1, such was its popularity and relevance to the zeitgeist.\textsuperscript{64} The long strike by many miners in 1984–5 and the print workers strike of 1986–7 both received considerable news coverage of the clashes
between strikers and police and provided a long-running reminder of what was at stake for those in declining heavy industries or where new technology was bringing radical change.

In those regions where long-term industrial decline was coming to fruition, the closure of major employers such as British Steel in Consett in 1980 meant that for many the experience of unemployment was real and alternative job opportunities few or non-existent. Lee John, interviewed in 1999 as part of the British Library’s Millennium Memory Bank Collection, was typical and his response a common one:

... when the works eventually closed in September 1980 I was probably like many other people, very, very bitter, depressed, angry all the negative feelings ... and I just didn’t know where to turn, I had no other skills only steel making.65

John also commented on the negative effects of unemployment on the health of his former colleagues who were unable to find alternative employment:

... we’d been brought up on the work ethic that it’s wholesome to work, so what does it do to a man or a woman who finds at 50 years of age that they’re no longer wanted in paid employment. That’s very damaging to self-image it’s er, and I’ve seen people who live close to me and I was close friends with getting very depressed and suffering healthwise because of that.66

Similarly, a PE teacher who had been made redundant told the MOP in 1984 that she had had ‘a lot of stressful things happen—mainly trying to find a job—lack of money etc ... I know that the loss of a secure and satisfying job and the inability to get another is affecting my health adversely’.67 The detrimental effects of unemployment on health were reiterated by a middle-aged ex-social worker, replying to the same directive, who suggested that ‘many more people have illnesses both mental and physical when they are unemployed’.68 The experience of being unemployed in this period was well-documented at the time by writers such as Jeremy Seabrook who demonstrated the effects on both the unemployed individual in terms of withdrawal from social connections, changes in status and the struggle to find meaningful new employment, but also on their family.69 The visibility of unemployment through popular culture and news reporting meant that few in Britain during the 1980s could be unaware of the potential consequences of job loss and many lived in fear of it, creating a constant underlying sense of anxiety that coupled with financial worries made for considerable stress.

In 1984, an ex-banker, who had been forced to take early retirement due to a nervous breakdown, explained to the MOP that the very process of being unemployed and trying to find work was also a source of significant stress: ‘A few months registering as unemployed brought with it several DHSS and Manpower Commission interviews to find me (unsuccessfully) a new job, which were just as pressure making’. The result of this ‘pressure’ was that he stopped signing on to avoid this additional strain, thus disappearing from the unemployment statistics, and made do on the small pension he was able to draw. This led to an improvement in his health and the development of ‘... a hobby which brought in a few extra pennies’.70 A much younger man was also clear about the effects of joblessness, ‘I do have a great deal of stress from being unemployed’, although he was hopeful that this was a ‘transient state’, which was probably a more realistic hope for him given his youth, compared to the older ex-
banker or the redundant steelworkers. The experience of being unemployed was one that created strain and stress which in many cases was further compounded by the financial commitments that the consumer boom and the drive for homeownership had produced.

A further compounding factor for many was the uncertainty of intermittent employment. Although many in traditional areas of heavy industry experienced significant and debilitating long-term unemployment as Lee John explained, for others, it was the experience of being in and out of work and the constant uncertainty that caused strain. A 35-year-old housewife explained: ‘Family life for the past two and a half years has not been stable as my husband has been employed or unemployed—the latter in particular causing stress.’ Indeed for many in 1980s Britain, the only way to find employment was to travel long distances or work away from home for long periods, something that was encapsulated in the popular television programme ‘Auf Wiedersehen, Pet’ which ran from 1983–1986 on ITV and told the story of the trials and tribulations of a group of builders, mostly from the North East who were forced to travel to West Germany to find work. Such practices inevitably brought their own stresses for both worker and their family, as the housewife above went on to explain. Her husband was now working away from home during the week, ‘... so I have the children to cope with—alone for the greater part of the week... today I have felt very sorry for myself and depressed...’ Similarly, another younger woman of 28 explained that her mental health had ‘been very bad over the past couple of years. This is due to my husband having a job which means he’s away for the best part of each year’. She went on to recount that this situation as well as the death of her mother had led to her being prescribed tranquillisers. The volatility of employment, the long-term decline of some heavy industries in areas that had few alternative sources of employment, the necessity for increasing flexibility and willingness to travel or relocate were all sources of strain for many individuals and families in the period. Those who might wish to relocate to find work found that the rapid increases in house prices during the period, particularly in the South-East where unemployment was least significant, proved a barrier to mobility as they simply could not afford the cost of housing, contributing to the sense of a North/South divide.

Even for those who were employed there was a growing change in work culture that an older farm worker reported to the MOP in the mid-1980s, explaining:

Mental stress seems to be worse these days and no one is interested. For working people small wages and large bills are an endless worry, the fear of unemployment causes people to go to work when they are ill, the shortages of staff at work is another reason for people going to work when they could do with a couple of days off.

Workers were afraid that absence through illness would make them appear less effective and thus put them more at risk of being considered superfluous if reorganisations or redundancy threatened. This fuelled an increasing ‘presenteeism’ whereby people turned up for work whether they were physically or mentally ill or not, as the farmworker noted, and with detrimental effects for both worker and employer alike. Within work environments, there was a growing sense of the increased pressure of work, as a government press officer expressed, ‘... lately it has become so busy, hectic, stressful that there seems little time for everyday pleasantries in the office—such as discussing the weekend on
a Monday morning’. She went on to refer to the ‘stresses and strains’ of the type of work she did, explaining that ‘it is the sort of job from which it is difficult to switch off, even when I am not on duty’.\(^8\)

As these two comments from the early 1980s illustrate work culture was changing and in many cases quite rapidly. By the late 1990s, a male charity worker explained its impact: ‘There are precious few jobs for life now. With a constant labour surplus, jobs will remain less secure than they did 25 years ago when there was almost full employment. I think this puts huge stresses on a lot of people’.\(^8\) Similarly, an older woman from Aberystwyth also reflected on the change:

Very many people are employed on short term contracts so job security has gone. This means that loyalty to a firm or employer doesn’t grow because there is no certainty that an employee will be kept on . . . There is the perpetual stress and uncertainty of not knowing if their contract will be renewed. People work longer and longer hours to impress their employers so that they will want to keep them on – yet another contributory factor to the break-up of family life. People used to be valued and appreciated if they worked well + conscientiously – now they are just statistics.\(^8\)

Both accounts reflect a shift to temporary, insecure forms of employment that Arthur McIvor has argued diminished the ways in which work contributed to identity, pushing people to turn to leisure and consumption as well as family to create meaning in their lives.\(^8\) Evidently doing so, in some cases, contributed further to financial strains as credit cards and easy financing deals enabled the purchase of such consumer goods and leisure activities.

To some extent, such accounts reflect a nostalgia for a mythologised past of full employment, job security and stressless jobs. However, these views evidently arose because people were conscious that the experience of work had changed and was changing and that much of this stemmed from the diminished relationship between employer and worker resulting from short-term contracts, out-sourcing and the loss of job security.\(^4\) Writing in the 1990s, a primary school teacher complained that her work took over every area of her life, unlike that of her parents who could ‘shut their minds off from work after working hours’, echoing the view of the government press officer above. She was also effectively describing not just a state of mind, but a set of work practices that were becoming the norm for those experiencing cost-cutting and efficiency improvements, whilst also adapting to new technologies that were blurring the lines between working life and home life.\(^5\) The cultural context for understanding work and its negative effects on individuals had also shifted from a norm of stoicism and commitment to work that had been grounded in the solidarity of community and communal experience whether from trade unions or social networks focused around specific employers, to one that was increasingly individualised and that pathologised many negative aspects of daily life and framed work as inherently stressful. For workers in the 1980s the pressures and strains of work, be it permanent or short-term, and of intermittent and long-term unemployment were closely tied up with a public discourse that framed such experiences as stressful. What might previously have been understood as a normal response to difficult or challenging work or perhaps a temporary miserable existence in a much-despised job, was now reframed as stress and tied closely to a changing work culture that no longer put a premium on loyalty and long-service, solidarity and community but was based on individualism and the market.\(^6\)
Public sector workers

Therefore, life for many during the 1980s and 1990s was understood as implicitly stressful. Whether this was due to the financial difficulties that accompanied large personal debt and increasing interest rates, loss of job security, unemployment or intermittent work, long-distance commuting or the erosion of distinctions between work and home life, people felt that life was more stressful and this was reflected and reinforced through the public discourse on stress. Newspapers and other media reported regularly on the dangers of stress to health, on the cost of stress-related absenteeism for businesses, on ways of managing stress and frequently identified particular groups to suggest their particular vulnerability to stress, including children and the clergy.\(^8\) For the most part, writing about the way that stress affected particular groups was a common feature of media coverage and a method of recycling the topic to fill newspapers. However, public sector workers were the particular focus of regular, repeated press coverage that used the concept of stress in contradictory ways to both vilify and victimise the alleged sufferers.

Public sector workers, and health workers, teachers and social workers in particular, were specifically identified in the media during the 1980s and 1990s as groups who were particularly vulnerable to stress. To some extent, there are obvious reasons for this: the public sector during the period was undergoing considerable change driven by successive Conservative governments’ desire for a smaller state and an economy underpinned by the market rather than state planning.\(^8\) Inevitably this meant restructuring, cost efficiency drives, and the introduction of new technology, but these were also underpinned by an ideological threat to the very nature of public service that was a pivotal issue for both government and the voting public. While privatisation of the NHS might be an ideological goal for such governments, those in power were well aware that it would be a step too far for voters.\(^9\) Short of that, however, reform might be used to reduce the size and cost of the civil service and introduce market practices into the NHS. The tension between the deep-seated goodwill of the public towards public sector institutions such as the NHS demonstrated in campaigning groups such as ‘Keep our NHS Public’ and the government’s neo-liberal agenda was played out in the contradictory ways in which workers in the sector were represented in press coverage.\(^9\) Alternately seen as a part of the problem or victim of it, their portrayal as stressed and sometimes ‘burnt-out’ workers not only illustrated the political tensions but demonstrated one way in which public discussion might be diverted from the structural issues by a focus on the apparent inability of individual workers to cope.

The public sector reforms instituted by successive governments under Margaret Thatcher and John Major have been characterised as an ‘attack on the professional ethic’ fuelled in part by Thatcher’s personal suspicion that professionals were insufficiently self-critical or responsive to market forces, and too prominent in defending the welfare tradition, particularly in health and education.\(^9\) Thatcherite ideology positioned public sector workers as privileging their own interests over those of the public they were supposed to be serving based on an assumption of never-ending tax-generated funding that relieved them of the necessity to be prudent, efficient or innovative.\(^9\) The fact that many public services operated as effective monopolies was also seen as a failing as this reduced the incentive for efficiency and innovation but also prevented private sector organisations from challenging them in an open market.\(^9\) The proponents of these new
ideas rejected the notion that many people deliberately chose to work in services such as health care, social work or education, rather than in commercial organisations because of a real commitment to public service. The implementation of reforms designed to improve efficiency, create competition and marketise the sector, often underpinned by performance indicators, league tables and a steady stream of audits, apparently ignored the effect that such changes in both practice and ethos might have on the morale of the very large workforce involved, for whom the changes mostly meant longer working hours and a great deal more stress.

In the first six months of 1987, amongst the general coverage of government reforms affecting the public sector, more than half of the articles featuring stress that ran in The Guardian or The Times focused specifically on public sector workers. It was relatively commonplace for newspaper coverage to focus on health workers in the NHS, teachers or social workers as professions of particular concern regarding stress. Indeed, doctors, nurses, teachers and social workers all featured in and scored above average in Cooper’s occupational stress league in the Sunday Times article of 1985 mentioned earlier. Such articles focused on how people in these professions were particularly at risk of stress or ‘burn-out’ and often reported on the effect that this was having on either recruitment or people leaving the profession. For example, The Times reported in 1984 that doctors in the NHS were ‘suffering burn-out’. Burn-out was a phrase adopted by Herbert Freudenberger, a psychiatrist working in the US in the 1970s, to describe the process by which those working in care-giving and service occupations became exhausted by and detached from their work leading to a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment, all of which resulted from interpersonal stressors. By the 1980s the term was being used more broadly to apply to anyone who was perceived to be overworked or under extreme stress for long periods, and often used of sportsmen and women.

The Times article was based on a survey of 156 hospital and family doctors in Aberdeen published initially in the Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. According to its authors, 83% of respondents reported that ‘they suffered periods of physical, emotional or intellectual exhaustion’, while 68% ‘found their work stressful’ and almost half had suffered ‘appreciable periods of boredom, frustration and disenchantment with their work’, which for eight per cent led to clinical depression. The article went on to suggest that ‘recent social and economic conditions, such as high unemployment levels and cutbacks, have tended to increase occupational stress’ and that ‘government and bureaucratic intrusion is increasing’. Coupled with this was a sense that the medical profession no longer felt ‘privileged or special’. What is interesting here is not only that social and economic conditions and government reforms were being blamed but that doctors themselves were feeling a loss of status. The key role of work in constructing a sense of identity and conferring status made it (and make it) socially and psychologically important, as John Lee suggested in his testimony about the redundant steelworkers of Consett. So it is perhaps not surprising that doctors whose status was being eroded were feeling the strain. What is also pertinent is that although external circumstances were acknowledged as creating the situation, there was also a sense too that doctors were understood to be compounding the situation through their inability to adapt. Their world was changing but it was this personal weakness that was the real problem.
Reporting about nurses appeared frequently in several newspapers, the *Daily Mail* claiming in April 1987 that 30,000 nurses were ‘quitting each year’ leaving colleagues under ‘intolerable pressure’. The General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, Trevor Clay, was reported as saying ‘I have never known stress levels as high as they are now’.

A short report in *The Times* a month later quoted a hospital psychiatric worker speaking at the National Union of Public Employees conference in Scarborough, who stated that he ‘had never seen so many nurses admitted to hospital because of stress’ suggesting that ‘they just cannot cope any more’ and referring to ‘poor working conditions in the National Health Service’.

Again, although their working conditions were placed at the heart of the problem, it is significant that it was their lack of coping that was also highlighted as a contributing factor.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s newspaper reporting about teachers regularly painted a picture of a profession under considerable pressure with large numbers leaving and those remaining working under increasingly stressful conditions. The *Daily Mail* reported in April 1987 that teachers were ‘cracking under the strain of work pressures’ and went on to list physical problems suffered by teachers often as a result of failing school infrastructure because spending curbs had reduced maintenance budgets. It also attributed problems to the increased stress relating to the introduction of the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination and the woeful attitudes of headteachers. According to one delegate at the annual assembly of the Assistant Masters and Mistresses Association, headteachers regarded any signs of stress among their staff ‘as a sign of weakness’.

Three years later a Health and Safety Executive report was quoted in the same newspaper claiming that up to ten per cent of teachers ‘could have serious stress-related illnesses and as many as 30% minor psychological and physical ailments’. It also claimed that ‘some have become suicidal’.

Teachers were also reportedly being ‘driven to burn-out’ according to *The Guardian* in 1994. Research commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and carried out by Warwick University found that the increased workload associated with the introduction of the National Curriculum had resulted in ‘considerable stress’ for teachers and that this was not simply teething problems, as teachers ‘difficulties in managing the curriculum’ had become worse over the three years since its introduction. The researchers reported that a 54-hour working week was now the norm for primary teachers and as many as one in ten were working more than 60 hours.

In the same year, a brief report in *The Times* explained that the number of teachers leaving the profession had ‘more than doubled’ in the past twelve months. The shadow Education Secretary, Ann Taylor, claimed that this was due to the ‘constant chopping and changing in education’ which had put ‘enormous stress onto teachers’ such that education was losing ‘its best teachers because their health reaches breaking point when they cannot deliver education to the high standards they set themselves’. The article went on to state that in 1993–94, 5,535 teachers left their jobs on health grounds at a cost of more than £130 million in lump sums, compared with only 2,449 ten years previously. Whilst not all of these departures would have been due to stress it is clear that the changes in education during the 1980s and into the 1990s were having a detrimental effect on the health of teachers.

The reporting about doctors, nurses and teachers painted a picture of professions under increasing strain caused by fundamental changes to work and working conditions but also by the inability of individuals to cope with these changes. On the one hand
doctors, nurses and teachers were framed as working ineffectively as weak parts of a much larger, inefficient system in desperate need of reform. Their stress resulted from them being dragged down by bureaucracy and an inherently flawed and out of date public sector ethos that was no longer fit for purpose. On the other hand, they were portrayed as long-suffering, hard-working and dedicated professionals whose desire to serve was undermined by ideologically-driven attempts to introduce market economics, cut costs and impose ill-advised change. Either interpretation pathologised their experience and used stress as a means of focusing the problems on people rather than politics. The stress of public sector workers as reported in newspapers was effectively a signifier of the crisis in Britain’s public sector. However, it might also be interpreted as a way of distracting attention from the underlying political, organisational and structural issues by focusing instead on a problem of mental well-being that could be reduced at the individual level to a personal inability to cope.

**Personal testimony**

That public sector workers themselves were aware of this whilst being part of the process can be seen from their testimony of experiences of stress in the 1980s and 1990s. They used stress to explain their response to negative and distressing workplace experiences, whilst also reflecting on the political and structural issues that were challenging them. A 46-year old teacher in Staffordshire wrote to MOP in 1997:

> What’s disintegrated most within my lifetime seems to be the respect employers have for their workers. The general economic situation, especially over the last twenty years, has encouraged employers to put cost-cutting and profit before the welfare of those who do the work. Many people I’ve met in recent years have found themselves suddenly made redundant from jobs they’ve held for twenty years or more. Sometimes they haven’t been replaced, but mostly they are experienced, older employees who are replaced by young, inexperienced and cheaper staff. This is neither fair nor sensible. What a waste of the nation’s money to have trained and educated people with experience thrown on the scrap heap for short-term savings.\(^{110}\)

This perspective was perhaps unsurprising, considering the pace and extent of change during the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1979 and 1986 public spending on schools was cut by ten per cent and Education Acts in 1980 and 1988 effectively removed Local Education Authority control, ceding management of schools ostensibly to school governors, although more often in practice to headteachers. Over the same period, there were successive conflicts between the teachers’ unions and government over pay and by the early 1990s, a National Curriculum had been imposed that scarcely met either the government’s wishes or those of educational experts. New qualifications had been introduced, the new General Certificate of Secondary Education replacing the old ‘O’ level General Certificate of Education and Certificate of Secondary Education, whilst ‘A’ levels, which were largely regarded as too narrowly focused, were left intact.\(^{111}\)

In Huddersfield, another teacher on long-term sick leave due to stress painted a bleak picture:

> As the years have gone by and the job has changed and become increasingly stressfull, I saw myself and indeed, planned to take early retirement at 50 years of age. I feel exhausted, as do the majority of my colleagues, no matter what their particular circumstances are. I thought I’d
take retirement and possibly find a less stressful job to occupy me until 60. However, recent changes by the previous government have put a stop to early retirements and now we shall be forced to work on to 60+. The thought is unbearable both to me and many of my colleagues and morale seems to have taken a nose-dive. The direct consequence of these changes in my Authority, Calderdale, is that 38% of the headteachers have resigned/taken early retirement during the past year to avoid having to stay on and work under the new rules.112

She went on to explain that for people her age (she was 45) the job had ‘changed so dramatically’ and they had been required to deal with so much change over the past ten years that she felt they should be allowed to retire whilst they still retained their sanity. She added ‘speaking to professionals in other “caring” jobs eg medicine, social work etc it seems to be fairly common that people of my age are feeling “burnt-out”’.113 Those who had managed to retire after the first wave of change in the early 1980s, reported a sense of relief, ‘My health is better than when I was teaching, most of the teachers I know who have just retired feel this because the strain is quite heavy’.114 The teacher from Huddersfield’s situation had resulted in serious illness as she explained:

I have been off work for almost 6 months. At one point, even passing a school in a car I felt physically sick and wanted to vomit. That has now passed, but as September approaches I can feel my body tensing up again, my sleep is becoming disturbed—all this, and I’ve no intention of going back to school at the beginning of term. I’ve decided I’d like/need a change from teaching—for my own sanity and the health and safety of the children I teach! There’s no counselling available through the Education Authority, my employer. The ‘Personnel’ department may as well not exist in terms of stress counselling, career counselling or support of any description for a member of its workforce who is patently very ill and unable to function.115

She was not alone in struggling to find support. In 1999 The Times reported an out of court settlement, thought to be the first of its kind, between a teacher and her employer, Wirral Borough Council. The settlement of £47,000 resulted after the teacher retired early due to stress and anxiety but claimed that her employer had been negligent when it failed to act on her complaints about workload which stretched back to 1988. According to the National Union of Teachers general secretary Doug McAvoy, her case confirmed that ‘teacher stress is an occupational health problem for employers, which they must take seriously’, confirming that the union was preparing sixteen similar cases.116 Indeed, hers was not the first case of a public sector worker going to law over stress. In 1994, an ex-social worker, John Walker won a case and made legal history when a judge ruled that his employer, Northumberland County Council had failed to provide a safe working environment thus contributing to the nervous breakdown that forced him to quit his job.117 While he settled out of court for £175,000, Walker’s case shows that by the end of the century stress had become formally entrenched as a potential and legally recognised consequence of work enshrined in the British legal system through case law.118 Such a ruling is evidence not only of the significant changes to working life during the last decades of the century but to changing attitudes and beliefs about work, health and society.

Taken together, both the public discourse about stress and public sector workers, as evidenced in newspapers, and the personal testimony of Mass Observers who worked in the sector demonstrate how stress was used as a means of explaining and understanding
the changes that were taking place in large sections of Britain’s workforce. Articles about stress made good copy and to some extent were newsworthy for much of the 1980s because the concept was still a new one and academic research such as Cooper’s could be linked to a range of topics. While there undoubtedly was a great deal of change and upheaval occurring, and this inevitably had detrimental effects on people, focusing on stress, particularly in media reporting, drew attention onto individuals and issues of coping and resilience, and away from the circumstances that were creating the stress. Criticism of the public sector and portraits of it as struggling to change effectively played into government efforts to impose radical reform, but stories of nurses driven to breaking point and teachers quitting in droves also reflected badly on a government apparently blind to the human and institutional cost of pushing forward marketisation and reform. The public stress discourse around public sector workers acts as a microcosm of the much larger political tensions at play in the 1980s and 1990s.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the causes and experiences of stress in the 1980s and 1990s and how the contradictions inherent in the reporting of stress in certain public sector worker groups revealed the tensions arising from government reforms. In focusing on both the individual and the structural and bringing together social histories of medicine, history of emotion and attention to material conditions, I have illustrated both the stress of work and the work of stress. I have argued that underlying the growing awareness, understanding and deployment of the concept of stress were other more structural issues relating to economic, political and social changes in Britain. My contention is that whilst stress became a way for people to explain their responses to change, adoption of the concept also effected changes in working practices as well as understandings of both work and well-being.

The 1980s saw a huge growth in financial consumerism that brought benefits for some, but also unmanageable debt to others particularly exacerbated by the volatility of interest rates, the housing market and, in some regions, significant levels of long-term unemployment. Personal testimony shows that people were clearly aware of the causes of their difficulties and many of them identified the stress and other mental health problems they were experiencing as directly resulting from debt, job worries and the housing market. For certain groups of public sector workers, particularly those in medicine and education, the changes to their work and working environments and the toll that these took on them were also clearly understood as stress and ultimately endorsed as such in law.

The popular usage of the concept of stress in relation to public sector workers particularly in media usage can be seen to elide structural change but also challenge it by emphasising its human cost. Public discussion of the stress suffered by these groups framed them as either contributors to an inefficient and unwieldy system, or victims of the ideologically-driven reforms being imposed on them by government. Both portrayals tended to emphasise the inability of workers to cope with the situation as the cause of their stress rather than the institutional or structural reforms that were occurring. Such reporting also encapsulated the contradictions arising from government policy in the period and effectively illustrated the tensions around public sector reform. Ultimately what is revealed by both personal testimony and public discourse is the way that
experiences of stress were grounded in economic, political and social changes that were specific to the end of the twentieth century in Britain. They also demonstrate that the concept of stress proved extremely useful as an explanation for people’s responses to those changes while refocusing the problem on the individual rather than the wider context.

The popular adoption of a medical diagnosis that could apply to a wide range of physical symptoms as well as emotional responses to life in the 1980s and 1990s tells us about the continuing processes of medicalisation and psychologisation of everyday life, but also the ongoing rise of individualism. As Lawrence has pointed out individualism was not new in the period, and people had always focused on their own singular experience, but they had also very often understood them as part of a wider, collective context and it was this that was changing, indeed had already changed for many, in the period. While personal testimony acknowledged the crises and disasters at the national scale, discussed in the existing historiography, it was the everyday personal crises and disasters that arose from debt, unemployment, redundancy and changing work circumstances and that were increasingly labelled as and understood as stress, that encapsulated the 1980s and 1990s for many.

Notes

1. “Hard Work Killed Many”, The Guardian, 12 February 1986, 22.
2. Replies to Spring Directive ‘Social Well-Being’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1984), B1187.
3. “Social Well-Being,” M1327.
4. Healy, Let Them Eat Prozac, 6. Healy has suggested that media coverage of health issues became more common in the 1980s. A sample of newspaper article headlines about stress for 1985 includes: “Stress at work has now reached epidemic proportions” in The Guardian 13 November, “Taking the pain out of strain” in The Times 24 January and “Mystery Disease here to stay” also in The Times 18 September.
5. Langhamer “Who the Hell Are Ordinary People?” 3–4 and 17.
6. Cannon, Bodily Changes.
7. For a discussion of the language of ‘nerves’ see Kirby, Feeling the Strain.
8. Jackson, The Age of Stress, 159 and 212–15. See also Jackson, “Evaluating the Role of Hans Selye” in Stress, Shock, and Adaptation, ed. Cantor and Ramsden, 21–48.
9. Viner, “Putting Stress in Life,” 394.
10. Selye, Stress: A Treatise; Selye, The Stress of Life; and Viner, “Putting Stress in Life”, 395 and 399.
11. Viner, “Putting Stress in Life,” 399–400.
12. Ibid., 405–6.
13. Ibid., 403. Hinkle, “Stress and Disease,” 561.
14. Jackson, Age of Stress, 1–2.
15. Holmes and Rahe, “The Social Readjustment Rating Scale,” 213–18.
16. Watkins, “Stress and the American Vernacular,” in Stress, Shock, and Adaptation, ed. Cantor and Ramsden, 49–70.
17. Kirby, Feeling the Strain, 167–88.
18. “Working Can Be a Health Hazard,” The Sunday Times, 24 February 1985, 7.
19. “Dying for a Job,” Daily Mail, 5 April 1989, 9; and Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Cultures of Neurasthenia,” 2.
20. Kirby, Feeling the Strain, 205–6.
21. “Working Can Be a Health Hazard,” 7.
22. “Why We Should Be Worried by the High Cost of Stress”, The Times, 14 October 1980, 19; “Sick of Work”, The Guardian, 12 April 1989, 27.
23. Bancroft, “The Civil Service in the 1980s”, 141; Civil Service College Annual Report and Accounts’ (Cabinet Office, April 1984), The National Archives. See Kirby, Feeling the Strain, 194–7 for discussion of management attitudes to employee stress in Lloyds Bank.

24. Thomson, Psychological Subjects.

25. “How to Survive the 9 to 5” (Channel Four, 1986).

26. “Social Well-Being,” S496.

27. Kirby, Feeling the Strain, 53.

28. Robinson et al., “Telling Stories,” 268–304.

29. Crane, “Save Our NHS,” 65.

30. Robinson et al., “Telling Stories,” 269–71.

31. Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “Class Politics” in Making Thatcher’s Britain, ed. Jackson and Saunders, 135 and 140.

32. Robinson et al., “Telling Stories,” 302.

33. See Lawrence, Me, Me, Me?

34. Replies to Special Directive ‘The General Election’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1987), G218.

35. Gallup Political Index, no. 355, March 1990 quoted in Robinson et al., “Telling Stories,” 275.

36. Ewen and Andrews, “Decade of Disasters,” 4; and Robinson, “Putting the Charity Back,” 410.

37. Ewen and Andrews, “Decade of Disasters,” 2–3.

38. Jones, “Ending Cold War Fears,” 258–59.

39. Replies to Spring Directive ‘A Retrospective View of the 1980s’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1990), for example C1878, D2438, G226, M1956, O1364 and R1321.

40. Lawrence, Me, Me, Me, 233.

41. Stephen Brooke, “Living in ‘New Times,’” 21.

42. Ford, The Indebted Society, 32.

43. Edwards, “Financial Consumerism,” 213.

44. “Social Well-Being,” H256.

45. See note 43 above.

46. Ibid., 219.

47. Matthew Francis, “A Crusade to Enfranchise the Many: Thatcherism and the ‘Property-Owning Democracy’”, Twentieth Century British History 23, no. 2 (1 June 2012): 289, doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwr032.

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49. Replies to Autumn Directive Part One ‘Self-Portrait’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1986), B1867.

50. Ford, The Indebted Society, 3.

51. Tiratsoo, From Blitz to Blair, 200–202.

52. Ford, The Indebted Society, 32.

53. Ibid., 3.

54. Lawrence, Me, Me, Me? 201–2.

55. “Self Portrait,” B1867.

56. “Social Well-Being,” F1143.

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59. Ibid., 1906.

60. HC Deb 13 December 1989 Vol 163 Cc996-1047 (Hansard), accessed 16 December 2020, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1989/dec/13/mortgage-costs-and-housing.

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65. John Lee, Millennium Memory Bank Collection, 1999, C900/11104, British Library Sound Archive © BBC.
66. Ibid.
67. See note 61 above.
68. Ibid., S479.
69. Seabrook, Unemployment.
70. See note 44 above.
71. Ibid., H1291.
72. Lee, Interview 1999.
73. “Social Well-Being,” N880.
74. The programme was revived by the BBC and ran from 2002–2004.
75. See note 73 above.
76. Ibid., K1283.
77. Martin, “Britain’s North-South Divide,” 412.
78. See note 26 above.
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81. Replies to Summer Directive Part One ‘Doing a Job’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1997), G2701.
82. Ibid., 1009.
83. McIvor, Working Lives, 68–69.
84. Ibid., 70.
85. “Doing a Job,” N1552.
86. For discussion of the rise of individualism, particularly in the 1970s, see Robinson et al., “Telling Stories”, 274–275.
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88. Evans, Thatcher and Thatcherism, 65–74.
89. Ibid., 66.
90. See note 29 above.
91. Evans, Thatcher and Thatcherism, 64.
92. Dorey, “The Legacy of Thatcherism,” paras 11 and 13.
93. Ibid., 17.
94. Ibid., 14.
95. Evans, Thatcher and Thatcherism, 77.
96. Eight of fifteen articles in The Guardian and seven of twelve in The Times. Examples of articles about public sector stress include: “Health Service Run ‘at Expense of Staff’”, The Guardian, 16 February 1987, 4; “London in Nursing “Crisis””, The Times, 2 April 1987, 2; “Teachers’ Stress Is ‘Hitting Pupils Harder than Strikes’”, and The Times, 15 April 1987 4. Other articles about stress featured executive, childhood and family stress.
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“Stress Crisis of Nurses”, The Times, 20 May 1987, 3.

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“Teachers ‘scarred’ by Stress”, Daily Mail, 17 November 1990, 2.

“Teachers Are ‘Driven to Burn-Out’”, The Guardian, 21 June 1994, 3.

“More Teachers Quitting”, The Times, 27 June 1994, 2.

“Doing a Job,” W1813.

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See note 85 above.

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See note 3 above.

See note 85 above.

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