

Does work really cause distress? The contribution of occupational structure and work organization to the experience of psychological distress

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Abstract

This research examines the specific contribution of occupation and work organization conditions on psychological distress, based on a representative sample of 9501 workers in 419 occupations in Quebec, Canada. Multilevel regression models show that occupational structure accounts for 0.8% of variation in psychological distress. Among the constraints and resources related to work organization condition, physical and psychological demands, irregular schedules, and workplace harassment emerge as important determinants of psychological distress. The effects of work organization conditions do not vary across occupations. Family situation, support available from social networks outside work, and personal characteristics of individuals are also associated with psychological distress, but these factors do not moderate the effects of work organization conditions. Overall, the findings support the hypothesis that occupation and, to an even greater extent, “pathogenic” work organization conditions contribute independently to the experience of psychological distress. They also support the theoretical model conceptualizing psychological distress as the product of stress caused by constraints and resources brought to bear simultaneously by the agent’s personality, structures of daily life, and macrosocial structures.

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Introduction

In the last decades, mental health problems in the work force have reached major proportions. In the province of Québec (Canada), the prevalence of psychological distress among workers varied between 17.3% and 25.5% over the period 1987–1998 (Daveluy et al., 2000). The Whitehall II study reported prevalence rates of 21% for men and 25% for women among London civil servants (Stansfeld, Fuhrer, Shipley, &

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Marmot, 1999). A survey conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in five countries (Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the United States) estimated that one adult in five suffered from depression, anxiety, stress or overwork (ILO, 2000). Mental health problems entail annual expenditures of several billion dollars for businesses and society as a whole (ILO, 2000; Vézina, Cousineau, Mergler, & Vinet, 1992), mainly as a result of workplace absenteeism, lost business productivity, income replacement outlays, and health services use.

According to many studies, the type of occupation and work organization conditions constitute important factors for explaining the genesis of these problems among individuals. However, few studies take simultaneously into account the broader contexts of people's lives and personality characteristics in order to understand how and under what conditions work affects mental health. In so doing, the specific contribution of work in mental health problems remains controversial and needs to be clarified. This paper examines the contribution of occupation and work organization on psychological distress in the work force, based on a social action model that takes into account agent personality, structures of daily life, and macrosocial structures.

Background

Psychological distress, depression, and burnout are the most commonly concepts used regarding mental health problems in the workplace. Psychological distress seems more general in its definition and measurement, since it overlaps the various symptoms of psychic imbalance described and measures by the two other concepts. It is defined by a set of psychophysiological and behavioral symptoms that are not specific to a given pathology, like anxious and depressive reactions, irritability, decline in intellectual abilities, sleep disturbances, work absenteeism, etc. (Dohrenwend, Shrout, Egri, & Mendelsohn, 1980; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldstein, 1990; Vézina et al., 1992). Untreated, psychological distress can cause more serious, reversible health problems (psychosomatic illnesses, arterial hypertension, severe depression, alcoholism), and with time, it can also lead to irreversible damage (permanent disability, premature deaths, suicide, cardiovascular and neuropsychiatric diseases). Overall, the presence of psychological distress gives a sign that something is going wrong in the individual psychic (Marchand, Demers, Durand, & Simard, 2003).

Over the last 20 years, rare longitudinal and many cross-sectional studies have highlighted two large sets of work factors to explain the emergence or aggravation of psychological distress. The first has to do with the

position of the individual in the occupational structure. Some studies indicate that white- and blue-collar workers, semi-professionals, supervisors, and unskilled workers experience higher levels of psychological distress compared with professional groups such as senior executives, professionals, and middle managers (Niedhammer, Goldberg, Leclerc, Bugel, & David, 1998; Vermeulen & Mustard, 2000; Vézina et al., 1992). Other studies also report that lower levels of distress is associated with rises in employment grade, in professional prestige, or in the socioeconomic status of an occupation (Hemingway, Nicholson, Roberts, & Marmot, 1997; Fuhrer, Stansfeld, Chemali, & Shipley, 1999; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995).

The second set of factors associates psychological distress with the stress or strain generated by work organization conditions experienced by an individual in his own job: repetitive work (Johansson, 1989; Shirom, Westman, & Melamed, 1999) and low levels of skill utilization and decision authority (de Jonge, Reuvers, Houtman, Bongers, & Kompier, 2000b; Mausner-Dorsch & Eaton, 2000; Niedhammer et al., 1998; Stansfeld et al., 1999; Van der Doef, Maes, & Diekstra, 2000); physical demands related to the environment and individual effort (Challenor & Wright, 2000; de Jonge, Mulder, & Nijhuis, 1999; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2000; Julien et al., 2000); psychological and emotional demands caused by workload, workplace, conflicting requests, and role ambiguity (Bültmann, Kant, van den Brandt, & Kasl, 2002; de Jonge et al., 1999, 2000b; Demerouti et al., 2000; Lam, Ross, Cass, Quine, & Lazarus, 1999; Payne & Morrison, 1999; Stansfeld et al., 1999; Van der Doef et al., 2000); irregular schedules and long hours (Bohle & Tilley, 1989; Bourbonnais, Comeau, & Vézina, 1999; Demerouti et al., 2000; Spurgeon, Harrington, & Cooper, 1997); weak social support (Bourbonnais et al., 1999; Bültmann et al., 2002; Stansfeld et al., 1999; Van der Doef et al., 2000; Vermeulen & Mustard, 2000) and physical, sexual and psychological harassment (McDermut, Haaga, & Kirk, 2000; Piotrkowski, 1998; Richman et al., 1999); low rewards (de Jonge, Bosma, Peter, & Siegrist, 2000a; Demerouti et al., 2000; Tepper, 2000) associated with job insecurity (Bourbonnais et al., 1999; Bültmann et al., 2002; Feldt, Kinnunen, & Mauno, 2000; McDonough, 2000; Schmitz, Neumann, & Oppermann, 2000) and performance pay (Shirom et al., 1999).

Two main theoretical models have been the most used over the last two decades to explain work related psychological distress. In the first one, the job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) hypothesizes that decision latitude (high levels of skill utilization and decision authority) moderates psychological demands, and the demand-control-support model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) postulates that low social support in the

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