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Original article

Relationships at work and psychosocial risk: The feeling of belonging as indicator and mediator

Relations au travail et risque psychosocial : le sentiment d'appartenance comme indicateur et médiateur



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ABSTRACT

Introduction/objective. – This article highlights the links between, on the one hand, the feeling of belonging to the work group and, on the other hand, the tension and burnout experienced, amongst 444 employees in a hospital centre.

Methodology. – The methodology is based on the use of 4 self-administered questionnaires (Karaseck's JCQ, Maslach's MBI, Quality of relationships with parties concerned and Feeling of belonging) and is based on correlations and multiple regressions.

Results. – The results highlight the fact that relationships perceived as generally relaxed with the different people concerned (care team, doctors, management and administrative staff), predicted Karaseck's three dimensions and those assessed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Similarly, the feeling of belonging predicted all these variables. Most of the time it played a mediating role between the perceived quality of relationships and the different measures of well-being at work. So, the feeling of belonging seems to be a variable of interest, which can play a key role in the prevention of suffering at work.

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R É S U M É

Introduction/objectif. – Cet article met en évidence des liens entre, d'une part, le sentiment d'appartenance au collectif de travail et, d'autre part, la tension et l'épuisement professionnels ressentis, auprès de 444 agents d'un centre hospitalier.

Méthodologie. – La méthodologie est basée sur l'utilisation de 4 questionnaires auto-administrés (JCQ de Karaseck, MBI de Maslach, Qualité des relations avec les parties prenantes et Sentiment d'appartenance) et se fonde sur des corrélations et régressions multiples.

Résultats. – Les résultats mettent en évidence que des relations perçues comme globalement détendues avec les différentes parties prenantes (équipe soignante, médecins, encadrement et administration), prédisent les trois dimensions du Karaseck ainsi que sur celles évaluées par le Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). De la même façon, le sentiment d'appartenance prédit l'ensemble de ces variables. Il joue la plupart du temps un rôle médiateur entre la qualité perçue des relations et les différentes mesures de bien-être au travail. Le sentiment d'appartenance semble donc bien être une variable d'intérêt, pouvant jouer un rôle clé dans la prévention de la souffrance au travail.

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1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the “2007–2012 hospital plan” reforms, French hospitals have undergone profound changes, the consequences of which have been an increase in malaise and suffering experienced at work (Gilbert & Daloz, 2008; Roland-Lévy, Lemoine, & Jeoffrion, 2014). In fact, the methods of funding hospitals and in the way they operate have changed very rapidly, in order to meet government requirements for cost reduction, while retaining their initial objectives to provide care and public service. Like private companies, hospitals today must cope with the problems of efficiency and profitability, which creates a paradox for the healthcare profession: in the beginning, hospitals were a place of charity and then of not-for-profit care. To this can be added the complexity of managing the production systems of “hyper-modern”, neo-bureaucratic organisations (Lamrani, 2014) which could perhaps be the cause of an environment experienced as harmful, and conducive to the emergence of psychosocial risks. In this management context of promoting individualisation at work, it is interesting to re-examine the collective dimension of work in depth (Clot, 2008).

This study was conducted in a hospital centre as part of an assessment of the well-being of its employees, after the reorganisation of work teams (3 × 12 h days weekly instead of 5 × 7 h 45 min days). Beyond these reorganisations, without any notable effects on quality of life, our aim was to examine identification with the institution and the feeling of belonging to this group, as a factor influencing the professional tension experienced in the face of work content and in a state of burnout. After a reminder of the literature related to these different concepts and their connections, we will present the concept of identification underlying the feeling of belonging to the work group. We will see how this variable can be viewed as being central in the measurement and management of psychosocial risks.

2. Theoretical section

2.1. The feeling of belonging and identification with the team

The feeling of belonging, studied for a long time in the field of psychology, seems to be an interesting area for exploration, even though few studies on psychosocial risks have focused on it. Belonging to a group is thought to be more than a simple feeling, it is a necessity, a fundamental need to belong. Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) and Wiesenfeld (1996), define it as a fundamental need to belong, to feel accepted and to define oneself in relation to others and in relationships with them. A feeling of isolation at work (real or perceived) is thought to be harmful for individuals. On this subject, Chevrier (2012) points to a gradual dilution of the feeling of belonging, through geographical remoteness and confinement in an activity, whereas the fact of being integrated in a work group promotes closeness and therefore social connections, both formal and informal. The expression of a feeling of belonging illustrates the fact that an individual considers themselves to be part of a group, with a level of attachment of the employee to the team of which they are part, and to the organisation which employs them (Gueudar-Delahaye, 2012; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). This is a process through which individuals are inter-connected and define themselves in relation to each other, in accordance with their interests and affinities. Belonging structurally to a team therefore gives people a status in it, allows them to explore possible methods of cooperation, to seek complementary relationships with other members and finally to offer specialised contributions (Dameron, 2004). According to the same author, it is in interaction that everyone’s role is defined, and their place in

relation to the other members. This feeling of belonging is closely linked to identification with the group (Gueudar-Delahaye, 2012). It seems difficult to study this feeling of belonging without drawing on the concept of identification with the group, traditionally studied in intergroup processes (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Chedotel, 2004). In fact, Turner has already referred to the fact that the identification of an individual with a social group prompts the emergence of a feeling of belonging, which can go as far as the feeling of being at one with the membership group, during intergroup comparisons (Buton, Fontenay, & Heuzé, 2006; Pansu, Tarquinio, & Gilbert, 2005). Therefore, identification is thought to lead to a feeling of belonging, to unity of meaning and feeling at one with others. It is thought to allow the individual to see themselves as a member of a group which supplies norms, values and points of reference. Identification therefore refers to a process through which an individual considers themselves as connected to other individuals or to a team (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Identifying with a team means feeling that this group is one’s own, perceiving oneself as a part of it, and considering its actions as one’s own, just like its successes and failures.

2.2. The feeling of belonging to the work group as a contributor to well-being

Our general premise is that the feeling of belonging and identification with the team can influence the tension at work and burnout experienced. In fact, when members feel integrated and identify with the team, they are thought to perceive, not only greater social support, but also greater autonomy in the performance of their tasks or even a lower psychological demand faced with their tasks (Laugaa, Rascle, & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2008). At a more subjective level, the emotional burnout experienced is likely to be lower, as is the depersonalisation of relationships with patients and lack of self-fulfilment in work.

Chedotel (2004) suggests that identification and cooperation have an ambivalent relationship. Nevertheless, according to him, the level of identification can influence practices, and, in the case where this is high, leads to the construction of a cooperative environment in which each member will tend to perceive themselves as an entity in their own right within the group. Conversely, a low identification with the group will be conducive to inward-looking behaviours, both on the part of team members and of management (Conjard & Jounour, 2013). When members identify with the work team and perceive an interdependence between them, it is likely that this leads to the initiation, maintenance and strengthening of cooperation and coordination. Some people emphasise the fact that individualisation of performance and pay influences human relationships, whether within a team and/or in relationships with managerial staff, and induces objective isolation amongst employees, in turn reducing opportunities for exchange and cooperation (Lachmann, Larose, & Pennicaud, 2010). Studying the feeling of belonging and identification with the work group, in connection with the quality of life at work, therefore appears essential.

2.3. Tension at work and burnout

In order to assess the perception which employees have of their work and the professional tension experienced, we used Karasek’s three-dimensional model (1979), which has been widely documented. This model, two-dimensional initially, firstly examined decisional latitude (autonomy in the way of organising one’s work) and psychological demand, which refers to workload and the disruptions which occur in this work. The study of social support was added to these two dimensions. This model is one of the most used in the study of psychosocial risks as it identifies impaired work situations, and the isolation which the employee can feel when

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