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Psychological empowerment at the workplace as a predictor of ill health

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Abstract

Both theoretical arguments and empirical findings imply a negative relationship between psychological empowerment and ill health. The aim of the present study was to expand the empirical knowledge concerning the relationship between psychological empowerment at the workplace and three aspects of ill health.

A total of 2011 registered and assistant nurses completed a questionnaire consisting of scales measuring psychological empowerment at the workplace, general mental health, burnout, and sick leave. Hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses were performed using the three aspects of ill health as the criterion variables, age, gender, and profession as the control variables and the four empowerment-dimensions as the predictor variables.

The four empowerment-dimensions explained 2–18% of the variation among the nurses with regard to the three types of ill-health measures. The meaning dimension and the competence dimension were most negatively related to ill health.

Greater psychological empowerment at work corresponds generally to less ill health. Psychological empowerment at work may be one of the many possible factors that provide protection against ill health.
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1. Introduction

An important task for research is to identify factors that may protect individuals against various aspects of ill health. *Empowerment* is a variable that is in line for being studied with regard to its relation with ill health (see e.g., Rissel, 1994). Empowerment which generally may be defined in terms of giving power, giving capacity, to energize, or to enable has relatively recently been given both a firm theoretical framework (see Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) and a rigorous definition (Spreitzer, 1992, 1995a, 1997).

Spreitzer (1992, 1997) has focused on *psychological empowerment at the workplace*, which she defined in terms of sense of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The four components were given the following explicit definitions.

Meaning: a fit between the requirements of the job tasks and the subject's own values. *Competence*: the subject's belief that he or she possesses the skills and abilities necessary to perform a job or task well. *Self-determination*: the subject's feelings of having control over his or her own work. *Impact*: the belief that the subject has a significant influence over strategic, administrative, or operational outcomes at work. Spreitzer (1997) has also illuminated some characteristics of her definition of *psychological empowerment at the workplace*. The most central characteristics are given below. First, the focus is on *individual* empowerment not on group, organizational, or societal empowerment. Second, the focus is on *psychological* empowerment (a subjective phenomenon) not on relational empowerment (empowerment through concrete sharing of power). Third, the focus is on empowerment at the *work place* and not on empowerment related to other areas or roles. Fourth, the focus is on a continuous phenomenon or variable that may be considered as a *fairly stable state that can be influenced both by context-related factors and by person-related factors* and not on an unchangeable trait or personality attribute.

Spreitzer (1995a) defined the four-dimensional empowerment concept operationally in terms of a 12-item scale, where each one of the four dimensions is measured by three items. The empowerment scale has been assessed with respect to its main psychometric properties in three separate studies (Hochwalder & Bergsten Brucefors, in press; Kraimer, Seibert, & Liden, 1999; Spreitzer, 1995a). In all three studies both the reliability (as measured by Cronbach's alpha) and the construct validity (as measured by second-order factor analyses) were found to be highly satisfactory. Besides the basic psychometric properties of the scale, the nomological network of the four-dimensional empowerment construct has also been studied (see e.g., Kraimer et al., 1999; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997). There are both theoretical arguments and some empirical findings concerning the relationship between psychological empowerment and various ill health indicators.

Theoretically, it may be hypothesized that the four empowerment dimensions have a negative relationship to ill health. For example, Antonovsky (1987) regards *meaning* as a main protective factor against ill health. Karasek and Theorell's (1990) work implies that *competence* should result in improved ability to deal with demands and is thus a protective factor against ill health. *Self-determination* may be viewed as a form of autonomy, and autonomy is an important mechanism for reducing strain (see Spreitzer et al., 1997). Finally, *impact* may, according to Spreitzer (1997), be viewed as the converse of Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness and thus may also be a buffer against ill health. The empirical documentation concerning the relationship between Spreitzer's operationalization of psychological empowerment at the workplace and mental ill health is sparse.

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