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## An evaluation of the impact of a policy-level intervention to address psychosocial risks on organisational action in Italy

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### ABSTRACT

Psychosocial hazards have the potential to cause harm to employee health and negatively affect organisational outcomes. Work-related stress is an outcome of exposure to psychosocial risks that has received broad attention at research and policy level in the last decades. Great awareness raising efforts have been made in the European Union, including at the macro policy level, with several differences and approaches across countries. However, evaluation of policy-level interventions to address psychosocial risks is still scarce. This paper focuses on Italy as one of the cases where the policy context on psychosocial risks recently changed with the introduction of the Legislative Decree 81/2008. Using data collected through the European Survey of Enterprises of New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) immediately after (2009) and six years after (2014) the implementation of this new legislation, this paper aims to evaluate the impact of its introduction by exploring differences in the reported level of organisational action as concerns psychosocial risk management. The sample was composed of 2984 respondents corresponding to 1501 highest-ranking managers responsible for health and safety at work in 2009 and 1483 persons who know best about the way safety and health risks are managed at their workplace in 2014. Findings highlighted a decreasing reported concern from the respondents about psychosocial risks over time and an improvement in the management of work-related stress. The paper also highlights the use of large-scale surveys such as ESENER as an important tool in evaluating health and safety management trends over time in European enterprises.

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### 1. Introduction

Work-related psychosocial factors concern aspects of work organisation, design, management as well as interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Depending on how organisations manage these factors, they can have either positive outcomes (in terms of productivity, work engagement, job satisfaction, etc.) or negative outcomes (in terms of sickness absence, conflicts, human error, turnover, etc.). In the case of the latter, they are referred to as psychosocial hazards since they have the potential to cause harm to employee health and negatively affect organisational outcomes (Leka and Cox, 2008). Psychosocial risks refers to the potential of psychosocial hazards to cause harm and their magnitude will depend on several other issues, such as consensus in terms of their incidence and prevalence in the work environment, the particular

groups they affect, and the measures taken to prevent them or alleviate their impact. Work-related stress is an outcome of exposure to psychosocial risks that has received a large amount of attention in the scientific literature.

Even though the majority of the literature focuses on measures that can be taken to address psychosocial risks (interventions) in order to alleviate negative outcomes (such as work-related stress) at the level of the organisation, the team, or the individual, a growing literature has been focussing on interventions that can be taken at the macro (international, regional, national or sectoral) level. With greater awareness of these types of risks and increasing evidence of their negative impact on individuals, organisations and society, came greater effort by policymakers to introduce interventions at the policy level (Leka et al., 2015a,b).

The European Union (EU) is the region where the highest level of awareness raising efforts and interventions in relation to psychosocial risks have taken place including at the macro policy level. In fact, the policy context in relation to psychosocial risks in the EU

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is quite diverse and includes examples of various types of approaches implemented across countries and at national and regional level. However, it has been acknowledged that contrary to interventions at the individual and organisational level where many studies have been conducted to evaluate their outcomes, evaluation of policy-level interventions to address psychosocial risks is scarce (Leka et al., 2015a,b).

This paper aims to address this gap by focussing on the case of one country in particular, Italy, where the policy context on psychosocial risks recently changed with the introduction of specific legislation on work-related stress in 2008. Taking into consideration data collected through the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) immediately after (2009) and six years after (2014) the implementation of this new legislation, this paper aims to explore whether Italian organisations report more action to address psychosocial risks after this policy level change. Since it is well known that the translation of policy into practice at the organisational level requires time (Leka and Jain, 2013), the 2009 data is not expected to reflect organisational action due to the introduction of new legislation only a year earlier. However, this should be reflected in the 2014 data, especially since several actions were taken by the Italian government and its agencies to raise awareness and provide appropriate tools and support organisations in order to fulfil the new legal requirements. The following sections will first summarise the policy background on psychosocial risks in the EU and then discuss developments in Italy in order to contextualise these changes and their potential impact.

## 2. The policy context on psychosocial risks in the European Union

Psychosocial risks and their management are included in several types of policies in the EU, including binding legislation ('hard law'), and non-binding/voluntary policies ('soft law'). These types of policies have been developed both at EU level (being applicable to all EU member states) and at national member state level (that can be more specific and detailed than EU policies). At EU level, managing psychosocial risks is among employers' responsibilities as stipulated in the main occupational health and safety legislation in the EU - the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC on Safety and Health of Workers at Work - since it obliges employers to address all types of risk in a preventive manner and to establish health and safety procedures and systems to do so. It requires employers to adapt the work to the individual, especially as regards the design of workplaces, the choice of work equipment and the choice of working and production methods, with a view, in particular, to alleviating monotonous work and work at a predetermined work-rate. It also requires that employers developing a coherent overall prevention policy which covers technology, organisation of work, working conditions, social relationships and the influence of factors related to the working environment.

However, there have been criticisms that even though the Directive asks employers to ensure workers' health and safety in every aspect related to work, 'addressing all types of risk at source', it does not include the terms 'psychosocial risk' or 'work-related stress', making understanding of its requirements by key stakeholders (e.g. employers) potentially unclear. This is also the case for the Directive on organisation of working time (93/104/EC), while the Council Directive on work with display screen equipment (90/270/EEC), actually refers to 'problems of mental stress' in the context of risk assessment. Leka et al. (2015a,b) provide a review of key binding policies on psychosocial risks at EU level.

In addition to hard law, non-binding/voluntary policies have been developed in the form of recommendations, resolutions, opinions, proposals, conclusions of EU institutions (Commission,

Council, Parliament), the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee. Furthermore, social partner agreements and frameworks of actions, specifications, guidance, campaigns etc. have been initiated by recognised European and international committees, agencies and organisations. Leka et al. (2015a,b) also provide a review of key non-binding policies on psychosocial risks applicable at EU level. Among these policies, important developments have been the European social partner framework agreement on work-related stress (European Social Partners, 2004), and the framework agreement on harassment and violence at work (European Social Partners, 2007). These clarify the relevance of the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC on Safety and Health of Workers at Work to these issues and urge social partners in each EU member state to take action to address these issues collaboratively.

The European Commission has evaluated both the implementation of the Framework Directive and these two framework agreements. The Framework Directive evaluation (EC, 2004) indicated that long-term effects of risks that are not easily observed (e.g. on mental health) were being neglected in organisations' risk assessment and management actions, while there was also hardly any consideration of psychosocial risk factors. The findings of the evaluation indicated that much still needed to be done regarding psychosocial risks such as work control and work organisation, preventing unreasonably intense work pace and repetitive work. This suggested an insufficient application of some of the general principles of prevention foreseen in the Framework Directive 89/391 (Leka et al., 2015a). As concerns the evaluation of the framework agreements for work-related stress and for harassment and violence at work, the main activities that followed the signing of the agreements were their translation in national languages (EC, 2011; European Social Partners, 2011) however they did act as catalysts for the implementation of new or updated legislation in some countries (e.g. the Czech Republic and Italy).

At national EU member state level (e.g. Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic), legislation is more specific than EU law and makes direct reference to work-related stress, bullying and harassment and/or psychosocial risks. In addition, good practice examples in this area exist in a number of member states, including the Management Standards in the UK and Italy, Work Positive in Ireland, the Work and Health Covenants and Catalogues in the Netherlands, ISTAS in Spain, SOBANE in Belgium, the tools developed by INRS and ANACT in France, and EU-OSHA's online simple risk assessment tool for SMEs, OiRA (Leka, Van Wassenhove & Jain, 2015). The next section will focus on policy developments following the introduction of the framework agreement in work-related stress in one EU member state, Italy.

## 3. Policy developments in relation to psychosocial risks in Italy

In Italy, the term of work-related stress was introduced for the first time into the policy framework in June 2008, when the European Framework Agreement on work-related stress was translated in Italian and it was implemented into policy through the new updated normative framework concerning the health and safety at work, namely the Legislative Decree 81/2008 (Persechino et al., 2015). Before that, only general provisions without specific mention or examples of psychosocial risks were described into the national policies. Some references to the issues related to the organisation of work may be found in the Italian civil code (1942), where in the article 2087 it is stated that "the employer is required to adopt, within his company's organisation, the measures that, according to the particularity of the work, the experience and the technology, are necessary to protect the physical integrity and moral personality of the workers/employees".

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