Review

Labour inspections and the prevention of psychosocial risks at work: A realist synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Little research exists on the effectiveness of workplace visits by labour inspectors in relation to psychosocial risks. The study aimed to produce a consistent and transferable evidence-based framework.

Methods: We conducted a systematic literature review using the realist synthesis approach. Searches in three electronic databases, systematic hand-searches in five specialised journals and iterative purposive searches yielded 25 publications. The initial search included any study between 2000 and 2015 containing information on labour inspectorates and psychosocial risks or stress at work. We conducted a complementary search to identify publications from French-speaking authors.

Results: The synthesis yielded a conceptual model relating public intervention measures, mechanisms of action, outcomes and contexts. Publications indicate positive outcomes in 4 cases, possibly positive in 2, mixed outcomes in 4, and no or poor effects in 10. Studies from Nordic countries show some positive outcomes of inspection activities based on dialogue with employers, group interviews with employees, repeated visits and combinations with other communication and information channels, in the context of highly organised labour markets. Conversely, other studies highlight the limitations of intervention strategies that rely on an "enlightenment" principle, in a context of increasingly precarious and flexible work situations.

Conclusion: The synthesis suggests the possibility of positive outcomes of inspectors' interventions on psychosocial risks in supportive contexts and with appropriate training and resources. However, strong evidence is lacking and more evaluation studies are necessary. A comprehensive conceptual framework may help to analyse the wide range of factors influencing the effectiveness of workplace visits by inspectors.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, most industrialised countries have endorsed regulations requiring systematic occupational health and safety management. General duty provisions stipulate that employers have to assess and prevent all occupational health risks. The integration of organisational and psychosocial health risks into the scope of occupational health and safety (OHS) has challenged the roles and daily practices of labour inspectors, who were traditionally more comfortable with technical issues. The present paper concentrates on the inclusion of psychosocial risks and the assessment of the psychosocial work environment in the strategies and actions of labour inspectorates. It aims at providing a systematic review of the publications dealing with this topic.

According to Leka and Cox (2008), "work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm". This multifaceted notion combines health outcomes (fatigue, mental disorders, mental attrition, burnout, cardiovascular diseases, and other forms of suffering), pathogenic processes (stress reactions), and risk factors related to the work organisation and interpersonal relationships (e.g. overload, threats, violence, harassment, restricted autonomy, lack of recognition, etc.).

For the last 15 years, there has been an increasing number of publications on national and international psychosocial risk policies. They often present descriptive accounts, perspectives on the challenges for regulators and suggestions for the future. Most of them address the situation in Europe, considered the "cradle of Occupational Health" (Gagliardi et al., 2012). For example, Leka et al. (2015a) conducted a review of 94 hard and soft law policies on psychosocial risks and mental health in Europe. Ertel et al. (2010) examined the role of European social dialogue in the field of psychosocial risks; they identified diverging perspectives and structural weaknesses. In France, de Gaulejac (2010) undertook a review of three governmental reports; he criticised the refusal to tackle structural causes, such as work organisation, management ideology and the "liberalist dogma" (p. 65). Several authors (Langenhan et al., 2013; Leka et al., 2011b; Zoni and Lucchini, 2012) found a gap between policy and practice. Workplaces do not sufficiently understand and incorporate psychosocial risks into strategic decision-making, and do not know how to manage them adequately. The European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management (PRIMA-EF) was developed to tackle these challenges (Leka et al., 2011a). It provides a model and indicators for the management of psychosocial issues by governments and companies. Finally, some studies emphasize that developing countries are not free from psychosocial risks (Cheng, 2015; Kortum and Leka, 2014; Kortum et al., 2010).

A few other studies focus on an operational level, exploring how labour inspectors consider psychosocial risks in their daily practices. A systematic review of this type of publication could be useful for government agencies confronted with the difficulty of tackling these issues. Previous systematic reviews have measured the impact of labour inspections in terms of injuries and occupational diseases (MacEachen et al., 2016; Mischke et al., 2013), but to our knowledge, there has not been any systematic review on labour inspector intervention for the prevention of psychosocial risks. Many countries have launched intervention programmes over the past 20 years. However, an overview of their contents, results, success factors, and limitations is lacking. The development of an evidence-based programme theory could help labour inspectorates identify what kinds of interventions could be fruitful, in which contexts, and by which mechanisms. For this purpose, we sought to answer two questions. First, which inspection practices have been developed in industrialised countries? Secondly, what have been their impact, in which contexts and by which mechanisms? We studied these questions through a realist synthesis approach.

2. Methods

2.1. A realist synthesis approach

The aim of a systematic literature review is to synthesise the available, high quality evidence on the effects of an intervention. This is interesting for policy-makers, because it delivers an overview of the outcomes of policy instruments, based on a transparent and rigorous process (Victor, 2008a,b). For instance, Robson et al. (2007) studied the effectiveness of OHS management systems, and Tompa et al. (2007) the prevention incentives of insurance and regulatory mechanisms. To date, more than 130 systematic reviews on health and safety topics are available in the Cochrane Library (osh.cochrane.org). Specifically, Mischke et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review on enforcement tools for preventing occupational diseases and injuries. They found evidence that inspections decrease injuries in the long term but not in the short term. The magnitude of the effect and the impact of fines and penalties are uncertain. Larger effects are attained by specific rather than general inspections.

The Cochrane criteria are usually considered the gold standard for reviews in safety research, with randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental alternatives being the preferred methods (Pedersen et al., 2012; Verbeek and Ruotsalainen, 2012). According to Berthelette et al. (2008), systematic reviews often exclude other types of designs, deemed as methodologically weak, when results from RCTs are available; however, these authors recommend complementing this approach by evaluative research and qualitative methods, to identify the reasons why an intervention does – or not – lead to the expected outcomes.

Our initial exploratory work revealed that very few studies collected quantitative data on our review topic. Most publications describe state intervention measures, their contexts and sometimes their outcomes or mechanisms of action. It also turned out