



# Work engagement, social support, and job satisfaction in Portuguese nursing staff: A winning combination



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## ABSTRACT

*Background:* Job Demands-Resources model assumes the mediator role of work engagement between social support (job resource) and job satisfaction (organizational result). However, recent studies suggest that social support can be considered as a moderator variable in the relationship between engagement and job satisfaction in nursing staff.

*Aim:* The aim of this study is to analyze the moderator role of social support, from supervisor and from co-workers, in the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction in a Portuguese nursing sample.

*Method:* We conducted a cross-sectional and correlational study assessing a final sample of 215 participants (55.56% response rate, 77.21% women). Moderation analyses were carried out using multiple and hierarchical linear regression models.

*Results:* Job satisfaction was significantly predicted by work engagement and social support from supervisor and from co-workers. The significant interaction in predicting job satisfaction showed that social support from co-workers enhances the effects of work engagement on nurses' satisfaction.

*Conclusion:* A climate of social support among co-workers and higher levels of work engagement have a positive effect on job satisfaction, improving quality care and reducing turnover intention in nursing staff.

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## 1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century gave rise to a new perspective on the analysis of work and organizations. In view of the traditional perspective of stress and burnout, a more positive perspective has emerged focused, above all, on improving the quality of individuals' working life (Snyder & López, 2009): In this context, the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model appears as the theoretical framework that integrates those two perspectives, i.e., research on burnout and stress, and research on motivation, engagement, health, and workplace well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013).

The JDR model establishes that two types of elements can be differentiated in any job, namely: job demands; and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). Job demands are the characteristics of the work organization, which require effort in the part of employees. This effort is associated with a physical and/or psychological cost (mental or emotional). Examples of demands are the mobilization of patients by nurses (physical demand), and having to show empathy or positive emotions when the feelings are the opposite (emotional demand).

On the other hand, job resources are the characteristics of the work (physical, psychological, social, and organizational) that allow dealing with the demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). Examples of resources are the availability of equipment for the mobilization of patients, and social support from co-workers. High demands "consume" the individuals and cause burnout, whereas job resources are related to workers' engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Further development of the JDR model added personal resources as important antecedents of work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). Personal resources refer to some aspects of the individuals which are often followed and associated with resilience, and represent the personal perceptions of the ability to control and affect their environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011).

In this sense, work engagement is defined as a positive emotional state associate with the work, characterized by high levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Vigor refers to high levels of energy and resilience, even when job difficulties and obstacles arise. Dedication is related to high job involvement, attached to the manifestation of a feeling involving meaning, enthusiasm, pride in work, and inspiration. Finally, absorption arises when the individuals are fully concentrated on the job and time "flies", with difficulties to disengage from what they are doing (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

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According to Simpson (2009) and Crawford, Lepine, Rich, and Demerouti (2010), work engagement is related to job attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Engaged employees perceive that the work they perform has sense and meaning. They show a better performance in the tasks, valuing positively the function that they perform and experiencing greater satisfaction levels. Several studies have shown positive and significant relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction in nurses (Shahpouri, Namdari, & Ahmad, 2016; Spence Laschinger, 2012; Van Bogaert, Wouters, Willems, Mondelaers, & Clarke, 2013), as well as in samples composed of other professionals (Aларcon & Lyons, 2011).

Among the job resources included in the JDR model, social support is considered one of the most important resources for the nursing staff (AbuAlRub, Omari, & Al-Zaru, 2009a; AbuAlRub, Omari, & Rub, 2009b; Cortese, Colombo, & Ghislieri, 2010; Hamaideh, 2011; Pohl & Galleta, 2016; Poulsen, Kahn, Poulsen, Kahn, & Poulsen, 2016). Social support is defined as the social climate in the work context involving the relationship with supervisor and co-workers (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). It involves both socio-emotional and instrumental support (Martín-Arribas, 2007). The first refers to the degree of social and emotional integration between co-workers and supervisor, whereas the instrumental support refers to the collaboration between co-workers and supervisors to carry out work tasks (Martín-Arribas, 2007). Several studies have reported relationships between the perception of social support on the part of nurses and the quality of care provided, professional performance, and job satisfaction (AbuAlRub et al., 2009a; AbuAlRub et al., 2009b; Hamaideh, 2011; Kwak, Chung, Xu, & Eun-Jung, 2010; Pohl & Galleta, 2016).

According to the JDR model, work engagement functions as a mediator between job resources (i.e., social support) and organizational outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction). However, recent studies have not confirmed the mediator role of work engagement between social support and job satisfaction (Pohl & Galleta, 2016; Shahpouri et al., 2016). In the study of Shahpouri et al. (2016), with a sample of 208 female nurses from Iran, work engagement mediated the influence of personal resources (hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy) on turnover intention, but it did not mediate the influence of job resources (contingent rewards, organizational support, and organizational justice) on turnover intention. The path analysis showed no direct or indirect effect of social support on nurses' turnover intention. Pohl and Galleta (2016), in a sample of 323 nurses from Belgium, found that the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction (individual-level) was positively moderated by supervisor emotional support (group-level). In this sense, it is possible that the relationship between social support, work engagement, and job satisfaction may be explained by other processes, such as moderation, similarly to the buffer effect of social support on the relationship between burnout and job satisfaction (Stetz, Stetz, & Bliese, 2006). If social support reduces the negative effects of burnout on job satisfaction in nursing staff (AbuAlRub et al., 2009a; AbuAlRub et al., 2009b; Hamaideh, 2011), it is likely that also enhances the positive effects of work engagement (opposite to burnout) on job satisfaction (Pohl & Galleta, 2016).

Social support and work engagement are two organizational variables that tremendously affect the job satisfaction of nurses. Job satisfaction is an important issue for nurse administrators and hospital directors because it affects on the nurses' job performance and, subsequently, quality healthcare services (AbuAlRub et al., 2009b; Chien & Yick, 2016). Job satisfaction needs to be investigated on a regular basis in health care institutions, so the analysis of the factors that enhance job satisfaction in nursing staff is an important issue for researchers and practitioners (AbuAlRub et al., 2009a; AbuAlRub et al., 2009b).

### 1.1. Aims

To fill in the knowledge gap of better understanding the relationship between social support, work engagement, and job satisfaction, the goal

of the present study was to assess the role of social support (from supervisor and from co-workers) as a moderator variable in the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction in a sample composed of nurses from the south of Portugal. Specifically, we question whether social support is a moderator variable in the relationship between work engagement and job satisfaction, so that participants with high social support would achieve higher job satisfaction in situations featuring high work engagement.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design and participants

We conducted a cross-sectional, descriptive and correlational study using questionnaires (Montero & León, 2007). A total of 450 nursing professionals of three public hospitals from the south of Portugal were surveyed, obtaining a final sample of 215 participants (55.56% response rate). As for inclusion criteria, all participants were required to have worked for a least 1 year in the same ward in public hospitals.

The average age of the participants was 38.89 years ( $SD = 9.37$ ), and 77.21% of the sample was composed of women ( $n = 166$ ). With respect to marital status, 47.44% of the participants reported that they were unmarried ( $n = 102$ ) and 46.51% married ( $n = 100$ ). Almost 70.75% ( $n = 150$ ) of the sample reported that they had indefinite contracts, with an average of approximately 10 years of nursing professional experience ( $M = 9.40$ ;  $SD = 8.10$ ).

### 2.2. Instruments

Instruments used in the study were the dimension of social support included in the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ), the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), the Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS), and a demographic data sheet designed by the researchers.

#### 2.2.1. Social support

To measure social support at work, we used the dimension of social support included in the JCQ (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) adapted to Portuguese language. The eleven items of the dimension are distributed into two sub-scales: (a) support from supervisor (5 items); and support from co-workers (6 items). The questions were answered according to a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). Higher scores indicated high levels of social support, both from supervisor and co-workers. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the support from supervisor and co-workers were 0.93 and 0.86, respectively.

#### 2.2.2. Work engagement

To assess work engagement, we used the reduced questionnaire of the Portuguese version of the UWES (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This scale consists of nine items distributed into three dimensions, namely: vigor (3 items); dedication (3 items); and absorption (3 items). The participants answered the nine items using a Likert-type scale, which ranged from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). High scores expressed high levels of work engagement in the participants. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient obtained in the present study was 0.92.

#### 2.2.3. Job satisfaction

To assess job satisfaction, we used the JSS developed by Lima, Vala, and Monteiro (1994). This scale is made up of eight items that measure satisfaction with various aspects of the work context. The participants responded to each statement using a Likert-type scale, which ranged from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Higher scores expressed higher levels of job satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency obtained in the present study was 0.87.

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