



The social integration of healthcare agency workers in long-term care facilities: A cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Patient care quality is a key concern for long-term care facilities and is directly related to effective collaboration between healthcare professionals. The use of agency staff in long-term care facilities creates important challenges in terms of coordination and communication within work units.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to assess the mediating effect of common in-group identity in the relationship between permanent employees' perceptions regarding the use of agency workers -namely distributive justice, perceptions of threat, perceived similarities with agency workers, and leader inclusiveness toward agency staff- and the permanent employees' adoption of collaborative behaviours.

Design: Cross-sectional study.

Settings: Three long-term care facilities.

Participants: 290 regular healthcare employees (nurses and care attendants).

Methods: Data were obtained through questionnaires filled out by employees. Hypotheses were tested using structural equation analyses.

Results: The results showed the indirect effects of perceived distributive justice, perceived similarity and leader inclusiveness toward agency workers on permanent employees' cooperation behaviours through common group identification. Perceptions of threat were not related to common group identification or collaborative behaviours. The results also showed that common in-group identification is related to cooperation behaviours only for employees without previous experience as agency workers.

Conclusions: This study suggests that permanent healthcare employees who feel they are fairly compensated relative to agency workers, who consider these workers as similar to them, and who believe their supervisor appreciates agency workers' contributions tend to develop a common in-group identity, which fosters collaborative behaviours. Managers of long-term care facilities who wish to foster collaboration among their blended workforce should thus create an environment conducive of a more inclusive identity, particularly if their employees have no previous experience as agency workers.

What is already known about the topic?

- Reliance on agency workers is a common practice in the healthcare sector.
- The use of agency workers brings several challenges in terms of collaboration and communication between employees.

What this paper adds

- The paper shows that when permanent workers share a common identity with agency workers, they tend to collaborate more with them.

- The paper demonstrates that permanent employees will develop a common inclusive identity and adopt collaborative behaviours when they 1) perceive they are fairly compensated relative to agency workers; 2) consider these workers as similar to them; and 3) evaluate that their leader adopts an inclusive attitude towards agency workers.

1. Introduction

Ensuring high quality care for patients is a well-recognized priority of long-term care facilities. Although many factors may contribute to patient care quality, those related to the workforce are of primary

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importance because care delivery in such facilities is a labour-intensive process (Spilsbury et al., 2011). In the literature, low staffing levels, turnover, and more recently the use of agency staff have been identified as determinants of patient care quality (Castle et al., 2008; Hurst and Smith, 2011). Reliance on agency staff in the healthcare sector, including long-term care facilities, is a common practice, as reported in numerous countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Creagan et al., 2003; David et al., 2011; de Ruyter et al., 2008). Whereas the use of agency staff can help improve care delivery by supplying the necessary workforce to respond to patients' needs, and by providing complementary expertise and experience, it can also be associated with a number of disadvantages like increased potential for medication or charting errors, a greater need for constant supervision, and less effective teamwork (Castle et al., 2008; Manias et al., 2003). Indeed, empirical evidence shows that the use of agency staff creates several challenges in terms of cohesion, communication and coordination within work units (Adams and Bond, 2003; Manias et al., 2003). Collaboration and communication between healthcare professionals have been identified by researchers as key mechanisms for ensuring the quality of patient care (Havens et al., 2010).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that may lead permanent employees to engage in more collaborative behaviours with agency staff. Building on the social identity literature, and more specifically on the common in-group identity model (Gaertner et al., 1993), we propose and test a model in which common group identity acts as a mediator between permanent employees' perceptions of the use of agency workers—namely distributive justice, perceptions of threat, perceived similarities with agency workers and leader inclusiveness toward agency staff—and permanent employees' adoption of information sharing and altruism behaviours. These factors, derived from Allport's (1954) "intergroup contact hypothesis," which identifies the conditions that reduce intergroup prejudice and enhance collaboration, are particularly salient in the dynamics between permanent and temporary staff.

By increasing our understanding of the factors that facilitate collaboration and communication between permanent employees and temporary agency staff, our results will help long-term care facilities identify sound approaches to face the challenges of managing a blended workforce and ultimately improve patient care quality. Our results will also extend the literature on the dynamics surrounding agency work in the healthcare sector, given the persistent lack of comprehensive exploration in that domain (Manias et al., 2003).

1.1. Integration of agency workers by developing a common identity

Although the notion of integration can be approached from different angles, such as social or economic integration, this study focuses on identity integration and examines the integration of agency workers through the model of common in-group identity (Gaertner et al., 1993). This model explains the conditions under which interactions between different groups can foster positive relations between them. The basic premise of the model is that if members of different groups are encouraged to perceive themselves as being part of a more inclusive common group, then their attitudes and behaviours toward one another will be more positive. Recent conceptualizations of the model specify that the development of harmonious relations is not conditional on abandoning distinctions between different groups (Dovidio et al., 2009; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). Individuals can thus consider that they belong to a common group while recognizing that they are also part of different subgroups; a process referred to as integration.

This model is of particular interest in the context of agency work. Agency workers on temporary placements are characterized by the fact that they are employed by one organization (the agency), but do their work at another one (e.g. a healthcare facility). Because of the nature of their job relationship, agency workers are objectively considered as external workers, or organizational outsiders. The use of agency work

therefore creates a situation where, within the same organization or unit, two groups of workers with different job statuses coexist. Research has shown, however, that the boundary line between the two groups is sometimes hazy. For instance, despite their objective outsider status, temporary workers' may feel like full members of the organization (Lapalme et al., 2009). Further, a study of intergroup relations between permanent and contingent workers demonstrates that whereas some employees feel they effectively belong to two entirely distinct groups (permanent employees versus contingent workers), others feel that they are united in that they all belong to the same larger group (organization members), creating a feeling of common group identification (Lipponen and Leskinen, 2006).

Our research aims to shed light on this variation in employees' perceptions by 1) assessing the influence of specific factors hypothesized to be determinants of the development of a common group identity among permanent employees (nurses and patient care attendants) working in long-term care facilities; and 2) evaluating the extent to which this common group identification influences their cooperation behaviours toward agency workers.

1.2. Determinants of common group identification

Based on the literature on temporary workers (Boyce et al., 2007) and intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), we identified a set of factors that can lead permanent employees to integrate agency workers, that is, consider that they all belong to the same superordinate group (common group identification). We targeted four factors that appear pertinent for the study of integration of agency workers in the healthcare sector: perceived distributive justice, perceived sense of threat, perceived similarity with agency workers, and leader inclusiveness toward agency staff.

1.2.1. Perceptions of distributive justice

Given that the use of agency workers brings together two groups of workers who work under different employment conditions but often perform similar tasks, a setting is created that favours social comparisons and raises questions of distributive justice. Distributive justice refers to the individual's perception of justice regarding the distribution of resources (e.g. salary) in the organization (Colquitt, 2001). It results from the comparison that individuals make between their outcome/input ratio (i.e., what they receive in exchange for their contribution at work) and that of a referent (Adams, 1965; Greenberg et al., 2007). In the context of agency work, a referent of interest for permanent employees is agency workers in their unit. Agency healthcare workers serve the same function as permanent employees, but perform their work under a different compensation structure, sometimes with different performance expectations. For instance, Hass et al. (2006) report that in some healthcare facilities, agency nurses are appointed to low acuity types of patients. This may exacerbate the comparison process, leading to employee perceptions of distributive justice or injustice. Whereas few studies have examined the notion of distributive justice in the context of the use of agency workers, the experimental works of Platow et al. (2008) suggest that this form of justice can be linked to the concept of integration. Their results show that the perception of injustice regarding the distribution of resources between two groups reinforces the boundary between these groups. Conversely, distributive justice tends to minimize the distinctions that individuals make between groups. We can therefore posit that permanent employees who have a strong perception of distributive justice when they compare what they receive to what agency workers receive would tend to consider themselves as belonging to a common group. The arguments above lead us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. The perception of comparative distributive justice relative to agency workers is positively associated with permanent employees' perception of sharing a common identity with agency workers.

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