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Article

What's up with the self-employed? A cross-national perspective on the self-employed's work-related mental well-being

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ABSTRACT

Although many governments actively stimulate self-employment, their work-related mental well-being remains understudied. The aim of current study is to investigate the mental well-being of different types of self-employed, testing whether mental well-being differences among self-employed are explained by the presence of work characteristics that are in accordance with the ideal-typical image of the “successful entrepreneur” (e.g. creativity, willingness to take risks, innovativeness, high intrinsic motivation, skilfulness and the ability of recognizing opportunities). Moreover, we investigate the relation of country-level “entrepreneurial climate” and the individual mental well-being of self-employed. For this purpose, data from the European Working Conditions Survey, round 6 (2015) was analysed, including 5448 cases, originating from the 28 EU-member states. Multilevel random intercepts modelling was used to investigate associations of both individual- and country-level characteristics with mental well-being. We found that motivation, the ability to recognize opportunities, and finding it easy to be self-employed positively influences the mental well-being of self-employed. Respondents with these characteristics are often medium-big employers, while farmers, dependent freelancers and own account workers generally have less of these features and tend to have lower levels of mental well-being. At the country-level, positive entrepreneurship perception relates to more advantageous mental health scores in self-employed. These results implicate that policies promoting self-employment should be (more) concerned with the work-related characteristics of (future) self-employed.

1. Introduction

Governments worldwide are trying to stimulate self-employment. The EU2020 employment strategy is illustrative in that regard: it recognises entrepreneurship and self-employment as key for achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and as a way to create new jobs (European Commission, 2017). Many European countries are translating the European Commissions' strategy into their policies to promote self-employment. In 2015, between 6.1 (Luxembourg) and 35.2 (Greece) percent of EU-countries' labour force was self-employed (OECD, 2017). In some EU-countries – e.g. The Netherlands – entrepreneurship policies may have some effect, considering recent increases in the proportion of self-employed. Notwithstanding the policy attention and the fact that self-employed constitute an important minority in the labour force, research on work-related (mental) health of

self-employed is very scarce – certainly when compared to employees (Toivanen, Griep, Mellner, Vinberg & Eloranta, 2016). This is even more so for research looking into determinants of mental health among self-employed (Nordenmark, Vinberg, & Strandh, 2012). Even fewer studies have adopted a cross-national perspective to this study domain – see e.g. Johansson Sevä, Vinberg, Nordenmark, and Strandh (2016) for a notable exception.

The current study aims to investigate variation in mental health between types of self-employed residing in 28 European countries, using data from EUROFOUND's 2015 European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). Moreover, we will test whether the presence of entrepreneurial characteristics typically attributed to successful self-employment – e.g. creativity, willingness to take risks, innovativeness, high intrinsic motivation, skilfulness and the ability of recognizing opportunities (Gartner, 1990; Hendry, 2004) – are helping to explain

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mental health differences among self-employed. Finally, we will also examine whether country-level “entrepreneurial climate” (Audretsch & Keilbach, 2004) explains country-level variation in the mental well-being of self-employed.

1.1. Defining the self-employed

Two approaches towards defining and classifying the self-employed may be adopted. A first, objective, approach derives self-employment from the legal, societal, and contractual framework of each country (Casson, 2003). Although, such an approach typically results in idiosyncratic descriptions, some general criteria can be applied to distinguish self-employed from other types of workers and to make sub-classifications among the self-employed. According to Eurofound (2010), characteristics to identify and classify self-employed are: the absence of a wage-labour-relation (at least formally); a certain degree of economic and organisational independency; working alone or having employees; and the magnitude of the economic activity (De Moortel & Vanroelen, 2017). In order to turn the objective approach into an element of research, multiple combinations of attributes and characteristics can be used to make typologies (Webster, 1977). In this research, a 7-category classification based on a consensus model developed for EUROFOUND is used, distinguishing between (1) medium-to-big employers, (2) small employers, (3) independent freelancers, (4) dependent freelancers, (5) liberal professions, (6) farmers, no employer and (7) others (De Moortel & Vanroelen, 2017) – this classification is further discussed in the methods section.

The second approach is of a subjective nature, and attaches the definition of self-employment to the discourse of the “entrepreneurial self” (Peters, 2001). According to entrepreneurial discourse, key characteristics of an ideal and successful “entrepreneur” are creativity, willingness to take risks, innovativeness, high intrinsic motivation, skilfulness and the ability of recognising opportunities (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Gartner, 1990; Hendry, 2004). According to this discourse, the self-employed person is projected as a hero and seen as the engine of society (Laermans, De Cauter, & Vanhaesebrouck, 2016). The characteristics of the self-employed are even something to aspire to for everyone (Anderson & Warren, 2011). So, from this subjective perspective, “real self-employed” are those people disposing of the attributes associated with the entrepreneurial self (Anderson & Warren, 2011). According to critics, pursuing the entrepreneurial characteristics traps people in a new highly ideological ideal of neoliberalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), of which it can be questioned to what extent even “real self-employed” actually meet up to. It can certainly be assumed, that different types of self-employed meet up to the ideal of the entrepreneur to different extents. Therefore, in this study we will test whether these characteristics embedded in the entrepreneurial discourse are able to explain mental well-being differences between types of self-employed.

1.2. The mental well-being of self-employed

If entrepreneurial characteristics are a recipe for a successful life, it is logical to assume that the self-employed should experience positive individual consequences from their work, since it can be assumed that they have high amounts of entrepreneurial characteristics. This assumption is supported with some empirical evidence, showing that self-employed experience more autonomy, self-determination and freedom in their job (Nordenmark et al., 2012; Stephan & Roesler, 2010). In general, self-employed appear to be more motivated and engaged with their work (Dijkhuizen, Gorgievski, van Veldhoven & Schalk, 2016), which could be the reason for findings of higher job satisfaction (Binder & Coad, 2013; Meager, 2015), life satisfaction (Andersson, 2008) and mental well-being (Crum & Chen, 2015; Stephan & Roesler, 2010), compared to other groups of workers.

Other studies however, show that better health status of self-

employed is largely due to selection effects of healthy people into self-employment, while engaging in self-employment itself is not particularly beneficial for health (Rietveld, Van Kippersluis, & Thurik, 2015). High economic insecurity (Annink, Gorgievski, & Den Dulk, 2016), low support (Syrett, 2016), high workloads and long working hours (Hyytinen & Ruuskanen, 2007; Nordenmark et al., 2012) may have negative consequences for the mental well-being of self-employed. A too strong work-commitment may also lead to insufficient effort into other domains of life, affecting mental well-being negatively (Binder & Coad, 2013).

Of course, general comparisons of the self-employed versus other types of workers are highly misleading. Research into differences in mental health and their determinants among self-employed is crucial in order to get a deeper understanding of the work-related drivers of their mental well-being (Dijkhuizen et al., 2016). Some evidence exists regarding differences in mental well-being between categories of self-employed. One of the more problematic groups in terms of working conditions and mental well-being are freelancers, also called contractors or independent professionals, who have a tendency towards work over-commitment (Syrett, 2016) and the related phenomenon of Effort-Reward-Imbalance (Ertel, Pech, Ullsperger, Von Dem Knesebeck & Siegrist, 2005). Often freelancers also experience low autonomy, economic dependence and financial hardship (Böheim & Mühlberger, 2006). Also, self-employed farmers are often considered as a group with more mental health issues. They are having the highest suicide rate before any other occupational group in the UK (Gregoire, 2002; Hounsome, Edwards, Hounsome & Edwards-Jones, 2012). Farmers often have unpredictable and long working hours, experience financial insecurity, and lack basic social contact and social support (Gregoire, 2002). Another group that has been investigated separately are small-to-medium enterprise owners or managers (SME managers). Cocker, Martin, Scott, Venn, and Sanderson (2013) found that around one third of the SME-managers mentioned feelings of serious psychological stress. Shepherd, Marchisio, Morrish, Deacon, and Miles (2010) relate burnout in this population to role conflicts and role overloads. In contrast, larger business owners and those in the liberal professions appear to experience more beneficial work characteristics. Those groups appear to have fluent access to financial support, information, and social contact with people of the same occupational status (Sorgner & Fritsch, 2013). Larger business owners have often been self-employed for a large period of time, which results in more experience and a more stable business and workforce (Bradley & Roberts, 2004).

Hypothesis 1. Farmers, freelancers, and small business owners have worse mental well-being, compared to medium-to-large employers and liberal professions.

It can be assumed that differences in mental well-being between groups of self-employed partly relate to the different work quality they are exposed to. Certainly, in those cases where “reality” does not meet the standards set out by the entrepreneurial discourse, harmful psychosocial consequences might be expected. In such cases, the entrepreneurship discourse may turn into a trap: it may lead the self-employed person to feel obliged to commit to the life projected in the discourse also when this life is unattainable and uncertain (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). In other words, one could argue that those self-employed who are lacking the above described characteristics central to “ideal typical entrepreneur”, find themselves in a situation of “role inconsistency”, which could be harmful for mental health (Mirowsky & Ross, 1986).

Hypothesis 2. (a) A lack of entrepreneurial characteristics is related to lower mental well-being scores; and **(b)** entrepreneurial characteristics mediate the relationship between types of self-employed and mental well-being.

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