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Original article

Assessment of job stress factors in a context of organizational change



Évaluation des facteurs de stress au travail dans un contexte de changement organisationnel

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Research consistently showed that stress and organizational change are closely related.
Objective. – This study was conducted to identify the psychosocial job characteristics that are responsible for psychological stress in a context of organizational change.
Method. – An expanded 30-item version of the Job Content Questionnaire was used to measure psychological demands, decision latitude, supervisor support, coworker support, and organizational difficulties. Online survey responses from 973 employees from the university of Strasbourg were analyzed.
Results. – Confirmatory Factor Analyses indicated a poor fit of the five-factor model based on 30 items but an acceptable to good fit of a reduced five-factor model based on 26 items. Results from a stepwise regression showed that the organizational difficulties dimension was the second most important predictor of psychological stress.
Conclusion. – The implications of these findings for further work on health outcomes of organizational changes closed this study.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les recherches ont montré de manière consistante que stress et changements organisationnels sont étroitement liés.
Objectif. – Cette étude a été conduite dans le but d'identifier les facteurs psychosociaux vecteurs de stress au travail, dans un contexte de changement organisationnel.
Méthode. – Une version élargie du Questionnaire de Satisfaction au Travail de Karasek a été utilisée pour mesurer la demande psychologique, la latitude de décision, le soutien de la hiérarchie, le soutien des collègues et les difficultés organisationnelles. Les réponses à un questionnaire en ligne obtenues auprès de 973 employés de l'université de Strasbourg ont été analysées.
Résultats. – Les Analyses Factorielles Confirmatoires ont montré une mauvaise adéquation entre le modèle théorique en 5 facteurs et l'échelle initiale de 30 items mais une bonne adéquation si l'échelle est réduite à 26 items. Les analyses de régression pas à pas ont montré que les difficultés organisationnelles représentent le deuxième prédicteur le plus important du stress perçu.
Conclusion. – Les implications de nos résultats en termes de santé au travail sont discutées en fin d'article.

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1. Introduction

Organizational change is an integral part of today's working life and can be viewed as a critical life event, which has potential negative outcomes on employees. Indeed, employees are likely to experience uncertainty over the nature of their job and new work environment and insecurity over their personal career. Numerous studies have found that structural changes within organizations

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create a range of work-related stressors such as role ambiguity, increased job demands (long hours, increased workload and pressure...), lowered control, as well as changes in opportunities for social support from supervisors (less manager availability, lack of guidance, lack of recognition...). These factors may, in turn, lead to increased levels of psychological stress, less job satisfaction, declining levels of organizational commitment and detrimental effects on individual health (Hansson, Vingard, Arnetz, & Anderzen, 2008; Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004; Kivimäki, Vahtera, Elovainio, Pentti, & Virtanen, 2003; Noblet, Rodwell, & McWilliams, 2006; Tvedt, Saksvik, & Nytro, 2009). The present research follows this line of work. Its focus is on identifying the psychosocial job characteristics that are responsible for psychological stress in a context of organizational change.

The framework for this research is based on the most widely used theoretical model in the field of research on the relationship between work and stress, the Demand-Control-Support (DCS) model, also known as the job strain model, formulated by Karasek (1985). Originally, the job strain model (Karasek, 1979) focuses on two important dimensions in work situation: psychological job demand and job control or decision latitude. Psychological demand refers to the workload in terms of quantity of work and time constraints. Job control or decision latitude refers to the worker's possibility to control his or her own work activities (De Araujo & Karasek, 2008; Brisson et al., 1998; Karasek, 1979). This dimension includes two highly related sub-dimensions: skill discretion, i.e. the possibility to use and develop one's skills, and decision authority, i.e. the possibility to make decisions about one's own work (Niedhammer, 2002; Niedhammer, Chastang, Gendrey, David, & Degioanni, 2006; Theorell & Karasek, 1996). The model hypothesizes that a combination of high psychological demands and low decision latitude produces high job strain, which predicts adverse health problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, muscular skeletal diseases, and poor psychological well-being (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Kawakami & Haratini, 1999; Kristensen, 1995). In the 1980s, the Job Demand-Control model has been extended to include a social support dimension (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Johnson, Hall, & Theorell, 1989), resulting in the Job Demand-Control-Support (DCS) model. Social support can be defined as the availability of people on whom one can turn in times of need (Sarason, Levine, Baham, & Sarason, 1983). Previous studies consensually distinguished social support received from supervisors and/or from colleagues and considered that these two dimensions often "buffer" the impact of high psychological demands and low decision latitude (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Although this model has provided key insights into the relationship between work and stress, it has been criticized for its parsimonious focus on a general set of job characteristics contributing to employees' well-being at work at the expense of more situation-specific factors (Noblet et al., 2006; Peeters and Le Blanc, 2001; Sparks & Cooper, 1999). Consequently, it may be not sufficiently appropriate for understanding stress in a specific context such as a context of organizational change. Karasek himself already questioned the integration of an organization-level job factor into his model, acknowledging that the effects of organizational difficulties on determining work environment appear to be fundamental (Karasek et al., 1998). Thus, in line with our focus, the Job DCS model used in this study has been expanded to include an organizational change dimension.

The classical instrument used in connection with the DCS model is the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) elaborated by Karasek (1985). This self-administered questionnaire can be considered as a standardized instrument to assess job stress. Numerous studies have explored the psychometric properties of the JCQ and highlighted its reliability and validity in various languages and cultural contexts and among different working populations (Cheng,

Luh, & Guo, 2003; De Araujo & Karasek, 2008; Eum et al., 2007; Karasek et al., 1998; Kawakami & Fujigaki, 1996). The French version of the JCQ was examined and validated in the region of Quebec (Brisson et al., 1998) and in two major national surveys in France: the SUMER survey (Niedhammer, 2002) and the GAZEL cohort (Niedhammer et al., 2008). The results of these different validation studies consistently supported the theoretical structure of the Demand-Control-Support model. Factor analyses showed that the expected dimensions of psychological demand, decision latitude and social support were clearly found. Moreover, results generally supported the division of decision latitude into skill discretion and decision authority, and the division of social support into coworker support and supervisor support (e.g. De Araujo & Karasek, 2008; Kawakami & Fujigaki, 1996; Niedhammer, 2002). Nevertheless, these studies also underlined the existence of some problematic items. In particular, the items "conflicting demands" and "wait on others" consistently had low loadings on the psychological demand factor (Brisson et al., 1998; De Araujo & Karasek, 2008; Eum et al., 2007; Karasek et al., 1998; Kawakami, Kobayashi, Araki, Haratani, & Furui, 1995; Laroque, Brisson, & Blanchette, 1998; Niedhammer, 2002). These results raise the question of whether these items really refer to the work load in terms of quantity of work and time constraints such as "work hard", "work fast", "excessive work" or "not enough time". Rather, we can hypothesize that these items may be associated with organizational difficulties, a factor that is not included in the JCQ, but that could be particularly relevant in the specific context of organizational change (Karasek et al., 1998).

To sum up, the focus of this study is on identifying the psychosocial job characteristics that are responsible for psychological stress in a context of organizational change. We thus aimed (1) to measure Demand-Control-Support dimensions through a version of the French JCQ (Niedhammer et al., 2006) that has been expanded by incorporating specific items related to difficulties from organizational change; and (2) to examine the fit of this new version of the JCQ with data, its psychometric properties (as measured by internal consistency, cross-scale correlations, discriminant validity), and its relationship with psychological stress. Our main purpose was to examine how the *new* organizational change dimension can play a role in accounting for psychological stress variance by improving prediction of psychological stress beyond that afforded by the more *classical* factors of the JCQ. Specifically, we expected that the more an employee viewed difficulties from organizational change, the more he/she perceived psychological stress (controlling for the impact of the other stress factors on psychological stress).

2. Method

2.1. Organizational background

The present study was conducted in the context of an important organizational change within a large French university: the university of Strasbourg. The origins of the university of Strasbourg date back to the early 16th century, with the aim to develop medicine, theology, philosophy, and law areas. Following several historic developments, three separate universities were created in 1968 focusing on sciences, humanities, and law. During the last two decades, the three universities have been working together to manage ambitious projects. Encouraged by this experience, they decided to link their forces in only one university, in order to face the challenging international competition. This important fusion led to a large organizational restructuring, including the reassignment of staff into new work units, the introduction of intermediate management positions, and substantial modifications to

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