

Original article

The “Working conditions and control questionnaire” (WOCCQ): Towards a structural model of subjective stress[☆]

Le questionnaire sur le contrôle de l’activité de travail (WOCCQ) : vers un modèle structural du stress subjectif

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Abstract

This paper examined the structural model of subjective stress using the job control dimensions of the “Working conditions and control questionnaire” (WOCCQ), a psychosocial risk diagnosis widely used in French-speaking countries. Two research questions were investigated: (1) Do all the control facets influence subjective stress in the same way? and (2) Are certain control scales more important than others in the prediction of stress? The sample used includes 816 workers of a public employment agency. First, not all of the facets of job control influence stress in the same way. The control of resources dimension is important in indirectly influencing the stress process. Planning control is a partial mediator between control of resources and other dimensions of control. The model suggests considering future control as an exogenous variable. Finally, the direct effect of the four job control subscales on stress is identical in terms of R-square. These results are discussed not only with regards to the theoretical perspective of stress at work but also the stress intervention perspective.

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Résumé

L’objectif de la recherche est de présenter un modèle structural du stress au travail permettant de prendre en compte les dimensions de contrôle du « Questionnaire sur le contrôle de l’activité de travail » (WOCCQ), un diagnostic des risques psychosociaux largement utilisé dans les pays de langue française. Deux questions guident cette recherche : (1) Les dimensions de contrôle influencent-elles toutes de la même manière le stress subjectif ? et (2) Certaines dimensions de contrôle sont-elles plus importantes que d’autres dans la prédiction du stress ? L’échantillon utilisé comprend 816 travailleurs d’une agence publique pour l’emploi. Tout d’abord, toutes les dimensions de contrôle n’influencent pas le stress de la même manière. Le contrôle sur les ressources est primordial même s’il n’influence le stress que de manière indirecte. Le contrôle sur la planification des tâches se présente comme un médiateur partiel entre le contrôle sur les ressources et les autres dimensions de contrôle. Le modèle suggère également de considérer le contrôle de l’avenir comme une variable exogène. Enfin, les effets directs mis en évidence pour quatre dimensions de contrôle sont semblables en termes de R-carré. Ces résultats sont discutés non seulement dans la perspective théorique du stress au travail, mais aussi en termes d’interventions relatives à la gestion du stress.

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1. Introduction

Job control is one of the most popular concepts in occupational psychology literature. The complexity of this concept is largely recognized and discussed in the scientific literature (e.g. Aronsson, 1989; Frese, 1989). More particularly from the perspective of stress studies, the feeling of uncontrollability on job

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factors is hypothesized to influence the generation of stress. High job control also has an impact on health and well-being, i.e. fewer somatic complaints and higher satisfaction (e.g. Spector, 1986; Smith et al., 1997).

Several models exist to explain how job control has an impact on the well-being of workers (Frese, 1989; Karasek, 1979). More specifically, according to Frese (1989), it is possible, as far as mechanisms of control are concerned, to distinguish between different moderating and direct effects. Carayon (1993) has tested the moderating effect of control assumption. Her results did not confirm a moderating effect of job control on stress outcomes. She argues that “job control does not play a mediating role (endogenous variable) but rather functions as an exogenous variable. Job control could be a structuring factor that would allow individuals to adjust job demands and other job elements to their desired level” (Carayon, 1993, p.474). Frese (1989) called this mechanism “stressor reduction”. This means that the perception of control has an indirect effect on stress reactions by reducing the impact or intensity of the demands of the situation. This underlines the importance of a job control measurement that makes it possible to assess whether or not a worker has a perception of control over all job factors included in his/her tasks. Consequently, control dimensions focusing on specific aspects of the job should be negatively correlated with the perception of stress. In this sense, perceived control is even more important insofar as only perceived control leads the person to change the work environment situation (Frese, 1989).

The job demand–control model (Karasek, 1979), which is the reference in the field of job control research, is useful for epidemiological studies but insufficient for diagnostic purposes in an interventionist perspective (de Jonge and Kompier, 1997). Even if this model is intuitively attractive and largely recognized in the scientific community, its empirical validity still has to be demonstrated. From a methodological point of view, many authors criticize the use of the decision latitude construct as a measure of job control. The decision latitude items of Karasek (1979) reflect decision authority and skill discretion. But many authors (e.g. De Croon et al., 2000; Kristensen, 1995; Smith et al., 1997) mention that the skill discretion items are quite confused in that they are closer to job characteristics such as skill utilization, job complexity and job variety than to job control. However skill discretion is not necessarily linked to job control (Wall et al., 1995; Van der Doef and Maes, 1999). All these authors recommend more specific scales to measure job control and job demands.

1.1. From unidimensional scales of job control to multifaceted job control scales

From a methodological point of view, we have to deal with an important criticism of studies dealing with job control (Karasek, 1979, p. 290): the measurement of job control through global scales (e.g. Jones and Fletcher, 1996; McKnight and Glass, 1995).

De Croon et al. (2000) observe that up until now many studies have used the general decision latitude construct, as defined by Karasek (1979). During the 1980s, following criticisms regard-

ing one-dimensional scales, we could observe an evolution in the way in which control scales are conceived. Admittedly, certain authors have created scales that are still one-dimensional, but they are based on items which make reference to various aspects of the work situation. But most recent studies, aiming to verify Karasek’s model or the moderating role of control, still make reference to one-dimensional scales (e.g. Barling and Kelloway, 1996).

The disparity of the scales is quite obvious. The most representative example of the problem is probably Carayon (1993) who obtains four different response formats for nine items taken from three different scales: the autonomy scale of the Insel and Moos diagnosis (1974, cited by Carayon, 1993), the participation scale of Caplan et al. (1975, cited by Carayon, 1993) and items of Smith et al. (1981, cited by Carayon, 1993).

It is not until the end of the 1980s and thereafter, that we see certain authors propose scales with several control dimensions, parallel to the elaboration of different taxonomies (Table 1). Unfortunately, numerous criticisms can be levelled at these multifaceted scales. First of all, it is said that the authors seem to agree on the content of the different facets but, unfortunately, little consensus is to be found regarding the optimal number of fields to be considered. Certain aspects are also relatively neglected, in particular control over the physical environment, responsibilities and the future. Moreover, different indicators measure different aspects, and this means that there is little prospect of obtaining sound databases. The scales are often specific to the job analyzed and do not incorporate validity constructs. Different indicators measure different aspects, which makes it difficult to look for reliable data. As Jackson et al. (1993) noticed, only standardised, generally applicable measures will allow the accumulation of comparative and normative data that is necessary to make more systematic judgments about whether job control is at an optimal level. Finally, the relatively small number of items contained in the existing multidimensional scales is a problem when making a differentiated diagnosis of the psychosocial risks in a working environment. The fields should therefore not only be pertinent for the purposes of adjustment of the intervention after the diagnosis, but should also be sufficiently detailed to allow more specific control problems to be targeted in each field (Kristensen, 1995).

In response to these criticisms, we have developed a control scale that relates to different fields of work, from the point of view of the stressor reduction mechanism (Frese, 1989), and which generally applies to any working environment. Above all, our approach aims to be practical in the sense that the methodology proposed should be useful in terms of the potential for intervention by any professional concerned by the problem of psychosocial risks in the workplace.

1.2. From a new multifaceted job control scale to research questions

Up until now, none of the studies that have highlighted control tools pertaining to different aspects of work have attempted modelling. The authors involved in this field of study have put forward multidimensional control scales (e.g. Breugh,

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