

Psychosocial work environment, well being and emotional exhaustion. A study comparing five age groups of female workers within the human sector

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to describe the psychosocial work environment measured by the Job Demand–Control-model (JDC-model), work related well being and emotional exhaustion for female workers within the human sector. Furthermore, the aim was to analyze differences between the age groups regarding the above mentioned variables. The purpose was also to investigate the association between age, psychosocial work environment and burnout. The result indicates that the combination of high demands and low decision authority is particularly harmful for older workers. © 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The Demand–Control model (JDC-model) [1] provides a framework to explain the relation between the psychosocial characteristics of the work environment and health outcomes. It comprises two basic dimensions—psychological job demands and decision latitude. Job demands refer to the workload, and have been operationalized in terms of amount of work, time pressure and conflicting demands. Decision latitude includes two theoretically distinct concepts. Skill discretion refers to the extent to which the job involves the opportunity to learn new things, to develop skills and to make use of one's ability. Decision authority incorporates an individual's possibilities to influence work

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content and how the work is done. According to Karasek and Theorell [1] psychological strain results not from single aspects of the work environment, but from the joint effects of the demands of a work situation and the range of decision-making freedom available to the worker facing those demands. Two basic dimensions are included in the model: job demands and decision latitude, which combined make it possible to distinguish between four main types of job: high-strain jobs (high demands and low decision latitude), low-strain jobs (low demands and high decision latitude), active jobs (high demands and high decision latitude) and passive jobs (low demands and low decision latitude). Two hypotheses have been derived based on the model: (a) The strain hypothesis, which states that the highest level of ill health is expected when the job is characterized by high demands and low control and (b) The buffer hypothesis, which predicts that control can buffer the potential negative effects of high demands on health. To date, there is support regarding the relationship between job demands, job control and negative health outcomes, in particular burnout [2]. Ageing is by nature one significant factor reducing employees' tolerance to workload and work strain. On the other hand ageing can also result in development of better coping strategies with stress. The purpose of this study was to describe the psychosocial work environment measured by the JDC-model, work related well being and emotional exhaustion for female workers within the human sector. Furthermore, the aim was to analyze differences between the age groups regarding the above mentioned variables. The purpose was also to investigate the association between age, psychosocial work environment and burnout.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample and data collecting procedure

The sample consisted of Finnish teachers and nurses. The questionnaire was sent to 1028 randomly chosen teachers in November 2000 and 839 (82%) were returned. The high school teachers, teachers teaching at several levels as well as the male teachers (25% of the whole sample) were not included in the sample of the current study which then consisted of 340 female teachers working at primary and secondary level. The nurses' sample consisted of nurses employed at the Department of Surgery of Helsinki University Central Hospital (HUCH). The questionnaire was given on hand to 630 nurses in November 2000. Of them 353 nurses returned the questionnaire by post and the response rate was 66%. Practical nurses, staff nurses and head nurses were not included in the current study. Also 15 male nurses were excluded. Altogether 254 female Registered nurses (RGN) participated in the study. Both samples were combined ($N=594$) and divided into five age group so that in the range 25–31 years were 50 (9%) employees, in range 32–38 were 141 (24%), in range 39–47 were 185 (31%) employees, in range 48–55 were 156 (26%) and in range 56–61 were 62 (10%).

2.2. Measurements used

The Swedish Demand–Control Questionnaire (DCQ) [3] assessing psychological job demands (5 items) and decision latitude (6 items) was used. Answer choices were presented on a 4-level scale varying from “never” to “very often” and all items were coded so that a high level indicated more of the property measured, e.g., demands or decision

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