PSYCHOSOCIAL WORK ENVIRONMENT AND SICKNESS ABSENCE: THE ROLE OF GENDER

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect gender has on the relationship between work-related psychosocial environment and work absence due to sickness. Using the stress profile questionnaire, results show that work control and influence was the major contributor of sickness absence among men. However, burden of workload and levels of work control and influence influenced sickness absence among women. When both men and women were compared on the scale of sickness absence, a significant relationship existed between gender on workload and level of control rather than resources.The study has research, health and managerial implications.

Keywords: Gender, Psychosocial Environment, Workload, Resources, Sickness Absence,Control and Influence

Introduction

Our world today is rapidly changing and this has considerable direct influence on the society and workplace. With this effect, the organizational culture of many institutions had been transformed to include psychosocial work environment as a crucial factor for productivity. The Psychosocial work environment has been noted to be a combination of several variables, which most often are interrelated and tend to lend themselves to reciprocal effect of reactions. Several factors like nature of job, the level of employee job returns, family stress, personality traits, support mechanisms and others sometimes affect the performance of individuals at work (North et al., 1996, Riolli,&Savicki, 2006, Heilmann, Bell, & McDonald, 2009). Subsequently, absence from work especially in the form of sickness had been a significant

effect from unbearable psychosocial impact (Kivimaki et al., 1997; North et al., 1996).

In effect, the need for a holistic view of an organisation to include the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the employees is very important (Cacioppe, 2000). In trying to observe the complexity of psychosocial work environment, the Michigan occupational stress model looks at work stress as a multifaceted and active process which incorporates several variable interactions. Consistent recent studies have also showed a significant relationship between an increasing level of perceived work stress, negative effects on job performance, and bio-psychosocial health of employees (Bond, 2004; Creed,& Muller, 2006; Kenny,& Cooper 2003).As a result, employers ought to pay attention to the psychosocial work characteristics in their quest to attain their set goal(Arnold et al., 2007).Factors like workload, resources, level of control and influence are very substantial in this regard (Cranwell-Ward, & Abbey, 2005; Deming, 2000; Fochsen, Sjögren, Josephson, &Lagerström, 2005;Riolli&Savicki, 2006; Siegrist et al., 2006)

Considering the psychopathology of job stress and its related effects, they seem to be generated and manifested differently across men and women. Although findings have not pointed out singularly at one type of stressor, the causes of job stress seem to be different across gender. In a recent study showed evidence in the case of men, to be more in relation to the quantitative job demands whose effect is faded to some extent by the direct properties of control and support. On the other hand, women suffer from qualitative job stressors which are related to emotional and intellectual features (Rivera-Torres, Araque-Padilla, & Montero-Simó (2013). The Whitehall II study done by North et al. (1996) for example attributed these characteristics within the psychosocial work environment to be perceived differently on the bases of the distinct gender of the individual. Increased levels of work demands, for example, was identified to have had a significant relationship with higher sickness absence occurrences in men but only to a minor degree among women.

The factors may be attributed to the different working conditions that men and women are more likely to find themselves at work. Men are more likely to occupy higher positions than women in most organisations. In addition, men are more likely to opt for a full time work while women in most cases go for part-time jobs that are usually low-paying. Other social factors like caring for families and other dependents even among full time paid workers produces more stress, especially when there are role conflicts between family and work life (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2003).One of the significant elements of the society is the family. Commitment by employees who may be parents may sometimes lead to

work–family conflict which may add to the already internal organizational burden (Heilmann, Bell, & McDonald, 2009).

The aim of this study was to examine the role gender plays in the relationship between work-related psychosocial environment and sickness absence.

Method

Participants

A sample of 2,059 respondents was selected for this study. Out of the total respondents, 61.4% were females and 38.6% were males. Table 1 shows a summary of the demographic characteristics of participants.

Measures

The Stress Profile which was the main psychological instrument used for data gathering measures perceived stress in everyday life - at work, leisure and in private life. It was developed over a period of 5 years and undergone several reliability and validity testing.Various reliability tests (Cronbach's Alpha, Spearman-Brown Split-half and Maximum likelihood) indicated over .80 (Setterlind& Larson, 1995). The Stress Profile is made of 224 questions of which the initial 20 items covers the background of the respondent. The questionnaire consists of 16 main fields and each field is subdivided into 60 subsidiary indexes.

Table 1: Demographics data of respondents, N = 2059.

	Male	Female
Variables	n= 794 (38.6%)	n= 1265(61.4%)
Age group		
< 20	2(0%)	0(0%)
20 – 29	35(2%)	53(3%)
30 – 39	208(10%)	308(15%)
40 – 49	274(13%)	454(22%)
50 – 59	210(10%)	348(17%)
60 – 65	62(3%)	96(5%)
65+	3(0%)	6(0%)
Educational level		
Primary/ Secondary	42(2%)	80(4%)
Vocation training	131(6%)	215(10%)
Upper sec. school	178(9%)	210(10%)
College/University	443(22%)	760(37%)
Position	37(2%)	46(2%)
Top management		
Middle Management	152(7%)	247(12%)
Supervisor	76(4%)	72(3%)

Higher grade official	339(16%)	412(20%)
Lower grade official	115(6%)	290(14%)
Skilled/unskilled	75(4%)	198(10%)
Type of employer		
Municipal	82(4%)	333(16%)
The government	51(2%)	88(4%)
County Council	10(1%)	94(5%)
Private business/industry	651(32%)	750(36%)

Statistical Method

Data collected from year 2010/2011 were analysed using the SPSS 20.0 statistical package for Windows and the VassarStatsonline calculator. Two different correlations based on gender were done among the 3 variables, workload, resources, control and influence. Proceedings from there, multiple linear regression and partial correlation analysis were done.

With respect to preliminary analysis, all indexes shown were calculated in similar direction, from a lower grade of strain (1) to a higher grade of strain (5), or ranging from good/positive features (1) to bad/negative features (5), hence, a numeric rise are interpreted as challenge. Level of workload was coded as follows: (Very Low Workload = 1), (Low Workload = 2), (Average Workload = 3), (High Workload = 4), (Very High Workload = 5). Level of control and influence was coded as follows: (Very Less Control = 1), (Less Control = 2), (Average Control = 3), (High Control = 4), (Very High Control = 5). Level of resources was coded as follows: (Very Few Resources = 1), (Few Resources = 2), (Average Resources = 3), (High Resources = 4), (Very High Resources = 5).

Results

In order to analyse the data, the self-reported sickness absence of employees was correlated with the three main variables; workload, control and influence, and resources. Table 2 depicts the influence gender in the relationship between psychosocial factors and sickness absence. Sickness absence which is the outcome variable interacted with the selected predictors (workload, control & influence and resources) to significantly explain a variance of approximately 4% when gender is non-specific. However, when analysed separately for either males or females, the predictor variables significantly predicted a variance of approximately 1% and 5% of the total sickness absence model respectively.

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Showing the Effect Gender on the Predictors of Sickness Absence

	Sickness Absence					
Variable	**Male**		**Female**		**Non-Specific Gender**	
	β	*p-value*	*β*	*p-value*	*β*	*p-value*
Workload	.011	.793	.078*	.018	.055*	.034

Control & Influence	.118**	.002	.190***	.000	.173***	.000
Resources	-.013	.760	-.003	.932	-.008	.773
R^2	.014		.049		.037	

After statistically controlling for the predictors in the model, sickness absence and workload correlated, $r = .078$ ($\rho = .018$) among the women and $r = .011$ ($\rho = .793$) among the men. However, there was no significant difference, $z = -1.33$, $\rho = .2$. In addition, sickness absence and control and influence correlated, $r = .190$ ($\rho = .000$) among the women and $r = .188$ ($\rho = .002$) among the men. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the both genders, $z = -1.53$, $\rho = .126$. In the model again, sickness absence and resources correlated, $r = .003$ ($\rho = .932$) among the women and $r = .13$ ($\rho = .760$) among the men. Thus, there was no significant difference between them, $z = -.2$, $\rho = .84$.

Discussion

According to the results, women and men differ in their appraisal of psychosocial work stressors. With a more specified relation, each gender showed varying degree of associations (Mykletun, Dahl, Moen, & Tell, 2005; van der Doeff, &Maes, 1999). Notwithstanding this general major finding, it is very important to take into consideration the specific role each gender play in the generation and response of the psychosocial stress at work. Employees' absence from work as a result of sickness had a significant association with workload among women instead of men. It is important to note the relative effect of the female gender to influence the perception of workload. Thus, the problem of perceived workload at work post in various jobs have been noted to exert both physical and psychological form of burden (perceived and real) and pressure on the employees (Riolli, &Savicki, 2006). Though, women and men are now usually noted to react to workload and other stressors when perceived as straining in a systemic review analysis (Gyllensten, & Palmer, 2005), this study noted otherwise.

The study also indicated that the perceptions of control of decisions/autonomy maybe a factor in considering workplace stressors (Fochsen et al., 2005). Psychosocial work-related stress is defined as one of the greatest causes of strain that employees experience even in studies over several decades in the Job Demands-Control (JDC) model (Karasek, 1979; Karasek, & Theorell, 1990). It is worth noting that the relationship between sick leave and the stress produced by control and influence affected both men and women significantly. Other studies on job stress attribute variables like control and influence more with men than women (Bruin, & Taylor, 2006; Brunborg, 2008; Vermeulen, & Mustard, 2000), this outcome is also consistent with Grönlund (2007).

Conclusion

Psychosocial work environment when influenced by gender affects the level of absence from work due to sickness. From the study's model, sick absence and resources did not correlate significantly among both women and men. There is a natural tendency to believe that an employee either had adequate working resources or a personality that could inherently serve as a cushion in stressful condition. Rivera-Torres et al. (2013) recently noted that women compared to men may cope well with job stress as they receive extra emotional support than the men. According to Arnold et al. (2007), job demands are met if all employers pay attention to the employees' psychosocial work characteristics.

Future studies should consider the effect of other demographic variables in defining the effect of job strain. A longitudinal study will afford many explanations to the negative effects of stress over time.

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