Psychosocial risks in the workplace
Bridging the gap among theory, practice and policy

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Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management work as well as the social and organizational context that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm (Leka, Griffiths, & Cox, 2003). The issue of psychosocial risks has been studied extensively in the academic literature and the focus has recently shifted from the individual to the organizational level and management practices. Some of the most widely studied psychosocial risks include high jobs demands, time pressure, low job control, social relations with superiors and colleagues, job insecurity, effort-reward imbalance, discrimination, harassment, bullying and mobbing.

In terms of legislation, Europe has issued the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC for the improvement of the working environment to protect workers' health and safety" . Also, the European Framework Agreement on Work-related Stress (Brussels, 2004) and the European Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence at work (Brussels, 2007) have been steps forward in terms of addressing the issue. Policy level interventions in Europe have been wide ranging from introducing new policies, guidelines and best practice standards, issuing declarations, passing new legislation, signing agreements with and among stakeholders, conducting extensive surveys as well as implementing large scale campaigns aiming for awareness (see OSHA, ESENER, SLIC, healthy-workplaces.eu. etc.).

However, despite these measures, a substantial gap between policy and practice and lack of awareness in issues related to psychosocial risks exists. One key obstacle is that the understanding and prioritization of these issues varies greatly among key stakeholders (Leka & Jain, 2010). For example, Ertel et al. (2010) reported on the views of 75 European OSH experts from three stakeholders groups as to whether they believed that the 1989 directive on health and safety had been effective for the management of psychosocial risks at work, revealing that only a low percentage of participants (17.3%) considered that the agreement has been implemented effectively. After analysing the implementation reports of the agreement on five key criteria (translation of agreement, awareness raising, further social dialogue initiatives, sectoral initiatives, development of new policy/legislation). Ertel et al. found that the main activities that followed the signing of the agreement were limited to its translation in national languages and its use as an awareness raising tool. Iavicoli et al. (2011) report that the main barriers to the effectiveness of the European Directive 89/391 were reported to be low prioritisation of psychosocial issues, the perception that psychosocial issues are too complex/difficult to deal with, lack of awareness and lack of consensus between social partners.

The need for more work in this area is obvious. There is a significant intention-implementation gap. The ongoing economic crisis has highlighted the way psychosocial risks can impact on psychological, physical and social functioning.

Overview of the special issue

This special review covers a range of experiences and geographic locations. In the first two, papers Costa et al. and Doulougeri & Georganta report on a European Commission funded programme to address psychological risks in SMEs in Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain. Wilczek-Ruzyczka and Kalicinska report on the impact on burnout on Polish nurses, while Viseu, Rus & de Jesus provide important data in the relationship between injustice and psychosocial risks. When we consider psychosocial risks, musicians are the not necessarily the first group that come to mind. However, Mc Sharry, Doherty and Wilson present a compelling case as to why Irish traditional musicians are at particular risk. A unique sample, and an interesting example of how psychosocial risks can be important for individuals who are highly motivated in what they do. Next Kroon informs us of the important factors concerning older people and psychological risks. Finally, in terms of what can be done, Van Doorn, Kok & Ruiter introduce us to how intervention mapping can reduce the gap between policy and the organizational reality.

Contents of the issue

Costa et al. (2015) recently implemented the Participative Prevention of Psychosocial Emergent Risks in SME's project (PPPER) aiming to better understand psychosocial risks in small and medium sized companies in south European countries. Using mixed methods to approach the issue the team brought to light limited awareness of the topic both in terms of prevention and intervention strategies in small and medium companies. To tackle this issue, the project produced toolkits for SMEs to utilize when they need to evaluate their workplace in terms of psychosocial risks or need information, tools and practices that could be implemented to deal or prevent them.

Doulougeri and Georganta (2015) present the qualitative part of the PPPER project in Greece. The economic crisis affecting Greece during the last five years has contributed to the emergence of new psychosocial risks or has exacerbated the already existent risks. Job insecurity, unemployment, fewer opportunities in the market, working with insurance and with flexible contracts (part time, seasonal work) were identified as the most important risks shifting the source to factors that are not purely related to work design, but are dependent on management style.

In cases of chronic exposure to psychosocial risks in the workplace employees might suffer from job burnout. Wilczek-Ruzyczka and Kalicinska (2015) examining effort reward imbalance in Polish nurses, found evidence relating it to job burnout, specifically emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

When talking about psychosocial risks injustice might surface as a key issue. As Viseu, Rus & de Jesus (2015) show perceptions of justice, adaptability and integration can be signs of a healthy organization. Specifically they found that teachers who perceived the context of their organizations as just and organizationally healthy reported more vigour, dedication, and absorption by capitalizing on the positive effects and by feeling satisfied with their job.

Mc Sharry, Doherty and Wilson (2015,) present the Safe Trad Initiative, which is an effort to reduce workplace risks for Irish traditional musicians. According to the authors, there is a growing concern over performance-related risks for traditional Irish musicians, lack of support, and an increasing numbers of them who are reporting playing-related musculoskeletal disorders. Using focus groups the initiative tried to understand the risks factors that the

musicians faced, with musculoskeletal problems, fear of acknowledging the problem and distrust of interventions from healthcare professionals being the most prevalent.

Aging in the workplace, especially in Southern Europe, will emerge as a significant psychosocial risk as we go forward. Kroon (2015) argues that we need better evidence based interventions and prevention strategies to address a key part of the psychosocial risks that older employees face in the workplace: being the victim of age driven discriminations. Kroon offers recommendations for interventions addressing the issue in the workplace, structured in four phases: diagnosis, development, implementation and evaluation.

Van Doorn, Kok & Ruiter (2015) describe an intervention mapping approach to address the gap between policy level initiatives on psychosocial risks and the reality of organizational interventions. According to the authors, in order to change unhealthy behaviours, a needs assessment is essential in identifying the change goals. Following this, the methods need to be theory-based and tailored to be effective. Insuring the aforementioned foundations can ensure appropriate implementation and evaluation processes follow.

Conclusions

The scope of psychosocial risks that can impact on the workplace represents a rich source of data for researchers and organizational practitioners. However, this scope can also be perceived as insurmountable to the stakeholders (e.g., employers and employees). Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers and managers are supportive of the ideals, but suspicious of the actual implementation. Thus, the first port of call for future researchers and practitioners is to demonstrate how 'small wins' can be achieved without the need to deconstruct completely the

organizational culture and/or police employee behaviour.

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