

Editorial

Work is good for you! Psychological approaches to the problematic of occupational health

Le travail c'est la santé ! Approches psychologiques des problématiques de santé au travail

This special issue of the *European Review of Applied Psychology* is rather particular as it is devoted to the subject of occupational health. Far from being a novelty for specialists who work in this field, occupational health is currently of considerable importance in enterprises and has become a subject which preoccupies employees and workers as well as managers and directors of human resources. This issue aims to contribute to a better comprehension and understanding of this phenomenon.

People no longer work only to survive or to earn a living. They also work, specifically, in order to exist psychologically and socially. Working means having an identity, a situation and a social function. While on the contrary, not working (long-term unemployment, retirement, restructuring, etc.) more often leads to stigmatization, a feeling of uselessness and suffering. If things are not going well at work, if work is not going right, it has a consequence on the physical and psychological health of the employees (Dubé et al., 2007). Similarly, poor physical health or low morale will have a negative impact on professional activity, even on a workgroup in its entirety. Work, health and social context then prove to be indissociable.

But the novelty is undoubtedly due to the fact that occupational health is no longer merely the concern of some knowledgeable specialists in the field. On the contrary it has, and will, become more and more of a concern for all individuals (Fusrt et Cable, 2008). Moreover, is it still necessary to contextualize health in the workplace? Does health not go beyond the framework of work? Where does work end during a period in which flexibility, hidden work hours, intensification of work rhythms and working at a distance have become standard and thus blur the line between personal life and professional life? The study of occupational health merits a rigorous, open-minded and pragmatic approach.

Rigorous, because it is time to cast aside ideas and positions that are without true scientific basis, most often guided by ideologies which, depending on the case, attribute the responsibility for occupational health problems either to the organizations and

working conditions, or to individuals who are considered to be incapable of adapting.

Open-minded, because occupational health must moreover be defined in a multidisciplinary context, and requires us to be receptive on a theoretical level by comparing models, approaches and methods stemming from various disciplines such as social or medical sciences. In psychology, this means that occupational health can be the object of work psychology, clinical psychology and health psychology. In fact, the task is not easy since the way in which objects of study are apprehended by the adherents of these different approaches is sometimes caricatured, either by considering that work is a context like the others (while the psychological function of work makes it a subject of exceptional complexity) or that health and disease can be apprehended as their proper entities (almost reduced to occasionally exaggerated models of health psychology).

Finally, pragmatic, because it is imperative to capitalize on fieldwork experiences which deal with the prevention and management of occupational health. The experiences are numerous but often neglected while everyone, management and employees alike would benefit by knowing and applying them.

The effects of psychosocial risks with professional origins are recognized today. The relevant literature covers professional risks, such as the lack of job security, working under time duress, moral harassment, violence at work, etc., which undermine the mental health of employees (Tragno et al., 2007). These risks lead to diverse pathologies such as sleeping disorders, psychosomatic illnesses, or more or less perceptible signs (stress, ill-being, anxiety) which, if ignored, can progressively evolve to become pathological (distress, pain, depression). They can result in different types of behaviours (absenteeism, attitudes of rejection or withdrawal, aggressiveness, addiction and even suicides linked to work). Psychosocial risks can also undermine the physical integrity of workers via the phenomena of somatization which is still studied relatively little and also probably underestimated. This is particularly the case of some musculoskeletal

disorders (MSDs) such as certain lumbagos. These factors are diverse and revolve around the intensification of work: e.g., working under time duress; an increase in work rhythms; failing to master the tasks to be carried out; relational, organizational and communication problems; standby duty (e.g., employees of large stores who work at the checkout counter and who must be ready at all times to fill in for a co-worker or to handle a customer rush). All of these factors lead to discouragement and loss of self-esteem (Dellve et al., 2008). It is difficult to predict with certainty the evolution of psychosocial risks in the future. However, it is difficult to be optimistic about this evolution.

This issue of REPA includes nine papers which are heterogeneous in their approach to the topic of occupational health. Far from being exhaustive, the emphasis here is on the contributions of psychology to the understanding of this preoccupation which is a current concern in political spheres (for example, concerning psychosocial risks in France, the 2005–2009 occupational health plan, dated February 17, 2005, observes: “The phenomenon is tending to spread. Psychosocial risks head the list of professional risks to which the working population considers itself the most exposed”. In objective no. 4 (Encouraging enterprises to be actors in occupational health), the government proposes to “mobilize the health services to better prevent psychosocial risks”. Additionally, psychologists must not remain on the sidelines.

The first paper, “Explicative models of MSD: from biomechanical and psychosocial factors to clinical analysis of ergonomics” by Jean-Baptiste Lanfranchi and Aurélie Duveau, shows, by reviewing the question of how the appearance of new work organization forms have considerably impaired occupational health, that among these impairments are MSDs which have become the main category of professional disease in France. Based on a synthesis of the literature, the authors propose an inventory of the principal risk factors.

The aim of the second paper, “Thwarted activity in geriatric care: the uncertain development of a profession” by Malika Litim and Katia Kostulski, is to characterize the links which exist between work activities and the profession from a developmental point of view, based on a Clinic of Activity intervention in a geriatric ward. More precisely, the authors question the function of group work and workgroup as an instrument for developing each individual’s activity as well as that of the profession by analyzing an extract of a crossed self-confrontation between a nurse and a nurse’s aid.

In the third paper, “Typological and factor analysis of the perceived stress measure by using the PSS scale”, Alain Cercle and his co-authors examine the structure of the perceived stress scale (PSS) by using data analysis, questioning its theoretical and methodological basis in a critical and positive manner. The fourth paper, “Stress and burnout among French elementary

school teachers: a transactional approach” by Didier Laugaa and his co-authors, uses the transactional model of stress by Lazarus and Folkman to show the extent to which teachers meet increasing difficulties in their profession (i.e., overworked, students dropping out of the system, the discrediting of the profession among the users of the educational system). In the fifth paper, “The Working Conditions and Control Questionnaire (WOCCQ): towards a structural model of subjective stress”, Isabelle Hansez examines a structural model of job stress based on the dimensions of the WOCCQ. Daniel Gilibert and Lionel Daloz, in “Disorders associated with burnout and causal attributions of stress among health care professionals in psychiatry”, present a study carried out among health care professionals in psychiatry in order to evaluate burnout in relation to other associated disorders (e.g., self-esteem, frequency of stress felt, feeling of general control, perception of the general state of health, etc.). In their paper, “A qualitative and quantitative evaluation of an experiment for preventing violence in the workplace”, Johanne Dompierre and his co-authors verify the effectiveness of measures for the prevention of workplace violence in a school setting.

In his paper entitled “Physical violence in the workplace: consequences on health and measures of prevention”, George Steffgen presents a review of the literature of scientific definitions and theoretical models of physical violence in the workplace.

Finally, Yves Clot takes a critical look at all of the papers by putting the problem of occupational health into perspective and offers a particularly innovative proposition, that of a psychology for the development of occupational health.

References

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