

Chapter #17

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL JOB DEMANDS AND SUPERVISOR SUPPORT IN PREDICTING EXHAUSTION A study among Italian funeral directing during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

During COVID-19, the exponential increase in the mortality made critical the working conditions of funeral directing services (FDS) workers as a greater number of funerals had to be handled. Few studies to date have examined the psychosocial conditions of FDS during the pandemic. The present study aimed to increase the knowledge about this phenomenon in Italy, investigating whether psychological job demands, and supervisor support could predict work-related exhaustion in a sample of Italian FDS workers during the pandemic. The sample consists of 142 FDS workers, 82.4% men, mean age 41.77 years ($SD = 20.73$), mean seniority 13.14 years ($SD = 11.97$). The hierarchical regression results showed that psychological job demands were positively related to exhaustion, whereas supervisor support was negatively related to exhaustion. Regarding differences between groups, older workers, women, senior workers, and on-call workers had higher scores on psychological job demands; regarding supervisor support, women reported higher scores; no significant differences were found regarding exhaustion. This study offers new insights into the factors related to the wellbeing of death care workers, one of the professions most concerned with coping with the impact of the COVID-19. It also confirms the importance of supervisor support during difficult times in the workplace.

Keywords: funeral directing, exhaustion, COVID-19, psychosocial risks, JD-R.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on people's psycho-physical health (Brooks et al., 2020; Fabbri, Simione, Martoni, & Mirolli, 2022; Mannarini et al., 2022) and led to negative mental health impacts in various occupational settings (Grandi et al., 2022; Grandi, Sist, Martoni, & Colombo, 2021), particularly in the healthcare sector (Vizheh et al., 2020). Nevertheless, very little attention has been paid to those occupational groups that have had the most to do with the calamitous consequences of the pandemic. Death care workers in fact were involved in front-line – as healthcare and emergency workers – in order to guarantee the disposal of the bodies and the burials, and therefore helping to *rule* the chaos that the staggering number of deaths was engendering. During the recent pandemic, the exponential increase in mortality made the working conditions of these professionals critical, as a greater number of bodies (and funerals) had to be handled. Few studies to date have examined the psychosocial conditions of death care workers during the pandemic (Van Overmeire, Van Keer, Cocquyt, & Bilsen, 2021; Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020). The present chapter presents an investigation on this phenomenon in a sample of Italian funeral directing services (FDS) workers during COVID-19.

2. BACKGROUND

Death care work can be very demanding because workers in this field are frequently – if not daily – exposed to the sight of corpses (in varying degrees of decomposition) and the suffering of the bereaved (Cotrim et al., 2020; Grandi, Guidetti, Converso, Bosco, & Colombo, 2021; Guidetti, Grandi, Converso, & Colombo, 2022; Keith, 1997; Roche, Darzins, & Stuckey, 2022). Funeral directing is one of the most important professions in death care, along with crematoria, mortuaries, and cemeteries services. Funeral directing services professionals take care of all the bureaucratic procedures required in the event of death, the organization and management of the funeral ceremony and the transfer and burial of the body. In addition, they deal with bereaved families or relatives almost daily. All of these tasks can involve long hours and emotional stress (Forsyth & Palmer, 2006).

During the pandemic, the work of the FDS underwent several changes. First, stricter hygiene and safety practises were introduced for handling the bodies that were – or could have been – contaminated with the virus. The high number of deaths also made the management and storage of the bodies more difficult. In the funeral ceremony, the number of people present was reduced and new forms of "virtual" participation were introduced to maintain a kind of continuity in relation to the funeral process and thus allow the bereaved to process their grief. Finally, the high number of deaths has led to an exponential increase in workload and increased pressure related to the management of services, as queues in cemeteries and crematoria have increased the time required. All these new working conditions have increased the risk factors for FDS workers.

Psychosocial risk factors are indeed important issues for these workers to examine and address in order to maintain their occupational and psychological wellbeing. Previous studies have shown that working conditions in FDS can have negative effects on psychophysical health, such as anxiety and depression (Cegelka, Wagner-Greene, & Newquist, 2020; Goldenhar, Gershon, Mueller, Karkasian, & Swanson, 2001; Keith, 1997) and can lead to work-related stress (Bailey, 2010; Bartlett & Riches, 2007; Goldenhar et al., 2001; Kroshus, Swarthout, & Tibbetts, 1995) and occupational burnout (Guidetti et al., 2021; Smith, Dorsey, & Mosley, 2009; Tetrick, Slack, Da Silva, & Sinclair, 2000). Some protective factors have also been identified as important job resources that can offset critical work conditions, such as social and organizational support (Cegelka et al., 2020; Guidetti et al., 2021; Tetrick et al., 2000).

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Work has changed profoundly in recent decades, bringing new contractual forms, the massive use of technology and the request for ever greater flexibility. To understand these new work environments, it becomes important to use an adequate perspective to evaluate the different work-related factors. Bakker and Demerouti (2014) have moved in this direction, formulating the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, a theoretical framework now widely validated and supported by copious evidence in the occupational field. This new approach goes beyond previous models, such as the demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) and the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996) which, according to the authors, considered a limited number of variables that not always showed to be relevant for all jobs. At the base of the JD-R theory is in fact the assumption that every profession is characterized by two main orders of factors: job demands and job resources. The former concern physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of work involving considerable use of physical and/or psychological energy. The latter, job resources, are physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of work that are useful in

achieving work goals, stimulate personal growth and learning of the individual and help reduce the negative effect of job demands. According to JD-R, it's important to maintain a balance between the two factors: job demands in fact can increase the risk of disengagement or exhaustion, while job resources have a buffering effect and maintain a good level of commitment and job satisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014).

Applying the JD-R approach to the funeral directing context, important job demands that characterise the profession are the psychological job demands, i.e. work methods such as fast work, frequent interruptions, little time, which can have an impact on the psychophysical health of the individual at work (Karasek et al., 1998). Among the negative outcomes most common in this occupation is exhaustion, the main component of burnout. It leads to a depletion of personal energies as a result of an imbalance between the demands and the resources available to the worker (Guidetti et al., 2021; Van Overmeire et al., 2021). Finally, among the most important resources is supervisors support, which seems to have a buffering effect in relation to job demands and exhaustion (Guidetti et al., 2021; Tetrick et al., 2000).

According to the theoretical framework of JD-R and the literature findings discussed so far, we will examine two hypotheses in this study:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): psychological job demands are significant and positively associated to exhaustion.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): supervisor support is significant and negatively associated to exhaustion.

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional design with a self-report questionnaire distributed, via purposive sampling, to FDS employees in northern Italy (the area most affected since the beginning of the pandemic) was used to collect data. The sample is made up of small and medium-sized funeral directing agencies of the provincial capital and some neighbouring municipalities. Participation was voluntary, participants received no reward, and data protection was ensured in accordance with current EU Regulation (2016/679). The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin (protocol code no. 0598340). In order to participate in the study, the employees had to read and sign the consent form. The researcher attended the meetings and presented the research project and the objectives of the survey in order to clarify any doubts the participants might have. The sample consists of 142 FDS workers, 82.4% men, mean age 41.77 years (SD = 20.73), mean length of service 13.14 years (SD = 11.97). Regarding marital status, 45.1% were married or cohabiting with a partner and 53.5% reported having children. Among the sample, 74.6% reported having daily contact with bereaved, 64.1% were exposed to the sight of corpses and 36.6% manipulated corpses on a daily basis.

3.2. Measures

The questionnaire contained validated measurement scales that are consistent and reliable according to the literature. It also contained a brief sociodemographic section.

Psychological job demands were measured with eight items from The Job Content Questionnaire—JCQ (Karasek et al., 1998) on a four-point Likert scale (0 = never, 3 = always); a sample item is “My job requires working very fast”. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .83.

Supervisor support was considered as a job resource and measured with four items from the Social Support from Supervisor Scale (Caplan, Cobb, French Jr, Van Harrison, & Pinneau Jr, 1975) on a four-point Likert scale (0 = never, 3 = always); a sample item is “How much your supervisor can be relied on when things get tough at work?”. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .86.

Exhaustion was considered as outcome and measured with five items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory—General Survey (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996) on a seven-point Likert scale (0 = never, 6 = every day); a sample item is: “I feel burned out from my work”. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .89.

3.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses (means and standard deviations of the scales, see Table 1) were performed using IBM SPSS 27. Cronbach’s α was calculated to assess the reliability of each scale. Pearson correlations between all variables were calculated. Hierarchical linear regression analysis was also conducted to investigate the role of psychological job demands and supervisor support as predictors of exhaustion. In the regression model, multicollinearity between variables was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF): no multicollinearity problem was found ($VIF < 5$). Analysis of variance (t-tests for independent samples and ANOVA) was used to analyze the differences between groups in the means of the variables.

4. RESULTS

As for differences between groups, psychological job demands were slightly below the average scale score ($M = 1.38$, $SD = .31$), with higher scores for women ($M = 13.44$, $SD = 4.97$), $t(33.73) = 2.69$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $D = .62$, older workers, $F(2, 139) = 4.07$, $p = .02$ ($M = 12.15$, $SD = 4.56$), on-call workers ($M = 11.82$, $SD = 4.73$), $t(128.27) = 2.49$, $p = .01$, Cohen’s $D = .43$, and workers with higher job tenure, $F(2, 135) = 11.55$, $p < .001$ ($M = 13.46$, $SD = 4.25$).

Self-reported supervisor support was above the average scale score ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .15$), with higher scores for women ($M = 10.33$, $SD = 2.50$), $t(20.82) = 3.96$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $D = .93$.

Self-reported feelings of exhaustion were below the average scale score ($M = 1.99$, $SD = .53$); no significant differences were found.

Correlations were calculated between exhaustion, psychological job demands and supervisor support. All significant correlations were in the expected direction. Pearson coefficients are shown in Table 1. Exhaustion had strong positive correlation with psychological job demands ($p < .01$) and strong negative correlation with supervisor support ($p < .01$).

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Table 1.
Correlations between the variables (N = 142).

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3
1. Exhaustion	9.94 (7.85)	—	—	—
2. Psychological job demands	11.04 (4.85)	.36**	—	—
3. Supervisor support	7.86 (3.16)	-.33**	-.05	—

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01

Hierarchical linear regression analyses (see Table 2) were conducted to investigate whether psychological job demands, and supervisor support could predict exhaustion at work. Exhaustion was considered the dependent variable; gender and job tenure were included in the model as control variables.

Gender and job tenure were introduced as control variables in Step 1, and no significant effects were found on exhaustion. In Step 2 psychological job demands was introduced and was found significantly and positively associated with exhaustion; the variable added to the model was good predictor of the dependent variable since there was a significant change in R² coefficient (13% explained variance). Finally, in Step 3 supervisor support was introduced. Among the variables, both psychological job demands ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$) and supervisor support ($\beta = -.75$, $p < .001$) were – respectively – significantly positively and negatively associated with exhaustion. The further change in R² coefficient (8% explained variance) showed that the new variables were also good predictors of exhaustion. The F value showed a significant R² change associated with Step 2 and Step 3.

Table 2.
Hierarchical multiple regression (exhaustion = dependent variable).

1 ST STEP (CONTROL VARIABLES)	β	t	p
Gender (1 = women)	-.03	-.31	.76
Job tenure	.15	1.65	.10
	R²=.03		
2 ND STEP (DEMAND)			
Gender (1 = women)	-.11	- 1.25	.21
Job tenure	-.02	-.23	.81
Psychological job demands	.40	4.07	< .001
	R²=.13		
3 RD STEP (RESOURCE)			
Gender (1 = women)	-.00	-.05	.96
Job tenure	.03	.35	.73
Psychological job demands	.34	3.55	< .001
Supervisor support	-.30	- 3.35	.001
	R²=.08		

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to better understand the role of psychological job demands and supervisor support in the relationship with work-related exhaustion in a sample of Italian FDS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the lack of studies in the literature, the results contribute to new knowledge about this occupational field.

The first hypothesis of the study (H1) stated that there was a significant and positive relationship between psychological job demands and exhaustion. As we have seen, H1 was confirmed by the regression analysis, and this result is consistent with previous research on death care (Colombo, Emanuel, & Zito, 2019; Cotrim et al., 2020); as for the specific occupational group, this result is particularly interesting because FDS during the pandemic COVID-19 have not been previously studied in terms of psychological job demands, but only emotional job demands in relation to the occurrence of burnout (Van Overmeire et al., 2021). The second hypothesis of the study (H2) stated a significant and negative relationship between supervisor support and exhaustion and was also confirmed by the analyses. While the role of social and peer support has been examined in death care studies (Cegelka et al., 2020; Guidetti et al., 2021; Tetrick et al., 2000), supervisor support has been neglected with the exception of a recent study by Guidetti et al. (2021). Our findings confirm the role of this job resource as an important psychosocial factor that can help offset the negative effects of death care work and maintain workers' psychological and occupational wellbeing.

FDS workers fall into the categories of work considered essential to society, which is why they are always on duty even in times of crisis. The recent pandemic has highlighted the importance of their work, while at the same time tightening their working conditions, increasing the risk factors for their occupational health. Although the FDS have been working in the frontline, there have been few studies on this sector, unlike other categories of essential workers. The findings of the present study go towards filling the gap in the literature relating to this particular occupation, but much more research needs to be done.

6. CONCLUSION

This study offers new insights into the factors contributing to the wellbeing of funeral directing services workers, who are among the professions most struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also confirms the importance of supervisor support during difficult times in the workplace. Nevertheless, some limitations must be pointed out, namely a small sample size and a cross-sectional design that does not allow for causal inferences. Differences with other occupational groups in the funeral sector (e.g. crematoria, mortuaries, cemeteries workers) as well as specific organisational factors related to death care would also be interesting to investigate in future studies. In order to learn more about the effects of psychosocial risks on this profession, it would also be useful to use qualitative approaches such as ethnographic studies.

Psychosocial risks are an important and topical issue for workers in the death care. Factors related to the characteristics of the work, such as the constant on-call, the workload, the levels of autonomy and control, the degree of organisational support, together with the overexposure to death and the suffering of the bereaved are possible precursors for the reduction of the quality of life of these professionals (Goldenhar et al., 2001; Turner & Caswell, 2020). Constant and careful monitoring of these antecedents is necessary to avoid consequences that may affect workers' psychophysical health, such as depression, anxiety, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue and burnout, as well as their work

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performance, such as reduced work ability and increased turnover intention (Colombo et al., 2019; Cotrim et al., 2020; Grandi, Rizzo, & Colombo, 2023; Guidetti et al., 2022; Linley & Joseph, 2005).

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