



Psychosocial safety climate moderates the job demand–resource interaction in predicting workgroup distress

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ABSTRACT

Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) arises from workplace policies, practices, and procedures for the protection of worker psychological health and safety that are largely driven by management. Many work stress theories are based on the fundamental interaction hypothesis – that a high level of job demands (D) will lead to psychological distress and that this relationship will be offset when there are high job resources (R). However we proposed that this interaction really depends on the organizational context; in particular high levels of psychosocial safety climate will enable the safe utilization of resources to reduce demands. The study sample consisted of police constables from 23 police units (stations) with longitudinal survey responses at two time points separated by 14 months (Time 1, $N = 319$, Time 2, $N = 139$). We used hierarchical linear modeling to assess the effect of the proposed three-way interaction term ($PSC \times D \times R$) on change in workgroup distress variance over time. Specifically we confirmed the interaction between emotional demands and emotional resources (assessed at the individual level), in the context of unit psychosocial safety climate (aggregated individual data). As predicted, high emotional resources moderated the positive relationship between emotional demands and change in workgroup distress but only when there were high levels of unit psychosocial safety climate. Results were confirmed using a split-sample analysis. Results support psychosocial safety climate as a property of the organization and a target for higher order controls for reducing work stress. The ‘right’ climate enables resources to do their job.

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1. Introduction

Psychological injury arising from workplace psychosocial hazards is a serious occupational health and safety issue. The costs of work-related psychological injury are significant (Australian Safety and Compensation Commission, 2009), and virtually all figures suggest they will continue to rise. In addition to the personal distress of psychological injury, there are substantial costs to organizations in terms of sickness absence and reduced performance (Whiteford et al., 2005). In the UK economy alone the cost of absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover related to stress and poor psychological health is calculated at £25.9 billion per annum (Cooper et al., 2009).

Importantly, legislation in some countries requires employers to take action against workplace conditions that cause work psychological injury (Ertel et al., 2008). Nevertheless, worldwide, most workplaces practices and occupational health and safety legislation focuses on physical hazard management rather than psychosocial hazard management (Australian Productivity Commission, 2010).

For over 30 years, the safety climate construct (Zohar, 1980) has been fundamental in focusing and framing workplace efforts to eliminate, control, and manage physical hazards. Payne et al. (2009) highlight the role of safety climate as a lead indicator of (physical) safety outcomes. In contrast, psychosocial safety climate is an emerging construct that underpins efforts to eliminate, control, and reduce workplace psychosocial hazards (Dollard, in press). Hence, safety climate and psychosocial safety climate have similar functions, with the key distinction being the nature of the hazards and outcomes targeted (physical versus psychosocial, respectively).

Psychosocial safety climate is largely determined by the values and actions of organizational management, and reflects management concerns for psychosocial working conditions and worker psychological health and safety (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). Recent research suggests psychosocial safety climate is a “cause of the causes” of work stress because, when it is low, high levels of psychosocial work stressors, such as bullying and emotional demands, are also found (Law et al., 2011). As a leading indicator of these stress-related factors, psychosocial safety climate has a primary role in stress prevention (Dollard and Karasek, 2010). In this paper we extend this work and focus on the secondary prevention role of psychosocial safety climate, as a moderator of the impact of stressful work conditions once they occur.

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