



REVIEW

Psychosocial risks at work: a growing problem with theoretical ambiguities

Riesgos psicosociales en el trabajo: un problema creciente con ambigüedades teóricas

Miguel Valencia-Contrera¹  , Flérida Rivera-Rojas²  , Naldy Febré¹  

¹Universidad Andrés Bello, Faculty of Nursing. Santiago, Chile.

²Universidad Católica del Maule, Department of Nursing. Curicó, Chile.

Cite as: Valencia-Contrera M, Rivera-Rojas F, Febré N. Psychosocial risks at work: a growing problem with theoretical ambiguities. Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología. 2024; 4:867. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt2024867>

Submitted: 13-08-2023

Revised: 10-01-2024

Accepted: 29-04-2024

Published: 30-04-2024

Editor: Dr. William Castillo-González 

ABSTRACT

Introduction: prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, workers were exposed to psychosocial risks that were aggravated, negatively impacting their health. This has generated a boom in its study; however, theoretical ambiguities persist.

Objective: to explain the theoretical ambiguity present in the study of psychosocial risks at work.

Methods: the analytical article explores the theoretical ambiguity of psychosocial risks in the workplace. It incorporates various sources of information, including classical authors and contemporary approaches. Additionally, the authors offer critical insights and provide considerations for future research in the field.

Result: there is a theoretical-conceptual ambiguity in the study of psychosocial risks at work. It is recommended: 1. To generate less abstract conceptual proposals to address semantic confusion and lack of taxonomic clarity. 2. Adopt an interdisciplinary conceptual approach that includes perspectives from psychology, sociology, and occupational health nursing. 3. Incorporate qualitative methodologies instead of continuing to use quantitative approaches, questioning the appropriateness of measuring a construct with traditional methods that have theoretical omissions. 4. develop unifying theoretical proposals.

Conclusions: there is an urgent need for integrative theoretical proposals. In the opinion of the present authors, these proposals should have a low level of abstraction and include interdisciplinary perspectives that transcend psychology and sociology, as well as use qualitative methodologies.

Keywords: Occupational Health; Occupational Health Nursing; Models, Theoretical; Occupational Risks.

RESUMEN

Introducción: previo a la pandemia de la COVID-19, los trabajadores estaban expuestos a riesgos psicosociales que se vieron agravados, impactando negativamente en su salud. Esto ha generado un auge en su estudio, sin embargo, persisten ambigüedades teóricas.

Objetivo: explicar la ambigüedad teórica presente en el estudio de los riesgos psicosociales en el trabajo.

Métodos: El artículo analítico explora la ambigüedad teórica de los riesgos psicosociales en el lugar de trabajo. Incorpora diversas fuentes de información, incluidos autores clásicos y enfoques contemporáneos. Además, los autores ofrecen una visión crítica y aportan consideraciones para futuras investigaciones en este campo.

Resultados: existe una ambigüedad teórico-conceptual en el estudio de los riesgos psicosociales en el trabajo. Se recomienda: 1. Generar propuestas conceptuales menos abstractas para abordar la confusión semántica y la falta de claridad taxonómica. 2. Adoptar un abordaje conceptual interdisciplinario que incluya perspectivas desde la psicología, sociología y enfermería del trabajo. 3. Incorporar metodologías cualitativas en lugar de seguir utilizando enfoques cuantitativos, cuestionando la idoneidad de medir un constructo con métodos tradicionales que presentan omisiones teóricas. 4. Desarrollar propuestas teóricas unificadoras.

Conclusiones: existe una urgente necesidad de propuestas teóricas integradoras. A juicio de los presentes autores, estas propuestas deben tener un bajo nivel de abstracción e incluir perspectivas interdisciplinarias que trasciendan la psicología y la sociología, así como utilizar metodologías cualitativas.

Palabras clave: Salud Laboral; Enfermería del Trabajo; Modelos Teóricos; Riesgos Laborales.

INTRODUCTION

Psychosocial factors at work are defined by the WHO/ILO joint committee as follows: "Psychosocial factors at work refer to interactions between and among work environment, job content, organizational conditions and workers' capacities, needs, culture, personal extra-job considerations that may, through perceptions and experience, influence health, work performance and job satisfaction".⁽¹⁾

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, workers were already exposed to unfavorable working conditions. The ILO explicitly pointed out the possible increase of some psychosocial risks, such as work-life imbalance, technostress, and work overload.⁽²⁾ The ILO predictions proved accurate and were further exacerbated by the pandemic. A recent review concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a significant psychosocial burden, particularly on nurses and women. This impact extends to both frontline and non-frontline workers, resulting in various physical and psychological disorders in different contexts.⁽³⁾

Given the evident relevance of studying psychosocial risks at work, there has been a call for redefinition within the scientific community.⁽⁴⁾ This call is prompted by the theoretical-conceptual ambiguity in the study of these risks, where researchers have relied on heterogeneous proposals.⁽⁵⁾

Based on the aforementioned considerations, this short communication aims to explain the theoretical ambiguity present in the study of psychosocial risks at work.

METHOD

Analytical article whose guiding question was: What is the theoretical ambiguity present in the study of psychosocial risks in the workplace? To answer this question, different sources of information were included, enriching the sample studied, incorporating: classical authors of the main theoretical proposals in the field, as well as more contemporary approaches. It also incorporates the critical view of the authors and presents considerations for future studies.

DEVELOPMENT

How have psychosocial risks at work been studied?

Psychosocial risks at work have primarily been addressed through two models: the "Job Strain model" and the "effort-reward imbalance model," with additional consideration of other models, as outlined below:

Demand-Control-Support Model

Initially Karasek proposed the "Job Strain model",⁽⁶⁾ where he described how high demands and low control was a stressor for the worker, sometime later in 1986, Johnson described the importance of social support,⁽⁷⁾ an element that Karasek did not consider in his proposal, this led Johnson and Hall to present expanded model considering social support.⁽⁸⁾

Effort-reward imbalance model

Siegrist proposed the "effort-reward imbalance model",⁽⁹⁾ with a sociological and social psychological basis, as well as roots in human stress theory,⁽¹⁰⁾ describing high-cost/low-reward conditions as stressful. Currently, the model has extended its basic notion of failed reciprocity in costly social transactions beyond paid work.⁽¹¹⁾

Other models

In addition to the traditional models, there are other theoretical sources used in the study of psychosocial risks at work. Examples include the Human Ecosystem Model, as well as more general approaches such as Systems Theory,⁽¹²⁾ and the Organizational Justice Model.⁽⁵⁾

On the other hand, it is pertinent to mention the COPSQ questionnaire, which is widely known by those who study of psychosocial factors, self-described as "theory-based",⁽¹³⁾ aims to describe a large number of relevant factors in the field of psychosocial work environment, health, well-being and personality, including in its first version the substantial parts of the main dimensions of seven theories of occupational health psychology: 1) the job characteristics model; 2) the Michigan organizational stress model; 3) the demand-control-(support) model; 4) the sociotechnical approach; 5) the action-theoretical approach; 6) the effort-reward-imbalance model, and 7) the vitamin model.

Subsequently, in the second version of the COPSOQ questionnaire, new scales were included, which according to the authors reflected the development of new theories and perspectives, such as: recognition, trust, justice, work-family conflicts, and depressive symptoms.⁽¹⁴⁾ The authors published the third version of the questionnaire,⁽¹⁵⁾ among other factors due to the need for a more comprehensive perspective of the models used, as well as the integration of new theories on stress in the workplace, such as Stress-as-Offence-to-Self theory (SOS).

Harvey SB et al,⁽¹⁶⁾ proposed a "Unifying model of workplace risk factors", which arises from a review of the literature, however, it does not constitute an exclusive proposal for addressing psychosocial risks, in addition to this, they show an overlapping of concepts that can make its operationalization even more difficult.

Considerations for future studies

Generate less abstract conceptual proposals

A semantic confusion and a lack of taxonomic clarity have been described, as well as an absence of an epistemological framework in accordance with the complexity of psychosocial factors at work.⁽¹²⁾ In the view of the authors, there exist several definitions currently proposed within this context. Nevertheless, the level of abstraction inherent in these definitions remains problematic, as the absence of clear conceptual boundaries impedes their thorough examination.

Interdisciplinary conceptual approach

According to some currents its study should start from psychology and sociology,⁽¹⁷⁾ however, a positive impact has been described using a multidisciplinary approach,⁽¹⁸⁾ in this sense the present authors highlight the need to include an approach from occupational nursing, since nursing science could facilitate its understanding and approach from human care, which is inherent to the phenomenon in question.

Need to use qualitative methodologies

Currently, there is a clear quantitative predominance in the study of psychosocial risks at work, where the present authors question its suitability due to the ambiguities exposed in the present manuscript. Why continue measuring a construct with traditional methods if its theoretical bases present omissions? In this manuscript we have cited works dating back more than 10 years showing the problem, however, it persists to this day. Why do researchers insist on measuring and concluding in their studies the presence/absence of psychosocial factors at work, without the existence of conceptual limits?

This article highlights the need to generate unifying theoretical proposals to guide the study of psychosocial risks at work, in agreement with what has been stated by other authors,⁽¹⁹⁾ whose relevance transcends the theoretical, since by addressing this shortcoming, it will be possible to develop more solid research and interventions,⁽²⁰⁾ and thus raise the awareness of decision makers,⁽²¹⁾ improving the health of the working population.

CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary analysis of psychosocial workplace risks faces theoretical and conceptual uncertainties. Despite the presence of multiple proposals of differing complexity, there is a pressing need for a unified approach. The authors argue for a framework with reduced abstraction, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives beyond psychology and sociology. They also advocate for the inclusion of qualitative methodologies to address this challenge.

REFERENCES

1. Comité Mixto OIT-OMS. Factores psicosociales en el trabajo: naturaleza, incidencia y prevención. Ginebra: OIT/OMS; 1984. 85 p.
2. Oficina Internacional del Trabajo. Seguridad y salud en el centro del futuro del trabajo. Primera ed. Ginebra: OIT; 2019. 86 p.
3. Franklin P, Gkiouleka A. A Scoping Review of Psychosocial Risks to Health Workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* [Internet]. 2021;18(5):2453. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052453>
4. Valencia-Contrera M, Rivera-Rojas F. The need to redefine psychosocial risks at work. *Work* [Internet]. 2022;75(1):363-363. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-220574>
5. Pujol-Cols L, Lazzaro-Salazar M. Ten Years of Research on Psychosocial Risks, Health, and Performance in Latin America: A comprehensive Systematic Review and Research Agenda. *Rev Psicol del Trab y las Organ*

[Internet]. 2021;37(3):187-202. <https://doi.org/10.5093/jwop2021a18>

6. Karasek RA. Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude, and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign. *Adm Sci Q* [Internet]. 1979;24(2):285-308. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392498>

7. Johnson J. The impact of workplace social support, job demands and work control. University of Stockholm; 1986.

8. Johnson J V, Hall EM. Job strain, work place social support, and cardiovascular disease: a cross-sectional study of a random sample of the Swedish working population. *Am J Public Health* [Internet]. 1988;78(10):1336-42. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.78.10.1336>

9. Siegrist J. Adverse health effects of high-effort/low-reward conditions. *J Occup Health Psychol* [Internet]. 1996;1(1):27-41. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/1076-8998.1.1.27>

10. Siegrist J. The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model. In: *The Handbook of Stress and Health: A Guide to Research and Practice*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2017. p. 24-35.

11. Siegrist J. Effort-Reward Imbalance Model. In: *Stress: Concepts, Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior* [Internet]. Elsevier; 2016. p. 81-6.

12. Juárez García A, Camacho Ávila A. Factores psicosociales de la salud en el trabajo: análisis de su concepción y base teórica. In: *Reflexiones teórico-conceptuales de lo psicosocial en el trabajo*. México: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos; 2011.

13. Kristensen TS, Hannerz H, Høgh A, Borg V. The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire—a tool for the assessment and improvement of the psychosocial work environment. *Scand J Work Environ Health* [Internet]. 2005;31(6):438-49. <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.948>

14. Pejtersen JH, Kristensen TS, Borg V, Bjorner JB. The second version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire. *Scand J Public Health* [Internet]. 2010;38(3_suppl):8-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494809349858>

15. Burr H, Berthelsen H, Moncada S, Nübling M, Dupret E, Demiral Y, et al. The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire. *Saf Health Work* [Internet]. 2019;10(4):482-503. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2019.10.002>

16. Harvey SB, Modini M, Joyce S, Milligan-Saville JS, Tan L, Mykletun A, et al. Can work make you mentally ill? A systematic meta-review of work-related risk factors for common mental health problems. *Occup Environ Med* [Internet]. 2017;74(4):301-10. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2016-104015>

17. Delgadillo G. Factores psicosociales. Una crítica a su definición. In: *Reflexiones teórico-conceptuales de lo psicosocial en el trabajo*. México: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos; 2011. p. 77-93.

18. Iavicoli S, Di Tecco C. The management of psychosocial risks at work: state of the art and future perspectives. *Med Lav*. 2020;111(5):335-50. <https://doi.org/10.23749/mdl.v111i5.10679>

19. Vazquez ACS, Pianezolla M, Hutz CS. Assessment of psychosocial factors at work: A systematic review. *Estud Psicol* [Internet]. 2018;35(1):5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-02752018000100002>

20. Rodrigues CML, Faiad C, Facas EP. Fatores de Risco e Riscos Psicossociais no Trabalho: Definição e Implicações. *Psicol Teor e Pesqui* [Internet]. 2020;36(spe). <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e36nspe19>

21. Coutinho H, Queirós C, Henriques A, Norton P, Alves E. Work-related determinants of psychosocial risk factors among employees in the hospital setting. *Work* [Internet]. 2019;61(4):551-60. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-182825>

FINANCING

The authors did not receive financing for the development of this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Miguel Valencia-Contrera.

Data curation: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Formal analysis: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Acquisition of funds: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Research: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Methodology: Miguel Valencia-Contrera.

Project management: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Resources: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Software: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Supervision: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Validation: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Display: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Drafting - original draft: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.

Writing - proofreading and editing: Miguel Valencia-Contrera, Flrida Rivera-Rojas, Naldy Febré.