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EXHAUSTION IN ITALIAN FUNERAL DIRECTING SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL JOB DEMANDS AND SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

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Abstract

Funeral directing services (FDS) workers deal with the practical and bureaucratic support of the bereaved, i.e., from the management of the funeral ceremony to the handling of the procedures necessary for the transfer and burial of the body. The activities of these professionals expose them to intense emotional stress and long working hours.

During the recent pandemic COVID-19, the exponential increase in the mortality made critical the working conditions of these professionals as a greater number of funerals had to be handled. Few studies to date have examined the psychosocial conditions of FDS during the pandemic (Van Overmeire et al., 2021; Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020).

The present study aimed to increase the knowledge about this phenomenon in the Italian context. Following the JD-R theoretical framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014), job demands may increase the risk of disengagement or exhaustion, while job resources have a buffering effect, maintaining a good level of commitment and job satisfaction.

The research question was whether psychological job demands, and supervisor support could predict work-related exhaustion in a sample of Italian FDS workers during the pandemic. Differences between groups in age, length of employment, and gender were also considered. A questionnaire was administered via purposive sampling to FDS workers in northern Italy (the area most affected since the beginning of the pandemic); participation was voluntary, participants did not receive any 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). 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 ($SD = 11.97$).

The hierarchical regression results showed that psychological job demands were positively related to exhaustion, whereas supervisor support was negatively related to exhaustion; gender and job tenure were included in the model as control variables. 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 that contribute to the wellbeing of funeral directing service workers, one of the professions most concerned with coping with the impact of the COVID -19 pandemic. 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

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 et al., 2021; Guidetti et al., 2022; Keith, 1997; Roche et al., 2022). Funeral directing is one of the most important professions in death care, along with crematoria, mortuaries, and cemeteries services. Funeral directing services (FDS) 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. All of these tasks can involve long hours and emotional stress (Forsyth & Palmer, 2006). 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 et al., 2020; Goldenhar et al., 2001; Keith, 1997) and can lead to work-related stress (Bailey, 2010; Bartlett & Riches, 2007; Goldenhar et al., 2001; Kroshus et al., 1995) and occupational burnout (Guidetti et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Tetrack et al., 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; Tetrack et al., 2000).

During the recent pandemic COVID-19, the exponential increase in mortality made the working conditions of these professionals critical, as a greater number of funerals had to be handled. Few studies to date have examined the psychosocial conditions of FDS during the pandemic (Van Overmeire et al., 2021; Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020).

The present study aimed to investigate this phenomenon in a sample of Italian FDS employees during the pandemic. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theoretical framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014), job demands 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.

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.

2. Methods

2.1. 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. 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). 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.

2.2. 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 et al., 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 et al., 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.

2.3. 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.

3. 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 ($p < .01$).

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 R^2 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 R^2 coefficient (8% explained variance) showed that the new variables were also good predictors of exhaustion. The F value showed a significant R^2 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
	$R^2 = .03$		
2 ND STEP (DEMAND)			
Gender (1 = women)	-.11	-1.25	.21
Job tenure	-.02	-.23	.81
Psychological job demands	.40	4.07	< .001
	$R^2 = .13$		
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
	$R^2 = .08$		

4. Discussion and conclusion

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 et al., 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.

This study offers new insights into the factors contributing to the wellbeing of funeral directing service 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) would also be interesting to investigate in future studies.

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