Testing Karasek’s Demands/Control Model in Restructured Health Care Settings: Effects of Job Strain on Staff Nurses’ Quality of Worklife

Heather K. Spence Laschinger, Joan Almost, Joan Finegan
The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Judith Shamian, Health Canada
Ottawa, Ontario

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to test Karasek’s Demands-Control Model of job strain by examining the extent to which the degree of job strain in nursing work environments affects staff nurses’ perceptions of structural and psychological empowerment, work satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Method: A predictive, nonexperimental design was used to test these relationships in a random sample of 351 Canadian staff nurse from across Ontario (response rate 72%). Karasek’s Job Content Questionnaire, Kanter’s Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire-II, Spreitzer’s Psychological Empowerment Questionnaire, Meyer and Allen’s Organizational Commitment Questionnaire and the Global Satisfaction Scale were used to measure the major study variables.

Results: Nurses’ ratings of their jobs fell in all four categories of job strain described by Karasek. The largest proportions were within the high strain category (36.8%) and the active job category (32.8%), the lowest in the low strain job category (9.7%). The distribution across categories is remarkably similar to those of Bourbonnais et al. (1995) in their study of Quebec nurses. Nurses in the high strain category were significantly less empowered (both structural and psychological). That is, they felt they had significantly less access to information, support, and resources in their work setting than the lower strain groups and that they had less autonomy, were less able to have an impact on unit decisions, and were less able to accomplish their work in an effective manner. They were also less committed to the organization and less satisfied with their jobs than those in the low strain categories. These differences were even more dramatic when the high strain group was compared to the active job group.

Conclusions: Over one third of Ontario nurses fell into the high strain category. Since highly committed and satisfied nurses have been shown to be more likely to rise to the challenges of organizational restructuring and to be more resistant to job stress and burnout, our results suggest managerial interventions that increase the nurses’ feelings of job control may increase their ability to respond more effectively to the extensive changes in current health care work environments.

Funded by SSHRC Extramural Grants Program Grant #410-93-0611.