

Abstract

Pousette, A. (2001). *Feedback and stress in Human Service Organizations*. Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden

In this thesis, five empirical studies which investigate the working conditions in organizations concerned with people's health, well-being or education are presented (Human Service Organizations, HSOs). The focus was on two work-related constructs, feedback and job stress. The aims were to study the occurrence of performance feedback in HSOs and the contribution of performance feedback to stress-related phenomena and to investigate the processes that regulate demand and generate strain in human service work. **Study I** was a comparative study of five HSOs (N = 855) and two manufacturing companies (N = 265) and focused on the scope of performance feedback from several sources. The results showed that the frequency of positive feedback was higher in the HSOs for the client/customer source and lower for the self source. Furthermore, the frequency of negative feedback was higher in manufacturing industry for top management, superiors, coworkers and self. Employees in HSOs requested comparatively more feedback from top management and superiors. **Study II** used a structural equation modeling approach to investigate the linkages between performance feedback, role ambiguity, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Survey data were obtained from 604 human service workers in three organizations. Two latent factors, positive feedback and negative feedback, were identified using confirmatory factor analysis. Positive feedback was related to less role ambiguity. Negative feedback was related to more role ambiguity. However, there was no support for a direct relationship between the feedback factors and job satisfaction or organizational commitment. Instead, the relationships were mediated by role ambiguity. **Study III** investigated the contribution from several work and individual characteristics to stress symptoms among 826 comprehensive school teachers in 27 schools. Teachers' stress reactions were best predicted by perceived work demands, pupil misbehavior and negative feedback. Feelings of mastery were best predicted by learning orientation, positive feedback and goal clarity. Perceived work demands were best predicted by pupil misbehavior, coordination problems and poor work control. **Study IV** explored the daily use of five coordinating strategies in 30 schools, among 994 teachers. The most important coordinating strategy was "professional consideration", followed by "striving for goals". The results showed that "striving for goals" was related to less frequent coordination problems and lower levels of burnout than "professional consideration". **Study V** used a structural equation modeling approach to compare four occupational types with regard to the linkages between job characteristics, appraised work situation, stress-related health outcomes and sickness absenteeism. The occupational types were blue-collar workers (N = 241), white-collar workers (N = 209), elderly-care workers (N = 338) and child-care workers (N = 336). A partially recursive mediated multigroup structural model revealed both similarities and differences across occupations as regards the relationships between latent variables. It was concluded that occupation-specific models were more plausible than a generic model.

In the thesis, it is suggested that the concept of demand in HSO work is a function of a cybernetic regulation process, depending on circumstances in the organization, the professional socialization and the individual. In the perspective of control theory and action theory, the concept of *target level* was introduced to label the level of an individual's action standards (demands). The results of the studies suggest that problems regulating the target level may be a potential mechanism for stress in HSOs. Furthermore, the results indicate that performance feedback may perform an important function in this regulation process.

Key words: human service organizations, work psychology, stress, performance feedback, goals, role ambiguity, demand, coordination of work, burnout, workload, job satisfaction, control theory, cybernetic regulation, structural equation modeling

Anders Pousette, National Institute for Working Life - West, Box 8850, SE-402 72 Göteborg, Sweden. Fax +46 31 50 16 10. E-mail: anders.pousette@niwl.se.

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