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PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN RELATION TO EMPLOYEE AGE AND JOB TENURE

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The present study examined psychological distress among workers at various stages of career development, with special reference to the first year of job tenure, the organizational socialization period. Measures of psychological and physical health, as well as demographic data, were obtained from 3,151 employed persons who participated in a national health interview survey conducted by the Census Bureau in 1978. Analysis of covariance was performed in which employee age and job tenure were predictor variables, and gender, marital status, educational level, and number of physical health conditions entered as covariates. The results indicated that distress was highest among workers with less than 6 months tenure, and distress levels decreased progressively with longer tenure. Employee age moderated these effects, however, in that older workers with less than 6 months tenure reported higher levels of distress than younger workers with similar tenure. Older workers also showed a delayed decrease in psychological distress with longer tenure than younger workers. The results identify organizational socialization as a critical period with respect to employee mental health.

Little empirical research has examined the relationship between job stress and stage of career development. The substantial amount research devoted to job stress and career development have developed largely as independent endeavors. For example, job stress studies typically treat age and tenure (i.e., career stage) as nuisance variables whose influence on health outcome variables is controlled statistically. Likewise, career development studies typically do not include a health outcome variable, preferring instead to focus on performance, withdrawal behaviors, job satisfaction. Consequently, there has been little cross-fertilization of ideas and theories in these areas.

The few studies which examined job stress across career stage have reported provocative findings. There is evidence that work conditions which are perceived as stressful, and the strategies used to cope with stress, differ among older and younger workers (Hurrell, McLaney, and Murphy, 1990). Also, levels of psychological distress appear to differ by age; older workers generally report lower distress than younger workers

(Osipow and Doty, 1985). These results suggest an interaction between job stress and career stage which could have important implications for an aging U.S. workforce.

The purpose of the present study was to assess relationships among employee age, job tenure and psychological distress, using data obtained from a nationally representative health interview survey. Two hypotheses were tested: (1) Psychological distress will be highest among the lowest tenured workers, reflecting the stressful effects of the early organizational socialization period; and (2) the distress associated with the early socialization will be less pronounced for older newcomers because of their prior experience with socialization processes and their increased coping resources.

METHOD

The data were obtained from a health interview survey conducted in 1978 which was representative of noninstitutionalized persons aged 18-64 who resided in the continental United States. Response rate to the interview was 84.4%. A total of

3,151 employed persons comprised the sample for this study.

The survey contained 20 questions dealing with symptoms of psychological distress. The questions were similar to the "demoralization" scale developed by Dohrenwend, Shrout, Egri, and Mendelson (1980). The 20 items were subjected to principal components factor analysis. Twelve (12) of the 20 items factored together, forming an internally consistent measure of psychological distress ($\alpha = 0.78$). Age, job tenure, education, and number of illnesses were continuous variables; gender, race, and marital status were dichotomous variables.

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to identify variables related to distress, and to compare adjusted mean levels of distress for age and tenure groups. For these analyses, age was grouped into five strata (18-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, and 55-64 years) and job tenure was grouped into seven strata (0-5 months, 6-11 months, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-19 years, and 20+ years). Also, marital status was dummy coded as Marital1 (formerly married vs. currently married) and Marital2 (never married vs. currently married).

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are shown in Table 1. The mean age of respondents was 37.93 years. Fifty-six percent (56%) were male and 89% were white. Average educational level was 12.42 years, and the average job tenure was 7.69 years.

The ANCOVA model contained main effects for age and job tenure group, the age by tenure interaction, and the covariates (gender, race, marital status, educational level, and number of illnesses). The full ANCOVA model was significant [$F(38, 2994) = 35.30$, $p < 0.001$] and explained 31% of the variance in psychological distress scores. Employee age was not significant in the model ($p > 0.05$) but tenure and the interaction of age with tenure were significant

($p < 0.05$). All of the covariates except Marital2 (never married) were significant in the model ($p < 0.05$).

Workers with the 0-5 months tenure had the highest distress scores for all age groups except the middle age group (35-44 years), whose distress levels did not vary with tenure and were similar to the sample grand mean. Workers in the three longest tenure groups reported average or below average levels of distress, compared to the sample grand mean. Older workers with low tenure (i.e., experienced newcomers) had the highest levels of distress, especially newcomers in the 55-64 group.

Whereas distress decreased with increasing tenure for the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups, distress remained high with increasing tenure for the oldest two age groups (45-54 and 55-64). This effect was especially prominent in the oldest group, where distress did not decrease to the sample grand mean until these workers accrued more than 5 years tenure.

The pattern for the oldest age group was noteworthy. Levels of distress were very high in the lowest tenure group, but distress decreased after 6-11 months tenure, although the mean was still substantially above the overall sample average. However, the number of workers in the lower two tenure groups (0-5 months and 6-11 months) was very low ($n = 5$ and 8, respectively). If the two tenure groups were combined for the oldest age group, the adjusted mean distress score becomes 2.93 ($s.d. = 0.64$), which is significantly above the sample grand mean ($p < 0.05$). Unlike all other age groups, distress among the oldest age group increased after 1-2 years of job, and remained high in the 3-5 year tenure group. Only after five years of tenure did the level of distress in oldest age group decrease to the sample grand mean, resembling that of the younger age groups. The 45-54 age group also showed a delayed decline in distress with tenure, but the decline occurred after 2 years of tenure, instead of after 11 months as was found for the younger two age groups.

DISCUSSION

This study assessed the relationships among employee age, job tenure and psychological distress. Analyses of national health interview survey data indicated the importance of the first few months of job tenure as a critical period with respect to worker emotional health. Which specific aspects of the early months of job tenure were responsible for the high levels of distress could not be ascertained in the present study because no measures of task, role, and interpersonal demands were contained in the questionnaire survey. However, Katz (1985) has proposed a number of testable hypotheses regarding the mechanisms which may underlie the stressful effects of organizational socialization processes (e.g., relationships with supervisor, clarity of demands and worker discretion to meet the demands, and the congruence of job demands with organizational rewards).

Beyond the early socialization period, psychological distress decreased monotonically with tenure, and the effect varied with age group in an orderly fashion. The decline in distress occurred earliest in the 18-24 age group (after 5 months tenure), after 11 months tenure in the 25-34 group, after 2 years tenure in 45-54 group, and after 5 years tenure in the 55-64 group. The only exception was the middle age group (35-44), whose distress levels were invariant with tenure and were not different from the sample grand mean.

The elevated levels of psychological distress during early job tenure, and the delayed decrease in distress among older newcomers to an organization, have practical implications for organizational socialization programs. Such programs might profitably target older newcomers for greater attention to reduce the negative psychological effects associated with entry into organizations. Reduction of distress among these employees should result in improved work performance, better employee health, and lower health care costs.

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