DOES INTENSITY OF INTERPERSONAL CONTACTS AT WORK INFLUENCE SOCIAL CONTACTS OUTSIDE OF WORK?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of following article is to analyze the influence of social contacts’ intensity in the workplace on our everyday life. Polish multiannual research proves that functioning in socially-isolated work environment for a long time has negative impact on our trustfulness and quality of social interactions in general.

KEYWORDS: Social isolation, work, workplace, interpersonal relations, trust.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper, situated in the frames of both industrial sociology and social psychology, touches social aspect of work and its impact on everyday interactions with other members of society. It was partially inspired by confidence that environment of work and its character should leave mark on social and psychological routines of people.

THE VALUE OF WORK

Generally speaking, work is understood as a fair fragment of individual’s everyday life so there is no reason to assume that one have the ability to effectively separate professional part of life from its totality. As a result, the way we function at work and in what environment have a potentially significant aftereffect outside of it. For example, continuous either isolated or accompanied (i.e. cooperative) work must have its outcomes, therefore affect certain behaviors. The more time we spend with people the more experienced and comfortable in social contacts we should feel. Of course we cannot simplify this too much in that way since there are many factors shaping our socialness. However, considering that people usually spend at work a respectable amount of time and commonly consider it a life’s necessity and often a priority, we can assume that work environment does have a certain effect on our psychology. The reason of this analysis is to figure out if working with or without social interactions for a long time does indeed affect certain aspects of our socialness in general. The topic might become an important element in studying how work affects our perception of society as well as our social behaviors altogether.

WORKPLACE ISOLATION

Being separated from other people for several hours a day, for several years should be by some means reflected in the shape of everyday interactions with others. I want to examine if such “loneliness” at work is a significant factor in determining social isolation. For the matter, simple “yes or no answer” might be insufficient, therefore point of reference is the constructed scale of complexity of working with people. It’s based on the codes of occupations1 rather than single closed-ended question stating the fact or its absence. Mentioned scale has been constructed especially for this analysis which itself is based on data collected in four waves of Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN). “Complexity of working with people” scale was assembled from data of waves 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2003 measuring respondents’ occupations. The final independent variable is a scale from 0 to 9 where 0 corresponds to the lowest complexity (or secluded work) and 9 to the highest (unavoidable everyday interactions with people, essential due to nature of work).

Social isolation is also a constructed scale, combining multiple Nottingham Health Profile (NHP) items regarding problems with sociability and openness. NHP is a section of questionnaire intended for primary health care, designed to subjectively measure respondent’s emotional, social and physical health problems. As a result, it’s an accurate measure of how strong (from 0 to 100 points) an individual is alienated.
from social interactions and to what extent contacts with other people are problematic for such person. Social isolation was measured in 2008 wave of POLPAN.

GENERALIZED TRUST

Another element of analysis is level of trust - a scale measuring how much respondent is willing to trust another person. It was measured in 1998 wave in scale from 1 to 4 and in 2008 wave in scale from 1 to 3. In both cases lowest digit corresponds to the opinion that people cannot be trusted and highest to belief that they can. Along with social isolation, this component of socialness should be adequate for the beginning of examining possible correlation. However, in order to measure mostly extensive effect on trust, only data from the latest (2008) wave was utilized.

INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL LIFE

Explicitly for this analysis, four hypotheses have been formulated. Two of them apply to the outcome of decrease in complexity of working with people and two to increase: 1. With the decrease in complexity of working with people, higher level of social isolation will be reported.; 2. With the decrease in complexity of working with people, lower level of trust towards other people will be reported.; 3. With the increase in complexity of working with people, lower level of social isolation will be reported.; 4. With the increase in complexity of working with people, higher level of trust towards other people will be reported. By dividing hypotheses in such way, more precise examination of relationship was possible.

1990 analysis of occupational self-direction, performed and reported by Kazimierz M. Slomczyński and Melvin L. Kohn was regarding, among other components, influence of job conditions on adult personality through generalizing what has been learned in work to other strands of life. Evidence can be found, that stressful environment at work (e.g. close supervision, dirty work and a lack of job protections) does indeed have negative impact on emotional health. Influence of job on psychology was notably pointed out by Adam Smith in 1776: “The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects, too, are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention, in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He (...) generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him (...) incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation (...)”

Loneliness is a subjective understanding of social isolation, meaning that even human accompanied with other people might feel socially isolated due to being unable to initiate and maintain contact. Loneliness is also a multifaceted concept. J. Rembowski is distinguishing five approaches vital for understanding it entirely: psychodynamic, phenomenological, existential, interactional and cognitive. However, it has a distinctive, binding quality of being an outcome of human interactions’ shortage, as well as experience subjectively perceived as unpleasant and stressful. There is no doubt that people working alone or with minimal contact with other individuals are adapting to such environment. This is yet another reason of this analysis - whether such continuous process of adaptation is causing an increase in i.e. reporting social isolation or mistrust of others.

Isolation however might be less wounding if it’s a matter of choice. Considering someone might be socialized in such way that he or she prefers to function alone in remote settings. In this case such person should be more resistant to negative psychological consequences - social isolation - or not experiencing it at all.

Nevertheless, sense of alienation at work is a potential reason of rising distrust among coworkers. Therefore, complete loneliness at a workplace, attributable to inducing self-sufficiency, might affect trust in people in general. Distance from social support network might contribute to problems with self-perception. People are finding it hard to see themselves as others see them and are forced to work on their own with minimal support.

It should also be verified whether high complexity of working with people does have an effect on level of social isolation and trust. First of all, the concept of teamwork should be introduced and for this subject it should be understood as a process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a certain goal. J.H. Mann and C.H. Mann performed an experiment
among six groups of people. Members of each group were supposed to be working together continuously for twelve hours in three weeks’ period. Three of these groups had been assigned with a specific goal to achieve and the other three had no such obligation - they could argue on any sort of subject. After second and ninth meeting they were supposed to evaluate each other and themselves. Three weeks after the experiment’s beginning, their mutual evaluation showed that working on a specific goal as a team results in more favorable assessments. This experiment revealed that methods of working do have an effect on personality and closely cooperative work has a positive impact on reciprocal assessments.\(^8\)

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

Hypotheses have been tested using multiple linear regression due to presence of four independent variables (continuous high complexity of working with people, continuous low complexity of working with people, age and gender). Regression is the most appropriate method of analysis due to presence of several independent variables of metric type. Social isolation and level of trust have both been transformed into metric variables as well. Age was also included in the model since it was recognized, that impact of job conditions on cognition is larger in case of older age rather than younger.\(^9\) However, this variable as well as gender, have both been used in the model in order to control their effect.

In this case we can reject the null hypothesis stating that none of independent variables have statistically significant effect on reporting social isolation, because the F test, even if small in value, is significant in 95% (\(F = 4.72; p < 0.05\)). From the independent variables of our interest, only continuous low complexity of working with people has an effect on reporting social isolation. There is a possibility, that continuous low complexity of working with people is causing an increase in level of social isolation. We cannot assume however, that higher complexity has any effect on reporting social isolation because the results are not statistically significant. In conclusion, we can accept only the research hypothesis stating, that with the decrease in complexity of working with people, higher level of social isolation will be reported.\(^9\)

With regards to trust towards other people, we are dealing with, to some extent, parallel results. F test of this regression model is also statistically significant (\(F = 3.71; p < 0.05\)), which means that at least one of the independent variables has an impact on level of trust. Correlation is present in case of continuous low complexity of working with people and indicates that low complexity has a negative effect on level of trust towards others. Again, there is no relationship between more accompanied work and dependent variable meaning that continuous high complexity of working with people does not affect respondent’s trust as well as reporting of social isolation. Ultimately, we can only accept the before stated research hypothesis, that with the decrease in complexity of working with people, lower level of trust towards other people will be reported.\(^10\)

**CONCLUSIONS**

Results are showing, that people who for several years have been declaring to be working in a place where possibility of contact with other people is reduced are tend to report problems with interacting with other people outside of work. They also have problems with trusting people surrounding them in everyday life. There is a strong possibility that being detached from social contacts in one’s job for a longer time results in emerging symptoms of social isolation, such as difficulties with making contacts with other people and lack of confidence in social relations in addition to trust issues. However, performed research shows that working in a job where composite contacts with other people (such as mutual cooperation) are frequently on daily basis does not mean that symptoms of social isolation will be reported less or more often. There is no explicit proof for existence of a link between intensive social interactions at work and low level of social isolation reported. The same applies to level of respondent’s trust towards other people. Presence of such relationship cannot be verified. However, existing data should encourage further research on work environment’s influence on daily social interactions.

**REFERENCES**


