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Unemployment and associations with sense of coherence and ill health

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Introduction and objective

Generally, stressful situations, e.g. unemployment, do not have similar effects on everyone. One proposed global resource construct is sense of coherence (SOC) [1], which is a dispositional orientation of perceiving and controlling the environment for meaningful and appropriate action. The objective was, firstly, to investigate the associations between SOC components and ill health among unemployed, and, secondly, to compare SOC components among unemployed and re-employed.

Material and Method

A cross-sectional study was carried out approximately two years after the closing down of the Volvo Kalmar plant in Sweden. A questionnaire was mailed to the former workers at the closed down plant. They answered the questionnaire anonymously on background variables (e.g. employment status), SOC (13-item version, Cronbach alpha=0.87) and ill health (physical and psychological symptoms). SOC included items measuring the three components: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Physical symptoms included headache, heart and stomach problems, and pain in the shoulders, back and hands. Psychological symptoms included concentration difficulties, restlessness and tension problems, irritability, anxiety, sleeping problems and low mood/depression. Responses were obtained from 344 persons (89 per cent men, 11 per cent women), of whom 172 were re-employed, 92 unemployed and 80 retired, studying etc.

Results

Multiple regression analyses were calculated, where ill health was treated as a dependent variable (physical and psychological symptoms separately) and each of the three components of SOC were used as multiple predictor variables. Among the unemployed, R^2 was 0.54 ($p < 0.001$) as regards *psychological* symptoms; however, meaningfulness did not contribute significantly to the regression when used in combination with comprehensibility and manageability. Concerning *physical* symptoms, R^2 was 0.20 ($p < 0.001$) among the unemployed. A significant difference was found between re-employed and unemployed as regards SOC, and especially concerning meaningfulness where the re-employed reported higher values ($t=7.07$; $df=262$; $p < 0.001$).

Discussion and Conclusions

Individual attitudes and the opportunity for control are traditionally considered to be important in the unemployment situation. Differences in SOC ought to be an additional explanation in this context, especially as regards psychological symptoms.

Reference

1. Antonovsky A. Health, stress, and coping. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979.

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