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Working conditions and intent to leave the profession among nursing staff in Europe

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4 *Social work environment and nurses' commitment*

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Introduction

In this chapter the relationship between social support and nurses' commitment will be explored. Workers' perceptions of the extent to which they receive supervisory support, and support by near colleagues is supposed to be of theoretical and empirical relevance with regard to performance in the nursing sector.

Following a previous study on the relationship between social support and occupational expertise (see Van der Heijden, 1998, 2002, 2003) it is expected that in case supervisors and near colleagues are supportive, and provide positive, informational feedback, and in case they facilitate employee skill development positive feelings will prevail (see also Deci et al., 1989; Greenhaus et al., 1990). Interpersonal relationships appear to be important predictors of job satisfaction (see also Stordeur et al., this book) and as a consequence related to absenteeism, expression of grievances, and turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Moreover, a positive working climate wherein supervisor and co-worker support is prevalent enhances the amount of professional growth of individual workers (Van der Heijden, 2002, 2003).

It is important to understand under which circumstances nurses' intent to leave increases. In this contribution the predictive value of two important aspects of the social working climate are studied, that is to say, the relationship between on the one hand social support from immediate supervisor and from near colleagues, and on the other hand nurses' intent to leave is empirically investigated by using data from eight European countries. In case we better understand the influence of the working climate upon the decision whether to leave the nursing profession or not we might be able to prevent premature departure. Given the enormous shortage of nurses and the fact that the working climate in organizations is a factor that management can strongly exert influence on, our outcomes might contribute to enlarge the employability and staffing opportunities within the healthcare sector.

Social support from immediate supervisor

At the heart of the learning climate lies the relationship between the employee and his or her immediate supervisor. Good supervisory feedback and good communication between the two enhance the opportunity for advancement in the worker's capabilities (Blancero et al., 1996; Dubin, 1977). Social support from one's superior can generate a general feeling of satisfaction and faith in one's further career development (Bratton & Gold, 1994; Sloboda, 1991). All kinds of

learning require feedback to be effective. In an environment where poor or even delayed feedback is given, learning may be slow or even non-existent (Ericsson & Smith, 1991).

In another previous study (Boerlijst, 1994; Boerlijst et al., 1993) it has been found that most supervisors fall short in devoting attention to the functions and functioning of their older workers. This is apparent on a number of fronts, including the area of the stimulation of training and development and the promotion of the learning value of the function, i.e. the value that the function has as nutrient for the employee's further development. Particular in the case of seniors, supervisors appear to be uncooperative and unhelpful with regard to their professional development. In other words, the degree of social support from one's immediate supervisor is expected to decline when the employee gets older.

As work-based support correlates negatively with job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and noncompliant job behaviors (see Lim, 1996) it is likely that the accessibility of social support from one's immediate supervisor effects the employee's intent to leave.

Social support from near colleagues

The majority of our abilities come from the social transfer of other people's knowledge via a variety of cultural processes - some formalised in education but many of them being very informal (Gaines, 1988). In each working organisation, one's peers must bear the responsibility of providing reliable information on current technical developments, for example by drawing one's attention to useful new journals or training courses. Peers must be willing to act as sounding boards for new ideas based on their own experiences.

Where colleagues are prepared to provide feedback on each other's work, such as regular reviews of progress, they convey a feeling of being interested in and of valuing the work and the output that is achieved.

In the case of middle-aged employees, determination of possibilities for advancement in one's professional field seems to be a central theme (Schein, 1978). Because of the fact that vertical progress is not within everyone's reach, owing to the increasing flattening of organisations, this gives rise to a great deal of competition between near colleagues. The individual's social network, so to say, is subject to change in the course of life (see also Sarason et al., 1987).

Accordingly we expect a decrease in social support from near colleagues when employees enter the mid-career phase. The difference between middle-aged employees and seniors is envisaged as being minimal.

As work-based support correlates negatively with job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and noncompliant job behaviors (see Lim, 1996) it is likely that the accessibility of social support from one's near colleagues effects the employee's intent to leave.

Methods

Social support instruments

For the measurement of the variable ‘*social support from immediate supervisor*’ four items have been used: “Is your immediate supervisor able to evaluate the value of your work and its results?”, “Does your immediate supervisor regularly express an opinion on your work?”, “Is your immediate supervisor in general ready to help you with the performance of your tasks?” and “Does your immediate supervisor regularly give you supportive advice?”.

For the first item a six-point rating scale has been used, ranging from: (1) not at all to (6) very much. For the second and fourth item a six-point rating scale has been used, ranging from: (1) never to (6) very often. For the third item a six-point rating scale has been used, ranging from: (1) In my opinion, (s)he shows little willingness to help me to (6) In my opinion, (s)he is very willing to help me.

The variable ‘*social support from near colleagues*’ was measured by exactly the same four items, with obviously ‘near colleagues’ instead of ‘immediate supervisor’ in the item formulation.

Data analysis

Data analysis has been conducted with SPSS 11.0. Differences of means were calculated by analysis of variance and T-Tests. Post-hoc analyses of mean values were computed with Scheffé-tests. Due to the large sample size, the limit for significance was set by $p < .01$.

Table 1. Overview over participants by country and social support scale

country	n total	n social support supervisor	response rate	n social support near colleagues	response rate
BE	4,257	4,197	98.5%	4,196	98.6%
DE	3,565	3,523	98.8%	3,521	98.8%
FIN	3,970	3,920	98.7%	3,922	98.8%
FR	5,376	5,319	98.9%	5,321	90.0%
IT	5,645	5,465	96.8%	5,445	96.5%
NL	4,024	3,967	98.6%	3,969	98.6%
POL	1,129	1,090	96.5%	1,096	97.0%
SLK	3,396	3,245	95.6%	3,224	94.9%
<i>all</i>	<i>31,362</i>	<i>30,726</i>	<i>98.0%</i>	<i>30,694</i>	<i>97.9%</i>

Results

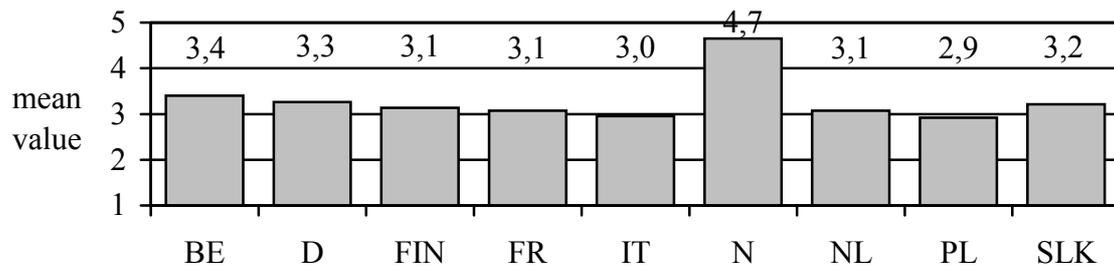
Social support from immediate supervisor

The scores for social support from immediate supervisor were highest for the Belgian nurses and lowest for the Polish ones. However, scores do not differ greatly across countries. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc analyses

(Scheffé-tests) revealed that the Belgian nurses perceive the amount of social support by their direct supervisor as significantly higher compared to nurses in all other participating countries (p.001).

Nevertheless, even for Belgium the range of answers did not reach the higher categories on the six-point rating scale.

Figure 1. Mean scores for social support of immediate supervisor by country.



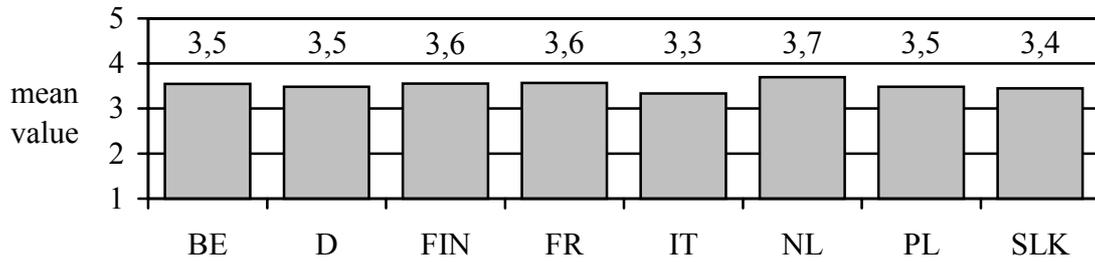
In all countries age appears to have no effect on the perceived amount of social support from the immediate supervisor (for all countries $p > .01$). Thus, our results can not support our previously stated hypothesis concerning age. With the exception of Finland, the same is true for gender. In Finland men have slightly, yet significantly higher scores compared with their female colleagues ($M=3.3$ versus 3.1) ($p < .001$).

Social support from near colleagues

The lowest scores for social support from near colleagues as perceived by the nurses have been found in Italy, while the highest ones have been found in the Netherlands. Both countries differ significantly from all other countries (ANOVA and Post-hoc Scheffé-tests, $p < .001$). The amount of social support from near colleagues does not differ for male and female nurses.

It was hypothesized that social support from near colleagues decreases in the mid-career phase of individuals. Except for Poland, the amount of social support from near colleagues appears indeed to decrease with age. In Italy and Slovakia the pattern of social support is U-shaped, that is, after a decline with age, perceived support is increasing again in the older groups (over-fifties).

Figure 2. Social support from colleagues by country



Social support and intent to leave

Concerning the relationship between the amount of social support and nurses' intent to leave, our results indicate that there is a negative relationship between social support from immediate supervisor and intent to leave. Nurses that report the highest amount of perceived support indicate the lowest scores for intent to leave (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Mean scores for social support from supervisor and intent to leave (total sample).

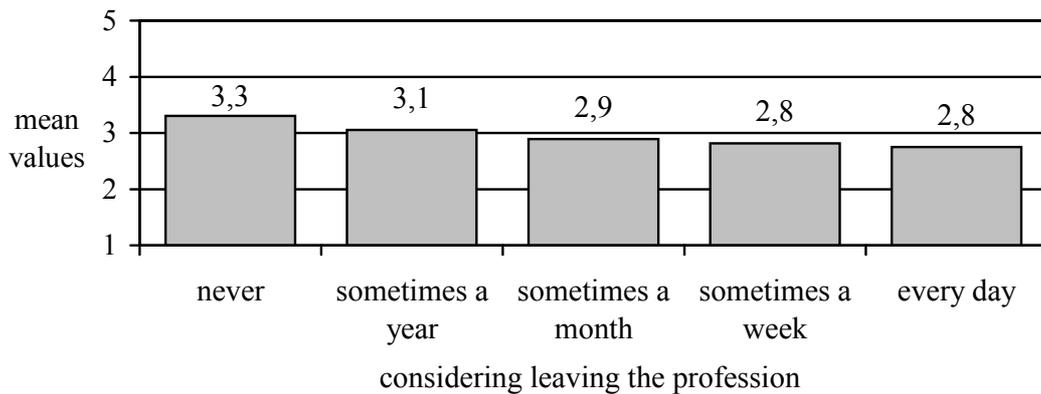
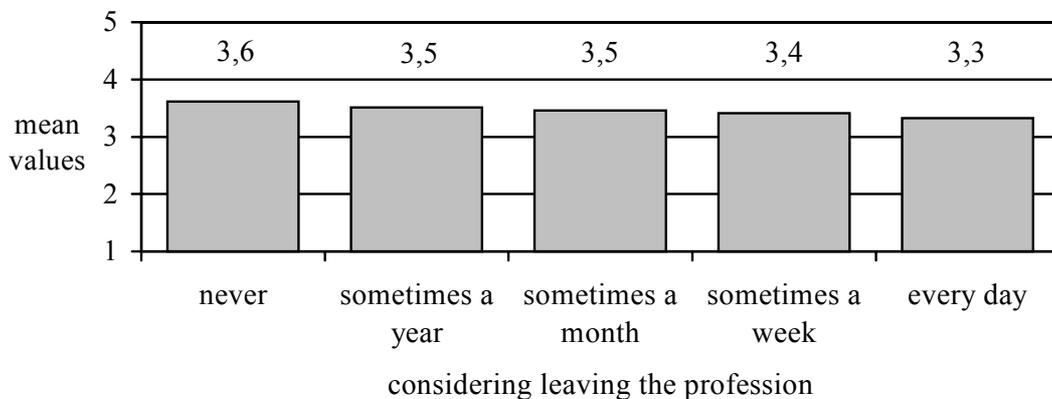


Figure 4. Social support near colleagues and intent to leave (total sample)



It appears that the amount of social support from near colleagues does not have a significant influence upon the nurses' intent to leave.

Discussion

As far as the country differences in social support from immediate supervisor are concerned we have not found differences that are worth mentioning. For most nurses the scores fall in the three lower rating anchors indicating that a lot has to be done in order to improve this potentially powerful management instrument. Moreover, neither gender (except for Finland where males have slightly higher scores) nor age differences have been found.

As regards social support from near colleagues it has been found that in most countries the relationship with age is negative. For Italy and Slovakia we have found a U-shaped pattern indicating that after a decline with age, perceived support is increasing again in the older age groups. More research is needed to understand whether these outcomes indeed may be partly attributed to a lack of vertical progress for most nurses during the mid-career phase (flattening of organizations), and, as a consequence, a high amount of competition.

As the relationship between social support from immediate supervisor and intent to leave is indeed negative, it is extremely important to have a working climate where mutual trust is prevalent. The nurse should feel safe to experiment (of course within certain limits...) and mistakes have to be seen as starting-points for further coaching programs instead of ways of surpassing or excluding one another. As the social support of the immediate supervisor appears to be determinative, taking care of open communication with nurses, providing them with supportive feedback and being there when they need it should be part of the responsibility of all line management staff in healthcare sector.

Notwithstanding the lack of a relationship between social support from near colleagues and nurses' intent to leave, we advice to carefully guide the working climate within departments and to make sure that all nurses are fed with social support by peers in their working environment. Nurses' perceptions of their work contexts, more specifically, the nature of supervision, social support from supervisors and peers, appreciation felt, and a general sense of empowerment will affect their commitment.

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