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Shiftwork: Effects on health, social and organizational life

Isabel Silva & José Keating

School of Psychology, University of Minho

Amongst the varied work schedules, shiftwork is the one which enables organizations to extend operating hours. Shiftwork, particularly shift systems involving night work in a fixed or alternate work schedule, is associated with several disorders which, in a generic way, can be classified in three interconnected domains: i) health (e. g. circadian and sleep disturbance), ii) family and social life (e.g. conflict between parental and/or conjugal roles); iii) occupational/organizational (e.g. disturbance in performance and safety).

The present study examines the possible differences between three work shifts – morning, afternoon and night – in dimensions related to health, social and family life, social support and evaluation of one's work schedule, in a particular sector of activity (textile industry).

903 workers from five textile companies participated in this study. 66% were male workers and they were predominant in the night shift. The mean age was 39.7 (SD=10.62) and the mean time working in the shift was 14.15 years (SD=11.84). Besides the gender distribution, no differences were found among the three shifts.

These shifts were compared according to the following variables: health (digestive and sleep problems), evaluation of shift schedule (satisfaction and intention to leave), social support (supervisor, co-workers and family) and satisfaction in the interface between the shift schedule and family or social activities. Data were collected by means of published questionnaires (e.g. Standard Shiftwork Index) and especially designed ones.

When compared with the morning and the afternoon shifts, the night shift was significantly associated with higher sleep disturbance and less satisfaction with shift schedule. In its turn, the morning shift was significantly associated with less intention to leave it and with a greater satisfaction with the interface between the shift schedule and extra-organizational life.

Finally, the morning shift was significantly associated to a higher perception of family support in managing the work schedule, when compared with the night shift.

Results show that the night shift is the most negatively evaluated work schedule. Moreover, the payment of a shift bonus to night shift workers represents in some way that the legislator recognizes the hardship of working this shift. The bonus in that sector of activity consists of 40% of the monthly salary. In spite of this compensation (frequently the only form of compensation offered), workers evaluated more negatively their shift schedule as they also presented greater sleep problems.

Results also suggest that the night work, even if it is a fixed one (and therefore more regular from a social point of view) and it involves experienced shiftworkers, would hardly be positively evaluated when compared with other work schedules. In spite of this conclusion, the

implementation of other intervention strategies (e.g. educational programmes, longer holidays) may have an impact on the work schedule evaluation.