THE QUALITY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK. A COMPARISON OF THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR IN POLAND

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Received 14 January 2020, Accepted 2 April 2020

Abstract

Research Background: This article compares the private and public sector by the quality of interpersonal relationships between employees. Available publications indicate some differences in this quality between each of these sectors. However, there are no comprehensive empirical studies in this area.

Purpose: The author set two objectives: 1) to identify possible differences in the interpersonal relationships at work between the private and public sector, 2) to evaluate the quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the private and public sector in Poland.

Research methodology: To achieve the objectives the author used the results of a survey conducted in 2018 on a sample of 1,336 active workers in Poland.

Results: An analysis of the results made it possible to achieve both objectives. It has been confirmed that the quality of interpersonal relationships at work differ between the private and public sector (the quality was higher in the private sector). The Author also evaluated the quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the private and public sector in Poland.

Novelty: The presented research results are novel, because it has been confirmed, that the quality of interpersonal relationships at work differ between the private and public sector.

Keywords: quality of relationships, interpersonal relationships at work, private sector, public sector

JEL classification: M12

Introduction

Interpersonal relationships between employees are a complex and multidimensional construct affected not only by the characteristics of employees, but also by situational variables. These variables include, among others, the type of a sector, in which the individual works. However, there are no comprehensive studies and empirical data on this subject. Available publications indicate some differences in attitudes and behaviours of employees between the sectors (Baarspul, Wilderom, 2012), but they focus on other aspects than interpersonal relationships at work, such as:

- attitude toward risk (Bellante, Link, 1981),
- motivation for work (Buelens, Van Den Broeck, 2007),
- involvement and work ethic at work (Lyons, Duxbury, Higgins, 2006),
- absenteeism (Vandenheuvel, 1994),
- citizenship (Glińska-Noweś, Szostek, 2018) or counterproductive work behaviors (Szostek, 2018).

The quality of interpersonal relationships at work is a very important construct for the functioning of employees, organization and even surroundings of the individual (e.g. family members). One of the aspects, which can help to understand this construct, is empirical confirmation of the possible differences in the quality of interpersonal relationships at work between the private and public sector. The differences may appear because of different working conditions in every sector. However, this is not an unambiguous issue. There are some grounds to conclude the higher quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the public sector due to higher job security which contributes to lower stress (Balchin, Wooden, 1995). On the other hand, counterproductive work behaviours are more and more often reported in the public sector (Burned, Pope, 2007; Szostek, 2019). Employment in the public sector is more affected by red tape and depersonalization. Besides the management style is more authoritarian. What is more, in the public sector, compared to the private sector, there are more gaps in communication and lower salaries, which as a result has a negative impact on job satisfaction (Leymann, 1996; Nasir, Bashir, 2012). These factors may make the quality of interpersonal relationships lower than in the private sector. However, all these conclusions are merely speculations.

The identified and above-mentioned gaps in research allowed formulating the following objectives:

- to identify possible differences in the interpersonal relationships at work between the private and public sector,

- to evaluate the quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the private and public sector in Poland.

It is expected that this study will make a significant contribution to the relevant literature in the area of possible differences in the quality of interpersonal relationships at work between the private and public sector. In the following sections, the theoretical framework for this study is suggested. Next, a suitable methodology to test the research model is proposed. The empirical results of this study and the contributions of those findings are also discussed. Lastly, the limitations, future research directions and practical implications are discussed.

1. The quality of interpersonal relationships at work

Interpersonal relationships at work can be characterized as positive (high quality) or negative (low quality). The first one is more intimate, sincere, close, friendly, based on trust, are characterized by more frequent and longer interactions as well as they are full of positive emotions and satisfaction. On the other hand, negative relationships are rather connected with short-term and rare interactions and conflicts, the communication is difficult, they are poor in positive emotions and have a negative behaviors (e.g., helping behaviors). Besides, such relationships are full of suspicions and formalized (see e.g., Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli, Brueller, Dutton, 2009; Carmeli, Gittell, 2009).

The quality of interpersonal relationships between employees is a very complex construct not only due to the various determinants (individual and contextual). This quality has the character of a continuum, i.e. it is gradable and rarely assumes extreme forms. Besides it seems easier to qualify an interpersonal relationship as high quality than qualifying the same as low quality (Szostek, Glińska-Noweś, 2017). What is more, the presence of negative aspects of interpersonal relationships (or absence of positive aspects) does not mean automatically that the whole relationship is negative. On the other hand, manifestations of positive aspects of interpersonal relationship (or absence of negative aspects) is not sufficient to qualify the whole relationship as high quality. Authors agree that this construct is totally subjective and, therefore, depends on an employee's individual assessment – which aspects of relationships prevail and whether the expectations connected with the relationship have been met (Atrak, Marcone, Gregori, Temperini, Moscatelli, 2014).

It should be noted that the quality of relationships at work is a very poorly researched construct, especially in Polish cultural conditions. There are few studies in this area and there is lack of instruments for measuring interpersonal relationship quality at work. For example

Szostek (2019) proposed such an instrument and identified some main variables for measuring this quality, dividing them into four categories:

- organizational climate (e.g. atmosphere at work, trust, mutual treatment),
- interpersonal ties (e.g. sharing private information, meeting after work, helping one another, common celebration of private events),
- interpersonal relationships building methods (e.g. meetings of management with employees, employee opinion surveys, organization of corporate events),
- distance resulting from management style (e.g. fair treatment by the supervisor, private contacts after work).

Variables for the measurement of interpersonal relationship quality were divided into two dimensions, i.e.: causes vs. effects of interpersonal relationships at work and organizational (activities undertaken by an organization) vs. individual manifestations (activities undertaken by an employee) – see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Dimensions and categories of quality of interpersonal relationships at work

Source: Szostek (2019), p. 239.

2. Research methodology

In the research a survey method was used (an online, direct and auditory survey). The research was conducted in March 2018 and covered active employees in Poland. The sample was non-random. In order to differentiate among the respondents, the survey questionnaire was sent to all regional offices in Poland (approx. 2,500), 226 enterprises identified mainly from available rankings,¹ students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (almost 3,200).

The measurement of the quality of relationships at work was realized with the use of the QIRT-S scale (*Quality of Interpersonal Relationships in the Team Scale*) (Szostek, 2019). The scale is constructed from 58 items (positive statements about behaviors and attitudes) and divided into the above-mentioned four categories and two dimensions. For each of the items a respondent chooses one of the answers (from “I do not agree at all” to “I agree completely”).

The total of 1,336 correctly completed questionnaires were collected and analysed with the use of the IBM SPSS Statistics application. The data were characterized by high reliability as proved by Cronbach’s alpha (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic values for evaluation of the reliability of data

Scale	No. of items	Cronbach’s alpha	Average	Variance
QIRT-S	58	0.965	3.615	0.036

Source: author’s own work based on research results.

Table 2 includes selected demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Sex	F	57.6% (770 persons)	Type of current work	office/clerical	49.9% (666 persons)
	M	40.6% (542 persons)		management	27.6% (369 persons)
	b/o	24		blue collar	20.5% (274 persons)
Age	AV	40.3 years	Region of Poland	b/o	27 persons
	MIN	18 years		Kujawsko-Pomorskie	19.4% (259 persons)
	MAX	67 years		Śląskie	9.7% (129 persons)
	SD	11.8 years		Małopolskie	7.1% (95 persons)
	b/o	70		Podlaskie	6.0% (80 persons)

¹ „Wprost”, *Ranking 200 Największych Polskich Firm 2017*, <http://rankingi.wprost.pl/200-najwiekszych-firm#pelna-lista>; „Rzeczpospolita”, *Lista 500 – Edycja 2016*, https://sklep.rp.pl/produkt/lista_500__edycja_2015.php.

Continuation of Table 2

Education	higher	56.7% (757 persons)		Warmińsko-Mazurskie	6.0% (80 persons)
	secondary	22.1% (295 persons)		Mazowieckie	5.9% (79 persons)
	vocational	19.2% (256 persons)		Świętokrzyskie	5.9% (79 persons)
	middle school	0.3% (4 persons)		Pomorskie	5.8% (77 persons)
	none	0.3% (4 persons)		Wielkopolskie	5.3% (71 persons)
	b/o	20		Lubuskie	4.8% (64 persons)
Length of work in present job	AV	9.7 years		Łódzkie	4.6% (62 persons)
	MIN	1 month		Podkarpackie	4.5% (60 persons)
	MAX	48 years		Lubelskie	4.2% (56 persons)
	SD	9.9 years		Dolnośląskie	4.0% (53 persons)
	b/o	84		Opolskie	3.4% (45 persons)
Sector of current employment	private	50.8% (679 persons)		Zachodniopomorskie	3.1% (42 persons)
	public	48.9% (653 persons)			
	b/o	4 persons			

Source: author's own work based on research results.

3. Results and discussion

The respondents evaluated the quality of interpersonal relationships at work really high (18.27% of the total answers were “I definitely do not agree” and “I rather disagree” and 63.22% of the total answers were “I definitely agree” and “I rather agree”). What is more, the high evaluation of the quality of relationships both applied to employees from the private sector and public sector (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the private and public sector

Source: author's own work based on research results.

It can be stated that employees from the private sector evaluated relationships in their place of work slightly better. This can be proved by the high dominance of the definitely positive evaluation (29.4% vs. 18.6%) and higher total evaluation of all answers such as “I definitely agree” or “I rather agree” (65.5% vs. 61.0%) as well as the lower ambivalent evaluation (“hard to say”: 15.7% vs. 21.3%) as compared to employees from the public sector.

Analysing the evaluation of employees from all of the sectors separately in relation to particular categories of the quality of relationships it should be noticed that only in the case of two of them (interpersonal relationships building methods; distance resulting from management style), evaluations were slightly lower compared to those of employees employed in the private sector (see Figure 3). Employees from this sector tended to express definite and rather negative opinions rarely and more often expressed definite and rather positive opinions (they rarely had nothing to say compared to employees from the public sector).

The difference in evaluations expressed by employees of both sectors may have a logical substantiation. It should be remembered that organizations in the private sector potentially have much wider opportunities of activities as regards to building relationships among employees and use the same much more often (e.g. integration events, equipment in the place of work). What is more, the distance resulting from management style is much greater in the public sector, which was confirmed empirically by other authors (resulting from greater depersonalization, red tape and authoritarian management) (Leymann, 1996; Nasir, Bashir, 2012).

Regarding the organizational atmosphere and interpersonal ties differences between the analysed sectors were not so distinct. Firstly, employees employed in the private sector tended to evaluate these two categories more often in a negative way (including definitely negative opinions). Definitely positive evaluations prevailed in this sector; however, moderately positive evaluations prevailed among respondents employed in the public sector. Thus, it should be deemed that in both sectors the categories of the quality of relationships, on that employees have an impact (individual dimension), are evaluated similarly.

In order to confirm, whether a relation between the quality of interpersonal relationships and the sector type is statistically significant, Pearson's chi-square coefficient was used (see Table 3). In each case (both for the general quality of the relationships and particular categories of this quality) the value of significance was lower than the assumed level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$ and, therefore, the hypothesis of the independence of the analysed variables should be rejected in favour of an alternative hypothesis assuming that there is no such independence (the variables are correlated).

Figure 3. The quality of interpersonal relationships at work in the private and public sector

Source: author's own work based on research results.

Table 3. Pearson's chi-square coefficients

		Chi-square	Df	Significance	p-value
The sector of employment vs.	quality of relationships	176.302	6	0.000*	0.002*
	organizational atmosphere	169.325	5	0.000*	0.010*
	interpersonal ties	148.627	5	0.000*	0.000*
	interpersonal relationships building methods	145.885	5	0.000*	0.000*
	distance resulting from management style	179.779	5	0.000*	0.007*

* Statistics of the chi-square are relevant at the level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Source: author's own work based on research results.

Conclusions

To sum up the research results presented in this article, it should be stated that the objectives were achieved, i.e. (Baarspul, Wilderom, 2012):

- it has been confirmed that the quality of interpersonal relationships at work differs between the private and public sector,
- the quality of interpersonal relationships at work has been described in the private and public sector in Poland.

First, it should be noted that the presented results of the research have some limitations. Non-random selection of the sample was determined by the non-representative character of the research. The relatively numerous sample (1,336 persons) and its diversification by the demographic criteria somehow mitigate this problem; however, future research should ensure the random selection of respondents.

The second limitation is the use of direct survey methods in the measurement of the quality of relationships (a direct and auditory survey). The respondents could be afraid of losing their anonymity and, thus, their willingness to participate in the research and their ability to provide reliable answers could be affected. Therefore, it was justified to use the indirect survey method (online research, approx. 80% of the collected data). The analysis of the empirical data did not show relevant differences among those answers collected with the use of various survey methods. There were also no questionnaires with zero variance in the case of the QIRT-S scale. However, further tests should mainly use indirect survey methods thus providing the highest degree of anonymity for respondents.

The third limitation was the quantitative character of the research method. This made it possible only to confirm the difference in the quality of the relationships at work between both

sectors. However, determinants of the differences were not identified. Therefore, future research should be deepened using qualitative methods in order to identify determinants of the quality of relationships in each of the sectors. Most of the current studies analyse mainly organizational determinants and, therefore, further research should focus on a worker's individual perspective (Baarspul, Wilderom, 2012). The discussed limitations are justified by the explorative character of the research.

Empirical confirmation of differences in the quality of relationships between the analysed sectors has an applicative character. Managers have to consider the specificity of a sector in order to maximise the advantages of their activities in favour of building high quality relationships at work. First of all, in the public sector, it is necessary to take actions to build strong interpersonal ties and a positive organizational atmosphere. Finally, a key factor could be the management style.

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