

# **Employee Embeddedness: A research model for the influence of social capital on social cohesion and conflicts about sickness absence. (Working paper 2015a)**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

In the Netherlands, employees who are involved in a dispute with their employer over work absence due to illness may ask the Dutch Employee Insurance Authority (UWV) for a second opinion entitled '(In)ability to work due to illness'. The employee, who is embedded in different social groups, both at work and at home, must make important choices before requesting this form of intervention. If the employer doubts whether the employee is genuinely unable to work, Dutch Civil Law allows the employer to reduce the employee's salary or threaten the employee with dismissal on the grounds of an illegitimate absence from work.

Dutch policymakers assumed that both sides in the dispute, i.e. employer and employee, would adhere to the decision of UWV (a 'trusted and expert third party') and that they would resume the process of rehabilitation on the basis of that decision. As one policymaker said: 'We hoped that the second opinion would function as a kind of mediation'. However, this 'second opinion' falls far short of being a mediation process. In the Netherlands, a mediation process starts with a contract on how the mediation process will proceed and ends with a mediation agreement contract. The mentioned second opinion issued by the UWV does not include any mediation between two parties, but is a professional and expert opinion regarding the balance between the employee's functional capacity and the workload of his or her present job.

Each year, UWV receives around 5000 requests for a second opinion, of which some 70% are put in by employees. This was our motivation for considering factors in the social context of the applicant. When we looked at research carried out by the insurance physicians involved and the Dutch foundation 'de Ombudsman' (2011:41), we noticed that many employees had not resumed their work or had quit working for that employer altogether after a second opinion. Putting these findings alongside the original intentions of the legislator, a range of questions spring to mind. Why are employees prepared to leave or to lose their job as a result of the dispute? Why can they not resolve their disagreement with the

employer? Why do employees ask for UWV as a third party for a second opinion? And which factors may influence these phenomena?

To answer these questions, we carried out a short secondary analysis of second opinion reports issued by UWV in 2007. We took a random sample of 112 files. The reports were qualitatively screened by one of the authors (FFWS) for references to the characteristics of the social context of the employees. Of the 122 files, 76 were suitable for further screening. In those cases where data were available, nothing indicated a connection between social context, the conflict and the request for a second opinion.

We then turned to theories that describe the connections between the social context of the employee, the sick leave, and the conflict that led to the second opinion. In our search we were keen to identify sociological approaches that could shed some light on the reasons why some employees on sick leave run into conflicts with their employers about their absence from work and decide to request a second opinion. Because such sociological approach is not existent, we continued our search under more social psychological explanations for sickness absence at work, as well.

In the abundance of theories we found four relevant approaches, which we will now outline briefly. The first theory includes so-called balance models or conflict models, such as 'Job Demands and Control', 'Job Demands and Resources, Home Demands and Resources'. A more recently developed theory, the Enrichment model, contradicts the theoretical models mentioned above. We also looked at the model of Job Embeddedness, specifically the different aspects of the 'On-the-Job' and the 'Off-the-Job' factors of this model. We looked at an extension of the theoretical approaches by considering the sociological concept of social capital. We compared all these approaches in order to determine the main theoretical variables, connect them in the research model, and operationalize them into a research model based on relevant literature. This model may provide greater insight into the possible relationships between the background of employees, disputes over absenteeism and second opinion requests.

### **Theoretical approaches**

#### *Balance model*

The first approach is that of the conflict-model, also known as the balance model, which is an influential theory in this field. A specific model in this approach is the Job Demands-Resources model, which is based on the premise that employees are faced with job demands but have limited resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). This model was developed in response to the Job Demand-Control model, also known as the Job Strain Model (Karasek, 1979). The latter model assumes that the availability of job control could be seen as a means of counterbalancing job demands (De Jonge, Bosma, Peter and

Siegrist, 2000). The Job Demands-Resources model assumes that human time and energy are finite resources (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002). In other words, time and energy spent at home cannot also be invested in work and vice versa (Friedman, Christensen & Groot, 1998). Heavy home demands mean that less time and energy are available for work, which results in stress and overburden and affects both the duration and the frequency of sick leave (Ter Hoeven, 2009:79-80). There is empirical evidence (Demerouti et al., 2005; Peeters et al., 2005) that the home-work balance plays a key role in the development of psychological fatigue: work pressure and emotional burden make the relationship between work life and home life problematic (Van Ruysseveldt, 2010:52). An imbalance caused by a conflict between work life and home life may influence the behaviour of both partners at work. This imbalance may lead to arriving late for work, frequent breaks to deal with domestic matters and absence from work (Hammer, Bauer, Grandey, 2003:429).

#### *Enrichment theory*

The second approach is the Enrichment theory, which is supported by a growing number of authors. This theory claims that activities at work and at home can also be seen as sources of energy that reinforce each other or provide low-level compensation (Edwards en Rothbard, 2000; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Hill, 2005; Voydanoff, 2002). Greenhaus and Powell (2006) suggest that activities in private life can be beneficial for work because they produce satisfaction, respect and energy, which means that individuals are able to contribute more at work. It can also lead to new skills, experience and knowledge that can be used at work. In addition, personal networks can be extended through partners' professional contacts, and this in turn may be beneficial to professional careers. Additional resources gained through family life may provide more energy and flow at work (Ter Hoeven, 2009:79).

#### *Job Embeddedness model*

The third approach is based on the theory of the Job Embeddedness model. The founders of this theoretical model distinguish between two aspects of job embeddedness. One is the 'on-the-job' factor and measures the extent to which an employee is embedded in the organization and work. The other is the 'off-the-job' factor, which measures the degree of embeddedness in the community in which people live (Lee et al., 2004:711). Each component has three dimensions: Links, Fit and Sacrifice. The first refers to the extent to which an employee has 'links' to other people or activities; the second is the extent to which his job and community 'fit' into other aspects in his 'life-spaces'; the third is the ease with which individuals can relinquish existing fringe benefits, the so-called 'sacrifices' (Lee et al,

2004:712). Originally, the authors aimed to discover why employees stayed with their company and did not resign when the balance between home and work was upset by, for example, a life-event. The results of their empirical research show that a low degree of embeddedness in the community correlates with absence from work or even leaving one's job. A high degree of embeddedness in the work organization is more closely related to 'organizational civility' and 'performance' at work (Lee et al., 2004:717). An interesting aspect of this research model is that it defines the concept of home life more broadly by including the employee's social activities in general, such as active volunteering in local politics or associations or engaging in sports (e.g. football) and cultural events, (e.g. theatre, museum). Does the community in which individuals live include the cultural or medical facilities that make that community a more attractive place? Are there aspects of the natural environment that enable individuals to engage in certain free-time activities such as outdoor sports (sailing, horse-riding, etc.)?

#### *Social capital*

Another possible approach is the theoretical sociological concept of social capital. This concept is strongly related to the concepts of social groups, social cohesion and conflict. According to Bourdieu (1986:249), social capital is the product of a determined and never-ending strategy of social investment in social relationships that are useful in the short or long term, whether on a conscious or unconscious level (Decoster, 2001:4). Scott et al. refer to social groups when 'a number of individuals, defined by formal or informal criteria of membership, share a feeling of unity or are bound together in relatively stable patterns of interaction' (Scott et al., 2005:257). In general, we may view the concepts of both social cohesion and social conflict as inextricably bound up with the existence, rise, fall and resurrection of social groups (Simmel, 1908:Chapter 6). However, in terms of effectiveness, there is at first glance little distinction between these two concepts.

While Robert Putnam, in his book 'Bowling Alone', describes the changes that have taken place in American society, he specifies that a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is less productive than one in a well-connected society (Putnam, 2000:20). In other words, social cohesion does not automatically work the same at different levels: social cohesion at each level may even interfere with social cohesion at other levels in many different ways. Another example from economics suggests that it is possible for the conflicting demands of work and personal life to overload the employee. In these situations, managers appear to play a crucial role in assigning 'work-life instruments' (i.e. human relations management instruments) to their staff (Den Dulk et al., 2011:301). While 'the organizational context is the most important layer of context for understanding managers' perspectives, the managers'

perspectives are also shaped by national and even global layers' (Den Dulk et al, 2011:324). As in other studies (Cornelius & Skinner, 2008; Robeyns, 2003), these authors find that 'work-life issues were viewed by managers as primarily women's issues' (Den Dulk et al., 2011:325).

It is possible that people vary in their degree of attachment to the social groups in which they participate. This web of different types of connections may be seen as the individual's social capital. Social capital helps people support each other and this behaviour is referred to as 'civic virtue' (Putnam, 2000:20-25). In Putnam's eyes, 'civic virtue' is most powerful when it is embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations' (2000:19).

Van Scheppingen and others (2013:371) refer to the distinction between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social capital (Oksanen et al,2010). The horizontal aspect is represented by the social support and relationships of trust and reciprocity between individuals who are at the same level, whereas vertical relationships reflect the connectedness between people at different levels of the social hierarchy (Van Scheppingen et al., 2013:371). Despite the many dimensions of the concept of social capital, there is a general agreement that social capital reflects the accumulated historical, cultural, and social factors that give rise to (formal and informal) networks, shared norms, values, beliefs, mutual reciprocity, and collective action (Van Scheppingen et al., 2013:371).

### **Comparing the approaches**

When comparing these theoretical approaches, we observed that the two domains of work and home life are seen as interconnected sources of energy in the conflict or balance model. The connection between imbalance and illness is fairly clear: as soon as an imbalance occurs in one domain it influences the burden experienced in the other domain, and the additional burden can lead to absence due to illness. However, not every overburdened employee becomes ill and reports sick. According to this theory, therefore, it is more likely that other factors are involved as well, such as the combination of personal characteristics and whether or not the employee is facing additional set-backs or life events. This argument is disputed in the Enrichment approach: an active personal life may provide sufficient resilience to withstand set-backs at work and contribute to the development of important competences. Furthermore, a partner who is in employment may enable an individual to broaden their own network through their partner's contacts, while at the same time causing them to become more embedded in the (local) community. The concept of home or personal life is extended further in the Job Embeddedness model. Apart from taking into account whether a person has a family or a (working) partner, this model also includes civic participation. Ter Hoeven defines civic participation (2009:98) as involvement in local

politics, attending cultural events (e.g. concerts and movies), participation in sports and volunteer work. Being active as a volunteer, being a partner and being an employee are, according to Siegrist (2000), the three most important roles for a human being. This means that the individual is meaningful for society and able to develop personal skills while belonging to the community. All this provides a person with feelings of recognition and acknowledgement, which in turn ultimately contribute to that individual's sense of self-worth (Siegrist, 2000). This is consistent with the notion of the empowering function of social exchange (Siegrist, 2000) and relates strongly to an observation by De Swaan. According to this author (De Swaan, 1985:151), humans depend on each other to achieve their goals. It is through this interdependency that they derive a sense of meaningfulness to their fellow humans, which subsequently contributes to the perceived significance of their existence. In essence, humans need to develop themselves and acquire influence over the design of their own life. An impossibility to fulfil these needs may result in negative coping behaviour and, ultimately, to work absence due to sickness (Peter and Siegrist, 1997). One function of absence from work may in fact be to protect the employee from the sense of frustration and powerlessness caused by the inability to regulate his or her own life (Ter Hoeven, 2009:98-99).

The Job Embeddedness model includes a combination of the concepts of social capital and the enrichment approach (Holtom et al., 2006:319). It does so by combining the concepts of 'on-the-job embeddedness' and 'off-the-job-embeddedness' with the assumption that there is a relationship between both concepts. In our opinion, it is superior to the other theories as it integrates both concepts into a single theoretical model. While some operationalizations of the concepts in the Job Embeddedness model are rather weak, we wish to use it because it can help us achieve our primary aim of understanding the influence of social capital on conflicts concerning sickness-related absence and second opinion requests. This point of view may shed some light on both aspects: the contrast between, on the one hand, the employer, who does not understand the nature of the relationship between the job and the employee's complaints and the resulting sick leave, and, on the other hand, the employee, who is caught between the combined forces of the three domains (i.e. work, home and community), and actually experiences this connection very clearly. From the point of view of the employee, who does not have enough influence over the various domains of his or her life, the employer is simply demonstrating a lack of acknowledgement and understanding.

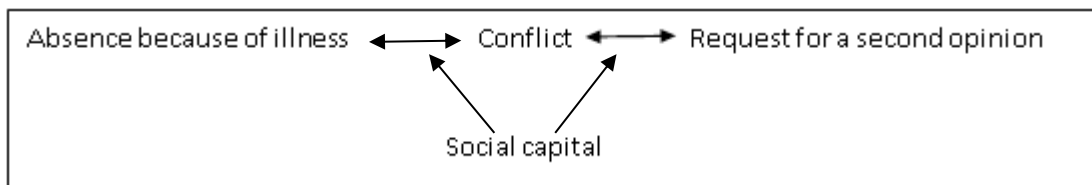
In the meantime, the employee is putting a great deal at stake. Long-term absence may lead to dismissal and the loss of the fringe benefits of employment. Social status in the local community may be lost. An employee who derives no enjoyment from these additional work arrangements, however, will not experience this inconvenience and will probably feel less reluctant to report sick. If the employer

determines that the employee reports sick too easily or for invalid reasons, the former will, in turn, wish to discuss the employee's absence at an early phase of the sick leave.

### Objective

As mentioned above, the reasons for researching the background to this phenomenon from a sociological perspective were our thoughts on the origins of conflicts regarding sickness absence in the Netherlands. Our objective was therefore to create a theoretical research model that incorporates meaningful elements from existing theories in which factors were accountable for the transmissions, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1



### A THEORY-BASED RESEARCH MODEL

The term 'job embeddedness' suggests a concept that relates to the employee's embeddedness in his or her job. However, our concept of Employee Embeddedness includes both 'on-the-job' and 'off-the-job' factors and relates much more closely to the employee's embeddedness in the three most important life domains: work, home and community. It also includes the employee's social and professional network structures. In our opinion, the concept of 'employee embeddedness' is a better expression of our research perspective: that of the employee's social participation. Siegrist (2000) has shown that participation in social institutions influences the degree to which an employee is willing to report sick for work (Ter Hoeven, 2009:98). The fulfilment of central social roles at work (such as being an employee and colleague), in the family (as a parent and a partner), and as a citizen (through volunteer work in local politics or on the school board) gives people the opportunity to satisfy their need to exert an influence on their own lives (Ter Hoeven, 2009:98). According to Siegrist (2000), these social roles offer the main opportunity for people to contribute to society and develop, belong to a group, and receive some recognition and appraisal, which ultimately leads to a greater sense of self-esteem (Ter Hoeven, 2009:98).

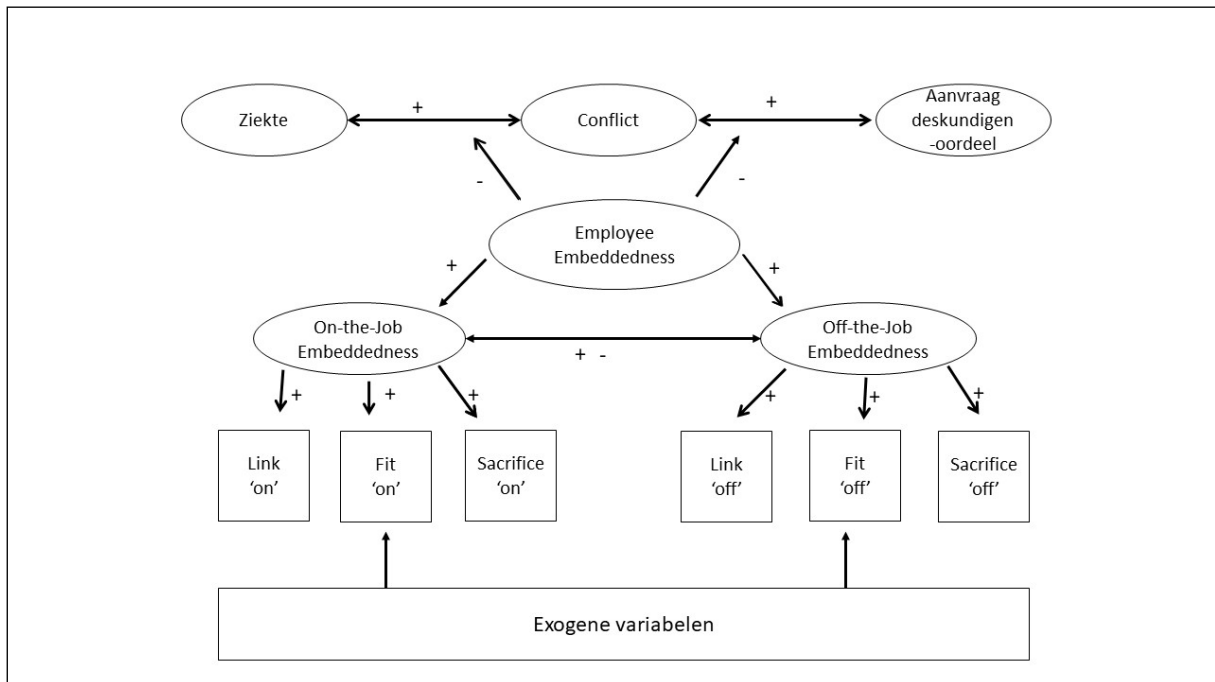
We use the on-the-job and off-the-job factors of the Job Embeddedness model in the conceptual model of Employee Embeddedness. In doing so, we have created a single concept with which to measure the strength of links with the organization, as well the strength of links with the community. The assumption is that the employee's degree of social participation in the domains of family life and the community – defined as 'off-the-job' factors - may shed more light on the origins of disputes over sick leave and the reasons for requesting second opinions. The concept of 'community' is difficult to define clearly in sociology (Scott et al., 2005:93). The Dutch word for 'community' (*gemeenschap*) is not often used and is open to misinterpretation in terms of this research, and we have therefore chosen to make a differentiation. For the purposes of our research model, the concept of community includes four geographical levels which increase in scale: the local neighbourhood, the larger district in which the neighbourhood is situated, the town or village, and the region of the village or town.

In our model, employee embeddedness is a theoretical construct with two dimensions: the 'on-the-job' factor and the 'off-the-job' factor (see Figure 2). We cannot deduce the direction (positive or negative) of the relationship sign between these two constructs on theoretical grounds. This relationship is therefore ambiguous, i.e. it may be positive, negative or absent depending on the specific (contingency) factors involved. Both constructs have three underlying dimensions: 'Link', 'Fit' and 'Sacrifice'. 'Links' (on- and off-the-job) are characterized as formal and informal connections between the person and his or her colleagues, relatives and friends or other citizens in the community (Mitchell et al., 2001b:1104). The concept of 'Link' refers to the density of relationships in one's network, while 'Fit' involves the quality of the relationships in the employee's networks. On-the-job 'Fit' is defined as an employee's perceived compatibility with an organization, which may be expressed in career goals and personal values as well as in practical job knowledge, skills, and abilities. In addition, the employee may be considered to 'fit' off-the-job into a community or environment because of the weather, amenities, and the general culture of the location, or due to prevailing political and religious culture, outdoor activities (e.g. fishing and biking), and due to leisure activities (e.g. sports, music, theatre) (Mitchell et al., 2001b:1104). 'Sacrifice' captures the perceived cost of materials or the psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job. For example, leaving an organization implies personal losses such as leaving colleagues, interesting projects, or perks (Shaw et al., 1998:). Community sacrifices mainly become an issue when an individual is forced to relocate. Even a change in jobs alone without leaving the community may have a significant impact on the work-life balance, such as no longer being able to be at home at certain times due to the absence of a flexitime arrangement (Mitchell et al., 2001b:1105). This is a good example of how a change at one level may influence other levels. We have assumed that employee embeddedness moderates (Baron et al., 1986; Kraemer et al., 2001) the relationship between sickness absence and



having a disagreement on the one hand, and between having a disagreement and requesting a second opinion on the other. Each of the exogenous factors may interfere with the theoretical constructs and the relationships between these constructs, especially on the constructs of Link, Fit and Sacrifice.

Figure 2



### Operationalizing the theoretical constructs in the model

#### *On-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness*

In order to operationalize theoretical constructs by the underlying 'Link', 'Fit' and 'Sacrifice' variables, we relied as much as possible on previously applied questionnaires in which the relevant concepts had been proven to be valid (see the Appendix for further details).

#### *Employee Embeddedness*

Employee Embeddedness is a new construct based on the concept of Job Embeddedness that has been described as 'a net or a web in which an individual can become stuck' (Mitchell et al., 2001b:1104). People live in a web-like constellation, surrounded by various nodes or objects which represent people, things, groups and institutions. The job may be the centre of this web (Mitchell et al., 2001a:102). In our research model, the central focus is on the employee's social capital and sources of enrichment, which are represented by on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness.

### *Sickness/illness*

In the Netherlands, an employee may file a claim for disability benefits after two years of illness, regardless of the cause of the illness (whether it is work-related or not). In the second opinion, the focus is on the question whether or not the employee is 100% unable to perform his normal daily work due to his or her state of health.

### *Dispute, disagreement, conflict*

In order to operationalize these concepts, we focused firstly on the employee's overall personality: whether the employee tends to avoid or initiate conflict. We used items from the frequently applied 'Measure of Conflict-Handling Behavior' model by Kilmann and Thomas (1977). Furthermore, an important aspect is that the conflict with the employer concerning his or her state of health may in itself be a factor in the employee's continuing sick leave. The company physician may also have taken a position in this dispute.

### **Developing hypotheses**

Employees with a high degree of employee embeddedness may be less likely to initiate a conflict due to sick leave because they have several sources of energy to withstand or compensate for possible setbacks. Moreover, with an enhanced network in the community, such an employee can more easily call on acquaintances to help out with matters such as caring for children or a (sick) partner or parent(s), while an employee with a lower degree of civic participation may be faced with an insufficient safety net. Such an employee may be forced to prioritize the home situation and work may be pushed into second place. This will be unacceptable to the employer, who will insist that the employee does everything possible to return to work. He or she will ask the employee to resume work as quickly as possible. The employee is faced with no choice: his or her home life continues. He or she may already have had to discontinue other activities on a more or less temporary basis. While the employer will be disappointed with the employee's behaviour, from the employee's perspective, the employer fails to understand the situation. He will be disappointed with the employer's attitude after years of loyalty and hard work. This can lead to a situation of mutual distrust when both parties' expectations no longer match up, and this will ultimately cause a dispute. The employee, who comes to depend on his or her new 'role' as a sick employee, is only able to restore his sense of self-respect by becoming a 'rebel' and obstructing the other party (De

Swaan, 1985:157) by requesting a second opinion. Another explanation is that the employee may experience a lack of social exchange as a result of a lower degree of social participation or embeddedness: the individual is no longer capable of satisfying his basic needs by himself (ter Hoeven, 2009:98-99). This perhaps explains why the individual modifies his or her expectations and create a greater distance from others, which, in turn, may lead to a more passive coping style and/or deteriorating health (ter Hoeven, 2009:98-99). Ultimately in this context, the employee's absence from work may become a strategy to mitigate any deficiency (Peter & Siegrist, 1997).

We formulated the following hypotheses on the basis of the considerations mentioned above:

1. On-the-job embeddedness and off-the-job embeddedness have a positive relationship with on-the-job and off-the-job factors, respectively: link, fit and sacrifice;
2. Employee embeddedness has a positive relationship with on-the-job embeddedness and off-the-job embeddedness;
3. A high degree of employee embeddedness is associated with a) fewer disputes between employee and employer regarding absence due to illness and with b) fewer second opinion requests made by the employer and employee in order to resolve the dispute.

#### **Various exogenous factors**

We considered the following exogenous factors and their potential influence on on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness: the employee's age, gender, cultural background, (objective and perceived) labour market position and level of education.

##### *Age*

Age is an important factor because it is plausible that an older employee has more tenure years of service and has lived for a longer time in a community than younger colleagues. Merely because of that, the older employee can be more On-the-Job as well Off-the-Job embedded.

##### *Gender*

Gender may be an important factor because the majority of women in the Netherlands work part-time and may therefore be less 'embedded' in companies than men, who are more likely to occupy full-time jobs. On the other hand, women may have stronger links to the community through their greater

involvement in the raising of children. Their networks, which typically consist mainly of other mothers or parents from their children's school, may offer support in the event of set-backs. This provides a high degree of social embeddedness, with which these women are able to cope with disruptions in the balance between home and work life.

#### *Perceived position on the labour market*

The labour market develops continuously, and jobs are likely to be affected by technological progress or internal reorganisations within companies. For individual employees this means that they may at times be less competent at their jobs. This may result in two things. An employee may be very actively lobbying within the company to retain his present position or request another job within the company, or he may choose to direct his energy at his network in the community in order to find another or more suitable job elsewhere. It is relevant to know whether this factor affects the degree of the employee's embeddedness and their tendency to initiate disagreement or conflict, or their tendency to make a request for a second opinion, and the relationships between these factors.

#### *Level of education (personal and job requirement)*

A higher level of education is generally associated with jobs that provide higher salaries, better perks and higher fringe benefits. In addition, a higher level of education may indicate that the employee is more likely to have a broad network through his many activities within the community. Therefore, it is conceivable that a highly educated employee will need to make greater sacrifices in terms of status in the event of the loss of a job, both in terms of work and in the community.

#### *Ethnic background*

Ethnic background is, of course, an important variable within our research. Having been born in another country may mean that the employee is not sufficiently integrated into the community in which he or she lives. Although such a person may be integrated within their own community and have a family to support them when needed, they may not necessarily be integrated within the company in the same way and this may influence their 'links' with both the company and the community.

## **Research design**

Given that this is the first study in this field, and also for practical reasons, we have chosen to undertake a descriptive quantitative case-control in order to determine the degree of employee embeddedness among employees on long-term sick leave. The case group of employees who have requested a second opinion will be compared with a control group of employees who have not made such a request, but whose period of sick leave was of the same duration. The data from both groups are drawn from the UWV data warehouse, a primary source of information on long-term sickness leave among employees. The degree of employee embeddedness will be measured using respondents' scores on the on-the-job or off-the-job variables. We will also compare exogenous factors such as gender, education level, career level, age and cultural background for the case group and for the control group. An article questionnaire will be used for this quantitative study. A power analysis ( $\alpha=0.05$ ,  $\beta= 0.20$ ) for the outcome measure in relation to making a request for a second opinion has indicated that a minimum of 200 cases was required in each group. Since we anticipate a low response rate of 20%, we will approach at least 1000 persons in each group. For the case group we will select employees who have made a second opinion request during the six months prior to our selection. This is an acceptable period in terms of recall bias (see e.g.: Middel et al., 2006), particularly given that a request for a second opinion is a salient event (Garon, 2013). We know that about 80% of requests for a second opinion are made within 6 months to one year after the beginning of the sick leave (Stichting de Ombudsman, 2011:26). The control group will comprise of employees who have been absent due to illness for at least 42 weeks or 10.5 months. This is the period after which the employer is obliged to report the sick leave to UWV. In addition to age, gender, cultural background and perceived position on the labour market, we will also statistically check for differences in background between the case group and the control group. Additionally, using a qualitative study (Boeije, 2008) with several case group respondents, we will try to discover more about how the dispute arose and the grounds on which employees have decided to request a second opinion. We will interview these respondents individually and in their own environment rather than in groups, since we believe that respondents will feel more secure and safer in a one-on-one interview situation.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to the theory of employee embeddedness, there is a relationship between disputes over sick leave and requests for a second opinion on the one hand, and the extent to which the employee is embedded within his or her community on the other hand. At first glance, it seems logical from the

viewpoint of this study to approach this issue from the employee's perspective and only investigate employees' requests for a second opinion. However, it may also be interesting to scrutinize requests that were submitted by employers. For practical reasons, however, we decided not to include these in our quantitative study.

We will select a number of respondents from the case group to participate in a qualitative follow-up. We intend to gain further insight into the considerations of the respondents by inquiring in greater detail about the start of the dispute and their reflections on the request for a second opinion at the time. In symbolic interactionism - a prevailing point of view in this research - the main focus is on the meaning and significance that people attribute to events and their actions in response to those events. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate manner of interpreting the data already obtained from the survey. This approach allows us to acquire a better picture of the way in which people assign meaning to their social reality, and of how they interpret and act upon it (Boeije, 2008:31-32). These systems of meaning and patterns of acting are created in a social manner and influenced by the entire social context (Giddens, 1984; Harre, 1979). We will be alert to signals that may support or undermine the relationships that appear in our quantitative study.

One criterion for selecting respondents for the qualitative interviews seems obvious: we will undoubtedly find respondents in the survey with higher and a lower degrees of employee embeddedness. It would be very interesting to include both in the selection so that we can examine in greater depth the potential differences between these two groups in relation to the putative relationships between the different constructs in our theoretical framework. Interdependency between the on-the-job and off-the-job factors is, for example, one interesting aspect.

The strength of this study is the fact that we designed an extensive quantitative component and combined it with a qualitative component. Another strength is that we have built our research model on the basis of theories which have been proven to be relevant. We shall make use, as far as possible, of previously applied and validated questionnaires in order to operationalize the theoretical constructs. However, the theoretical construct of employee embeddedness is strongly rooted in the theory of job embeddedness, the constructs of which have been empirically tested in the United States. There are significant differences between the US and the Netherlands in terms of social security, health insurance and fringe benefits in the labour market. For instance, moving from one region of the USA to another may involve a much greater distance and impact on one's life than moving from one region to another within the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, most employees who are employed by an employer enjoy

(good) health insurance which is often unrelated to the type of employment contract, whether this is permanent or temporary.

The results of our research may be relevant for policymakers at the Ministry of Social Affairs in the Netherlands and the administrators of the Employee Benefits Insurance Agency. The basic assumption of the theoretical model is that social processes also play a secondary role in this type of conflict. One possible outcome may be that the professionals involved need to explore the situation that is relevant to their job performance. This may perhaps lead to the conclusion, according to the process of demedicalization, that the role of vocational experts in handling the 'second opinion' phenomenon will become more important. If the hypothesized relationships between the theoretical constructs are proven, then these results are also meaningful for other aspects of the labour market. For example, it may mean that employers facing a shortage of staff need to take special actions to recruit new employees, such as offering facilities for carrying out volunteer work during working hours. Furthermore, it may mean that more has to be done to re-integrate unemployed people into jobs on a permanent basis. Moreover, regardless of the outcomes, it will shed more light on the field of influence behind this phenomenon which, until now, has been hidden in the little-known interface between the labour market and the social security domain. Our research model may lay the foundation for a new approach to researching the social security domain, and may open a black box that had previously been sealed.

## **CONCLUSION**

We believe that this research model will shed more light on the background to second opinions concerning disputes over sick leave between employees and employers in the daily administration of social security. Currently, professionals may experience such disputes as a black box with major consequences (salary cuts or dismissal) for the employee. However, we also imagine that after the empirical testing of the relationships in our research model, this model may be applied in other studies to obtain a better insight into the policy of sustainable return to work of incapacitated employees, or of long-term retention of personnel.

## **APPENDIX Operationalization of on-the-job and off-the-job factors**

We have relied as much as possible on questionnaires that have been previously applied and validated in order to operationalize the theoretical constructs.

### *On-the-job factors:*

#### *Fit with the organization/job*

- job skills' demands 1,3,7
- fit with standards and values of the organization<sup>1,3</sup>
- appreciation by colleagues/manager<sup>1,6,7,8</sup>
- being settled in the organization<sup>8</sup>
- fit with the content of the job<sup>2,6,7</sup>
- comradeship with colleagues (in finishing the job)<sup>7,8</sup>
- appreciation of colleagues<sup>5,6</sup>
- resemblance to colleagues in conducts
- match between work hours and personal wishes<sup>1</sup>
- possibility of coordinating work with private obligations, e.g. by teleworking or working part-time<sup>4</sup>
- autonomy in approach to the job, working at one's own pace etc.<sup>3,6,7</sup>
- autonomy in finding solutions to everyday problems<sup>7</sup>
- existence of bottlenecks in work-life balance<sup>7,8</sup>
- attraction of one's job<sup>2,8</sup>
  
- opportunities to achieve professional goals<sup>5,7</sup>
- positive feelings about progress at work<sup>5</sup>

#### *Link with the organization/job*

- type of work agreement (temporary, casual, permanent)<sup>7</sup>
- number of years in service/having done the same job/having worked in the same sector<sup>1,5,6,7</sup>
- working alone or in a team (number of people in a team)<sup>3</sup>
- frequency of contact with colleagues<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- being in charge at work or not<sup>1,6</sup>



- autonomy in taking (short-term) leave<sup>4,7</sup>
- working in other settings than the usual (and how frequently), e.g. as a member of a committee or project group<sup>1,5</sup>
- perceived quality of the work of colleagues<sup>2,7</sup>
- receiving signals about shortcomings due to factors in private life<sup>7</sup>
- having received external or internal training during the last two years<sup>7</sup>

*Sacrifices* concerning leaving/losing the job

- loss of freedom in work<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- loss of work-related perks<sup>1,2,5</sup>
- loss of particular facilities such as sports, daycare and/or educations
- missing the appreciation of colleagues<sup>1,5</sup>
- missing professional prospects<sup>1,2,3,5,6</sup>
- missing good salary<sup>1,2,5</sup>
- missing a pension plan<sup>2,5</sup>

*Off-the-job factors:*

*Fit* with the community

- being fond of the community in which one lives<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- appreciation of the weather/climate in the region in which one lives<sup>5</sup>
- fit with the people who live in the community in which one lives<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- job is in the community in which one likes to live and in which one lives<sup>2,5</sup>
- community in which one lives has enough facilities to spend one's free time according to one's wishes<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>

*Link* with the community

- being married<sup>1,2,3,5</sup>
- having children<sup>2,4</sup>
- composition of the household<sup>1,5,7</sup>
- having a partner with a job outside the house<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- having a rented house or an owner-occupied house<sup>1,3,5</sup>

- having family that was born and bred in one's community<sup>1,3</sup>
- having best friends living in one's community<sup>3</sup>
- having a family-friendly community<sup>1</sup>
- having next of kin living in one's community
- being a member of a club or institution <sup>2,3</sup>
- being active in the board of a club or institution <sup>2,3</sup>
- being able to spend enough time on activities in the community<sup>4</sup>

*Sacrifices* concerning leaving the community in which one lives

- feeling strongly about leaving the community<sup>1,3,5</sup>
- losing friends by leaving the community<sup>3</sup>
- missing safety by leaving the community<sup>1,5</sup>
- missing a club/institution by leaving the community<sup>2</sup>
- missing the contacts that one has by leaving the community<sup>3</sup>
- missing the facilities that one has by leaving the community<sup>4</sup>
- missing voluntary activities by leaving the community<sup>3,4</sup>

1) Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, Holtom, 2004: 721-722; 2) Holtom, Inderrieden, 2006: 449; 3) Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom and Harman, 2009:561; 4) Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Graske, November 2001 (as items, no used questions); 5) Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, Erez, December 2001; 6) Vragenlijst WAO-intrede, December 1991; 7) Nationale Enquête Arbeidsomstandigheden, TNO/CBS/minSZW, 2010; 8) Vragenlijst Arbeidsreïntegratie VAR, Lex Vendrig, maart 2005

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