

# Fear of contagion, Supervisor Support, Safety Climate and Job Satisfaction in Cemetery Workers during COVID-19

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## *Abstract*

La recente pandemia di COVID-19 ha avuto un forte impatto sulla popolazione mondiale, ma è stata particolarmente critica per i lavoratori impiegati nei contesti professionali ad alto rischio, come i “lavoratori essenziali”. Il settore funerario rientra in questa categoria occupazionale in quanto ha dovuto gestire gli effetti della mortalità cresciuta a livelli esponenziali. Le difficili condizioni affrontate dagli operatori funerari durante la pandemia hanno ricevuto poca attenzione sia dai governi che dalla ricerca. Il presente studio mira a colmare questa lacuna esaminando la paura del contagio sul posto di lavoro, il supporto dei supervisori, il clima di sicurezza e la soddisfazione lavorativa in un campione di 82 lavoratori cimiteriali italiani (52,4% donne). Il modello di regressione dei minimi quadrati ordinari (OLS) ha mostrato una forte relazione negativa tra paura del contagio e soddisfazione lavorativa e una forte relazione positiva tra supporto dei supervisori, clima di sicurezza e soddisfazione lavorativa. Questi risultati forniscono nuove informazioni sui fattori protettivi che hanno contribuito a mantenere il benessere degli operatori funerari durante un periodo difficile come la recente pandemia.

## *Keywords*

COVID-19, settore funerario, sicurezza sul lavoro, JD-R

## *Introduction*

COVID-19 has brought major changes to the world of work around the world. Government regulations designed to contain the spread of the virus have led to a reduction in physical presence in the workplace and, in many cases, a switch to remote working (Barone Gibbs et al., 2021). In contexts where this solution was not practical (e.g. essential services), strict safety measures were introduced to ensure the health of workers. However, given the wide and rapid spread of the virus and the associated high mortality rate, the fear of contagion in the workplace was

a constant concern for many workers who had to continue to provide services during the pandemic. Among the categories of workers who have been on the front line, we certainly find the health sector, which has received a lot of attention in the literature and equally strong media coverage. Less interest, on the other hand, has been aroused by the work of people employed in the deathcare sector, who have had to deal tirelessly with the management and disposal of the numerous corpses that the virus has harvested. This study aims to expand knowledge about this particular profession during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Background*

The deathcare sector includes professionals involved in the whole range of activities that begin with the reception of the body and end with the burial or scattering of the ashes, i.e. mortuary, funeral directing, crematoria and cemeteries. Professionals working in this sector are not only exposed to constant contact with death, but also to the psychological suffering of bereaved family members. It is therefore a very demanding job that also entails various occupational risks (Colombo et al., 2019; Davidson & Benjamin, 2006; Guidetti et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2022)

Cemetery work includes, in particular, the bureaucratic activities required for burial operations, the management and maintenance of cemetery areas and the burial/inhumation (or exhumation) of coffins. All these activities can involve different risks depending on their nature. Compared to roles that involve purely physical labour, such as gravediggers and green workers, the risks of musculoskeletal disorders as a result of repetitive movements and handling loads have been highlighted (Colombo et al., 2019; Kloetzer et al., 2015). The constant contact with death and the suffering of the bereaved also exposes workers in this sector to psychosocial risks such as emotional dissonance (Colombo et al., 2019), burnout (Cotrim et al., 2020; Cüneyt et al., 2013) and secondary traumatic stress (Colombo et al., 2019). The stigma associated with the profession is also of great importance, as working in contact with death is often labelled as “dirty work” (Guidetti et al., 2021; Pinheiro et al., 2012; Soria Batista & Codo, 2018; Thompson, 1991).

Despite the importance of the work of these professionals, research in the deathcare sector is still scarce. This is particularly surprising in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where deathcare work has played an essential role in addressing the rapidly exponential increase in mortality. The critical conditions faced by workers in this sector have been insufficiently studied (Clavandier et al., 2021; Mas'amah et al., 2023; Moreras, 2023). At a practical level, for example, a significant increase in workload and the difficulty of managing the spaces to accommodate the large number of coffins have been identified, while at a social level, critical issues have emerged in relation to the suspension of funeral ceremonies, essential ritual processes for processing grief (Clavandier et al., 2021; Turner & Caswell, 2020).

During the pandemic, governments introduced restrictions and new regulations to protect public health. These obligations affected all areas of work, including deathcare. In particular, since the actual infectivity of corpses affected by COVID was not known (Mahajan et al., 2020; Suwalowska et al., 2021), preventive measures were taken as a precautionary measure for handling infected bodies or coffins of infected people (Petroni et al., 2021). Unlike the healthcare sector, which was prioritised for its role in “saving” lives, the deathcare sector has not been included in government plans as a category of “essential” services. This important shortcoming in Italy has meant that these workers have not been included in the procurement plans for safety equipment (PPE) and not even in the plan for priority vaccinations, to which healthcare sector workers have instead been given access. These conditions have led to workers being more exposed to the virus, contributing to the development of a greater fear of contagion. The perception of working in a safe environment is of paramount importance for the well-being of employees and can influence overall job satisfaction. Indeed, the level of support that organisations provide is also associated with a climate of safety and when employees perceive this type of support, they are more satisfied with their working conditions (Ayim Gyekye, 2005). According to the Job Demands–Resources theory (JD-R) (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), each work context is associated with specific demands and resources. Demands are organisational, personal or social aspects that require a certain level of effort in terms of the use of energy by the

individual. Resources, on the other hand, concern those aspects of an organisational, personal or social nature that contribute to the achievement of work goals and that can compensate for the effects of work demands. The theoretical framework also provides outcomes such as indicators of well-being or malaise in the work context and therefore aims to identify both risk factors and protective factors.

Based on the literature findings and the theoretical framework of JD-R theoretical framework, we formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1): Fear of contagion is significantly and negatively associated to job satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Supervisor support and safety climate are significantly and positively associated with job satisfaction.*

## *Methods*

### Participants and Procedure

The research design chosen to test the above hypotheses is a cross-sectional study. A paper questionnaire was administered in 2022<sup>1</sup> to all employees of a large cemetery company in northern Italy. To conduct the survey, meetings were organised in the various offices of the company in consultation with the management and participation of the employees was voluntary. No reward was offered for participating in the survey. Participants were given a data protection form and a consent form to sign in order to complete the questionnaire (in accordance with the applicable EU Regulation 2016/679). The project

<sup>1</sup> The initial phase of the pandemic in Italy led to very restrictive measures, particularly with regard to attending funerals. During the first lockdown, they went from an initial total suspension of funeral ceremonies to a maximum attendance of 15 people (only close relatives), with ceremonies preferably held outdoors, keeping distance and wearing PPE (D.P.C.M. 26 aprile 2020, 108). Subsequently, the decision on the limited number of people was delegated to local governments, with the obligation to maintain social distancing and the use of PPE remaining (Circ. 11 gennaio 2021, n. 818). The administration of the survey took place when the latter government regulations were in force.

was approved by the company and the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin (protocol code no. 0598340). The survey had a response rate of 61.5% compared to the company's total population. The sample consists of 82 cemetery workers, 52.4% women, average age 52.38 (7.34), job tenure 12.41 (7.86). In terms of marital status, 61% are cohabiting/married, 58% have children. As for the education level, most of the respondents have a high school diploma (42.7%). The functions performed by the participants are front office (17%), technical and administration (31.7%), decoration and garden (29.3%), gravedigger (18.3%) (see Table 1).

### Measures

The questionnaire consisted of an introductory section detailing the objectives of the study, followed by a short socio-demographic section and finally a series of questions measuring specific variables (job demands, resources and outcomes). The latter were selected from instruments that have been widely validated in the literature.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample (N = 82)

	N	%
<b>Age</b> (M = 52.38; SD = 7.34)		
<b>Job tenure</b> (M = 12.41; SD = 7.68)		
<b>Gender</b>		
Women	43	52.4
Male	35	42.7
<i>Missing</i>	4	4.9
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Single	13	15.9
Married/cohabiting	50	61.0
Separated/divorced	17	20.7
<i>Missing</i>	2	2.4
<b>Children</b>		
Yes	58	70.7
No	22	26.8
<i>Missing</i>	2	2.4

**Education**

Lower secondary school diploma	25	30.5
High school diploma	35	42.7
Bachelor's degree	15	18.3
Post-graduate training	4	4.9
Missing	3	3.7

**Role**

Front-office	14	17.0
Technical and administrative	26	31.7
Decoration and gardens	24	29.3
Gravediggers	15	18.3
Missing	3	3.7

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*Job satisfaction* was measured with the 4-item Job Satisfaction scale of the COPSOQ-II (Pejtersen et al., 2010; Setti et al., 2017) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied); a sample item is “Regarding your work in general, how pleased are you with the physical working conditions?”. The Cronbach alpha in this study is .88.

*Fear of contagion* was measured with a single ad hoc item, “How worried are you about the risk of contracting Covid-19 at work?” with response modes from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much.

*Supervisor support* was measured with the 4-items Social Support from Supervisor Scale (Caplan et al., 1975) on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = never, 3 = always); a sample item is “How much your supervisor can be relied on when things get though at work?”. Cronbach's alpha in this study was .86.

*Safety climate* was measured with the 3-items Safety Climate scale (Neal & Griffin, 2006) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = disagree, 5 = agreement); a sample item is “Safety is given a high priority by management”. Cronbach's alpha in this study was .94.

Data Analysis

Preliminary descriptive analyses were performed for each scale (means and standard deviations) and Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the variables analysed. Correlation analyses were performed in which the Pearson r was calculated to check the relationship between the

variables. An OLS regression was then tested, with job satisfaction as the dependent variable and fear of contagion, supervisor support and safety climate as predictor variables. Gender and job tenure were considered as control variables. No problems with multicollinearity were identified in the regression model ( $VIF < 5$ ). The software used is IBM SPSS 28.

### Results

The correlations between job satisfaction, fear of contagion, supervisor support and safety climate (see Table 2) were calculated and all were in the expected direction. Job satisfaction showed a strong positive and significant relationship with supervisor support and safety climate ( $p < .01$ ) and a strong negative and significant relationship with fear of contagion ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 2. Correlations between the variables (N = 82)

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Job satisfaction	18.36 (6.40)	—	—	—	—
2. Fear of contagion	4.09 (2.88)	-.30**	—	—	—
3. Supervisor support	7.94 (3.12)	.54**	.02	—	—
4. Safety climate	12.39 (2.95)	.57**	-.28*	.23*	—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

An OLS regression model was calculated to test whether fear of contagion, supervisor support and safety climate could predict job satisfaction. Gender and seniority were included in the model as control variables, while job satisfaction was considered the dependent variable.

Table 3. OLS regression (job satisfaction = dependent variable)

MODEL 1 (CONTROLS ONLY)	$\beta$	t	p
Gender (1 = women)	-.17	-1.38	.17
Job tenure	-.07	-.53	.59
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>=.01</b>			
MODEL 2 (CONTROLS AND FEAR OF CONTAGION)			
Gender (1 = women)	-.14	-1.19	.24
Job tenure	.06	.52	.60
Fear of contagion	<b>-.37</b>	<b>-3.04</b>	<b>.00</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>=.12</b>			
MODEL 3 (CONTROLS, FEAR OF CONTAGION, SUPERVISOR SUPPORT AND SAFETY CLIMATE)			
Gender (1 = women)	-.08	-1.03	.31
Job tenure	.03	.28	.78
Fear of contagion	<b>-.22</b>	<b>-2.33</b>	<b>.02</b>
Supervisor support	<b>.48</b>	<b>5.85</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Safety climate	<b>.40</b>	<b>4.45</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>=.57</b>			

Bold has been used to emphasise parameters or significant results.

The control variables (gender and job tenure) were included in Model 1 and there were no significant effects on the dependent variable. Fear of contagion, considered as a job demand, was included in Model 2 and was found to be negatively and significantly associated with job satisfaction; the variable added to the model proved to be a good predictor of the dependent variable as there was a significant change in the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> (12% explained variance). Finally, the resources supervisor support ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and safety climate ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were added to Model 3, both of which were positively and significantly associated to job satisfaction. Fear of contagion ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .02$ ) remained negatively and significantly associated with the dependent variable. The significant change in the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> (57% explained variance) also shows that the variables were good predictors of the dependent variable.



*Discussion*

The aim of the study was to better understand the situation of cemetery workers during the pandemic, in particular which factors influence their job satisfaction. Research to date has focussed on the new difficulties faced by death care workers (Clavandier et al., 2021; Mas'amah et al., 2023; Moreras, 2023) and the impact on their mental and physical health (Durand-Moreau & Galarneau, 2021; Grandi et al., 2023; Hicks et al., 2022; Van Overmeire et al., 2021). Exposure to biological risks has also received little attention (Mahajan et al., 2020; Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020), but there are still no studies on risk perception in relation to the safety of workers in this occupation and how this may affect their overall job satisfaction. The hypotheses tested in the present study are along these lines, i.e. to investigate how a specific demand of the context (fear of contagion) and two specific resources (supervisor support and safety climate) influence job satisfaction in a sample of cemetery workers of an Italian company during the COVID-19 period.

The first hypothesis (H1), i.e. that fear of contagion was significantly and negatively associated with job satisfaction, was confirmed by the results of the correlation and regression analyses. Fear of being infected in the workplace is an important aspect for high-risk occupations, especially in a time like the pandemic. Fear of contagion has been studied primarily in the healthcare sector (Gorini et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2020) but not yet in death care, an essential services sector that has been particularly hard hit during the recent pandemic. Research has shown that employee fear of contagion is closely linked to negative work outcomes such as burnout and lower work performance (Sarwar et al., 2023) and also has a negative impact on job satisfaction (Giménez-Espert et al., 2020; Rai & Verma, 2023). In light of these previous findings, the results of the present study are particularly interesting as they confirm the negative relationship between fear of contagion and job satisfaction in the deathcare.

The second hypothesis (H2) – namely that support from the supervisor and the safety climate are significantly and positively associated with job satisfaction – was also confirmed by the correlation and regression analyses. Job satisfaction is closely associated to values, norms and organisational practises, which include management's

commitment to supporting employees and ensuring a safe working environment for them. Supervisor support has been shown to be an important resource in preventing a negative workplace climate (Grandi et al., 2024; Guidetti et al., 2021) and is a strong contributor to well-being and job satisfaction (Ayim Gyekye, 2005). On the other hand, the perception that the organisation invests in a safe workplace climate is closely related to the adoption of safety behaviours by employees themselves (Neal & Griffin, 2006) and a general feeling of greater job satisfaction (Ayim Gyekye, 2005).

Our findings are also consistent with the theoretical framework of JD-R theory (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), showing how organisational resources can support well-being and job satisfaction and offset the negative effects of challenging demands.

Deathcare, as we have already mentioned, has always attracted little interest in research and also from governments. Further research is needed to learn more about this particular work context and to understand what specific risks factors these professionals are exposed to and what factors contribute to their overall well-being.

### *Conclusion*

The results of the present study provide new insights into the factors that have influenced the occupational well-being of deathcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been shown how in high-risk occupations, such as cemetery workers, support from supervisors and the organisation's investment in a safety climate can influence the maintenance of good levels of job satisfaction in a work context characterised by uncertainty and a high risk of contagion.

Nevertheless, it is also important to emphasise the limitations of the study. As this is a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to investigate the causal relationships between the variables; longitudinal studies could better investigate these types of relationships. In addition, the sample used is limited to a single company. In order to assess the generalisability of the results, studies involving different organisational settings would be required.

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