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The Impact of Telework on Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Four-Wave Cohort Study among Belgian Workers in the First Wave

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Introduction

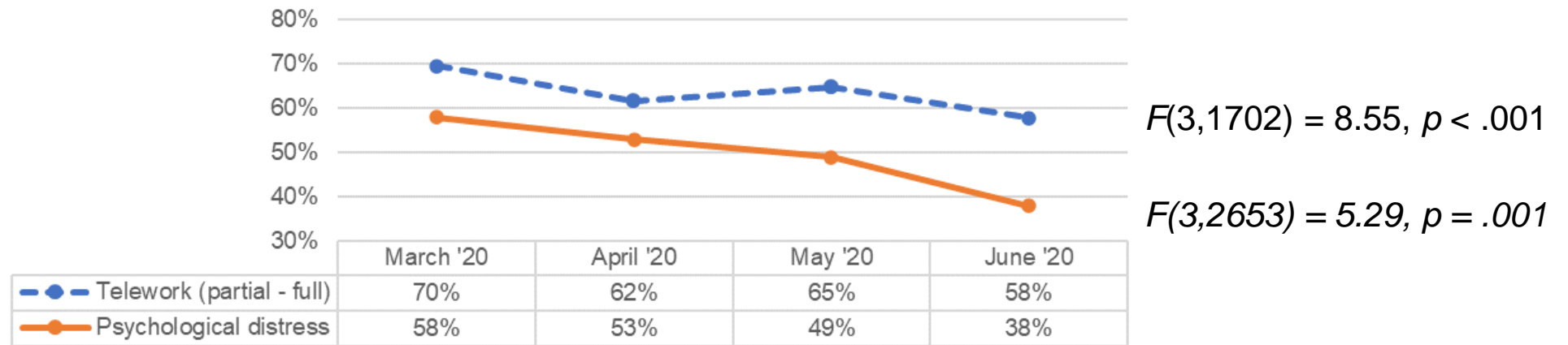
- COVID-19 pandemic: massive switch to telework
- Previous evidence: The impact of telework on employee mental health is inconsistent. (Allen et al., 2015)
- Important to gain insight into the explanations: why does telework affect health? (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012; Vander Elst et al., 2017, 2020)
- Current study:
 - Impact of telework on mental health in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - Are the following explanatory mechanisms in play (i.e., test of mediation)?
 - Work-home interference (WHI)
 - Home-work interference (HWI)
 - Loneliness
 - Social support

Methods

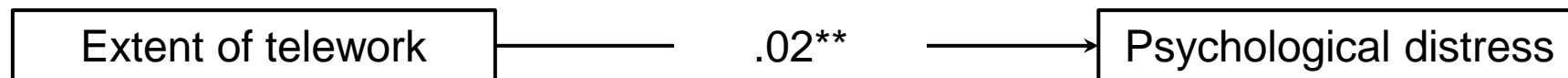
- Design and procedure
 - Prospective cohort study with 4 monthly measurements via online questionnaire (March-June 2020)
 - Recruitment via:
 - IDEWE research panel
 - Media campaign: social media, website and newsletter
- Sample
 - 5959 working Belgians, who participated in at least one of the four surveys
 - Heterogenous: $M_{\text{age}} = 45$ years ($SD = 10.25$), 77% female, 60% cohabiting children, 24% manager, multiple sectors
- Protocol
 - Approved by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee (SMEC) of KU Leuven (G- 2016 10 645, amendment)
- Measures:
 - Extent of telework
 - “In the last 4 weeks during the corona crisis, did you make use of the following measures? Working from home”
 - 1 (*no telework*), 2 (*telework – partial*), 3 (*telework – all the time*)
 - Psychological distress
 - GHQ-12 (Goldberg, 1972; Koeter & Ormel, 1991)
 - Threshold of 2/3 (Makowska et al., 2002)
 - WHI & HWI
 - E.g., “My work causes hindrance to my private life.” (based on QPSNordic; Dallner et al., 2000)
 - 1 (*(Almost) never*) – 5 (*(Almost) always*)
 - Loneliness ($\alpha = [.72-.77]$ across times)
 - 4 items (Neto, 2014)
 - Social support from colleagues ($\alpha = [.80-.83]$)
 - 2 items (SIMPH, Notelaers et al., 2007)

Results: Telework and psychological distress

- Evolutions



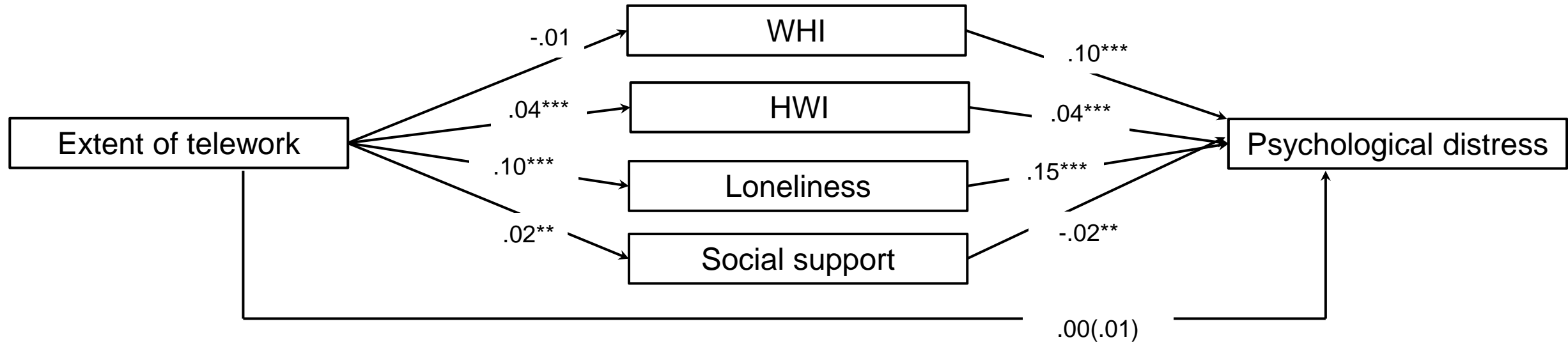
- Multi-level path analysis in MPlus 8.5: Direct effect model (standardized regression coefficients)
 - Focus on intra-individual processes: Relationships between variables were tested at the within-person level, while controlling for their variance at the between-person level.
 - The DV at time T was regressed on IVs at time T-1, while controlling for the DV at time T-1.



- $R^2_{\text{psychological distress}} = .06 (.01), p < .001$

Results: Explanatory mechanisms

- Multi-level path analysis in MPlus 8.5 : Indirect effect model (standardized regression coefficients)



- $R^2_{\text{psychological distress}} = .29 (.01), p < .001$
- Indirect effects (unstandardized coefficients)
 - WHI: -.002 (.001), *ns*
 - HWI: .002 (.001), $p = .001$
 - Loneliness: .02 (.002), $p < .001$
 - Social support by colleagues: -.001 (.000), $p = .044$

Conclusion

- There is a small direct effect from extent of telework on psychological distress across time.
- The relationship between extent of telework and psychological distress is mediated by HWI, loneliness and social support from colleagues.
 - Surprising: telework was positively related to subsequent social support
- Initial study results
- Next step: Are the effects different for different time lags?
- Practical implications:
 - Focus on HWI and loneliness among teleworkers