# Value congruence, importance and success and in the workplace: Links with well-being and burnout amongst mental health practitioners

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## ABSTRACT

Living according to one's personal values has implications for wellbeing, and incongruence between personal and workplace values has been associated with burnout. Using the SGP Card Sorting Task (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008), this study explored mental health practitioners' personal life values and personal work-related values, and their relationships with wellbeing and burnout. Congruence between life and work-related values was related to wellbeing and perceived accomplishment at work. Those whose personal values were consistent with the commonly-shared values of a caring profession experienced lower burnout and higher personal wellbeing. Successfully pursuing one's work values predicted lower burnout and greater wellbeing. Honesty, clearly defined work, competence and meeting obligations were associated with lower burnout and higher wellbeing. Acceptance of others and helping others were associated with lower burnout. The implications for recovery-oriented practice are noted. Values clarification exercises may invigorate the sense of meaning in practitioners' work, increasing wellbeing and reducing staff burnout.

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## 1. Introduction

A career in mental health can be both emotionally demanding and rewarding, being linked to psychological distress (Harris, Cumming, & Campbell, 2006) and burnout (Leiter & Harvie, 1996; Maslach, 1982) but also to positive outcomes such as wellbeing (Graham & Shier, 2010; Ragusa & Crowther, 2012). The wellbeing of mental health practitioners is vital to quality service delivery, and consequently, job satisfaction (Rose & Glass, 2006; Salyers, Rollins, Kelly, Lysaker, & Williams, 2013). However, mental health workers tend to experience high levels of burnout, and this has been implicated as contributing to staff turnover (see Paris & Hoge, 2010 for a review). High levels of turnover in community-based mental health service organisations impacts on the quality of service delivery and staff morale (Aarons, Sommerfeld, Hecht, Silovsky, & Chaffin, 2009). In an extensive review

of studies of burnout amongst mental health practitioners, Leiter and Harvie (1996) concluded that burnout was most evident when workplace issues impacted on the worker's ability to address the needs of his or her clients; that is, when workers were unable to realise their values through their work (Leiter & Harvie, 1996).

Values can be seen as guiding principles that give meaning to our actions and behaviours (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Rokeach (1973) distinguished between terminal values (desirable end-states, e.g. self-respect, wisdom), and instrumental values (modes of conduct in the service of terminal values, e.g. helpfulness, broad-mindedness). Burnout is comprised of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). High levels of emotional exhaustion can lead to workers developing an increase in depersonalisation as a coping mechanism for dealing with difficult clients (Winstanley & Whittington, 2002), whilst reducing levels of emotional exhaustion can buffer against increases in depersonalisation (Lloyd, Bond, & Flaxman, 2013). Actions taken in pursuit of values have psychological and practical consequences, which may lead to perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that facilitate healthy coping strategies (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000) and thus may protect from development of dysfunctional coping strategies such as depersonalisation.

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Indeed, successful pursuit of values has been shown to be an important predictor of vitality and wellbeing (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Ferssizidis, Adams, Kashdan, Plummer, Mishra, & Ciarrochi, 2010). Prioritising social values, in particular, has been linked to wellbeing (Ferssizidis et al., 2010; Konow & Earley, 2008), with the prioritising of friendship and love associated with enhanced emotional wellbeing (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008).

Values have been categorised into 10 universal value domains, which vary in degree of conflict or compatibility with one another (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). The pursuit of conflicting values, may therefore result in exposure to negative internal experiences (thoughts, emotions, sensations), which people may seek to avoid (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008). Such experiential avoidance can become problematic when it develops into a pattern against valued action (Soriano, Valverde, & Martinez, 2004). Indeed, experiential avoidance (Kashdan, Breen, & Julian, 2010), and thought and emotion suppression (Haga, Kraft, & Corby, 2009; Wegner, Schneider, Knutson, & McMahon, 1991) have been linked to negative wellbeing outcomes, as has attempting to prevent aversive outcomes by pursuing avoidance goals (e.g. Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). The use of escape-avoidance coping strategies has been linked to higher burnout amongst mental health workers (Leiter & Harvie, 1996), whilst conversely, psychological acceptance and values-based action was found to be associated with lower burnout and higher wellbeing amongst physical rehabilitation staff (McCracken & Yang, 2008).

One source of such conflict occurs when an individual's personal values are at odds with the values of their work environment. The congruence between workplace values and an individual's personal values in life has implications for wellbeing and burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Sagiv, Roccas, & Hazan, 2004). For example, congruence between business and psychology students' values and those of their academic environment was associated with enhanced wellbeing (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000), while conflict between personal values and organisational values has been found to be related to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and to stress (Bouckenooghe, Buelens, Fontaine, & Vanderheyden, 2005). This study is novel in that it looks at an individual's personally-held work values, rather than the values of the organisation. In one of the few studies comparing personally-held work values and personal (life-in-general) values, Leuty and Hansen (2012) concluded that work values were related to, but distinct from personal values, and that the two should be assessed separately. They asserted that while work values were important to job satisfaction, there was a need for more research into the role of personal values in work outcomes (Leuty & Hansen, 2012). In the current study, we examined the congruence between personal life values and personal work values, and their relationships to wellbeing and burnout amongst mental health practitioners. Leuty and Hansen (2011) identified six domains common to extant measures of work values: work environment, competence, autonomy, status, organisational culture and relationships. Rather than using pre-defined sets of work and life values, we asked participants to choose from a broad range of values to identify both their work and life values. In addition, we examined perceived success in pursuing important values – a dimension frequently found in the goals literature (e.g. Elliot & Sheldon, 1997) but rarely in the values literature (Veage, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2011).

Congruence between important life and work values was expected to be associated with higher wellbeing and lower burnout (e.g. Bouckenooghe et al., 2005; Sagiv et al., 2004), as was successful pursuit of life and work values (Ciarrochi, Fisher, & Lane, 2011; Leiter & Harvie, 1996). Those who endorse and are successful in the pursuit of pro-social values, in keeping with a caring profession, were expected to report greater wellbeing and less burnout (Ferssizidis et al., 2010; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Sagiv et al., 2004).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 106 mental health professionals comprising psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, welfare workers and registered nurses (72 female, 25 male, 9 unidentified) from five non-government mental health organisations in Australia. Ages ranged from 18 to 60 years (median=38 years). The participants were involved in a larger intervention study focusing on facilitating the transfer of training in a service delivery model (Deane et al., 2010). The data reported here is from the baseline data collection.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Maslach burnout inventory-human services survey (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

The MBI comprises three subscales, emotional exhaustion (EE), personal accomplishment (PA) and depersonalisation (DP). It consists of 22 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 6 (everyday), with some items reverse-scored. An example item is "I feel emotionally drained" (EE), "I can easily understand how my recipients feel about things" (DP) and "I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work" (PA). Higher scores on the EE and DP scales indicate higher burnout, while high scores on the PA scales indicate lower burnout. The reliability and validity of the MBI has been well described (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and it is used extensively within mental health settings (Leiter & Harvie, 1996).

#### 2.2.2. Psychological well-being scales (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995)

An 18-item version of the PWB scales was used to measure six dimensions of wellbeing: personal growth, positive relations with others, autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery and purpose in life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Items are scored using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (agree strongly) to 7 (disagree strongly), with some items reverse-scored. Example items are "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far" and "I like most parts of my personality". Higher scores indicate higher wellbeing. PWB has been widely used and has demonstrated construct and concurrent validity (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

#### 2.2.3. The survey of guiding principles: card sorting task (SGP: Ciarrochi & bailey, 2008)

The SGP Card Sorting Task is based on the survey of life principles, a values clarification exercise derived from a synthesis of the values and goals literature (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008). Sixty cards represent principles closely mapped to items from Schwartz (1992), Rokeach (1973) and Braithwaite and Law (1985). Cards represent 10 universal value domains: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security, as well as items related to religion, sexuality and experiential avoidance. Each card has a brief description of a guiding principle, such as 'Being ambitious and hard working'; 'Having an exciting life'; 'Avoiding self-doubt'.

Using a two-stage card-sorting methodology, participants first identify their 15 most important guiding principles in their life generally ('Life') and complete the 'Principle success rating sheet: Life in general', on which they list their 15 identified important life principles, and rate how successful they have been at putting these principles into practice over the previous 3 months. Ratings range from 1 (Not at all successful) to 5 (Highly successful). Next, participants repeat the procedure in relation to their current job