



# The relative importance of Big Five Facets in the prediction of emotional exhaustion



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Big Five Factor facets on the main component of burnout: emotional exhaustion. There is a lack of research examining the predictive validity of the facets regarding emotional exhaustion. We distributed an online survey to 445 undergraduate students at a medium-size Midwestern university, with a final sample size of 345. We conducted a relative weights analysis on the facets that compose agreeableness and conscientiousness to determine their utility in predicting emotional exhaustion. The analyses showed that there was an uneven distribution of importance across the facets of the Big Five Factors.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

The condition of burnout is correlated with decreased job performance (Parker & Kulik, 1995), lowered job satisfaction (Wolpin, Burke, & Greenglass, 1991), cardiovascular disease in men (Honkonen et al., 2006), and musculoskeletal disorders in women (Honkonen et al., 2006). Burnout is a result of working in a stressful environment for an extended duration; it is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and diminished feelings of accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). Whereas there is a wellspring of research published on the topic of burnout since the 1970s, researchers had ignored the link between burnout and personality traits until the mid-1990s (e.g. Parker & Kulik, 1995). In the course of this project, we will examine the role of the facets that compose agreeableness and conscientiousness in burnout.

### 1.2. Defining burnout

In 1981, Maslach and Jackson theorized that burnout is composed of 3 factors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduction of feelings of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is characterized by an inability to become emotionally

involved and feel positive emotions (Maslach & Pines, 1977). The second component, depersonalization, is characterized by the burned out worker treating the people they are assisting as objects (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The person who is burned out feels as if they are no longer effective in their job, which is referred to as having reduced feelings of accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Over time, research has determined that the central feature of burnout is emotional exhaustion (e.g., Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Taking this into account, this research project focused on emotional exhaustion.

### 1.3. Costs of burnout

There is evidence that burnout has sizable economic, personal, and health costs for the workforce. Medibank, (2011), a private insurance company in Australia, estimated the cost of burnout and presenteeism—employees coming to work when they should be home sick (Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009)—to be 34.1 billion dollars annually for the Australian economy; in 2011 the Australian Gross Domestic Product was 1.4 trillion dollars (World Bank, 2013). On an individual performance level, research has shown that workers suffering from burnout have lower performance and higher rates of voluntary turnover (Parker & Kulik, 1995; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

A number of health outcomes relate to burnout including increased risk for cardiovascular disease in men and musculoskeletal disorders in women (Honkonen et al., 2006). Forestry workers under the age of 45 experienced a 26% increase in risk of mortality while emotionally exhausted (Ahola, Vaananen, Koskinen, Kouvonen, & Shirom, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that

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burnout is linked to, but is different from, depression (Bakker et al., 2000; Schaufeli, Bakker, Hoogduin, Schaap, & Kladler, 2001). Given these personal and organizational costs, researchers have attempted to gain a better understanding of the personality predictors of burnout.

#### 1.4. Personality facets as a predictor of burnout

In order to get a complete picture of burnout and its roots we need to examine both the situation and the person. Maslach (1982) stated that “Rather than looking just at ‘defective’ people, we focus our attention on the *situation* in which they find themselves (emphasis in original).” It is certainly important to determine what pieces of a job contribute to burnout, but it is also necessary to pinpoint the part individual differences play in burnout. Using the Big Five Factor model—and its facet components—we can tease out the most important personality components of burnout. In order to do this, we will use a relative importance test—relative weights analyses—to determine the contribution each variable makes to the total  $R^2$  of all of the predictors (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004). While multiple regression analysis and the underlying regression coefficients provides an indicator of the unique contribution of each variable examined when combined with the other predictors, relative weights analysis provides the extent to which the criterion can be predicted by the criterion variable itself. Such statistics provide a better understanding of the potential useful of each facet and facilitates comparisons between facets.

Research has shown that narrow traits can account for incremental variance over global traits in predicting specific behaviors (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; Hastings & O’Neill, 2009). Given these research findings it is an important step to tease out the narrow traits most important to the prediction of emotional exhaustion to better understand the condition. It has also been shown that using a broad measure including unrelated narrow traits can attenuate the relationship between the broad trait and the broad criterion (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). For example, facets of conscientiousness that are unrelated to emotional exhaustion may attenuate the relationship between conscientiousness and emotional exhaustion. To get a more accurate picture of how a Big Five Factor influences emotional exhaustion, we need to look at the specific facets.

Costa, McCrae, and Dye (1991) stated that each factor of the FFM can be broken down into facets. For example, with the NEO-PI-R, within each factor there are six facets; the facets enable researchers to gather more information regarding the nuances of personality and behavior. There is a significant base of literature on the influences of the Big Five personality traits on burnout (e.g. Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009; Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2007, 2011), however, there is a lack of research examining the facets of the Big Five and their roles in burnout. An exception is a study conducted by Piedmont (1993). Piedmont examined the relationship between the facets of neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness (1993). Unfortunately, the Piedmont study lacked power with only 36 participants and studied a very limited population of occupational therapists. For this study we focused on the facets in agreeableness and conscientiousness.

The factor of agreeableness contains the facets of trust, the belief that others are moral and good; compliance/cooperation, a person’s willingness to submit to authority; and altruism, a person’s concern for other’s well-being; straightforwardness, a person’s tendency to tell the truth; modesty, an individual’s tendency to be humble; and tender-mindedness, someone’s tendency to sympathize with others (Costa & McCrae, 1992a; Costa et al., 1991). Research has found a consistent link between agreeableness and burnout. All three factors of burnout were negatively correlated

with agreeableness (Ghorpade et al., 2007, 2011; Zellars, Perrewé, & Hochwarter, 2000). The Alarcon et al. (2009) meta-analysis also found that agreeableness negatively correlates with the components of burnout. Piedmont (1993) found significant negative relationships between agreeableness and the burnout factors emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment.

We hypothesize that some facets of agreeableness play a larger role in burnout than others. Specifically, we think that trust, compliance/cooperation, and altruism will be more influential in predicting emotional exhaustion than straightforwardness, modesty, and tender-mindedness. A trusting person might do more than their fair share of the work for a project because they trust their coworkers not to social loaf, even if they do. This would cause the trusting person to expend their emotional resources quicker than a less trusting person. An overly cooperative person may fall into the same trap: since the cooperative person does not want confrontation and won’t complain, their coworkers may pile more work on the person and exhaust them.

**Hypothesis 1.** The variance accounted for by the facets composing agreeableness will not be evenly distributed across each facet; specifically trust, compliance/cooperation, and altruism will account for more variance than straightforwardness, modesty and tender-mindedness.

Researchers have found mixed results for conscientiousness’ relationship with burnout. The meta-analysis by Alarcon et al. (2009) found a mean  $\rho$  of  $-.19$  between conscientiousness and emotional exhaustion. Reflecting the variability Alarcon et al. reported, several researchers (Ghorpade et al., 2007, 2011; Zellars et al., 2000) have failed to find a correlation between conscientiousness and emotional exhaustion. Part of the reason for these mixed findings may be the composition of conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is composed of competence, a person’s feelings of self-efficacy; order, the tendency to be well organized; dutifulness, a person’s tendency to be ethical and moral; achievement striving, an individual’s drive to succeed; self-discipline, a person’s ability to persist; and deliberation, an individual’s tendency to be thoughtful and careful. Some of the facets of conscientiousness are most likely more important in emotional exhaustion than others, and the parts of conscientiousness that are unrelated are dragging down the correlations (Roberts et al., 2005). For example, self-discipline, a person’s ability to self-motivate and remain persistent, likely has a role to play in emotional exhaustion. A person with low self-discipline might get overwhelmed with the size of a task and become worn out sooner. Achievement striving could also play a key role; a person constantly pushing to achieve will exhaust their resources faster than someone who is less driven.

**Hypothesis 2.** The variance accounted for by the facets of conscientiousness will not be distributed evenly across the six facets. The facets of self-discipline and achievement striving will account for more variance than the remaining conscientiousness facets.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 445 undergraduates at a medium-sized Midwestern university who took part in the study to satisfy a research involvement course requirement; final data are reported for 345 participants who completed the survey and responded appropriately to the Insufficient Effort Responding Indicators (see below). Their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years ( $M = 19.34$  years,  $SD = 3.22$  years). The sample was 28.5% male and 71.5% female, and

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