

# Professional commitment and health among teachers in Germany: A typological approach

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## Abstract

The interplay of occupational engagement and individual coping capacity is very important. A methodological tool that provides the means for such an analysis which includes psychological aspects of the health is the “Arbeitsbezogenes Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster” questionnaire (AVEM: Pattern of Work-related Coping Behavior). This assessment instrument allows for a subscale-level evaluation as well as differentiation between four types of work-related coping behaviours that have been obtained by cluster analysis. Comprehensive analyses involving 7693 teachers have established the health relevance of this cluster differentiation. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Professional commitment; Personality; Coping styles; Occupational stress

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching is a challenging and, therefore, often stressful job. Undoubtedly, teachers face great demands on their energy and personal skills (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Schaarschmidt, 2005; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Sometimes this is more than a person with few coping resources can handle. In Germany, the situation has become critical over the last years, with alarming numbers of teachers taking disability leave or early retirement as a result of stress-related conditions (Weber, 2003, 2004). According to statistics from 2001, 72% of German teachers left the profession before reaching the regular retirement age (compared with 41% for other officials in the public service; Bundesinnenministerium, 2001). Very often in Germany, and more than in other occupations, teachers are treated for psychosomatic conditions (Hillert & Schmitz, 2004), with teachers complaining about a constant increase in their workload coupled with declining working conditions, particularly from problems with students’ behaviours and decreasing assistance in schools. It is therefore essential to enhance psychological health among teachers.

At the University of Potsdam we have been studying teachers’ psychological health in German schools for 10 years. Especially, we have investigated personal resources and competences which facilitate health-supporting management for their challenges at work. To highlight the stressful situation of teachers we have included comparative analyses about work-related coping behaviours among other occupations. The basis for these comparisons has been data that we collected with the “Arbeitsbezogenes Verhaltens- und Erlebensmuster” questionnaire

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(AVEM: Pattern of Work-related Coping Behavior; Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2003). More than 7600 teachers as well as 6000 professionals from other occupations have taken part in our studies. Meanwhile longitudinal studies have taken place with a teacher sample ( $N = 291$ ).

This article highlights key findings from our research among teachers in Germany. The question of motivation – the focus of this special issue – is a central concern within our approach and conclusions. As we emphasize, strong professional commitment is not sufficient to find satisfaction and happiness in working life. If teachers carry out their duties too much and expect too much of themselves and their surroundings they run the risk of experiencing heightened stress and disappointments (Jepson & Forrest, 2006). That in turn will have long-term negative consequences for their teaching effectiveness and classroom management (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, & Baumert, 2006). The quality of academic learning opportunities can only be enhanced by competent, committed *and* healthy teachers (Prenzel et al., 2005).

## 2. Work, personality and health: the AVEM typology

For decades, psychometric instruments have been used to measure the detrimental effects of work on people's health (Hart & Cooper, 2002). The employment of numerous symptom and problem checklists reflects the central role that is ascribed to the psychological and somatic indicators of strain. The conceptualization of the burnout syndrome is also dominated by its physical or psychological effects (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Based on modern models of health psychology, current research has gone beyond the mere identification of problems and disorders. For example, the salutogenetic approach of Antonovsky (1987) suggests taking into account personal and social resources as supporting and buffering factors. Here, the affected person is perceived as an active element in dealing with professional demands and strains rather than a passive victim of the circumstances. Analyzing one's coping resources can lead to the early identification of possible future health risks. This constitutes an important advantage: recommendation for intervention can be given on the basis of identified deficits in coping, and can be applied before symptoms have occurred. In fact, utilizing one's resources is far more effective than intervention after disorders have become manifest. The AVEM questionnaire (Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2003) allows a detailed assessment of an individual's developmental potential with special regard to aspects of psychological health. This instrument has been designed to gather self-report data about personal experiences with work-related stress, and typical behavioral responses in coping with stress.

In detail, the questionnaire covers the following three major areas: professional commitment, coping capacity, and subjective well-being (in the context of work) which are assessed with 11 separate scales (see Fig. 1 for details). Each scale contains 6 items with responses in a Likert-type format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

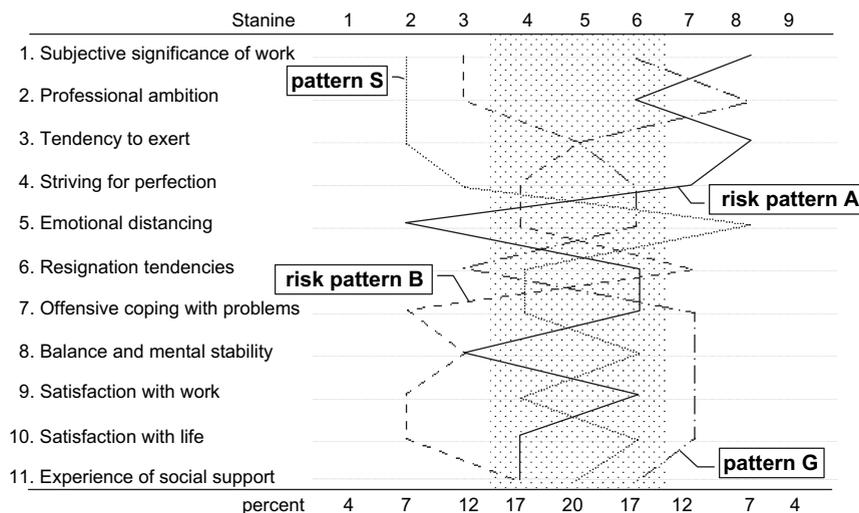


Fig. 1. Four patterns of work-related coping behavior: G, S, A, B. The 11 scales can be divided into three areas of characteristics: professional commitment (scales 1–5), coping capacity (scales 6–8), and subjective well-being (scales 9–11).

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