



Examining burnout profiles in the Veterans Administration: All Employee Survey narrative comments



Nancy J. Yanchus*, Jan Beckstrand, Katerine Osatuke

VHA National Center for Organization Development, 11500 Northlake Drive, Suite 230, Cincinnati, OH 45249, United States

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study examined burnout profiles: statistically generated configurations reflecting relative levels of the three MBI-based burnout dimensions – exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement – within individuals. These profiles, based on quantitative ratings, were examined in parallel with open-ended employee comments in the same survey (a large organizational census in the USA Veterans Administration; $N = 179,271$). We were able to distinguish between the quantitatively defined profiles based on the raw data of the comments. *Summary themes* (derived from comment data through content analysis) did not differentiate between the profiles. We discuss the conceptual and pragmatic and implications and recommendations for future research.

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1. Introduction

Understanding employee burnout is critically important for organizations. Employees who are burned out are more likely to show greater absenteeism, higher turnover intention as well as actual turnover, lower job satisfaction, and lower organizational commitment (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Suñer-Soler et al., 2014). The Veterans Administration, the second largest federal agency in the United States that provides comprehensive healthcare, financial, and burial services to American Veterans and their families, is experiencing growing stress to its system due to an increasing number of Veterans returning from two concurrent wars. This additional strain, whether through greater numbers of patients requiring health services or more disability claims being filed that need to be processed by employees, impacts the amount of stress, and, therefore, increases the risk of burnout in Veterans Administration employees.

Research suggests that burnout consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and reduced personal accomplishment (PA). EE is the manifestation of the stress experienced when burnt out. It is what most people think of when they feel and report being burned out. However, EE does not constitute burnout in its entirety. DP, the need to distance oneself from

work as a result of exhaustion or feelings of cynicism toward one's job, is also a critical dimension of the construct. Reduced PA, or loss of sense of self at work (efficacy), is considered to be a function, to varying degrees, of EE, DP, or a mixture of both dimensions (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The burnout state is, therefore, a complex, multi-dimensional construct that provides insight into employee's psychological well-being, job attitude and productivity at work. Indeed, employee burnout is often conceptualized as the negative end of the same continuum where the positive end is employee engagement (Innanen, Tolvanen, & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). The implication of this view is that increasing engagement and reducing burnout represents fundamentally the same task for organizations. In other words, differentiating between the two concepts is a matter of perspective – much like describing the glass as half-full or half-empty.

One step in addressing burnout in the Veterans Administration employees is to examine its measurement. Burnout in the Veterans Administration is measured within the annual organizational census, All Employee Survey (AES), using items from the most widely validated measure of employee burnout: Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1986). These items reflect employee self-ratings of the three burnout aspects (EE, DP, and PA). Using these data, we take a configurational approach (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993) to burnout; first noting individual-level patterns (i.e. which dimensions of burnout are rated high or low relative to the others), then using these to group individuals into burnout profiles, then consider how the specific profiles are distributed (e.g. which ones are most typical) among various organizational groups. Thus,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Nancy.Yanchus@va.gov (N.J. Yanchus).

the configurational approach involves looking at the *combination* of burnout dimensions (by summarizing them as burnout profiles), as opposed to continuous or discrete measurement of each dimension as a separate measure of burnout. The configurational approach allows for a more fine-grained understanding and thus a clearer and more accurate picture of the Veterans Administration employees' experience of burnout.

The current study is a qualitative examination of the Veterans Administration employee burnout profiles defined from EE, DP and PA ratings of MBI items administered within the organizational census survey. We begin with a brief overview of the Job Demands-Resource model – the most well-known theory explaining burnout – followed by a description of how burnout impacts Veterans Administration employees. We describe in more detail the configurational approach to measuring burnout, and explain how the results of burnout measurement across organizational groups are reported within the Veterans Administration. We then report a qualitative examination of the burnout profiles that we conducted to evaluate whether the content of employee open-ended comments about their work environment (was consistent with the burnout profiles based on quantitative ratings of burnout included in that same survey). We end with discussing applications of these findings within organizations and ideas for continued work in this area.

1.1. The Job Demands-Resources model

The most common framework that explains the underlying mechanism of burnout is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). According to the JD-R, burnout results from both an excess of job demands (i.e. workload) and a depletion of job resources (e.g. social support). It is insufficient to have one or the other but rather it is a combination of the two that creates burnout. For example, an overwhelming amount of work, given adequate resources, will not lead to burnout. If, however, the job requirements are overly demanding – such as an emergency room surgeon overwhelmed with the number of patients – and the equipment and supplies to perform surgery are lacking, resulting in inefficiency and a backlog of patient appointments, then burnout will predictably occur. The JD-R model has been empirically supported in multiple populations (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), both in cross-sectional and longitudinal research (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008).

1.2. Burnout in the Veterans Administration

The Veterans Administration seeks to reduce burnout and improve well-being among its employees, therefore addressing or preempting burnout is of concern. Research on burnout in the Veterans Administration suggests that supervisor burnout may spillover onto the shared work environment, resulting in less favorable perceptions of workplace by the supervised staff (Hernandez, Luthanen, Osatuke, & Ramsel, 2014; Hernandez, Osatuke, & Ramsel, 2014; Hernandez, Yanovsky, & Osatuke, 2014). Additionally, staff who are already experiencing burnout are less likely to successfully cope with a critical event (shock) at work, resulting in greater turnover intentions. Minimizing burnout can lessen shock impact and thus minimize turnover intentions (Tenbrink, Weinhardt, & Griffith, 2012). This outcome is particularly important in health-care as it ensures the continuity of patients' experience of services, a critical factor in improving patient outcomes (Cabana & Jee, 2004; Plomondon et al., 2007). On the other hand, greater self-awareness appears to serve as a protective factor for burnout. For example, for Veterans Administration supervisors more aware of their

workplace behaviors and its impact on others, their supervised workplace climate was largely unaffected by their personal (self-reported) burnout, likely because they were better at monitoring their burnout levels (Hernandez, Luthanen, et al., 2014; Hernandez, Osatuke, et al., 2014; Hernandez, Yanovsky, et al., 2014).

1.3. Measurement of burnout

One approach used to better understand and attend to burnout in the Veterans Administration is to enhance the quality of its measurement across organizational groups, to be able to monitor and clearly communicate results to broad organizational audiences including leaders, decision-makers, and employees themselves. The traditional methods of measuring burnout consists of evaluating its levels, i.e. continuous measures (assessing whether more or less burnout is present) or evaluating presence versus absence of burnout, i.e. discrete measures (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, & Silber, 2002; Lasalvia et al., 2009; Rudman & Gustavsson, 2012). A less typical configurational approach to the construct (e.g. Meyer et al., 1993) examines combinations of the burnout elements (EE, DP and PA) as they form specific patterns per individual (Demerouti, Verbeke, & Bakker, 2005). This allows conceptualizing the individual expression of burnout in a way that captures the interplay of individual differences and workplace conditions at one point in time (Luthanen, Beckstrand, Yanchus, & Osatuke, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that the configurational approach is a more useful measure of burnout than using the dimensions separately (see Boersma & Lindblom, 2009; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Luthanen et al., 2015).

Of note, this conclusion addresses a different point than the one advocated in Golembiewski and Munzenrider's (1984) early work on phases of burnout. These authors dichotomized burnout into high and low categories and translated these into phases, describing these as progressive, temporal phases of burnout, related in the expected direction with a variety of organizational variables, and possibly moderated by the hierarchical level and job type within the organization. The present authors do not view configurations of burnout dimensions as necessarily reflecting temporal phases, e.g. we do not claim that individuals progress from one profile to another as their burnout improves or worsens. We see the configurational approach as beneficial because it allows simultaneously considering all the three dimensions of burnout, while reflecting their relative salience in the individual experience *at a given time*. Further, based on the subsequent research evidence accumulated since the early work by Golembiewski and Munzenrider, we do not believe that the concept of developmental progression between burnout phases has been empirically supported. For example, Leiter (1989) found no such evidence, and also questioned Golembiewski and Munzenrider findings based on the specific method they used to interpret their data. To our knowledge, Leiter's (1989) conclusion has not been reverted by any subsequent empirically based studies.

Within the framework of the configurational approach, the present study conceptualized burnout as consisting of the three dimensions (EE, DP, and PA) that combine into eight unique burnout profiles. We defined these profiles as non-overlapping clusters that comprehensively included all of the theoretical possibilities of how the three burnout dimensions may be configured, that is how high versus low levels on each dimension may be combined with high versus low levels on each other dimension (e.g. high EE and high DP with high PA; high EE and high DP with low PA; etc.). (For a detailed rationale and description of the statistical method and analyses used to develop the profiles, please contact the corresponding author). The benefit offered by this approach is that it allows comparing the conceptual possibilities of how burnout may be expressed, to the actual (observed) frequencies of burnout configurations in groups of interest.

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