



# A meta-analysis of burnout with job demands, resources, and attitudes

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## ABSTRACT

A meta-analysis was conducted on job demands, resources, and attitudes and their relation with burnout in regard to the COR theory. The version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory used was explored as a moderator of the aforementioned variables. Results suggest that higher demands, lower resources, and lower adaptive organizational attitudes are associated with burnout. In particular, results of the current study show stronger relations than previous meta-analysis (Lee & Ashforth, 1996) have suggested. The scale type also provided some evidence of moderation, with stronger effects found in samples that utilized the MBI-HSS. Implications of the findings in relation to the COR theory and future research directions to clarify the relation between job demands, job resources, organizational attitudes and burnout are discussed.

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## 1. Job demands, resources, attitudes, and burnout: a meta-analysis

Burnout is an important issue in the psychological literature. Research has demonstrated that burnout can result in anxiety, depression, drops in self-esteem, substance abuse, decreased performance, and increased health problems (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006; Taris, 2008). It is also seen as contagious and has a negative spillover effect on people's home lives (Maslach, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout is a psychological phenomenon of prolonged exhaustion and disinterest, typically in the work context (Maslach et al., 2001), and is an important aspect of employee well-being and organizational research. Organizational demands and resources have demonstrated an important role in the development of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001), and they are critical aspects of the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2002). In addition, the organizational correlates of burnout such as turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are important constructs for organizations.

The purpose of the current study is twofold. The first purpose is to more accurately assess the quantitative relations, through meta-analysis, of job demands, job resources, and organizational attitudes with burnout. Second, previous meta-analyses have either been limited in scope, or are somewhat dated and have failed to explore moderators. As such, the study explores possible moderators of the aforementioned relations in regard to the measure used.

### 1.1. Previous meta-analyses

The construct of burnout has been explored with meta-analytic technique in prior research. Specifically, Lee and Ashforth (1996) explored many correlates of burnout including job attitudes, stressors, support, enhancement opportunities and the response format of the MBI. Although their study did provide meta-analytic results of the studies up to that time, there are issues with the study. First, the samples included in the study focused almost exclusively on human service professions, as the MBI-General Survey (MBI-GS) had not been created yet. Second, the analyses were conducted on a small number of studies, with 82% of the reported correlations with a number of samples of less than 10. These are under the established standard described by Hunter and Schmidt (2004). Research has demonstrated that Type I errors are likely to occur when using 15 or fewer studies in a meta-

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analysis (Field, 2001). Similar to Lee and Ashforth's study other meta-analyses have failed to explore possible moderators of burnout, and are also somewhat dated (e.g., Collins, 2000; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010; Weng, 2005). As we expect more accurate analysis in the current study, exploratory analyses will compare results of the current study to Lee and Ashforth's (1996) study.

Lastly, the author concedes that resources such as social support and personality play a key role in the stress process; however previous meta-analyses have been conducted on those resources (see Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009; Halbesleben, 2006), and repeating the analyses in this study would add little.

### 1.2. Conservation of resources theory

Conservation of resources (COR) theory hypothesizes that people strive to obtain, build, and protect that which they value. Strain occurs when these resources are threatened, lost, or there is a failure of gain after investment of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002; Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). Resources are defined as objects (e.g. tools), personal characteristics (e.g. emotional stability), conditions (e.g. social support) and energies (e.g. money) that are valued by an individual as a means to acquire and strengthen resources. The threats of loss, actual loss or lack of gain of resources after investment are conceptualized as demands in the theory. The fewer resources an individual has at his or her disposal and the higher demands placed on the individual, the more maladaptive coping will be performed. This maladaptive coping leads to increased burnout and a reduction in organizational attitudes such as job satisfaction.

In the context of the stress experience, resource loss and gain are central in high demand situations. Specifically, the primacy of loss hypothesis states resource loss and increased demands have a stronger effect in high demand situations. This aspect is of particular importance because it implies moderation effects of the environment on other demands and resources. The prolonged experience of low resources and high demands leads to an erosion of other resources such as energy, identification, and perceived efficacy, which is the burnout process (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990). According to the COR theory, emotional exhaustion occurs first. Cynicism occurs as a maladaptive coping mechanism to deal with the excessive demands and lack of resources. However, this maladaptive coping style leads to a lack of personal accomplishment. These events start a spiral of resource loss, which is the burnout process. In contrast, high resources in a high demand environment should lead to optimal functioning, leading to a reinvestment of resources such as time and energy into the work environment.

### 1.3. Burnout

Several researchers have suggested theoretical compositions of burnout and the prevalence of many scales indicates these varying views on the construct (Mathiesen & Dyregrov, 1992; Malach-Pines, 2005; Shirom & Melamed, 2006). The most prevalent measure of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 2001). The MBI is comprised of three subscales, exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. These constructs have been hypothesized to slowly occur in this order, creating a downward spiral of resources (Taris, LeBlanc, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2005; Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). Exhaustion consists of a feeling of not being able to give any more emotionally to the job because people have nothing more to give (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalization, later reconceptualized as cynicism, is an attempt to distance one's self from the job and clients by actively ignoring the job and client's unique and engaging qualities. Reduced personal accomplishment is a decrease in one's perceived professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). A majority of the literature has focused on the MBI, and the alternative scales do not share a single comprehensive theory or measure. As such, the focus of the current article is solely on the MBI.

Stressors, stimuli which an individual responds with perceptions of stress, are a type of demand in both the COR theory and play an important role in the burnout process (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). Job demands threaten and deplete one's resources, and over time prolonged exposure will lead to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). Most jobs have multiple task requirements and responsibilities. Role stressors are demands resulting from the multiple task requirements or the responsibilities of the employee, such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and workload (Landy & Conte, 2007). Role ambiguity is the extent to which an individual is unclear about his or her responsibilities at work or when the role-related information is unclear (Fried, Shirom, Gilboa, & Cooper, 2008). Role conflict occurs when an individual experiences conflicting demands at work (Fried et al., 2008). Workload is an overload of demands at work (Maslach et al., 2001). The prolonged exposure to these demands is an integral part of the burnout process and leads to increased strain (Hobfoll, 1989; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

**Hypothesis 1.** Demands are positively related to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Resources in the workplace play an intricate role in predicting stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Control, sometimes referred to as decision making, is the amount of discretion the worker is permitted in deciding between two or more options (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989). Spector (1986) hypothesized that control is a larger construct that subsumes constructs such as autonomy and participation in the decision making process. Autonomy, a subset of control at work, is the decision latitude one has over the immediate tasks and time constraints (Spector, 1997). These job resources aid in preventing burnout. Having high decision latitude has been consistently related with lower strain and higher performance both in the organizational literature and in other aspects of life (Henry, 2005; Maslach et al., 2001; Stipek, 1988).

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