



Research Article

Chronic job burnout and daily functioning: A theoretical analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the individual employee's role in the development of his/her job burnout. We review the antecedents and consequences of burnout, and propose a model with chronic burnout as a moderator of daily functioning in the workplace. Specifically, we argue that chronic burnout strengthens the loss cycle of daily job demands, daily exhaustion, and daily self-undermining. Additionally, we argue that chronic burnout weakens the gain cycle of daily job resources, daily work engagement, and daily job crafting. We conclude that employees with high levels of burnout need help in structurally changing their working conditions and health status.

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1. Introduction

Burnout is arguably one of the most popular research topics in occupational health psychology, and there is a good reason for this. Research has convincingly shown that employees who are at risk of burnout (i.e., who are chronically exhausted and hold a negative, cynical attitude toward work) show impaired job performance and may face serious health problems over the course of time (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014). One obvious problem is that once employees experience high levels of burnout, they often continue to be in trouble. Indeed, longitudinal research suggests that burnout can be rather stable, over periods of five, ten, or even fifteen years (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, Bosveld, & Van Dierendonck, 2000; Hakanen, Bakker, & Jokisaari, 2011; Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker, & Sixma, 2011). How can we explain that burnout persists for so long? We think that burnout has not been adequately explained because most studies do not regard burnout as an ongoing process that unfolds over time (see also, Ten Brummelhuis, Ter Hoeven, Bakker, & Peper, 2011).

Previous burnout research has suggested that the syndrome has structural causes in the work environment, particularly high

job demands and low job resources (Alarcon, 2011; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). This research also indicates that individual factors such as neuroticism and perfectionism play a significant role in the development of burnout, because these characteristics predispose employees to cope in the wrong way with their high job demands (see also, Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). Despite all this knowledge, we still know little about the role the individual employee plays in the daily process that may lead to burnout. Do employees only react passively to the work environment or do they actively influence it?

The central aim of this article is to analyze the burnout phenomenon from the perspective of the burned-out worker. We want to capture the process leading to burnout, and explain why burnout persists for such a long time. How do those with high levels of burnout function in the workplace on a day-to-day basis? Does the problem progress from bad to worse? This paper aims to contribute to the literature in two important ways. First, we challenge the rather static view of burnout that dominates the literature, suggesting that burnout is a simple response to the working environment. We present a more dynamic model that elucidates how burnout progresses over time. Second, we emphasize the role of the individual employee in the burnout process. What can employees do themselves to break through the loss spiral of burnout? We introduce the concepts of self-undermining and job crafting as behaviors that may help to understand how burnout often persists and leads to more job demands and less job resources over the course of time.

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2. Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome characterized by chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and a lack of personal accomplishment. It is usually defined as “. . . a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one’s occupation and doubtful of one’s capacity to perform” (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996, p. 20). Emotional exhaustion is the central strain dimension of burnout, described as feelings of being emotionally drained by one’s work. Cynicism is a negative or excessively detached response to the work itself and/or to the individuals with whom employees’ interact while performing their job. Finally, lack of personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one’s feelings of competence and of successful achievement at work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Burned-out individuals simultaneously experience high levels of chronic fatigue, and distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work activities.

Employees with higher levels of burnout are more likely to report a range of psychological and physical health problems, including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, memory impairment, and neck pain (Peterson et al., 2008). In a study among a nationally representative sample of more than 3000 Finnish workers, Ahola (2007) reported an increased prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders and of alcohol dependence among burned-out employees. Similarly, in their three-wave, seven-year prospective study of 2000 dentists, Hakanen and Schaufeli (2012) found a positive relationship between burnout on the one hand and depressive symptoms and life dissatisfaction on the other. In what physical health is concerned, Kim, Ji, and Kao (2011) showed that social workers with higher initial levels of burnout reported more physical health complaints over the course of their three-year study, including sleep disturbances, headaches, respiratory infections, and gastrointestinal infections. Higher levels of burnout led to a faster rate of deterioration in physical health. The burnout syndrome has also been found to be an independent risk factor for infections (e.g., common cold; Mohren et al., 2003), and type 2 diabetes (Melamed, Shirom, Toker, & Shapira, 2006). Moreover, burnout is a risk factor for cardiovascular diseases (Ahola, 2007). A ten-year prospective study by Ahola, Väänänen, Koskinen, Kouvonon, and Shirom (2010) concluded, “burnout, especially work-related exhaustion, may be a risk for overall survival” (p. 1).

Consequently, burned-out employees are likely to display one or more withdrawal behaviors (Hanisch, 1995) such as lateness, absence, or turnover (Maslach et al., 2001). Clinically burned-out employees may get justified absence leaves from work. However, other burned-out employees remain at work, which leads to a form of presenteeism. Presenteeism occurs when individuals go to work when they should instead be off sick, either because they are ill or because they are no longer effective (Cooper, 1996). Individual performance is compromised because burned-out workers need to invest extra time and effort in performing their job. Additionally, collective performance may suffer because healthy employees spend time in helping their sick colleagues, at risk of also damaging their own health (Roe, 2003). Moreover, presenteeism itself a risk factor for burnout. Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli and Hox (2009), in a three-wave study among staff nurses working in general hospitals, found reciprocal relationships between burnout, job demands, and presenteeism. Burnout (exhaustion and depersonalization) predicted more job demands and presenteeism; presenteeism, in turn, predicted higher levels of burnout. In conclusion, employees who are burned-out by their work, experience more psychological and physical health problems, and this influences their behavior at work in a significant way.

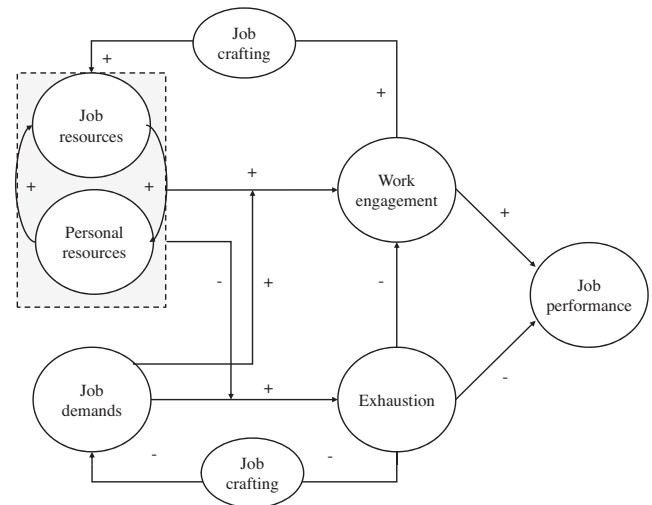


Fig. 1. The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014).

2.1. Causes of burnout

The causes of burnout are generally divided in two categories: situational factors and individual factors (Bakker et al., 2014). Situational factors include job demands and (lack of) job resources. Job demands are aspects of the job that require sustained effort (Demerouti et al., 2001). Therefore, job demands are associated with physiological and psychological costs, such as an increased heart rate and fatigue. Such symptoms may set the ground for the experience of burnout, because job demands lead employees to feel exhausted and to psychologically distance themselves from work (Bakker et al., 2000). Role ambiguity, role conflict, role stress, stressful events, workload, and work pressure are among the most important job demands that cause burnout (Alarcon, 2011; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

Job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that facilitate the achievement of work goals, reduce job demands and its costs, or stimulate personal growth through meaningful work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The relationship between job resources and burnout is consistently negative, where lower levels of job resources are associated with higher levels of burnout, especially in what cynicism is concerned (Demerouti et al., 2001). Moreover, Job Demands-Resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) proposes that job resources play a buffering role in the relationship between job demands and burnout (see Fig. 1). Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema (2005) found that when employees experienced autonomy, received feedback, had social support, or had a high-quality relationship with their supervisor, being subject to work overload, emotional demands, physical demands, and work-home interference did not result in high levels of burnout. Thus, burnout is more likely to develop when high job demands are combined with low job resources.

In what individual factors are concerned, both socioeconomic status and personality variables have been analyzed as creating a predisposition to suffer from burnout symptoms. Hakanen et al.’s (2011) cohort study among Finnish employees found that socioeconomic status and cognitive ability in adolescence were associated with job burnout 35 years later, through adult education and skill variety. Personality influences the way people perceive their work environment, and therefore how they deal with job demands and resources. Strain may arise, for example, when the work environment is not aligned with individual personality, leading to frustration of individual needs. For example, when an introverted technician becomes a leader, he will need to enact behaviors he

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