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Social support and coping as mediators or moderators of the impact of work stressors on burnout in intellectual disability support staff

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ABSTRACT

Theories applied to work stress predict that coping will mediate and support will moderate the impact of work demands on worker well-being. We explored the mediating and moderating effects of coping and support on the relationship between perceived work demands and burnout in support staff working with adults with intellectual disabilities. Ninety-six support staff completed questionnaires that measured demographic factors, perceived work demands, coping, support, and burnout. A sub-sample participated in a follow-up 22 months later. Cross-sectional regression analyses revealed a relationship between work demands and emotional exhaustion burnout that reduced when wishful thinking coping was introduced as a predictor. Exploration of multiple mediator effects using bootstrap methods revealed that wishful thinking partially mediated the relationship between work demands and emotional exhaustion but practical coping did not. Practical coping had a main effect relationship with personal accomplishment, and there was evidence that support moderated the impact of work demands on personal accomplishment (although not fully consistent with theory). Study variables, other than personal accomplishment, were stable over 22 months but no longitudinal relationships between coping and burnout was found. These findings emphasise the importance of coping in managing work demands and for the development of burnout in support staff.

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1. Introduction

In intellectual disability services, support staff are a valuable resource: the quality of their work reflects the quality of the service (Hatton, Emerson et al., 1999), and they are often central to the social networks of the people they support (Sharrard, 1992). However, there is evidence that working in intellectual disability services can be stressful. Surveys of intellectual disability services have found between 32.5% (Hatton, Emerson et al., 1999) and 25% (Robertson et al., 2005) of staff experienced significant levels of stress. Prolonged exposure to high levels of stress may contribute to burnout, which is a state characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment at work (Maslach, 1982). Staff reporting stress and burnout will not only personally experience negative psychological states (Maslach, 1982), but also the quality of their interactions with service users may be negatively affected (Hastings, 2002; Rose, Jones, & Fletcher, 1998).

Work stress theory suggests that the demands of the job are associated with the development of stress and burnout in staff (Dermouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). To meet work demands, workers draw on a number of resources. These resources can be physical, psychological, social, and organizational, and they can function to help get the job done, reduce demands, or stimulate growth and development (Dermouti et al., 2001; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the present study, we examine two important resources: the psychological resource of coping, and the social resource of support. Coping is concerned with the individual response to a demand, and is related to an individual's psychological flexibility. Support, or the perception of support from others, is a social resource in helping to manage demands at work. Both factors are relevant for support workers who will have to cope as individuals with the demands at work, but who also usually work in small teams supporting people with an intellectual disability.

The ability to cope with demands is given an important role by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). These authors suggest that the development of stress is a transactional process. Stress occurs when the demands of a situation tax or exceed the person's resources to cope with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Two central processes are proposed: first, the appraisal of a situation and whether it is a threat or stressor, and secondly the judgment of whether the coping resources are at hand to manage the threat. Within this cognitive-behavioral theory, coping is defined as the: "cognitive and behavioral efforts a person makes to manage demands that tax or exceed his or her personal resources" (Lazarus, 1995, p. 6). Coping is proposed to operate as a mediator of the emotional outcome of a stressful encounter because the nature of coping engaged in response to different threats varies and has different implications for outcome (Lazarus, 1999). Two main types of coping are proposed: practical coping strategies, which are focused on changing the situation, and emotion-based coping where efforts are made to manage the emotional distress. Both types of coping can serve a useful function in different circumstances and sometimes in the same circumstances. The efficacy of a coping effort will be determined by the "continuing fit with the situational demands and opportunities provided by the environment as well as the outcome criteria employed to evaluate it" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 122).

Several studies have explored support staff coping in intellectual disability research (Cottle, Kuipers, Murphy, & Oakes, 1995; Hastings & Brown, 2002; Hatton, Brown, Caine, & Emerson, 1995; Hatton, Emerson et al., 1999; Mitchell & Hastings, 2001). Main effects for coping, with positive relationships between emotion-based coping strategies and staff stress, have been reported (Hatton & Emerson, 1995; Hatton et al., 1995; Hatton, Emerson et al., 1999; Rose, David, & Jones, 2003). For example, Mitchell and Hastings (2001), found that disengagement coping, an emotion focused strategy, was a positive predictor of emotional exhaustion burnout, and a negative predictor of personal accomplishment (i.e., was associated with less personal accomplishment). In the same study, the use of adaptive problem focused coping strategies positively predicted feelings of personal accomplishment at work. In most existing research, the function of coping as a mediator variable in the stress process has not been explored. Hastings and Brown (2002) did explore the function of coping, but a moderation model was examined. Thus, these researchers found main effects for maladaptive coping on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. However, special education staff use of maladaptive emotion-focused coping strategies moderated the impact of exposure to challenging behavior on their reported burnout. Those staff exposed to high levels of challenging behavior who more frequently used maladaptive emotion-focused coping strategies were more likely

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