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Journal of Vocational Behavior 65 (2004) 39–56

Journal of

Vocational
Behavior

www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

Adjusting to job demands: The role of work self-determination and job control in predicting burnout[☆]

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Received 25 September 2002

Available online 16 September 2003

Abstract

This study examined the dynamic interplay among job demands, job control, and work self-determination in order to predict burnout dimensions. A three-way interaction effect was found between job demands, job control and work self-determination in predicting each dimension of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). Overall, results showed that job control moderates the unhealthy effects of job demands in predicting emotional exhaustion and depersonalization only for employees with high levels of work self-determination. In addition, job control increases the relation between job demands and the sense of personal accomplishment only for employees with high levels of work self-determination. These results are discussed in light of the Job Demand–Control model.

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Keywords: Work self-determination; Job demands; Job control; Individual characteristics; Burnout; Occupational stress and strain

[☆] We thank Caroline Biron and Jean-Pierre Brun for their significant contribution to this research project.

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1. Introduction

Using various theoretical models, many researchers have attempted to explain psychological well-being of workers in relation to the work environment (see Cooper, 1998; Parker & Wall, 1998). Among these theoretical models, the Job Demand–Control (JD–C) model (Karasek, 1979, 1998; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) has been widely studied. This model suggests that job control protects the individual from the unhealthy effects of the work environment. Although this model proves to be useful for understanding the link that exists between job demands and work adjustment, the latter does not take into account individual differences to explain such a link. However, numerous studies in organizational psychology have demonstrated that not all people react in the same way to stressful situations (Parkes, 1990, 1994).

This study investigated whether some individual characteristics (i.e., work self-determination) can explain the links that exist between job demands, job control, and burnout dimensions (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). This study is innovative because it assesses the role of a personal characteristic, (i.e., work self-determination) which has not yet been examined in order to understand the relations that exist between job demands, job control, and burnout. In the sections that follow, we will examine: (a) the multidimensional nature of burnout, (b) the JD–C model, (c) the role of individual characteristics, and (d) the specific goals and hypotheses of this study.

1.1. The multidimensional nature of burnout

Burnout is defined as a symptom of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment at work due to work activity (Maslach, 1982). *Emotional exhaustion* refers to the depletion of one's emotional resources. *Depersonalization* refers to a detached attitude that used employees toward others in order to protect themselves from the psychological stress coming from people with whom they interact. *Reduced personal accomplishment* refers to a decrease in the feeling of competence and productivity at work. Thus, in addition to being marked by a loss of emotional energy, burnout implies a negative assessment of the self (reduced personal accomplishment) and of others (depersonalization). Studies suggest that the three dimensions of burnout are associated with different aspects of work environment, in particular work overload, role ambiguity or role conflict (Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 1999). Moreover, some studies underline the role of individual characteristics in individuals' vulnerability to developing burnout (Semmer, 1996). However, most studies on burnout tend to consider individual and contextual factors separately rather than using a theoretical framework which incorporates them together (i.e., job-person fit). According to Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), the challenge is to extend the job-person paradigm to a broader and more complex conceptualization of the person situated in the job context. In this respect, the JD–C model could be quite useful (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

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