



Stress and burnout: The significant difference

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Abstract

Burnout is often conceptualized within the framework of stress research. The present manuscript contends that while burnout and strain are both adverse responses to job stressors they seem to have different antecedents, correlates and consequences. The existential perspective is offered as a theory based approach to differentiate the two concepts and point to the distinct features of burnout. Path analysis of data obtained from 1182 Israeli police officers during a Palestinian uprising revealed good reconstruction by the theoretical model and provided tentative support for this proposition. As predicted, job stressors (assumed to be antecedent variables) were more highly correlated with strain than with burnout whereas job importance (assumed to be an intervening variable) was more highly correlated with burnout than with strain. Burnout was more highly correlated than strain with such (outcome) variables as job dissatisfaction, desire to quit the job, physical and emotional symptoms and perceived performance level. Implications for differential treatment of stress and burnout are offered suggesting that the focus in treating burnout should be on enhancing people's sense of their work's importance and significance.

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1. Introduction

Burnout is often conceptualized within the framework of stress research (e.g., Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Farber, 1983; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Kop, Euwema, & Schaufeli, 1999; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Paine, 1982; Row, 2000; Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001; Shirom, 2003; Vachon, 2000; Vettor & Kosinski, 2000). Maslach et al. (2001), for example, define burnout as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 397). Hobfoll and Shirom (2000) view it as a consequence of one's exposure to chronic job stress; Cooper et al. (2001) as “caused by chronic job stress” and Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) as “a special type of prolonged occupational stress that results particularly from interpersonal demands at work” (p. 8).

The problem with conceptualizing burnout within the framework of stress research, as noted by Schaufeli and Enzman, is that the concept of stress is plagued by the same sort of definitional ambiguity as burnout. Cox (1985) wrote that “the concept of stress is elusive because it is poorly defined. There is no single agreed definition in existence. It is a concept which is familiar to both layman and professional alike; it is understood by all when used in a general context but by very few when a more precise account is required” (p. 1). Toch (2002) also argued that stress tends to be “oversold” as a general term in which causes and consequences are often confused. Not much, then, is gained by putting burnout within the conceptual framework of stress.

In addition, there is ample anecdotal evidence to suggest that burnout is not always the result of high stress. At times, stress at work implies that one's work is important and thus is associated with lower burnout. A hospital nurse provides an example: “The days I enjoy work most are the days in which I work the hardest” she says. Burnout develops “when there is nothing I can do to help a patient” (Pines, 2000).

The current paper contends, based on an application of existential theory, that while burnout may be a sub-category of stress, it seems to have somewhat different antecedents, correlates and consequences.

According to the existential perspective, the root cause of burnout lies in people's need to believe that their lives are meaningful, that the things they do are useful and important (Clarkson, 1992; Pines, 1993; Yiu-kee & Tang, 1995). “The striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man” wrote Frankle (1976, p. 154). People's need to believe that the things they do are meaningful is their way of coping with the angst caused by facing their mortality (Becker, 1973). People who expect to derive a sense of existential significance from their work, enter their chosen careers with high goals and expectations, idealistic and motivated. When they feel that they have failed, that their work is insignificant, that they make no difference in the world, they start feeling helpless and hopeless and eventually burn out.

Indirect support for the existential perspective can be found in studies that demonstrated a consistent negative correlation between burnout and a sense of significance at work (e.g., Pines, 2000, 2002). However, correlations do not imply causality and it is possible that one of the outcomes of burnout is the feeling that the work is insignificant, or it could be that both burnout and lack of significance are the results of a third, more general stress factor.

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