



The relationship between maladaptive perfectionism with burnout: Testing mediating effect of emotion-focused coping

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of maladaptive perfectionism with burnout in a sample of nurses. Specifically, structural equation modeling analyses were employed to examine the effect of maladaptive perfectionism with burnout and to test the mediating effect of emotion-focused coping. The results of this study suggested that emotion-focused coping fully mediated the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and burnout. Nurses with higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism reported a higher habitual usage of emotion-focused coping, and maladaptive perfectionism had a direct effect on the choice of coping style. The results of this study broaden the current knowledge on perfectionism in relation to vocational behaviors and provided important managerial strategies and psychological interventions.

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1. Introduction

One of the most frequently investigated phenomena in vocational research to date is employees' burnout. In particular, nursing is regarded as a high-risk occupation for experiencing burnout (Bourbonnais, Comeau, & Vezina, 1999; Schaefer & Moos, 1996). According to Vahey, Aiken, Sloane, Clarke, and Vargas (2004), more than 40% of hospital nurses are at high risk of job-related burnout, and more than 1 out of 5 nurses have indicated that they plan to quit their jobs within a year. It should be seriously recognized that symptoms of burnout influence the ability of nurses to better serve clients, and can substantially degrade the quality of patient care. Current research in this area has demonstrated that a substantial number of organizational factors can contribute to burnout, including job demand and resources, workload, role conflict, stress, and social support (Bakker, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2005; Greenglass, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2001; Jenkins & Elliott, 2004; Poghosyan, Aiken, & Sloane, 2009). However, most of the research focuses on organizational-level causes of burnout while relatively little work has been done to identify individual factors that can affect burnout in a work setting.

Individual factors, such as personality, essentially can determine an individual's career outcomes. Smith (1986) proposes that personality can affect the experience of burnout via a cognitive appraisal of stress. Beck (1997) further states that individuals' personalities affect the way in which they interpret information from their environment, and can lead to entirely different

responses toward stressors. Recently, a growing body of research has turned the focus to personality as a significant predictor of burnout (Bakker, Van der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006; Garrosa, Moreno-Jiménez, Liang, & González, 2008). Within the scope of personality and burnout, most research attention has been placed on the Big Five personality model (De Vries & Van Heck, 2002; Goddard, Patton, & Creed, 2004). However, among an array of personality traits, perfectionism is one of the dispositional tendencies that are highly related to burnout, but has been generally underestimated in the research community. Perfectionists are more likely than non-perfectionists to experience various kinds of stress in a variety of forms (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In addition, perfectionists who are already experiencing a high level of daily pressure are particularly vulnerable to the disruptive effects triggered by environmental stressors.

Perfectionism has been acknowledged as a multidimensional construct that reflects a strong commitment to unrealistically high standards for accomplishment and inability to accept one's own mistake (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). In current research, perfectionism can be divided into two general categories: adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism (e.g., Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neuberg, 1993; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998). Adaptive perfectionism has been viewed as possessing a strong desire for achievement with high standards, perseverance, and experiences of pleasure for success. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism has been regarded as setting unattainable goals with a strong fear of failure and others' criticism. Moreover, these two types of perfectionism are associated with different psychological as well as work outcomes. For example, adaptive perfectionism has been linked to positive psychological results including positive

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influence, patience, scholastic performance, test achievement, and engagement in work (e.g., Stoeber, Hutchfield, & Wood, 2008; Stoeber & Kersting, 2007; Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). On the contrary, maladaptive perfectionism has been associated with unhealthy psychological and work consequences. For instance, Stoeber and Rennert (2008) indicated that maladaptive perfectionism was positively related to job burnout because of a discrepancy between high standards of personal achievement and the performance in reality. Thus, it is not surprising that, compared to individuals with adaptive perfectionism, people with maladaptive perfectionism are more vulnerable to experience symptoms of burnout and possibly employ different coping style upon exposure to stress.

Next, current research has suggested that a person's personality disposition can predict his or her choice of coping (Armstrong-Stassen, 2004; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). The coping style is considered to be a problem-solving manner that helps people to adapt to their psycho-social situation when they feel stressed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hewitt, Flett, and Ediger (1995) indicated that people with perfectionist traits use deficient forms of problem-solving. Further, Stoeber and Rennert (2008) and Wei, Heppner, Russell, and Young (2006) both found that maladaptive perfectionism was positively correlated with emotion-focused coping that aims to avoid sources of stress. Recently, Hill, Hall, and Appleton (2010) investigated the effect of perfectionism and burnout in a sample of athletes and examined the mediating role of coping tendencies. They found that maladaptive perfectionism had a direct effect on one type of emotion-focused copings (i.e., avoidant) and shown indirect effect on athletes' burnout.

Although Hill et al. (2010) has examined the mediating role of coping in the relationship between perfectionism and burnout, some further areas of investigation should be warranted. First, research related to perfectionism has been primarily conducted with student populations including athletes, adolescents, and college students. Little is known about the influence of perfectionism in a given adult occupational group. Nursing can be a particularly important profession in examining the effect of perfectionism at work. On one hand, nurses generally work in an environment where perfection is taken for granted. Unlike other occupational groups, nurses' mistakes can be directly related to patient safety and medical outcomes. On the other hand, nurses too are human beings and mistakes are inevitable. Melrose (2011) reported that under pressure, nurses with maladaptive perfectionism often keep their problems to themselves and cannot admit their failures to others. Therefore, the effectiveness of medical teamwork can be seriously affected. Meanwhile, nurses with maladaptive perfectionism can feel depressed and unsupported, which leaves them unable to learn from their mistakes. Therefore, examining perfectionism in this occupational group has significant meaning and contributions to both nurses and the patients they serve. Moreover, following Castro and Rice (2003), further research is encouraged to examine the construct of perfectionism in relation to the generalizability of the findings and other cultures. In fact, this study is a pioneering study in investigating perfectionism and burnout in cultures other than the Western culture, with a targeted occupational group.

Next, most of the coping measures used in prior perfectionism research has not clearly indicated the nature of coping efforts. Although coping is a commonly used term in psychology and other social science literatures, it is worth noting that there is a conceptual difference between coping styles and coping strategies. Coping style is considered as a context-free construct that assumes individuals possess a dominant coping approach across life situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Conversely, coping strategy is viewed as a context-dependent construct that emphasizes individuals may change their coping behaviors across stressful situations. Thus, these two conceptual approaches of coping are linked to

different implications for research (Lazarus, 1993). To address the limitations of previous studies mentioned above, the present study intends to focus on how one's coping style may be related to perfectionism and burnout, based on the development of burnout symptoms as a process rather than the results of a single stressful encounter. Next, this study used the coping measure of Problem-Focused Style of Coping (PF-SOC; Heppner, Cook, Wright, & Johnson, 1995) that particularly assesses an individual's habitual coping style across situations and the PF-SOC is based on the conceptualization of coping as a relatively stable coping disposition representing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping activities. In accordance with construct equivalence of the PF-SOC, this study adapted Chinese version of the PF-SOC validated by Chang, Lan, Lin, and Heppner (2012) and Chang (2011) with nursing population. It was hypothesized that individuals with maladaptive perfectionism traits are likely to deal with stress in habitual coping styles that can be associated with the development of burnout across work situations. Therefore, examining the context-free nature of coping can further explain the dynamics and development of perfectionism and burnout, clarify the mediating role of coping, and develop targeted interventions that are suitable for nurses.

1.1. Purpose of the study

Taken together, the current study seeks to employ a structural equation modeling analysis to investigate the relationships among maladaptive perfectionism, emotion-focused coping, and burnout in a sample of nurses. Higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism was expected to associate with higher levels of emotion-focused coping as well as burnout. Moreover, the mediating effect of emotion-focused coping was examined in relation to burnout in an independent hypothesized model. In essence, the goal of this investigation was to explore individual-level predictors of burnout and to stimulate the development of effective managerial and counseling interventions for individuals with maladaptive perfectionism who have experienced burnout.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants are nurses who recruited from northern hospitals in Taiwan ($N = 314$). A total of 99.4% are female, and 44.6% have registered nurse license, 29.3% have vocational nurse license, and 22.3% have both registered nurse and vocational nurse licenses. However, there were 19.7% of nurses belong to outpatient services department, internal and external medicine ward was 13.1% and 12.1% separately, pediatrics was 3.5%, Dialysis center was 2.5%, Professional Nursing was 1.3%, and obstetrics and gynecology was also 1.3%. The mean participant age was 29.23 years ($SD = 1.21$). Ethical research requirements for conducting research on human subjects were fulfilled for all of the participants used in the study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. MBI-HSS

The Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Service Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) is used to measure the construct of job burnout. The MBI-HSS is a 17-item instrument on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = refers to "never" to 5 = through always). The MBI-HSS consists of three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement. In this study, the Chinese version of MBI-HSS translated by Su (2000) was used and the internal consistency for the Chinese

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