



Gender differences in burnout: A meta-analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 February 2010

Available online 2 May 2010

Keywords:

Burnout

Emotional exhaustion

Depersonalization

Labor policies

Occupational gender typing

Well-being

Gender differences

ABSTRACT

The literature on male–female differences in burnout has produced inconsistent results regarding the strength and direction of this relationship. Lack of clarity on gender differences in organizationally relevant phenomena, such as work burnout, frequently generates ungrounded speculations that may (mis)inform organizational decisions. To address this issue, we conducted a meta-analysis of the relationship between gender and burnout using 409 effect sizes from 183 studies. Results challenge the commonly held belief that female employees are more likely to experience burnout than male employees, revealing instead that women are slightly more emotionally exhausted than men ($\delta = .10$), while men are somewhat more depersonalized than women ($\delta = -.19$). Although these effects are small, they are practically noteworthy when translated into a percent overlap statistic. Moderator analyses further revealed some intriguing nuances to the general trends, such as larger gender differences in the USA compared to the EU. In contrast, gender differences did not vary significantly in male-typed vs. female-typed occupations. Our analyses also suggest discontinuation of the use of overall burnout measures because they are highly consistent with the emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout only.

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Work burnout is a type of strain resulting from prolonged exposure to chronic, job-related stressors (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Historically, work-related burnout has been conceptualized as a three-dimensional construct, consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion, or feeling over-extended and emotionally and physically depleted at work (Maslach et al., 2001), has been called “an orthodox strain variable” (Salanova, Peiro, & Schaufeli, 2005, p. 808). Depersonalization, or distancing oneself psychologically from clients and co-workers, is also viewed as a strain (Semmer, McGrath, & Beehr, 2005). In contrast, diminished personal accomplishment, or feeling ineffective at work, has been criticized as being akin to a personality variable, such as self- or professional efficacy (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Shirom, 1989). Further, diminished personal accomplishment correlates only weakly with the other two burnout components, as well as with known burnout correlates (Kalliath, O’Driscoll, Gillespie, & Bluedom, 2000; Lee & Ashford, 1990, 1996; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). As a result, recent scholarship has tended to focus mostly on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). In short, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—both defined as types of strain—are now viewed as the core components of burnout.

The present investigation examines the relationship between gender and the two core components of work burnout—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. We chose to focus on gender for two reasons. First, gender differences on various variables, such as competence, personality, leadership, and well-being to name a few, are typically exaggerated beyond their true sizes, often to women’s disadvantage (Matlin, 2004). With respect to burnout specifically, there are arguments that burnout is more of a female experience (Maslach et al., 2001). In fact, however, the nature of the gender–burnout relationship remains unclear as only a handful of authors have investigated this relationship directly, and empirical results have been mixed. Because inflated claims about gender differences

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can be costly to both sexes (Hyde, 2005), our meta-analysis will help to clarify the issue by aggregating the empirical evidence on gender differences in burnout. Second, gender is confounded with many other factors, such as educational background, occupation, culture-specific social roles and expectations, and even economic and political realities (Sulsky & Smith, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Our meta-analysis will attempt to disentangle the effects of gender from those of other factors by examining moderators of the gender-burnout link. We specifically focus on occupational gender typing and national labor policies as moderating variables. In sum, our primary purpose is to estimate the magnitude and direction of the gender-burnout relationship; an additional purpose is to investigate the role of moderators acting on that link.

1. Burnout: a female experience?

Speculations that burnout occurs more frequently among women are not uncommon (Maslach et al., 2001). Such speculations may be dangerous for two reasons. First, at the workplace, work peers and superiors may perceive women as more likely to burn out than men. Research shows that individuals stereotypically assume that women are more susceptible to stress—and by extension to burnout—than men (Matlin, 2004). Even trained clinicians and physicians are not exempt from such assumptions as they are more likely to diagnose female patients than male patients with depression and anxiety disorders, both when presented with vignettes, or with real patients (Garrett, 1991; Lichtenberg, Gibbons, Nanna, & Blumenthal, 1993; Potts, Burnam, & Wells, 1991; Wrobel, 1993). If managers tend to perceive female employees as disproportionately more likely to burn out than male employees, women may be passed up for challenging assignments and promotions.

Second, assuming that burnout is a mostly female experience may result in men not receiving enough attention or appropriate care when they do experience burnout (Wilcox, 1992). The latter issue becomes even more noteworthy when one considers that the two sexes may experience burnout in different ways. For example, in their qualitative review of the burnout literature, Maslach et al. (2001) observed that there is a tendency for women to score higher on emotional exhaustion than men, whereas men tend to score higher on depersonalization than women. This is consistent with gender role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1982), which predicts that women should be more likely to express feelings of emotional and physical fatigue (e.g., emotional exhaustion) because they learn to display their emotions, whereas men should be more likely to shut off and withdraw under stress (i.e., depersonalization) because they learn to conceal their emotions. However, both the general public and trained professionals alike tend to associate emotion-expressive behaviors with psychological distress, whereas emotion-suppressive behaviors tend to be associated with strength, masculinity and psychological adjustment (Landrine, 1988; Sprock & Yoder, 1997; Widiger & Spitzer, 1991). This suggests that men's burnout at the workplace may go unrecognized.

In brief, assuming that women are more burned-out than men may lead to implicit or explicit work discrimination against women, and may result in failure to recognize burnout in men. Furthermore, discussing gender differences in *burnout* implicitly puts the focus on only one of its two central components—emotional exhaustion—because emotional exhaustion has become synonymous with burnout itself (Burke & Richardson, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Yet, based on gender role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1982), and consistent with Maslach et al. (2001) qualitative review, one can expect important differences in the two sexes' reactions to job-related stressors. Specifically,

Hypothesis 1. Women experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion than men, and men experience higher levels of depersonalization than women.

2. Moderators of the gender-burnout link

2.1. The moderating effects of occupational gender typing on the gender-burnout link

Despite significant increases in the number of women in the workplace globally (International Labor Office, 2007) and the equal representation of the sexes in some occupations (e.g., journalism), most occupations remain gender-typed. Women are frequently employed in occupations that fit stereotypes about female gender roles (e.g., caregiving/nurturing occupations, support/administrative occupations), and men are typically employed in occupations that fit stereotypes about male gender roles (e.g., physically demanding occupations, salaried occupations). Specifically, the 2008 report of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008) shows that women are still underrepresented in the following occupations: managers (37%), computer operators (25%), architects and engineers (14%), scientists (46%), lawyers and judges (40%), dentists (27%), physicians and surgeons (31%), police officers (15%), and correctional officers (30%), to name a few. In contrast, men are underrepresented in the following occupations: nurses (8%), physician assistants (33%), community and social workers (21%), educators and librarians (26%), telemarketers and customer service representatives (33%), childcare and elderly care workers (4%), office support workers (25%), paralegals (12%), claim adjusters, accountants, and auditors (35%), and food preparation and serving workers (35%), to name a few.

The numerical and cultural domination by one gender in a given occupation likely creates negative experiences for members of the underrepresented gender (Hunt & Emslie, 1998). Though this issue has captured social scientists' and feminists' interest for some time now (e.g., Acker, 1991; Bradley, 1989; Cockburn, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Zimmer, 1988), empirical research on health-related outcomes for men and women in typical vs. atypical occupations has been scarce. Still, the available data strongly suggests that women in male-typed occupations and men in female-typed occupations fare worse than women and men employed in gender-typical occupations. For example, Hunt and Emslie (1998) reported greater psychological distress and poorer self-assessed

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