



Burnout and sense of coherence among residential real estate brokers

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ABSTRACT

Burnout is a multidimensional syndrome that occurs primarily in professions where practitioners are subjected to stress associated with direct interpersonal contact with clients. Previous research indicates that working as a real estate broker is a particularly stressful form of work. Considering the potentially harmful effect of burnout on real estate brokers, resulting in a range of negative impacts, it is important to identify those factors emanating from either the individual or their work environment that contribute to this syndrome. The paper presents a study that used a questionnaire survey to determine the individual demographics, work and intrapersonal characteristics that affect burnout in real estate brokers. A sample of 305 real estate brokers was obtained in Western Australia. Hierarchical regression was then employed to identify predictors of burnout (i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment) and sense of coherence (SOC). The analysis revealed the following: emotional exhaustion was associated with lower age, higher numbers of hours worked, and lower SOC; higher depersonalisation was associated with lower age and SOC; higher personal accomplishment was associated with a greater number of visits to clients per week, the presence of postgraduate qualification and a high SOC. The results provide insight to guide health promotion for real estate brokers so as to enhance their psychological and physical well-being, thus making a contribution to improving their overall performance levels and effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Workplace stress has been identified as a major determinant influencing the psychological well-being and productivity and performance of individuals (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Latack, 1986; Wang et al., 2007). Workplace stress however can vary according to the characteristics of an occupation (Cox et al., 1993). Constant interpersonal contact with clients has been identified as a workplace stressor that is unique to sales people such as real estate brokers (Abiala, 1999; Rawlins, 2008). Having to work autonomously, choosing the number of hours to work, how and when to contact potential and existing clients, and an over reliance on commission for remuneration, provide an environment for burnout to occur (Edwards, 1997; Rawlins, 2008). The pressures placed upon real estate brokers are further exacerbated by the cyclical nature of demand and supply within the housing market, which is predominately influenced by interest rates, government intervention (e.g., first home buyer's and financial services regula-

tion), stock market and the lending capacity/requirements of financial institutions (Rawlins, 2008). The recent sub-prime mortgage crisis, for example, triggered by a dramatic rise in mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures in the United States (US) has adversely influenced the residential and commercial property sectors around the globe. The resultant decline in residential sales in 2008 and 2009 has meant that real estate brokers income potential has dropped, and they have had to work longer and harder to obtain sales, which can influence their psychological and physical well-being.

Burnout can adversely influence the way in which real estate brokers deal with their clients (Wharton, 1996; Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Rawlins, 2008). Having to cope with burnout is an area that has received limited attention among real estate brokers (Wharton, 1996; Sand and Miyaszki, 2000; Rawlins, 2008). The propensity for burnout can be reduced if real estate brokers take advantage of coping strategies that are readily available to them (Sand and Miyaszki, 2000). Not all coping strategies, however, are suitable for all individuals as their dispositional orientation toward stressors will influence their ability to confront problems that may arise (Antonovsky, 1987, 1993; Love and Edwards, 2005). The concept of sense of coherence (SOC) as a 'salutogenic' approach for explaining good health and positive

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adjustment has been advocated by Antonovsky (1987, 1993) and can be used to explain *why* some people cope adaptively with related stressors. The strength of an individual's SOC is a major determinant of their state of health. In stressful situations a strong SOC helps to mobilise the necessary generalised resistance resources that are needed. This promotes adaptive and effective coping, and therefore enables an individual to deal with stress in a 'salutogenic' manner.

Considering the potentially devastating impact of burnout on real estate brokers and associated industry stakeholders, it is important to identify those factors emanating from either the individual or their work environment that contribute to this syndrome. The aim of the research presented is to identify the individual demographics, work and intrapersonal characteristics (such as SOC) that affect burnout in real estate brokers. The results provide insight to guide health promotion for real estate brokers so as to enhance their psychological and physical well-being, thus making a contribution to improving their overall performance and to the benefit of the sector.

1.1. Burnout

The construct validity of burnout has been questioned by numerous researchers who have argued that it is synonymous with illnesses such as depression (Meier, 1994), strain (Perlman and Hartman, 1982) and disillusionment (Edelwich and Brodsky, 1980). In fact, depression and burnout share some important characteristics but are different (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). Depression is characterised by the following symptoms: depressed mood, an inability to derive pleasure from things, weight loss or weight gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotoric agitation or retardation, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of insufficiency or guilt, indecisiveness or inability to concentrate, and thoughts about death and suicide (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994; cited in Brenninkmeijer et al., 2001). The symptoms of burnout are: mental and emotional exhaustion (which refers to feelings of being 'empty' or 'worn out'), depersonalisation (which indicates a negative, cynical attitude toward one's work or the recipients of one's care) and reduced personal accomplishment (which refers to a negative evaluation of one's achievements at work) (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Of these characteristics, dysphoric symptoms, like fatigue, emotional exhaustion and feelings of depression, are regarded as the most characteristic symptoms of burnout (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998). In essence, burnout can be defined as a:

"syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind. It is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems. ...what is unique about burnout is the stress that arises from the social interaction between helper and recipient" (Maslach, 1982).

Bearing in mind the above definition, it can be seen that burnout has a multidimensional nature that comprises of three related but separate components (Maslach et al., 2001): (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalisation, (3) personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is thought to be the initial stage where employees are emotionally depleted of energy and personal resources. Such employees feel over extended and unable to cope with their work situation. Depersonalisation is an insensitive and uncaring attitude that affected workers develop toward their clients. Reduced personal accomplishment occurs when employees gain no professional satisfaction from their occupation, believing

that they are not performing as expected of them. It is accepted that the three components are necessary for a complete understanding of the burnout syndrome and to reduce it to a unitary concept would severely impoverish its explanation (Cox et al., 1993).

For those employees who are directly subjected to interpersonal contact with clients, different aspects of work and personal characteristics have been shown to influence the components of burnout (Bussing and Glaser, 2000). Emotional exhaustion is often linked to work demands, more specifically overload (Cordes et al., 1997), work hassles (Leiter, 1988), workload (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) and is considered to be the most responsive subscale to the nature and intensity of work stressors (Greenglass et al., 1998). For the real estate broker, the management of emotion is essential as they seek to perform in ways that will earn business from their clients. Failure to manage emotions and act appropriately may lead to a loss of a sale and abate income (Belschak et al., 2006). The sale's environment within which real estate brokers operate is deemed to be 'emotionally charged' (Rawlins, 2008). It requires brokers to feel or at least pretends to feel certain emotions during work related interactions so as to secure a sale (Kuml and Geddes, 2000). Hochschild (1983) refers to such behaviour as acting. According to Hochschild (1983) internalising expected emotional displays has the potential for individuals to alter their natural personality and emotional behaviours. Furthermore, the individual may no longer perceive their management of emotions as acting but rather as authentic parts of their persona. This 'false behaviour' can also be linked to the demonstration of a 'fake sense of coherence' (Antonovsky 1987) in a working environment exhibiting such high levels of instability. Despite a possible reliance on acting, Wharton (1996) revealed that real estate brokers actually enjoyed helping their clients discover new homes and experienced many positive outcomes. Wharton (1996) however used the metaphor of an emotional 'roller coaster' to describe the work environment of real estate brokers as they often lacked control of their business dealings due to elements such as a volatile housing market, shifts in mortgage business, and the indecisive nature of clients.

Depersonalisation is found to be related to various types of resources within the work environment, such as lack of autonomy and low supervisory support (Turnipseed, 1988), role ambiguity (Von Emster and Harrison, 1998), lack of control coping (Leiter, 1992) and lack of co-worker support (Leiter, 1988). Diminished personal accomplishment has been associated with a number of items such as contingent rewards (Cordes et al., 1997), professional development (Schlenz et al., 1995), role ambiguity (Von Emster and Harrison, 1998), age (Turnipseed, 1988), control coping (Leiter, 1992), and co-worker support (Leiter, 1988). Given that each burnout component has been related to different work and personal characteristics highlights the importance of examining the three components separately (Koeske and Koeske, 1989).

2. Individual demographics

The development of burnout appears to be a result of a complex interaction between three main factors that occur within the work environment (Fig. 1). Differences in individual demographics have been identified as being an important explanation of burnout (Rogers and Dodson, 1988). In particular, factors such as age the level of education attained, and years of experience are key determinants of burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2005) have revealed that younger people are more prone to burnout. Increasing age has been negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion (Van Der Pleog et al., 1990) and positively correlated with personal accomplishment (Lewis et al., 1994).

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