Psychosocial work-related predictors and consequences of personal burnout among staff working with people with intellectual disabilities

Agnessa Kozak [a,*], Maren Kersten [b,1], Zita Schillmöller [c,2], Albert Nienhaus [a,3]

[a] University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Institute for Health Services Research in Dermatology and Nursing, Martinistr. 52, 20246 Hamburg, Germany
[b] Institution for Statutory Accident Insurance and Prevention in Healthcare and Welfare Services, Pappelallee 33-37, 22089 Hamburg, Germany
[c] University of Applied Science in Hamburg, Lohbrügger Kirchstraße 65, 21033 Hamburg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to investigate the potential predictors of personal burnout among staff working with people with intellectual disabilities and to investigate whether personal burnout is associated with health and work-related outcomes. A cross-sectional survey was carried out in 2011 in 30 residential facilities in northern Germany ($N = 409$, response rate 45%). The German standard version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire was used. In a multiple logistic regression analysis, we identified factors which were predictive of personal burnout, such as work–privacy conflict (OR = 1.04, 95% CI 1.03, 1.05), emotional demands (OR = 1.03, 95% CI 1.01, 1.05), role conflicts (OR = 1.02, 95% CI 1.02, 1.03), job insecurity (OR = 1.03, 95% CI 1.01, 1.05) and feedback (OR = 0.98, 95% CI 0.97, 0.99). These factors explained 49% of the total variance. Higher levels of personal burnout were significantly correlated with higher rates of intention to leave the job and cognitive stress symptoms ($p < .01$). Low values of personal burnout were associated with greater job satisfaction, good general health, and higher satisfaction with life ($p < .01$). The present study indicates that improving the psychosocial work environment at the organizational level may reduce personal burnout and may also diminish unfavorable outcomes, such as intention to leave or job dissatisfaction.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.

1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the mental and physical well-being of staff working in services for people with intellectual disabilities. The concept of burnout has become widely known in connection with psychological work stress. As described by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. To a certain degree, many jobs are associated with high levels of stress. However, this problem is exacerbated in emotionally demanding work environments. Staff caring for people with intellectual disabilities are often confronted with agitated individuals (Innstrand, Espnes, & Mykletun, 2002; Rose & Rose, 2005). The constant interaction with clients with complex and diverse needs requires a high level of dedication and empathy from staff (Marquard, Runde, & Westphal, 1993). Often, carers are

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 40 7410 59516; fax: +49 40 7410 59708.
E-mail addresses: a.kozak@uke.de (A. Kozak), maren.kersten@bgw-online.de (M. Kersten), zita.schillmoeller@haw-hamburg.de (Z. Schillmöller), a.nienhaus@uke.de (A. Nienhaus).
[1] Tel.: +49 40 2020 73236.
[2] Tel.: +49 40 4287 56128.
[3] Tel.: +49 40 7410 59516.

overwhelmed by the emotional or organizational impact of the task and become exhausted. If perceived demands exceed individual coping strategies and organizational resources, stress cannot be managed appropriately (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Long-term exposure to stress is also associated with absenteeism, sickness, higher turnover, lower job satisfaction, reduced commitment and increased intention to leave the job (Hasselhorn, Tackenberg, & Müller, 2003a; Hatton & Emerson, 1998; Hatton, Rivers, Kiernan, et al., 1999; Robertson et al., 2005). Thus, the negative consequences of stress pose a serious burden, not only for professional carers, but also for the quality of client care (Robertson et al., 2005; Rose & Rose, 2005). Overall, burnout may lead to lower productivity and effectiveness at work (Maslach et al., 2001). Felce and Emerson (2001) point out that staff behavior, orientation and performance are important influences on the behavioral development of people with mental retardation. Staff behavior – in the form of assistance and positive contact – had a direct impact on the quality of life of the service users. Sharrard (1992) emphasizes that direct care staff are often the most important people in the lives of the clients. Thus, the assessment of stressful tasks should be of considerable concern to service providers. Research findings within the field of intellectual disability indicate that there are various psychosocial stressors and resources at work which are related to burnout and/or personal distress.

1.1. Job stressors

Role conflicts arise when there is no adequate information about job performance, or conflicting demands at the job have to be met (Maslach et al., 2001). Blumenthal, Lavender, and Hewson (1998) found that poor role clarity was associated with higher scores in emotional exhaustion. Similar findings have been reported in other studies (Aitken & Schloss, 1994; Dyer & Quine, 1998). In addition, role conflicts can occur when demands of the workplace interfere with family responsibilities or other obligations in private life (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). Using a path analysis, Hatton, Emerson, et al. (1999) showed that factors such as role ambiguity and work–home conflict are strongly and directly associated with general distress. More evidence on the effects on burnout of the relationship between work and private life would be clearly beneficial for research in the field of intellectual disabilities (Skirrow & Hatton, 2007).

Job demands, in particular quantitative demands, have been studied by many researchers. The results indicate that there is a consistent association with burnout – with a strong emphasis on the dimension emotional exhaustion (Devereux, Hastings, & Noone, 2009; Devereux, Hastings, Noone, Firth, & Totsika, 2009; Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2010; Lasalvia et al., 2009). High emotional demands from interaction with clients with challenging behavior may be seen as a key demand characteristic in burnout research. There is a link between care for people with intellectual disabilities and negative emotional reactions of the staff (Hastings, 2002; Hastings & Brown, 2002; Rose, Horne, Rose, & Hastings, 2004). Devereux, Hastings, and Noone (2009) note that measuring staff emotional experiences may give an indication of the extent of the worker's perceived interpersonal demands. However, in the field of intellectual disability, studies on burnout have rarely directly measured emotional demands. Only a few studies have examined the association between negative emotional reactions to clients' challenging behavior and burnout of direct staff (Dyer & Quine, 1998; Mitchell & Hastings, 2001; Rose et al., 2004).

Job insecurity is the work-related stressor which has been least investigated. It reflects the discrepancy between the level of security a person experiences and the preferable level of security. The results of the longitudinal study by Dekker and Schaufeli (1995) indicate that job insecurity is associated with symptoms of psychological distress and burnout. To our knowledge, in the field of intellectual disabilities, little is known about the relationship between job insecurity and burnout.

1.2. Job resources

Social support is the resource that has been investigated most extensively in connection with burnout. The perception of support from others is a resource in helping to manage demands at work and is associated with reduced stress levels and burnout scores (Dyer & Quine, 1998; Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011; Skirrow & Hatton, 2007). However, the study by and Devereux, Hastings, Noone, et al. (2009) could not confirm these findings. Special importance is attached to the support given by supervisors. Studies by Ito, Kurita, and Shiiya (1999) and Gibson, Grey, and Hastings (2009) indicate that staff who could entrust themselves openly to their supervisors about work-related or private problems scored significantly lower on the burnout scale.

The dimensions of *organizational culture* (including aspects such as commitment, the meaning of work, social relations, a sense of community, quality of leadership, and conflict management) become increasingly important in services for people with intellectual disabilities. Poor staff morale may have an impact on job performance in human services (Jenkins & Allen, 1998; Rose, 1995). Hatton, Rivers, Mason, et al. (1999) found that greater mismatch between real and ideal organizational culture was associated with greater alienation from the organization, less moral commitment, greater job strain, reduced work satisfaction and higher intention to leave the job. However, the relationship to burnout dimensions has not yet been investigated.

Another group of resources captures aspects such as control and information at work. *Control* at work describes workers' degree of control over their work activities (Karasek, 1979). In a recent study conducted by Kowalski et al. (2010), lack of control over administrative decisions and little influence at work was found to be a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion. The results of earlier studies within the field of intellectual disability support these findings (Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Dyer & Quine, 1998).