Need for achievement, burnout, and intention to leave: Testing an occupational model in educational settings

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the links between need for achievement, burnout, and intention to leave one's study program in undergraduate university students in order to assess the applicability of the occupational model of burnout to an educational context. A sample of 226 university students completed the personality research form need for achievement scale, the Maslach burnout inventory – student survey, and Weisberg's intention to leave scale. Structural equation modeling indicated that need for achievement directly prevented each component of burnout (emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy). Moreover, emotional exhaustion directly promoted cynicism, which in turn directly promoted reduced efficacy. Finally, cynicism and reduced efficacy directly promoted intention to leave. The findings suggest that the characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of study-related burnout are similar to those of work-related burnout.

1. Introduction

Freudenberger (1974) introduced the construct of burnout to describe a stable pattern of work-related stress. Maslach and Jackson (1981) developed the construct to depict a crisis in one's relationship with work that comprises three correlated but distinct components: (a) emotional exhaustion, which represents a prolonged emotional draining experienced in connection with work activities; (b) cynicism, which represents a loss of interest and belief in the job and the organization; (c) reduced personal efficacy, which represents a perception of inability to perform as required by the job. Burnout is a key cognitive-emotional pattern of distress that leads employees to distance mentally from, develop intention to leave, and eventually leave their job (e.g., Rainey, 1995; Um & Harrison, 1998; Weisberg, 1994).

Burnout was initially detected in human services requiring intense interpersonal interactions, but following research has shown that the construct applies to virtually every occupation (see review by Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker, (2002)). Moreover, there is growing evidence indicating that undergraduate university students experience study-related burnout, that student burnout has the same three-component structure as that of worker burnout, and that student burnout correlates negatively with study engagement and academic performance (e.g., Balogun, Helgemoe,

Pellegrini, & Hoeberlein, 1996; Bresó, Salanova, & Schaufeli, 2007; Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

The key issue in extending the construct of burnout from organizational to educational contexts is whether student work entails a systematic and prolonged exposure to stress as work does. Research in the field of educational psychology has shown that students can experience stress due to work overload, time pressure, lack of opportunity for self-management, frequent evaluation, competition with peers, perceived irrelevance of content, poor teaching, poor student–teacher relationships, and competing engagements in other domains of life; these contextual factors were found to adversely influence students' engagement with the study material (e.g., Chambers, 1992; Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Meyer & Parsons, 1989; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). In all, these findings suggest that study-related stress can be sufficiently intense and prolonged to cause burnout. As such, the construct of burnout might be useful for explaining students' psychological adjustment to the learning environment.

The goal of the present study is to assess the applicability of the construct of burnout to undergraduate students. The goal is pursued by constructing and testing a model of student burnout that mimics previously tested models of worker burnout. Three sets of relationships involving the construct of burnout are examined. First, this study tests whether the three components of burnout are sequentially ordered in students as they are in workers. Second, this study tests whether the components of burnout are predictive

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of students' intention to leave their study program as they are of workers' intention to leave their job. Finally, this study tests whether need for achievement is a preventing factor of burnout and intention to leave in students as it is in workers. The assessment of these relationships provides clues as to whether burnout in educational settings has characteristics, antecedents, and consequences similar to those it has in occupational settings.

Conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993) posits that workers strive to gain and maintain valuable resources, and they are likely to experience burnout if they lose resources, the resources are insufficient to meet work demands or do not lead to expected rewards. Leiter and Maslach (1988) linked COR with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping to produce the first developmental model of burnout. The model posits that stress occurs when work demands exceed resources. If exposed to prolonged stress workers will tend to experience strain in the form of emotional exhaustion. In turn, an increase in emotional exhaustion will promote defensive coping in the form of cynicism. Finally, an increase in cynicism will foster negative self-evaluation in the form of reduced efficacy. Although other developmental models of burnout have been proposed and tested (see review by Taris, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, and Schreurs, (2005)), Leiter and Maslach's (1988) sequential ordering of the three components of burnout has received substantial support in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g., Brouwers, Evers, & Tomic, 2001; Byrne, 1994) with the exception of a few studies that failed detecting the link from cynicism to reduced efficacy (e.g., Byrne, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 1999).

Leiter's (1993) model of burnout and coping characterizes emotional exhaustion and cynicism as affective components of burnout, and efficacy as the cognitive component of burnout. The model posits that the affective components of burnout promote avoidant coping, or escaping from the stressors, whereas the cognitive component of burnout promotes approach coping, or directly tackling the stressors. As such, the model predicts that emotional exhaustion and cynicism will foster intention to leave, whereas reduced efficacy will lead to less approach coping. Empirical studies have confirmed that emotional exhaustion and cynicism are the main predictors of intention to leave (see review by Lee and Ashforth, (1996).

Need for achievement is the aspiration to accomplish difficult tasks and willingness to put forth effort to attain excellence per se or in competition with others (McClelland, 1985). Although the construct of achievement motivation has been shown to be multi-faceted (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001), the classic unidimensional definition and measurement of the construct is adopted in the present study in consideration of the preliminary nature of the investigation. Need for achievement is theorized to foster positive emotions when a worker engages in difficult tasks and, in turn, to foster resilience when a worker confronts strong work demands over extended periods of time (McClelland, 1985). The first prediction has received support in experience sampling studies showing that, when engaging in difficult activities, employees and students who are high in need for achievement tend to experience more positive affect and less negative affect than their less motivated counterparts do (Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock, & Tenglund, 2005; Moneta & Wong, 2001). The second prediction has received support in a study of teachers for whom need for achievement was negatively correlated with both burnout and intention to leave, and burnout mediated the relationship between need for achievement and intention to leave (Zhongzeng & Xiting, 2005). In all, these findings indicate that need for achievement is a preventing factor of burnout and intention to leave, through the mediation of burnout.

The hypothesized model of this study, shown in Fig. 1, integrates the reviewed conceptualizations and empirical findings.
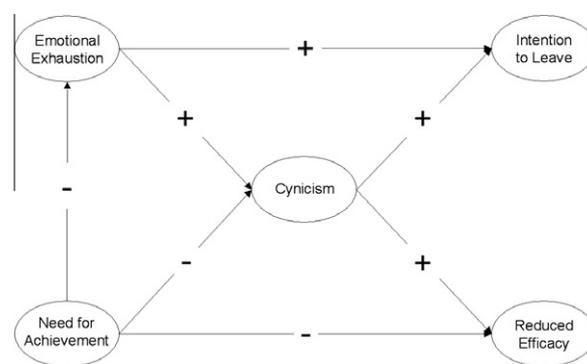

Fig. 1. The path diagram, with expected positive (+) and negative (−) relationships, of the hypothesized model of intention to leave, interlinked components of burnout (emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy), and need for achievement.

Consistent with Leiter and Maslach's (1988) developmental conceptualization of burnout, the model states that emotional exhaustion has a direct and promoting effect on cynicism, which in turn has a direct and promoting effect on reduced efficacy. Consistent with Leiter's (1993) conceptualization of affective components of burnout as promoters of avoidant coping, the model states that both emotional exhaustion and cynicism have direct and promoting effects on intention to leave, whereas reduced efficacy has no effect on intention to leave. Consistent with McClelland's (1985) conceptualization of success-oriented achievement motivation as a promoter of positive affect and resilience in the face of strong work demands, the model states that need for achievement has direct and preventing effects on each of the three components of burnout. Finally, consistent with Zhongzeng and Xiting's (2005) findings, the model states that the preventive effect of need for achievement on intention to leave is entirely mediated by burnout. In all, the model specifies and integrates seven directional relationships. The model testing considers whether the hypothesized relationships hold and whether additional relationships are present.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 226, 122 (54%) male and 104 (46%) female, undergraduate students from a London university. The age range was 18–52 years (M = 23.7, SD = 5.8); 68 participants (30.0%) were White, 45 (19.9%) Black, 69 (30.5%) from Indian, Chinese or other Asian origin, and the remaining 44 (19.5%) had a mixed ethnic background; 154 (68.1%) were British, and the remaining 72 (31.9%) of other nationalities; 99 (43.8%) were enrolled in social science programs, 66 (29.2%) in business programs, and the remaining 61 (27.0%) in other programs; 92 (40.7%) were enrolled in the first year of study, 74 (32.7%) in the second year of study, and the remaining 60 (26.5%) in the third year of study. Participants were approached during lecture breaks and asked to complete the following study questionnaires.

2.2. Measures

Intention to leave scale (Weisberg, 1994). The intention to leave scale was originally developed for teachers in order to measure individual differences in intention to leave one's profession on three items. In this study, the three items of the scale were adapted to students as follows: (1) "I have considered leaving my course of study", (2) "I think that if I were choosing my course of study again, I would choose the course I am currently enrolled in" (reversed),