



Burnout predictors among prison officers: The moderating effect of temperamental endurance

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates whether work stressors, coping styles, and work-related social support predict burnout among prison officers ($N = 476$). It was hypothesized that coping and social support would mediate the effects of work stressors on burnout and that these effects would be moderated by temperamental endurance. Results of structural equation modeling showed that emotion-oriented coping was positively related to emotional exhaustion, and negatively to personal accomplishment. Task-oriented coping was positively related to personal accomplishment. Social support from work was negatively related to emotional exhaustion. The effects of work stressors on burnout were mediated by work-related social support and by emotion-oriented coping. Additionally, some of these mediating effects were moderated by endurance. Work-related social support was negatively related to depersonalization only among participants with strong endurance. High level of work stressors predicted high emotion-oriented coping only among individuals with weak endurance.

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1. Introduction

Burnout is usually defined as a complex phenomenon, with three groups of symptoms: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Regardless of a lack of strong evidence for the causal order of the three burnout symptoms, a cautious assumption may be made that emotional exhaustion leads to depersonalization, which in turn affects personal accomplishment (Leiter & Maslach, 1988). Initial studies on burnout mainly dealt with employees of the occupational sector of human services and education. Prison officers' burnout (and factors contributing to its development) was less frequently studied than burnout of teachers or medical personnel.

1.1. Work stressors and burnout among prison officers

Four factors may impact correctional officers' work stress and burnout, namely role characteristics, overload, poor social relationships at work, and low social status of occupation (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). A meta-analysis by Dowden and Tellier (2004) indicated the following predictors of correctional officers' work stress: a lack of participation in decision making, job dissatisfaction, low

work commitment, turnover intention, perceived dangerousness of work, and role stress variables (e.g., role ambiguity).

Among three symptoms of burnout, only emotional exhaustion was related to inter-role conflict and intra-role conflict among prison officers (Allard, Wortley, & Stewart, 2003). Other aspects of role stress – role ambiguity and role preference – were unrelated to burnout (Triplett & Mullings, 1999). Moon and Maxwell (2004) demonstrated that among workers of correctional institutions everyday contact with inmates led to higher work stress, but the frequency of these contacts was unrelated to job dissatisfaction. Negative public image, work overload, and ambivalent attitudes towards inmates were listed among other sources of prison officers' work stress. Keinan and Malach-Pines (2007) indicated that four work stressors factors (i.e., stressful contacts with noninmates, stressful contacts with inmates, organizational stressors, and inconsiderate practices) predicted burnout among prison personnel.

So far studies among prison officers did not test the role of potential mediators or moderators of the work stressors–burnout relationship. Research in other occupational settings tested both direct and indirect links between work stressors and burnout. For example, stressors specific for police forces were directly related to burnout among police officers (Pines & Keinan, 2005). Chronic stressors among forensic doctors were directly related to emotional exhaustion but the effect of acute stressors on emotional exhaustion was mediated by symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Van der Ploeg, Dorresteijn, & Kleber, 2003). Consequently, we

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investigated both direct and indirect effects of work stressors (specific for prison officers) on burnout symptoms.

1.2. Social support, coping with stress, and burnout

According to the Job Demands-Resources model, burnout may be predicted not only by the intensity of demands at work (e.g., work stressors), but also by available resources (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Our study focuses on two types of resources: social support and coping with stress.

Although the association between social support and burnout is well-established (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000), the mediating effect of support in the stressors-burnout relationship was investigated rarely. Some studies showed that social support indeed mediates between stressful events and stress outcomes (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). Other research, which did not confirm the mediating effects on social support, usually employed work stress as an outcome variable, instead of burnout (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Therefore, the mediating effect of social support needs further investigation.

According to the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), coping constitutes behavioral and cognitive responses to situations appraised as stressful and demanding. Thus, coping mediates the effects of work stressors on stress outcomes (e.g., burnout). Research confirmed that coping relates to burnout (Anderson, 2000).

Earlier research among prison officers demonstrated the effect of resource depletion on burnout (Neveu, 2007). Our study, in turn, considers both work stressors and resources, where resources are hypothesized to mediate the effect of work stressors on burnout symptoms.

1.3. Personality and burnout

Beneficial effects of coping and social support may be determined by personality (Klonowicz & Cieslak, 2006), thus, personality should be considered when predicting burnout. Big Five personality factors were associated with burnout among volunteer counselors (Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006) and teachers (Kokkinos, 2007). The results also suggested that a high number of negative experiences at work (i.e., work stressors) moderated the effects of personality on burnout. Although Bakker et al. (2006) concluded that there is the interplay of personality factors and work stressors in predicting burnout, another approach would consider the moderating role of personality, instead of the moderating role of the intensity of work stressors. In line with this approach, Mo (1991) demonstrated that Type A personality moderated the effects of work stress on burnout, with Type A individuals experiencing less harmful effect of work stress on burnout than Type B individuals.

Temperament may be defined as the personality traits present since early childhood, observed both in human and animal behavior, and referring to formal aspects of behavior (Strelau, 1998). Following the Regulative Theory of Temperament (RTT; Strelau, 1998), temperament plays a regulative role, which is especially evident under stressful situations. Temperament co-determines the intensity of stressors and, in case of stressors dependent on the individual, also its probability of occurrence. Temperament also moderates the coping efforts and contributes to stress outcomes (Strelau, 2008).

The role of temperament was supported in many studies (cf. Strelau, 1998). For example, de Vries and van Heck (2002) found that strength of excitation – a dimension referring to endurance under highly and/or long-lasting stimulation and the level of effi-

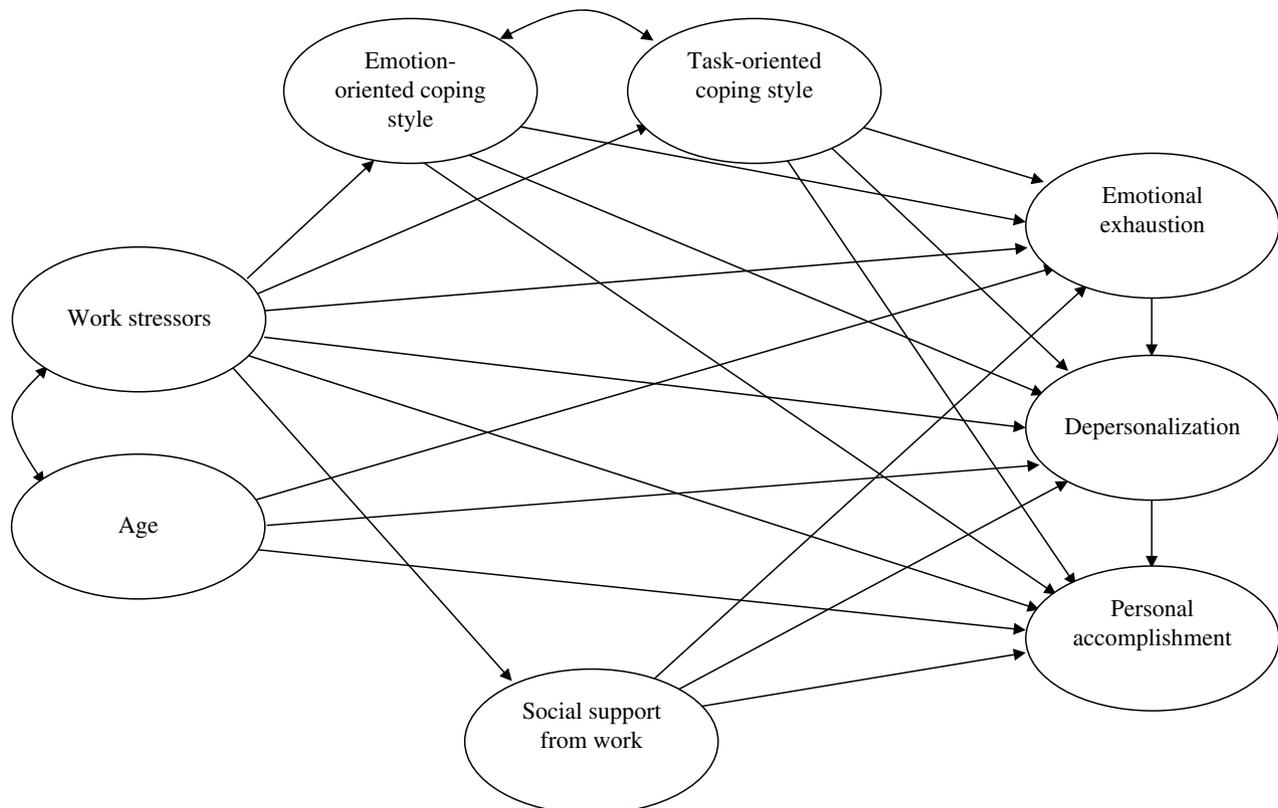


Fig. 1. Hypothesized relationships between burnout and its predictors. Endurance (not depicted in the model) is hypothesized to moderate these relationships.

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