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Personality and contextual variables in teacher burnout

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Abstract

Although several papers have shown the importance of personality structure in the disposition to burnout, its role remains controversial, especially in relation to contextual variables of an organizational and environmental type. In this sense, we have first considered describing and then predicting the burnout levels of 99 teachers in the province of Seville (Spain). In addition to a structured, self-applied interview, we have used the Spanish adaptation of the reduced version of NEO-PI-R (NEO-FFI) (Costa and McCrae, 1999) and the Spanish teachers' version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Ferrando and Pérez, 1996). We have used Homogeneity Analysis and Multiple Linear Regression (SPSS 11). The results allow us to appreciate the important role of personality structure in combination with some of the selected contextual variables, both in the description and prediction of teacher burnout. Most results confirm what has been achieved in similar research, and they especially emphasize the role of agreeableness as a protective factor (high scores) and, at the same time, as a vulnerability factor (low scores). These results are discussed from the perspective of interaction between disposition and contextual variables.

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Keywords: Teacher burnout; Personality; Big Five Models; Maslach Burnout Inventory; Homogeneity Analysis

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1. Introduction

Since the pioneer papers about burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Jackson, 1981) up to now, research into this subject has gotten stronger. Many studies have shown the importance of this syndrome concerning productivity and working efficacy, working absenteeism, illness casualties, and psychopathology, in addition to an important deterioration produced in social and family relationships (Dick & Wagner, 2001).

In the educational area, studies of occupational stress and burnout have found data that stir concern and justify the need to continue research (Borg, Riding, & Falzon, 1991; Capel, 1991; Kyriacou, 2001). Indicating this is the high percentage of teachers (between 30% and 75%) who are aware of a moderate to high degree of stress in their work (Borg et al., 1991; Capel, 1991). Stress leads teachers to express in a significant way the typical characteristics of this disturbance (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, 1986): problems in personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

The appearance of burnout has been both related to contextual and individual variables. Most of the explanatory models introduce both groups of variables within a net of multiple relationships (Peiró, 1993; Schaufeli, Maslach, & Mareck, 1993; Shirom, 1993). Burnout could be explained as the transactional outcome of triggering contextual variables and the facilitating or inhibiting effect on personality variables (Shirom, 1993). However, personality has been less studied and even ignored for some time.

Among contextual variables, the most considered have been those which deal with working or organizational characteristics, such as role stressors, working conditions, students' behaviour problems, the need for professional recognition or prestige, level of specialization, teacher-student ratio, lack of resources, relationship with colleagues, social support, type of centre, etc. (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Borg et al., 1991; Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Dick & Wagner, 2001; Griffith, Steptoe, & Cropley, 1999;). Among individual variables, some demographic variables have been studied, such as age, sex or marital status (Billingsley & Cross, 1992), personality structure (Burisch, 2002; Fontana & Abouserie, 1993; Mills & Huebner, 1998; Zellars, Perrewé, & Hochwarter, 2000), coping strategies (Griffith et al., 1999; McElpatrick et al., 2000) or perceived self-efficacy (Dick & Wagner, 2001).

The relevance and significance of each of these groups of variables do not always point in the same direction, and in the majority of papers the study of contextual variables takes priority over that of individual variables. While the role of demographic variables turned out to be contradictory, the same did not happen in the role of contextual variables, where the majority of the results support the appearance of working stress and burnout (Griffith et al., 1999; Mills & Huebner, 1998).

As regards to personality, there have been fewer papers. For example, Fontana and Abouserie (1993), using Eysenck model (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985), have found associations between burnout and high scores in neuroticism, introversion and psychoticism, respectively. Using Big Five Models (Costa & McCrae, 1999), Mills and Huebner (1998) have shown that neuroticism and introversion correlate with the three factors of burnout. Moreover, emotional exhaustion was associated with the dimensions of conscientiousness and agreeableness; depersonalization was associated with agreeableness; and personal accomplishment with conscientiousness. Extraversion explained 10% of emotional exhaustion and 24% of personal accomplishment. On the other hand,

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