
32 Burnout and emotions: an underresearched issue in search of a theory

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Since the early 1970s, burnout research has developed from a science derogatively classified as 'pop-psychology' into an important branch of stress research in occupational and organizational psychology. Whereas 25 years ago anecdotic reports on burned out cases and efforts to clarify the definition and concept of burnout prevailed, nowadays the practical and scientific relevance of burnout research is generally acknowledged. This is mainly the consequence of two developments.

For one thing, the question of how to define burnout has been settled quite easily by the establishment of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach and Jackson, 1981a; Maslach *et al.*, 1996) as the most widely used instrument to measure burnout, that is emotional exhaustion (feelings of fatigue and of being drained by one's work), depersonalization (a negative attitude towards and a dehumanizing treatment of clients) and reduced personal accomplishment (lack of feelings of competence and achievements in one's work with people). The MBI was basically designed to assess burnout in 'helping' professions, hence the name, MBI-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). To assess burnout within occupations that are not people-oriented, a general version of MBI, the MBI-General Survey (MBI-GS) (Maslach *et al.*, 1996) has been developed. Similar to the MBI-HSS, its three components are denoted as exhaustion, cynicism and efficacy at work. Based upon the MBI and its inductive operationalization of burnout, the MBI-GS extends and generalizes the construct 'burnout'.

Secondly, the burnout phenomenon was taken up by occupational and organizational psychologists, who placed the construct of burnout into the framework of stress theory (Cherniss, 1980b; Leiter, 1991; Cox *et al.*, 1993; Hobfoll and Shirom, 1993) and who conducted (almost exclusively with the MBI) empirical studies concerning the relationship between working conditions, burnout and its concomitants (see Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998). Ever since burnout research has entered its empirical stage and situational and personal conditions of burnout were thoroughly examined, the theoretical framework of burnout research has been significantly expanded, during the 1990s especially, by analysing and emphasizing the importance of interaction between situation and person (see Maslach *et al.*, 2001). This was accompanied by further extensions of the construct, for instance the reinterpretation of burnout as an erosion of professional engagement (Maslach and Leiter, 1997) or as comprising different levels of activation and pleasure in one's work (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). A recent development is the growing interest in the relevance of emotion work and the regulation of emotions at work for the development of burnout (see Zapf, 2002).

By accentuating emotion work and regulation of emotions as central themes, the focus of attention lies again on an aspect which had already been of special interest at the very

beginning of burnout research, but which had moved into the background during the development of burnout into a scientific concept. In the early stages of burnout research, the prevailing perspective was to explain burnout as being caused by emotionally demanding interactions with other people, which were phenomenologically characterized by negative attitudes and emotions towards people and towards the job. In describing her early thinking about burnout, Maslach reports, 'The implication was that working with other people, particularly in a caregiving relationship, was at the heart of the burnout phenomenon.' (Maslach, 1993, p. 23). She defined burnout as a syndrome characterized (among others) by 'feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources' (p. 21). Accordingly the dominant dimension of the MBI was termed *emotional* exhaustion. Similarly, Pines *et al.*, authors of the popular book, 'Burnout—From Tedium to Personal Growth' (Pines *et al.*, 1981) defined burnout as a syndrome of physical, *emotional* and mental exhaustion. Meanwhile, however, the concept of burnout is expanded into a reaction that can occur in any profession and the 'emotional' component of exhaustion has been dropped, at least conceptually. The MBI-GS, the new variant of the MBI, 'defines burnout as a crisis in one's relationship with work, not necessarily as a crisis in one's relationship with people at work' (Maslach *et al.*, 1996, p. 20). It is constructed to measure a continuum from engagement to burnout: 'Engagement is an energetic state in which one is dedicated to excellent performance of work and confident of one's effectiveness. In contrast, burnout is a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform.' (*ibid.*)

The following will address the issue of the role of emotions in the development of burnout. In doing so, the main problem will be to determine whether the present operationalization of burnout in the MBI-HSS and MBI-GS really taps the primal aspect of the phenomenon and how to evaluate the results of previous studies (which were rather based upon a stress theory approach) against the background of the original idea of putting emotionally demanding interactions at the heart of the burnout phenomenon. Finally future directions of burnout research which could advance this early concept will be sketched.

Emotionally demanding interactions and burnout

To answer the question whether emotionally demanding interactions with clients are at the heart of the burnout phenomenon, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) reviewed 16 empirical studies that employed the three burnout dimensions of the MBI-HSS as criteria and measures of job and client-related stressors as predictors. Common job-related stressors such as work overload and time pressure should have minor effects on burnout compared to stressors resulting from the interaction with clients, such as emotionally demanding clients or confrontation with death and dying. However, contrary to expectations, in most studies common job-related stressors (workload, time pressure, role conflicts) correlated more strongly with burnout than client-related stressors (contact with terminally ill patients and conflicts in interactions). The authors concluded, 'Hence, it seems that, on empirical grounds, the assertion that burnout is particularly related to emotionally charged interactions with clients has to be refuted' (p. 84).

Reviewing results with respect to caseload and burnout, Koeske and Koeske (1989) did point to the necessity to distinguish between the number of client contacts (quantity) and

the type of client contact (quality): because heavy caseload also implies workload and time pressure, the number of client contacts might be confounded with problems in interacting with clients. The ratio of negative to positive contacts might be a better indicator of emotionally demanding interactions.

With regard to the three dimensions of the MBI, meta-analyses showed that emotional exhaustion is best predicted by job demands; the best predictors are workload and time pressure (Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998). The relationships to depersonalization are much weaker, the weakest that with personal accomplishment.

One objection to the results presented could be that nearly all studies included in the meta-analyses are based on cross-sectional studies that cannot distinguish between causes and effects. Moreover, because burnout is likely to be a long-term reaction, cross-sectional studies cannot reveal the factors responsible for the development of burnout. However, the main result that quantitative demands such as time pressure play a more important role than qualitative demands such as confrontation with death and dying, especially with respect to emotional exhaustion, was also found in a one-year longitudinal study (Enzmann, 1995).

Although validation studies showed that assessments of respondents' degree of burnout made independently by others or by component profiles of those who declare themselves to be burnt out validated only the emotional exhaustion scale of the MBI (see Cox *et al.*, 1993), at the same time results of numerous studies confirm the notion of Maslach (1993, p. 27) that 'emotional exhaustion is the closest to an orthodox stress variable'. It is noteworthy that especially *emotional* exhaustion is related to quantitative workload rather than qualitative demands that result from interacting with difficult clients or dealing with emotionally demanding situations. Apart from the conclusion that burnout is unrelated to emotional demands (which seems to be rather unlikely), there are at least two possible ways to interpret this result: the MBI does not measure burnout but something else, and emotional demands have not been properly investigated or operationalized, therefore individual processing of demands (coping and emotion regulation processes) deserve closer attention.

Burnout and the MBI: problems of operationalization

It is important to recognize that the MBI was not developed deductively by applying a validated theory of burnout. Instead, the initial research was very exploratory, the items of the MBI being drawn from interviews, other questionnaire surveys and observations. Exploratory factor analyses of, initially, 47 items resulted in the three factors currently known as emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA), plus a fourth factor, involvement, that was dropped later (Maslach and Jackson, 1981b). It is quite conceivable that another pool of items could have resulted in different dimensions of burnout, for example a much stronger factor of involvement or other items to assess emotional exhaustion. It is likely that this would have led to a different definition of burnout and it could have changed the course of research on burnout considerably. Because the MBI has been developed inductively, a replication of the factorial structure of the current MBI in different populations, or the correlation of its subscales with a range of possible causes, concomitants or consequences, is not necessarily an appropriate means to establish the validity of the construct as such and to develop a conclusive theory of burnout.

With respect to the factorial structure of the MBI, a close examination of the loadings shows that especially those items that tap interactions with clients have the lowest loadings on the subscale EE or tend to have common error variances with items of the subscale DP (Enzmann, 1995). This is a first indication that EE might not assess emotional exhaustion as it has been paraphrased and interpreted in the early publications (that is *emotional exhaustion* as a reaction to *emotionally demanding interactions* with other people).

The close relationship of emotional exhaustion (EE) as measured by the MBI with time pressure indicates that EE is rather a general measure of fatigue or general exhaustion. The frequency of situations characterized by time pressure (one of the strongest predictors of EE) is essentially a quantitative demand, for which fatigue is a characteristic reaction (Hacker and Richter, 1984). In contrast, emotionally demanding interactions, the assumed primal cause of burnout, are essentially a qualitative demand. In general, time pressure should correlate rather negatively with burnout because it forces professionals to reduce intense emotional involvement with their clients. This is in line with the results of a longitudinal study that showed that the effect of empathic distress on personal accomplishment (PA) is buffered by time pressure (Enzmann, 1995). The negative effect of empathic distress on burnout in terms of PA was less when time pressure was high. Thus EE as measured by the MBI seems to be a symptom of prolonged fatigue rather than burnout. This view is supported by a validity study that compared the psychometric properties of six fatigue questionnaires including EE in a sample of working people (De Vries *et al.*, 2003). A one-factor solution of all six measures was found with a high loading of EE (0.82). A secondary analysis with two factors employed by the author found EE to have the highest loading on the strongest factor (0.96), together with 'need for recovery' and measures of physical fatigue.

The items of the subscale depersonalization (DP) have special problems as well. Conceptually DP is the most interesting subscale because it links stressful and 'bad' situations of the job to unprofessional and dehumanizing behaviour of 'good people' towards their clients or people in need. However it is difficult to assess emotional hardening and cynical attitudes if the respondents have developed a high degree of depersonalization in its original sense. For example, a person who endorses the statement, 'I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally', cannot be completely depersonalized. In contrast, an affirmative answer can be interpreted as an indication that the respondent is *not* (yet) dehumanized or emotionally hardened. The fact, that DP correlates positively with EE is no counter argument, because it is likely that tired professionals happen to treat their clients in a callous manner. High scores on the subscale DP might indicate that the respondent is able to recognize this problem. Additionally this subscale suffers most from social desirable responding ($r = -0.31, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI} = -0.38 \text{ to } -0.24$) (Enzmann, 1995, p. 143).

To evaluate possible problems of the subscale personal accomplishment (PA) is more difficult. On the one hand, this scale shows the weakest correlations with the other subscales and with measures of stress that are typically included in research on stress and burnout. On the other hand, there are some results that fit the proposition that PA is a genuine burnout dimension. A study on emotion work and its effects on burnout (Zapf *et al.*, 2001) showed that although weakly related or unrelated to common job stressors (uncertainty, organizational problems, time pressure), PA correlated positively with the necessity to display positive emotions in interacting with clients and with the requirement

to pay attention to their feelings. In terms of explained variance, emotion work had the strongest effect on PA after controlling for gender, age, support and other job characteristics. Similarly a longitudinal study on the relationship between empathy and burnout (Enzmann, 1995) showed that PA was the only burnout dimension that was affected by interaction effects of empathy (perspective taking and empathic distress) with job stress (time pressure and confrontation with death and dying). Thus, with respect to emotional demands at work and emotional responding (empathy), the results fit better the notion of PA as a dimension of burnout that is affected by interpersonal emotions than EE and DP. Earlier research did not show this, probably because the studies used rather indirect indicators of emotional demands or emotional responding.

Alternatives of conceptualizing burnout and *emotional* exhaustion

Despite numerous attempts to develop theoretical models that explain burnout, only a few have tried to redefine the construct as such and the way to measure it. With the exception of the MBI-GB and the notion that burnout is a bipolar construct ranging from engagement to burnout (see above), none of the most prominent models (see Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998), for example the 'disturbed action pattern' model (Burisch, 1989), the 'conservation of resources' model (Hobfoll and Shirom, 1993), the 'existential' model of burnout (Pines, 1993), the 'social competence' model (Harrison, 1983), the model of emotional overload (Maslach, 1982), Leiter's process model of burnout (Leiter, 1993), the 'dual level social exchange model' (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1996), the 'reality shock' model (Cherniss, 1980a) or the 'environmental' model of burnout (Golembiewski and Munzenrider, 1988), challenges the way to *measure* burnout.

The most pronounced criticism of the prevailing definition of burnout has been elaborated by Cherniss (1986). Criticizing the metaphor of burnout as rooted in a mechanistic stress terminology, Cherniss proposes to conceptualize burnout as a 'symptom of the loss of social commitment' (p. 219), thereby rejecting the idea that burnout is a response to 'overcommitment'. Instead, burnout is thought to be caused by a weakening of the moral-religious paradigm and could be prevented if the work of professionals were based on a 'belief in a transcendent body of ideas and a strong identification with a group, institution, or method that is based on those ideas' (p. 219). With respect to the phenomenology of burnout, Cherniss expects the truly committed to feel very energetic, whereas professionals feel drained and exhausted if social commitment is lacking.

Another reconceptualization has been proposed recently by Schaufeli and his colleagues, who characterize burnout as low levels of activation and pleasure and the opposite of burnout as engagement, 'as a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption' (Maslach *et al.*, 2001, p. 417). To measure engagement, a questionnaire has been developed that showed a high correlation between engagement and the efficacy dimension of the MBI-GS (see Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Whereas burnout as measured by the MBI correlates more strongly with job demands, engagement is more strongly related to job resources. However the idea that emotions at work and the regulation of emotions might be the most significant precursor of burnout has been abandoned.

Despite the prevailing claim since the beginning of burnout research that emotional exhaustion is a central characteristic of burnout, there is still no clear conceptual definition

of *emotional* exhaustion. The line of argument has always been rather fuzzy: because the professionals become exhausted owing to excessive *emotional* demands, the exhaustion is *emotional*; alternatively, because the emotions towards clients or the job change and become more negative, or because the professionals harden emotionally, the engagement is reduced; because the result of less engagement is accompanied by more negative *emotions* or more *callous* interactions, it is termed *emotional* exhaustion.

But is it really possible at all to become emotionally exhausted in analogy to physical exhaustion where increased efforts can compensate a depletion of energy? An answer from a functionalist perspective on emotions is 'One cannot really elicit emotion at will; one can only work oneself into it, to some extent. Also, one cannot really abolish emotion at will; one can only work oneself out of it, to some extent, for some duration' (Frijda, 1986, p. 468). That means that emotional exhaustion is rather a surface phenomenon; emotional exhaustion, in the sense that it becomes more difficult to feel, is not possible because it is impossible to feel at will. However it is possible to promote conditions at will that generate or facilitate the experience and expression of certain emotions, and this capacity may become exhausted.

What can cause the exhaustion of the capacity to regulate one's emotions indirectly? And what is the effect of a state of low energy or physical fatigue that is often encountered among people who were subjected to prolonged stress and excessive demands? On the one hand, physical exhaustion and a state of low energy is likely to contribute to the diminished capacity to regulate one's emotions at will by creating situations or cognitions that facilitate the experience or expression of emotions that in turn help to regulate interpersonal behaviour. On the other hand, physical exhaustion does not necessarily imply a reduction of emotional responsiveness. Some emotional responses are 'a function of exhaustion, prolonged stress, or illness. We refer here to the complex of enhanced irritability, anxiousness, and sentimentality, of enhanced startle responses and diminished concentration and pain tolerance' (*ibid.*, p. 406). Thus a state of low energy should not be equated with emotional exhaustion in the sense of reduced emotional responsiveness.

There are several ways to regulate one's emotion experiences and emotional expressions indirectly. One can change (or leave) emotion-inducing situations, one can change the attention to situational aspects that are linked to certain emotional responses; one can change the meaning of such situational aspects (reappraisal); and finally one can try to modulate one's emotional responses if they occur (suppression) (Gross and John, 2003). Perhaps it is the capacity and the way to regulate one's emotional experiences and expressions indirectly that distinguishes experienced and efficient professionals that show no signs of burnout from inexperienced burned-out professionals. This might explain why training in psychosocial interventions that include (among others) engagement skills, mood assessment, training of coping strategies and expression of emotions may have pronounced effects on reducing burnout, especially with regard to depersonalization and personal accomplishment (for example, Ewers *et al.*, 2002).

Future directions of research on burnout and emotions

The emotional 'components' of exhaustion, especially the emotional consequences of demands at work, deserve more attention. If the lack of capacity to regulate one's own emotional experiences and expressions that influence interactions with other people

positively is at the heart of burnout in its original sense, one should try to find means to assess (changes in) this capacity. To explain burnout one has to explain how it happens that this capacity diminishes. This comes close to the beginning of Maslach's research on burnout: 'the research did not even begin with a focus on burnout at all. Instead, my interest was in emotion and in the general question of how people "know" what they are feeling' (Maslach, 1993, p. 21). Thus, burnout research in this sense would return to its roots and become a theory of the situations that allow and suppress the capacity to regulate one's own and others' emotions, respectively the social, attitudinal and emotional consequences of factors that inhibit professionals' emotion work. Recent research has shown that the way in which people try to regulate their emotions has important consequences for their affect, their relationships and their well-being. Gross and John (2003) showed that attempts to suppress the experience or the expression of positive or negative emotions are more costly and have more negative consequences than antecedent-focused emotion regulation that aims at emotion-eliciting situations or its meanings.

This line of research would complement recent approaches that began to investigate the relationship of emotion work and emotional well-being (see Zapf, 2002). In this line of research job requirements with respect to expressing and sensing emotions, as well as emotion work strategies (automatic emotion regulation, deep acting, surface acting, emotional deviance, sensing emotions) are investigated. Classical burnout research in the orthodox paradigm of work stress has contributed enormously to our knowledge of organizational and task-related working conditions and personality factors that contribute to exhaustion, cynicism and feelings of inefficacy, including its consequences for clients or the organization. To supplement this research with the focus on emotions, emotional demands and emotion regulation at work seems to be promising. It is doubtful, however, whether the prevailing conceptualization of burnout and the current way to measure it will suffice for this task.

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