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Is burnout solely job-related? A critical comment

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Within the field-dominating, multidimensional theory of burnout, burnout is viewed as a work-specific condition. As a consequence, the burnout syndrome cannot be investigated outside of the occupational domain. In the present paper, this restrictive view of burnout's scope is criticized and a rationale to decide between a work-specific and a generic approach to burnout is presented. First, the idea that a multidimensional conception of burnout implies a work-restricted scope is deconstructed. Second, it is shown that the burnout phenomenon cannot be confined to work because chronic, unresolvable stress – the putative cause of burnout – is not limited to work. In support of an integrative view of health, it is concluded that the field-dominating, multidimensional theory of burnout should abandon as groundless the idea that burnout is a specifically job-related phenomenon and define burnout as a *multi-domain syndrome*. The shift from a work-specific to a generic approach would allow both finer analysis and wider synthesis in research on chronic stress and burnout.

Key words: Burnout, chronic stress, generic approach, Maslach Burnout Inventory, occupational stress, scope.

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IS BURNOUT SOLELY JOB-RELATED? A CRITICAL COMMENT

Introduced in the mid-1970s (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976), the burnout construct has received growing attention from researchers in psychology and psychiatry over the years, with different models of the burnout phenomenon having been developed (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). To date, Maslach's model¹ (Maslach, 1982, 1998, 2003) is the leading model in the field of burnout research (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach, 2009). Within this model, burnout is viewed as a work-related chronic stress syndrome made up of exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, 1996; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). Exhaustion characterizes an emotionally drained and physically used up worker. Cynicism refers to a distant and callous attitude toward one's job and especially the people with whom one interacts when working (e.g., students, clients, patients). Lastly, lack of professional efficacy includes feelings of incompetence, uselessness, and lost self-confidence. These three dimensions are assessed with a dedicated, self-administered questionnaire, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981, 1986; Maslach *et al.*, 1996), which is considered the "gold standard" for the measurement of burnout and has been used in a vast majority of studies bearing on the syndrome (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). Despite 40 years of sustained research, gray areas subsist in the definition of burnout (Cox, Tisserand & Taris, 2005; Shirom, 2003, 2005). Reducing this conceptual uncertainty is important if burnout research is to progress.

A central object of controversy surrounding the definition of burnout is its context-dependency (Cox *et al.*, 2005; Farber, 1983; Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Pines & Aronson, 1988; Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981;

Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009; Warr, 1990). Whereas some researchers posit that burnout is a work-specific phenomenon (e.g., Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2005), others hold that burnout is cross-domain or context-free and can occur as the result of chronic difficulties in virtually any sphere of life (e.g., Hallsten, 1993; Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen & Christensen, 2005; Pines, Neal, Hammer & Icekson, 2011; Pines & Nunes, 2003). Within Maslach's model, burnout is defined as "a crisis in one's relationship with work" (Maslach *et al.*, 1996, p. 20) and the "work-relatedness" of burnout is presented as a distinctive feature of the construct (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). For instance, the conceptual distinction between burnout and depression notably relies on the idea that burnout is job-related and situation-specific whereas depression is context-free and pervasive (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Although the work-restricted character of burnout constitutes a core tenet of Maslach's model (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009), the justification for the tenet remains limited (Cox *et al.*, 2005) and has led to a circular trap. Indeed, by using an exclusively job-focused instrument as the MBI for assessing burnout, the investigator acts as if the problem of establishing burnout's scope has already been solved (Kasl, 1978; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Empirically speaking, several studies have linked (job) burnout to non-occupational factors and situation-unspecific characteristics. Burnout has been associated with symptoms manifesting themselves in non-work situations (e.g., general cognitive impairment; Bianchi, Boffy, Hingray, Truchot & Laurent, 2013; Sandström, Rhodin, Lundberg, Olsson & Nyberg, 2005) as well as with personal life events (e.g., major illness; Dyrbye *et al.*, 2006; Lopes Cardozo, Gotway Crawford, Eriksson *et al.*, 2012) and family-related features (e.g., number of children; Ayala & Carnero, 2013; Bekker, Croon & Bressers, 2005; Greenglass & Burke, 1988; Landsbergis, 1988; Leiter, 1990; Lingard, 2004; ten Brummelhuis, van der

Lippe, Kluwer & Flap, 2008), suggesting that purely job-focused approaches to burnout may be of limited interest. Moreover, endorsing an extended meaning of the term *occupation*, numerous studies have fruitfully traced burnout in the context of being a student in high school and university (Ishak, Nikravesh, Lederer, Perry, Ogunyemi & Bernstein, 2013; May, Sanchez-Gonzalez, Brown, Koutnik & Fincham, 2013; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen & Holopainen, 2009). All in all, it is unclear whether burnout should be considered a syndrome that is solely job-related or develops as a result of experiences in a variety of contexts.

The main aims of this paper are to (a) critically examine the way burnout's scope is conceived within Maslach's model and (b) propose a rationale to define burnout's scope, based on the consensual view that chronic stress is the fundamental cause of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Shirom, 2003; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). The idea underlying this paper is that the scope of burnout is not satisfactorily defined within the field-dominating, multidimensional theory of burnout. Targeted analyses of emblematic questions were preferred over a linear literature review given the relative absence of theory regarding the scope of burnout. Rigorously defining burnout's scope is crucial to clarifying the burnout construct.

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENCY

Although the issue of burnout's scope has been addressed in the past (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993), this has been done essentially descriptively, and the work-specific character of the burnout phenomenon has been postulated rather than demonstrated. Thus, the *reason* for limiting (the study of) burnout to work has long remained elusive (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). Recently, an explanation has been provided on this topic by contributors to Maslach's model (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). In support of the idea that burnout cannot develop outside of work, it has been affirmed that a multidimensional burnout construct is *by definition* incompatible with the notion that burnout is a context-free phenomenon. The aim here is to show that such an assertion does not stand up to scrutiny, leaving intact the possibility of extending the burnout construct beyond the occupational domain. In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the discussed position while not betraying any nuance in that position, a detailed quotation is provided right below.

a multi-dimensional approach as in the MBI is by definition incompatible with the notion of context-free burnout ... A retired or unemployed person may feel exhausted, but it is impossible to identify the "something" about which unemployed or retired people should feel cynical or inefficacious. Hence, arguing that burnout is a generic, context-free phenomenon goes necessarily hand in hand with a limited definition of burnout as the equivalent to exhaustion. (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009, p. 212)

The statement that burnout cannot be both multidimensional and context-free is problematic. Any object that is invested in by (or important for) an individual – whether related or unrelated to work – can be a "target" for cynicism and feelings of inefficacy, and there is no reason to postulate that the object in question

would be less identifiably burnout-related if it is unrelated to work. Cynicism refers to an attitude of detachment and withdrawal (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005), that is, to a disinvestment strategy that can apply to any previously invested-in object that did not provide the individual with the expected return on investment. The investment-disinvestment mechanism is both fundamental and general in the relational economy linking human beings to their (social) environment (Bourdieu, 2003) and there is no reason to confine that mechanism to work. For instance, a husband can feel cynical about his marriage that is a failure and withdraw from the marital relationship. Similarly, a father can become cynical about parenthood given an ungrateful teenage son who chronically treats him disrespectfully. The same line of reasoning can be followed with sense of inefficacy. Sense of inefficacy refers to feelings of incompetence and failed achievement (Maslach *et al.*, 1996). Virtually anything we do can elicit such feelings in us if we chronically estimate that we do it wrong. A husband can experience a sense of inefficacy each time he is unable to manage a conjugal conflict. A father can feel inefficacious each time he fails to communicate with his rebellious teenage son. To take one of the examples provided by Schaufeli and his colleagues (2009), if chronically unemployed, one may feel cynical and inefficacious toward one's own unemployment and fruitless job search. Thus, unemployment is not *per se* unrelated to burnout.

The claim that a multidimensional approach to burnout is by definition incompatible with a context-free concept of burnout appears to be mistaken. Wherever there is an investment, there can be a defensive disinvestment and an emergence of cynical attitudes (Beck & Alford, 2009; Bourdieu, 2003; Nesse, 2000; Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993). In a similar vein, wherever an action is produced, a sense of inefficacy can develop, resulting in a persisting feeling that one is incompetent and unable to cope with the challenges at hand (Bandura, 1982; Beck & Alford, 2009; Laborit, 1986; Peterson *et al.*, 1993). Pines and Aronson (1988, p. 208), with reference to their unidimensional, "exhaustion-only," theory of burnout, pointed out that "it is possible to be a burned-out husband, a burned-out wife, or a burned-out parent". This possibility is not *a priori* eliminated by the adoption of a three-component definition of burnout linking exhaustion to cynicism and sense of inefficacy.

That burnout was first observed in relation to work is by no means a proof that it is specific to the occupational domain. As demonstrated in this first part of the paper, opposition to the idea that burnout may be cross-domain or context-free is not justified by an adherence to a multidimensional conception of burnout. The next section shows that an etiology-guided approach to the scope of burnout actually pleads for a multi-domain study of the syndrome.

TOWARD A SOLUTION

In order to determine whether or not burnout is a work-specific syndrome, it is necessary to consider the fundamental cause of burnout, namely, unresolvable stress (Chrousos, 2009; Chrousos & Gold, 1992; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). Interestingly, from a stress perspective, the problem of burnout's scope can be solved without speculation. Any activity able to elicit an acute

stress response in the organism can potentially elicit a chronic activation of the stress response – this is a question of frequency and intensity – and, therefore, contribute to the development of burnout, which is conceived of as a product of chronic stress (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Shirom, 2003; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). This line of reasoning leads to a conclusion that differs from that of the proponents of Maslach's model (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009): Burnout can only be considered a multi-domain syndrome, given that chronic stress is not a job-restricted phenomenon. This conclusion is notably in accordance with models of burnout proposed by Pines and Aronson (1988, p. 208), for whom burnout “can occur in all spheres of life that give people a sense of meaning,” and Kristensen and colleagues (2005), who assessed burnout regardless of an individual's occupational status. In addition, this conclusion is consistent with findings showing that (generic) stressful and traumatic life events are associated with burnout (e.g., Mather, Blom & Svedberg, 2014).

To date, the idea that burnout can develop outside of the workplace can only be found within some minority conceptions of burnout (e.g., Pines *et al.*, 2011). By acknowledging that the field-dominating, multidimensional conception of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001) is compatible with a generic approach to burnout, it becomes possible to use the MBI as a basis to study burnout beyond the occupational context (e.g., parental or conjugal burnout) or within a context-independent approach. This point is critical for research advance given that (a) the MBI is by far the most widely used instrument for assessing burnout – by the end of the 1990s, the MBI was used in more than 90% of the journal articles dealing with burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) – and (b) the MBI reflects a unique conception of burnout as a combination of exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy. Our demonstration thus illuminates new avenues for integrative research on burnout, in the service of multilevel, health-promoting interventions.

BURNOUT VERSUS DEPRESSION

Before concluding, we would like to address an issue for which the problem of burnout's scope has implications. In order to distinguish burnout from depression, it has been advanced that, unlike depression, burnout is work-specific (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Hence, some authors have suggested that the adoption of a context-free approach to the burnout phenomenon might undermine the added value of the burnout construct with respect to the concept of depression (see Shirom, 2005). In our view, this should not be a concern for at least two reasons. First, linking the singularity of burnout to its work-relatedness is questionable given that depression can be work-related as well (Clays, De Bacquer, Leynen, Kornitzer, Kittel & De Backer, 2007; Clumeck *et al.*, 2009; Kahn, 2008; Rugulies, Bültmann, Aust & Burr, 2006; Rydmark *et al.*, 2006; Schonfeld, 2001; Siegrist, 2008; Tennant, 2001). The distinctiveness of burnout, if actual, has to lie elsewhere. Second, it is worth noting that the phenomena underlying the label of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy – should not be restricted to the occupational area *a priori*. If exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy can be encountered in response to chronic stressors in various domains of life (e.g., in the parental or conjugal domain), these

encounters should simply be recognized and assimilated, regardless of what this implies for the resolution of the burnout-depression issue. In sum, the adoption of a generic approach to burnout should not be rejected but welcomed by researchers interested in better understanding the burnout phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Within the field-dominating, multidimensional theory of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001), burnout explicitly refers to a work-specific phenomenon. Consequently, the burnout construct cannot be applied to conditions outside of work. The present paper advanced the view that a restrictive conception of burnout is groundless. It was argued that rejecting a context-free approach to burnout by claiming that it is incompatible with a multidimensional definition of the construct is not justified. Crucially, it was affirmed that burnout's scope can be consistently defined by getting back to what lies at the heart of burnout, namely, chronic stress. On this basis, burnout cannot be confined to the occupational sphere because chronic stress is not confined to the occupational sphere. Exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy, the usually-recognized components of burnout, can thus develop in response to chronically-occurring occupational and nonoccupational difficulties.

In Maslach's model, burnout has long been conceptualized as a syndrome limited to human services employees (e.g., teachers, social workers) before it was recognized that workers from any occupational group could be affected (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, 1986; Maslach *et al.*, 1996). The time has come to acknowledge that the burnout syndrome is not circumscribed to the sphere of work either. Conceiving burnout as a multicontextual syndrome may provide researchers with new lines of inquiry to understand the complex interactions between stressors endured at work and in other domains of life (Bakker, 2009; Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005; Westman, Brough & Kalliath, 2009). This may help shape a lifespan approach to burnout (Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker & Sixma, 2011) combining within and between-individual perspectives. Importantly, a widening of the scope to which burnout applies may also provide practitioners with new opportunities to prevent the adverse effects of chronic stress. It has been emphasized that “burnout researchers should carefully scrutinize the models that they implicitly or explicitly use to relate the measures of burnout to the construct that they seek to understand and predict” (Shirom, 2005, p. 268). This paper, as a theoretical prelude to further empirical research, was intended to serve this objective.

NOTE

¹ By using the expression “Maslach's model,” we neither ignore nor minimize the contributions of many researchers to the elaboration of this model (e.g., S. E. Jackson, M. P. Leiter, W. B. Schaufeli). This linguistic shortcut is only intended to promote content's concision.

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