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Effective therapies for burnout need teamwork between academics and health care providers.

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Summary

Burnout research over the past 30 years has yielded both knowledge and tools to apply to interventions at unit and organizational levels. Examples of innovative partnerships between researchers and practitioners point to the importance of multi-level approaches in generating relevant and effective solutions to the burnout problem.

Keywords: burnout; engagement; interventions; multi-level

Introduction

Over 35 years ago, a practitioner (Freudenberger) and a researcher (Maslach) started to write about this hitherto unidentified occurrence, and the topic of burnout was born. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), the gold standard for studying burnout, was published in the Journal of Organizational Behavior 30 years ago. The question of "what can we actually do about burnout?" has been of paramount importance from the start; that is, how can the findings of this study be used to create treatments that are likely to be successful? The earliest researchers to study burnout had to deal with competing demands from academia and the job. Practitioners were unhappy with the sluggish pace of research and its "ivory tower" character, while burnout research would be derogated within academia as "pop psychology," or as merely "old wine in new bottles," or as overly applied rather than fundamental study.

Initial studies on burnout were mostly experimental, bottom-up, and based on participants' own experiences. It became clear from this study of careers in human services that emotional tiredness and depersonalization are common reactions to the stress of these sometimes thankless occupations, as does a diminishing feeling of personal accomplishment. To move the field of study forward, standardizing the measurement of burnout was an important next step. Maslach and Jackson (1981) took on this psychometric task and created the MBI to evaluate the aforementioned trifecta of topics. In its most current iteration, the MBI-General Survey, weariness, cynicism, and inefficacy were added to the definitional words of the three dimensions (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) has been translated into many languages and has been the gold standard for measuring burnout in studies all around the globe. For instance, in a review of the literature conducted by Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998), 90% of the studies used the MBI as a component of their analysis. As we developed our theory of burnout, we came to see the spectrum of employee emotions and attitudes toward their work as spanning from the negative experience of burnout (fatigue, cynicism, and a lack of efficacy) to the positive experience of engagement (energy, participation, and a sense of purpose). In contrast to the traditional view of burnout as a discrete state, response distributions on the MBI were consistent with this concept. This continuum between burnout and engagement has practical implications since engagement should be a target of any burnout therapies. By using this approach, businesses may determine what kinds of workplace improvements will have the most impact on their workers' enthusiasm, resilience, and engagement in their work, as well as their commitment, confidence, and job satisfaction. Individual-level studies on burnout have been conducted for three decades, yielding insights into how workers respond to their jobs in terms of satisfaction, commitment, absence, intention to leave, and turnover (e.g., Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, & Silber, 2002; Wright & Bonett, 1997). Work overload, lack of control, insufficient reward, breakdown of community, absence of fairness, and value conflict are six broad domains of job-person mismatch that have come to be recognized by burnout scholars as primary correlates of burnout as research has progressed. Any or all of these areas may match well with workers' preferences or capabilities, fostering engagement, while bad alignments may increase burnout. We created the Areas of Work life Scale (AWS) to put this theoretical framework into practice by measuring the complete range of job-person fit to misfit across these six dimensions (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

Let's go back to the beginning of the issue of burnout and the need for immediate action to test and create remedies. Do we now have the information and resources necessary to make more successful organizational interventions, thanks to advances in knowledge and technology? We like to think so. But we also believe that being more strategically proactive in building good relationships between scholars and practitioners is a key incubating notion. Our latest findings show how collaborations like these may boost employee satisfaction and productivity.

The majority of our recent studies have included teams of employees in real-world workplace settings, using a set of common tools and procedure we term a "organizational checkup." First, we create a company-specific survey with the goal of receiving a 70%+ response rate from employees. By integrating our study measures with evaluations of chosen topics of relevance to the specific firm, the approach engages managers and improves their interest and collaboration (Leiter & Maslach, 2000). The compiled survey findings for the company as a whole and its key units are then disseminated to all staff and used to inform improvements to working conditions. Organizational evaluations benefit from the use of these surveys, which combine the AWS and the MBI, since they show where and whether burnout is a serious problem in the workplace, as well as what areas are troublesome. Researchers have shown that burnout rates (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and work unit injury rates (Leiter & Maslach, 2009) may be predicted using a combination of these two metrics over the course of a year. These results demonstrate the value of the MBI and the AWS for conducting assessments inside organizations in order to diagnose existing issues, foresee possible future difficulties, and implement timely preventative measures.

Although we originally developed the organizational checkup process to ensure high quality samples for our research, we have found that it can become a valuable, ongoing self-assessment process for organizations. For example, one of the first organizations to collaborate with us has continued to use this process annually, for their own improvement, for over 10 years. Some of their interventions involved redesigning staff recognition programs and making them fairer, whereas others focused on improving community issues, such as internal communications and leadership training for new supervisors. The lesson here is that the methods and tools developed for research may have a second, practical use within the workplace—and we would recommend that researchers could provide a valuable social function by actively collaborating with practitioners to achieve these additional benefits. This is a different form of "applied" research, and its value should be recognized, and encouraged, within the academy.

Using a Unit Level of Analysis for Intervention

For years, we have heard repeated calls for scholarship that has more apparent relevance to the everyday work of practicing managers. The field of organizational behavior has no singular answer to how best to achieve the desired degree of "relevance" in our research, but addressing phenomena at higher levels of analysis is one possible strategy. Organizations are designed and managed around work units. Usually, managers are held accountable for large groups of employees, not only individuals. When their performance as managers is evaluated, the measures are typically aggregated indicators, such as productivity, turnover rates, and work unit engagement. In organizations where burnout is a potential issue, interventions to prevent or ameliorate it are often designed for, and implemented across, entire departments or business units. Decisions about how to monitor and manage burnout are often made in the context of the needs of an entire organization—or at least numerous units within the organization. Thus, the relevance of future research on burnout may grow to the extent that it is conceptualized and conducted with the objective of drawing implications and conclusions that apply to managing work units.

Prior research on burnout provides strategic directions for collaboration at these unit levels. First, the strategy for organizational intervention is to change qualities of the work environment with strong links to enhanced employee engagement. The diverse range of burnout's organizational precursors in the six domains of the AWS presents many potential intervention targets. For example, a mismatch on the community area of work-life may suggest work on team building or civility, whereas a mismatch on fairness may suggest increasing transparency of decision making. The challenge is then to identify leverage points at which a feasible investment of resources would produce a meaningful improvement in employees' connection with their work.

An innovative example of this approach is a project on civility among coworkers. Research has found that coworker and supervisor relationships have strong links with burnout (e.g., Leiter & Maslach, 1988), but clearer evidence about the social mechanisms was only recently suggested by research on the negative impact of coworker incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Incivility is characterized by a lack of consideration and by demonstrations of disrespect of ambiguous intent, as specified in the Workplace Incivility Scale, for example, "Ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie" (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001, p. 70). Because of its milder nature and greater frequency, incivility provides different research or an intervention focus than relatively rare instances of abuse or aggression.

A structured process, CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work; Osatuke, Mohr, Ward, Moore, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009), has been demonstrated to improve civility among coworkers; these results suggested that improved civility would in turn affect employee burnout. The approach builds upon clear principles of respectful working relationships while using a loose structure that allows workgroups to adapt the process to their specific challenges and their local values. CREW seeks to infuse qualities of civility into workgroups' preferred style of interacting. Qualities of civility include being attentive to colleagues, listening to their views and concerns, accommodating one another's preferences, and anticipating the impact of one's behavior on others.

The CREW process occurs through local facilitators who lead regular sessions of workgroup members over a six-month period. Guided by a toolkit of group exercises and discussion topics, the group reflects upon their usual mode of interacting and explores alternatives. After role playing new ways of responding to colleagues, participants try out new social behaviors during their workdays, reflecting on these experiences in subsequent

CREW sessions. Using a waiting list control design, Leiter, Laschinger, Day and Gilin-Oore (2011) demonstrated that CREW not only improved civility (replicating the Osatuke et al., 2009 findings) but that improvements in civility also mediated improvements in the cynicism dimension of burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and management trust. This analysis provided support for the assertion that improving working relationships plays an important role in alleviating burnout.

The research design for this project had several features of a successful collaboration of researchers and practitioners. First, the problem—workplace incivility—was identified in conversations between researchers and organizational leaders as both an urgent issue needing solutions and a topic with a rich potential to contribute to knowledge. Second, the participating organizations played a major role in the intervention, in that the facilitators were ongoing employees who developed the capacity to facilitate CREW sessions. This quality gave the knowledge to the organizations to help them address future challenges in workplace relationships. Third, each party made essential contributions to the project. The organizations contributed the opportunity and facilitators; the researchers contributed high-quality measurement that critically evaluated CREW's impact.

Focusing on Multi-Level Effects

Scholarship within the broad field of organizational behavior has rapidly expanded to consider phenomena at multiple levels of analysis. By bringing a multi-level lens to investigations of organizational behavior, the field is beginning to develop deeper understandings of the complex intertwining of individual and social phenomena. Looking ahead, we envision more multi-level approaches in future research on burnout as well.

More than 30 years have passed since Roberts, Hulin, and Rousseau (1978) laid out a framework for integrating organizational scholarship grounded in “micro” and “macro” approaches. Multi-level models such as those recognize that individuals are embedded in nested organizational entities. Employees often work closely with members of a small work team, which resides in a larger business unit, which is embedded in an organization that spans multiple geographic boundaries (e.g., districts, states, provinces, and countries).

Earlier research conducted at the individual level of analysis suggested the important role such social systems play in the unfolding of burnout phenomena. With recent methodological and statistical advances, many practical barriers to conducting research that matches the rich multi-level reality of organizational life have been removed. Multi-level research promises to stimulate both new conceptual thinking and the development of knowledge that can be put to practical use to reduce burnout in organizations. For example, separating the individual and workgroup dynamics of exhaustion would provide direction for developing distinct interventions that focus on improving management practices at the team level or workplace health practices at the individual level. Greater understanding of the distinct social dynamics of organizational units has the potential to help sustain gains from organizational interventions. Activities and policies that fit the local context are more likely to establish self-perpetuating cycles of actions and responses that maintain constructive change.

Burnout has a future. By anchoring a continuum of personal experiences, the burnout construct has provided a foundation for continuing explorations of psychological connections of people with their work from both positive and negative perspectives. We have touched upon the potential of these ideas for incubating new insights regarding the social context of psychological relationships with work.

Author biographies

Christina Maslach, PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. Her current research is addressing cross-cultural comparisons of burnout and engagement in both China and Latin America, as well as investigating potential interventions. For more details, visit <http://maslach@socialpsychology.org>
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