IMPLICATIONS OF BURNOUT ON INTENT TO LEAVE

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ABSTRACT

The past 35 years have included a rise in research on burnout and its implications for employees and organizations. Among the many causes of burnout, work overload results in exhaustion, disengagement, and employee turnover, which is expensive for companies. The intent of this study was to confirm previous research studies by exploring the antecedents, symptoms, and consequences of burnout. Therefore, we measured the variables of work overload, burnout, and intent to leave, using the Quantitative Workload Inventory, Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, and Intention to Quit Scale. We used convenience snowball sampling and an online survey to acquire men and women (N=108) living in the United States who were 18 years of age or older. We hypothesized that there is a positive correlation between burnout and intent to leave. Furthermore, we expected to find a positive correlation between work overload and burnout. Correlation/regression tests supported these hypotheses, revealing positive and statistically significant correlations. Combined, these findings suggest that people who are subject to a high workload tend to experience burnout; and people who are experiencing burnout are likely to harbor the intent to leave their job. For employers, the consequences of burnout are damaging and expensive; further implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Burnout, Work over load, Intent to leave, Correlation, Regression

INTRODUCTION

Implications of Burnout on Intent to leave for the past 35 years, extensive research has been conducted on the global phenomena of job burnout, its causes, and its impacts. It is a significant problem which may have far-reaching consequences for both individuals and organizations. On an individual level, some of the potential ramifications include a deterioration of physical/mental health and a negative attitude toward one’s work that
manifests as disengagement and intent to leave. Furthermore, it seems that organizations may suffer financial losses due to absenteeism, reduced productivity and performance, and turnover. Though burnout has been widely studied, the majority of studies have been cross sectional as opposed to longitudinal; while the correlations between variables and burnout are clear, the direct causes and effects are not certain.

Among the various factors contributing to burnout, workload plays an important role. An examination of the evolution of research on work overload, burnout, engagement, and turnover will lay the foundation for this research proposal [1], [2], [3]. Since the emergence of burnout in the 1970s, there has been a growing movement to understand and prevent it. Initially, burnout was explored mainly in the human services occupation, and Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) were credited with defining the construct and developing a method of measuring it in employees. According to Maslach et al. (2001), burnout is a condition resulting from long term exposure to workplace stressors, including work overload, lack of resources, high emotional demands, and social tension. It is revealed through the three main components of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Exhaustion is the most commonly expressed symptom of burnout. Employees experience exhaustion due to work overload and the volume of interaction with people who the employee serves. Individual defense mechanisms kick in to protect people and help them cope with this stress, which results in employees withdrawing from their work.

The second component of burnout, cynicism/depersonalization, relates to this withdrawal or distancing and it’s various manifestations depending on the occupation. For example, in health services or education, it is challenging for employees to continuously connect to large numbers of people on an emotional and compassionate level. Therefore, through depersonalization, employees disconnect from the unique human relationship with the people they are serving and perceive them as merely objects and tasks to be completed at work. In other professions, this exhaustion and the resulting distancing is evidenced through cynicism or an indifferent attitude [4].

The third component of burnout is inefficacy, which involves a self-assessment of personal accomplishment. Inefficacy is intricately related to exhaustion and cynicism. When
employees are incessantly subjected to intense workplace stressors such as work overload and resource scarcity, this may lead to the self-perception of a decrease in performance. In addition, exhaustion and cynicism/depersonalization impede goal accomplishment due to the depletion of energy, negative attitudes/behaviors, and emotional detachment from the people being served.

In response to burnout, The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was developed as a tool to measure the three dimensions of burnout. Because the phenomenon was first observed with human services and healthcare employees, the initial questionnaire was developed for employees who are faced with the demands and emotional stress of serving people. During the late 1980s, the idea that burnout was specific to human services occupations was challenged. Through empirical research, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) asserted that burnout was experienced in a variety of professions. In response to this, the MBI-General Survey (GS) was developed to examine burnout in other industries.

Even though the Maslach Burnout Inventory is the most widely used burnout assessment tool, it has been criticized for the phrasing of its subscales, which are one-sided, instead of developing an equal number of positive and negative phrases for each subscale. For example, negative phrasing is used for exhaustion and cynicism while positive phrasing is used for professional efficacy. This can lead to errors in the results and interpretation of the survey because the phrasing of all items in one direction can result in answering bias [5].

Research revealed another shortcoming of the MBI with respect to professional efficacy. While the exhaustion and cynicism/distancing burnout dimensions consistently display a strong positive correlation, the relationship between professional efficacy and these two dimensions is weak. According to Taris, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, and Schreurs (2005), the burnout dimensions can impact each other; for example, exhaustion can lead to distancing/withdrawal. On the other hand, a decrease in personal accomplishment/professional efficacy grows independently of the other two components, which raises the question of whether professional efficacy is truly a burnout component [6].

As a result of this debate, many researchers assert that the main dimensions of burnout are exhaustion and withdrawal/mental distancing. The Oldenburg Burnout Instrument was created to address the shortcomings of the MBI. It measures exhaustion and disengagement, which is synonymous with mental distancing/cynicism. Furthermore, it
employs a balance of positive and negative item phrasing. For example, each subscale has four positively phrased items and four negatively phrased items.

Along with burnout instruments, other sources of scholarly debate include the causes of burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) maintain that emotional components weigh more heavily than other job stressors in relation to burnout, emphasizing the prevalence of burnout within human services occupations. In contrast, the job demands-resources (JD-R) model asserts that burnout is caused by high job demands and limited resources, which drain employees’ energy and enthusiasm for work. Since job stressors are experienced across all industries, this phenomena can occur in any profession.

Furthermore, the JD-R model proposes that burnout begins with the process of constantly experiencing excessive job demands, which result in exhaustion. Job resources add to the equation because if employees are provided with adequate organizational and social resources, they are better able to handle the job demand. Conversely, a scarcity of resources compounds this exhaustion as employees lack the resources to meet the already high demands. As a result, employees disengage as a means of protection.

As evidenced by the research, the risks of burnout are many, and it has an impact on employee and organizational health. Often, it leads to employee turnover, which is expensive for organizations. In a research study of newspaper firm employee burnout, Jung and Kim (2012) explore the causes and consequences of burnout within a newspaper firm in Korea through the use of surveys/questionnaires. Some of the causative agents of burnout were identified as overload and time pressure, specifically impacting exhaustion. Other factors were organizational support for autonomy and job satisfaction. In alignment with previous research in other industries, burnout was revealed through the development of cynicism and decreased personal accomplishment. In turn, this led to intention to leave and turnover [7].

While this study confirms findings of previous literature, some weaknesses include the fact that the results were measured solely through self-reporting questionnaires, the study focuses on one country, Korea, and the majority of the participants, 70%, were male. The results may differ when using different instruments, surveying different cultures, and ensuring equal gender participation. This is one of the various research studies that strengthen the link between work overload, burnout, and intention to leave.
Another study sought to explore the relationship between burnout and physician productivity by performing a systematic review of relevant articles over a 10 year period. They employed an extensive screening process to ensure relevant data, including using a specific definition of burnout, focusing on physicians of various disciplines who practiced in civilian environments, screening in the specific order of title, abstract, and full-text review. Moreover, the articles were subjected to a quality assessment to analyze for clear description of details, data collection, and sound statistical methods. Ultimately, their research analysis provided a strong degree of evidence for the link between burnout and a decline in productivity. Productivity was measured by the number of hours worked, the volume of patients, sickness absence, changing to a different occupation, and retirement. Some of the weaknesses in the review lie in the fact that because of the scarcity of research on this topic, there is not enough evidence to confirm that these results would be applicable to all physicians. Also, the study was conducted in China, and the results may differ in other locations. Moreover, although physicians in the study may have answered questions in a manner implying their intent to leave, their final actions were not recorded [8].

In conclusion, there are various research studies that strengthen the link between work overload, burnout, and intention to leave. The aim of this study was to confirm these findings by exploring the antecedents, symptoms, and consequences of burnout. Therefore, the hypothesis of this research project was that there is a positive correlation between burnout and intent to leave.

**METHOD**

**Inclusion criteria:** Participants were men and women living in the United States who are 18 years of age or older and working full time or part time (N = 108).

**Demographics:** Participants worked in various industries. Employees in Education comprised 36%, Healthcare and Social Assistance were 16%, and the remaining respondents were distributed across a wide range of industries. 105 of the 108 participants identified their gender, and the majorities were female, at 73.3%. Males were 26.7% of the sample surveyed [9].
White/Non-Hispanic participants contributed to 49% of the sample, 3.8% were Black/African American, 45.2% were Hispanic/Latino, and 1.9% were Multi-racial. The mean age was 43.01 (SD = 13.077). The mean years of education were 16.2 (SD = 2.668), based on the following classification of education on the survey: high school – 12 years, bachelor degree – 16 years, and doctoral degree – 20 years. The majority of the participants were married at 58.8%. The participants were predominantly from a dual income household at 62.4% while 33% were from a single income household. The mean income was $56,614 (SD = 36,070); however, only 78 out of 108 respondents answered this question. In addition, some outliers, in the income range between 100,000 to 200,000, increased the mean. The mean years of working experience was 14.68 (SD = 14.96) and the majority of respondents, 54.2%, were at the professional level, with 17.7% at the managerial level, 13.5% self-employed, 10.4% at entry level, and 4.2% at the executive level. The respondents were primarily full time employees at 71.7% [10], [11].

Data Collection
The entire data collection process took approximately a month. Convenience snowball sampling was used to acquire 108 participants. Email and social media invitations were sent to co-workers, acquaintances, and family in the United States. The invitation provided a link to the informed consent and an online survey. When people agreed to complete the survey, they were encouraged to share the survey link with others. At around 65-70 respondents, English Language Learners at Miami Dade College’s Aventura Language Center were invited to participate. Classroom visits were conducted with the advanced grammar and conversation students to invite them to complete the survey. Handouts were provided which contained the website link to the consent form and the survey. While this provided additional diversity in the sample, the potential issue with this was that some of the students were permanent residents/citizens of the United States, and some of them were foreigners who may only be here temporarily. In the demographic section of the survey, 98% of the respondents chose the United States as their place of residence.
Operational Definitions

Workload was described through the self-report questionnaire and measured by the quantity, speed, and intensity of work, and the allotted time to complete tasks (Spector & Jex, 1998). Burnout was also measured in the self-report questionnaire through levels of physical and emotional exhaustion, attitude toward work, and disengagement. Intent to leave was measured through reported job future projections, thoughts of quitting, and plans for job searching.

Instrumentation

The instrument begins with 12 demographic items which collect information on participants’ gender, age, race/ethnicity, education level, employment/income data, country of residence, and marital/family status.

The first scale of the instrument, Job Requirements and Workload, contains five items from Spector’s and Jex’s (1998) Quantitative Workload Inventory, QWI. This scale evaluates the amount of work in a job by asking participants to report the frequency of each item on a 5 point Likert scale anchored from 1 (less than once per month or never) to 5 (several times per day). A high quantity of work is signified by high scores.

The second scale of the instrument, How You Feel at Work, contains 16 items from the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI), which utilizes a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 4 (Strongly Disagree). The OLBI was developed in Germany and measures exhaustion and disengagement. Physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion are assessed, which strengthens the validity of this instrument across various industries ranging from physical to information to human services workers. In addition, the disengagement scale explores the connection employees have with their work, their level of dedication, and their emotions/attitudes toward job responsibilities.

The third scale of the instrument, Job Future, utilizes five items. The first three items are from Colarelli’s (1984) Intention to Quit scale. This scale examines employees’ thoughts and plans on leaving a company on a 5 point Likert scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The last two items are from the NIOSH Generic Job Stress Questionnaire, and they explore participants’ perception of the level of ease/potential in finding a new job.
on a 5 point Likert scale anchored from 1 (very easy) to 5 (not at all easy) (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH], 2014). The combined use of the three above-mentioned scales is a sound instrument to illustrate the correlation between burnout and intent to leave because it includes the antecedents and symptoms of burnout along with employees’ job future projections.

There are 39 items on the questionnaire, which was completed online, taking approximately 15 minutes to complete. There are a variety of question formats, such as multiple choice, fill in the blank, a 5-point Likert scale with responses anchored from less than once per month or never to several times per day, Likert scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and ranging from very easy to not at all easy. The informed consent form was sent via email with a description of the study, its purpose, and an explanation of participants’ rights and confidentiality. Because the results are confidential, in lieu of a signature, participants provided their consent by participating in the survey [11], [12].

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Mean score of major variables of interest: The mean score of all the participants on The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory is 35.16 (SD = 7.973). Scores range from a total of 16 to a total of 64 with higher scores revealing higher burnout levels. By classifying scores in the range of 16-31 as low, 32-48 as medium, and 49-64 as high, this mean reveals that the sample population is within the medium level of burnout.

The mean score of all the participants on the Quantitative Workload Inventory is 17.03 (SD = 5.116). Scores range from a total of 5 to 25. A high quantity of work is signified by a high score. By classifying scores in the range from 5-11 as low scores, 12-18 as medium scores, and 19-25 as high scores, the sample population mean displays a medium level regarding quantity of work.

The mean score of all the participants on the Intention to Quit scale is 7.36 (SD = 3.192). Scores range from a total of 3 points to a total of 15 points with higher scores revealing a higher intent to leave. By classifying scores in the range from 3-6 as low scores, 7-10 as
medium scores, and 11-15 as high scores, the sample population mean displays a medium level of intent to quit.

**Statistical Analysis**

A correlation/regression was computed to evaluate the relationship between burnout and intent to leave. In addition, a correlation/regression was ordered to assess the relationship between work overload and burnout.

The histograms with normal curve plots showed a normal distribution for burnout and intent to quit scores. Therefore, the pre-test criterion of normality was satisfied. A scatter plot illustrated that the straight regression line reasonably fit the distribution of points; therefore, the criterion of linearity was met. Furthermore, the scatter plot revealed that the criterion of homoscedasticity was satisfied because the points were mainly located around the center of the regression line with fewer points toward the ends of the line.

The correlations table below shows a positive correlation ($r = .545$) between burnout and intent to quit; $p = .000$, which was less than the specified .05 $\alpha$ level, indicating that this was a statistically significant correlation.

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**Correlations**

Histograms with normal curve plots showed a normal distribution for work overload and burnout. Therefore, the pre-test criterion of normality was satisfied. In addition, a scatterplot illustrated that the criteria of linearity and homoscedasticity were satisfied.

The correlations table below shows a mildly positive correlation ($r = .255$) between work overload and burnout; $p = .014$, which was less than the specified .05 $\alpha$ level, indicating that this was a statistically significant correlation.
The findings of the correlation/regression test on burnout and intent to leave revealed a positive correlation \( r = .545 \), suggesting that people who are experiencing burnout at work are likely to have the intent to leave their job. This correlation was statistically significant \( (p = .000; \alpha = .05) \).

The findings of the correlation/regression test on work overload and burnout revealed a positive correlation \( r = .255 \), suggesting that people who are experiencing a high work load tend to experience burnout. Although it was a mild correlation, it was statistically significant \( (p = .014; \alpha = .05) \).

The results of this study support the main hypothesis; there is a positive correlation between burnout and intent to leave. Because the aim of the study was also to explore the antecedents, symptoms, and consequences of burnout, the impact of work overload was examined as well. The results of the correlational tests supported the main hypothesis because the findings revealed a statistically significant correlation between work overload and burnout and also a statistically significant correlation between burnout and intent to leave.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study confirm that there is a positive correlation between work overload and burnout. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between burnout and intent to leave.
The limitations of this study are that since a convenience sample was used instead of random sampling, it is not possible to guarantee that it is representative of the entire population.

Also, the majority of the respondents were female, which may make it difficult to generalize the results of the survey from the sample to the entire population. In addition, there was a lack of ethnic diversity in the sample with the majority of respondents being White/Non-Hispanic and Hispanic/Latino. Only a few industries were represented in the survey, and it is possible that employees’ experience of burnout and intent to leave varies across industries. Future studies using probability sampling would help to ensure a sample that is representative of the population.

Other limitations are that since this study is correlational, it is possible that there are many other variables that impact burnout and intent to leave. While the correlations between variables and burnout are clear, the direct causes and effects are not certain. Future research is needed to explore this. Furthermore, using another research method along with the correlational analysis will aid in exploring other variables and preventing error.

Despite the limitations, the findings of statistical significance suggest that while employers may want to cut costs by laying off employees and delegating an increasing work load to the remaining employees, the long term consequences outweigh the temporary savings. When employees are faced with growing demands/expectations, they become physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. A scarcity of resources compounds this exhaustion as employees lack the resources to meet the already high demands.

As a result, individual defense mechanisms kick in to protect people and help them cope with this stress, which results in employees withdrawing from their work. This withdrawal/mental distancing is one of the main dimensions of burnout. In human services positions, this manifests as depersonalization, whereby employees stop connecting in a compassionate manner with the people they serve. In other professions, this exhaustion and resulting distancing is evidenced through cynicism or an indifferent attitude.

When employees are exhausted, cynical, and disengaged, there are many repercussions. Employees can become mentally or physically ill, which increases health care costs for
employers. In addition, the company suffers a tangible loss in productivity, effectiveness, and the quality of customer care. Ultimately, a breakdown in productivity and quality can trigger a domino effect whereby clients are lost and profits decrease. Another consequence of work overload and burnout is that employees will leave the company for a better opportunity. Companies invest a significant amount of time and money in training and developing their talent. When employees leave, this investment is wasted. Companies have to start over again, hindering the attention and resources that should be invested on growth and improvements for the company.

In conclusion, this study confirms previous research on burnout by exploring the relationship between burnout and the specific correlates of work overload and intent to leave. In light of the growing research that supports the correlation between burnout and intent to leave, companies need to protect their investments by ensuring that the work load is realistic and achievable and that there are sufficient staff and resources to accomplish the company’s goals.

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