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Burnout in Student Teachers

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Abstract

Teacher burnout and the influence of personality thereon, as well as that of organisational and environmental conditions, have been discussed in several studies. Until now, this syndrome has mainly been observed in teachers who have spent many years in the profession. Additionally, there is little clarity offered by those studies as to when the burnout process begins. Recently a few studies have indicated burnout evidence among student and novice teacher samples (e.g., Dückers-Klichowski, 2005), therefore our study used a sample group of 75 student teachers in an attempt to discover whether or not a specific personality structure is more susceptible to the onset of burnout at an earlier stage. In line with Hobfoll's (1998) conception of spirals of resources loss, the study aimed firstly to establish levels of burnout among the sample and, secondly, to investigate correlations between these levels and the subjects' own individual and social coping styles, as well as motivation.

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Work stress has been attributed to external (e.g., organisational settings) and internal (e.g., self efficacy) factors. It is reasonable to assume that objective external reasons (e.g., workload) contributes to burnout (e.g., Greenglass, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2001), but many workers seem to cope successfully with heavy workloads, whereas others do not. Perhaps it is the subjective response to external factors, rather than the external factors itself, that contributes most to burnout. Personal characteristics have generally been related to burnout and the impact thereon has been analysed (e.g., Zellars, Perrewe, & Hochwarter, 2000). There has been a substantial amount of research on burnout among teachers (e.g., Schmitz & Schwarzer, 2004) and recently a few among burnout in novice teachers (Dückers-Klichowski, 2005). Some studies have explored burnout among college students (e.g., Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988) but not on student teachers, in particular. Also, those studies focused almost exclusively on individual (e.g., gender) and situational (e.g., room assignment) factors. To our knowledge, nothing is known about how intrapersonal (e.g., motivation) and interpersonal (e.g., considerate action) factors are related to burnout among student teachers.

In addition, there has been an extensive amount of research on stress among general students. Stress has been shown to be associated with college students' anxiety concerning exams (Zeidner, 1998), and coping strategies and styles that students use (Buchwald, 2003; Ringeisen & Buchwald, 2006). In state-trait theories (e.g., Spielberger, 1972) states are described as responses to a particular situation whereas traits are characteristics of personality and a predisposition to respond to situational stimuli in a certain way. Overall, coping traits have repeatedly been identified as a significant predictor of coping states with systematic changes in the strength of relation over time. Coping traits can be seen as personality traits which are linked to other traits. The role of individual traits in the development of burnout is complex and multifaceted (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). The conservation of resources theory (COR theory; Hobfoll, 1998) may be applied to identify specific personality traits that predispose individuals to develop burnout.

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As stress and coping are important components of burnout, this research is relevant to the development of a model of burnout among college students. Within the framework of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1998) it can be hypothesized that burnout is a result of chronic work stress, existing in an environment where limited renewal of resources exists (Buchwald & Hobfoll, 2004). The development of burnout can be seen as a cycle of resource losses which obtains its dynamic from a combination of chronic work stress and inadequate coping with it. The COR theory suggests that during early stages of burnout individuals attempt to combat ongoing work stress by a high level of resources investment directed toward coping. If these efforts fail, individuals turn to cope more defensively. They reduce their loss of resources that results from continuing to invest in unrewarding solutions, and limit loss that comes from exposing themselves to the negative feedback they are receiving in the workplace (see Figure 1).

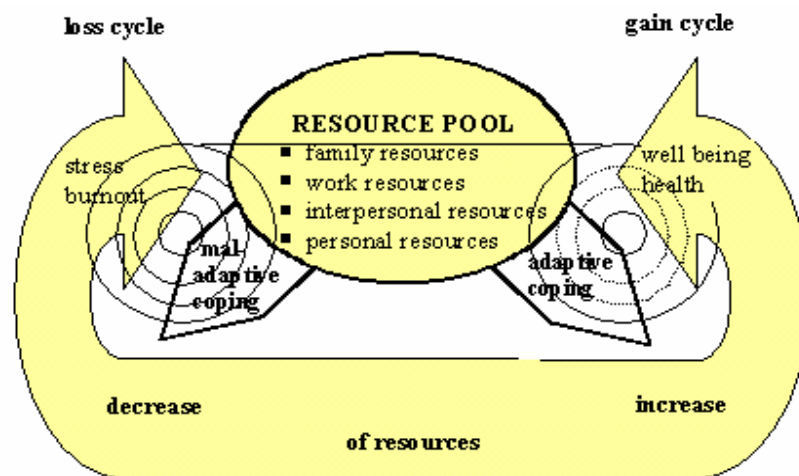


Figure 1: Resource loss and gain at the university (Buchwald & Hobfoll, 2004)

Between overcrowded classes, examinations, doubtful employment as a teacher, side jobs, and extracurricular activities, students are likely to experience high levels of work stress. However, it is still unclear whether they do experience burnout. Much research is needed to determine the prevalence of burnout, to identify important intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that influence burnout, and to develop effective interventions to prevent and reduce burnout in college students. Therefore, we analysed the impact of individual and communal coping styles, as well as motivational resources on burnout in a sample of students who are going to become teachers.

Following the conceptualisation of burnout of Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1997) burnout is viewed as a syndrome that consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalisation (D) and reduced personal accomplishment (RPA). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being depleted of one's emotional resources and is regarded as the basic individual stress component of the syndrome. Depersonalisation, referring to negative, cynical or excessively detached response to one's clients and colleagues, represents the interpersonal component of burnout. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one's feelings of

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competence and successful achievement in one's work with people and represents the selfevaluation component of the syndrome (Maslach, 1998).

Hypotheses

This study aimed at contributing to the field by linking individual and communal coping styles (trait) and motivation to burnout. First, we aimed at exploring the student teachers' burnout levels at the beginning of their career, and secondly looked whether these levels depend on their general coping styles and general motivation to study. Specifically, it was hypothesised that individual and communal coping styles as well as motivation serve as predictors of burnout.

Method

Participants

Participants were 75 student teachers at the University of Wuppertal, Germany. The university, located in an urban setting, has no selective admissions criteria and its students are generally considered to be moderately motivated academically. The sample consisted of 86.7 % women and 13.3% men. Their mean age was 22.16 (± 3), ranging from 19 to 37 years, the ethnicity of the sample was approximately 91% German. Participants were enrolled in a class of educational psychology where respondents completed their questionnaires at the beginning of the course.

Measures

Coping styles of students were assessed via items of the German version of the SACSdispositional (GSACS-D; Schwarzer, Starke, & Buchwald, 2003). The various SACS subscales were theoretically derived and are partially supported by factor analytic research in the original and German version. The original SACS is composed of nine subscales: avoidance, social joining, seeking social support, cautious, indirect, assertive, instinctive, antisocial and aggressive action. It consists of 52 items with a 5-point rating-format, ranging from (1) "Not at all what I would do" to (5) "Very much what I would do". However, the nine subscales suggested by Hobfoll and his colleagues (Dunahoo, Monnier, Hobfoll, Hulsizer, & Johnson, 1998) could not be fully reproduced. The German SACS consists of only seven subscales labeled as avoidance ($\alpha =$

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.81), seeking social support ($a = .88$), assertive action ($a = .74$), aggressive-antisocial action ($a = .80$), instinctive action ($a = .85$), considerate action ($a = .68$) and indirect action ($a = .74$). The main differences between the original SACS and the German adaptation are that aggressive and antisocial actions were combined in one subscale. The same is true for cautious action and social joining described as considerate action.

In order to assess burnout a modified instrument of Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used. The original MBI was designed to measure burnout in a variety of human services occupations. Because of the high level of interest in teacher burnout and the need for more research in this particular area, the MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) was developed (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). The MBI-ES is basically the same as the MBI. However, in some of the items the word recipient has been changed to student. For the purpose of evaluating burnout in student teachers the original MBI was modified in the same manner. The word recipient has been exchanged for people and, in addition, work has been replaced by study. The MBI consists of three subscales representing the three dimensions of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion ($a = .71$), depersonalisation ($a = .62$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($a = .70$). In the original version 22 statements are answered in terms of the frequency on a 7-point scale (ranging from 0 "never" to 6 "every day"). As recommended by Schmitz (2000) we minimized it into a 4-point rating format (ranging from 1 "not at all true" to 4 "exactly true"). A high degree of burnout is reflected in high scores of all scales as the scores of RPA were recoded, such as high scores of RPA represents major losses of competence. The scores for each subscale are considered separately and are not combined into a single, total score. Each score can then be coded as low, moderate or high by using the numerical cutoff points given as the scoring key by Maslach et al. (1997).

Finally, motivation was assessed by using the Work- and Health-Related Behavior and Experience Questionnaire (AVEM) developed by Schaarschmidt and Fischer (1996). AVEM is a well-validated diagnostic instrument in work-related contexts including 11 subscales. Here we only

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used the following six subscales referring to motivation: subjective remarkableness ($a = .86$), professional ambition ($a = .76$), willingness to strain, ($a = .83$), striving for perfection ($a = .85$), tendency of resignation after failure ($a = .86$) and success in career ($a = .87$). Samples are “The study is the most important purpose in my life” (subjective remarkableness); “I am working more than I should” (willingness to strain); “Until now I had success in my course of study” (success in career). Each subscale is represented by 6 items with a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 “exactly true” to 5 “not at all true” (Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 1996).

Results

The first aim was to examine the levels of burnout among student teachers. By using the scoring key 46 % of the participants showed a moderate degree of emotional exhaustion (EE). Two thirds of the sample expressed a low or moderate level of depersonalisation (D). Fifty percent of the respondents revealed a moderate level and 10 % a high level of reduced personal accomplishment (RPA; see Figure 2).

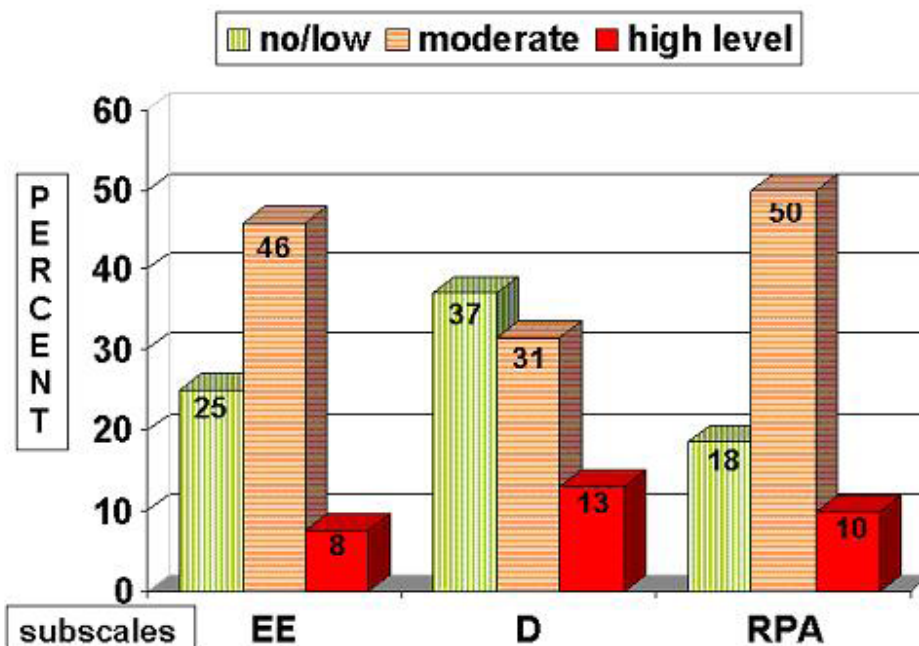


Figure 2. *Levels of Burnout*

The second aim was to analyse if personality structure, i.e. the subjects’ own individual and social coping styles as well as motivation, is more susceptible to the onset of burnout at an

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earlier stage of career. Other personal variables that may be related to burnout were controlled for. Burnout was not affected by the sex ($p = .215$), age ($p = .584$) and length of studying ($p = .272$) in this study. In order to examine the relative strength of personal and individual coping as predictors of burnout, stepwise multiple regression procedures were performed with all three burnout dimensions as dependent variables. The set of regression analyses were conducted with all seven coping styles. Two variables were left in the equation with emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable. The strongest predictor was considerateness. This relationship explained 10% of the variance ($F(1,55) = 5.98, p < .01$). If integrated into the equation together with avoidance both variables together increased the explanation of the variance to 16% ($F(2,54) = 5.24, p < .01$). The use of considerate coping led to more emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.30, t = 2.43, p < .01$) as well as avoidance does ($\beta = 0.26, t = 2.04, p < .05$). The second set of stepwise regression analyses on depersonalisation identified avoidance as a predictor accounting for 31% of the variance in depersonalisation scores ($F(1,58) = 25.68, p < .000$). Students higher in avoidance ($\beta = 0.56, t = 5.07, p < .001$) tend to feel more depersonalisation. One variable was left in the equation with reduced personal accomplishment as the dependent variable. The predictor was assertiveness ($\beta = -0.57, t = -5.07, p < .001$) accounting for 32% of the variance ($F(1,55) = 25.73, p < .001$). This underlines the positive value of assertive action facing burnout.

Further, in order to examine the relative strength of motivation as predictors of burnout, stepwise multiple regression procedures were performed with all three burnout dimensions as dependent variables. The set of regression analyses were conducted with all six motivation subscales. Two variables were left in the equation with emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable. The strongest predictor was willingness to strain and explained 17% of the variance ($F(1,47) = 9.90, p < .01$). If integrated into the equation together with subjective remarkableness both variables together increased the explanation of the variance to 30% ($F(2,46) = 9.98, p < .000$). Subjective remarkableness led to less emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.37, t = -2.91, p < .01$)

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but the higher value and reversed sign of $\beta = 0.50$ ($t = 3.95$, $p < .000$) for the willingness to strain oneself implied that this motivational resource predominates in the development of exhaustion. Two variables were left in the equation with reduced personal accomplishment as the dependent variable. The strongest predictor was success in career and explained 30% of the variance ($F(1,48) = 20.08$, $p < .001$). If integrated into the equation together with tendency of resignation after failure both variables together increased the explanation of the variance to 45% ($F(2,47) = 19.45$, $p < .001$). Little success in career led to reduced personal accomplishment ($\beta = -0.44$, $t = -3.98$, $p < .001$) as well as a high tendency of resignation after failure ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 3.68$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study was designed to evaluate the relative influences of coping styles and motivation on psychological burnout. Our first aim was to examine the levels of burnout among student teachers. The analyses showed remarkable levels of burnout at this early stage of a teacher career. Nearly half the participants showed a moderate degree of emotional exhaustion that is associated with individual stress and depletion of resources. Instead, depersonalisation was not highly developed, probably due to the fact that student teachers in general do not have much contact to pupils until this point of time. Half of the respondents revealed a moderate and 10% a high level of reduced personal accomplishment. This third aspect of the burnout syndrome refers to feelings of being unhappy about oneself and dissatisfied with one's accomplishments on the job. These feelings of incompetence could be influenced by the university environment suffering from strong resource constraints on every level (e.g., staff, counselling, courses).

According to the COR theory the development of burnout is a consequence of inadequate styles of coping with work-related stressors. The results support the assumption of COR theory that at that early stage of burnout student teachers tried to regain resources by using both, personal and communal coping styles to cope with their emotional exhaustion. At an advanced stage of burnout teachers turn to avoidance to protect their resources as former research already showed. Further research is needed to validate this theoretical assumption. This individual

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defensive coping style predicted both, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. On the other hand, coping with stress assertively and experiencing success in career might protect people from feeling a reduced personal accomplishment whereas the tendency of resignation after failure had the opposite effect. Emotional exhaustion, the key aspect of the burnout syndrome, could be predicted by a high willingness to strain oneself and a low subjective remarkableness of study. Interestingly enough, those who are not too enthusiastic about their study but at the same time feel strongly committed to their course of studies felt extremely exhausted by that conflicting situation.

In sum, it can be said that student teachers with a specific coping style and motivation are more vulnerable to the onset of burnout at an earlier stage of their profession. Findings may have implications for a resource-based model of burnout (Hobfoll & Buchwald, 2004; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000) and for intervention programs that enhance successful coping in student teachers, in particular.

Finally, we want to point out some limitations of our study that present opportunities for future research. The current study was conducted at a highly overcrowded, and therefore competitive, public university. The relations of coping and motivation to burnout may be very different in other academic settings, including more demanding graduate settings. Furthermore, the sample consisted of more female than male participants and should be replicated with a wellbalanced gender ratio. We focused on specific individual traits, namely coping styles and motivation that predispose individuals to develop burnout. Further research on this topic may set priorities on personal (e.g., self-efficacy) or social (e.g., social support) resources that may buffer the effect of work stress and the development of burnout.

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