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AUTHOR Meier, Scott T.; Davis, Susan R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of systems theory as an introduction to the applications possible to a model of burnout. Literature dealing with burnout is reviewed and shown to be in an early, descriptive stage, with basic concepts largely unchallenged. Meier's (1982) expanded model of burnout, based on current cognitive-behavioral and vocational models of human behavior is proposed to integrate the findings of previous burnout studies under one theoretical model. The concept of expectations, defined as probabilistic descriptions of interactions between the self and the world, is explored, and the three components of the model (reinforcement, outcome, and efficacy expectations) are explained and illustrated. The most expansive category of the burnout model, contextual processing, is described as human information processing within contexts, and several examples of the process are given. Systems theory is suggested as a useful approach to studying the contextual processing aspects of burnout, particularly in treating family problems. Finally, examples of structural and communication theories which apply to burnout are described, and boundary patterns are discussed. (JAC)

Burnout:

A Term in Search of a Theory

Scott T. Meier and Susan R. Davis

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

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A COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL MODEL OF BURNOUT

Interest in the burnout phenomenon has swelled in the eight years since Freudenberger (1974) first introduced the term. Dozens of journal articles, books and dissertations, in diverse fields from education to criminal justice, have been generated about burnout. However, Savicki and Cooley (1982) have noted that in the current literature about 75 per cent of the articles involve only the expression of opinions about burnout. Also, the methods of examining burnout have often been case studies with descriptive reports that lack substantial empirical support and precise theoretical foundations. The resulting proliferation of definitions and causes of burnout, as well as suggestions of generic intervention strategies (e.g., vacations), has gone largely untested. Thus, the study of burnout remains in an early, descriptive phase, with considerable improvement in conceptualization, research and intervention remaining.

While the quantity of ideas about burnout has grown since Freudenberger's introduction of the topic, the basic concepts remain unchanged and largely unchallenged. Freudenberger (1974) observed that burned-out persons often cannot shake colds, are quick to anger, evince strong dedication to work, and become cynical and rigid in their thinking. In some form or another, these ideas have been repeated time and again in the burnout literature. However,

few researchers have attempted to integrate these and other concepts into an overarching theory of burnout.

Einsiedel and Tully (1981) note that the attention given to the practical aspects of burnout far exceeds that given to the scientific. They maintain that conceptual and operational definitions of burnout are rare, and that few replications and extensions of previous research exist. They describe the dozens of individual and organizational components of burnout listed in the literature as an 'unwieldy universe'.

Definitions of burnout proposed by various researchers include emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic tension and stress in people-helping work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), and a state of tension or energy depletion produced by continuing frustration of personal needs on the job (Sassali, 1979). Causes which have been advanced range from tedium and stress (Pines, Aronson, & Kafry, 1981), career development crises (Cardinell, 1981), and poor economic conditions (Crase, 1980) to work overload and lack of perceived success (Weiskopf, 1980). One result of this diversity of causes and definitions of burnout are questions about whether it comprises a unitary phenomenon (Paine, 1981). In the everyday parlance of many people-helping professionals, burnout has become a catchword for all types of job- and self-dissatisfaction.

A COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

Meier (1982) has attempted to produce an expanded model of burnout based on current cognitive behavioral and vocational models of human behavior. The proposed burnout model attempts to fill the current void in burnout theory, resolve the current dichotomy over whether the causes of burnout reside in the organization or the individual, and integrate the findings and conclusions of previous burnout studies under one theoretical model.

The burnout model emphasizes the cognitive and behavioral aspects of burnout and thus complements the more affective approach as exemplified in the work of Freudenberger (1974) and Maslach (1981). To the persons who have been described by self or others as suffering from emotional exhaustion in their work, there exists little doubt that 'burnout' is an intuitively meaningful word to describe their feelings. The fact that burnout is an appropriate and easily grasped label for the feelings many people experience on the job may well explain the explosion of interest in the topic. However, the notion of emotional exhaustion, by itself, may be of limited usefulness in specifying the development and remediation of burnout. The burnout model proposed here treats emotional exhasution as one of a set of signals of burnout, rather than its definition. Burnout presumably has cognitive and behavioral correlates in addition to an affective element.

In this model, burnout is hypothesized to be a state resulting from repeated work experiences in which individuals possess:

1) very low expectations for positive reinforcement and very high expectations for punishment, (reinforcement expectations),

2) very low expectations for control of reinforcement (outcome expectations),

3) very low expectations for personal competence in obtaining reinforcement (efficacy expectations), or

4) any combination of the above three factors. Individuals who possess expectations at these low levels will experience unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety and fear (see Bandura & Adams, 1977), and behave in unproductive ways, such as avoiding work and lacking persistence (see Bandura, 1977; Seligman, 1975; Davis & Lofquist, 1978).

Central to the cognitive behavioral model of burnout is the concept of expectations, defined as probablistic descriptions of interactions between the self and world. Contextual processing, defined as human information processing within contexts, determines how expectations are learned and changed. All human information processing occurs within contexts (Schmeck, Note 1), but the label of contextual processing was chosen to emphasize that the processing of environmental events can be influenced by

forces within the individual (e.g., memory processes), as well as the organization (e.g., (group norms). Thus, the choice of expectations as a key element in this burnout model does not imply that the important processes are solely intrapsychic. Expectations can be considered a meter which produces readings of self-environment interactions.

In the following sections the concepts of reinforcement expectations, outcome expectations and efficacy expectations, which are proposed to influence burnout, are explained. It should be noted that prolonged deficiencies in any of these expectations is expected to lead to decreases in the other types of expectations. Thus, if one strongly expects oneself to be incompetent at work, one will also come to expect little positive reinforcement. In the proposed model, reinforcement, outcome and efficacy expectations and contextual processing are assumed to form a system with reciprocal effects. The extent to which the system is stable and reliable may depend on an individuals' psycholinguistic abililites and styles. For example, the extent to which individuals' expectations about competence influence expectations about reinforcement may depend on how individuals generalize information (Bandler & Grinder, 1975).

REINFORCEMENT EXPECTATIONS

Reinforcement expectations are descriptions about whether certain outcomes meet or will meet one's implicit

and explicit goals. Work outcomes, the result of work experiences, differ in the value and meaning individuals place on them. Thus, one teacher might prefer to work with students who frequently ask questions during class (Outcome A). Another instructor might find more satisfying a class of students who silently attend to an hour lecture (Outcome B). These two teachers might feel equally pleased by the outcome of their efforts, but those feelings could change to displeasure should the outcomes be switched.

Dawis and Lofquist (1978) incorporate the concept of reinforcement expectations in their theory of work adjustment. They indicate that individuals attempt to achieve and maintain correspondence with their work environments. Correspondence occurs when workers' needs are met by the reinforcement in the work environment and when the environment's demand for work is matched by the workers' performance. Dawis and Lofquist suggest that workers possess a set of needs which they compare to reinforcers expected to be present in the work environment.

Pines et al. (1981) separate the concepts of tedium and burnout. They suggest that burnout occurs in conjunction with tedium. In terms of reinforcement expectations, tedium is that state where a person expects little positive reinforcement from work outcomes. For example, highly skilled individuals who can control their work reinforcement may still satiate on occupational rewards. In other words,

as rewards are experienced again and again they may lose their value to the individual, who habituates and experiences tedium. Should the individual view tedium as aversive (and many who become people-helpers believe the work will remain intrinsically interesting and self-fulfilling), or should tedium then become coupled with aversive events, burnout will ensue. In terms of reinforcement expectations, then, burnout is a state where a person expects occupational experiences which are perceived as punishing in addition to low expectations for rewards.

Some burnout writers have discussed concepts similar to reinforcement expectations. Maslach and Jackson's (1981) notion of emotional exhaustion implies that individuals can no longer feel pleasure or tolerate pain. Discussing the development of stress, Gowler and Legge (1978) emphasize the individual's subjective sense of importance of the outcome of certain events. Fines et al. (1981) indicate that in client-centered work situations, predominant attention may be paid to the needs of clients while those of the caregiver are largely ignored. Finally, Cardinell (1981) believes that certain career development stages are ripe for burnout because one's committment to ideals of the profession may be significantly larger than one's sense of satisfaction from work.

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

Outcome expectations are defined as descriptions about which behaviors will lead to certain outcomes (Bandura, 1977). While reinforcement expectations describe whether certain outcomes will meet desired goals, outcome expectations describe what behaviors are required to obtain those outcomes. Lack of control of outcomes or lack of knowledge of what behaviors produce desired outcomes can eventually lead to tedium and burnout. For example, a teacher might experience tedium because of experiences that create the expectation that a particular class simply cannot learn new material, thus dousing any hope for positive reinforcement from teaching that class.

Concepts similar to outcome expectations have been identified in the burnout literature. Crase (1980) discusses economic conditions that are leading faculty across the country to doubt their ability to affect higher education and to improve their lot. In other words, faculty may be experiencing a loss of perceived control over the educational environment. Depression, mentioned by Weiskopf (1980) as a possible characteristic of burned-out teachers, has been linked to learned helplessness (Miller & Norman, 1979). Cherniss (1980), who interviewed 28 new professionals in his study of burnout, concluded his book by describing burnout as a form of learned helplessness. Research by Wortman and Brehm (1975) indicates that some individuals, when control of reinforcement is removed from them, will work with great effort to regain that control.

This concept, termed reactance, indicates that should those individuals fail to regain control through their efforts, they may experienced learned helplessness. Workers who experience sweeping job changes that alter their sense of control of rewards and punishers may burn out should their attempts to regain that control be unsuccessful.

EFFICACY EXPECTATIONS

While outcome expectations refer to knowledge of beheaviors that produce desired outcomes, self-efficacy refers to expectations of personal competence in executing that productive behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between efficacy and outcome expectations. For example, teachers might burn out because students cannot learn new material (i.e., the outcome expectation is that no behaviors will lead to the outcome of learning) or because teachers feel they lack the personal competence necessary to teach adequately (efficacy expectation). Efficacy expectations strongly affect what activities individuals choose to engage in as well as how long they will persist in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1977).

The burnout literature is ripe with concepts similar to efficacy expectations. In a factor analysis of questionnaire data, Maslach and Jackson (1981) found three major factors of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. They

describe the personal accomplishment component as including a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively and to feel unhappy and dissatisfied with job accomplishments. Csikszentmihalyi (1975), discussing the role of play in work, indicates that any activity can be rewarding if it is structured correctly and if one's skills are evenly matched with the challenges of the situation. Pines et al. (1981) also recognize the importance of emphasizing success and achievement as a method of interpersonal coping with potential burnout. Weiskopf's (1981) application of Cooper and Marshall's (1976) stress model to teachers of exceptional children includes lack of perceived success as a component of stress and eventual burnout. Casas, Furlong and Castillo (1980) indicate that one of the characteristics of burned-out minority counselors is a loss of self-confidence. Finally, Cherniss (1980) found that among new professionals self-doubts about personal competence formed a primary concern.

CONTEXTUAL PROCESSING

Contextual processing is the most expansiv e of the four categories of the burnout model because here an attempt is made to account for how people learn, maintain and change expectations. As mentioned previously, contextual processing refers to human information processing within contexts. Examples of contexts which could influence that processing include social groups, organizational structure,

learning style, and personal beliefs.

Systems theory is one useful approach to studying the contextual processing aspects of burnout. According to this view, first advanced by von Bertalanffy (1968), individuals and their contexts are best understood as interactive elments within a larger system. The emphasis is not on what causes what, but rather on pattern recognition and the relationship of elements to each other and to the system as a whole. The general systems theory described by von Bertalanffy has been applied to many disciplines, including the biological sciences, physics, mathematics, and psychology. In particular, systems theory has been developed extensively for use in the conceptualization and treatment of marital and family problems.

Family systems theory has as its basis the notions that the family is a system. These theorists see the problems of individual family members (i.e., the acting out child or the depressed parent) as symptomatic or evidence of a larger family or systems problem. Treating the individual, then, is seen as inefficient at best and most frequently ineffective. Although the individual's symptoms may be alleviated outside the family context, the press by the system for homeostasis (a return to status quo) will rapidly result in the return of those or similar symptoms either in the original individual or another family member. Analogies between a family system and a workplace system may

prove useful in describing elements of burnout.

Haley (1967) describes a frequently seen family interactional pattern in which a child manifests behavior problems (e.g., throws tantrums or engages in delinquent behavior) each time the parents appear to be on the verge of marital strife. The parents must then unite in order to discipline and care for their troublesome child. Like the acting-out of the child, burnout as a symptom or constellation of symptoms serves the purpose of maintaining the status quo of the workplace system. A worker may, for example, manifest burnout which requires supervisory attention at a time when that supervisor is experiencing difficulties with higher management. As long as the worker is experie ncing burnout, the focus is directed away from upper level strife which is more threatening to the status quo of the work environment than the burnout itself.

All who are involved--clients, staff, and management--have an investment in maintaining the homeostasis of the system and in maintaining burnout. Far from being bad or the fault of the burned-out individual, burnout may actually serve to keep the workplace functioning at its current level. Just as it is difficult to alter the acting-out behavior of the child without addressing the issues of the entire family, so it may be impossible to alter burned-out behavior without changing the patterns of interaction in the workplace. Thus, a systems theorist

might hypothesize that vacationing is a poor, long-term solution for burnout. A systems theorist might also predict that certain workers will take turns being burned-out or that specific workers will be chronically burned-out, almost from the time they began working.

Communications theory, a branch of systems theory, suggests that all behavior has message value. That is, all behavior communicates. Just as one cannot not behave, so also one cannot not communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967, p. 48). All communication conveys information at two levels. The first or report level contains the overt message being sent. The second or command level conveys information regarding the nature of the relationship between the communicants. The second level contains the covert message being sent. When the report and command levels of a given communication convey contradictory information, the receiver may become frustrated and confused. Haley (1977) and others have labeled this kind of communication the double-bind.

Examples which apply to burnout abound. The supervisor whose report level communication is "you're doing a wonderful job, keep it up!" but whose command level communication is "you're threatening me" may then express bewilderment when the worker experiences frustration or burnout. People-helping professionals frequently receive these contradictory messages from their clients who on one level desparately

seek help, but on another level are quite frightened of giving up their problems. Likewise, Bateson and Jackson (1968) suggest that the symptom itself is a communication. A burned-out worker's command level message may be "I will not threaten the boss (or client) too much by my competence." Thus, by looking at the kinds of messages being sent and received in the workplace, an understanding of how burnout contributes to the overall maintenance of the status quo of the system may be furthered.

Salvadore Minuchin's structural theory pays less attention to the communication patterns and emphasizes instead the system's organizational characteristics, patterns of transactions, and responses to stress. According to Minuchin (1974), the boundaries of individuals and groups of individuals within the system play a significant role in how well the system responds to the internal and external stresses faced by any system. Boundaries in a system exist at the point where a significant change in power or function occurs. There is, for example, a boundary formed between upper level management and direct service providers in a community mental health center.

Boundaries vary in the amount of permeability they possess. A healthy boundary must maintain a good balance. If the boundary is too permeable, individuals and subsystems within the system may lose their identity. The

psychotherapist whose supervisor insists on always doing therapy a certain way may confuse her or his identity as a therapist with that of the supervisor. If the boundaries are too rigid, on the other hand, the individuals or subsystems may stagnate. Because of the change in power that occurs at a boundary interface, subsystems and individuals enclosed by boundaries can be hierarchically ordered along a power dimension. Boundaries that are too permeable make this ordering difficult (e.g., supervisors who are too friendly with their supervisees may have difficulty making demands on them), and boundaries that are too rigid prevent communication between levels.

Minuchin (1974) has extensively studied the patterns of boundaries in dysfunctional families. He has concluded that the clear boundaries so necessary for the health and growth of the family system are missing in dysfunctional ones. Dysfunctional families tend to lie at one extreme or the other of a continuum which has clear boundaries at its center, enmeshed (very permeable) boundaries at one end, and disengaged (very rigid) boundaries at the other.

The workplace might also be examined for its boundary patterns. One might look at who socializes with whom and whether or not the workers have interests and social groups outside the workplace. If not, perhaps the enmeshed system contributes to a loss of identity of the worker and subsequent burnout symptoms. At the other extreme, a

disengaged boundary pattern (and the lack of communication thereof) may contribute to decreased motivational levels which may also lead to burnout.

This very cursory overview of systems theory has been designed to stimulate interest and is by all means an introduction to the applications possible to a model of burnout. Of primary importance is system theory's elegant handling of the individual versus environment issue. Finally, systems theory, as a theory of contextual processing, appears to illuminate the ways in which expectancies might be learned and maintained.

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