



Early career burnout among Dutch nurses: A process captured in a Rasch model



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 October 2015

Received in revised form 25 April 2016

Accepted 7 June 2016

Keywords:

Burnout

Nurses

Early career

Dimensionality

Item response

Rasch measurement

ABSTRACT

This study investigates burnout among Dutch nursing graduates as a process by testing a sequential-developmental model. A sample of 237 respondents was recruited from a population of Dutch early career nurses. Burnout was measured with the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS, Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli & van Dierendonck, 2000). First, the dimensionality was tested with confirmatory factor analysis. A resulting one-dimensional model with exhaustion and depersonalisation was then analysed using a Rasch rating scale measurement model. Rasch analysis showed that these data adhered well to a sequential-developmental model. Burnout among early career nurses may be operationalized as a process that starts with fatigue as a result of strain and ends with severe exhaustion and depersonalisation towards patients. Personal accomplishment develops relatively independently. A separate Rasch analysis on the personal accomplishment items revealed a scale with almost similar item locations, resulting in redundant information.

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1. Introduction

For nursing graduates the experience of transition from school-based experience to professional practice can be stressful (Duchscher & Myrick, 2008). Scientists have noted already decades ago that younger nurses show a greater vulnerability towards burnout than older nurses (Bartz & Maloney, 1986), and this was also noted in more recent studies (Lee & Wang, 2002; Winwood, Winefield, & Lushington, 2006). Only in the last decade this issue is the explicit focus of studies among new graduate nurses. Such studies show serious levels of mental health problems and high turnover (Laschinger, Finegan & Wilk, 2009). A study by Beecroft and colleagues (2008) showed that 30% of new graduates had high turnover intentions. Bowles and Candela (2005) found an actual turnover rate of 30% in the first year and 57% after two years. In another study, 66% of new graduates were experiencing severe burnout (Cho, Laschinger and Wong, 2006).

New professionals may initially feel inadequately prepared for their occupational role, which led Duchscher (2009) to describe this transition as the most stressful, frustrating, discouraging and disillusioning stage in the process of professional role adaptation for nursing graduates. Cherniss (1980) has explained this process as an identity crisis among novice professionals. This may lead to unsuccessful occupational socialization or early career burnout (Cherniss, 1980; Gustavsson, Hallsten, & Rudman, 2010).

Burnout is generally explained as a psychological syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being overextended emotionally and physically, and depleted of resources. Depersonalisation refers to a cynical and distant attitude towards one's work and the people one works with. Reduced personal accomplishment is the tendency to evaluate one's achievements at work negatively (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is usually considered to be the central quality of burnout and the most obvious manifestation of the syndrome (Taris, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2005).

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Scientists have proposed four major process models to describe the relationships between the burnout dimensions. [Cherniss \(1980\)](#) described a process of burnout consisting of three stages. The first stage involves an imbalance between resources and demand, i.e. stress. The second stage is the immediate, short-term emotional response to this imbalance, characterized by feelings of anxiety, tension, fatigue and exhaustion. The third stage consists of a number of changes in attitude and behaviour leading to depersonalisation.

[Leiter and Maslach \(1988\)](#) described a process model where burnout starts with emotional exhaustion, which then triggers depersonalisation, which leads to reduced personal accomplishment. Feelings of being overextended arise first as a consequence of a demanding work environment. To cope with exhaustion and stress, the overextended individual then distances himself from others and becomes cynical in his responses toward others. Once depersonalisation occurs, the individual may begin to feel ineffective on the job, and the self-evaluation of his or her accomplishments is likely to become negative.

Whereas in the previous models elevated levels of emotional exhaustion signify the onset of burnout, [Golembiewski, Munzenrider and Stevenson \(1986\)](#) consider emotional exhaustion to be the final stage of burnout. Golembiewski et al. describe a process of burnout that starts with depersonalisation, which triggers reduced personal accomplishment and ends in emotional exhaustion. They state that depersonalisation arises when professional detachment in dealing with others is no longer functional and thereby reduces the ability to form necessary relationships with others and to perform well on the job. As a consequence, the self-evaluation of job accomplishment becomes negative, the ability to cope with job demands declines, which in turn induces feelings of being overextended. [Lee and Ashforth \(1993\)](#) describe a process model of burnout in which emotional exhaustion is positively related to depersonalisation, and where personal accomplishment develops independently from depersonalisation. They state that elevated levels of emotional exhaustion have a direct effect on feelings of personal accomplishment rather than indirectly through depersonalisation ([Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Taris et al., 2005](#)).

These four major process models have in common that they considered burnout to be a one-dimensional syndrome consisting of several stages. However, the unidimensionality of burnout has been debated, as well as the exact causal relationships between the burnout dimensions ([Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003](#)).

[Taris et al. \(2005\)](#) investigated whether there were sequential relationships between the burnout dimensions by reviewing earlier research and analysing two longitudinal sets (a teacher sample and a sample of oncology care providers). The Cherniss model was not included in the review because the study only considered models with three dimensions of burnout ([Taris et al., 2005](#)). The review provided no convincing support for any particular process model. The longitudinal study tested the models of [Leiter and Maslach \(1988\)](#), [Golembiewski et al. \(1986\)](#), [Lee and Ashforth \(1993\)](#) and an integration of the latter two. The data supported the models of [Lee & Ashforth \(1993\)](#) and of [Leiter & Maslach \(1988\)](#), which both propose that burnout starts with emotional exhaustion and ends with reduced personal accomplishment. No evidence was found for the model of [Golembiewski and associates \(1986\)](#) that takes depersonalisation as a starting point.

In the integration of the model of [Lee and Ashforth \(1993\)](#) and [Leiter and Maslach \(1988\)](#) that [Taris et al.](#) construed, burnout starts with emotional exhaustion that triggers depersonalisation. This model assumes that persistent depersonalisation may lead to reduced personal accomplishment, but it also contains a separate direct effect of emotional exhaustion on reduced personal accomplishment. Furthermore they tested a feedback effect of depersonalisation over time on the other burnout dimensions. This

integrated model of [Taris et al. \(2005\)](#) showed the best fit of the data in comparison to the other models. Higher levels of exhaustion indeed triggered higher levels of depersonalisation, and higher levels of depersonalisation were associated with lower levels of personal accomplishment. Furthermore, a feedback effect of depersonalisation on exhaustion over time was reported ([Taris et al., 2005](#)). The last two effects were only found in the teacher sample, but not among oncology care providers. [Parker and Salmela-Aro \(2011\)](#) also compared and contrasted several major models for the development of school burnout in a four-wave longitudinal sample of high school students. Their results suggest that the model of [Taris et al. \(2005\)](#) provided a significantly better fit to the data than other models.

[Gustavsson et al. \(2010\)](#) applied an innovative approach to the [Cherniss \(1980\)](#) model in a study of early career burnout among nurses. Personal accomplishment is not a part of the Cherniss model. The burnout questionnaire that they used in their study, the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; [Demerouti, & Bakker, 2008](#)) also only measures exhaustion and disengagement. They assumed that early career burnout is a sequential developmental process that can be described in an item response theory. Their findings indicate a process consisting of three linked stages where first crisis and strain trigger exhaustion, then higher levels of exhaustion are associated with higher levels of defensive coping, which finally leads to even higher levels of exhaustion and disengagement.

[Gustavsson et al.](#) applied a probabilistic item response approach. The one-parameter item response measurement (Rasch model) has gained widespread recognition for its measurement properties and usage in constructing and evaluating measures of developmental-sequential or hierarchical attributes ([Gustavsson et al., 2010; Smith & Smith, 2004](#)). This method assumes that item scores are determined by the location of the respondent and the item, and provides information about items that do not fit the model. This method assumes an order of both participants and symptoms along a single latent continuum reflecting an individual growth sequence. This aspect of item response theory makes it possible to model a hypothesized developmental process. A score derived from this model then represents the severity of the burnout. If, for example, a person has developed depersonalisation after a period of severe emotional exhaustion, the model will assume and test that emotional exhaustion will not have disappeared, but still is present. Applying this to the [Taris model](#) would result in the prediction that a reduced sense of personal accomplishment can only develop after depersonalisation has been reported.

In most countries the OLBI is not used to assess burnout, but rather the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The aim of the current study is to investigate whether the items of the MBI can also be ordered as a sequential-developmental process by using an item response approach. In line with the [Cherniss \(1980\)](#) model and in line with the [Maslach \(1988\)](#) model we hypothesize that the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation aspects of the MBI-HSS can be modeled as a sequential-developmental process where both items and individuals can be located in specifically defined unique phases as an indicator of a burnout process. Drawing on the complex findings regarding the development of personal accomplishment from the [Taris et al. \(2005\)](#) model, we will test whether personal accomplishment also fits in a one-dimensional model or has to be regarded as a rather independent process.

[Maslach and Leiter \(1997\)](#) proposed that engagement is the opposite of burnout. [Schaufeli and Bakker \(2003\)](#) state that burnout and engagement are two distinct dimensions, although negatively correlated. [Schaufeli and Bakker \(2003\)](#) define work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. In order to validate our findings, we will calculate correlations of the Rasch burnout scores

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