# Client characteristics, organizational variables and burnout in care staff: The mediating role of fear of assault

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A B S T R A C T

A broad range of factors have been identified as having an impact on burnout and performance. To improve our understanding of how these factors interact, a model of carer stress is tested. Staff were surveyed in residential units, assessments included burnout, organizational factors, staff cognitions and ratings of resident challenging behavior. The relationship between challenging behavior and emotional exhaustion was fully mediated by fear of assault. The relationship between emotional exhaustion and experienced safety (an organizational variable) was also fully mediated by fear of assault. The use of the model with staff is supported and it suggests that staff burnout can be reduced by influencing either staff cognitions, organizational factors or challenging behavior or a combination of these factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Staff are increasingly being recognized as an important element in the care process (National Health Service, 2009). The psychological well-being of staff is seen as an important element in the delivery of care and support, and there is increasing evidence of a link between staff well-being and their effectiveness in providing support to people with intellectual disabilities (e.g. Hatton, Wigham, & Craig, 2009; Rose, Jones, & Fletcher, 1998). A range of variables have been identified as contributing to staff well being including client characteristics (e.g. Jenkins, Rose, & Lovell, 1998), organizational factors and staff cognitive variables (e.g. Rose, 2011). There is evidence to suggest that the way that staff perceive aspects of their working life, particularly challenging behavior can influence their reported levels of burnout. Howard, Rose, & Levinson (2009) have shown the relationship between challenging behavior and burnout can be moderated by the perceived self efficacy of staff. In a study based on a subset of the data presented here Mills and Rose (2011) have also shown the same relationship can be mediated by perceived fear of assault. That is staff report lower levels of burnout if they feel more competent, supported and consider the possibility of them being assaulted as lower than other staff. A similar relationship was found by Rose, David, and Jones (2003) in that wishful thinking (a coping strategy) partially mediated the relationship between work demands (of which challenging behavior could be an integral part) and stress. This relationship was confirmed by Devereux, Noone, Firth, and Totsika (2009) who found that wishful thinking was partially mediated by the relationship between work demands & emotional exhaustion in care staff.

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Other studies have suggested that organizational variables contribute significantly to stress and burnout (Hatton, Brown, Caine, & Emerson, 1995; Thompson & Rose, 2011), and recent research that evaluates the differences between a variety of inputs and outputs in relation to psychological well-being suggests that staff rank organizational factors as the single largest contribution to staff well-being (Rose, Madurai, Thomas, Duffy, & Oyebode, 2010; Thomas & Rose, 2010).

A complex array of factors can contribute to reported well-being and this complexity has contributed to the lack of a comprehensive model to explain the development of staff stress. A number of frameworks and models have been developed including Rose (1995) who proposed a simple framework relating to organizational proximity, and Hatton, Rose, and Rose (2004) who listed a broad range of core constructs that might influence the development of well-being, suggesting that staff morale and well-being was one construct that, among many, may directly influence well being. Other models have examined specific aspects of the relationship between staff and the people they care for such as attributions and have used Weiner's (1985) model however, the results from these studies have been mixed (Dagnan, Trower, & Smith, 1998; Rose & Rose, 2005). Other models have been developed for specific purposes such as examining the importance of staff characteristics (Rose et al., 2003) or identifying factors that may be responsible for placement breakdown (Phillips & Rose, 2010). These models tend to be specific in focus and lack a broader overview so while they can contribute to answering specific questions they lack a broader conceptual overview.

Alternative models can be found that examine the development of stress in parents of children with intellectual disabilities (e.g. Hill & Rose, 2010). While some of these models are complex and have been difficult to test empirically others have been partially tested and the results suggest that they have some utility. For example, a model of stress in parent child interactions based on Mash and Johnston (1990) is shown in Fig. 1.

Mash and Johnston's (1990) model consists of four elements including child characteristics such as ability and challenging behavior, environmental characteristics such as family support, parent characteristics that might include a variety of psychological variables such as attributions or locus of control with parent child interactive stress as an outcome. They see these links as reciprocal and while they recognize that other variables may be influential they note that these variables are likely to be the most important influence on the development of parent–child interactive stress. This model has been demonstrated to have predictive utility in mothers of children with intellectual disability (Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Hill & Rose, 2009).

A review of this model suggests that it may have direct applicability to understanding the development of staff well-being and burnout in that elements of the model map closely on to the factors that have been identified as important in research on staff well-being. The characteristics of clients are clearly of direct relevance, particularly challenging behavior.
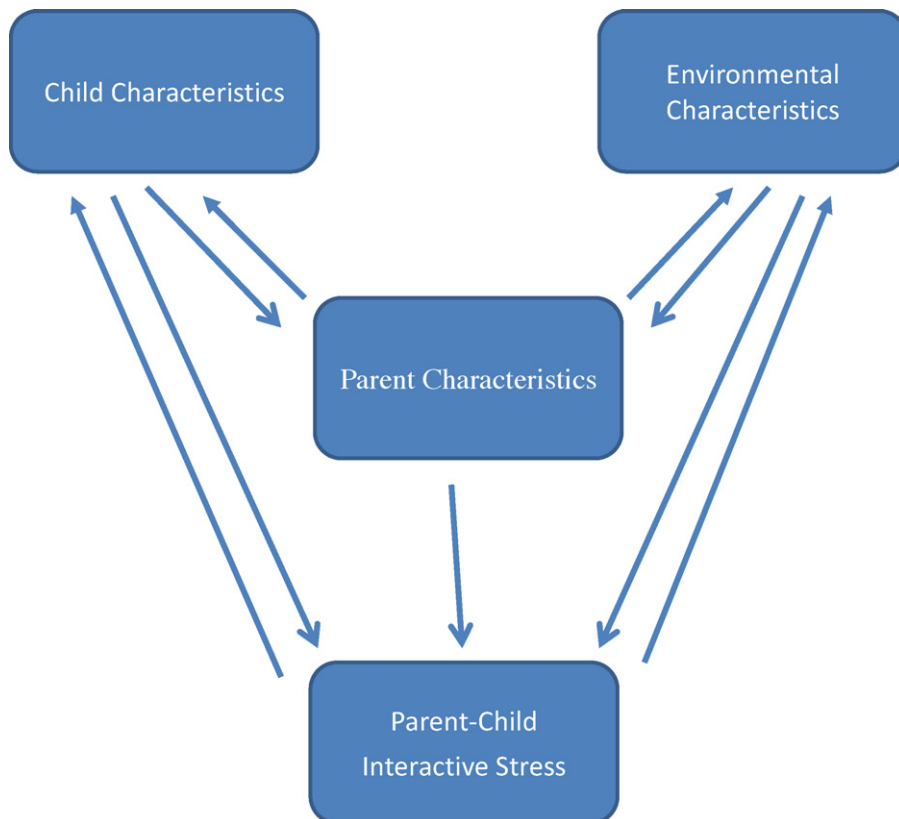


Fig. 1. A model of stress in parent child interactions based on Mash and Johnston (1990).