



The person-oriented approach to burnout: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

The variable-oriented approach has dominated empirical burnout research, but during the last 10 years a person-oriented approach to burnout has also become common. The aim of this systematic literature review was to identify, categorize and evaluate the empirical research to date that has adopted a person-oriented approach to burnout. The results of these studies were then compared with those generated by variable-oriented burnout research. An electronic search of seven databases was conducted in spring 2015. Initially 470 publications were identified, 24 of which met the selection criteria. The reviewed articles were categorized into three groups based on their research target(s): (1) intra-individual patterns of burnout symptoms (i.e., types of burnout) (42%), (2) intra-individual development of burnout over time (i.e., burnout trajectories) (33%), and (3) patterns of well-being indicators within individuals (i.e., well-being types) (33%). The typical burnout types and trajectories identified by person-oriented research were largely parallel with the information produced by variable-oriented research, but also brought out the heterogeneity of the burnout experience by revealing atypical burnout and well-being types and individual developmental trajectories. The advantages, along with the challenges, of taking a person-oriented approach are discussed. Based on the study designs, methodologies, and main findings of the reviewed studies, five avenues for future person-oriented burnout studies are proposed.

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1. Introduction

The serious stress syndrome of burnout, which represents a work-related state of ill-being characterized by the symptoms of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), has been intensively studied since it was first presented in the psychological literature in the mid-1970s (see Leiter, Bakker, & Maslach, 2014; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Most of the empirical work on burnout has been variable-oriented, i.e., burnout symptoms have been taken as the unit of the analysis. Typical research questions representative of this approach include how strongly burnout symptoms correlate with each other (for reviews, see Kim & Ji, 2009; Worley, Vassar, Wheeler, & Barnes, 2008) and whether burnout is stable over time either across the whole study population or in certain predefined subgroups (for reviews, see Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Taris, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2005).

However, during the early twenty-first century, burnout has also been investigated from a person-oriented (also termed person-centered) perspective in which the individual is taken as the unit of analysis (Bergman & Lundh, 2015; Bergman, Magnusson, & El-Khouiri, 2003). In the context of burnout, this approach is able to reveal intra-individual heterogeneity in the burnout syndrome and its development over time. More specifically, this means identifying potential types or patterns of burnout symptoms within individuals and individual developmental trajectories. This approach also makes it possible to explore the distinction between burnout and other (job-related) well-being variables at the within-person level.

This systematic review was undertaken with the aim of identifying, categorizing and evaluating the burnout studies conducted to date that have applied a person-oriented approach. Their results are then compared with those generated by variable-oriented research. The review is organized and presented in four parts. First, the theoretical and methodological facets of both the person- and variable-oriented approaches are introduced. Second, for comparison purposes, a brief overview of the existing knowledge on the multidimensionality of burnout, its long-term development, and relationship with other (job-related) well-being constructs based on variable-oriented approach is provided. Third, the available person-oriented burnout studies are reviewed and evaluated, and compared with the existing variable-oriented findings. Finally, the advantages, along with the challenges, of taking a person-oriented approach are discussed, and directions for future person-oriented burnout research suggested.

1.1. Person versus variable-oriented approach to burnout

The modern person-oriented approach was introduced by Block (1971) in the context of personality psychology, and further elaborated in the milieu of Swedish developmental psychology (Bergman et al., 2003; Magnusson, 1988). The person- and variable-oriented approaches differ fundamentally both theoretically and methodologically (Bergman & Lundh, 2015). Theoretically, the person-oriented approach is based on a holistic-interactionistic perspective on human development (Magnusson, 1988; Magnusson & Törestad, 1993), where the individual is seen as an organized whole, that is, as the sum of interactive

components operating together (Bergman & Lundh, 2015). Accordingly, the person-oriented approach aims to discover the configurations of factors that characterize a specific individual's functioning (Magnusson, 1988). Rooted in philosophical positivism, a variable-oriented approach pursues the search for generalizable laws in line with the ideal of the natural sciences and regards the variable as a central conceptual and analytical unit (see Bergman & Lundh, 2015).

On the methodological level, both these approaches use quantitative data. The basic difference is that person-oriented methods aim at investigating how variables group within individuals, whereas the main focus of interest in variable-oriented methods is the relations between variables (Bergman et al., 2003; Laursen & Hoff, 2006). Variable-oriented methods of analysis focus on inter-individual variation and typically capture the (linear) associations between variables. Correlation- and regression-based methods of analysis as well as mean level comparisons via analysis of variance are prototypically used in this approach. The basic assumption of these statistical methods is that a population is homogeneous with respect to the studied phenomena, for example, a correlation pattern or development over time is assumed to be similar across the whole study population (Laursen & Hoff, 2006).

However, person-oriented analytic methods, prototypically class and cluster analysis, are predicated on the assumption that the population is heterogeneous in terms of the mean levels of and changes in the studied phenomenon (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). Common to the statistical methods used in a person-oriented approach is that the number of classes is unknown and that different class solutions are formed and compared based on statistical and theoretical considerations (Bergman et al., 2003). Thus, classes are not formed on the basis of predefined values (e.g., cut-off values or group means). Person-oriented analyses are typically used for two purposes, that is, to identify types of individuals and individual trajectories (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). In both cases, typical and atypical types and trajectories can be identified. Therefore, the purpose is not that every person forms his/her own type or trajectory; instead the interest is in how individuals are similar and how they are different from others and in what respects (Bergman et al., 2003).

In burnout research, a person-oriented approach as described above has the potential to provide answers to, or at least complement the existing knowledge on, three key questions: the multidimensionality of burnout (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005), long-term development of burnout (Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker, & Sixma, 2011) and its relationship with other (job-related) well-being constructs (Maslach, 2011; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Next, these three facets are briefly discussed on the basis of variable-oriented burnout research.

1.2. Multidimensionality of burnout

Several conceptual and operational definitions, with varying symptomology, have been presented for job burnout. Nevertheless, the definition by Maslach et al. (1996) is most often used and widely accepted in the psychological literature. According to this three-dimensional definition, burnout is a persistent syndrome characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional

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