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Burnout in Irish teachers: Investigating the role of individual differences, work environment and coping factors

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore the role of personality, work environment and coping in teacher burnout.
- Burnout significantly predicted by a combination of these variables.
- Assertions of the transactional model partially supported by findings.
- The importance of including each variable type in future studies underlined.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to examine the relative contributions of individual difference, work environment and coping factors to teacher burnout in an integrative predictive model. The study is situated in the Irish context, where no previous such research has been carried out. A cross-sectional survey-based study with a sample of 192 second level teachers was conducted. Results suggest that individual difference, environmental and coping factors to a lesser extent play a significant role in predicting burnout. Each dimension was predicted by varied combinations of these factors, suggesting the need for a broad-based approach to tackling burnout.

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1. Introduction

Studies conducted in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands amongst others have identified teaching as a particularly stressful occupation, prone to high levels of burnout (Johnson et al., 2005; Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008; Schaufeli, Daamen, & Van Mierlo, 1994). To date, no investigation specifically exploring teacher burnout has taken place in Ireland, however, surveys by the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) indicate that stress and anxiety are the most common cause of occupational absenteeism among Irish teachers, and a significant factor in teacher retirement (Fitzgerald, 2008).

Burnout is a work-related syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment resulting from long-term occupational stress (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Burnout is conceptualised as a dynamic process, whereby its three dimensions influence and feed into each other (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources due to the experience of prolonged work stress. Emotional exhaustion has been described as the "central quality of burnout", as it reflects the stress dimension of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). The experience of emotional exhaustion prompts individuals to attempt to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work (depersonalisation). Chronic work-related exhaustion and accompanying disengagement erode one's sense of effectiveness at work, resulting in reduced personal accomplishment.

Research has consistently suggested that burnout can lead to a variety of negative outcomes both for individuals affected and the organisations that employ them (Awa, Plaumann, & Walter, 2010). Specifically in relation to teachers, those experiencing elevated levels of burnout have been found to be less sympathetic towards

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their students, have lower tolerance for classroom disruption, and are more likely to experience problems with health, wellbeing and commitment to their work (Farber & Miller, 1981; Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Evidently teacher burnout has consequences not just for the individual affected but also their students and the schools in which they are employed.

Stress, and by extension burnout, has been explained as resulting from a transaction between an individual, their coping resources and strategies, and their environment. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model emphasises the importance of both the environmental demands an individual is exposed to, and their appraisals of their ability to cope with them. This model suggests that individuals who appraise aspects of their work environment as threatening and who do not believe they can effectively cope with such demands are more likely to experience stress and burnout. Research into the causes of teacher burnout has typically tended to focus on identifying the environmental demands experienced by teachers in their work, however recent investigations have also explored the role of individual difference characteristics and coping resources that may influence appraisal of these demands (e.g. Betoret, 2009; Kokkinos, 2007). The primary aim of the current study is to integrate a novel combination of individual difference, work environment and coping factors into a predictive model of burnout and assess their relative contributions to the variance in each of its three dimensions.

1.1. Individual differences

The role of individual difference factors in stress and burnout is increasingly acknowledged (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). The current study investigates the role of dispositional (the 'big five' personality traits and core self-evaluations) and situation-specific (teacher self-efficacy) individual difference factors. These constructs were chosen on the basis of their apparent importance in predicting burnout, based on a review of recent literature in the area (e.g. Alarcon, Eschleman and Bowling's, 2009; Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Other individual difference constructs that appear in the teacher burnout literature were considered for inclusion (e.g. dispositional optimism, positive and negative affectivity), the current configuration was viewed as optimal for comparability of findings and reflection of the core aspects of personality of interest to the current study.

The Five-Factor Model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992) has provided a widely-used framework for research on personality. According to this model adult personality can be comprehensively described by five broad traits: openness (the extent to which one desires uniqueness, change, and variety), conscientiousness (the extent to which one is achievement-oriented, dependable, organised and responsible), extraversion (the extent to which one is cheerful, gregarious, fun-loving and enthusiastic), agreeableness (the extent to which one is cooperative, caring, trusting and sympathetic towards others) and neuroticism (the general tendency towards negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, hostility, frustration and guilt). Alarcon et al. (2009) meta-analysis of 121 papers found that personality traits were consistently related to the three dimensions of burnout. In relation to the five factors, neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and optimism were all found to predict variance in the three dimensions of burnout to a significant degree.

In research specific to teachers, numerous studies have identified significant relationships between personality traits and burnout dimensions. Neuroticism in particular has repeatedly been identified as a positive predictor of burnout in teachers. Kokkinos (2007) for example, identified neuroticism as a significant

positive predictor of all three burnout dimensions in a sample of Cypriot teachers, while Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Munoz, and Carrasco-Ortiz (2005) found neuroticism to significantly and positively predict emotional exhaustion among a Spanish sample. Neuroticism has been found to predict higher threat appraisals, a key step in the stress development process (Schneider, Rench, Lyons, & Riffle, 2012). The tendency of people with high levels of neuroticism to express more negative emotions, emotional instability and stress reactions appears to render such individuals vulnerable to burnout and other psychological disturbances (Watson, Clark, & Harkness, 1994). It is thus hypothesised that neuroticism will positively predict emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation and negatively predict personal accomplishment.

Findings in relation the four other 'Big Five' personality traits have been mixed. Kokkinos (2007) found both conscientiousness and openness to be significant negative predictors of depersonalisation and positive predictors of personal accomplishment, while extraversion positively predicted personal accomplishment. By contrast, Cano-Garcia and colleagues' (2005) study failed to find any significant contribution of conscientiousness, openness and extraversion, instead identifying agreeableness as a significant negative predictor of depersonalisation and positive predictor of personal accomplishment. Thus there remains some confusion as to the precise role of conscientiousness, extraversion, openness and agreeableness in teacher burnout. This study will assist in clarifying the relationship between the traits and burnout dimensions.

Beyond the 'Big Five' personality traits, several other individual difference factors have been found to be of significance in predicting burnout. A growing body of research has emerged suggesting that a broad personality trait, termed *core self-evaluations*, is a significant predictor of a variety of work-related outcomes including job performance, job satisfaction and burnout (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Core self-evaluations (CSE) refer to the fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998).

CSE is a broad, latent higher-order trait indicated by four prominent traits in personality literature: self-esteem (the general overall value that one places on oneself as a person), general self-efficacy (an evaluation of how well one can perform across a variety of situations), locus of control (beliefs about control over events in one's life) and neuroticism (the tendency to have a negative cognitive/explanatory style and to focus on negative aspects of the self.) The inclusion of neuroticism under the CSE construct highlights its association with the Big Five and significant correlations between CSE and neuroticism, as well as moderate to strong correlations with extraversion and conscientiousness have been found (Judge et al., 2003). In spite of these relationships, recent research (e.g. Bipp, 2010) has found that CSE predicts variance in job-related factors such as intrinsic work motivations, beyond that accounted for by the Big Five.

Research to date supports the notion that CSE is a significant predictor of job stress (Brunborg, 2008) and burnout (Best, Stapleton, & Downey, 2005). Alarcon and colleagues' meta-analysis (2009) found that CSE was a significant predictor of each of the three dimensions of burnout. CSE was found to have a positive relationship with personal accomplishment and negative relationships with both depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion. Recent research suggests that employee core self-evaluations play an important role in determining resilience to stressors, as well as the type of coping those subjected to stress will engage in (Harris et al., 2009). The current investigation will address the paucity of research exploring CSE and teacher burnout. Based on the extant literature it is hypothesised that CSE will significantly predict variance in burnout among the sample of interest, beyond that accounted for by the Big Five personality traits.