



Feelings of existential fulfilment and burnout among secondary school teachers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 September 2007
Received in revised form
26 November 2008
Accepted 6 January 2009

Keywords:

Existential fulfilment
Self-acceptance
Self-actualization
Self-transcendence
Burnout
Secondary school teachers

ABSTRACT

Teacher burnout is recognized as a serious problem. In research it has been related to many person-specific variables; one of these, the variable of existential fulfilment, has received very little attention thus far. The present study focuses on the relationship between existential fulfilment and burnout among secondary school teachers in the Netherlands ($N = 504$). Existential fulfilment was made operational by means of the Existential Fulfilment Scale, which distinguishes between three dimensions: self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence. A confirmatory factor analysis revealed a three-dimensional construct with interdependent dimensions. Burnout was measured by the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers. Negative relationships between the existential fulfilment dimensions on the one hand and the burnout dimensions exhaustion and cynicism on the other were hypothesized, as well as positive relationships between the existential fulfilment dimensions and the burnout dimension professional efficacy. The hypotheses were confirmed, except for the relationships between self-transcendence and exhaustion and self-transcendence and cynicism, which appeared not to be significant. The inquiry demonstrated the importance of existential fulfilment for the prevalence and prevention of burnout among teachers. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications for future research.

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1. Introduction

Burnout among secondary school teachers has been exposed in research as a serious occupational hazard (Van Horn, Caljé, Schreurs, & Schaufeli, 1997). The stress levels among teachers are found to surpass the average levels among people working in other client-related professions (Travers & Cooper, 1993), and the correlations between work load, stress and burnout symptoms are widely recognized (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Burnout is a job-related syndrome that manifests itself in three symptoms: mental exhaustion, cynicism (formerly labelled 'depersonalization') and reduced professional efficacy (or 'personal accomplishment') (Maslach, 1993). Besides environmental variables that predict burnout phenomena, for example workload, social support and school administration, personality factors have also been identified as significant in the research on teacher burnout; these include personality traits (Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Muñoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005), perceived self-efficacy (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002), existential fulfilment (Tomic, Evers, & Brouwers, 2004), constructive thinking (Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2005), and work engagement (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006).

Another line of investigation explores the interplay between personality and environment, such as the social exchange perspective of effort and reward (Bauer et al., 2007; Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999), and self-efficacy in eliciting social support (Brouwers, Evers, & Tomic, 2001). Intervention programmes focusing on personality factors are likely to be more effective than those focusing on environmental conditions because they appear to be more easily altered than organizational factors (Tomic et al., 2004). Among the personality factors, the concept of perceived self-efficacy is compatible with constructive thinking. Evers et al. (2005) argue that constructive thinking is more fundamental to an individual than are coping strategies, because it relates to underlying thought patterns. In the same way, it can be argued that the existential level of an individual is more fundamental than his or her cognitive level, because the former affects basic motivations and attitudes towards life with its possibilities and limitations. Constructive thinking therefore appears to be rooted in existential fulfilment. The latter construct has been suggested to play an important role in teacher burnout (for instance Längle, 2003). For this reason, we chose to focus on existential fulfilment as a possible predictor of burnout.

Along with many existentially inclined researchers, Pines (1993, 1996, 2000, 2002a, 2002b), postulates a need and search for existential meaning. Existential fulfilment refers to a way of life full of meaning and purpose, and reveals an existential psychological

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approach to life. Characteristic of existential psychology is the attention paid to the boundary experiences of human beings as determinants of human existence (Yalom, 1980). Human existence is confronted with several existential boundaries. To obtain a fulfilled existence, human beings have to overcome the psychological conflicts evoked by these boundaries. Humans have to meet several tasks: they have to accept their own mortality, the limitations of their potentialities, as well as their being only a part of reality. They have to be eager to explore and develop their limited potentialities, and they have to recognize the otherness of the outer world and relate themselves to it. In fulfilling these existential tasks, people find life-meaning, and a fulfilled existence. The three existential tasks can be summarized as self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence.

These three notions can be interpreted as basic attitudes to pursue existential fulfilment, and to overcome the psychological conflicts caused by human limitedness. Someone who accepts the self accepts his or her potentialities and intrinsic limitations. Someone who actualizes the self explores and develops his or her possibilities and potentialities for the sake of personal growth in understanding and abilities. Someone who transcends the self recognizes the otherness of the reality beyond the self, looking for respectful relationships with it, deriving life-meaning from these relationships, feeling responsible for them, feeling part of a larger whole, distinguishing interests that surpass self-interests, and being able to see the self in perspective of the outer reality (Loonstra, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2007).

That is why the concept of existential fulfilment has been reconsidered (Loonstra et al., 2007). Existential fulfilment is understood as the life-purpose that aims at doing full justice to the nature of human existence. Human beings pursue this life goal by accepting the self, by actualizing the self, and by transcending the self. The three dimensions self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence have been popularized in humanistic and existential psychological literature. Rogers (1961) contrasts self-acceptance to a behaviour in which individuals pursue values that will bring social approval, affection, and esteem. In this way they try to 'buy love' (Rogers, 1964). As to self-actualization, Maslow (1943) holds it to be the pinnacle of the hierarchy of human needs. He defines the concept as the desire for self-fulfilment, or the tendency to become more and more who one is. Self-transcendence is considered by Frankl (1962) to be the essence of human existence. This spiritual ability enables the individual to make intentional contacts with the world beyond the self, which gives ultimate meaning to life.

The interest in the relationship between existential fulfilment and burnout ensues from the view of healthy psychological functioning that has been developed by existential and humanistic psychology. Frankl (1962) in particular developed an existential perspective on burnout with his psychology of meaning. He introduced the term 'existential vacuum' for a mode of existence without any meaning and purpose, prone to neuroticism and characterized by boredom and attempts to escape such boredom by distraction. The opposite, existential fulfilment, refers to a way of life full of meaning and purpose.

Frankl (1962) was not alone in leaning towards existential significance. People need to believe that they are significant in the larger scene of things. In a more and more secularized environment work has become a frequently chosen alternative source of meaning. According to Pines (1996) this happens particularly in the lives of idealistic and highly motivated individuals. They work hard because they expect their work to make their lives matter in the larger scheme of things and give meaning to their existence. Pines (1993) writes that the cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful and that the things we do are useful and important. When individuals fail in these efforts, they are

prone to burnout. Burnout emerges out of the experience of meaninglessness. In this framework Pines (1993) describes burnout as growing out of a gradual disillusionment in a quest to derive a sense of existential significance from work.

Längle (2003) explained the genesis of burnout by referring to the concept of existential vacuum and fulfilment. Burnout can be seen as a special form of existential vacuum, or as a deficit of fulfilment, which entails a loss of interest, a lack of initiative, and emotional exhaustion. Burned-out professionals are described as being extrinsically focused on objectives like influence, income, recognition, appreciation, and social acceptance that prevent them from freely dedicating themselves to their job and truly accepting the related responsibility. Research in line with Längle's theory and using a scale that he developed and tested (Längle, Orgler, & Kundi, 2003) attempted to prove the hypothesized relationship (Nindl, 2001; Tomic et al., 2004). The results were astonishing, but unfortunately the scale was unable to stand up to confirmatory factor analysis (Loonstra, Brouwers, & Tomic, in press).

The above-mentioned authors have formed the basis for theories about the relationships between the dimensions of existential fulfilment and of burnout, leading to three hypotheses that are broken down into three statements each.

Hypothesis 1. Higher degrees of existential fulfilment predict lower scores on the burnout dimension mental exhaustion. This hypothesis can be subdivided along the lines of the three dimensions of existential fulfilment. Hypothesis 1a says that higher degrees of self-acceptance induce lower scores on mental exhaustion. People who accept themselves and their limitations are less dependent on the acceptance, recognition and appreciation of others. They spend less energy satisfying others and therefore do not run the risk of premature exhaustion. Hypothesis 1b says that higher degrees of self-actualization induce lower scores on mental exhaustion. Self-actualization is motivated by internal drives instead of external obligations, work engagement correlates negatively with exhaustion (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Hypothesis 1c contends that higher degrees of self-transcendence correlate with lower degrees of exhaustion. This is suggested by the reflection that self-transcendence supposes relationships that are inspiring instead of exhausting.

Hypothesis 2. Higher degrees of existential fulfilment predict lower scores on the burnout dimension cynicism. The dependent hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c maintain that higher scores on the three dimensions of fulfilment, i.e. self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence, bring about lower scores on cynicism. Cynicism is caused by job frustration. Lack of self-acceptance makes people rely more heavily on the approval of others. If they fail to gain such approval, frustration follows, leading to cynicism. If the job does not make it possible to actualize one's opportunities, self-actualization may function as an inner drive that subordinates the job to a comprehensive life project of self-realization. Without such a drive, frustration may once again result. And finally, if self-transcendence is low, there is only a faint notion of meaning and value beyond the self, which fosters cynicism.

Hypothesis 3. Higher degrees of existential fulfilment predict higher scores on the burnout dimension professional efficacy. The related hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c state that higher scores on the three dimensions of fulfilment are accompanied by higher scores on efficacy, for the following reasons. People who accept themselves and their limitations are aware of their finite possibilities. They believe in their efficacy within these limitations; they try to cut their coat to suit their cloth. Moreover, people who actualize their opportunities are self-confident in exploiting their potential, which is a sign of efficacy. Finally, self-transcendence, the sense of meaning in the world beyond the self, may serve as a source of inspiration and strength when performing one's duties.

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