Latent burnout profiles: A new approach to understanding the burnout experience☆

Michael P. Leiter [a,b,*], Christina Maslach [a,b]

[a] Deakin University, Australia
[b] University of California, Berkeley, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Latent profile analysis, with two large datasets, was used to identify multiple person-centered profiles across the burnout – engagement continuum, as assessed by the three dimensions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Five profiles emerged from this analysis: Burnout (high on all three dimensions), Engagement (low on all three), Overextended (high on exhaustion only), Disengaged (high on cynicism only), and Ineffective (high on inefficacy only). Each of these profiles showed a different pattern of correlates with organizational variables. The Disengaged profile was more negative than Overextended, and closer to the Burnout profile, which argues against the use of exhaustion alone as a proxy for burnout. The results have important implications for theory, research, and interventions.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier GmbH. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

The first phase of research on the phenomenon of burnout involved a lot of exploratory, qualitative field studies, which amassed many descriptions of the burnout phenomenon based on observations, interviews, case studies, and personal experience (for example, see Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980; Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Maslach, 1982; Pines, Aronson, & Kafry, 1981). Based on this exploratory work, psychometric research was carried out to establish a method for assessing the burnout experience. That research identified three basic dimensions: *exhaustion* (also described as wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue); feelings of *cynicism* and detachment from the job (also described as depersonalization, negative or inappropriate attitudes, detached concern, irritability, loss of idealism, and withdrawal); and a sense of professional *inefficacy* and lack of accomplishment (also described as reduced productivity or capability, low morale, and an inability to cope).

The measure that emerged from that psychometric research was the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which assessed these three dimensions and has been used in many research studies over the years (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

The potential of having three interrelated dimensions of burnout was first discussed in terms of a sequence of stages over time. For example, the transactional model of burnout (Cherniss, 1980) proposed a first stage of an imbalance between work demands and individual resources (*job stressors)*, a second stage of an emotional response of exhaustion and anxiety (*individual strain),* and a third stage of changes in attitudes and behavior, such as greater cynicism (*defensive coping)*. A process model, which emerged from the earlier qualitative work, proposed a first stage of *emotional exhaustion*, in response to work demands that taxed people's emotional resources; a second stage of *depersonalization*, as people tried to cope by withdrawal and negative, cynical reactions; and a third stage of *reduced personal accomplishment,* when people began to experience inefficacy and failure (Maslach, 1982). A third approach was the phase model, in which the three burnout dimensions were split into high and low categories, yielding eight different patterns, or phases, of burnout (Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1988). The phase model hypothesized that cynicism is the early minimum phase of burnout, followed by the additions of inefficacy, and finally by exhaustion.

What is noteworthy about all of these early approaches is the explicit assumption that people could experience various *patterns* of burnout, which might change at different points in time. However, the potential of these varying patterns has not been

exploited very much in the more recent empirical literature. If anything, there has been a move towards simplifying burnout to a one-dimensional construct of exhaustion. Exhaustion is often considered the strongest, primary element of burnout, and thus a suitable proxy for the entire phenomenon. A single dimension is easier to measure, and exhaustion is easier to fit within existing systems of medical diagnosis and disability. But a focus on just exhaustion may ignore other aspects of the burnout experience, which go beyond chronic fatigue. People experiencing burnout are not simply exhausted or overwhelmed by their workload. They also have lost a psychological connection with their work, which has implications for their motivation and their identity. The cynicism and inefficacy aspects of burnout capture both people's disaffection with work and a crisis in their work-based efficacy expectations.

The three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy do not always move in lock-step, which means that they are not so highly correlated as to constitute a single, one-dimensional phenomenon. The advantage of such distinct, but interrelated, burnout dimensions is that there could be several different patterns that are shown by people at varying times. In some instances, due to situational factors or personal qualities or their interaction, distinct patterns could emerge. Identifying these intermediate patterns would allow a clearer definition of the entire territory between the negative state of burnout and the positive state of engagement. For example, it may be that some people maintain a neutral stance towards work, experiencing neither joy nor despair. The exceptionally motivated condition of engagement might stand in contrast to both a humdrum existence as well as to chronic distress. Other person-centered patterns may identify distinct forms of distress, of which burnout represents only one particularly grievous state. Some progress on this point has been made by contrasting burnout and engagement with workaholism (e. g., Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008), suggesting the potential for further conceptual development.

2. A person-centered approach to multidimensional patterns

Such multidimensional patterns would fit well within a person-centered approach that considers the whole person, in contrast to an exclusive concern with single dimensions prioritized in variable-centered approaches (Bergman, 2001; Mäkikangas, Feldt, Kinnunen, & Tolvanen, 2012; Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2016). More specifically, a person-centered approach appreciates configurations of scores that depart from overall correlational patterns. Rather than de-emphasizing as error residuals the minority of respondents whose scores depart from the regression line, person-centered approaches entertain the possibility that these minority configurations reflect substantial concepts. Thus, for the current research, the strategy was to study the patterns that deviate from that overall norm, in addition to the correlations between the MBI scores for the entire sample.

The initial attempt to develop such a person-centered approach, for new MBI-scoring procedures, was to identify people whose pattern of MBI scores deviated from the standard correlational pattern. More specifically, this earlier research looked for patterns where only one dimension showed a high score, such as only exhaustion or only cynicism, as assessed by high or low scores on a median-split (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). A subsequent study identified a parallel set of "one high dimension" patterns by using within-subject standard deviations (Leiter et al., 2013). One pattern had a negative score on exhaustion, with positive or neutral scores on the other two dimensions, while the second had a negative score on cynicism, with positive or neutral scores on the others. Both patterns would not be clearly visible within a standard correlational analy-

sis. Although unstudied in this prior research, a third pattern of a negative score only on the inefficacy dimension would be another theoretically-relevant person-centered pattern.

For the current research, rather than a pre-selection of a few patterns to study, the goal was to explore a broader range of potential patterns that might exist between the endpoints of burnout and engagement. All of these patterns had to be measured by the scores on the three scales of the MBI: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (the reverse score of the positively worded professional efficacy scale). This conceptual framework was one of a continuum between burnout and engagement, as those two endpoints had been defined originally (Leiter & Maslach, 1998). Engagement was considered to be the opposite alternative of burnout and was defined in terms of the same three dimensions, but the positive end of those dimensions rather than the negative. From this perspective, an "engaged" pattern consists of no exhaustion or cynicism, but a strong sense of professional efficacy. This definition posits that this pattern appropriately describes a positive experience with work, given the absence of any signs of burnout.[1]

The objective in the current research was to use a different technique, latent profile analysis (LPA), to identify the prevalence of various distinct patterns, or profiles, and to determine whether these new person-centered profiles provide an improved understanding of the range of workers' experience on the job. We hypothesized that the identified profiles would include the two standard patterns for the endpoints of the burnout – engagement continuum, and that these would be the same as those generated by the correlational approach between the three dimensions. Thus, the Burnout profile would contain highly negative scores on all three MBI scales, and the Engagement profile would contain highly positive scores on all three MBI scales.

But what might be the intermediate profiles that could emerge from the latent profile analyses? Based on prior longitudinal research (Maslach & Leiter, 2008), we hypothesized that there might be three "one high dimension" profiles, which have been renamed to better distinguish them. An Overextended profile would reflect a high score on exhaustion alone (and lower scores on the other two dimensions). A Disengaged profile would reflect a high score on cynicism alone (and lower scores on the other two dimensions). An Ineffective profile would reflect a high score on inefficacy alone (and lower scores on the other two dimensions). None of these "one high dimension" profiles would be fully appreciated in a correlational analysis. Theoretically, there could also be two "two high dimensions" profiles, but because these had not yet appeared in prior research, they were considered on a more exploratory basis.

3. Latent profile analysis as a new approach

A recent discussion of profile analysis, as it pertains to commitment, identified the advantages and disadvantages of median splits, cluster analysis, and latent profile analysis (Meyer, Stanley, & Vandenberg, 2013). Median splits trade the advantages of simplicity against the limitations inherent in any arbitrary division of a sample. First, median splits may be misleadingly labelled as

---

[1] It should be noted that arguments have been raised against identifying positive scores on the MBI as "engagement," given the subsequent research that has been done on the phenomenon of work engagement and the development of a measure (the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES); Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). The UWES assesses the active presence of positive states, such as vigor, rather than assuming a positive state from the absence of a negative one like exhaustion. Furthermore, the UWES definition of engagement is not framed as being the "opposite" of burnout, as was done with the MBI. However, for the purposes of this study, which relied on analyses of MBI scores, the original conceptualization of engagement as the opposite pattern of scores on the MBI is the one that is being used.