



School burnout and intimate partner violence: The role of self-control



Ashley N. Cooper^{a,*}, Gregory S. Seibert^b, Ross W. May^b, Michael C. Fitzgerald^a, Frank D. Fincham^b

^a Family and Child Sciences, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491, United States

^b Family Institute, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 November 2016

Received in revised form 17 February 2017

Accepted 20 February 2017

Available online 24 February 2017

Keywords:

Emotional dysregulation

Intimate partner violence

School burnout

Self-control

ABSTRACT

The deleterious effects of school burnout (academic-related stress) on academic, physiological, and cognitive outcomes have been previously established. However, school burnout's relationship to emotional and relationship outcomes as well as underlying factors contributing to their potential relationship are less understood. Therefore, three studies were conducted to fill this gap by examining the relationship between school burnout, self-control, emotional dysregulation, and intimate partner violence. In emerging adult samples, results demonstrate that school burnout is positively associated with emotional dysregulation, independent of anxiety and depression (Study 1), and that self-control moderates this relationship (Study 2) as well as the relationship between school burnout and intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization (Study 3). Specifically, the relationship between school burnout and emotional dysregulation (Study 2), as well as with both victimization and perpetration (Study 3), are stronger under lower levels of dispositional self-control. Findings from these studies identify school burnout as an important phenomenon of inquiry in relation to psychosocial outcomes among emerging adults. More importantly, findings suggest that self-control may serve as a potential point of intervention for ameliorating school burnout's damaging effects. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Burnout within the occupational setting has been of interest to researchers since the 1970's (see [Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009](#)). However, in light of growing academic demands and rising levels of psychological distress among college students ([Wang, 2016](#)), researchers have begun to investigate burnout in tertiary education. School burnout, characterized by high levels of school related cynicism, emotional exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy, occurs as a result of the depletion or 'wearing out' of mental and emotional resources needed to provide meaningful engagement in one's work ([Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014](#)). Although school burnout has been shown to be related to academic ([May, Bauer, & Fincham, 2015](#)) and health outcomes ([May, Sanchez-Gonzalez, Brown, Koutnik, & Fincham, 2014](#); [May, Sanchez-Gonzalez, & Fincham, 2014](#); [May, Sanchez-Gonzalez, Seibert, & Fincham, 2016](#)), little is known about how school burnout is associated with individual emotional functioning and relationship outcomes, such as intimate partner violence (IPV).

The conceptual link between school burnout, emotional functioning, and ultimately intimate partner violence may reside with self-control. Self-control, defined as the capacity to inhibit immediate impulsive behavioral and emotional responses resulting from stress, is said to be contingent upon a depletable resource ([Baumeister & Heatherton,](#)

[1996](#)). Individuals with low dispositional self-control, relative those with high self-control, will have fewer resources to inhibit impulsive emotionally driven behaviors. Thus, the relationship between school burnout and emotional dysregulation as well as intimate partner violence is likely to be stronger under low dispositional self-control. The current research attempts to address this possibility by first investigating associations between school burnout and emotional dysregulation while controlling for similar affective symptomology (i.e., anxiety and depression) in Study 1. In the context of the self-regulatory strength model of self-control ([Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996](#)), emotional dysregulation can be understood as the outcome of poor self-regulatory strength. Previous findings indicate that both dispositional and state self-control moderate the relationship between school burnout and student outcomes (i.e. grade point average and absenteeism; [Seibert, May, Fitzgerald, & Fincham, 2016](#)), thus the current research goes on to explore (in Study 2) dispositional self-control as a potential moderator of the relationship between school burnout and emotional dysregulation.

School burnout is a growing concern on college campuses and may soon rival that shown for rates of intimate partner violence among college students ([Fass, Benson, & Leggett, 2008](#)). Some researchers have found that self-control is a critical component for understanding how individuals are able to inhibit the desire to act on thoughts of aggression towards their partner ([Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009](#)) while others have identified self-control as a predictor of victimization ([Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014](#)). Under the tenets of the strength model of self-control, school burnout would tax the strength of

* Corresponding author at: Department of Family and Child Science, Florida State University, 120 Convocation Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491, United States.
E-mail address: anc15j@my.fsu.edu (A.N. Cooper).

subsequent self-control efforts. Accordingly, we expect increased emotional dysregulation and occurrences of intimate partner violence for individuals who have low dispositional capacity for self-control and who are experiencing higher levels of school burnout. Thus, Study 3 investigates whether dispositional self-control moderates the relationship between two dominant issues faced by college students today: school burnout and intimate partner violence.

1.1. Emotional dysregulation and self-control

In the past few decades, researchers have sought to understand how individuals manage emotions and their subsequent behavioral responses (Gross, 1998a). Emotion regulation is understood as an internal process that occurs as one responds to stress. According to the process model of emotion regulation proposed by Gross (1998a), emotions unfold over time and individuals employ various emotion regulatory strategies throughout the emotion-generative process to diminish or increase the emotional impact of an event, either before the event occurs (antecedent-focused) or after it occurs (response-focused). The ability to effectively regulate emotions has been associated with improved psychological well-being (Bradley, DeFife, et al., 2011; Bradley, Westen, et al., 2011), physical health (see Gross, 1998b) and less aggression (McNulty & Hellmuth, 2008). Individuals low in effective emotion management are more likely to experience emotional dysregulation (Gross, 1998a, 2015). Emotional dysregulation is thus defined as the failure to effectively regulate one's emotions (Gross, 1998a, 2015), and can be conceptualized as a product of low self-regulatory resources. For example, individuals with a higher level of self-control are more resistant to the effects of stress, presumably reducing the likelihood that stress will result in emotional dysregulation. Therefore, individual capacity for self-control offers an explanation for why some individuals fail to effectively regulate their emotions.

Self-control is characterized by both dispositional and state features (Baumeister, 2014; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007); the dispositional aspect of self-control tends to be more consistent over time whereas the state aspect is more susceptible to day-to-day fluctuations (Baumeister, 2014; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). In the self-regulatory strength model of self-control the capacity to exert self-control is a limited resource, susceptible to depletion resulting from the exertion of self-control which further diminishes the strength of subsequent self-control efforts (see Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). The exhaustion of such resources is associated with poorer self-esteem, binge eating, substance use, mental health challenges (Tangney et al., 2004), and increased aggression (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007). Thus, the importance of self-control in managing negative emotions that precede such deleterious outcomes has long been recognized (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Tangney et al., 2004). It is therefore quite possible that susceptibility to emotional dysregulation in the face of school burnout varies at different levels of dispositional self-control.

1.1.1. Self-control and school burnout

Researchers have identified numerous stressors that are associated with self-control. For example, high maintenance social interactions (Finkel et al., 2006), financial strain, problem solving, making decisions and even the act of engaging in self-control (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2014) have all been found to deplete self-regulatory resources. For the average college student, the rising costs and academic demands of obtaining a degree (Wang, 2016) are sources of stress that potentially deplete the resources needed to effectively employ self-control to stave off the effects of school burnout. Only one study (Seibert et al., 2016) to date has demonstrated a link between school burnout, self-control, and individual outcomes such as academic performance.

As noted, interest in school burnout derives from the construct of occupational burnout which emerged as a global phenomenon as countries transitioned from industrial to service based economies

(Schaufeli et al., 2009). Within the academic context, school burnout is characterized by feelings of academic strain and fatigue due to an abundance of school work (i.e. exhaustion), a loss of interest in schoolwork which is seen as less meaningful (i.e. cynicism), and a reduced sense of competence including a lack of academic accomplishment and feelings of inadequacy (i.e. efficacy; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela, 2008). Higher school burnout has been linked to lower grade point average, cognitive functioning (i.e. poor attentional capacity and problem solving success; May et al., 2015), and less efficient cardiovascular functioning (May, Sanchez-Gonzalez, Brown, et al., 2014). Notably absent from this research, however, is the examination of interpersonal behavior which is also likely to be influenced by school burnout. Although the risks posed by school burnout are becoming clearer, understanding how school burnout leads to negative outcomes remains important. Recently, researchers have begun to address this need by identifying self-control as an individual resource that can help explain why school burnout may have more deleterious outcomes for some individuals than others. Seibert and colleagues found that when self-control resources were depleted, those experiencing high school burnout demonstrated poorer performance on laboratory tasks (i.e. arithmetic performance; Seibert et al., 2016). Such findings provide a precedent for how self-control might potentially impact the relationship between school burnout and interpersonal behaviors such as IPV.

Similar to school burnout, self-control has been linked to various outcomes such as academic performance, adjustment, eating and drinking behaviors (i.e. bingeing), and relationship well-being (Tangney et al., 2004). Self-control is not only important for one's responses, such as guiding behavior and making choices, but is also important for interpersonal processes (i.e. impression management or dealing with demanding partners; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). One study even attempted to establish a link between academic stress and dating violence in college students (Mason & Smithey, 2012). Academic stress in the context of experiencing school burnout may more readily deplete self-control resources leading to poor impulse control and the occurrence of destructive interpersonal behaviors such as aggression. Therefore, investigating the role of self-control can offer a clearer understanding of how school burnout, in tandem with self-control, is associated with occurrences of IPV.

1.1.2. Intimate partner violence and self-control

The prevalence of IPV among college students is high; one study found that over 35% of college students reported being a victim of IPV at some point while in college (Fass et al., 2008). Although estimates of IPV on college campuses vary, the most consistent prevalence rates range from about 20% to 33% (Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan, 2005). Not surprisingly, a considerable amount of research investigates the risk factors for and outcomes of IPV, including self-control (see Finkel et al., 2009). Specifically, researchers have begun to tease out the association between self-control and aggression towards romantic partners (Payne, Triplett, & Higgins, 2011) and have repeatedly shown self-regulatory failure to be associated with IPV (see Finkel, 2008).

Although a large body of research has identified risk factors for IPV (e.g., previous experiences of violence, or childhood trauma, and current triggers; Kaukinen, 2014), it is important to understand not only the propensity towards violence but also the strength of inhibitory behaviors, such as emotional regulation and self-control as potential prophylactic measures. In fact, McNulty and Hellmuth (2008) found that being able to regulate one's emotions reduces the tendency towards IPV, particularly in the face of IPV by one's partner. Additionally, individuals high in self-control are shown to be less likely to act on violent impulses; however, when depleted they are more likely to engage in violent tendencies towards their partners (Finkel et al., 2009). Individuals with low state self-control and high dispositional aggression were found to be more likely to engage in IPV (Finkel et al., 2012). In fact,

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