The long arm of work: A motivational conflict perspective on teacher strain[☆]

CrossMark

Axel Grund[*], Nina Katrin Brassler, Stefan Fries

University of Bielefeld, Germany

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher strain was examined with a focus on cross-domain (motivational) conflicts.
- Work-to-family conflict (WFC) positively related to teachers' emotional exhaustion.
- Experiences of motivational interference in action conflicts mediated this relation.
- Main findings were similar for different measures of emotional exhaustion.
- Recovery from work during private life seems crucial for teachers' emotional strain.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Teacher strain is seen typically as a phenomenon within the job domain. Drawing on effort-recovery theory as well as on research on work—family conflict and motivational interference, we propose that intrapsychic conflict between different life domains also contributes to teachers' emotional exhaustion. Findings based on self-reports of 234 teachers show that particularly the negative impact of work on teachers' private life related positively to their emotional exhaustion, and that this effect is mostly mediated by motivational interference effects in the social domain. Hence, adequate leisure experiences and detachment from work seem to be crucial to prevent prolonged emotional strain.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Teachers are among those professionals that are often referred to in terms of their high emotional strain (Chang, 2009; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015). So far, research—especially in the field of burnout—focused on the specific job characteristics of teaching as well as on social interactions inside the classroom that may contribute to this situation (Maslach, 2003). Certainly, the teaching task itself can place a high burden on the individual (cf.

Chang, 2009), yet how this work relates to engagement in other life domains may also be important.

A critical feature of being a teacher consists of a rather blurred line between work and non-work. For example, U.S. teachers report working at home and on Sundays more frequently than other professionals (Krantz-Kent, 2008). Similarly, U.K. teachers reported that outside working hours exceeded 20% of the total hours worked per day (Department for Education, 2014). For Germany, the situation is similar (Bauer et al., 2007), especially because few schools provide teachers with office space. Moreover, given that teachers' job requirements usually comprise a considerable amount of planning, preparation, and assessment beyond the teaching task itself (OECD, 2014; Philipp & Kunter, 2013), teachers' juggling of their engagement in different life domains may be especially critical. In the present study, we investigate the relation of negative interactions between certain life domains and teacher strain in terms of their emotional exhaustion. Specifically, by drawing on

effort-recovery theory (Meijman & Mulder, 1998), we propose that adequate leisure experiences, even more than non-conflicted work time, is crucial for an individual's emotional strain. Moreover, by drawing on research on work–family conflict (e.g., Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996) and motivational interference (e.g., Fries, Dietz, & Schmid, 2008), we seek to reveal the motivational processes that underlie these spillover effects.

1.1. Teacher strain, burnout, and emotional exhaustion

In the last 40 years, burnout has become a prevalent and infamous concept when it comes to teachers' strain. It describes a complex syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The emotional exhaustion component is typically seen as the central quality of burnout by scholars from different research groups (e.g., Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). It refers to feeling overextended and emotionally drained, or more generally to "stress reactions (…) such as fatigue, job-related depression, psychosomatic complaints, and anxiety" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 499).

Teaching, among other social services, has been a typical target domain for burnout research, given the large attrition rate of teachers (Macdonald, 1999). Early research focused on relations between demographic and personal characteristics and teacher burnout, with only limited explanatory power (cf. Chang, 2009). Some studies found that emotional exhaustion was higher for younger, less experienced teachers (e.g., Friedman & Farber, 1992), some found that personal accomplishment was lower for older teachers (e.g., Gold, 1985), and still others found only weak relations with age (e.g., Zabel & Zabel, 2001). Similar mixed results emerged for studies on the relation between gender and different burnout dimensions. For example, female teachers seemed to experience more emotional exhaustion compared to male teachers, whereas male teachers reported higher depersonalization (Burke & Greenglass, 1993; Gold, 1985; Purvanova & Muros, 2010). More recent studies identified teachers' self-efficacy as a potential buffer for burnout (e.g., Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Dicke, Parker, Marsh, Kunter, Schmeck, & Leutner, 2014; Philipp & Kunter, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), and found positive relations between burnout and neuroticism (Maslach et al., 2001).

Organizational factors that relate to burnout include school size and socio-educational status, salary, workload, classroom size and climate, and social support (Burke & Greenglass, 1993; Byrne, 1994; Chang, 2009; Cinamon, Rich, & Westman, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001; Philipp & Kunter, 2013; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). Among these, role ambiguity and conflict are particularly important because they highlight the grueling potential of (seemingly) incompatible standards, or end-states, that exert an influence on teachers. Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity regarding a teacher's obligations, whereas role conflict refers to the simultaneous occurrence of at least two pressures by which adherence to one pressure reduces the possibility to comply with the other (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In this sense, previous research has demonstrated that role conflict relates to burnout symptoms (e.g., Byrne, 1994; Maslach et al., 2001). Most recently, Demerouti et al. (2001) argued that the interaction between the specific demands of a job and a person's resources to deal with these demands is critical for the development of burnout.

All of these studies focused on critical organizational and personal features *within* the teaching profession. This is not surprising given that burnout and emotional exhaustion, in their original definitions, referred to work-related concepts (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008). Nevertheless, when it comes to teacher strain more generally, it may be helpful to take a perspective that regards a person's multiple roles, and not only the "working person". Such a broader perspective is especially reasonable when we look at three inherent features of being a teacher, identified by Rothland (2013): (1) Teachers usually have a bisected work place where the teaching job itself takes place in the schools, but curricular work, lesson planning, and grading typically takes place at home; (2) working hours are regulated only fragmentarily, and beyond the respective assigned courses that have to be taught, it remains unclear how much work has to be invested; and (3) in principle, the teaching task is infinite; there is no clear-cut standard about when a specific lesson plan is *good enough*. Rather, it depends on the individual standard of each teacher as to when the preparation task is *done*. This latitude is not accompanied necessarily by more or better leisure time (Cinamon et al., 2007). By contrast, teachers across several countries frequently find themselves in the situation of working overtime (Bauer et al., 2007; Philipp & Kunter, 2013), which sets the stage for spillover effects into other life domains.

1.2. Effort-recovery theory and work–family conflict

One of the premises of effort-recovery theory (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) is that working consumes personal resources (i.e., physical and psychological) because it is effortful. This depletion is short-term and reversible as long as there is enough respite from work. If, however, the recovery process is inadequate, short-term depletion may build up to chronic health problems. Hence, from this perspective, not only the demands of the teaching profession and how they are encountered by the individual, but also the possibility for recreation and recovery, are crucial for burnout. In this sense, Oerlemans and Bakker (2014) recently found that everyday engagement in physical, social, and low-effort activities is related to physical vigor, cognitive liveliness, and recovery from work, especially for those people who already suffer from burnout symptoms. Typically, recovery from work is assessed in terms of overt non-work-related activities. Hence, if people continue to work during their time off, this hampers recovery from work (Bakker, Demerouti, Oerlemans, & Sonnentag, 2013; Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). However, in everyday life, and especially for professions with rather ambiguous job characteristics, such as teaching, cross-domain impairments may often be less behaviorally apparent, but rather more emotional, cognitive, and motivational in nature. Here, the concept of work–family conflict comes into play.

Work–family conflict refers to role expectations from one context that conflict with expectations from the other context (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Different from role conflict *within* a certain life domain, here, incompatible standards exist *between* two (or more) domains. Participation in one life domain is made more difficult by engagement in another domain in terms of time- and strain-based conflicts. Time-based conflict refers to the notion that the more time one devotes to Domain A, the less time remains for Domain B, which makes fulfilling one's responsibilities in the latter domain less likely. Strain-based conflict, however, refers to the *psychological* costs of engagement in one domain at the expense of another domain. For example, if I worry for my family, this may render it difficult to stay focused during a demanding task at work.

According to Netemeyer et al. (1996), it is important to distinguish conceptually between work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work (FWC). Specifically, WFC refers to impairments of one's family, or one's private life in general, due to demands from work, whereas FWC refers to impairments of one's work due to general demands from the private domain. It seems justifiable to distinguish between the two concepts because correlations between WFC and FWC, though positive, are only small to medium in size (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). Moreover,