



Job pressure and ill-health in physical education teachers: The mediating role of psychological need thwarting



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Job pressure predicted autonomy, competence and relatedness need thwarting.
- Thwarted autonomy, competence and relatedness needs predicted burnout in teachers.
- Competence need thwarting predicted somatic complaints in teachers.
- Mediation analyses supported the explanatory role of psychological need thwarting.
- Results can inform interventions aimed at reducing ill-health in teachers.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from self-determination theory, this study examined the interplay among PE teachers' ($N = 364$) self-reported perceptions of job pressure, psychological need thwarting, burnout, and somatic complaints. Structural equation modeling indicated that autonomy, competence, and relatedness need thwarting were predicted by teachers' perceptions of job pressure. In turn, the thwarting of each need was positively associated with burnout; the thwarting of the need for competence also predicted somatic complaints. Mediation analyses supported the explanatory role of need thwarting. The findings point to the understudied construct of need thwarting as a promising underlying mechanism for explaining negative health-related outcomes in teachers.

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1. Introduction

Levels of stress-related ill-health and associated sickness absence are high among teachers (De Heus & Diekstra, 1999; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). A number of sources of stress have been identified in the educational literature including work overload (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006), a perceived lack of control and autonomy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009), disruptive pupil behavior (Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004; Kokkinos, 2007), and inadequate support from school management (Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2012; Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012). The potential repercussions of these occupational hazards on the education

system are of great concern. For example, poor health amongst teachers is likely to affect the quality of both the teaching and the pastoral care provided to students (Maslach & Leiter, 1999, 2005). In addition, ill-health and sickness absence in any one individual is likely to cause increased work and stress for other staff. The study of teacher stress and ill-health is, therefore, of great importance in relation to the productivity of schools, the well-being of teachers, and the standard of education provided to young people (Farber, 1991).

Surprisingly, empirical studies which explore the processes underlying the relationships between job demands and ill-health are relatively scarce (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). Guglielmi and Tatrow (1998) suggested that there is a need for research to move away from simplistic investigations of bivariate stress-illness relationships and examine the role of potential mediators which may explain causal pathways between

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job-related stress and ill-health. In line with these recommendations, the present study examines whether the thwarting of basic psychological needs, as defined in self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2002), mediates the relationship between perceived job pressure and ill-health in physical education teachers. Before outlining SDT and the concept of psychological need thwarting, however, we first discuss two related forms of ill-health reported to be prevalent amongst teachers.

1.1. Ill-health in physical education teachers

Work-related stress can be defined as an adverse reaction to excessive pressures placed upon employees' in the work context. Taylor and Ntoumanis (2007) interviewed physical education teachers about their work environment and identified several sources of perceived work-related stress including evaluations of their own effectiveness based on their students' performance, time constraints during physical education lessons, and pressures from the school management and colleagues to conform to certain teaching methods. Physical education teachers are often faced with additional sources of frustration including the low social status frequently afforded to the subject and inadequate facilities (Fejgin, Ephraty & Ben-Sira, 1995). Moreover, research with Spanish physical education teachers indicates that issues to do with organization and discipline are more pertinent than in other subjects because students have more freedom of movement during lessons (Saenz-Lopez, Almagro, & Ibanez, 2011). Further stress for physical education teachers will occur if the subject is devalued by colleagues and school management (Saenz-Lopez et al., 2011). For instance, colleague support has been shown to moderate the relationship between job demands and burnout among physical education teachers and managerial support has been shown to effect self-efficacy beliefs (Brouwers, Tomic, & Boluijt, 2011). Thus, this group of specialist teachers may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing stress from the sources of pressure examined in the current study.

Research has indicated that excessive work-related stress over a prolonged period of time can lead to both mental and physical illness. Burnout, for example, is considered to be the final step of extensive exposure to stress and can be defined as the inability of the employee to continuously invest the energy needed to meet the demands of his or her job (Maslach et al., 2001). This psychophysiological response to chronic situational stress is characterized by three main components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of mental fatigue and the depletion of one's emotional resources. Depersonalization refers to negative, cynical, or excessively detached responses which are employed to protect the individual from the psychological stress coming from people with whom they interact. Finally, reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decrease in feelings of efficiency and productivity at work (Maslach et al., 2001). Thus, in addition to a marked loss of emotional energy, burnout also implies a negative assessment of others (i.e., depersonalization) and the self (i.e., reduced personal accomplishment).

Numerous studies indicate high prevalence rates of burnout amongst teachers (Kyriacou, 2001), including physical education teachers (Pascual, Monfort, & Gonzalez, 2008; Smith & Leng, 2003). For example, Vitoria, Paredes, and Paredes' (2001) findings indicated that 58.6% of the physical education teachers involved in their study reported either intermediate (48.6%) or high (10%) levels of burnout symptoms. Moreover, a review by Martín (2006) suggested that Spanish physical education teachers are similarly affected with 60% having taken extended sick leave at some point during their career. Furthermore, 23.4% of these periods of absence were caused

primarily by psychological illness which was accompanied by physical symptoms. Burned-out educators are unable to deal successfully with the emotional stress caused by teaching pressures (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). This failure to cope can manifest itself in impaired performance and absenteeism, reduced levels of empathy and tolerance towards students, failure to prepare lessons adequately, and a lack of commitment to the teaching profession (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996). It appears, therefore, that physical education teacher burnout is particularly worthy of research attention.

There is also a large body of literature which outlines the negative physical effects of work-stress on teachers' health (see Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Somatic consequences of stress include cardiovascular disorders such as coronary heart disease, angina and high blood pressure, gastrointestinal problems such as stomach ulcers, as well as recurrent headaches, respiratory tract infections and other symptoms of colds and influenza (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Danhof-Pont, Van Veen, & Zitman, 2011; Seidman & Zager, 1991). As such, somatic symptoms were included in the current study to further explore links between perceived job pressures and self-reported physical health among physical education teachers. The objective of this study was to explore why and how perceived job pressure is associated with teacher burnout and adverse physical health-related outcomes. To this end, we used SDT, a motivational theory which explicates how pressurizing social environments can thwart basic psychological needs and result in poor human functioning and ill-health (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

1.2. Self-determination theory

SDT proposes that individuals will develop and function most effectively in social environments which support their innate psychological needs. The theory identifies three basic psychological needs, those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy reflects a need for individuals to feel volitional and responsible for their own behavior (deCharms, 1968). Competence reflects a need to succeed at optimally challenging tasks and attain desired outcomes (White, 1959). Finally, relatedness concerns the degree to which individuals feel connected to and accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Research conducted in various life domains, including the workplace (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Van den Broeck et al., 2008), has established a clear empirical link between psychological need satisfaction (or lack thereof) and well-being (e.g., Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Ntoumanis, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, SDT recognizes that beyond psychological growth and well-being, people can display cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns that represent the non-optimal or darker sides of human existence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). To explain the causes of such diminished functioning, Deci and Ryan proposed that the thwarting of basic psychological needs will lead to non-optimal development and ill-health. Although widely discussed in theoretical overviews (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006), comparatively little research has focused on the direct consequences of psychological need thwarting (Vallerand, Pelletier, & Koestner, 2008), primarily due to the way in which the construct has previously been operationalized and assessed.

Initial research by Author and colleagues (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen Ntoumani, 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011) has indicated that direct assessments of need thwarting, the negative experiential state which occurs when individuals perceive their psychological needs to be actively undermined by others, should be used when ill-being and other maladaptive outcomes are the focus of investigation. This is because need thwarting does not simply

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