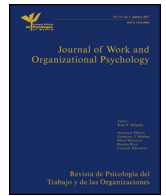




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Examining the role of cynicism in the relationships between burnout and employee behavior

Hyejin Bang*, Thomas G. Reio Jr

Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relation of burnout components (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy) with employees' self-rated job performance and prosocial behavior and test a conceptual model that incorporates the direct and indirect relationships of the burnout components with job performance and prosocial behavior. A paper-and-pencil survey battery was completed by 262 working adults in a university setting. The independent and dependent variables were collected one month apart to reduce the likelihood of common method variance bias. Emotional exhaustion and professional inefficacy were associated with lower task and contextual performance, and prosocial behavior. Cynicism was a significant partial mediator of the emotional exhaustion and professional inefficacy relations with three outcome variables, linking to increased task performance, contextual performance, and prosocial behavior. This is one of the few studies that use the burnout process model to examine the links between burnout and performance and prosocial behavior.

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Análisis del papel del cinismo en la relación entre el *burnout* y el comportamiento de los trabajadores

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la relación que tienen los componentes del *burnout* (es decir, agotamiento, cinismo e ineficacia profesional) con el desempeño profesional autoevaluado y el comportamiento prosocial, así como poner a prueba un modelo conceptual que incorpora la relación directa e indirecta que guardan los componentes del *burnout* con el desempeño laboral y el comportamiento prosocial. Una muestra de 262 adultos que trabajaban en el entorno universitario cumplimentó una encuesta de papel y lápiz. Las variables independientes y dependientes se calcularon un mes más tarde con el fin de reducir la probabilidad del sesgo de varianza común del método. El agotamiento emocional y la ineficacia profesional se asociaban con un menor desempeño en las tareas y con el desempeño contextual, además de con el comportamiento prosocial. El cinismo constituía un significativo mediador parcial en la relación que mantenían el agotamiento emocional y la ineficacia profesional con tres variables dependientes, vinculándose con un aumento del desempeño profesional y contextual y con el comportamiento prosocial. Es uno de los pocos estudios que se sirven del modelo procesual del *burnout* para analizar la relación entre burnout, desempeño y comportamiento prosocial.

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Burnout has long been regarded as having a negative impact on workplace well-being and productivity. Organizational research suggests that although employees who are happy and engaged are more productive (Shuck & Reio, 2014), employees who lack energy or other resources suffer decrements in performance and

* Corresponding author. 11200 SW 8th Street. ZEB 339A. Miami, FL 33199, USA.
E-mail address: bangh@fiu.edu (H. Bang).

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are less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (Demerouti, Bakker, & Leiter, 2014; Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2011). Burnout consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, cynicism (depersonalization), and diminished professional efficacy (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). To date, most empirical research and practice relies on the assumption that burnout negatively affects organizational outcomes, including job performance (Chiaburu, Peng, Oh, Banks, & Lomeli, 2013; Taris, 2006). However, beyond the simple burnout effect on employees' performance, understanding the distinction between three burnout components is imperative because each has different antecedents and consequences and potential causal relationships among the components. Emotional exhaustion occurs when employees feel overwhelmed and drained by the demands of their work and is closely related to absenteeism (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Cynicism and diminished professional efficacy, on the other hand, are associated with poor job resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004). Of the three components, cynicism is found to be the most powerful predictor of turnover intention (Leiter & Maslach, 2009).

Moreover, some research has addressed causal relationships among the three burnout components. For example, Leiter and Maslach (1988) noted that high levels of emotional exhaustion would lead to high levels of cynicism, which, in turn, leads to diminished professional efficacy. Because each of the burnout components demonstrates differential relationships with a wide range of antecedents and consequences, and with each other, it is possible that employees may experience one symptom (Demerouti, Verbeke, & Bakker, 2005) or two or all three symptoms of burnout depending upon the nature of their specific work conditions. This implies when employees suffer from more than one of the three burnout symptoms it is conceivable that each burnout component may play a differential role in predicting organizational outcomes like job performance or prosocial behavior (Angelo & Chambel, 2014; Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008), including acting as a mediator or moderator variable (Xu, Bègue, & Bushman, 2012). For the purpose of this study, we define job performance as "actions and behaviors that are under the control of the individual that contributes to the goals of the organization" (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002, p. 66).

Cynicism generally leads to negative associations with performance and prosocial behavior, conflicts among individuals, staff circulation rapidity, and absenteeism for individuals and organizations (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Naus, van Iterson, & Roe, 2007). In contrast, organizational researchers suggest that cynical behavior can also serve as an important coping mechanism that keeps stress and burnout at bay (Brandes et al., 2008; Brandes & Das, 2006). Cynical behavior can be a form of expression that increases not only an employees' divergent and critical thinking, but can also serve as a way to alleviate frustration with problem situations (Brandes & Das, 2006; Cutler, 2000; Wilkerson, Evans, & Davis, 2008). These inconsistent and mixed findings suggest a lack of conceptual and empirical clarity regarding the dynamic processes associated with the burnout dimensions. Therefore, it is important to clarify the role of cynicism in the relationships between other aspects of burnout (i.e., exhaustion and professional inefficacy) and employee behavior.

The purpose of this present study is twofold. First, it attempts to examine the relation of each burnout component with employees' job performance (i.e., task and contextual performance) and prosocial behavior, defined as positive social behavior that promotes the well-being and integrity of other people or society as a whole (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Second, it tests a conceptual model that incorporates the direct and indirect relationships of the three burnout components with job performance and prosocial behavior. This study makes substantial contributions to the literature in the following ways. As mentioned above, the quest

to find the role of cynicism as a coping strategy in the development of job burnout has proven elusive. Shedding light on this question is a significant next step in this line of research. Although the bulk of previous studies have suggested that cynicism contributes to negative effects on workplace outcomes (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Wilkerson, 2002), cynicism may not necessarily be a negative predictor of organizational outcomes (Brandes & Das, 2006). Therefore, our investigation could provide a better understanding of the possible role of cynicism in workplace performance, especially when employees suffer from all three symptoms of burnout concurrently. Moreover, earlier studies have demonstrated the mediating role of burnout between personality and job performance (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010), between social support and job performance (Parker & Kulik, 1995), and between psychosocial risk and work-related factors and musculoskeletal disorders (Gholami, Pahlavian, Akbarzadeh, Motamedzade, & Moghaddam, 2016; Jaworek, Marek, Karwowski, Andrzejczak, & Genaidy, 2010). However, little research has investigated plausible mechanisms partially mediating the relationships between the other two burnout components (i.e., emotional exhaustion and diminished professional efficacy) and employee behavior in organizational settings. This study will thus add to the knowledge base related to understanding relationships among the three burnout components. Ultimately, the findings might provide new information that support better ways for human resource professionals to help employees manage and prevent burnout in their work and personal lives.

Conceptual Framework

We undergird our research with a combination of Maslach et al.'s (1996) three-dimensional and Leiter's (1993) development process theories to understand burnout and its link to job performance and prosocial behavior. The underlying assumption of this study is that high job demands and low job resources is predictive of burnout, following the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Bakker et al., 2004; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Although the study did not investigate the relationships between the two working characteristics and burnout components, the JD-R model helps explain the links between the three burnout components and the employees' behavioral outcomes examined in this research: (a) task performance, (b) contextual performance, and (c) prosocial behavior.

Burnout

Burnout is defined as a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by a combination of very high expectation and persistent situational stress (Freudenberger, 1974). Maslach et al. (1996) conceptualized burnout as a three-dimensional syndrome: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) cynicism (also known as depersonalization), and (c) diminished professional efficacy (also known as lack of personal accomplishment). Emotional exhaustion represents a depletion of emotional energy and resources. Employees who are emotionally exhausted typically experience physical and cognitive fatigue. Cynicism describes where employees take cold, indifferent attitudes toward their job, coworkers, and organization. Diminished professional efficacy reflects feelings of reduced ability on the job. When employees feel a sense a decline in personal job competence, they feel a growing sense of inadequacy.

With regard to the sequence of the three burnout components, Leiter (1993) proposed a mixed sequential and parallel development model, indicating that burnout starts with emotional exhaustion, which in turn contributes to increased cynicism. This suggests that emotional exhaustion arises from work stressors, that is, from being continuously challenged with high job demands (e.g.,

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