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Work-related well-being in the South African Police Service

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to assess whether background variables, job stress, and personality traits could predict the work-related well-being (burnout and work engagement) of police members. A cross-sectional survey design was used. Stratified random samples ($N = 1,794$) were taken of police members of eight provinces in South Africa. The Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Police Stress Inventory, and Personality Characteristics Inventory were administered. The results showed that age, gender, and race explained a small percentage of the variance in exhaustion, cynicism, and vigor/dedication. Stress because of job demands and a lack of resources predicted exhaustion and cynicism. Emotional stability and conscientiousness inversely predicted exhaustion and cynicism, while emotional stability, conscientiousness, and extraversion predicted vigor and dedication. Stress because of job demands predicted only a small percentage of the variance in vigor and dedication.
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Introduction

In comparison with other occupations, police work has been identified as one of society's most stressful occupations (Alexander, 1999; Anshel, 2000; Crank & Caldero, 1991; Lord, Gray, & Pond, 1991; Paton & Violanti, 1999; Simmons, Cochran, & Blount, 1997; Whitehead, 1987). This is particularly true for South African circumstances, where the socioeconomic and political turmoil of the past three decades were characterized by high levels of crime and violence (Gulle, Tredoux, & Foster, 1998; Marks, 1995; Nel & Burgers, 1996). Statistics regarding continuous exposure to violence, retirement as a result of stress-related psychological disorders as well as the high suicide rate in the South African Police Service (SAPS) are indicative that many police officers experience their circumstances as stressful and traumatic (Kopel & Friedman, 1999). The exposure to these stressful conditions could lead to ill health and unwell-being of police officers. It is important to have a productive and healthy police service that serves as an important contributor to the stability and economic growth of a country, thus it is necessary to investigate possible factors (which include burnout and work engagement) that contribute to the work-related well-being of police officers.

Possible factors that could influence burnout and work engagement include job, organizational, and personal characteristics (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). While the role of the individual had been recognized in the general stress literature for quite some time (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), much of the early burnout research focused almost exclusively on the role of organizational factors in the prediction of burnout (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). No studies were found that related personality traits to work engagement. An emerging trend over the past decade, however, was a growing body of literature examining the interaction of environmental and personal factors in the burnout process (Burisch, 2002; Jansen, Kerkstra, Abu-Saad, & van der Zee, 1996).

It is plausible that individual traits that predispose employees to burnout or work engagement interact with organizational factors (such as job stress) that are

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conducive to the development of well-being. Therefore, the objective of this study was to assess whether background variables, job stress, and personality dimensions could predict the work-related well-being (burnout and work engagement) of police members.

Burnout and work engagement

Over the past three decades, interest in burnout has increased dramatically as researchers have begun to understand the significant negative impact it has on employees. Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998, p. 36) define burnout as "a persistent, negative, work-related state of mind in 'normal' individuals that is primarily characterized by exhaustion, which is accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation, and the development of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors at work." Recently, the concept of burnout has been expanded towards all types of professions and occupational groups. Consequently, the original version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was adapted for use outside the human services. This new version was called the MBI-General Survey (MBI-GS) (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). In the SAPS, Storm and Rothmann (2003a) confirmed a three-factor model of burnout consisting of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. Exhaustion refers to fatigue, but without direct reference to people as the source of those feelings. Cynicism reflects indifference or a distant attitude towards one's work in general. Professional efficacy encompasses both social and nonsocial accomplishments at work.

From a theoretical point of view one could argue that exhaustion and mental distancing (cynicism) constitute the two key aspects of burnout (Schaufeli, 2003). Exhaustion refers to an employee's *incapability* of performing because all energy has been drained, whereas mental distancing involves an employee's *unwillingness* to perform because of an increased intolerance of any effort. Mental distancing—or psychological withdrawal from the task—can be seen as an adaptive mechanism to cope with excessive job demands and resulting feelings of exhaustion (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). When this coping strategy becomes a habitual pattern, as is the case in cynicism, it disrupts adequate task performance and becomes dysfunctional. In turn, this condition leads to an increase in job demands and exhaustion, which makes the vicious circle complete. Incapacity and unwillingness to perform are considered as two sides of the same coin (Schaufeli, 2003).

Empirical findings point to the central role of exhaustion (incapacity and unwillingness to perform)

and mental distancing, as opposed to the third component, lack of professional efficacy in work-related well-being. Different explanations can be envisaged for this finding. First, relatively low correlations of professional efficacy are observed with exhaustion and cynicism, whereas the two burnout dimensions are found to correlate relatively strongly (Lee & Ashforth, 1996) or even collapse into a single factor (Green, Walkey, & Taylor, 1991). Second, it seems that cynicism develops in response to exhaustion, whereas professional efficacy seems to develop independently and in parallel (Leiter, 1993). Third, professional efficacy is the weakest burnout dimension in terms of significant relationships with other variables (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Moreover, several researchers have argued that professional efficacy reflects a personality characteristic rather than a genuine burnout component (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Shirom, 1989).

An important development that took place in the last few years is that the concept of burnout is being supplemented by its positive antithesis—work engagement—so that the entire spectrum of workers' well-being is now covered (Schaufeli, 2003). In line with the increased interest in positive psychology, is has been proposed to study the opposite of burnout in order to cover the entire continuum of work-related experiences, ranging from negative (burnout) to positive (work engagement) (see Maslach et al., 2001). The positive antipode of burnout is characterized by vigor (high energy) and dedication (strong identification). In addition, a third element is distinguished (absorption) which most likely plays a less central role in the engagement concept. The first psychometric results with a measure that assesses these three characteristics of engagement (the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale) are encouraging (Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Exhaustion (low energy) and mental distancing (poor identification) are the main features of burnout that are assessed by the MBI (Schaufeli, 2003). Vigor (high energy) and dedication (strong identification) as measured by the UWES seem to be the positive counterparts of exhaustion and mental distancing (as measured by the MBI).

Occupational stress

Stress is defined in terms of a disruption of the equilibrium of the cognitive–emotional–environmental system by external factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress may be studied in terms of an organism's response to challenges and upsets in the environment. It can also be studied where characteristics of the environmental stimuli give rise to stress (stressors), which may itself (themselves) become