



Burnout among social workers working with immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia in Israel: Testing the connections between personal value preferences, immigrant appraisal and burnout



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ABSTRACT

Burnout among service providers working with vulnerable populations can lead to a deterioration in well-being, high turnover of workers and a decrease in levels of services. The current study proposes a new threat-benefit theory (TBT) as predicting experiences of burnout and personal accomplishment among social workers working with immigrants. Based on the theory of human values (Schwartz et al., 2012) and extending Integrative Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), TBT suggests that the local population perceives immigrants not only as threatening but also as beneficial for the receiving society and that this threat/benefit appraisal is related to personal values held by the individual. In a study carried out among 358 social workers in Israel, findings supported a conceptual model in which threat appraisal, toward immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia, predicted higher levels of burnout and benefit appraisal predicted greater feelings of personal accomplishment and lower levels of burnout. In addition, findings showed that (1) immigrant groups were appraised as both threats and benefits to the receiving society; (2) appraisal of threat was predicted by lower levels of values of universalism, benevolence, self-direction and higher levels of power, tradition and conformity; (3) appraisal of benefit was predicted by lower levels of values of self-direction and power (Ethiopian immigrants) and higher levels of conformity and tradition (FSU immigrants).

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1. Introduction

Social workers are at the forefront of those working with immigrants, trying to help with their adaptation in the new country. Yet work with immigrants can be exhausting and draining and lead to burnout (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). The consequences of burnout are potentially very serious for social workers, their clients, and service agencies. Burnout can lead to deterioration in the quality of service that the social workers provide (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In addition, it can affect the solutions offered for clients' problems and can impair treatment outcomes. Finally, burnout contributes to the mental and physical health problems of workers and increases their turnover (Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, & Mutanen, 2002).

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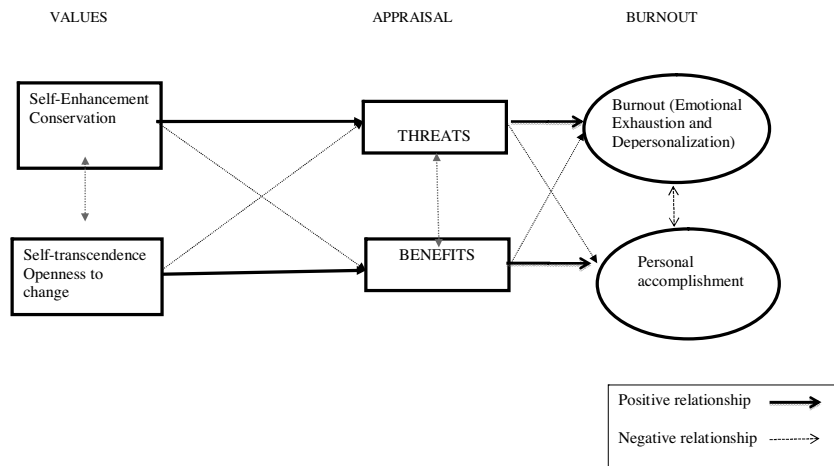


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

Service providers confront a number of stressors and difficulties when working with immigrants, e.g. lack of understanding and acceptance, fear, and a conflict between helping one's own community versus helping newcomers (Fong, 2004; Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2009). As such, social workers' attitudes toward immigrants may affect the quality of their services, as well as their work-related well-being/stress (Ajzenstadt & Shapira, 2012; Ayalon, Kaniel, & Rosenberg, 2008; Weiss, 2001). Therefore, understanding the factors affecting social workers' attitudes towards immigrants is important for the help-providing organizations, social workers themselves, and their clients. Recent years have seen increasing numbers of immigrants around the world. An estimated 247 million individuals worldwide are considered to be international migrants (IOM, 2016). The large numbers of immigrants, together with the susceptibility of those working with them to experience burnout, makes studying predictors of burnout of paramount importance.

The current study explores the relationship between social workers' attitude to immigrants from the FSU and Ethiopia in Israel and their experience of professional burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia are the two most numerous groups that have arrived in Israel during the last 25 years. Together with their children born in Israel, there are about 1,200,000 immigrants from the FSU and about 100,000 immigrants from Ethiopia (CBS, 2016). While the processes of adjustment of these two groups of immigrants have been investigated in numerous studies, only a few studies have focused on the attitudes of local people toward immigrants, and no study has focused on the attitudes of social workers toward these immigrant groups.

We examine attitudes of social workers toward immigrants from the FSU and Ethiopia, while testing a new Threats-Benefits Theory (TBT) developed by the authors (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). TBT sets out to explain the psychological mechanisms underlying connections between personal value preferences of the local population, their appraisal of different immigrant groups, and their behavior and emotions during interaction with immigrants (we outline each of these elements below). Applying this theory to social workers, we assume that the personal value preferences social workers hold affect their appraisal of the immigrants as both potentially threatening and beneficial (in different aspects) for the receiving society. In its turn, the group appraisal of immigrants affects the social workers' thoughts, feelings, and behavior when working with the immigrants. We assume that the group appraisal of immigrants mediates the connection between individuals' general motivational goals (expressed in the personal value preferences) and the thoughts, emotions, and behavior of social workers during their professional contacts with the immigrants (reflected in their sense of burnout and/or personal accomplishment). Specifically, the theory assumes that appraisal of the immigrant group as beneficial for the receiving country is associated with more positive feelings related to professional contact with the members of the specific immigrant group (i.e. with a lower level of the professionals' burnout and higher levels of personal accomplishment), while the appraisal of immigrants as threatening the receiving country is associated with a higher level of the professionals' burnout and lower perceived personal accomplishment.

As such the main goals of the present study were as follows: (1) to conceptualize and test empirically a multidimensional system of group appraisal of immigrants; (2) to investigate the relationships between personal value preferences and appraisal of the two immigrant groups among social workers; (3) to investigate the relationships between group appraisal of immigrants and social workers' burnout when working with the immigrants (see Fig. 1).

1.1. Appraisal of immigrants

The most popular theory of appraisal of immigrants is Integrative Threat Theory (ITT, Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald & Tor-Kaspa, 1999; Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000). The main assumption of the ITT is that local people perceive immigrants as a threat (Stephan et al., 2000). The theory delineates four types of threats that immigrants may pos-

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