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Why May Teachers Become Cynical at Work? Predictors of Organizational Cynicism Among Polish Teachers – Research Report

Abstract

The manuscript presents an exploratory study on the possible sources of organizational cynicism among Polish teachers. A sample of 157 teachers participated in the study. The results show that important positive predictors of organizational cynicism among teachers are continuance commitment and work-family conflict, whereas affective commitment is a negative predictor.

Keywords: organizational cynicism, work-family conflict, family-work conflict, organizational commitment

Introduction

Satisfaction with working conditions and engagement in professional work are among essential factors for the well-being of contemporary man. Numerous studies on the quality of working life highlight the importance of work satisfaction. At the same time, psychologists and educationalists point at disturbing phenomena in the teaching profession that probably result from a long-term stress. Aggravating conditions, as well as negative, conflicting or competitive relationships with others are supposed to be the culprits. Consequently, unwillingness to fulfill duties, falling motivation, lower self-esteem or worsening health can be observed. Studies on teachers from a few dozen countries showed that the most important outcome of stress that they experienced was occupational burnout (Billehoj, 2007). Moreover, the study results indicate that rising cynicism may stem from occupational

burnout (Pyżalski, 2010). This phenomenon should be linked to the loss of trust in ideals that used to guide man, on the one hand, and the sense of helplessness, pointlessness of one's own efforts, as well as the conviction of inability to achieve success, on the other (Abraham, 2000).

There are a few definitions of cynicism (Chudzicka-Czupała, 2013). As a personality trait cynicism is expressed by a tendency to mistrust others, undermine positive motives of their actions, and have a pessimistic outlook on the world (Graham, 1993). Nair and Kamalanabhan (2010) define cynicism as the conviction of an individual that other people commonly get involved in unethical behavior. Cynicism is often described as resistance to change, a result of negative experience with earlier reforms or no faith in change for the better. Cynicism understood in this way may either originate from personal traits or from external factors (Macko & Łaciak, 2010). Many scientists emphasise, however, that sources of cynicism should be traced outside personality – mainly in social relations. Besides, it is often accompanied by the sense of alienation (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989).

Nowadays the number of individuals that experience cynicism linked to organizational functioning rises. Studies on organizational cynicism are fairly new (Cole et al., 2006). They often point at an attitude typical of employees that are characterized by decreasing levels of trust in the organization's authority, as well as losing trust in the sense of their actions, feeling irritation, frustration and disappointment in the workplace. Dean et al. (1998) describe three dimensions of discernible cynicism. This is a conviction that an organization lacks unity and honesty with the accompanying negative and spiteful emotional attitude to it.

Socio-demographic variables as cynicism correlates

The teaching profession is considered by many to be one of the most stressful occupations. The stress that teachers experience may make them cynical towards the organization for which they work (Pyżalski, 2010). The aim of our study was to check if organizational commitment is linked to lower organizational cynicism and if and what kind of work-family or family-work conflict may contribute to its increase.

According to other studies, among socio-demographic variables, age may significantly contribute to frustration that boosts cynicism. Tucholska (2003) points out that the longer the seniority, the stronger the feeling of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Thus, age could be a variable in boosting cynicism. Sekułowicz (2002), on the other hand, emphasizes that the problem

of occupational burnout mainly affects teachers that represent two age groups: 25–29 and 50–54. As they are unrelated, the resulting correlation of age with stronger emotional exhaustion is somewhat ambiguous. In Pyżalski's study, age was neither connected with emotional exhaustion nor with cynicism. Among other significant factors there is also a growing dissatisfaction with one's income and frustrating pay differentiation between the organization's management and ordinary employees, for whom this fact does not remain unnoticed (Anderson & Bateman, 1997).

To check the significance of these variables in the study presented in this article, age and income were included in a group of independent variables that are potential predictors of organizational cynicism of the examined teachers.

Hypothesis 1: Age is an organizational cynicism predictor among teachers;

Hypothesis 2: Income is an organizational cynicism predictor among teachers.

The results of the study are inconclusive, also in reference to other socio-demographic variables such as sex or marital status (being in a relationship). Some authors (Lau et al., 2005) indicate that female teachers are more vulnerable to occupational burnout. Nonetheless, the study results show the opposite (Salami, 2011). All in all, most results confirm that the teachers who are not in a relationship are more vulnerable to occupational burnout than the persons with a partner (Mo, 1991). Yet again, there are studies with opposite conclusions (Bayram et al., 2010). Furthermore, Pyżalski (2010) shows that there is hardly any relationship between occupational burnout and the type of school in which teachers are employed. Only elementary school teachers present a little lower occupational burnout. In our study, given an imbalance in the number of male and female teachers, relevant comparisons in the above variables have not been made.

Work-family and family-work conflicts and organizational commitment as predictors of cynicism

Life-work balance is an equally important factor in achieving work satisfaction or satisfactory social relationships in the workplace. It is expressed in the ratio of working time to free time, as well as the effort that a person devotes to fulfilling professional, home and family duties (Ratajczak, 2007). In this study we decided to check the importance of a balance between these two areas of teachers' activities. It was achieved by focusing on work-family and family-work conflict intensification among the subjects.

Hypothesis 3a: Intensification of the experienced work-family conflict is a predictor of organizational cynicism among teachers;

Hypothesis 3b: Intensification of a family-work conflict is a predictor of organizational cynicism among teachers.

Dissatisfaction with work that results in a stronger cynical attitude may also be associated with a decreasing attachment to the workplace. Workers that experience a high intensification of work-family or work-free time conflict are also far less satisfied with work, tend to withdraw from it, perform professional tasks in a worse way, are absent from work a lot more often (Jansen et al. 2006). Workers who experience such problems are increasingly less attached to the performed organizational role and may even completely resign from their profession (O'Neill et al., 2009).

Commitment to an organization is a complex phenomenon. Allen & Meyer (1990) distinguish an affective component of commitment, which expresses an employee's emotional attitude to the organization and a degree of their identification with it. There is another component based on continuance, described as an awareness of the costs that would result from potential leaving the workplace and a normative component, i.e., a sense of moral duty and obligation to stay with the organization.

Bańka et al. (2002) indicate that workers with strong affective commitment want to work for their organization and as a rule perform their tasks well and conscientiously. Hence, it can be predicted that this kind of commitment is going to negatively correlate with cynicism. Continuance commitment can be observed among employees who perceive leaving the organization as costly, have devoted a lot to it or perceive no other alternative (e.g., no employment prospects elsewhere or in another profession). This kind of commitment, based on experienced coercion does not exclude the cynical attitude. In the same way, it is not excluded in the case of normative commitment, based on obligation and the need to remain loyal to one's own organization. To make sure if, to what degree and which aspects of organizational commitment are linked to cynicism, the following hypotheses underwent testing:

Hypothesis 4a: Emotional/affective commitment to the organization is a predictor of organizational cynicism among teachers;

Hypothesis 4b: Continuance commitment is a predictor of organizational cynicism among teachers;

Hypothesis 4c: Normative commitment to the organization is a predictor of organizational cynicism among teachers.

Methods

In the project both proven psychometric questionnaires applied in previous studies and new methods, specially adapted for the needs of this study, were used. To examine work-family and family-work conflicts the Polish adaptation of the Work-Family Conflict Measure (Grzywacz et al., 2006) was used. The method comprises six statements, three to measure each kind of conflict. The reliability of the tool was measured with the use of Cronbach's alfa, which amounted to 0.91 (for work-family scale) and 0.92 (for family-work conflict scale).

To measure the degree of commitment to the organization, the Meyer and Allen Organizational Commitment Scale (1991) was used; the tool was adapted by Bańka et al. (2002). The scale consists of eighteen statements, which describe three components of commitment, i.e., affective, continuance and normative ones. The scale has good psychometric parameters: Cronbach's alfa coefficients to measure reliability are the following: 0.82 for the scale of affective commitment, 0.84 for normative commitment and 0.71 for continuance commitment in this study. To measure organizational commitment, the Organizational Cynicism Questionnaire, adapted from Eaton & Struthers (2002) in the Polish language version, was used in this study. Each examined person was asked to express their attitude to nine statements. The method reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.93. Socio-demographic variables were controlled, too.

Sample

The sample consisted of 157 teachers of elementary schools, junior and senior high schools and specialized schools. The research was conducted at the end of 2013 and at the start of 2014 in the Silesia region, Poland. The vast majority of the sample, i.e. 93%, were women (146 people) and 7% men (11 people). The participants' average age was 40 (age range 27 to 61), the average seniority in education was 17 (from 2 to 37). All the respondents worked full-time.

Results

In order to verify the exploratory hypotheses, a regression analysis was performed for organizational cynicism, which functions here as a dependent variable.

Table 1. The results of the multiple regression analysis for a dependent variable *organizational cynicism*

Dependent variable	Independent variables included in the model	Beta	t	Model statistics
Organizational cynicism	Affective commitment to organization	-0.63	-7.75**	Adjusted R ² =0.32 F =19.04**
	Continuance commitment to organization	0.20	2.57**	
	Family-work conflict	0.13	2.00*	

Regression analysis method: stepwise regression, forward selection, probability of F to enter: $p < 0.05$; t and F test probability: $p < 0.01^{**}$; $p < 0.05^{*}$

Based on the independent variables, as the results (Table 1) indicate, affective commitment to the organization (as a negative predictor- the more someone identifies with the workplace, the lower the level of cynicism he or she reveals) turned out to be an important predictor of organizational cynicism. Other important determinants of cynicism are continuance commitment to the organization and frequency of experiencing family-work conflict. They are positive predictors- the bigger the constraint-based commitment and the more often teachers experience difficulties resulting from the conflict between home and professional duties, the more cynical they appear toward their workplace. The obtained results point at hypotheses 3b, 4a and 4b.

Age, income, work-family conflict and normative commitment to the organization were not included in the regression model as important variables. Thus, hypotheses 1, 2, 3a and 4c were not confirmed.

Discussion and conclusions

According to Pines (2000), people performing high-stress jobs, such as the teaching profession, are resistant to psychosocial burdens as long as they feel the sense of purpose of their work and are helpful for other people. What is specific about this job is that putting a lot of effort into work does not always bring fruitful results. Our study proves that cynicism, which points at lack of purposefulness and reflects disappointments with professional life, is connected with organizational commitment and lack of work- family balance. The obtained results are consistent with the tendencies shown by other authors (Dean et al., 1998).

Affective commitment turned out to be an important negative predictor of cynicism, which means that teachers who enjoy their jobs and strongly identify themselves with their schools show a far less cynical attitude towards them. Continuance commitment, based on a constraint to remain (employees are aware of the costs associated with leaving the organization) in a particular school as a workplace, is a positive determinant of cynicism.

What practical consequences may result from the above? Numerous research findings show that employees who reveal a high level of affective commitment have higher achievements at work. People who have a high level of continuance commitment perform their professional tasks in a worse way (Bańka et al., 2002). It has been found that people who feel constrained to remain in a particular organization, as opposed to those who want to work there, are rarely helpful to their co-workers, are less punctual, are not active enough to solve problems at work and reluctantly take on extra work (Shore & Wayne, 1993). If we add to this their cynical attitude, it is easy to imagine that they can do more damage to their schools than contribute to their development. Further research and more analyses are needed to see how it directly affects their relations with co-workers, the head teacher and pupils/students. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the level of commitment to the organization and the accompanying cynicism are of great importance.

The results of the research prove that the conflict between home and professional duties is also an important predictor of cynicism. Writing about the causes of a lack of work- family balance, Chirkowska-Smolak (2008) mentions the phenomenon of growing requirements that result from the increase in task complexity, time and pace of work, which is connected with the obligation to adapt to the increasing demands and spending extra hours at work and commuting to work. Moreover, teachers are required to raise qualifications, especially in the area of computer literacy. According to the above-mentioned author, adapting to these challenges negatively influences private life, results in worse family relations and also lower satisfaction from work and married life. In families where both partners are strongly involved in their professional work, a tendency to suffer from depression, fear and strong reactions to stressful situations at work have been observed. It is easy to imagine why teachers who are unable to meet the demands made on them become cynical towards their organizations.

The results also indicated that experiencing work-home conflict was not as significantly connected with cynicism as in the case of family-work conflict. It may be associated with the sex of respondents and their perception of social roles. We can observe feminization of teaching in Poland, which was also visible in our

study. The sample consisted mainly of women and they could experience overload connected with inability to fulfill professional duties because of family roles. Wierda-Boer et al. (2009) indicate that working women experience more family-work conflict than working men. Moreover, the results of our study indicate that experiencing family-work conflict is connected with assuming a cynical attitude. The connection of family-work conflict with cynicism may be a cultural question. The results of intercultural comparison, conducted by Pala & Saksvika (2008), indicate that in some cultures work-home conflict is a more important predictor of stress at work while in other cultures, family-work conflict enables employees to better foresee stress at work. Perhaps Poland belongs to the latter group.

People who are dissatisfied with their jobs become cynical; they avoid everything that evokes irritation or is a source of frustration. Organizational cynicism is a kind of alarm indicating that a person is forced to bear discomfort, which may result in low self-esteem, apathy, powerlessness, humiliation, depression and physical diseases. A cynical attitude also translates into the attitude towards duties and people. In the case of an institution such as school, it can have a negative effect on the way teachers communicate with their students or co-workers. It should be emphasized that organizational cynicism is a permanent attitude, resistant to changes introduced by new authorities of the organization (Pugh et al., 2003).

Thus, it is essential to measure this attitude, try to change it early enough and focus on prevention. It can mean creating good working conditions and taking certain actions to increase motivation and to reward employees. These factors will probably increase job satisfaction and minimize difficulties connected with fulfillment of work and family tasks, as it manifests itself in a negative attitude towards school as a workplace. We hope that our review of factors influencing the cynical attitude among teachers will show a way to the above actions.

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