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Danielle Smith

Trevecca Nazarene University

Bethany Burmeister

Trevecca Nazarene University

Randy Carden

Trevecca Nazarene University

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Danielle Smith
Bethany Burmeister
Randy Carden

Trevecca Nazarene University

Professor Burnout: Satisfaction with Salary and Perception of Student Competence

This study examined the relationship between professor burnout and satisfaction with salary and satisfaction with their students. Twenty-seven undergraduate professors at a small, liberal arts university in the southeast responded to the Maslach Burnout Inventory- Educators Survey and three items measuring satisfaction with salary and perception of competence and dedication of their students. Salary was found to be negatively related to emotional exhaustion. Ratings of student competence and dedication were negatively related to depersonalization and positively related to personal accomplishment.

A variety of terms have been used to label burnout. Dillon and Tanner (1995) reported at least 15 different definitions of burnout in the literature. Probably the most widely accepted operational definition and the one used in this study, was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). They defined burnout as a combination of three elements: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Maslach and Jackson developed a measure to evaluate these three dimensions, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). In 1996 an adaptation of the MBI was developed for use with educators: the MBI-Educators Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

The first dimension, emotional exhaustion, is what is most often referred to when speaking of burnout

(Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Emotional exhaustion can be described as “feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work” (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). “A tired and fatigued feeling that develops as emotional energies are drained” causing educators to no longer be able to “give of themselves to students as they once could” is a way to characterize emotional exhaustion (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). This is a necessary element of burnout; however, it is insufficient at completely defining this phenomenon.

The second dimension, depersonalization, helps explain the relational quality of burnout. It follows emotional exhaustion in the burnout process and is characterized by cynicism and indifference. Depersonalization occurs in educators when they no longer have positive feelings about their students.

This is portrayed by the professor's use of derogatory labels, exhibition of cold or distant attitudes, distancing themselves physically from students, and tuning out students through psychological withdrawal (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

The third dimension of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment which relates to a loss of feelings of achievement and success in one's work. This element is especially important in assessing educator burnout because one of the main areas that is rewarding for educators is working with their students (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). "When educators no longer feel that they are contributing to students' development, they are vulnerable to experiencing profound disappointment" (p. 28).

Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) discussed the importance of making a distinction between burnout and two associated constructs: depression and job satisfaction. Depression "tends to pervade every domain of a person's life" while burnout is "specific to the work context" (p. 403). There is also a well-established negative correlation between job satisfaction and burnout, but it is not strong enough to conclude that the constructs measure the opposite sides of one experience. It is impossible to tell whether one causes the other, or if there is a third factor that causes both (Maslach, et al, 2001).

A commonly reported dissatisfaction among educators is rate of pay (Dillon & Tanner, 1995; Fedler & Counts, 1982; Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz, 2001; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1988). One study found that 34.9% of respondents felt underpaid (Fedler & Counts, 1982) while another investigation reported 23% of those studied felt like their pay did not match their work (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1988). Dillon and Tanner (1995) found that 45% of respondents expressed disappointment in their pay. Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz (2001) found that salary was negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion. Although salary discontent has been shown to be a major complaint of educators, further research is needed to establish it as a correlate of burnout.

Professors' satisfaction with their students also has been investigated in past studies. Weaver and

Wilhoit (1988) reported 75% of professors interviewed stated that their greatest satisfaction came from working with students. Also, 13% listed low student quality as their greatest frustration in their job. Dillon & Tanner (1995) found that 29% of the educators in their study disagreed with the statement "The majority of my students are highly literate" which was related to Maslach's personal accomplishment subscale (p. 6).

In light of the previous research it was hypothesized that perception of the adequacy of salary would be negatively related to emotional exhaustion. Secondly, it was hypothesized that perception of student competence and dedication would be negatively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores and positively related to personal accomplishment scores.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 27 undergraduate professors (19 men and 8 women) at a small liberal arts university in the southeast. The average age of the professors was 48.33. All but one were full time professors and 8 had tenure. The mean number of years the professors had been teaching was 11.89. They reported working an average of 46.20 hours per week and teaching an average of 8.37 classes per year.

Procedure

The 27 professors completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey (Maslach, Jackson & Schwab, 2006) and a few other questions. The MBI has three subscales to measure the different aspects of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment.

The 22 items of the MBI are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, 0 (has never occurred) to 6 (occurs every day). There are nine items that measure emotional exhaustion, five items for depersonalization, and eight items for assessing personal accomplishment. According to this scale, burnout is present when there are high scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization

subscales and a low score on the personal accomplishment subscale. A sample item from each respective subscale includes: "I feel used up at the end of the workday", "I really don't care what happens to some students", and "I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work" (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996).

Iwanicki & Schwab (1981) found the MBI to be both reliable and valid with educators. Internal consistency estimates for the three subscales were as follows: emotional exhaustion subscale, .90; depersonalization subscale, .76; personal accomplishment subscale, .76. They also found that when assessing the construct validity of the MBI with educators that the scale measured the same basic dimensions as originally proposed during its initial development.

Professors also rated their satisfaction with their salary with the following item. "My salary is fair compared to the work I do here." Perception of student competence and dedication were assessed by asking the following two items. "The majority of my students are highly literate and competent" and "The majority of my students are highly dedicated to their education." All three items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Results

The professors' mean burnout scores were in the low range (EE: 14.44, DP: 4.37, PA: 40.48). The first hypothesis that professors' satisfaction with their salary is negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion scores was supported. Professors' satisfaction with their salary did have a significant negative correlation with EE scores ($r = -.368, p = .029$).

The second hypothesis was partially supported. Ratings of student competence were unrelated to emotional exhaustion scores ($r = -.209, p = .148$) but were negatively related to depersonalization scores ($r = -.336, p = .044$). Ratings of student competence were also found to be positively correlated with personal accomplishment scores ($r = .362, p = .032$). A similar pattern was found in that perception of student dedication was also unrelated

to emotional exhaustion ($r = -.175, p = .191$) and negatively related to depersonalization scores ($r = -.386, p = .023$) as well as positively related to personal accomplishment scores ($r = .415, p = .016$).

Discussion

Consistent with the work of Tang, Au, Schwarzer and Schmitz (2001), the results of the current study found ratings of salary satisfaction to be negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion. The results of the current study were also consistent with a previous finding relating satisfaction with student literacy to Maslach's personal accomplishment subscale (Dillon & Tanner, 1995). Interestingly, it was also found that professor ratings of student competence and dedication were negatively related to depersonalization scores. Although perception of student competence and dedication were unrelated to emotional exhaustion scores, it seems logical that competence and dedication ratings of students were related to professor depersonalization. Perhaps one way to cope with the perception of incompetent and undedicated students is to detach oneself from the student. An alternative explanation, however, might be that professors that have a tendency toward depersonalization or detachment might view their students as incompetent and undedicated.

Due to the correlational nature of the study, it is impossible to know the direction of the relationship between variables. Lastly, because the sample was small and the correlations were low to moderate in magnitude, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

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