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RESEARCH NOTE

Associations among altruism, burnout dimensions, and organizational citizenship behaviour

IJ. HETTY VAN EMMERIK[1], I. M. JAWAHAR[2], & THOMAS H. STONE[3]

[1]*Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands;* [2]*Illinois State University, Illinois, USA &* [3]*Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma, USA*

Abstract
Most studies of burnout have focused on lack of resources, prevalence of burnout, and negative outcomes. In contrast, this study examined the relationships among altruism, burnout and a positive outcome, namely, the engagement in organizational citizenship behaviour. Web questionnaires were distributed to employees in three professional organizations. The results from the 178 respondents indicated that altruism is related to organizational citizenship behaviour. Of the three dimensions of burnout, only reduced personal accomplishment was (negatively) associated with engagement in organizational citizenship behaviours. Implications of the results are discussed and directions for future research are offered.

Keywords: *Altruism, burnout, organizational citizenship behaviour*

Introduction

Burnout is a unique type of stress syndrome, typically referred to as a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993). A sizeable literature documents the association between burnout, withdrawal behaviours and associated negative employee outcomes, for example, absenteeism, turnover, and serious health complaints (Maslach, 1982; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 1993). There is also evidence that burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion, is negatively associated with job performance (Wright & Bonett, 1997; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). However, less attention has been paid to the consequences of burnout for positive contributions to employees' attitudes and behaviours within the organizational context. Helping behaviours within organizations are defined as voluntary and discretionary behaviours that contribute to an organization's effectiveness but typically

are not included in traditional definitions of job performance (Organ & Konovsky, 1989). Within the organizational context, these behaviours are generally referred to as organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Turnipseed & Murkison, 1996).

The main objective of this study is to elaborate on the association between altruism, burnout dimensions, and engagement in OCB. In the present study, we argue that when employees experience burnout, not only will their work-related performance be impaired (as already shown in previous studies) but their engagement in OCB is also likely to decrease (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 1993).

Organizational citizenship behaviour

OCB refers to the individual contributions in the workplace that go beyond role requirements and contractually rewarded job achievements (Organ & Ryan, 1995). Examples of organizational citizenship behaviours include performing extra-job activities, helping colleagues, meeting workplace rules, and acting according to organizational policies and procedures regardless of personal inconvenience (Organ & Ryan, 1995). OCB as a specific type of helping behaviour can be defined as activities entailing more commitment than spontaneous assistance in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, organization or cause (Wilson, 2000). Conceptually, OCB has been associated with social responsibility (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; Witt, 1990) or communal work, both of which are generally characterized by the absence of monetary payment for the work undertaken (Noon & Blyton, 1997). Numerous studies have examined antecedents and consequences of extra-role behaviours (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Wright, George, Farnsworth, & McMahan, 1993), prosocial behaviours (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Farmer & Fedor, 2001; Organ & Konovsky, 1989; Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983; Witt, 1990), OCBs (Organ & Konovsky, 1989; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Rioux & Penner, 2001; Smith et al., 1983; Turnipseed & Murkison, 1996; Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994) and contextual performance (Motowidlo et al., 1997; Organ, 1997; Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000), but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the possible relationship between OCB and burnout.

Altruism and engagement in OCB

Altruism (Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Piliavin & Charng, 1990) is the enduring tendency to think about the welfare and rights of other people, to feel concern and empathy for them, and to act in a way that benefits them (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Penner, Midili, & Kegelmeyer, 1997). Altruism is one of the most consistent individual resources that has been related to the engagement in helping behaviours (Carlo et al., 1991; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Smith et al., 1983). Piliavin and Charng (1990) conclude that such altruistic resources indeed exist and that the willingness to consider others in our overall calculations of our own interests is natural to people.

Studies show employees giving altruistic reasons for becoming involved in helping behaviours, such as wanting to help others (Farmer & Fedor, 2001; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Wilson & Musick, 1997). The study of Penner and Finkelstein (1998) found prosocial personality to be related to volunteer activities. Specifically, other-oriented empathy, as a dimension of altruism, was associated with prosocial actions: concern for the welfare of others, satisfaction derived from being helpful, and feelings of responsibility

for others' welfare. Midili and Penner (1995) found a similar relationship between the prosocial personality and OCB in the workplace. Moreover, an important function that may be served by involvement in helping behaviours is the opportunity to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others (Clary et al., 1998). Conversely, one could also argue that OCB may not always have a large altruistic component. For example, Penner et al. (1997) argue that OCB may be motivated by expectations of gain since such behaviours affect performance evaluations and workers may be aware of that effect. In summary, previous studies have related altruism to OCB (Carlo et al., 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Smith et al., 1983) but results concerning the strength of this relationship are mixed.

We decided to test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Altruism will be positively associated with OCB.

Burnout and the engagement in OCB

Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. A large amount of empirical evidence has shown that burnout is negatively associated with professional helping behaviours of human service workers (Maslach et al., 2001). Therefore, in the present study, we expect that each of the three dimensions of burnout will be negatively associated with OCB. Specifically, the behavioural withdrawal thesis predicts that burnout occurs when individuals experience a lack of resources (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). This recognition, in turn, leads to coping, and most frequently coping strategies involve some form of withdrawal from the situation, either attitudinal or behavioural (i.e. less OCB) (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Thus, burnout is expected to be negatively associated with OCB, although the processes underlying the associations between OCB on the one hand and the three burnout dimensions on the other may be different.

Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being over-extended and drained from one's emotional resources and this burnout dimension is often considered to be the key aspect of the burnout syndrome (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Behavioural reactions (e.g. absenteeism, turnover) are often more strongly related to emotional exhaustion than to depersonalization or to reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). It can be argued that exhausted workers are too tired to invest time and effort in their work. For this reason, it is appealing to assume that emotional exhaustion will precede withdrawal of OCB: exhausted employees will also be too tired to invest in activities other than those that their work already requires them to do. None the less, we could locate only one study that examined this relationship. Cropanzano, Rupp, and Byrne (2003) reported mixed results; they found that emotional exhaustion predicted OCB towards the organization but emotional exhaustion was not related to OCB towards the supervisor. Probably, OCB towards the organization refers to behaviours beneficial to a larger, and perhaps more impersonal, organization. In contrast, OCB towards the supervisor refers to behaviours beneficial to one's supervisor. Given this, it may be easier for emotionally exhausted individuals to withhold citizenship behaviours beneficial to the organization as a whole rather than to a single person with whom they are likely to frequently interact (Cropanzano et al., 2003).

Depersonalization or cynicism is an attempt to put distance between oneself and others. Depersonalized people may develop indifference or a cynical attitude when they are

exhausted and discouraged. In the helping professions (e.g. nursing), depersonalization often signifies treating people like objects (Zapf, 2002). In occupations other than the helping professions in which there are no recipients of professional help, the people one interacts with might be treated in a depersonalized way. Treating the people one works with in a depersonalized manner could be expected to go together with withdrawal of OCB towards them. For instance, the study of Huarng (2001) showed that 36% of the (non-human service workers) software developers indicated that they depersonalized others regularly to cope with the demands of the people they encounter on the job.

Reduced personal accomplishment or feelings of inefficacy are prompted by a work situation with chronic, overwhelming demands that erodes one's sense of effectiveness. Feelings of personal accomplishment may elicit a sense of obligation to help others, resulting in OCB. Conversely, employees who have little faith in themselves (i.e. low on personal accomplishment) will also feel unable to help others ('I cannot even help myself'). Additionally, personal accomplishment raises self-efficacy, thus providing more personal resources enabling engagement in OCB.

From this, we formed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Burnout, i.e. (2a) emotional exhaustion, (2b) depersonalization, and (2c) reduced personal accomplishment will be negatively related to the engagement in OCB.

Method

Participants and procedure

A web questionnaire was distributed to the employees of a bank, a city council and a university, with a request to complete it and return it anonymously by e-mail. For the bank and city council all the employees of the local offices were approached, and for the university all members of staff of the Social Faculty were contacted. A total of 550 web-questionnaires were distributed, with a 32% response rate. The final sample consisted of 178 employees (101 male, 77 female) from the three organizations: the bank ($n = 95$, mean tenure $= 9.39$ years), the city council ($n = 35$, mean tenure $= 10.05$ years), and the university ($n = 48$, mean tenure $= 5.74$ years). All respondents had considerable work experience. Participants from the bank were employed in jobs such as tellers, department head and complaints officers. Participants from the city council were employed in jobs including financial consultant, secretary, and human resources. Participants from the university were employed as researchers, associate professors, and grant co-ordinators. On average the respondents were 38.33 (SD $= 9.78$) years of age, and had 14.90 (SD $= 2.54$) years of education. On average, the respondents spent 34.43 h (SD $= 5.61$ h) on paid labour.

Measures

Helping behaviours. OCB is well understood and articulated in the literature, and there are reliable scales to measure OCB. In the present study, OCB was measured with 6 items ($\alpha = .79$) adapted from Organ and Konovsky (1989) and studies of Van Dyne et al. (1994). A sample item is 'At work, I volunteer for things that are not required'. Factor analysis yielded a one-factor solution (eigenvalue 2.95) that explained 49% of the scale variance.

Independent variables. Altruism was inventoried with 7 items ($\alpha = .92$) from the Survey of Interpersonal Values of Gordon (1976). An example of one of the items is 'I think it is important to help people who are in need'. Factor analysis showed a one-factor solution (eigenvalue $= 3.21$) that explained 80% of the variance.

To measure the three burnout dimensions the items of the Dutch translation of the general survey version of the MBI 'The Utrecht Burnout Scale' (Schaufeli & van Dierendonck, 2001) were used. All of the burnout items were measured on a 7-point scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree). Emotional exhaustion was measured with 5 items ($\alpha = .85$). An example of an item is 'I feel emotionally drained by my work'. Depersonalization was measured with 4 items ($\alpha = .79$). An example of an item is 'I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally'. Reduced personal accomplishment was measured with 4 items ($\alpha = .68$). An example of items is (this item was revese coded): 'I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my job'.

Background variables. Gender (male $= 0$, female $= 1$) and educational level (in years of education completed) were included in the analyses.

Data analysis

Hypotheses were tested using regression analyses. In addition, to test whether altruism mediated the associations between the burnout dimensions and engagement in OCB, the burnout dimensions were entered into a regression equation predicting engagement in OCB. The burnout dimensions together explained 22% of the variance in OCB ($p < .01$), but only the regression weights of reduced personal accomplishment were significant. On the second step, altruism was entered. Altruism explained an additional 3% of the variance in OCB ($p < .05$). In terms of mediation, there were only small differences in the magnitude of the regression weights from Step 1 to Step 2 for each of the burnout dimensions; therefore, altruism did not mediate the associations between OCB and the three burnout dimensions.

Results

Table I presents means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all measures included in the study.

OCB was negatively correlated with two of the three burnout dimensions, emotional exhaustion ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($r = -.46$, $p < .01$). As expected (Maslach et al., 2001), the burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion and

Table I. Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 OCB	4.00	0.46						
2 Gender	0.43	0.50	−.04					
3 Educational level	14.90	2.55	−.18*	.06				
4 Altruism	3.57	0.94	.12	.25**	.02			
5 Emotional exhaustion	2.77	1.21	−.19*	.11	.07	−.23**		
6 Depersonalization	2.49	1.24	−.12	−.04	.00	−.12	.58**	
7 Reduced personal accomplishment	2.38	0.88	−.46**	.24**	.09	−.08	.22**	.19*

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

depersonalization were moderately correlated ($r = .58$, $p < .01$) and both were weakly related to the third burnout dimension, reduced personal accomplishment ($r = .22$, $p < .01$ and $r = .19$, $p < .05$, respectively).

Regression analysis was performed to test the hypotheses (Table II).

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, altruism was positively related to OCB ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. After controlling for gender, educational level, and altruism, neither emotional exhaustion nor depersonalization was related to the engagement in OCB. The only burnout dimension that was associated with OCB was reduced personal accomplishment ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was only supported by the univariate analysis (Table I) and not by the multivariate analysis (Table II). Hypothesis 2b, specifying the relationship between depersonalization and OCB, was not supported. Hypothesis 2c, specifying the relationship between reduced personal accomplishment and OCB, was supported at both the univariate and multivariate level.

Discussion

Altruism and one of the burnout dimensions (i.e. reduced personal accomplishment) were found to be associated with OCB. Hence, these findings provide only limited support for the behavioural withdrawal thesis for the relationship between burnout and OCB.

Emotional exhaustion was expected to be negatively associated with the engagement in OCB based on the idea that exhausted employees will be too tired to invest time and effort in activities other than what their work already requires them to do. Yet, we only found weak support for this relationship: emotional exhaustion was found to be negatively associated with OCB, but this relationship disappeared when we controlled for the other variables in the model. More surprisingly, we did not find a relationship between depersonalization and OCB. Although one might expect that depersonalization (perhaps more than emotional exhaustion or reduced personal accomplishment) would be strongly associated with OCB, we did not find such an association. Interestingly, inspection of the correlation coefficients shows that depersonalization was the burnout component that showed the weakest associations with OCB, compared to the two other burnout components. This somewhat puzzling finding can perhaps be explained by the idea that OCB is not *per se* 'personalized' behaviour.

This study, like all studies, has limitations. Generalizability of the findings may be limited to employees working within professional organizations. For instance, white collar and

Table II. Summary of regression analyses for engagement in OCB.

	OCB	
	β	ΔR^2
Step 1		.03
Gender	.05	
Educational level	−.16*	
Step 2		.06**
Altruism	.16*	
Step 3		.18**
Emotional exhaustion	−.03	
Depersonalization	−.03	
Reduced personal accomplishment	−.45**	

Total variance explained is $R^2 = .26$ ($p < .01$) for OCB. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

professional employees may be more likely to engage in OCB than other occupational groups (e.g. blue collar) as their jobs involve qualities that make it likely that they will engage in extra-role behaviour (Pearce, 1987; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Future research must determine if these results hold for blue-collar employees. Further, the use of cross-sectional data precludes inferences about causality and directionality. Since we used a cross-sectional design it is also possible that uncontrolled third variables may have accounted for our findings. We did not control for work characteristics such as job demands and job control. It is well known that both concepts are related to burnout and these concepts could also be associated with OCB. For instance, high demands mean that workers have little time left for OCB. Low job control may imply that employees simply lack the opportunity to help others, e.g. because they are physically tied to their workplace. Since we did not have information about the nature of the work it could not be included in our analyses.

Although we have to be cautious because of the cross-sectional design, we found an unexpectedly strong effect between personal accomplishment and OCB. If these results indeed stand firm in future research, implications for organizations are clear. Organizations that desire to stimulate OCB should find ways that are specifically targeted to reduce this type of burnout. Verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and imaginal experience are examples of important sources of self-efficacy information, which suggest strategies for constructing effective interventions to strengthen employees' feelings of personal accomplishment (Van Yperen, 1998). Consequently, intervention programmes that sensitize employees to a greater awareness of their professional situation might stimulate personal accomplishment. For example, frequent feedback on job performance and the value of their work to both clients or customers and co-workers could lead to more positive perceptions of their workplace performance. Such modifications may contribute to greater engagement in OCB.

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