

Burnout Syndrome: Is it Just a Matter of Workload?

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Abstract

In this paper, the aim is to highlight the relationship between work loneliness and job burnout and a conceptual model is presented in order to explain the anticipated relationships. In this sense, based on the premises of social exchange theory, work anxiety is proposed as a mediator for explaining how loneliness can be associated with burnout. Also, optimism, social competence and need for affiliation levels of employees are expected to affect the relationship between loneliness and anxiety such that more optimistic and socially competent individuals are expected to experience lower levels of anxiety whereas employees with a higher need for affiliation are expected to experience higher levels of anxiety compared to other lonely individuals.

Keywords: Burnout, loneliness, anxiety, social competence, optimism, need for affiliation, social exchange

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, work loneliness has become a major topic in organizational behavior and it is considered as a challenge against organizational performance. Although there are many studies that have investigated the factors that result in loneliness (ex. Cheek & Busch, 1981; Maroldo, 1981; Anderson, Horowitz, & French, 1983; Ouellet & Joshi, 1986), the outcomes of work loneliness have not been explored thoroughly. Work loneliness is not just an outcome but also is the antecedent of many work-related consequences such as turnover intention, job satisfaction, and commitment. In this paper, the aim is to highlight the possible effects of work loneliness on job burnout and to evaluate how this relationship can be moderated by some individual characteristics. The process through which lonely people experience burnout syndrome is conceptualized.

Job burnout has been defined as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job and has been divided into three key dimensions; exhaustion, cynicism and reduced sense of accomplishment or ineffectiveness. Experienced workload and time pressure are in strong correlation with burnout, especially with exhaustion dimension. In this sense, it is observed in literature that, workload is considered as the most striking antecedent of burnout and, therefore; other possible stressors on the job are not investigated thoroughly (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). This paper aims to fill this gap by proposing workplace loneliness as a possible predictor of job burnout.

In terms of job resources, it has been found that lack of social support is related to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Although loneliness is different from social support, there are some corresponding characteristics in terms of conceptualization of both phenomena. Feelings of detachment from others and lack of close relationships in the social work environment are considered as major characteristics of workplace loneliness (Rook, 1984). In this respect, as lack of social support, loneliness is also expected to be related to burnout.

Workplace anxiety is conceptualized as a possible mediator in the relationship between loneliness and burnout. Lonely individuals are likely to experience feelings of being rejected and may face the anxiety that they will not be able to get help from others when required; therefore, this anxiety provoked by feelings of loneliness may contribute to burnout through higher levels of stress the employees face about their future on the job and their perceptions of self-efficacy. In workplaces, there are many stimuli that are likely to cause anxiety such as social hierarchies (Thomas & Hynes, 2007), conflicts with colleagues or superiors (Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007), uncertainty about future and keeping the job (Eshel & Kadouch-Kowalsy, 2003; Strazdins, D'Souza, Lim, Broom, & Rodgers, 2004), and demands for achievement which may provoke perceptions of inefficiency (Browning, Ryan, Thomas, Grrenberg, & Rolniak, 2007; Turnipseed, 1998). In a similar fashion, lonely individuals may face the fear of not achieving close connections or ties with other employees, and may feel that their jobs are at stake, their potentials or efforts are not visible, they cannot get feedback for their performance, and in return, they may experience higher levels of anxiety regarding their jobs and their career paths. In this respect, loneliness can be one of the drivers of anxiety in the workplace.

Social competence and optimism levels of individuals are expected to moderate the anticipated relationship between loneliness and anxiety. Socially competent employees are likely to manage the loneliness they face, to cope with the fear that emerge from loose social connections and are not expected to experience higher levels of anxiety at work. In a parallel fashion, optimistic people are likely to hold positive expectations for future (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), and therefore, are expected to face lower levels of anxiety compared to pessimistic individuals. In this respect, these two variables that are not previously studied as moderators in the relationship between loneliness and anxiety are conceptualized as important variables in

order to understand some individual characteristics that may affect the role of loneliness on workplace anxiety.

In addition to that, the need orientation of an employee is another variable that may affect the extent to which lonely people are to be subject to workplace anxiety. According to McClelland's Need Theory, individuals may have three kinds of needs: need for affiliation, need for power and need for achievement. Employees who are high on need for affiliation value social connections and cooperation with colleagues more in comparison to employees that are high on need for achievement or need for power. For these individuals, sense of belonging is the major motivator. Therefore, it is expected that, employees who are high on need for affiliation may not be able to avoid anxiety when they face loneliness and are not able to connect with others in the work environment.

2. LONELINESS AND BURNOUT RELATIONSHIP

Loneliness, defined as "an enduring condition of an emotional state that arises when a person feels estranged from, is misunderstood or rejected by, and/or lacks appropriate social partners for a desired activity, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy" (Rook, 1984), is considered as a psychological state that stems from ineffective social relationships with others and is a subjective construct that reveals how individuals perceive the discrepancy between their personal relationships and social environments (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).

Loneliness is considered as "a complex set of feelings encompassing reactions to unfulfilled intimate and social needs" (Cacioppo et al., 2000, p.143), often characterized by "an unpleasant, painful, anxious yearning for another person or persons" (Hartog et. al., 1980). Ernst and Cacioppo (1998, p.1) state that loneliness is associated with "variety of individual differences including depression, hostility, pessimism, social withdrawal, alienation, shyness, and low positive affect". According to Ponzetti (1990, p.336), loneliness can be described as an "interpersonal deficit".

When people face this deficit, they experience a negative emotion characterized by feelings of emptiness, isolation and worthlessness (Wang, 1989). The feeling of loneliness is defined as the result of an individual's dissatisfaction with their interpersonal social life, the gap between expectations and the reality of social status, or lack of emotional connection (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). Besides having a major effect, social isolation is not a prerequisite for loneliness; people can also feel lonely when they are with others (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001).

In the workplace, social interactions are indispensable. The quality of the social connections is found to have a crucial impact on how the employees perceive and connect with their organizations (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). As Maslow has stated, a sense of belonging is a fundamental need for well-being (Maslow, 1954). Research has shown that psychological well-being is enhanced when satisfactory workplace relationships are established (Mao, 2006). Lonely people are expected to be the ones who are unable to satisfy some of their social needs such as belonging, intimacy or affiliation. In this respect, lonely employees may not be expected to experience positive outcomes such as commitment or engagement towards their organizations. From a social exchange perspective, as long as the organization provides resources to the employee, he/she will reciprocate these resources in terms of in- and extra role behaviors (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). In this sense, employees who are not supported by their organizations, supervisors or coworkers are not expected to be emotionally attached to their organizations and symptoms of burnout are more likely to be observed.

As previously stated, burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic psychological stressors on the job and it consists of three dimensions. The first dimension, exhaustion refers to individual stress and indicates feelings of being "overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources". The second component, cynicism (depersonalization), can be considered as the interpersonal dimension of burnout and it indicates "a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job". The last dimension, reduced sense of accomplishment represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout and refers to "feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement or productivity at work". (Maslach et al., 2001, p.399)

In literature, job characteristics and resources have been investigated as possible reasons of burnout. In terms of job demands, it is seen that, burnout is a response to work overload and, in general, overload is strongly correlated with the exhaustion dimension of burnout (ex. de Beer L.T. et al., 2016). In terms of job resources, it is seen that lacks of social support, information and control have strong relations with burnout. Especially lack of feedback is found to be correlated with all the components of burnout (Maslach, et al., 2001). In this sense, lack of support and feedback may be conceptualized as contributors to employee loneliness, which, in return, may result in job burnout as a response to the unmet obligations and unsatisfied needs of the employee.

Burnout is found to be associated with all six areas of work-life, namely; workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. It is considered as a result of chronic mismatches between people and their work setting in terms of some of these six areas. With regard to this paper, it is possible to claim that

community area may be the major driver of burnout experienced by lonely people. When people lose their sense of positive connections with others in the workplace, they cannot satisfy their needs to share their feelings. Social support and emotional exchange are stated as factors reassuring an individual's membership in a group (Maslach et al., 2001). In this respect, when people face problems in their community, they will be more inclined to feel lonely and this stigmatization process is expected to lead to burnout.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) stated that burnout can be defined as an erosion of engagement with the job and these two concepts are considered the two opposite poles of a continuum. Engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy whereas burnout is characterized by the direct opposites-exhaustion, cynicism and ineffectiveness (Maslach et al., 2001). The drivers of engagement are also close to the drivers of burnout. Job resources such as social support from co-workers and from one's superior, performance feedback, job control, task variety, etc. are found to be positively associated with job engagement (Schaufeli, W.B. & Salanova, M., 2007). From a social exchange perspective, an employee that has high-quality connections and relationships within the work context is more likely to feel engaged. Research suggests that people who have strong friendships, who are emotionally connected to others in their social network, and who experience a sense of intimacy and membership in a wider social group are the least lonely individuals (McWhirter, 1990). When the environment satisfies such needs for belonging or intimacy in terms of social interactions, and when feelings of loneliness are low, the individual is expected to be more dedicated to the job. Turning this framework inside out, a similar scenario for the relationship between loneliness and burnout may be observed. It means that lonely people are expected to be more prone to experience burnout.

3. THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ANXIETY

Workplace anxiety is defined as a phobic reaction with symptoms of panic occurring when thinking of or approaching the workplace (Muschalla & Linden, 2009). Within the framework of this paper, anxiety is not considered as a phobic reaction. As a word, anxiety is defined as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome" (Anxiety, 2013). Drawing on this definition, workplace anxiety is conceptualized as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease associated with uncertainty about social work context".

In literature, loneliness is found to be positively related to social anxiety that is a disorder characterized by a strong fear of humiliation and embarrassment during exposure to unfamiliar people or possible scrutiny by others (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010). In this sense, social anxiety is not applicable within the framework of this research. It is considered as a disorder; but what this paper points at is rather a context-based variable that may be associated with the state of the individual and cannot be defined as a disorder. Also, it is not a trait; personality traits can be included in the model as moderators but it is not found plausible to use trait anxiety as a mediator within the context of this paper.

Drawing on the Hierarchy of Needs by Maslow (1943), when love and belonging needs of an individual are not satisfied, he/she cannot step up to the next level of needs; there is an order to be met. In this respect, it may be claimed that, when people face loneliness, one of their basic needs, love and belonging will not be satisfied, and therefore, they will not be able to move up in the hierarchy, to the esteem level needs. It means that these individuals may suffer from low self-esteem and confidence, may not be respected by others and may not show respect to others. Being not respected by others and such unhealthy relations may provoke uncertainty and anxiety through concerns such as "Will I be able to get help if I need?", "Will I be able to work this day out?", etc. On the other hand, poor self-esteem is indicated as one of the common personality characteristics of stress prone individuals who are more likely to face burnout (Semmer, 1996). Such people may not be able to fight for higher levels of needs such as achievement or self-actualization, and therefore, work may not mean anything more than the fulfillment of safety needs. In this respect, feelings of loneliness are expected to be an obstacle against one's setting his/her self-esteem through increasing anxiety and, as a consequence, is expected to lead to burnout.

From a social exchange perspective, this paper claims that lonely employees, who are detached from the social context, are more likely to face anxiety. It means that, these employees have put time and effort to the job with the expectation that their efforts will be reciprocated. When their social needs are not satisfied and these expectations are not met, then these individuals may be prone to feel uncertainty about their future, about the organization, and about the people around them. When social relationships are not healthy, one cannot be sure if he/she will be able to get help when needed or find support in an emergency. These kind of issues may increase the level of anxiety the individual faces. Anxiety and stress are considered as two of the major drivers of job burnout, especially of the exhaustion dimension (ex. Maslach et al., 2001; Oehler, Davidson, Starr, & Lee, 1991). Also, individuals that face uncertainty and anxiety about the people and organization surrounding them, may not try to put in further effort. Therefore, anxious people are expected to be less inclined to hope reciprocity from the other parties and, are expected to be less giving. This lack of hope may also increase the possibility of the individual to experience burnout.

4. OPTIMISM, SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND NEED FOR AFFILIATION AS MODERATORS

Optimism is described as holding positive expectations for future (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Rooted in expectancy theory, behavioral self-regulation model asserts that people will be engaged in efforts to reach goals as long as they expect sufficiently favorable success and when they have doubts, they will be more likely to give up on their goals (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). People's expectations influence their behaviors. If people believe that they can be able to overcome their feelings of loneliness and manage the work relations better in the future, then they may be expected to hold on to these goals and cope with anxiety more successfully. In this respect, optimism levels of employees may moderate the relationship between loneliness and anxiety.

From a social exchange perspective, it is expected that, even when people feel lonely, if they are optimistic, they may hope that the organization or the others at work will reciprocate their previous efforts in the future. Therefore, the anxiety levels of these people are expected to be lower when compared to pessimistic individuals. Previous research suggests that people respond to their feelings of loneliness more strongly when they feel that their social relationships will not improve in the future (Weiss, 1998). It means that, when they are not optimistic about the future of their relationships, their responses to loneliness are expected to be stronger, such as facing higher levels of anxiety.

In this respect, characteristics and skills of an individual play an important role in determining his/her future outcomes. Social competence can be another moderator in the relationship between workplace loneliness and anxiety and it is proposed that if a lonely individual is high in terms of social competence, then his/her anxiety level will be lower compared to a less competent one. Social competence consists of social, emotional, cognitive and behavioral skills that a person needs in order to successfully adapt to a social situation. Social competence is associated with social skills and interpersonal communication and it draws a basis for expectations regarding future interactions. It is related to the quality of an individual's relationships and his/her ability to form relationships (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

Social competence consists of five dimensions: social perception, impression management, expressiveness, persuasiveness and social adaptability. Social perception is defined as the accuracy in perceiving others. Impression management is associated with using techniques for inducing positive reactions in others. Expressiveness reflects the ability to express one's emotions and feelings clearly, and persuasiveness shows the ability to change and affect others' views. The last dimension, social adaptability, refers to "the ability to feel comfortable in or to quickly adapt to a wide range of social situations" (Baron & Brush, 1999). If an individual is socially competent, then, he/she has the potential to effectively interact with other people, therefore, it can increase an employee's confidence and belief that they can build social relationships in the future and moderate the effect of work loneliness on the employee's level of anxiety.

The employee's need for affiliation may also affect how loneliness may provoke feelings of anxiety. Research shows that people high in need for affiliation reflect higher levels of anxiety when they are placed in an anxiety-producing situation (Byrne, 1961). Loneliness is a major driver of anxiety. In this respect, it is expected that, when people high in need for affiliation face loneliness in the workplace they are more likely to experience anxiety. This kind of people may feel that their efforts or wished for close social interactions are not reciprocated when they are prone to loneliness and this dissatisfaction may arouse feelings of anxiety for the future, especially as a fear that they will never be included in social groups and they will be left alone in the workplace.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THE MODEL

As stated before, workplace loneliness may be a driver of job burnout through increasing level of anxiety and causing exhaustion and stress for the individual at work. It is also proposed that optimism, social competence and need for affiliation may moderate the relationship between loneliness and anxiety. The model can be seen below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Model

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed;

H1: There is a linear relationship between work loneliness and job burnout and this relationship is mediated by workplace anxiety.

H2: The relationship between work loneliness and workplace anxiety will be moderated by an employee's social competence level such that the effect of loneliness on anxiety will be weaker when social competence is higher.

H3: The relationship between work loneliness and workplace anxiety will be moderated by an employee's level of optimism such that the effect of loneliness on anxiety will be weaker when optimism is higher.

H4: The relationship between work loneliness and workplace anxiety will be moderated by an employee's need for affiliation level such that the effect of loneliness on anxiety will be stronger when need for affiliation is higher.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper is an attempt to understand other possible dynamics in the workplace that may contribute to experiencing higher levels of burnout. Accordingly, a model that may help to explain different drivers of burnout is presented. It is claimed that workplace loneliness may be associated with burnout through increasing anxiety levels of employees. Also, it is proposed that social competence, optimism and need for affiliation levels of employees may interact with loneliness and change the levels of burnout experienced by the individuals.

It is important to mention that the relationship between loneliness and anxiety may be moderated by other variables such as self-esteem. Also, although anxiety is proposed as a mediator in the loneliness-burnout relationship, there may be other conceptualizations and variables that may explain the proposed relationship better. Drawing on the hierarchy of needs model, self-esteem, again can be proposed as a mediator between these two variables.

As a limitation, we may state that, loneliness and burnout are usually considered as chronic states in the literature. Here, anxiety is conceptualized as a temporary, context-based state rather than a chronic one. Therefore, it requires great consideration if this paper is to be validated through data collection and application.

Job burnout is a crucial topic in organizational behavior and requires considerable attention. In literature, it is seen that burnout has crucial implications and consequences for organizations. Research has shown that burnout is associated with various forms of job withdrawal such as absenteeism, intention to leave the job, and actual turnover. Also, if people do not quit their jobs, then lower levels of productivity and effectiveness are observed. Burnout is also found to be related to decreased job satisfaction and commitment. It is also associated with interpersonal outcomes such as conflict. Another major factor that increases the importance of understanding burnout is the finding that burnout may lead to mental dysfunctioning such as chronic anxiety, depression, decrease in self-esteem, and so forth (Maslach et al., 2001). With regard to this, for further research, it may be suggested that the relationship of loneliness with the above stated variables may be investigated.

Understanding burnout and the circumstances that lead employees to face burnout are crucial for organizations. The characteristics and personalities of employees may play a crucial role in the process of managing anxiety and burnout. Some people may prefer being lonely and working alone whereas some prefer working in teams and establishing close social connections; therefore, it is very important to treat every individual employee separately, to understand their needs and wants and to adjust the working environment accordingly if possible. Burnout is not just a matter of workload, but it has many psychological features and contextual determinants that have to be studied further.

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