

COMMENTARY

Burnout research: Adding an off-work and day-level perspective

SABINE SONNENTAG

Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz, Germany

Abstract

This commentary argues that future burnout research will benefit from adding two perspectives. First, as depersonalization may result from insufficient recovery during off job time, it will be fruitful to include the investigation of off work experiences into burnout research. Second, adding a day level perspective will shed more light on the burnout phenomenon.

Burnout has attracted much research attention in the fields of health psychology, work and organizational psychology and beyond. Fortunately, during the past few decades we have been witnessing progress in burnout research. Two trends stand out: first, the continuous search for improved burnout measures, as reflected – among others – in the development of the MBI-General Survey version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996), the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Halbesleben and Demerouti, 2005, this issue), and as a more recent one the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005, this issue). One common assumption underlying the development of the MBI-GS, the OLBI, and the CBI is that burnout occurs not only in the human service professions such as teaching or nursing, but also in other areas. In addition, at least some of these newly developed instruments challenged the assumption that the burnout concept comprises all three sub-constructs included in the Maslach Burnout Inventory, namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism in the MBI-GS, and disengagement in the OLBI, respectively), and reduced personal accomplishment.

The second major trend in burnout research is the increased use of longitudinal designs (e.g., Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, Bosveld, & van Dierendonck, 2000; Taris, Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2004; Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, & Mutanen, 2002). Longitudinal studies have the potential to overcome many of the pitfalls of cross-sectional research and

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Correspondence: Sabine Sonnentag, Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz, PO D42, D 78457 Konstanz, Germany, Tel: +49 7531 88 3742. Email: sabine.sonnentag@uni-konstanz.de

may shed light more onto the causal processes associated with burnout – although longitudinal designs cannot show causality in a strict sense.

In their article in this issue of *Work & Stress*, Kristensen et al. (2005) address some important issues that go beyond the specific purpose of the development of their new burnout measure and the properties of this new instrument (for a critical discussion of these aspects, see the commentary by Schaufeli & Taris, 2005, this issue). In my view, at least two of these issues could be of interest for the broader burnout research community: First, the question whether depersonalization – or, more generally, mental distancing – constitutes a core aspect of burnout. Second, the suggestion to examine the experience of burnout in everyday situations.

Mental distancing as a core aspect of burnout

The burnout concept as measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) comprises emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment as the core aspects of burnout. In more recent developments, the depersonalization component has been replaced by “cynicism” (Schaufeli et al., 1996) or “disengagement” (Demerouti et al., 2001), reflecting the view that burnout can occur outside human service work. The new burnout measure proposed by Kristensen et al. (2005) focuses on exhaustion and excludes depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment from their conceptualization of burnout. I do not agree with the approach suggested by Kristensen et al., but feel that their perspective might stimulate a new and fresh discussion about what constitutes burnout and the specific role of depersonalization. In my view, the interpretation that depersonalization (and related constructs such as cynicism and disengagement) can be regarded as a coping strategy is not a sufficient argument for excluding depersonalization (and related constructs) from the burnout concept. Rather, it seems that this specific “coping strategy” is a key feature of burnout – in addition to the experience of emotional exhaustion. Otherwise, it would be also very difficult to differentiate burnout from fatigue and exhaustion. The article by Taris et al. (2005, this issue) nicely illustrates the interplay between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in the burnout process.

Besides the answer to the question of whether depersonalization should be conceptualized as a component of burnout, the discussion of the depersonalization experience addresses an important issue in occupational health psychology, namely the role of creating mental distance between oneself and the (emotional) requirements of one’s job. Depersonalization is such a distance-creating strategy that can be used when working with people. In other work areas, mental distance may be created by cynicism or disengagement. Depersonalization, cynicism, and disengagement have in common that the process of mentally distancing oneself from one’s job primarily occurs during work and with respect to the specific work requirements: For example, the client is seen in a depersonalized way and one’s tasks are accomplished “mechanically”.

I would like to argue that mentally distancing oneself from one’s work from time to time is not a problem per se. When task requirements become overwhelming, creating distance between oneself and these demands might be even a necessity. The problem arises when creating mental distance becomes a chronic approach towards one’s work and – most importantly – when mentally distancing oneself takes place during the actual work. Then, resources needed to accomplish the task are not mobilized (or maybe even used to increase

mental distance) and performance may suffer, potentially causing subsequent problems and inefficiencies.

Research findings on recovery and respite processes suggest that mentally (and physically) distancing oneself from one's work during off-job time can be beneficial for mental health and well-being. For example, a classical study by Westman and Eden (1997) showed that the experience of burnout symptoms decreased during vacations, that is when individuals were off work. Burnout also decreased during other off-job experiences (even during military service), particularly in individuals who managed to fully detach themselves from their jobs and who had a positive respite experience (Etzion, Eden, & Lapidot, 1998). By looking more deeply into the processes that occur during respite experiences, we found in our own research that university employees who negatively reflected on their work during a vacation experienced increased levels of exhaustion and disengagement after the vacation. This was also true when controlling for pre-vacation exhaustion and disengagement levels and a broad range of other variables (Fritz & Sonnentag, in press). Similarly, another study illustrated that the failure to switch off job-related thoughts and to psychologically detach oneself from work during the evening hours after work resulted in reduced well-being at bedtime (Sonnentag & Bayer, in press).

However, it seems that job-related thoughts are not detrimental in all instances. Reflecting on job-related issues in a more positive way (e.g., by focusing on the positive aspects of one's job and the opportunities it provides) was found to result in reduced exhaustion and disengagement after a free weekend (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005).

Thus, although it is important not to blur the concepts of depersonalization (or cynicism, or disengagement as a burnout component) and psychological detachment from one's job during off-job time, these results suggest that the *when* and *where* of mentally distancing oneself from one's job might be crucial. Of course, psychological detachment from work during off-job time does not imply that one has to be cynical about one's job or to devalue it. Rather, it is important to take a "mental break" from the demands and associated problems, for example by concentrating on other activities. One can speculate that when there are no opportunities to mentally distance and detach oneself from one's job during off-job time, mentally distancing oneself from the job requirements *during* work might appear as a promising "escape" route for mentally exhausted employees. Until now, research evidence stems from relatively short-term studies that covered time lags from a few hours up to some weeks. Studies are needed that examine whether lack of psychological detachment from one's work during off-job time contributes to the development of burnout over longer periods of time, i.e., whether employees compensate for low psychological detachment *off* the job with high mental distance *on* the job – and under which conditions this takes place.

The experience of burnout in everyday situations

With respect to the experience of burnout in everyday situations, Kristensen et al. (2005) refer to the work of Alonzo (1979), who stressed the importance of learning more about how individuals deal with their health and health status deviations in everyday situations. Kristensen et al. present a range of interesting research questions such as "how people live with their different degrees of burnout in their daily lives". Unfortunately, they do not further elaborate on this perspective in the present paper. Nevertheless, I think that future burnout research could benefit from addressing these questions. Although retrospective reports might be valuable in some situations, these questions should ideally be studied using an experience sampling or a diary study approach (Semmer, Grebner, & Elfering, 2004, for

a discussion of the potential of these approaches). Burnout research could make substantial progress by examining “life as it is lived” (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p. 579) and by analyzing the situational features and individual interpretations associated with the experience of burnout symptoms.

Specifically, interesting research questions for such diary studies on burnout include:

- Which situational features (including job stressors, interactions with clients of customers, inequity) of a specific day elicit increased symptoms of burnout in persons with a generally high burnout level?
- How do persons with a generally high burnout level react to day-specific stressors or lack of resources – as opposed to persons with a generally low burnout level? Do they show specific reactions that in turn evoke high acute burnout symptoms?
- How do persons with a generally high burnout level cope with their burnout symptoms as present on a specific day? This also includes further questions such as: how do persons react to work requirements when they perceive acute symptoms of burnout in themselves?
- How do burnout symptoms accumulate over periods of several days and weeks? Which variables predict the accumulation of burnout symptoms and which experiences may attenuate the accumulation?

Moreover, it would be particularly interesting to combine such an experience-sampling or diary study approach with a longitudinal design comprising time lags of several months or even years. For example, one might address the question whether responding to specific situational factors in a specific way (i.e., one’s coping strategies) increases or decreases symptoms of burnout over longer periods of time.

For addressing these questions, it is necessary to develop day-specific measures of burnout. This also refers to the conceptual question concerning the way burnout manifests itself at the day level. To arrive at a fine-grained picture of burnout processes at the day level, here it would be again useful to include a measure of depersonalization (or disengagement) as one aspect of burnout.

Using experience sampling and diary study approaches in the context of burnout research will require particular effort on the side of both the researchers and the study participants. Specifically, one might anticipate that compliance with multiple data assessments might be a problem, particularly in study participants with high burnout scores. However, first studies illustrate that it is feasible to use experience sampling methods and diary studies in burnout research (Ekstedt, Akerstedt, & Söderström, 2004).

Conclusion

Taken together, future burnout research may benefit from both keeping a broad view and going into more detail. With respect to keeping a broad approach, it is necessary to include depersonalization (or cynicism and disengagement, respectively) in the conceptualization of burnout. In addition, it might be particularly interesting to address also off-job experiences in the context of burnout research, particularly psychological detachment from work during off-job time. Narrowing the lens down to more detailed day-level processes promises to provide new insights into the way individuals handle their work situation and their own state, including burnout symptoms. This knowledge will contribute to our understanding of how burnout processes unfold over time.

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