

Burnout and emotional experience in professional educators

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Suggested Citation:

Tschiesner, R. & Farnet, A. (2016). Burnout and emotional experience in professional educators. *Global Journal of Psychology Research: New Trends and Issues*. 6(3), 106-111.

Received April 25, 2016; revised July 02, 2016 ; accepted September 13, 2016;

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Tulay Bozkurt, Istanbul Kultur University, Turkey.

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Abstract

Aim: This investigation deals with burnout processes and the associated emotional experience patterns in professional educators. The importance of emotions is underlined by the fact that emotions changes the readiness to act (Frijda, 1986). Each emotion is connected with certain kinds of behavior (e.g. disgust with reject of an object or fear with avoidance). Just burnout processes from the educators' emotional experience point of view become a significant role, because certain emotions are linked with the two most important stages in burnout processes, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Burisch, 2010). These aspects are able to become meaningful, because educators have to get in relation with learners and people. On account of these emotions have an effect on educational behavior processes. Method: A sample of nursery and primary school teachers as well as social educators were recruited and assessed with psychometric questionnaires (Maslach Burnout Inventory - MBI, Emotional Experience and Regulation Questionnaire - EER). Results: Data (N=148) evidences significant positive relations between emotional exhaustion and anxiety, grief, contempt, anger, guilt, shame as well as lifelessness and negative correlations between emotional exhaustion and interest. Significant positive correlations were calculated between depersonalization and shame, contempt, irritability, disgust and negative correlations between depersonalization and interest as well as happiness. Conclusions: Results indicate that consulting emotional experiences in burnout processes is useful: First results improve theoretical considerations concerning burnout models (e.g. Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Freudenberger & North, 1992) and second it can be helpful for explaining educators' behavior in burnout processes.

Keywords: EER, MBI, emotion

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1. Introduction

If we take into account that emotions have a significant impact on behavior, we have to investigate on these aspects in educational contexts. Emotions send a signal to persons or rather move a person to a specific behavior pattern (Frijda, 1986). Actually, emotions are caused a) by the intrapsychic status of a person and b) realistic or fantasized interpersonal relationships (Scherer, 1990). All in all emotions are the outcome of complex appraisal processes. Even Lazarus (1991) said that individuals appraise emotions and summarize them to the so-called “core-relational-themes”. Each emotion is associated with a specific core-relational-theme. Anger means that someone is confronted with a demeaning offence, anxiety means that someone is confronted with an uncertain situation or an existential threat, disgust means that someone is taking in or being too close to an indigestible object or idea. Emotions and activated core-relations-themes motivates individuals to act intrusively in a certain way. Especially in education, a specific readiness to act in certain situations becomes importance, because educators have to fit with their learners, pupils, followers and so on. Often in educational settings, emotional states were induced by followers’ or pupils’ behavior. A possible explanation could be instead, that the psychodynamic concept of transference and countertransference causes a certain emotional status (Tschiesner, Tauber, Pastore & Farneti, 2014). First of all, educators have to deal with emotions elicited by others, for instance children, pupils, followers, clients. For this reason educators are counted to the so called high-touch-professions. Another explanation of the perceived emotional status are internal causes, exhaustion for example, personality and so on (Burisch, 2010).

A diffused approach to describe teachers’ occupational stress is the burnout-concept by Maslach and Jackson (1981). Mostly many clinicians, educators and people misunderstand the term burnout. They are thinking that burnout is a disorder like a major depression episode or schizophrenia. In the strict sense burnout is a process, which starts with “emotional exhaustion” after a relative long or intensive exposition with wearing stimuli. In the second phase, the so called “depersonalization”, people try to avoid wearing stimuli. In the case of educators it does mean, that they avoid there pupils, learners or followers. They try to get (emotional) distance to their stimuli, which elicit distress. A consequence of depersonalization is the decrease of quality in the relation with the counterpart. Whiteout interpersonal tactfulness the work with other people becomes critical and the efficacy of work (“personal accomplishment”) degrades. In Maslach and Jacksons (1981) description of the Burnout process, two aspects are more important than the other. Maslach and Leiter (1997) confirm that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are the core-elements of burnout. The decrease of professional performance is seen as a consequence.

Job related stress or emotional exhaustion are something common, but who gets in a burnout process? In many models, burnout is described as a process, but the question why somebody slides into a burnout process remains unsettled. The important moment in burnout process is the crossover form emotional exhaustion to depersonalization. At this moment, severe occupational stress becomes a burnout process. Psychoanalytically oriented psychologists (Fischer, 1983; Schmidbauer, 1985) think that the burnout process c with a weak ego/self or a (depressive) basic conflict. On the top of stress people don’t stop working, rearing, educating, nursing or helping. The belief to do something, what nobody else is able to do, mobilizes the last resources and energy until people crash. The credo to be somebody special whiteout performance limits is stabilizing a weak self or ego. Especially the common religious symbol of the “good shepherd”, which mustn’t lost his sheep and does anything to save and protect them, is familiar with the beliefs of persons in a burnout process. That such an archaic imagine becomes a stabilizing function is evident.

This investigation deals with both phenomena, Burnout and emotional experience, which interact and become an important meaning. If we look at Maslach and Jacksons (1981) sub-construct “emotional exhaustion”, we expect to identify a specific emotion pattern, which is characterized by an emotional status with lifelessness, guilt, shame, helplessness, excitability. If we turn to “depersonalization”, we think to find negative emotions like disgust, contempt, anger. In addition to

these assumptions can be expected that emotional exhaustion as well as depersonalization are associated with a lack of positive emotions like happiness, interest and surprise.

2. Methods

Following Maslach and Jackson's (1981) explanation of burnout, the construct is assessed by Bussing and Perrar's (1992) German version of the "Maslach-Burnout-Inventory – MBI-D". The questionnaire is composed by 25 items, which shall be rated on a Likert Scale. The MBI evidences a total score and four scores on different subscales. The MBI subscale "emotional exhaustion" comprehends feelings of exhaustion. The subscale "depersonalization" underlines the impossibility to get emotionally in contact with recipient others. The subscale "personal accomplishment" measures feelings of successful work and satisfaction. The fourth, "involvement" named subscale, includes the sensation that subjects feel like their clients, patient or students, or think that they have the same problems like them. For the assessment of Emotional Experience is used Benecke and colleagues (2008) questionnaire to measure emotional experience and emotion regulation (EER). The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part assesses the emotional experience. In addition to basic emotions the questionnaire elevates emotions with clinical relevance. The second part deals with emotion regulation. The items in the first are clustered in passive-negative emotions (anxiety, shame, grief, loneliness, guilt ...), active-negative emotions (disgust, anger, contempt, envy, impulsivity ...) and positive emotions (joy, love, interest, surprise). The second part (emotion regulation) is not used in this study. Among psychometric questionnaires, sociodemographic variables were assessed.

3. Participants

Subjects were recruited in child and youth services, daycare-centers, primary and nursery schools in northern Italy. In the sample were included people, which work as educators, teachers or pedagogics. A total of 149 subjects (118 female, 31 male) aged 36.87 (SD=9.58) conducted the questionnaires. 84 (57.1 %) of them work in a fulltime job, whereas 63 (42.9%) in a part-time. 58 subjects were away sick for an average of 1.41 (SD=0.53) days in the last year. 89 (59.73%) work as educators in relevant youth work institutions and 60 (40.27%) in nursery or primary schools. If we look at the "Global Severity Index - (GSI)", we can assert, that nobody is suffering on clinical significant symptoms.

Table 1. Sociodemographic variables

N=149	Female	Male
Sex	118 (79.2 %)	31 (20.8%)
Age	M=36,87 fulltime	SD=9,58 part-time
Job	84 (57.1 %)	63 (42.9%)

4. Results

For the MBI-subscale emotional exhaustion is calculated an alpha of .89 – for depersonalization an alpha of .59 and for personal accomplishment and involvement both an alpha of .52. For the EER subscale anxiety is calculated an alpha of .75, for fear of annihilation an alpha of .79, for shame an alpha of .69, for grief an alpha of .77, for lifelessness an alpha of .75, for loneliness an alpha of .83, for guilt an alpha of .69, for disgust an alpha of .65, for lack of control an alpha of .80, for anger an alpha of .89, for happiness an alpha of .81, for love and affection an alpha of .78 and for interest an alpha of .67.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between “emotional experience” (EER, selected subscales) and burnout (MBI). (* means $p < .05$, **= $p < .01$, ***= $p < .001$), theoretically significant correlations were evidenced by the authors.

N=149	MBI Emotional Exhaustion	MBI Depersonalization	MBI Personal Accomplishment	MBI-Involvement
EER anxiety	.251**	.263**	-.223**	.133
EER fear of annihilation	.235**	.195*	-.245**	.116
EER shame	.249**	.337***	-.217**	.101
EER grief	.325***	.203*	-.148	.120
EER lifelessness	.280**	.236**	-.214**	.139
EER loneliness	.150	.203*	-.145	.077
EER guilt	.211*	.250**	-.231**	.177*
EER disgust	.154	.258**	-.225**	.077
EER lack of control	.413***	.273**	-.154	.190*
EER excitability	.492***	.276**	-.194*	.184*
EER anger	.375***	.216**	-.116	.167*
EER contempt	.262**	.285***	-.219**	.175*
EER envy, jealousy	.190*	.200*	-.158	.193*
EER happiness	-.195*	-.223**	.206*	-.103
EER love, affection	-.024	-.207*	.293***	.061
EER interest	-.220**	-.276**	.317***	-.051

Several significant correlations by Pearson are calculated (Table 2). Correlations show that Emotional Exhaustion is particularly associated with excitability ($r=.492$, $p < .001$), lack of control ($r=.413$, $p < .001$), anger ($r=.375$, $p < .001$), grief ($r=.325$, $p < .001$) contempt ($r=.262$, $p < .01$) and anxiety ($r=.251$, $p < .01$). Depersonalization, however, is associated with shame ($r=.337$, $p < .001$), contempt ($r=.285$, $p < .01$), interest ($r=-.276$, $p < .01$), excitability ($r=.276$, $p < .01$), lack of control ($r=.273$, $p < .01$), anxiety ($r=.263$, $p < .01$), disgust ($r=.258$, $p < .01$) and guilt ($r=.250$, $p < .01$). Personal Accomplishment mainly correlates with interest ($r=.317$, $p < .001$), love and affection ($r=.293$, $p < .001$), fear of annihilation ($r=-.245$, $p < .01$) and disgust ($r=-.225$, $p < .01$), whereas involvement correlates with envy and jealousy ($r=.193$, $p < .05$), lack of control ($r=.190$, $p < .05$), excitability ($r=.184$, $p < .05$) and guilt ($r=.177$, $p < .05$).

5. Discussion

If we look at the alphas in the EER-questionnaire, we can affirm that actually alphas are satisfying, what indicates that the questionnaire is reliable. With regard to MBI, on the contrary, is calculated a good alpha for emotional exhaustion, and low alphas for depersonalization, personal accomplishment and involvement, which points on an unfavorable measuring accuracy (Buhner, 2004).

If we look at the results of correlation analyses, a complex imagine will be given. A lot of emotions correlates with more than one MBI-scale. These findings stand most likely for that burnout in general is characterized by a kind of emotional state of emergency (Burisch, 2010). But for interpreting specific

data caution is required. Nonetheless should be tried the attempt to contextualize findings with theoretical considerations.

Data show briefly, that emotions become an importance in the specification of the different phases or stages of burnout process. The appearance of negative emotions like anxiety, fear of annihilation, grief, anger, lifelessness, lack of control and excitability at the same time with emotional exhaustion elaborates this stage accurately and gives an important starting point for clinicians because emotions result from specific evaluation processes in specific situations (Lazarus, 1991). These emotions, which we found, underline the dysphoric condition of affected persons and a strong affinity to affective disorders, especially depression, can be recognized (Ahola & al., 2005; Bruhlmann, 2007; Iacovides & al., 2003; Kirchler & Pycha, 2014). If we look at the stage after emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, data evidence the closeness to emotions like contempt, disgust, anxiety, shame, anger, excitability and lack of control. This kind of emotions activate behavior patterns characterized by withdrawal or avoidance. The congruence with depersonalization (Freudenberger & North, 1992) is given. Especially the emotions disgust, which causes a removal for a disgusting object, and anger, which force persons to get someone out of the way, are typical elements of hostile behavior and make it impossible to create a positive working atmosphere in a profession, in which the interpersonal relationship is so important. It is particularly revealing that also loneliness correlates with depersonalization. A possible justification for this could be, that after a heavy burden people avoid other people, because from their point of view, the others are the reason for their stress experience and so they keep other people out of the way. Another significant problem in burnout processes is involvement. Correlations show that especially guilt, envy and jealousy are relevant side effects. Emotions like guilt, envy and jealousy could result from a too close relationship or the traversing of (ego-) borders. Negative correlations with personal accomplishment and happiness, interest as well as love and affection illustrate a loss of identification with the job. Farneti and Tschiesner (2012) for example introduce the impact of positive emotions in wellbeing.

Certainly a limit of the study is, that there is no evidence to what refers the emotions listed in the EER. Somebody is able to mean for example himself with the emotion "disgust" or another person or group and the interpretation of data becomes difficult.

All in all data suggest that emotions, which are typically associated with burnout, can be considered as unfavorable starting point for the work as educator in particularly, if we think at the specific readiness to act, which emotions elicit in people.

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