

Exploring the Relationship between Organization-Based Self Esteem and Burnout: A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between Organization- Based Self-Esteem (OBSE, Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Durham, 1989) and the three dimensions of burnout i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Our hypothesis was that the three dimensions of burnout would have a negative impact on OBSE. Data collected from 215 employees working in a heavy manufacturing plant in the Midwestern part of the United States supported this hypothesized relationship. The organizational implications of these results and directions for further research are discussed.

Introduction

Self-Esteem as a personality variable has been widely researched, perhaps because of the belief that it can influence how we as individuals think, feel, and accordingly behave (Brockner 1988). As described by Korman (1970), self-esteem is an overall evaluation of our self worth and the extent to which an individual sees himself or herself as a “competent need satisfying individual” (p. 32) P. Because of its importance in human resource management, studies have examined the relationship between self-esteem and several variables including goal setting (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham 1981), feedback (Stone, Gueutal, & McIntosh 1984), quality circles (Brockner & Hess 1986) and work behavior (Brockner, 1988) to mention a few. With the increasing time Americans spend completing their jobs, experiences within an organizational context understandably hold significant influence over well-being with respect to one’s job.

Korman (1970, 1971, 1976) held that organizational occurrences play integral roles in employee self-esteem, a construct which he surmised considerably determined employees’ attitudes and behaviors in an organizational context. Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham (1989), furthering Korman’s paradigm, introduced the concept of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), and the construct has attracted considerable attention ever since. More specific than its global counterpart, OBSE constitutes the degree to which employees deem themselves competent and valuable within their organizations. It is “the degree to which organizational members believe that they can satisfy their needs by participation in roles within the context of an organization” (p.265). It also reflects “an employee’s evaluation of his or her personal adequacy and worthiness as an organizational member” (Gardner et al. 2004, p. 308) as well as the perceived value they have of themselves in the organization (Pierce et al. 1989). If one accepts Kormans’s (1970) view that an individual’s self- esteem is shaped by one’s experiences, it can be hypothesized that the experiences one has within the organization will consequently have an impact on one’s level of OBSE and the attitudes that are developed as a result of how they perceive they are treated by the organization. Studies have indicated that the organizational context as a whole influence OBSE (Pierce et al, 1989, 1993). This conclusion seems to reinforce Korman’s view (1970) that the environment in which an individual works in does in fact influence the beliefs that an individual has about his or her value and worth in the organization. So whereas self-esteem is a global evaluation of oneself, OBSE is more specific.

The construct holds considerable importance in an organizational context. At the individual level, research has shown that persons high in OBSE have greater work motivation (Pierce et al., 1989) and intrinsic motivation (Hui & Lee, 2000), and achieve higher performance ratings (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2003; Pierce et al., 1993; Gardner, Pierce, Van Dyne, & Cummings, 2000; 1992; Marion-Landais, 2000) than do persons low in OBSE.

Concerning the organizational level, scholars have also discovered that OBSE correlates negatively with turnover intentions and with turnover (Gardner & Pierce, 2001). Some studies have examined the relationship between OBSE and stress and found a negative relationship (Tang and Ibrahim, 1998). Jeck and Elacqua (1999) in their study found that OBSE was negatively related to frustration and depression and physical strain. However despite the wealth of research illuminating OBSE there have been no studies examining its relationship to burnout. Within the last couple of decades interest in the problem of burnout has increased tremendously. Most scholars agree that burnout is a reaction to role stress and occurs when individuals experience prolonged periods of stress at work. More specifically Maslach and Jackson have defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the physical, mental tension experienced as a result of experiencing job related stressors. Depersonalization occurs when an individual distances himself or herself from other coworkers, and views them impersonally. Diminished personal accomplishment is the result of a negative self evaluation. They identified four organizational factors that may affect the severity of burnout: feedback, control and clarity, social support, and personal expectations about work.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review extensively the literature on burnout and work environment the bulk of the research evidence to date suggests that environmental factors, particularly characteristics of the work environment, are more strongly related to burnout than are demographic and personality factors (Maslach and Jackson 1984). Research studies have indicated that as the intensity of the job experience and the demands of the employee increase the levels of burnout appear to increase (Maslach and Pines 1977; Pines and Maslach, 1978); Savicki and Cooley, 1987). Workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity also appear to increase the frequency of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). Research studies have also collectively found that burnout has an unfavorable impact on organizations in terms of the development of negative attitudes, decreased levels of job involvement and task performance, and increased turnover intentions (Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Leiter & Maslach, 1988; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). In addition Chiu and Tsai (2006) in their study of restaurant employees found a negative relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment.

If one accepts the view that the organizational context plays an important role in the development of an individual's level of OBSE, and that it is more situation-specific, and evolves over a period of time based on the types of experiences one has with an organization, one can therefore hypothesize that burnout will have a negative relationship with OBSE. If the organization creates an environment where employees feel devalued and marginalized then one can assume that this will unfavorable impact an individual's OBSE. In addition, if employees as a result of their experience in the organization, arrive at a negative evaluation in terms of their self worth, value, influence, and impact on job related issues and the job itself, then their level of OBSE will be negatively affected. It is therefore hypothesized that all three factors of burnout, namely, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment will have a negative impact on organization self-esteem.

Method

Site and research participants

Data was collected on site over a period of three days from employees working in a medium- sized heavy industry manufacturing organization in the Midwest. Surveys were completed by 215 employees for a 99% response rate. The high response rate was due to the fact that employees filled out the survey at the work site before the start of their respective shifts. Also, the plant manager strongly encouraged the employees to complete the surveys. To ensure strict confidentiality and to gain the most candid survey responses, the first author administered the anonymous surveys directly to the employees.

Measures

Organizational- Self-esteem (OBSE) was measured with a 10-item survey developed by Pierce, Gardner, and Dunham (1989). Items were rated on a seven-point scale. Sample items include: "I count around here," "I am taken seriously," "I can make a difference."

Burnout was measured using the The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson 1981). The inventory focuses on three dimensions. Emotional exhaustion measures feelings of depleted energy due to excessive psychological demands. Sample items include "I feel emotionally drained from my work" and "I feel used up at the end of the day." Depersonalization measures a negative and unfeeling attitude towards others.

Sample items include "I don't really care about what happens to some coworkers" and "Working directly with people puts too much strain on me." Finally diminished personal accomplishment measures reduced accomplishment. These items were reverse scored. Sample items include "I deal very effectively with the problems of my coworkers" and "I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my job." Items were rated on a seven-point scale.

Analysis and Results

Validation of Measures

Even though measures for OBSE and burnout have been validated in the past, these scales were constructed using factor analyses that relied predominantly on the use of the eigenvalue greater than one rule, for determining number of factors to retain (e.g., Maslach and Jackson 1981). Subsequent research in measures development have suggested that the eigenvalue greater than one rule often leads to the over extraction of factors, and have recommended the use of parallel analysis as a criterion for factor retention (e.g., Patil et al. 2008). As a result, we subjected these scales to an exploratory factor analyses (EFA) using parallel analysis to determine number of factors to retain.

For measures of OBSE, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.906 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1991.72$, $df = 45$, $p < .01$). For measures of burnout, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.824 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1662.91$, $df = 231$, $p < .01$). This suggests that the use of EFA for both sets of measures is appropriate (Stewart 1981). In the EFA, principal components analysis was used for factor extraction, parallel analysis for determining number of factors to retain, and varimax rotation for aiding the interpretation of factors. This package of decisions was used because of its accuracy over other available approaches (Patil et al. 2008).

All 10-items of OBSE loaded on one factor. Coefficient alpha was .94 and compares favorably with alpha coefficients of .86 to .96 as reported by Pierce et al. (1989, 1993). The factor analysis of 22 burnout items suggested the retention of 3 factors. After cleaning the factor structure for variables with low communalities (lower than 0.4, Costello and Osborne 2005), high cross-loadings (higher than 0.32, Tabachnick and Fidell 2001), and factors with low loadings (lower than 0.5, Hair et al. 2005), 13 variables loading across three factors were retained (see table 1). These factors were labeled as *emotional exhaustion* (4 items, alpha = .81), *depersonalization* (4 items, alpha = .73), and *personal accomplishment* (5 items, alpha = .64).

Table 1: Factor Loadings of Burnout Items*

	Component	1	2	3
<u>Emotional Exhaustion ($\alpha = .81$)</u>				
1. I feel emotionally drained from work		.859		
2. I feel used up at the end of the work day		.897		
3. I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job		.723		
4. I feel I'm working too hard on my job		.663		
<u>Depersonalization ($\alpha = .73$)</u>				
1. I feel I treat some coworkers as if they were impersonal objects		.712		
2. Working with people all day is really a strain for me		.694		
3. I don't really care what happens to some coworkers		.721		
4. Working directly with people puts too much strain for me		.752		
<u>Personal Accomplishment ($\alpha = .64$)**</u>				
1. I deal very effectively with the problems of my coworkers		.626		
2. I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work		.663		
3. I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my coworkers		.573		
4. I feel exhilarated after working with my coworkers		.656		
5. I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job		.596		

* Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis; Factor Retention Criterion: Parallel Analysis; Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Cross loadings not reported

** All items for this scale were reverse scored

Mean scores of all items loading on a factor were calculated for subsequent regression analysis.

Model Estimation

A multiple regression analysis was conducted, with OBSE as the dependent variable and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment as independent variables. The overall model was statistically significant ($N = 215$, $F = 16.57$, $p < .01$, adj. $R^2 = .179$). Since variance inflation factors for all independent variables were close to 1, multicollinearity was not an issue. Table 2 reports the unstandardized parameter estimates and standard errors.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Results

Variables	Estimate	SE	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	7.225	.331		
Emotional Exhaustion	-.166	.057 *	.915	1.093
Depersonalization	-.138	.074**	.844	1.185
Personal Accomplishment	-.377	.085 *	.893	1.120

* $p < .01$

** $p < .10$

A negative relationship was found between the three types of burnout and OBSE. Parameter estimates for emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment were statistically significant, whereas the estimate for depersonalization approached significance ($p = .06$).

Discussion

The results clearly indicate that burnout has a negative impact on an individual's level of OBSE. All three dimensions of burnout i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment had a significant negative relationship to OBSE. One can therefore conclude from this study that individuals who experience reduced personal accomplishment, feel emotionally spent and detached from others, will consequently have a negative evaluation of his or her self worth and corresponding self-image within the organization context. According to self-consistency motivation, Korman (1970) has suggested that individuals who have a positive self image of themselves will as a result of this evaluation, possess positive attitudes and engage in behaviors that reinforce that self image. The converse holds true for individuals who have a negative self image. If burnout creates an environment where one's evaluation of their self worth is unfavorably impacted, then employees will develop the negative attitudes that go along with this self evaluation, and engage in behaviors that are detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

For both individuals and organizations there are enormous costs associated with burnout, mainly because of its negative impact on job attitudes which leads to the development of negative behaviors such as low levels of job involvement, reduced task performance and increased turnover. The organizational implications of this study are therefore quite clear. In order to avoid this burnout syndrome, which as our study shows negatively affects OBSE, organizations should create an environment which is devoid of factors that lead to stress and consequently burnout. Some of these factors include role ambiguity, role conflict (Schuler, Aldag & Brief 1977) role overload, underutilization, and lack of responsibility and participation (Steers 1991) which lead to stress and consequently burnout. Organizations should create an environment where employees know what is expected of them and have the autonomy, authority and responsibility that go along with their jobs. Furthermore, they should also have the requisite resources and training to be successful in the performance of their job duties, as well as be encouraged to participate in work related decisions. This supports Maslach and Jackson's (1981) recommendation of participative decision making and job enrichment as corrective actions to counter burnout. Providing work environment structures and progressive management practices that promote and encourage self-direction and self-control will send positive messages to employees that they are competent and at the same time. This in turn will have a positive impact on an employees' self-evaluation of his or her self worth and consequently lead to higher levels of OBSE.

This study is not without its limitations. First, in this study, all the variables were obtained through self report measures. Next, a cross-sectional design was used to investigate the burnout-OBSE relationship. The limitations of this study therefore suggest directions for future research.

Perhaps, longitudinal studies to test the causal direction between the various dimensions of burnout and OBSE are needed. In addition, further research studies are needed to examine organizational and job variables that moderate the relationship between burnout and OBSE. The results of these studies will provide further direction and focus to organizations and managers on the development of policies and practices to better manage their employees.

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