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An Inquiry Into the Job-Relatedness of Burnout

Bachelor's thesis in Psychology

Supervisor: Renzo Bianchi

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Department of Psychology





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Preface

The study was planned by the project leader and was a quantitative approach that sought to explore the job-relatedness of burnout based on recent meta-study findings (Guthier et al., 2020). The student's contribution included preparation and translation of the survey, and to conduct data collection and data analyses. Together the students were expected to redistribute and recruit participants with an average of 50 participants each.

The research question of the thesis and study was to some degree set to involve the job-relatedness of burnout, but the hypothesis and approaches was independently chosen. Recommendations on thesis writing and structure was held in an introductory lesson. The data analyses and which types of analyses that should be conducted was presented and gone through in a lesson on data analysis and consisted of mainly frequency analysis, correlation analysis and regression analysis. The writing process of the thesis was mostly independent with the opportunity to ask questions or guidance during the entire semester. We were also given two deadlines, one in the beginning of the semester to turn in the introduction and methods section, and one later with the opportunity to turn in the results and discussion part of the thesis to get feedback. There was also one oral presentation in April where the students presented their research question, hypotheses, and findings to the supervisor.

Lastly, I want to thank my fellow students at the project for their support and help. I especially want to thank the students whom I worked closely with on the project and during the writing process, their advice and support was truly beneficial. I want to thank our supervisor for his feedback, encouragement, insights, support, and availability during the semester. I want to thank my family and friends for their support and proofreading.

Abstract

Burnout is a widely used construct in occupational health psychology. While it is often argued that burnout is a distinct concept because of its job-related causes, recent findings question this assumption. More specifically, these findings question whether burnout is as job-related as assumed, and find that it overlaps with other disorders. Our study examined the extent to which participants attributed experienced burnout symptoms to their job and compared burnout with two general conditions, exhaustion and nonspecific psychological distress. The study was cross-sectional, and the sample consisted of employed Norwegian adults ($N=813$). Our participants completed the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), the Karolinska Exhaustion Disorder Scale (KEDS), the K6 to measure nonspecific psychological distress, and 11 job-related items from the NIOSH WellBQ. Results from frequency analyses found that 46% of participants did not attribute their burnout symptoms to their work, which was similar to the rates obtained for exhaustion (43%) and nonspecific psychological distress (49%). Correlational analyses found large correlations between burnout and exhaustion ($r = .69$) as well as burnout and nonspecific psychological distress ($r = .66$). Regression analyses indicated that the variance explained by the job-related variables were higher for burnout ($R^2 = .45$), than for exhaustion ($R^2 = .27$) and nonspecific psychological distress ($R^2 = .33$). There were also positive correlations between work-nonwork conflicts and burnout ($r = .38$), and nonwork-work conflict and burnout ($r = .35$). The findings from the study question the assumption that burnout is a work-specific entity.

Sammendrag

“Burnout” eller utbrenthet er et mye brukt begrep i arbeids og organisasjonspsykologi. Mens det ofte hevdes at utbrenthet er et eget konsept på grunn av dens arbeidsrelaterte årsaker, setter flere nylige studier spørsmål ved påstanden. Funnene setter mer spesifikt spørsmål ved om utbrenthet er så arbeidsrelatert som antatt, og viser at utbrenthet overlapper med andre lidelser. Vår studie undersøkte i hvilken grad deltakerne i studien tilskrev opplevde utbrenthetssymptomer til arbeidet deres, og sammenlignet utbrenthet med to generelle tilstander, utmattelsessyndrom og andre ikke-spesifikke psykologiske lidelser. Studien var en tversnittstudie og utvalget bestod av norske arbeidstakere over 18 år ($N=813$) som fullførte spørreskjemaet. Deltakerne våre fullførte «Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), Karolinska Exhaustion Disorder Scale (KEDS), og K6 som målte ikke-spesifikke psykologiske lidelser, i tillegg til 11 arbeidsrelaterte variabler fra NIOSH WellBQ. Resultatene fra frekvensanalysene fant at 46% av deltakerne ikke tilskrev utbrenthetssymptomene sine til arbeid, likt prosentene for utmattelsessyndrom (43%) og andre ikke-spesifikke psykologiske lidelser (49%). Korrelasjonsanalysene fant høye korrelasjoner mellom utbrenthet og utmattelsessyndrom ($r = .69$), og utbrenthet og ikke-spesifikke psykologiske lidelser ($r = .66$). Regresjonsanalysene indikerte variansen forklart av de arbeidsrelaterte variablene var større for utbrenthet ($R^2 = .45$), enn utmattelsessyndrom ($R^2 = .27$), og ikke-spesifikke psykologiske lidelser ($R^2 = .33$). Det var også positive korrelasjoner mellom “work-nonwork conflict” og utbrenthet ($r = .38$), og “nonwork-work conflicts” og utbrenthet ($r = .35$). Funnene fra studien stiller spørsmål ved antakelsen om at utbrenthet er et arbeidsspesifikt fenomen.

An Inquiry Into the Job-Relatedness of Burnout

The Study

Burnout is a widely used construct in research on job stress and occupational health. As a label burnout is popular among the general public. However strong debates still surround the definition and conceptualization of burnout among occupational health specialists. A recent meta-analysis found that burnout may not be as work-related as generally assumed (Guthier et al., 2020).

Previous studies have argued that burnout may not be easily distinguishable from depression or other psychological conditions (Ahola et al., 2005; Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Bianchi et al., 2015). This study aimed to examine to which extent burnout is related to work, and how burnout compared to exhaustion disorder (ED) and nonspecific psychological distress (NSPD), relates to, or is differentiated from job variables such as work-nonwork conflict and nonwork-work conflict, and other work-related variables. It also sought to examine to which extent individuals experiencing burnout symptoms would attribute them to their work and compared this as well to ED and NSPD.

Burnout and Job-Relatedness

Burnout is often attributed to work and presented as a work-induced condition and as a term it is argued that it "...capture the realities of people`s experiences in the workplace" (Maslach et al., 2001, s. 398). It is also explained as a result of high job demands such as physical, emotional and cognitive effort over a long period (Bakker & De Vries, 2021). There are several models and theories explaining how different kinds of work-induced challenges or situations can eventually lead to development of burnout symptoms. The job-demand-resources

model is one of the models explaining how job demands can be associated with high levels of stress and both physiological and psychological costs (Demerouti et al., 2001; Guthier et al., 2020). The model explains job resources as: “aspects of the job that help the person to cope with job demands, increase learning and work motivation and are advantageous in accomplishing work-related goals” (Mäkikangas et al., 2021, s. 723). It also proposes that job resources have two different types of effects. One being that the job resources can increase motivation eventually leading to work engagement and job-satisfaction, and secondly reduce job-stressors. A lack of sufficient job-resources can cause burnout symptoms (Guthier et al., 2020). There is also a job-demand-control model which includes job control as a factor for possible development of burnout. Job control refers to autonomy aspects highly related to one's own work and participation in decision-making processes (Mäkikangas et al., 2021).

Several models and theories like for example the job-demand-control model suggest that job stressors like workload could cause strain which is also linked to burnout (Guthier et al., 2020). Strain theories are not prominent in burnout theories but are used to some extent, for example through the drift hypothesis explaining downward selection processes (Guthier, et al., 2020; Innstrand et al., 2008). An example of the downward selection process of the drift hypothesis would be if a person's health is generally bad, which again would lead to less desirable jobs or unemployment (Innstrand et al., 2008). The refuge hypothesis also built on strain theories proposes an upward selection process (Guthier et al., 2020). For example, if an employee suffers from high levels of strain the employee may seek new tasks or jobs that are less stressful or demand less of oneself (Garst et al., 2000). Heavy workload is, however, a primary risk factor and positively related to the burnout symptoms and has previously shown to be linked to several symptoms of burnout (Mäkikangas et al., 2021; Alarcon, 2011).

Burnout, Exhaustion Disorder, and Psychological Distress (BAT, K6, KEDS)

In this study, burnout is compared with exhaustion disorder- and psychological distress. The measure used to operationalize burnout is the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT). The K6 is used to measure psychological distress. The Karolinska Exhaustion disorder scale is used to measure symptoms of exhaustion.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most widely used measure of burnout. The MBI consists of the three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (also referred to as cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment (Schaufeli et al., 2020). “Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being drained and over-extended from one's emotional resources” (Schutte et al., 2000 s. 53). Depersonalization or cynicism refers to one's negative feelings like being detached or experiencing impersonal attitudes and feelings towards others (Schutte et al., 2000). The third aspect considering reduced personal accomplishment concerns one's feelings about competence and tendencies to evaluate their own work negatively compared to others (Schutte, 2000). Though popular among burnout researchers the MBI exhibits several shortcomings. Such shortcomings include an unclear conceptualization of burnout, technical and psychometric flaws, and poor practical applicability of the MBI. (Schaufeli et al., 2020). Recently BAT has been introduced in burnout research. The BAT tries to tackle the shortcomings found in the MBI, for example with regard to the definition of burnout and its key dimensions. According to the findings in the creation of BAT four core dimensions were found. These consisted of exhaustion, mental distance, and impaired emotional and cognitive impairment, as well as three secondary dimensions including depressed mood, psychological distress and psychosomatic complaints forming the foundation of the BAT (Schaufeli et al., 2020).

Exhaustion disorder is measured using the Karolinska exhaustion disorder scale (KEDS). Exhaustion disorder is characterized by symptoms like exhaustion, cognitive difficulties, sleep deprivation, reduced tolerance concerning stress, and can over time cause long-term disability and depressive symptoms (Besèr et al., 2014). KEDS seeks to assess exhaustion disorder symptoms with the listed symptoms as themes. This study also measures other non-specific psychological distresses. This is measured by K6 which is a six-measure scale used to screen psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002). Both exhaustion disorder and non-specific psychological distress are non-specific to job-related themes and are simply general disorders. They are measured and compared to burnout to further investigate whether burnout is job-related, and because there are several studies arguing that burnout overlaps with other psychological difficulties or diagnoses such as depression or exhaustion (Bianchi & Brisson, 2019; Grossi et al., 2015).

Is Burnout a Work-Specific Condition?

Previous findings, theories and models argue that burnout is work induced or related. A question remains: can burnout be regarded as a work-specific condition or are there other reasons, disorders or diagnoses that can better explain burnout symptoms? It is important to question this for several reasons. Firstly, it is important because treatments or other interventions on burnout symptoms could potentially only affect job-specific factors, when in theory there could be several other factors that need to be considered. Secondly it is also argued that job-relatedness is now a key feature of the definition which distinguishes it from other types of diagnoses or syndromes like depression or exhaustion disorder (Bianchi et al., 2015; Bianchi & Brisson, 2019).

A lot of the studies previously conducted on the topic are based on the MBI as well. As previously mentioned, the MBI has been criticized for containing several flaws (Schaufeli et al., 2020). The BAT for example is a further development of the MBI that considers these shortcomings and could explain or measure symptoms of burnout more correctly. Therefore, it is also important to consider that further research on the topic with new and further developed tools could result in more accurate findings. Such findings could also question whether burnout is work-related.

In this study, we examined to which extent the participants attributed symptoms of burnout, exhaustion disorder, and psychological distress to their work. We measured burnout-, exhaustion disorder- and psychological distress using BAT, KEDS and K6, and followed these with causal attribution items. These causal attribution items asked the participants directly whether experienced symptoms were something they attributed to their work. The study also used several items from the NIOSH worker well-being questionnaire (WellBQ) to examine workplace variables (Chari et al., 2022).

Hypotheses

- *H1*: Most individuals with burnout symptoms will not attribute the symptoms to their work.
 - *Prediction: conditions at work cannot (alone) cause symptoms of burnout*
- *H2*: Burnout, exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress exhibit similar correlations with the job-variables.
 - *Prediction: several variables connected to symptoms of burnout is also connected to exhaustion disorder and psychological distress*
- *H3*: Work-Nonwork and non-work-work conflicts affect symptoms of burnout.

- *Prediction: conflicts from both work and nonwork aspects of life causes symptoms of burnout*

Method

Participants and Procedure

The data was collected individually by the 11 students of the bachelor project via online surveys using a snowball sampling method. The same survey was sent out to all participants for example by mail, social media or by direct messages. The participants were also encouraged to redistribute the survey to their contacts. The survey was anonymous and written in Norwegian. In total a convenience sample of 917 participants answered the survey, but 104 participants (11%) did not pass the attention check item and were excluded, leaving a sample of 813 participants ($N=813$). 573 of the participants were women (71%), 233 were men (29 %) and 7 of the participants did not want to state their gender in the survey (1%). The age of the participants ranged from 18-50 or older. 313 (39%) were 18-35 years old, 146 (18%) were 35-49 years old, 347 (43%) were 50 years or older, and 7 (1%) did not wish to state their age in the survey.

Measures

The survey's main measure is the BAT, the KEDS, and the K6. These scales were administered in different sections of the survey, together with items from the NIOSH questionnaire.

When entering the survey, the participants were introduced to an introductory message and asked to answer two confirmatory items about occupational status and an age item asking the participants if they were 18 years old or older.

To assess burnout the 12-item version of the BAT (Schaufeli et al., 2020) was used, followed by a causal attribution item asking if the participant attributed the possibly experienced symptoms to their work. Each of the items formulated as statements was answered on a 5-point Likert scale reaching from 1. never to 5. always, one being the lowest and five being the highest. The BAT scale has a good reliability ($\alpha = .83$), and ($\omega = .83$). ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .46$)

To measure other work-related variables several items from NIOSH WellBQ were also used (Chari et al, 2022). Two items measuring interferences between occupational life and personal life answered from a 7-point Likert scale reaching from never to always. Two other items regarding social support at work were also supposed to be answered from a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “I strongly disagree” to “I strongly agree”, both items also contained an answer option of “does not apply”. One item measuring job security, another item measuring job autonomy, one to measure work overload, and one measuring job meaningfulness. All the latter measured in the same 4-point Likert scale as the items regarding social support, but without the option of “does not apply”.

The K6, a six-question scale was used to measure nonspecific psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002). In this measure, participants were asked to consider symptoms they may have experienced over the last 30 days. The answers were measured in a 4-point Likert scale reaching from the lowest “never” to highest “most of the time”. The K6 was also followed by the same causal attribution question following the BAT measurements. The K6 scale also showed a good reliability ($\alpha = .86$), and ($\omega = .86$). ($M = .96$, $SD = .63$)

The survey also contained an attention-check item to detect careless respondents where they were given five different answers and asked to answer “I somewhat agree” to verify that they were paying attention to the survey.

The Karolinska Exhaustion Disorder (KEDS) scale was used as a measurement in the survey to measure symptoms of exhaustion disorder (Besèr et al., 2014). The scale measured nine items with nine different types of “themes” to measure exhaustion. The participants were given a thorough explanation and examples to make sure they could answer as correctly as possible. Each of the themes had alternatives for answers measured on a 6-point Likert scale from 0 being the lowest “experiencing no discomfort, to 6 being the highest “experiencing extreme discomfort”. In each of the different scales the alternatives 0, 2, 4 and 6 included examples to make it easier for the participant to understand what the different levels of the scale meant. KEDS were followed by the same causal attribution item as BAT and K6. The KEDS scale also presented a good reliability ($\alpha = .87$), and ($\omega = .87$). ($M = 1.68$, $SD = .94$)

Finally, the survey contained age and sex items, an informed consent item, and a conclusion message to thank the participants for their contribution to the study and inviting them to redistribute the survey.

Data Analyses

All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS version 29. There was conducted three frequency analyses to explore burnout-, exhaustion disorder-, and nonspecific psychological distress symptoms attributed to work. A Pearsons correlation analysis was conducted to further explore the relationships between the job-related variables and the three measurements. Multiple regression analyses were also conducted to explore relationships between dependent and other

variables, predict outcomes, and see the variance explained in the dependent variables. Predictors that were used were burnout, exhaustion disorder and psychological distress. A Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted with the variables work-nonwork-, and nonwork-work conflicts and the BAT measurement to explore the relationship between these variables and the burnout measurement.

Results

Frequency Analyses

Table 1

Burnout Symptoms Attributed to Work

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Yes	190	23.4	27.7	27.7
	I don't know	181	22.3	26.4	54.1
	No	315	38.7	45.9	100.0
	Total	686	84.4	100.0	
Missing	-999	127	15.6		
Total		813	100.0		

Table 2

Exhaustion Disorder Symptoms Attributed to Work

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Yes	195	24.0	27.5	27.5
	I don't know	213	26.2	20.0	57.5
	No	301	37.0	42.5	100.0
	Total	709	87.2	100.0	
Missing	-999	104	12.8		
Total		813	100.0		

Table 3*Nonspecific Psychological Distress Symptoms Attributed to Work*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Yes	179	22.0	26.9	26.9
	I don't know	158	19.4	23.8	50.7
	No	328	40.3	49.3	100.0
	Total	665	81.8	100.0	
Missing	-999	148	18.2		
Total		813	100.0		

The results from the frequency analyses show that 28% of the individuals that experienced burnout symptoms attributed the symptoms to work, while 46% did not. They also show that 27% attributed symptoms of exhaustion disorder to work, while 49% did not. 28% attributed symptoms of nonspecific psychological distress to work, and 43% did not.

Regression Analysis**Table 4***Multiple Regression Analysis Summary for BAT scores (N = 614)*

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.46***	.45***
Work-Nonwork conflict	0.08	0.10	0.20***		
Nonwork-Work conflict	0.09	0.01	0.22***		
Supervisor support	-0.002	0.01	-0.004		
Coworker support	-0.02	0.03	-0.02		
Job security	-0.03	0.02	-0.05		
Job autonomy	-0.03	0.02	-0.06		
Meaningful work	-0.08	0.02	-0.13***		
Job satisfaction	-0.24	0.03	-0.33***		
Wage satisfaction	-0.04	0.02	-0.06		
Benefits satisfaction	-0.05	0.02	-0.09		

Advancement satisfaction	-0.01	0.02	-0.02
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* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The work-related predictors explained 45% of the variance $R^2 = .45, p < .001$., in burnout. The analysis found several significant predictor variables with job satisfaction being the strongest predictor variable $\beta = -0.33, p < .001$, followed by nonwork-work conflict $\beta = 0.22, p < .001$, work-nonwork conflict $\beta = 0.20, p < .001$, and meaningful work $\beta = -0.13, p < .001$.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis Summary for KEDS scores (N = 614)

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1				.28***	.27***
Work-Nonwork conflict	0.13	0.03	0.17***		
Nonwork-Work conflict	0.18	0.03	0.20***		
Supervisor support	-0.05	0.05	-0.04		
Coworker support	-0.12	0.06	-0.08		
Job security	-0.08	0.05	-0.06		
Job autonomy	-0.13	0.04	-0.12		
Meaningful work	-0.05	0.06	-0.04		
Job satisfaction	-0.27	0.07	-0.18***		
Wage satisfaction	-0.09	0.05	-0.08		
Benefits satisfaction	-0.08	0.05	-0.07		
Advancement satisfaction	-0.06	0.05	-0.05		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The work-related predictors explained 27% of the variance in Exhaustion disorder symptoms $R^2 = .27, p < .001$. The analysis found three significant predictor variables on exhaustion disorder with nonwork-work conflict being the strongest $\beta = 0.20, p < .001$, followed by work-nonwork conflict $\beta = 0.17, p < .001$, and job satisfaction $\beta = -0.18, p < .001$.

Table 6

Multiple Regression Analysis Summary for Predicting K6 scores (N = 614)

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Model 1				.34***	.33***
Work-Nonwork conflict	0.04	0.02	0.08		
Nonwork-Work conflict	0.02	0.02	0.19***		
Supervisor support	-0.05	0.03	-0.06		
Coworker support	-0.12	0.04	-0.12		
Job security	-0.11	0.03	-0.13***		
Job autonomy	-0.11	0.03	-0.15***		
Meaningful work	-0.04	0.04	-0.05		
Job satisfaction	-0.24	0.05	-0.24***		
Wage satisfaction	-0.06	0.03	-0.08		
Benefits satisfaction	-0.03	0.03	-0.04		
Advancement satisfaction	-0.02	0.03	-0.03		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The work-related predictors explained 33% of the variance in nonspecific psychological distress $R^2 = .33$, $p < .001$. The analysis found four significant predictor variables on NSPD with job satisfaction being the strongest $\beta = -0.24$, $p < .001$, followed by nonwork-work conflict $\beta = 0.19$, $p < .001$, job autonomy $\beta = -0.15$, $p < .001$, and job security $\beta = -0.13$, $p < .001$.

Correlation Analysis

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for BAT-, K6-, and KEDS with the work-variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Burnout	2.12	.46	-													
2. NSPD	.97	.64	.66**	-												
3. Exhaustion	1.68	.95	.69**	.66**	-											
4. Work-Nonwork conflict	3.60	1.34	.38**	.25**	.32**	-										
5. Nonwork-Work conflict	2.91	1.15	.35**	.27**	.28**	.33**	-									
6. Supervisor support	2.36	.85	-.31**	-.28**	-.25**	.24**	-.09**	-								
7. Coworker support	2.61	.60	-.22**	-.27**	-.27**	-.11**	-.15**	.37**	-							
8. Job security	2.45	.77	-.24**	-.30**	-.28**	-.09*	-.12**	.25**	.24**	-						
9. Job autonomy	2.12	.88	-.28**	-.32**	-.26**	-.04	.00	.20*	.20*	.19**	-					
10. Meaningful work	2.44	.76	-.37**	-.31**	-.21**	-.01	-.09*	.19**	.18**	.26**	.31**	-				
11. Job satisfaction	2.53	.65	-.53**	-.42**	-.34**	-.17**	-.08*	.38**	.27**	.22**	.37**	.54**	-			
12. Wage satisfaction	1.84	.84	-.25**	-.19**	-.22**	-.12**	-.01	.21**	.14**	.12**	.23**	.07	.27**	-		
13. Benefits satisfaction	1.93	.85	-.33**	-.19**	-.24**	-.21**	-.07	.40**	.19**	.17**	.28**	.14**	.38**	.46**	-	
14. Advancement satisfaction	1.65	.87	-.33**	-.26**	-.24**	-.19**	-.12**	.36**	.17	.27**	.28**	.20**	.43**	.44*	.52**	-

Note: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

A Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to further explore the relationships between the three measurements and the job-variables. The analysis found several similarities between the three measurements and the job-variables. All correlations with the measurements were negative correlations, significant over the $p < .01$ level. Burnout correlated with supervisor support $r(797) = -.31, p < .01.$, is similar to NSPD and supervisor support $r(797) = -.28, p < .01.$ Coworker support correlated with burnout $r(801) = -.22, p < .01.$, and exhaustion disorder also had a clear similarity $r(801) = -.23, p < .01.$ As well as job-security and burnout $r(813) = -.24, p < .01.$, and exhaustion disorder $r(813) = -.21, p < .01.$ Job autonomy with burnout $r(813) = -.29, p < .01.$, exhaustion disorder $r(813) = -.26, p < .01.$, and NSPD $r(813) = -.32, p < .01.$ And lastly job-satisfaction and burnout $r(813) = -.53, p < .01.$, and NSPD $r(813) = -.42, p < .01.$, both had highly correlated results.

The correlation analysis also found significant positive correlations between burnout and exhaustion disorder $r(813) = .69, p < .01.$, and burnout and nonspecific psychological distress $r(813) = .66, p < .01.$

Correlation Analysis on Work-Nonwork and Nonwork-Work conflicts with BAT

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Work-Nonwork and Nonwork-Work Conflicts on Burnout (N = 813)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Burnout	2.11	.46	-		
2. Work-nonwork conflict	3.60	1.34	.38**	-	
3. Nonwork-work conflict	2.91	1.15	.35**	.33**	-

*Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$*

The results from the correlation analysis found that there was a significant positive correlation between work-nonwork conflicts and burnout $r(806) = .38, p < .01$. There was also a significant positive correlation between nonwork-work conflict and burnout $r(806) = .35, p < .01$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the job-relatedness of burnout, to compare symptoms of burnout with exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress and see to which extent the symptoms were attributed to work. The results from the analyses show that there is a small proportion of individuals that attribute symptoms of all three to their work, while about half did not.

The analysis also found that there are several similarities between burnout, exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress compared to the job-related variables. The correlations between the measurements are high and suggests an overlap. Out of the three, burnout did have a higher variance explained of work-related predictors.

The correlation analysis conducted on non-work-, work-nonwork conflicts and BAT found significant positive moderate correlations which could suggest that these types of conflicts could be related to burnout symptoms.

Most Individuals With Burnout Symptoms Will Not Attribute the Symptoms to Their Work

The first hypothesis stated that most individuals with burnout symptoms would not attribute the symptoms to their work. The frequency analysis on burnout with the causal attribution item asking the participants if they attributed the experienced symptoms to their work found that

about 28% attributed their symptoms to work, while 46% did not. Compared to exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress the percentages were similar and it is natural to argue that the percentages of participants that attributed their symptoms to work is small. While some participants feel that the connection to work could be the cause of the perceived symptoms, a larger proportion of participants seem to believe that there are other factors involved. These findings are similar to recent studies seeking to examine whether participants attributed symptoms of burnout and depression to their work in Switzerland (Bianchi & Brisson, 2019). They found that 44% percent of the participants ($N=414$) attributed their symptoms to work, while 43% did not consider their work to be the main cause of the symptoms (Bianchi & Brisson, 2019). Our results show a smaller percentage of participants that attribute their symptoms to work. However, it is important to note that the participants of our study had a larger population and is Norwegian so there could be differences grounded in this. Still half of the respondents from the Swiss study did not attribute their symptoms to work, similar to the results in our study.

The results from the multiple regression analysis found that the work-predictors explained 45% of the variance in burnout symptoms. While the regression analysis of exhaustion disorder only found that the predictors explained 27% of the variance, and the results of nonspecific psychological distress found that the predictors explained 33% of the variance. This finding was partially unexpected, because even though the participants themselves did not attribute their symptoms much to their work, the regression analysis still demonstrates that the predictors explain more of the symptoms in BAT compared to the K6 and KEDS.

There could be several reasons for this, and it is natural to discuss the measurements when questioning why burnout is distinguished from the other two in the regression analyses. BAT is based on definitions of burnout that state that burnout is a work-induced phenomenon

(Schaufeli et al., 2020). It is built up by several work factors and variables that directly asks the participants about work related questions (Schaufeli et al., 2020). Job-related variables and predictors contain factors that are directly related to the workplace. Such factors could include workload, autonomy, conflicts, and social support to mention some (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Such variables are theoretically grounded in several models- and definitions that are linked to burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Maslach et al., 2011). The Job-Demands resources model and the job-demand-control model are some examples of the theoretical frameworks that seek to explain how job-related variables could lead to burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2021). The K6 and KEDS are on the other side not based on work related variables but on other types of psychological and physical symptoms without attributing these to work (Besèr et al., 2014; Kessler et al., 2002). This could explain the similarities from the correlation analysis that will be later discussed, and why the total variance explained by job-variables in the regressions analyses are higher with BAT than K6 and KEDS.

Overall, the results from the frequency analyses (table 1-3) and partially the regression analyses (table 4-6) seem to support the hypothesis that most individuals experiencing burnout symptoms would not attribute them to their work. These results weaken the claim that burnout is a specifically job-related construct.

Burnout, Exhaustion Disorder and Nonspecific Psychological Distress Exhibit Similar Correlations with the Job-Variables

The results from the correlation analysis (table 7) conducted on all three measurements (BAT, K6 and KEDS) with the job-variables show several similarities. First the correlation between burnout-, exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress are all positive significant results with strong effects. These correlations could imply that there is a high

probability that participants who experience symptoms on one of them, will also experience symptoms of the others. For example, if one has several symptoms of burnout, they will most likely also experience symptoms of exhaustion disorder and, or nonspecific psychological distress. The results show an overlap between burnout, exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress. This is consistent with other studies that find that burnout overlap with other psychological disorders (Ahola et al., 2005; Bianchi et al., 2014; Bianchi & Brisson, 2019). Overlaps such as this, question the job-relatedness of burnout to an even larger extent. If other diagnoses and disorders that are not exclusively associated with work could explain or share symptoms that are similar to burnout symptoms, the point or validity of burnout diminishes further.

The findings could also in comparison with other studies further help to understand why interventions on burnout that are mainly work-centered may not have the effect it is expected to have (Panagioti et al., 2017). The correlation results from our study further support assumptions that burnout overlaps with other disorders as it found that individuals that experience burnout symptoms have a high probability of experiencing symptoms of ED and NSPD that measure disorders that are not job-related (Besèr et al., 2014; Kessler et al., 2002).

There are also several similarities between specific job-variables and the three measurements. Both burnout and NSPD had the strongest correlations with the job-satisfaction variable, and shared similar moderate correlations with supervisor support. Burnout and NSPD also shared similar moderate correlations with coworker support, job security and job autonomy. These correlations could also be used to argue that burnout might not be as job-specific as earlier implied or assumed because the similarities suggest that the job-variables could be connected to ED and NSPD as well. The job-variables such as supervisor support, coworker support and job

autonomy are also main factors in models like the job-demand-control model or strain theories that further argue that the variables lead to burnout. Our results on the other hand show similar correlations on these variables and BAT, but also NSPD and ED. The correlations were mostly low to moderate effects which doesn't particularly support the job-relatedness claims of burnout. They did not show high effects in the correlations between ED or NSPD either which raises the question of whether the job-variables are sufficient to explain any kind of symptom or disorder.

There were also several negative significant correlations with low effects which are not presented here because H2 sought to explore the similarities that were found, but that further support the claims that suggest that burnout could be explained as specifically work-related. The similarities in the results suggest that the job-variables could be connected to ED and NSPD as well.

Work-Nonwork and Nonwork-Work Conflicts Affect Symptoms of Burnout

The results from the correlation analysis of Nonwork-Work and Work-Nonwork with burnout showed significant moderate effects on burnout symptoms. The moderate effects were somewhat expected. The prediction that nonwork-work-, and work-nonwork conflicts would affect symptoms of burnout was to some extent accurate based on our results, however it was unexpected that the effects weren't higher. These variables consider the "life" aspect of the symptoms to some extent. nonwork-work conflicts explain or entail how conflicts from the daily life can affect the work life, while work-nonwork conflicts is about how work conflicts could affect the everyday life. When questioning whether burnout is work-related, considering the other aspects of life that could affect symptoms of burnout is natural. While the job-related factors such as workload, autonomy and work satisfaction are researched and commonly associated with the development of burnout symptoms, the significance of non-work-related

factors like conflicts should not be overlooked. Conflicts from the personal life like experiences, health, family, and other non-work-related conflicts could potentially have a significant contribution to burnout. This could further challenge the job-relatedness stamp on burnout and recent studies have found that there is an increasing work-life integration in people's lives (Noja et al., 2022). Work-nonwork conflicts are based on work-family conflicts or role theory. In short, the theories state that all roles come with expectations on appropriate behavior, and when several incompatible roles meet, there are bigger risks of conflicts (Reichl et al., 2014).

Other studies also show moderate correlations between work-nonwork, and nonwork-work conflicts and burnout (Reichl et al., 2014). This could mean that these types of conflicts are present but not to a large extent. For future research a focus on specific types of nonwork-work, work-nonwork conflicts are probably more convenient to investigate. This could uncover more specific variables to measure against burnout or other psychological disorders. When considering the implications of intervention strategies that aims to reduce burnout like previously mentioned, considering work-life balance conflicts could be one of these strategies.

One reason for the moderate effects could also be that despite of the conflicts the participants have enough resources both personally and workwise to cope with the conflicts (Allen et al., 2012; Michel et al., 2011). Still the effects show that these types of conflicts are correlated with and could lead to a development of burnout symptoms. The conflicts are on one side work-related, but on the other side they apply to aspects that are not job-related and the question remains on whether we can argue that burnout is fully job-related or if other diagnoses or distresses could explain these kinds of symptoms equally or better.

Another reason why investigating the relationship between work-life conflicts is interesting is because of boundary blurring. Boundary blurring between work and private life

essentially means that employees involve themselves with work related problems in their leisure time which could lead to strain (Noja et al., 2022). Strain could like proposed by the drift hypothesis or the refuge hypothesis eventually lead to development of burnout symptoms (Guthier et al., 2020). These types of work-life integration issues could make it harder to separate which stressors are in fact work-related, and which are “life” related. This would also threaten the statements that burnout is a job-related phenomenon, or if it reflects broader issues related to other life aspects.

Strengths and Limitations

The participation in the study was voluntary and granted the participants anonymity. Information about the study and its use was given to the participants as well. The study has a relatively large sample, which resulted in a large mass of data to conduct the analyses on ($N=813$). The BAT and K6 are valid and reliable measures. (Kessler et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2020). Our study compared to recent studies uncovered results that could further question the job-relatedness of burnout and whether it exists or should be referred to as a job-related phenomenon. The findings also compare burnout to exhaustion disorder and other nonspecific psychological distresses and found several similarities that could be of use to further research on the field.

The study also subjected to several limitations that should be considered. It contained three larger measurements with additional items which could potentially lead to poor attention from the participants when answering. When answering in studies and self-reporting surveys like the one conducted in this study, the participants could be exposed to self-report bias (Latkin et al., 2017).

Although the sample is large it cannot be ensured that it is representative of the Norwegian population. The study consisted of more women (71%) than men (29%). Most of the participants were either in the age group of 18-35 years (39%) or 50 years or older (43%), while only 18% were in the age group 35-49 years old.

Implications and Future Research

It is important for future research to address the question of whether burnout is a job-related phenomenon because it affects how we measure and intervene with issues related to burnout symptoms. Our study found that work-nonwork-, and nonwork-work conflicts have moderate associations with on burnout symptoms. Future research may explore if there are specific conflicts that should be addressed, and if so, how closely these conflicts are related to burnout symptoms. It is possible that a qualitative approach could be utilized to explore such conflicts.

The similarities between burnout, exhaustion disorder, and nonspecific psychological distress found in our study could imply that burnout does not work as a “standalone” phenomenon or disorder, but rather something that could fall under other types of diagnoses such as exhaustion disorder or maybe even depression. Future research based on these findings should evaluate whether burnout should be defined as a work-specific phenomenon, or if it is a type of disorder or distress that should exist.

Our study did not include variables outside of the measurements that were non-job related. Future research could benefit from examining whether burnout correlates with or can be explained by variables unrelated to work and comparing these with other measurements or disorders.

Conclusion

This study's findings question the view that burnout is specifically job-related. The study found that most individuals with burnout symptoms did not attribute the symptoms to work, this was also the case for symptoms of exhaustion and nonspecific psychological distress. Furthermore, the study suggests that there is an overlap between burnout, exhaustion disorder and nonspecific psychological distress. Although the job-related variables explain a larger variance (45%) in burnout than in exhaustion (27%) or NSPD (32%), the study discussed how this could be a result of BAT being a measure based on job-related variables (Schaufeli et al., 2020). When we investigated the correlations between work-nonwork and nonwork-work conflicts in relation to burnout, we found moderate effects. All things considered; it seems reasonable to conclude that the study questions the assumption that burnout is a work-specific entity.

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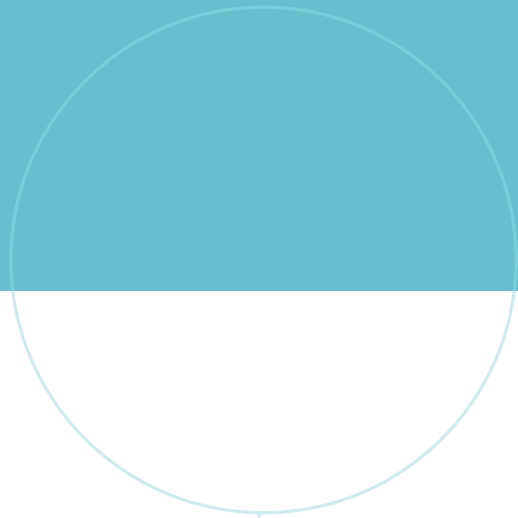
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