

How Do Stressors Lead to Burnout? The Mediating Role of Motivation

Cristina Rubino, Aleksandra Luksyte, Sara Jansen Perry, and Sabrina D. Volpone
University of Houston

We extend existing stressor-strain theoretical models by including intrinsic motivation as a mediator between well-established job stressors and burnout. Though the link between situational stressors and burnout is well established, little is known about mechanisms behind this relationship. With a sample of 284 self-employed individuals, we examined motivation as a mediator to explain why situational factors impact 3 dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Motivation is an explanatory mechanism that drives human behavior and thought, and thus may have an impact on important well-being outcomes. As expected, intrinsic motivation was a full mediator for the effect of perceived fit on the inefficacy dimension of burnout. Unexpectedly, neither perceived fit nor motivation was related to the other 2 dimensions of burnout, and role ambiguity had only a direct effect on the inefficacy dimension; it was also unrelated to exhaustion and cynicism. We discuss implications of these findings for researchers as well as for practitioners.

Keywords: burnout, stressor-strain, intrinsic motivation, fit, ambiguity

As jobs become more demanding, researchers have increased their focus on occupational stress consequences (i.e., strain). Burnout, one type of strain, is particularly important because it is associated with crucial psychological and behavioral outcomes, including productivity, withdrawal, attitudes, and employee well-being (Friesen & Sarros, 1989; Maslach, Shaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout is “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397). Emotional exhaustion refers to the basic stress reaction of feeling overextended. Cynicism pertains to negative perceptions about the environment or job, including feelings of detachment. Last, the inefficacy component represents beliefs of one’s professional incompetence and lack of productivity (Maslach et al., 2001).

Although the stressor-strain model demonstrates that job demands, resources, and individual differences are related to burnout (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001), a comprehensive process-based burnout model has not been established.

In addition, mixed support exists for some of the most common stressor-strain theories. Therefore, recent theories have sought to better understand the stressor-strain relationship by expanding the stressor and strain constructs as well as examining possible mediators and moderators of the stressor-strain relationship (Friesen & Sarros, 1989; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Thus, in this study, we proposed an expansion to the current stressor-strain model by incorporating intrinsic motivation as a mediator between perceived fit, role ambiguity, and the three burnout dimensions.

In the following introduction, we first briefly review the stressor-strain literature. Then, we discuss predictive power of perceived fit and role ambiguity as stressors leading to the dimensions of burnout. Next, we introduce theory-driven rationale for intrinsic motivation as a mediator between the two stressors and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy. We ground our proposed hypotheses in well-supported theoretical paradigms, including stressor-strain, intrinsic motivation, and job characteristics models. Finally, we provide a brief overview of our study context.

Stressor-Strain Model

Occupational health researchers exclusively have studied stressors and resources as antecedents of strain (Hart & Cooper, 2002). Strain is a psychological,

Cristina Rubino, Aleksandra Luksyte, Sara Jansen Perry, and Sabrina Volpone, University of Houston.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cristina Rubino, 2400 Richton, Houston, TX 77098. E-mail: crubino@uh.edu