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## Review Paper

# Burn-out as a crisis in self-efficacy: Conceptual and practical implications

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*Keywords:* Burn-out; Self-efficacy; Emotional exhaustion; Depersonalization; Personal accomplishment; Self-management; Empowerment; Control theory.

This paper reviews the central role of self-efficacy expectations in a variety of approaches to organizational performance and management. It also explores the implications of self-efficacy for the study of psychological burn-out. It is proposed that conceptualizing burn-out as a crisis in self-efficacy would allow a more reasonable understanding of moderate instances of the syndrome, and would differentiate the concept of burn-out distinctly from the related field of occupational stress. The paper proposes the utility of a more specific construct of professional efficacy in light of the essential achievement experiences which occur in the workplace. It is proposed that a clearer delineation of the role of professional efficacy throughout these research approaches would enhance the coherence of the field. In conclusion the paper discusses implications for research and practice.

### 1. Professional efficacy as an integrative construct in organizational research

This paper integrates diverse concepts pertaining to individuals' relationships with their work. Specifically, it is proposed that common themes evident in recent developments in control theory, intrinsic reward, self-management, and empowerment have implications for the active research area of occupational stress and burn-out. It is proposed that delineating the professional efficacy construct could help to create an integrated view of the role of cognitive and emotional mediators in the relationship between job characteristics and behavioural/attitudinal outcomes. This integration requires both differentiation of concepts as well as identification of common themes. The field of organizational psychology has been particularly vulnerable to concept redundancy (Morrow 1986) in which poor delineation of related concepts contributes to confusion rather than to deeper understanding. This problem is particularly evident when research areas proceed with only minimal reference to one another, although their commonalities have sufficient substance to serve as a basis for thorough model testing and theory building.

### 2. Professional efficacy

Social learning theory requires a distinction between outcome expectations and efficacy

expectations. Bandura (1977) posited that both outcome expectancies—the extent to which a response would lead to a desired result—and efficacy expectations—the extent to which an individual feels capable of adequately implementing a response—determine an individual's behaviour in a demand situation. Outcome expectancies have to do with the action–outcome link: if a therapist provides a certain therapy to a client, the client is likely to improve. Efficacy expectations have to do with the person–action link: does the therapist feel capable of performing the required behaviour? The transactional approach to stress (see, for example, Cox 1978, Lazarus and Folkman 1984) posited that limitations in either outcome or efficacy expectations can contribute to experienced stress.

Work settings provide a powerful context for developing efficacy expectations. They are fairly constant social systems in which most people attain significant life accomplishments. Individuals receive direct performance feedback from observing the effects of their own actions as well as vicarious information from observing colleagues operating under similar constraints. Bandura's (1977) original formulation was primarily concerned with individuals' expectations for addressing personal problems effectively; low self-efficacy expectations result from perceived personal deficiencies.

It is difficult to make a precise attribution for success or failure within a structured social

setting: the values by which participants judge performance are somewhat unique within each setting. A more fundamental issue is the degree of interdependency prevalent in current service work. Most important projects require the coordinated behaviour of various participants, such that no one can claim exclusive responsibility for the outcome of the project. In fact, one cannot consider performance in terms of discrete component parts, in that one person's contribution serves as a cue for another and provides performance feedback to a third party.

Even when supportive, the obvious structure of organizational life may stand in the way of developing strong expectations of self-efficacy in that it invites external attributions of success: a success may be seen as a function of the resources and management of the organization rather than of personal skills or effort. To some extent self-serving biases incline individuals to take credit for success whenever given the opportunity. Management may strengthen this tendency more directly by empowering workers to use their judgement and initiative within the goals of the organization. In well functioning teams cooperative action enhances the self-efficacy of the individuals who make up the team. As Bandura (1977) and others (Meichenbaum 1971) have argued, people do not have to labour entirely on their own or under inconspicuously arranged influences to experience therapeutic gains as resulting from their own efforts, but they do need support and guidance in utilizing 'opportunities for self-directed accomplishments after the desired behaviour has been established. Any lingering doubts people might have, either about their capabilities . . . are dispelled easily in this manner' (Bandura 1977, p. 201).

Summarizing to this point, self-efficacy expectations are fundamental components of the way people understand their environment and develop strategies for making an impact on it. The relatively stable structure inherent in most professional work settings influences the efficacy expectations pertaining to their professional roles. To the extent that professional roles are central to a person's life, work-specific efficacy expectations have a profound impact on the experience of stress.

Recent developments in management research provide direction for assessing professional efficacy expectations and conceptualizing the way in which they have an impact on performance and organizational functioning. This research facilitates the use of the professional efficacy construct. For example, Latack (1986) recognized both outcome and efficacy expectations in her development of an

instrument for measuring coping styles in occupational settings. She defined a control-oriented coping style which was based on strong expectations of efficacy of proactive responses to organizational problems and an escape-oriented coping style associated with weak outcome and efficacy expectations. Both Latack (1986) and Leiter (1991) found consistency between cognitive and action coping responses: people who were control oriented in managing personal priorities tended to be control oriented when addressing occupational problems with other people.

An important application of the professional efficacy construct in the occupational domain has been that of Manz's work on self-management and self-leadership (Manz and Sims 1984, Manz 1986). From this perspective a successful application of a self-leadership approach to management requires expectations of self-efficacy on the part of an individual, as well as an organizational environment conducive to enhancing efficacy further. Manz (1986) posited that personal feelings of efficacy were based on a sense of: (a) competence; (b) self-determination; and (c) purpose. These considerations are consistent with Burke's (1986) and Neilsen's (1986) view of an empowering managerial relationship. Manz's approach emphasizes the importance of considering both personal and organizational issues in understanding self-management behaviour: organizational control systems work primarily through their impact on personal control systems working to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and purpose. In other words, '... organizations provide organizational control systems that influence people but these systems do not access individual action directly. Rather, the impact of organizational control mechanisms is determined by the way they influence, in intended as well as unintended ways, the self control systems within organizational members' (Manz 1986, p. 586). Organizational control systems can serve to enhance or to undermine an individual's efficacy expectations through their impact on the availability of opportunities to experience effective use of abilities.

Mills and coworkers (Mills 1983, Mills *et al.* 1983) have pointed out the need for self-management under conditions of uncertainty, which imply 'the role performer has the right to determine what is to be done and how it should be done' (p. 447). In other words, health-care systems require professionals to address the uncertainty which is invariably part of client problems (Christian and Hannah 1983, Kanfer

1984, Howell and Dorfman 1986). Hence, the discretion necessary for effectively managing client contacts allows non-administrative employees in service industries to structure their work context to the point of creating their own roles (Bobbitt and Ford 1980). An integral part of their role is the requirement to make myriad decisions and judgements involved in adapting services to the unique situation of a specific client. As such, a professional must have a sufficient range of self-management in order to function effectively.

The concept of self-management as a viable approach to enhancing creative and responsible organizationally based performance is necessarily based on personal systems of self-control. Control systems imply the existence of both an end state toward which one is striving, as well as some impetus towards attaining that state. The literature on goal setting (see, for example, Locke *et al.* 1981) has established that the major benefit of participative decision-making in organizations is the potential for participative processes to facilitate members' acceptance of an organizational goal as an individual goal. Greenberger and coworkers (Greenberger and Strasser 1986, Greenberger *et al.* in press) have further emphasized that worker-participation programmes must be accompanied by real increases in control or lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. When workers experience both goal acceptance and control, pursuit of the goal becomes an intrinsically rewarding experience. The enhancement of control and self-determination contributes not only to the more vigorous pursuit of accepted goals, it also contributes to a more proactive relationship with the information environment of an organization (Ashford and Cummings 1985), and in turn enhances personal feelings of self-efficacy (Evans 1986).

Lord and Kernan (1987) applied script analysis to organizational goal setting. They emphasized that strong scripts are defined in relation to the goals of individual actors, incorporate multiple paths to goals, and are readily elaborated to incorporate new experiences. In strong scripts the means for attaining higher-order goals include the attainment of more concrete, lower-order goals, which are connected to the higher-order goals through 'in-order-to' relationships. An 'in-order-to' relationship in turn is based on the attributional assumptions held by the member concerning who causes what in an organization.

It follows that efficacy expectations are an essential component of the scripts which define the role of career in a person's life. The 'in-

order-to' relationships contained in the script would define person-action links and action-outcome links on which both efficacy and outcome expectancies are based. The associated attributions shape workers' interactions with any member of the organization. An individual with a strong script enters an interaction with an organizational context with a set of expectations upon which the person will evaluate the event. If the script is characterized by a strong sense of self-efficacy, the individual is likely to act consistently with this assumption, and be further empowered by the outcome.

Problems arise when there are substantial inconsistencies among the assumptions held by members of the same organizational unit. Martinko and Gardner (1987) review research which establishes that supervisors and subordinates differ systematically in their attributions regarding subordinate behaviour by virtue of their organizational roles. They argue that supportive relationships between supervisors and subordinates are facilitated by congruence in their attributional processes. It follows that similarity between subordinates' and supervisors' attributional processes would be enhanced when they share a similar relationship to the organizational goals. That is, workers and supervisors who have participated in the process of developing a higher-order goal not only share a commitment to it, they also share their way of thinking about the goal. As a consequence, they will subsequently make similar decisions regarding the attainment of that goal. This level of consistency permits a wider range of self-management. An outcome which empowers one member's efficacy expectations would be much more likely to confirm the self-efficacy of other members of the organizational unit.

Hackman's (1986) examination of conditions supporting effective self-management was consistent with Mills's (1983) and Manz's (1986) emphasis on an actively supportive management system. He emphasized five characteristics of organizational support: (a) goals and direction, (b) task design, (c) education and reward systems, (d) coaching and consultation, and (e) material resources. Hackman (1986) noted that the current state of research provides only general direction regarding the design of truly effective self-management systems. It is clear at this point, however, that organizational management systems must take into account—indeed, cultivate—the personal control and problem solving systems of the self-managers.

In summary, these conditions for self-

management affect the behaviour of employees through influencing their efficacy expectations. That is, a system which fosters self-management operates on an organizational level in a manner similar to that which Bandura (1977) attributed to psychological procedures on a personal level. That is, they '... serve as means of creating and strengthening expectations of personal efficacy' (Bandura 1977, p. 193). Following Bandura's theory further, professional efficacy expectations are hypothesized to influence workers' choice of activities and settings, as well as the strength and persistence of their efforts. Bandura (1977) posited that efficacy expectations varied on three dimensions: magnitude, generality, and strength. The model developed here places particular emphasis on the generality dimension by proposing that workers develop a coherent schema of efficacy expectations specific to their work setting. Variations in the content, magnitude, and strength of these expectations are influenced by enduring properties of the work setting and have an impact on affect and performance.

This perspective supports the conclusion that management of professionals requires a distinct supervisory style. As Raelin (1989) has stated, 'the management of autonomy may be the most essential skill in managing professionals in organizations' (p. 227). Hackman (1986) depicts the management of self-managers as more demanding than a traditional supervisor-subordinate relationship. He points out that self-managers require meaningful tasks, for which they experience personal responsibility, and thorough feedback regarding outcomes. This situation requires not only that work roles be defined with sufficient autonomy and authority, but that tasks be defined with sufficient clarity and completeness to function as a meaningful unit providing discernible results. When these conditions are not met people are vulnerable to experiencing a crisis in professional efficacy.

### 3. Efficacy and burn-out

The idea of professional efficacy as a defining feature of a person's relationship with a career complements the concept of psychological burn-out as a work-related emotional problem. Unlike depression, a mental disorder with pervasive influence on a full range of life activities, burn-out has been conceptualized as influencing primarily human service workers' thoughts and feelings about professional performance (Shinn *et al.* 1984, Maslach and Jackson 1986, Leiter and Maslach, 1988). The

impact of burn-out on family relationships is considered an indirect effect, rather than an intrinsic part of the syndrome (Maslach and Jackson 1982, Leiter 1990). Diminished personal accomplishment, one of the three subscales of the Maslach Burn-out Inventory (MBI) (Maslach and Jackson 1986), is particularly relevant to the concept of professional efficacy, or the lack thereof. Golembiewski and Munzenrider (1988) have argued that the current prevalence of burn-out as a syndrome and as an object of interest for researchers is a function of the central role of occupational performance has taken in determining an individual's self-esteem. The pressure toward high-level performance in all aspects of life frequently overload the capacity to replenish depleted personal resources. Golembiewski and Munzenrider thoroughly document numerous ways in which the cognitive/emotional experience of burn-out brings about a deterioration of professional performance.

The discouraged, cynical, impersonal state of burn-out among human service workers is diametrically opposed to concepts of self-efficacy and internal work motivation which Hackman (1986) posited as a defining characteristic of a self-manager. Leiter's (1990) longitudinal study of burn-out indicated that a crisis in professional efficacy may be an essential component in his process model of burn-out. This study found that the extent to which human service professionals perceived that their jobs enhanced their skills, and encouraged a control-oriented coping style which was significantly related to changes in burn-out over the subsequent 6-month interval.

Handy (1988) has criticized burn-out research for following too closely the research agenda and theoretical problems of occupational stress research. It is the centrality of self-efficacy to burn-out, much more so than to occupational stress, which can clearly differentiate the burn-out concept from that of general occupational stress.

Progress has been made toward extending social learning theory to the study of psychological burn-out (Meier 1983, Leiter and Skoe 1989). In many ways burn-out can be considered as a breakdown in the occupational domain of a person's efficacy feelings. The emotional exhaustion component of the syndrome implies depletion of the energy and emotional warmth necessary for interacting with service recipients in a vibrant and supportive manner. Diminished personal accomplishment is a direct measure of efficacy in that the items

assess respondents' perceptions of the impact of their work. Neither of these components of burn-out is necessarily limited to the human service context. Both emotional depletion and diminished accomplishment are incompatible with the effort required for creativity or problem solving in any line of endeavour. Only the depersonalization component of burn-out is specific to human service work: it is largely irrelevant to those whose work does not require a personal relationship with clients.

As Leiter and Skoe (1989) have discussed, burn-out, as measured by the MBI, implies external attributions to stable aspects of the work or work-setting for the workers' negative emotional state. The emotional exhaustion items identify the work setting as a distinct context in which negative feelings have emerged; a high score on this subscale indicates both that the respondents feel exhausted and that they attribute this exhaustion to the work environment. The initial conceptualizations of the burn-out syndrome focused primarily on the demands of the helping relationship in the development of burn-out (Cherniss, 1980, Maslach and Jackson 1982). Recent research (Beehr 1985, Burke and Greenglass 1986, Golembiewski & Munzenrider 1988, Leiter 1988a, Leiter and Maslach 1988) has emphasized interpersonal relationships with people other than service recipients. From this perspective, problems in the helping relationship are attributed to immediate supervisors or to more senior administrators. For example, workers attribute heavy caseloads and inappropriate referrals to supervisors' disregard for quality service (Beehr and Bhagat 1984). They attribute insufficient resources to indifference on the part of administrators toward the problems confronting service professionals (Leiter 1988b).

It follows that the scripts of a person experiencing burn-out are characterized by weak efficacy expectancies, in that burn-out is inconsistent with a sense of self-determination, and a sense of purpose, two of Manz's (1986) requirements for effective organizational involvement. To the extent that others in an organization control professional activities, individuals cannot attribute success to themselves. The person-action link is thereby weakened. The person may not experience the thwarting of professional intentions as being the function of personal shortcomings, however, but as the result of organizational constraints which interfere with the provision of services. Unfortunately for the organization and for the individual, the 'in-order-to' relationships

specified in this script do not delineate pathways through which an actor can pursue goals. Instead, they define pathways which are blocked by organizational processes and structures.

The burn-out script is a negative self-fulfilling prophecy in that it diminishes the potential for subsequent effectiveness. The low efficacy expectations result in a wider range of demands being interpreted as stressful in the negative sense rather than as challenging. Many people who enter human service professions are actively seeking challenging opportunities in which they can make a significant contribution. As both Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) view of stress and Hobfoll's (1989) resource depletion theory of stress emphasize, the distinction between a stressful demand and an exhilarating challenge is focused on one's assessment of the sufficiency of one's resources. A person with a low sense of professional efficacy would be subject to greater stress, if only because of their low regard for their personal resources.

Shinn *et al.* (1984) provided examples of the thwarting character of a burned-out person's view of the work environment. They demonstrated that human service professionals report a great potential for organizational interventions which would alleviate pressures towards burn-out, but that employing agencies either neglected such initiatives or engaged in 'counter-productive activities' (Shinn *et al.* 1984, p. 869). Their responses indicated that workers under strain develop a view that occupational stressors are impervious to individual coping attempts and are a matter of indifference for administrative personnel. They also suggest the presence of a management structure which engenders more powerlessness than self-efficacy.

It is important to note that the organizational initiatives suggested by workers were not solely characterized by diminishing demands. Many proposed interventions which would clearly have served to enhance the workers' sense of efficacy regardless of the demand level: 'encourage personal growth experiences, good training opportunities, in-service and workshops, ... set realistic goals, diversified work activities, ... open relationships with supervisors so problems and concerns can be expressed and dealt with effectively' (Shinn *et al.* 1984, p. 869). When asked to describe the agencies' actual interventions, the respondents' bitterness was evident in such responses as, "not a damn thing"; "not much. They have crazy time-punching ethics that don't work for therapists"; "not an operative concept where I am presently"; "the agency itself is the major stressor" (Shinn *et al.* 1984, p. 869).

Relating this situation to Bandura's (1977) framework, the workers have well articulated outcome expectations: if the agency instituted certain policies, strain would be reduced. However, they also have low efficacy expectations: they do not believe that they can bring about the implementation of these policies. This weak person-action link is not primarily based on an assessment of personal shortcomings, however. The difficulty in instituting these policies is indifference or active thwarting on the part of powerful members of the organization.

The focus on professional efficacy crises calls for a re-evaluation of measurement issues in burn-out research. The use of the MBI to measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment presents a labelling problem, particularly in regard to moderate scores. The term 'burn-out' connotes an extreme, terminal state, which is not appropriate to the majority of respondents with moderate scores on the instrument. Pick and Leiter (1989) reported that respondents who diagnosed themselves as being burned out at the time of an interview scored over two standard deviations above the population norm for emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson 1986). The large majority of respondents who score in the moderate ranges of the subscales report problems, but rarely apply the term 'burn-out' to themselves. As Leiter (1989a) points out, the fact that the full range of MBI scores are linearly related to measures of organizational stressors and supports argues against treating extreme values of burn-out as special cases. Moderate scores on the MBI may be more accurately seen as indicative of a crisis in professional efficacy rather than labelled as a mild form of burn-out.

In summary, the preceding discussion leads to the following propositions. (a) The management structure in which human service professionals work has an impact on their performance through influencing their efficacy expectations. These effects occur most directly on workers' cognitive schemas, then work their way through emotional reactions to effects on performance. (b) The closer a professional's management structure approximates a self-management system, as described by Hackman (1988) and Manz (1986), the greater the sense of efficacy and the less the feelings of burn-out. (c) The complex interdependency of constructs describing people's psychological relationships with their work (commitment, efficacy, stress, etc.) requires close scrutiny of measurement issues. The development of new measures must

occur with a thorough appreciation of its place in relation to neighbouring or contrary constructs. (d) Constructs related to professional efficacy, self-management and burn-out are relevant to a wide range of service professionals. Specifically, research is needed on professionals working in financial, government, and health services.

#### 4. Implications for research

The common theme of self-efficacy throughout the research discussed above provides an opportunity for integrating these diverse fields. However, the diversity in research approaches to date has slowed the development of a more complete theory of the relationship between job characteristics and behavioural/attitudinal outcomes. This paper proposes the utility of professional efficacy as a unifying construct to provide direction for further research in these fields.

Measurement issues are of primary importance. The development of a reliable, credible means of assessing an individual's level of professional efficacy is an essential step to studying the construct. Including such a measure in investigations of self-management, individual control processes, and burn-out would provide an anchor for relating these fields more precisely.

Furthermore, major integrative studies considering the full range of constructs which pertain to professional efficacy would make a substantial contribution to the field. Longitudinal studies in particular could delineate the processes through which subjective states mediate the impact of changes in organizational structures and management procedures on professional performance.

#### 5. Implications for management

The management of professionals has become a matter of intense concern in the information and service economies currently dominating Europe and North America. Organizations in both the private and public sector are attempting to address the issue of the productivity of professionals as information processing, service provision, and technical development become more central components of their missions.

Managers often encounter a conflict between eliciting commitment to the organization's goals and respecting the professional integrity of employees. A thorough understanding of the importance of efficacy expectations in

professional performance could provide directions in resolving these conflicts. The situation calls for management systems which value professional autonomy while maintaining a clear focus. However, much work is needed to define specific organizational procedures and policies which will support professional efficacy. In this context, the management of professionals could be the most important organizational issue today.

The multidisciplinary context of health-care service presents particular difficulties for management. The involvement of various professions on a case-by-case basis results in opportunities for conflict among professionals as well as those usually expected between professionals and administration. The professionals' demands for autonomy may run counter to their occupational (and ethical) requirements of responsible integration of treatment activities. Current changes in the professional status of many health-care specialties provide pressure towards redefining organizational procedures and power relationships. As a practical consideration, a clear assessment of the impact of an organizational change or intervention on the professional efficacy of participants is a crucial aspect of programme evaluation.

### 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of professional efficacy is implicit throughout diverse approaches to examining individual's relationships with their careers. The persistence and vitality of the research on psychological burn-out is based on the insight the syndrome provides to central aspects of the way people define their identity and understand the social context in which they work. By bringing efficacy into focus as a central aspect of discussions of these issues, these fields could build on one another more closely. Without such integration on a substantial level of research design and programme evaluation, there is a real danger that some of the progress made in recent research will be lost in the myriad of specific issues which can be related to professional efficacy. The development and maintenance of professional efficacy will continue to be a major concern of managers. The management of autonomy is an issue with direct implications for the power relationships within an organization. The emphasis on professional expertise in major sectors of the economy—service provision, technological development, and information processing—brings inevitable pressures toward

redefining the organizational context of work. Both high-quality professional performance and a personal sense of well-being require that the organizational context operate to maintain a strong sense of professional efficacy.

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