

## **The relationship between burnout and role identity amongst client service employees**

Carly Steyn

Dr Mias de Klerk (supervisor)

Burnout, characterized by feelings of reduced personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, can prove detrimental to both the individual employee and the organization. These negative effects can significantly affect the service culture of client service organisations, since research has shown that burnout amongst front-line service employees can result in these employees displaying negative feelings and behavior towards their clients and co-workers (Yagil, 2003: 259).

Research into the antecedents of the three burnout dimensions has primarily focused on organizational and job variables, such as role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload and lack of social support. The present study departs from this tradition by focusing on the relationship between role identities (subjective perceptions) and burnout amongst 100 client service employees in three client service organizations in South Africa. This research was informed by previous studies that suggest that client service employees who feel subordinate to and powerless against the client may display higher levels of burnout than those that feel in control of the service relationship (Buunk, Peiro, Rodriguez & Bravo, 2007; Vanheule & Verhaege, 2004).

By applying a sequential mixed methods approach consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative phase, the research compares the role identities of high(er) burnout employees with those of low(er) burnout employees. In the quantitative phase, use was made of a pen and paper based survey questionnaire incorporating the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (Maslach & Jackson, 1996) and a modified version of the Burke-Tully role-identity technique (Burke & Tully, 1977). The Burke Tully technique requires that respondents rate themselves, client service employees in general and the client on a set of bipolar adjective pairs. The quantitative phase was followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight high burnout and nine low burnout employees.

Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data shows that the MBI items load on two, instead of the three factors as conceptualised by Maslach and Jackson (1986). One of the two factors corresponds to the Personal Accomplishment subscale. The other factor comprises items from both the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalisation subscales. The two subscales derived from the present study were correlated with ratings on the bipolar adjective scales to reveal a number of moderate significant correlations-suggesting a difference in the role identities of high burnout respondents and low burnout respondents. The qualitative data confirms the proposition that the role identities of high burnout

employees differ from the role identities of low burnout employees. While high burnout employees define themselves as subordinate to and powerless against the client, low burnout respondents define themselves as superior to and more knowledgeable than the client. Low burnout employees are able to exert a level of control and power over the client, while high burnout employees feel controlled by the client. The qualitative research also illustrates how role identities inform behaviour which may contribute to the development of burnout. The role identities of low burnout employees also enable self-verification, while the role identities of high burnout client service employees inhibit self verification.

The dissertation concludes with recommendations as to how organisational client discourse may be framed so as to facilitate the creation of role identities which empower the employee vis a vis the client.

## References

Burke, P.J. & Tully, J.C. 1977. "The measurement of role identity." *Social Forces*, 55(4): 881-896.

Buunk, B.P. & Schaufeli, W.B. 1993. Burnout: A perspective from social comparison theory. In Schaufeli, W.B., Maslach, C. & Marek, T. (Eds.) *Professional Burnout: Recent developments in theory and research*. Washington: Taylor and Francis. Pp. 53-74

Maslach, C. & Jackson, S.E. 1986. *The Maslach Burnout Inventory*. Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Maslach, C. & Jackson, S.E. 1996. Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). In Maslach, C., Jackson, S.E. & Leiter, M.P. *MBI Manual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Mountain View, California: CPP Inc.

Vanheule, S. & Verhaeghe, P. 2004. Powerlessness and impossibility in special education: A qualitative study on professional burnout from a Lacanian perspective. *Human Relations*, 57(4): 497-519.

Yagil, D. 2006. "The relationship of service provider power motivation, empowerment and burnout to customer satisfaction." *International Journal of Service Industry Management*. 17(3):258-270.