

Relationship of Social Service Managers' Instrumental and Expressive Traits to Job Burnout

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Abstract

The EPAQ Scales, which measure positive and negative attributes of instrumentality (agency) and expressiveness (communion), were administered along with the Tedium Scale to a random sample of social service managers (n = 245). The strongest correlate of job burnout (tedium) was self-reported passive-aggressiveness, while the interaction of high instrumentality and high expressiveness was associated with lower burnout. The balance of agency and communion measured in persons and their congruence with organizational values in specific occupational environmental contexts (e.g., the social service agency) is proposed as a model for concurrent and longitudinal research studies of tedium and burnout.

Keywords: Job burnout, Tedium, Personality traits, Agency, Communion, Social service managers

1. Introduction, Literature Review, & Research Question

Job burnout has been studied for over 40 years and still has currency in the 21st century for theory, research, and practice in vocational science (for reviews, see Leiter, Bakker, & Maslach, 2014; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009; Seidler et al., 2014). We have described burnout in a large social service agency (C. Hawkins, Williams, & R. Hawkins, 1990). In this paper we measured self-reported attributes of instrumentality and expressiveness (Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979). We hypothesized that instrumentality and expressiveness would be significantly related to burnout. Bakan (1966), as interpreted by Spence et al. (1979), has hypothesized that psychological health and life satisfaction involve balancing "agency" (instrumentality) and "communion" (expressiveness). Both unmitigated agency (e.g., a hostile dictatorial manner) and unmitigated communion (e.g., servility) would thus not be compatible with the well-being of individuals and their ecology. The salience of investigating the relationship between the instrumentality - expressiveness dimensions and burnout is supported by Hershey and Blanchard's (1982) situational / contingency management model. According to this model there is not one management style which is most effective in all situations. Instead, the most effective leadership style (measured along the dimensions of agentic "task behavior" and communal "relationship behavior") is contingent upon the situation, i.e., the nature of the work to be performed and the needs and maturity level of the personnel involved.

There is an extensive literature relating the sex role personality measures of (masculine) instrumentality and (feminine) expressiveness to burnout (cf., Eichinger, Heifetz, & Ingraham, 1991) and to psychological adjustment in particular (e.g., Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Lubinski, Tellegen, & Butcher, 1981; Payne, 1987). Agency and communion have been proposed as a theory for the meaningfulness of work (Russo, Dekas, & Wrsesniewski, 2010); however, to our knowledge, there is no published study of burnout in social service managers in relation to instrumentality (agency) and expressiveness (communion).

2. Method

2.1 Sample & Procedure

This sample comprised 245 social service managers (136 females, 109 males) who had completed a packet of questionnaires mailed to a random sample of 440 mid-level supervisors employed statewide in the Department of Human Services of a large state in the Southwestern United States. The overall return rate was 56 percent. The sample had a mean age of 42.1 years. Most of the participants were Caucasian, but there were 10 African-Americans, 43 Hispanics, and five cases where race was unspecified. Seventy percent of the respondents were married. Fifty-six managers were high school graduates, 129 had bachelor's degrees, 65 had masters' degrees (36 with a Masters in Social Work), and six had Ph.D.'s.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

Tedium Scale. Pines, Aronson, and Kafry (1981) developed a 21-item scale tapping self-perceived physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion at work. Each item is rated on a 7-point scale from "never" to "always" and a total "tedium" score is computed. This measure has a high internal consistency reliability (assessed by Cronbach's "alpha" coefficient) ranging from .91 to .93 across studies, and a two-month test-retest stability of .76 (Pines et al., 1981).

Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire. Spence et al. (1979) developed this 40-item self-report questionnaire to measure positive (socially desirable) and negative (socially undesirable) instrumental and expressive personality traits. Each item presents a pair of characteristics (e.g., "hostile" vs. "not at all hostile") to be self-rated along a 5-point continuum according to "what kind of person you think you are." The 40-item EPAQ is an extension of the PAQ, a well-known questionnaire developed by Spence and Helmreich (1978) to investigate the socially desirable personality attributes of masculinity (instrumentality) and femininity (expressiveness). The EPAQ measures socially desirable instrumental attributes (*I+*) (e.g., independent, active, make decisions easily), socially undesirable instrumental traits (*I-*) (e.g., boastful, dictatorial), a bipolar instrumentality - expressiveness (*IE*) scale (e.g., dominant vs submissive), socially desirable expressive characteristics (*E+*) (e.g., kind, helpful), and two scales measuring socially undesirable expressive traits: negative communality (*EC-*) (e.g., servile, gullible) and negative verbal passive - aggressiveness (*EVPA-*) (e.g., complaining, nagging). These EPAQ scales have satisfactory levels of reliability and validity (Helmreich, Spence, & Wilhelm, 1981; Spence et al., 1979).

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were performed to investigate the effects of respondent's gender, race, education, management level, and age upon the Tedium Scale and EPAQ measures. Of these demographic variables only gender effects were statistically significant. Women scored higher than men on the Tedium subscales of depression and physical /emotional exhaustion, as well as on the EPAQ *E+*, *IE*, *EVPA-*, and *EC-* scales (Table 1). Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and T-tests for the Tedium and EPAQ scales^a, shown separately for females ($n = 135$) and males ($n = 109$).

	M	SD	M	SD	t	p ^b	d ^c
	Females		Males				
TEDIUM	3.2	.8	3.0	.8	1.8	.07	.23
TEDDEP	2.9	1.0	2.6	1.0	2.2	.03	.28
TEDEXH	3.6	.8	3.3	.9	2.6	.01	.33
I+	23.4	4.3	23.8	4.4	- .7	.48	-.09
E+	23.4	3.9	21.9	3.4	3.2	.01	.41
IE	15.8	4.3	17.2	3.6	-2.7	.01	-.35
I-	11.3	4.3	11.6	4.5	- .4	.67	-.04
EVPA-	5.8	2.8	4.5	2.7	3.7	.001	.48
EC-	5.7	2.4	5.3	2.2	1.5	.14	.19

^a Legend: TEDIUM, total score; TEDDEP, Tedium depression subscale; TEDEXH, Tedium physical/exhaustion subscale; I+, EPAQ positive instrumentality; E+, positive expressiveness; IE, instrumentality - expressiveness;

I-, negative instrumentality; EVPA-, negative verbal passive - aggressiveness; EC-, negative communality.

^b two-tailed tests; ^cCohen's d (effect size)

The mean Tedium Scale score for the male and female social service managers was 3.1 ($SD = .8$). Pines et al. (1981) reported an overall Tedium mean value of 3.2 for their combined samples. Thus our social service managers as a group were reporting comparable levels of overall tedium to the normative population: an overall score of "3" would indicate that only "rarely" would these individuals be experiencing physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion from their jobs. A score of "4" on the Tedium Scale (one standard deviation above the mean for this sample of social service managers) would indicate that "sometimes" such a level of exhaustion would be experienced. Tedium Scale scores were significantly negatively correlated with job satisfaction ratings ($r = -.44, p < .001$).

3.2 Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlation matrices for the females' and males' scores on the Tedium and EPAQ scales. For both sexes, total Tedium Scale scores (and depression and physical /emotional exhaustion subscale scores) were significantly positively correlated with socially undesirable expressiveness (i.e., verbal passive - aggressiveness, *EVPA-*). For females only, total Tedium scores and Tedium - depression subscale scores were significantly positively correlated with socially undesirable instrumentality (*I-*) and significantly negatively correlated with socially desirable instrumentality (*I+*). Women who scored higher on the Tedium depression subscale also tended to score lower on the socially desirable expressiveness scale (*E+*). On the bipolar instrumental - expressive scale (*IE*) women who reported more total Tedium and Tedium - depression scored in a more expressive direction (hence a negative correlation). Similarly, men reporting more Tedium - depression scored in a more expressive direction on the *IE* scale. Men obtaining higher total Tedium scores had significantly lower scores on the *I+* scale. Table 2 also shows the intercorrelations among the EPAQ scales, which generally replicated earlier normative studies (cf., Helmreich et al., 1981; Spence et al., 1979), and were not the emphasis of the present study.

Table 2. Zero-order correlation matrix for Tedium and EPAQ scales, shown separately for 135 females (above diagonal) and 109 males (below diagonal)^a

	TEDIUM	TEDEP	TEDEXH	I+	E+	IE	I-	EVPA-	EC-
TEDIUM		.93	.80	-.30	-.17	-.27	.25	.31	.05
TEDEP	.91		.60	-.35	-.20	-.28	.26	.33	.07
TEDEXH	.86	.63		-.10	-.06	-.18	.15	.19	-.08
I+	-.21	-.18	-.15		.16	.56	.00	-.28	-.39
E+	-.12	-.03	-.12	.15		-.25	-.49	-.28	-.01
IE	-.16	-.19	-.12	.45	-.08		.18	-.13	-.50
I-	.14	.05	.15	-.07	-.47	-.08		.38	-.11
EVPA-	.27	.27	.23	-.32	-.19	-.16	.39		.11
EC-	.05	.09	.01	-.45	.10	-.40	-.02	.16	

^a pairwise comparisons, two-tailed tests, decimal points omitted; Correlations > .19 are significant at the $p < .05$ level, and those > .25 are significant at the $p < .01$ level. For abbreviations, see Table 1.

3.3 Multiple regression analyses

The main predictions of the present study were that tedium (burnout) would be moderated by (1) a balance of socially desirable "agency" (instrumentality) and "communion" (expressiveness), and (2) the extent of unmitigated agency and/or communion (Bakan, 1966), that is, socially undesirable instrumentality and/or expressiveness. A separate multiple regression analysis was performed for each dependent measure (Tedium Scale total score, Tedium - depression subscale, and Tedium - physical/emotional exhaustion subscale). Each analysis was done in a stepwise fashion, within each of two blocks of independent variables (Lubinski, Tellegen, & Butcher, 1983; Pedhazur, 1982). In Block 1, instrumentality (*I+*), expressiveness (*E+*), gender (*G*), instrumentality - expressiveness (*IE*), verbal passive - aggressiveness (*EVPA-*), and negative communality (*EC-*) were entered in incremental stepwise fashion. In Block 2, ten product terms were entered using this same procedure (*I+* x *G*, *E+* x *G*, *IE* x *G*, *I-* x *G*, *EVPA-* x *G*, *EC-* x *G*, *I+* x *E+*, *I-* x *EVPA-*, *I-* x *EC-*, and *EVPA-* x *EC-*). By entering the product terms after all the individual variables, statistical significance attained by any of these product terms (e.g., *I+* x *E+*) would indicate the increment in the percentage of variance contributed by the interaction effect above and beyond that accounted for by each individual predictor variable (e.g., *I+* and *E+*) in Step 1 (Pedhazur, 1982; Holmbeck, 1989).

Table 3 presents the results of these regression analyses. This table shows only those independent variables accounting for significance increments in variance at each step ($p < .05$), within each of the two blocks. There were no significant effects of gender, either as an individual predictor or in interaction with the other independent variables. The data in this table show that the *EVPA-* (negative expressiveness verbal passive - aggressiveness) scale accounted for the most variance in terms of total score on the Tedium Scale (10%), as well as on the Tedium depression subscale (11%), and the Tedium physical / emotional exhaustion subscale (6%). In addition, the bipolar instrumentality - expressiveness scale also accounted for significant ($p < .05$) variance for these three dependent variables. Two of the product terms ($I+ \times E+$ and $EVPA- \times EC-$) accounted for small, but significant variance for Tedium Scale total score and Tedium depression subscale, while *EC-*(negative expressiveness communality) accounted for a small, significant proportion of the variance for the Tedium physical / emotional exhaustion subscale.

Table 3. Multiple regression of Tedium scales on EPAQ measures of instrumentality, expressiveness, gender, and their interactions^a.

Variable		EPAQ			
Dependent	Independent	^a <i>r</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ² Increment
Tedium	EVPA-	.31	.11	.38	.10
	IE	-.24	-.05	-.23	.03
	$I+ \times E+$	-.27	-.00	-.19	.02
	$EVPA- \times EC-$.22	-.01	-.24	.02
TEDDEP	EVPA-	.33	.13	.37	.11
	IE	-.26	-.06	-.24	.04
	$I+ \times E+$	-.27	-.00	-.17	.02
	$EVPA- \times EC-$.25	-.01	-.20	.01
TEDEXH	EVPA-	.24	.07	.22	.06
	IE	-.18	-.04	-.21	.02
	EC-	-.02	-.06	-.15	.02

^a *r*, Pearson *r*; *b*, unstandardized regression coefficient; *B*, standardized regression coefficient; *R*², squared multiple correlation coefficient; *N* = 109 men and 135 women. For the above independent variables, $p < .05$.

The direction of these effects may be described as follows: social service managers reporting more complaining or nagging (high *EVPA-*) and less dominance (*IE* scale, scored in the "instrumental" direction) endorsed more tedium or burnout. Higher scores on both the socially desirable instrumentality (*I+*) and expressiveness (*E+*) scales mitigated against reporting Tedium and Tedium - depression, but not for Tedium physical/emotional exhaustion. It is important to note that the "buffering" effect of *I+* and *E+* on Tedium was a multiplicative, interaction effect rather than an additive effect. The other product term ($EVPA- \times EC-$) also was a significant interaction effect: after accounting for the $I+ \times E+$ interaction, respondents reporting both high *EVPA-* and high *EC-* scores endorsed less Tedium and Tedium - depression.

The EPAQ scales accounted for a smaller proportion of the variance in the Tedium physical/emotional exhaustion subscale (TEDEXH), and, in addition, another predictor variable, *EC-*, accounted for small, but significant variance. The zero-order correlation coefficient between *EC-* and TEDEXH was only -.02; however, after controlling for the contributions of *EVPA-* and *IE*, the partial correlation of *EC-* and TEDEXH was -.17 ($p < .05$). In other words, those social service managers who were more complaining (high *EVPA-*), less dominant (low *IE* scale), but less servile (low *EC-*) reported more physical/emotional exhaustion.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between social service managers' burnout and their self-reported attributes of socially desirable and undesirable instrumentality and expressiveness. More specifically, we were interested in whether burnout (as measured by the Tedium Scale and subscales) would be moderated by either a balance of positive instrumentality and expressiveness, or by unmitigated agency or communion (Bakan, 1966).

As hypothesized, the multiplicative interaction of positive instrumentality and expressiveness ($I+ \times E+$) did indeed moderate total Tedium Scale scores and scores on the Tedium depression subscale. In addition, there was significant moderation of Total Tedium and Tedium depression by the product term involving the interaction of the two negative expressiveness traits ($EVPA- \times EC-$). However, for all three Tedium scales the strongest predictor was verbal passive-aggressiveness ($EVPA-$), accounting for six to ten percent of the variance, followed by the bipolar instrumentality - expressiveness scale (IE) (2 - 4 % of variance).

Social service managers who scored high on both positive instrumentality and expressiveness reported lower overall tedium, tedium depression and physical/ emotional burnout. Verbal passive-aggressiveness, however, was the variable most strongly related to overall burnout, depression, and physical/emotional exhaustion. Social service managers who were less dominant also reported more burnout, depression, and physical/emotional exhaustion. Interpretation of the product term comprising the two negative expressiveness scales ($EVPA- \times EC-$) is somewhat complex, both empirically and theoretically. As Table 3 indicates, the standardized regression coefficients (B) for the $EVPA- \times EC-$ interaction terms are negative in sign, suggesting that $EC-$ may mitigate the effect of $EVPA-$ on overall tedium and tedium depression. Social service managers who complained a lot (high $EVPA-$) but who were more servile (high $EC-$) reported less overall burnout and depression than those who were passive-aggressive and less servile. This modest, but statistically significant effect is in apparent disagreement with Bakan's (1966) warning of the detrimental effects of "unmitigated communion": the relationship of negative expressiveness in the form of passive-aggressive verbal complaining ($EVPA-$) to tedium was moderated, or mitigated, by subordinating oneself in a servile fashion ($EC-$).

The factor analysis of the Tedium Scale (as suggested by Shiron, 1989), yielding depression and physical/emotional components of burnout, provides a useful distinction of dependent measures with differential predictors. For example, the EPAQ scales accounted for less overall variance (i.e., 6%) of the Tedium physical/emotional exhaustion scale, and the two product terms ($I+ \times E+$, $EVPA- \times EC-$) did not explain significant variance. Instead, a modest but statistically significant suppressor effect appeared between $EC-$ and physical/emotional tedium: social service managers who were passive-aggressive, less dominant, but also more servile ($EC-$) were less likely to report physical/emotional exhaustion.

We believe that these exploratory, descriptive data, especially if replicated in a prospective, longitudinal study, suggest the value of using "person variables," reframed according to the ecological perspective, to increase the understanding of applied social science outcomes, such as burnout effects. Personality traits have been found to predict burnout risk (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). Measuring the balance of positive and negative aspects of agentic and communal personality traits has been relevant to many outcomes, such as mental health symptom patterns (Spence et al., 1979), dieting behavior and body image (R. Hawkins, Turell, & Jackson, 1983), codependency and problem drinking (C. Hawkins & R. Hawkins, 2014), and end-of-life decision-making (R. Hawkins, in press), particularly when there is a mismatch between the personality trait related values of the individual and the demands vs. resources of the social environment of the job (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; R. Hawkins & Meier, 2015), including organizational culture (Dimitrios & Konstantinos, 2014; Meyer, Hecht, Gill, & Toplonysky, 2010), and shared perceptions of supportive job climate (Spell, Eby, & Vandenberg, 2014).

5. Conclusion

The relationship of instrumental (agentic) and expressive (communal) traits to job burnout has not been studied. We found that the strongest correlate of job burnout (tedium) was self reported passive-aggressiveness, while the interaction of high instrumentality and high expressiveness was associated with lower burnout. Balancing the positive and negative aspects of agency and communion may mitigate job tedium and burnout, particularly in the context of mismatches between these personal values and the organizational cultural environment.

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