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Understanding Burnout in Child and Youth Care Workers

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Abstract Burnout is a major concern in human service occupations as it has been linked to turnover, absenteeism, a reduction in the quality of services, numerous physical and psychological disorders, and a disruption in interpersonal relations (Maslach et al. 2001). Child and youth care workers are especially susceptible to burnout as the inherent challenges of working within the life-space of high-risk children and youth causes difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified employees. In the present study, burnout was measured in a group of 94 child and youth care workers from 8 agencies in a Western Canadian city using the three dimensional model of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI conceptualizes burnout as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of a sense of personal accomplishment. Among these child and youth care workers each of the three dimensions of burnout was predicted by a combination of work environment, personality, and social support.

Keywords Burnout · Child and youth care workers

Introduction

The profession of Child and Youth Care is considered one of the most difficult and emotionally exhausting careers in the human service industry (Krueger 2002). Admission into a group home or residential treatment facility is often viewed as a last resort and children and youth may resist complying with treatment expectations. Many of these children and youth lack positive support systems from family members and friends and may feel isolated, afraid, and resentful (Frensch and Cameron 2002). These children and youth often have significant psychological, behavioural, and emotional problems and it is the job of the child and youth care worker to guide these children and youth through their

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daily routines. Children and youth may become verbally and physically aggressive, engage in self-harming behaviours, act-out sexually, and may resist treatment from counsellors and youth care workers (Ryan et al. 2008). Providing care to high-risk children and adolescents placed in residential care is stressful and challenging and yet little research has gone into better understanding the difficulties these workers face. This study examines the major factors that predict burnout in youth care workers.

The term "burnout" first appeared in the literature in the early 1970s to describe feelings of emotional overload, mental exhaustion, and a "jaded" or cynical reaction to those needing help in the human service fields (Freudenberger 1974). The most widely cited and researched formulation of burnout is the three-dimension model which was introduced by Christina Maslach and consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al. 2001). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally and psychologically drained and over-extended by one's work. It is the individual element of burnout and is often considered the central component in the burnout response (Maslach 2001). The second element in the burnout construct is depersonalization which occurs when workers become cynical and detached from their work environment and those in need of their services (Maslach et al. 2001). The final burnout component is inversely related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and is characterized by a reduced sense of personal accomplishment in the work environment. According to Maslach et al. (2001), the personal accomplishment dimension is the self-evaluation aspect of burnout and is described as a feeling of ineffectiveness, incompetence, and a lack of achievement. Burnout can significantly impact worker morale and effectiveness and employees experiencing high levels of burnout may experience a range of physical and psychological symptoms ranging from depression and anxiety to difficulties sleeping, headaches, and cardiovascular disease (Kahill 1988; Maslach et al. 2001; Savicki 2002). Youth care work in group homes and residential treatment facilities is known to be enormously stressful; however, little empirical data exists as to the predictors of burnout in these workers.

Factors that Influence Burnout

Although a bulk of the burnout research to date has focused on the role of organizational characteristics in the development of burnout, individual characteristics and social support have also demonstrated unique predictive value. The demographic factors that have been shown to be most predictive of burnout levels are age of the employee, marital status, and perceived levels of social support (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Lau et al. 2005; Maslach et al. 2001). Age is confounded with amount of experience in the field and is generally considered to be the demographic variable that most effectively predicts level of burnout. Although somewhat counterintuitive, research has demonstrated that younger employees experience the highest levels of burnout while employees in the later stages of their careers seem to be much more immune to experiencing burnout (Brewer and Shapard 2004; Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Schwartz et al. 2007). As well, individuals who are married have consistently lower scores on measures of burnout than single individuals (Maslach et al. 2001). Generally, social support from colleagues, supervisors, friends, and family serves as an effective buffer between job related stress and the harmful effects of burnout (Baruch-Feldman et al. 2002; Halbesleben 2006; Maslach and Jackson 1985).

Personality has also has been shown to be predictive of burnout. One influential measure of personality traits is based on the Big Five model of personality (Costa and McCrae 1992). Neuroticism and extraversion have been the personality traits most often found to be

predictive of burnout scores (Manlove 1993). Numerous studies have found links between extraversion and burnout, especially finding it inversely correlated with the emotional exhaustion component (Bakker et al. 2006). However, of all the Big Five personality components it is neuroticism that has consistently demonstrated the strongest relationship with all three burnout elements (Ghorpade et al. 2007; Kokkinos 2007; Zeng and Shi 2007). Individuals who score highly on the neuroticism scale experience a high proportion of intensely negative and distressing emotions and tend to be emotionally over-reactive and experience difficulty returning to a neutral state after emotionally distressing situations (Manlove 1993). Although personality factors, especially neuroticism, have been identified as burnout correlates very few studies have explored the significance of personality and work environment together. A majority of burnout studies have explored the significance of personality without partitioning out the effects of work environment and this may lead to potential confusion regarding the importance of personality in predicting burnout levels (Bakker et al. 2006).

Many researchers believe that although individual characteristics are important in their predictive value to the burnout construct, it is the characteristics of the organization that are the most important antecedents to burnout. Although there are many organizational characteristics that have been identified as burnout predictors, it has been role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload, the quality of interactions between both coworkers and supervisors, and employee involvement that have been most consistently associated with burnout (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Maslach et al. 2001). Role conflict occurs in the workplace when conflicting demands are placed on the employee. This may include conflicts between the employee's values and ethical obligations and the requirements of the company. Role ambiguity occurs when there is confusion over the worker's responsibilities, rights, and obligations and this affects the individual's ability to adequately perform the required job (Farber 1983). Employee involvement is often viewed at being the antithesis of burnout. Employees who are engaged and interested in their work are far less likely to burn out than employees who are exhausted and have adopted an attitude of cynicism and non-interest (Maslach and Leiter 2008).

Child and Youth Care Workers

Child and youth care workers are front-line human service professionals who work in constant contact with children and youth and who are responsible for their daily living needs. Children and youth are placed in group homes and residential facilities for a number of reasons which may include breakdowns in the child's family setting or foster care placement. Many of the children placed in these facilities suffer from a variety of behavioural and psychological disorders including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and/or conduct disorder. As well, children and youth placed in residential care are more likely to be on a variety of psychotropic medications in an attempt to stabilize these conditions (Ryan et al. 2008). Many of these children and youth are deemed to be "at-risk" to themselves or others and some engage in self-harming behaviours, act out sexually, and may become verbally or physically abusive towards peers and workers (Ryan et al. 2008; Savicki 2002). Considering the difficulty of the clientele, it is important that workers possess the needed skills, commitment, and knowledge to work with this vulnerable population of young people who are dependent on the capability of staff members (Mattingly 1995). Child and youth care workers are responsible for a plethora of duties including the formation of relationships with children and youth, providing instruction in daily living, offering individual and group counselling

both in formal and informal settings, disciplining, teaching, providing transportation to and from appointments, contacting social workers as well as other services and agencies, working with parents and families, and striving to provide a stable and predicable living environment for a diverse group of children and youth (Krueger 2007; Krueger 1991). Child and youth care workers are unique despite similarities with other professions such as social work and psychology. The essence of their unique role is their direct participation for extended periods of time in the "life-space" of the children and youth they care for on a daily basis. Child and youth care workers may provide their services within numerous work environments including group homes, correctional facilities, and temporary shelter care (Krueger 1991).

Challenges within the Field

Child and youth care workers have faced considerable difficulty gaining respect from society as well as other professionals. This lack of respect has created a stigma around child and youth care work and has made it difficult to attract and retain qualified employees (Savicki 2002). Despite the difficult client population as well as the need for a diverse range of skills and knowledge child and youth care employers are often unable or unwilling to provide adequate staffing, training, supervision, and support to their staff (Krueger 2007). Additionally, child and youth care workers often receive wages and benefits that are simply inadequate and sometimes appalling. This discrepancy between the type of work provided and the compensation offered by agencies employing child and youth care workers is perhaps the greatest obstacle faced in the profession and has been identified as a point of needed remediation in numerous articles outlining future challenges in the field (Cavaliere 2004; Krueger 2002, 2007; Savicki 2002). The combination of low salaries, poor working conditions, inadequate training and supervision, lack of support from policy makers and the general public, and a difficult and challenging work environment has led to tremendous turnover within the child and youth care field (Savicki 2002). This lack of long-term committed workers creates instability and a lack of experience and education that is desperately needed within the field. Child and youth care work is exceptionally stressful and the high rate of turnover is an indication that these employees may be experiencing the effects of burnout.

Burnout in Child and Youth Care Workers

Due to the challenging and distinctive nature of the field in which they work it is not surprising that child and youth care workers are especially susceptible to the effects of burnout. However, little empirical research has been conducted on the unique effects that burnout has on child and youth care workers (Savicki 2002). Savicki (1993) has claimed that burnout plagues the child and youth care field and is a major cause, though not the only one, contributing to the high rates of turnover that are rampant within the profession. However, most burnout studies have focused on a single burnout predictor such as work environment characteristics or personality variables. Very few studies have explored how these different individual and environmental predictors contribute to the overall variance in burnout scores. Although organizational factors have generally been accepted as being the most important predictors of burnout in human service occupations, personality factors, demographic characteristics, and social support are clearly important components when considering an accurate overall picture of burnout and thus warrant further study (Cordes and Dougherty 1993).

Several studies have found that burnout is especially high in younger professionals (Schwartz et al. 2007; Brewer and Shapard 2004). This result was confirmed for child and youth care workers by Savicki (1993) where he hypothesized that higher rates of burnout in beginning child and youth care workers could be attributable to low starting wages, lack of respect, and unmet expectations in relation to their role and duties. Child and youth care workers may enter the field with an exaggerated sense of idealism that may turn to frustration and disappointment when the difficult reality of child and youth care work becomes apparent. Unsupportive supervisors, poor coping skills, and challenging clients may also add to the elevated burnout levels in beginning workers. Therefore, it is no surprise that child and youth care workers generally last between 2 and 5 years in the industry before changing professions (Savicki 2002).

Rationale and Hypotheses

Little empirical evidence exists as to significant predictors of burnout in child and youth care workers and the studies that do exist explore only a few of the many predictor variables identified as burnout correlates. For example, work environment variables have generally been considered the most important burnout predictors (Maslach et al. 2001). However, recent research conducted on the relationship between burnout and personality has shed new light on the importance of personality characteristics in predicting burnout (Bakker et al. 2006). Additionally, considering the high degree of attrition found in child and youth care workers coupled with the elevated burnout scores found in young employees in other burnout studies it would seem important to explore burnout levels in beginning child and youth care workers (Schwartz et al. 2007). Through the identification of the most significant burnout predictors as well as the way in which beginning workers experience burnout it is the hope of these researchers that preventative measures will be identified and more child and youth care workers will choose to stay in the profession.

Based on existing research across a broad range of occupations it is hypothesized that: (a) child and youth care workers will experience elevated scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and lower scores on personal accomplishment; (b) beginning child and youth care workers will experience the highest levels of burnout on all three aspects of the MBI; (c) those individuals experiencing the highest levels of work overload, role ambiguity, and employee involvement will experience higher levels of burnout; (d) those individuals with the highest neuroticism scores will experience the highest levels of burnout; (e) individuals who experience the greatest support from coworkers, supervisors, family and friends will have significantly lower burnout scores than those individuals with low levels of support (Maslach et al. 2001); and (f) the combination of organizational, personality, demographic, and social support variables will better predict the burnout dimensions than individual factors.

Method

Participants

A list of government as well as non-profit child and youth care facilities was gathered using internet directories and phone books and eight facilities were identified that met the objectives of the research (i.e., employed front-line child and youth care workers). Each of

the eight facilities were contacted using email, telephone calls, and through a presentation at a monthly regional meeting of child and youth care facilities. All of the eight facilities agreed to participate in the research and 250 research packages were given to the managers and directors of the agencies to be distributed to consenting front-line child and youth care employees. A majority of the agencies were large and offered numerous programs to a diverse range of children and youth; however, a few of the agencies ran smaller, specialized programs.

Of the 250 packages that were distributed, 94 were returned resulting in a response rate of 37.6%. Of the 94 respondents, 65 (69.1%) were female while 29 (30.9%) were male. The average age of the child and youth care workers was 32.8 (SD = 9.7) years and ranged between 20 and 56 years. In terms of ethnicity, a large majority of the respondents identified themselves as Caucasian (78.7%), while 7.4% identified themselves as being Aboriginal, 3.2% as African-Canadian, 1.1% as Middle Eastern, 1.1% as Asian, 2.1% as Hispanic, 1.1% as East Indian, and 4.3% as Other. Most of the respondents were single (46.8%) while 26.6% were married, 20.2% were common-law/long-term relationship, and 6.4% were divorced. Of the 94 respondents, 32 (34.0%) had been working in the field between 1 and 5 years, 24 (25.5%) had been working for 5–10 years, 17 (18.1%) for more than 15 years, 14 (14.9%) had been working less than a year, and the remaining 6 participants (6.4%) had been in the field 10–15 years. Most of the respondents (56.4%) reported that they worked between 36 and 45 h per week in the past 6 months while 33.0% of the remaining participants claimed to have worked more than 45 h per week.

Procedure

A survey package was assembled consisting of: the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Services Survey (Maslach et al. 1996), the Work Environment Scale—Form R (Moos 1994), the NEO Five Factor Inventory (Costa and McCrae 1992), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al. 1988), and a demographic sheet. Managers from 8 large group homes and residential treatment centers for high-risk children and youth in a Western Canadian city were contacted and permission was requested to participate in the study. The minimum requirement to participate in the research study was that the child and youth care workers must have had 6 months experience and be in direct contact with children and youth for a minimum of 30 h per week at the time of the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants retained the right to discontinue completion of the research package at any time. Managers of the youth care facilities agreed to support the study by allowing employees to complete the research packages during regular work hours. However, it was explicitly communicated to the participants that completing the research packages was not an expectation both verbally and in the consent form provided in the research package. Completed research packages were deposited in a secured location within the staff office in the youth care facilities. The survey packages took between 30 and 45 min to complete.

Measures

Maslach Burnout Inventory: Human Services Survey

The Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS; Maslach et al. 1996) measures the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment dimensions of burnout in human service workers. It is comprised of 22 items and employs

a Likert scale format consisting of 6 possible responses ranging from 1 ("Never") to 6 ("Every Day"). Each of the three dimensions of burnout are measured by a number of items on the inventory which are summed once the inventory is complete. Thus, an employee's burnout level is evaluated using a combination of the respondent's emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment scores.

The MBI-HSS has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties and Maslach et al. (1996) have reported internal consistency scores of .90 for emotional exhaustion, .79 for depersonalization, and .71 for personal accomplishment. Convergent and discriminant validity have been established using several methods including comparing independent observer behavioral ratings with the individuals own ratings of their perceived burnout levels (Maslach et al. 1996). Validity of the MBI-HSS was further confirmed by comparing MBI-HSS scores with tests that measure other psychological constructs (e.g., job satisfaction, depression, occupational stress) to ensure the MBI-HSS did not measure a similar concept (Maslach et al. 1996).

Work Environment Scale

The Work Environment Scale—Third Edition (WES; Moos 1994) is used to measure the perceived social climate of an organization using three overarching dimensions and ten subscales. The Relationship dimension is made-up of the involvement, coworker cohesion, and supervisor support subscales and is a measure of employee commitment as well as perception of support from both coworkers and supervisors. The Personal Growth dimension is comprised of autonomy, task orientation, and work pressure subscales and is a measure of the employee's ability to work efficiently and independently while also measuring the demands and job stressors present in the work environment. Finally, the System Maintenance and Change dimension is comprised of the clarity, managerial control, innovation, and physical comfort subscales and is an appraisal of employer expectations, amount of work related variety and change, as well as the physical comfort level of the work environment. The WES Real Form is an evaluation of an employee's current perception of the work environment and has been used in a diverse range of job settings. The WES uses a true/false response format consisting of 90 items that can be adapted to fit a four-point response set. Although the WES was originally designed with a two-point true/false response format in mind, Abraham and Foley (1984) found a four-point Likert response format to have sound psychometric characteristics and that is what was used in this study. In the present study, the four items were presented as "true", "mostly true", "mostly false", and "false".

The internal consistencies of the subscales of the WES have been found to be adequate ranging from .69 for coworker cohesion to .86 for innovation (Moos 1994). Test–retest reliabilities have also been identified and range between .69 for clarity and .83 for involvement after a 1 month interval and between .55 for autonomy and .64 for physical comfort after 1 year (Moos 1994). According to Moos (1994), the Work Environment Scale is a reliable instrument and has also demonstrated adequate construct, concurrent, and predictive validity. The WES has been widely used by researchers to analyze, compare, and evaluate work environments in a number of occupations including health care, social services, educational settings, military settings, and therapeutic and rehabilitative work environments.

NEO Five Factor Inventory

The NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa and McCrae 1992) is a brief, comprehensive, and psychometrically sound measure of the five factor model of personality and

was developed as an alternative to the lengthier NEO Personality Inventory—Revised (NEO PI-R). The NEO-FFI consists of 60 items and takes respondents 10–15 min to complete. The NEO-FFI measures five personality dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The NEO-FFI uses a five point response format consisting of the following possible responses: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", and "strongly agree".

Although the reliability coefficients for the NEO-FFI are slightly lower than the longer NEO PI-R, they are still within an acceptable range. Costa and McCrae (1992) have provided the following alpha coefficients for the five dimensions of the NEO-FFI: .86 for neuroticism, .77 for extraversion, .73 for openness, .68 for agreeableness, and .81 for conscientiousness. Just as research has consistently found support for the five factor model of personality, the NEO-FFI has been validated through numerous studies and articles (Becker 2006; Furnham et al. 2003; Kanning and Holling 2001; McCrae et al. 1993).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet et al. (1988) and is a brief, self-explanatory, and user-friendly measure of social support. The MSPSS is comprised of three mutually exclusive categories of social support: significant other (SO), family (FA), and friends (FR) and employs a seven-point Likert scale format. The MSPSS is composed of 12 items with each of the three sources of social support being measured with four items.

The original version of the MSPSS was developed and established using university students, but it has since been validated using numerous populations including: psychiatric outpatients (Cecil et al. 1995), older adults (Stanley et al. 1998) and adolescents (Canty-Mitchell and Zimet 2000). The MSPSS has adequate internal consistency and has proven to be stable over time. Zimet et al. (1988) have reported reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha of .91, .87, and .85 for the significant other, family, and friends subscales, respectively.

Results

All the means and standard deviations for the principal predictor variables are displayed in Table 1. The means obtained for the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Services Survey were comparable to similar samples (Maslach et al. 1996; Savicki and Cooley 1987). When observing burnout scores it is important to note that high values on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scales represent a higher degree of burnout while a high score on the personal accomplishment scale represents a lower burnout rating. Maslach et al. (1996) reported means of 20.99 for emotional exhaustion, 8.73 for depersonalization, and 34.58 for personal accomplishment based on an overall sample of 11,067 human service participants from a large collection of studies. Although the emotional exhaustion component of burnout was higher than other human service professionals (24.65) in the present study, the depersonalization component was lower (6.22). As well, the personal accomplishment factor was slightly higher (36.29) than in the Maslach et al. sample (1996).

The age of the participant was significantly correlated with the depersonalization component of burnout ($r(93) = -.26$, $p < .01$), but not with emotional exhaustion or personal accomplishment. The means and standard deviations on the depersonalization dimension of burnout in 10 year intervals is provided as follows: 20–29 ($M = 9.21$,

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of dependent and predictor variables

	Total sample	
	M	SD
Emotional exhaustion[a]	24.65	10.91
Depersonalization[a]	6.22	4.79
Personal accomplishment[a]	36.29	6.11
Involvement[b]	24.55	4.12
Peer cohesion[b]	24.63	3.61
Supervisor support[b]	24.97	4.20
Autonomy[b]	25.94	3.48
Task orientation[b]	25.52	3.62
Work pressure[b]	24.84	4.75
Clarity[b]	22.01	3.82
Control[b]	26.48	3.45
Innovation[b]	22.82	3.96
Physical comfort[b]	22.11	4.42
Neuroticism[c]	21.25	7.77
Extraversion[c]	30.09	5.70
Openness[c]	29.11	6.01
Agreeableness[c]	31.73	5.10
Conscientiousness[c]	33.85	6.73
Family[d]	22.48	5.46
Friends[d]	22.03	5.48
Significant other[d]	23.15	5.97
Total Social support[d]	67.67	14.09
Years of experience[e]	7.50	7.61
Age[e]	32.82	9.75

[a] Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Services Survey

[b] Work Environment Scale

[c] NEO Five-Factor Inventory

[d] Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

[e] Demographic information

SD = 4.24), 30–39 (M = 11.13, SD = 5.82), 40–49 (M = 5.50, SD = 4.03) and 50–59 (M = 4.63, SD = 2.55). In the present study, it was the relatively younger employees who were the most cynical and tended to distance themselves from the children and youth in their care.

Predictors of Burnout in Child and Youth Care Workers

Stepwise and hierarchical regression procedures were used to evaluate the relative contribution of the predictor variables to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment in order to predict overall burnout in child and youth care workers. A two-step procedure was employed in order to choose the best predictor variables to enter into the hierarchical regression. The first step involved selecting the variables that have found the most empirical support as predictors of the three burnout dimensions. For example, previous research has found that organizational characteristics are more predictive of burnout levels than demographic variables or personality factors and so work pressure, clarity, and involvement were the first factors entered into each of the hierarchical regression models (Maslach et al. 2001). However, because very little research exists on predictors of burnout in child and youth care workers the researchers chose to supplement

previous knowledge with stepwise regression. This second step was added to assist the researchers in choosing the most relevant predictors as well as the order of entry into the hierarchical regression.

Although each of the three hierarchical regression models shared some similarities, there were also some notable differences. As illustrated in Table 2, the significant predictors for emotional exhaustion were work pressure, clarity, involvement, neuroticism, and support from a significant other. The work pressure, clarity, and involvement factors accounted for 28% of the total variance (F_{change} (3, 85) = 5.17, $p < .05$). Neuroticism was also predictive of emotional exhaustion and added 6% of the variance after the work environment factors were considered (F_{change} (6, 82) = 7.81, $p < .01$). Finally, even as the final entry into the hierarchical regression analysis, support from a significant other was found to be a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion and added 4% of variance to the model (F_{change} (8, 80) = 4.93, $p < .05$). Autonomy, supervisor support, extraversion, and experience did not contribute a significant amount of variance to the emotional exhaustion dimension in the regression model.

Several variables which were significantly predictive of the emotional exhaustion dimension were also predictive of depersonalization. Although work pressure was not a significant predictor of depersonalization, both clarity as well as involvement were found to be significant predictors after the variance associated with work pressure was held constant. As seen in Table 3, both neuroticism and agreeableness were found to be significant predictors of depersonalization after all work related variance was partitioned out of the regression model. Neuroticism added 4% (F_{change} (5, 83) = 4.10, $p < .05$) of unique variance to the regression model and agreeableness added 5% (F_{change} (6, 82) = 4.90, $p < .05$). Age was not found to be a significant predictor of depersonalization after the

Table 2 Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting emotional exhaustion ($N = 89$)

Variable	B	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
Step 1						
Work pressure	.94	.22	.41**	.17	.17	.16
Step 2						
Clarity	−.78	.28	−.28**	.24	.07	.22
Step 3						
Involvement	−.68	.31	−.26*	.28	.04	.25
Step 4						
Autonomy	−.50	.33	−.16	.30	.02	.26
Step 5						
Supervisor support	.31	.35	.11	.30	.01	.26
Step 6						
Neuroticism	.38	.13	.27**	.36	.06	.32
Step 7						
Extraversion	−.17	.21	−.09	.37	.01	.32
Step 8						
Experience	−.00	.14	−.00	.37	.00	.31
Step 9						
Significant other	−.37	.17	−.20*	.41	.04	.34

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis for significant variables predicting depersonalization ($N = 89$)

Variable	B	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
Step 1						
Work pressure	.04	.11	.04	.00	.00	−.01
Step 2						
Clarity	−.43	.13	−.35**	.11	.11	.09
Step 3						
Involvement	−.25	.15	−.22*	.14	.03	.11
Step 4						
Supervisor support	−.08	.16	−.07	.14	.00	.10
Step 5						
Neuroticism	.13	.07	.21*	.18	.04	.13
Step 6						
Agreeableness	−.21	.10	−.23*	.22	.05	.17
Step 7						
Age	−.05	.05	−.10	.23	.01	.17
Step 8						
Experience	−.06	.11	−.10	.23	.00	.16
Step 9						
Significant other	−.01	.08	−.01	.23	.00	.15

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

other variables had been entered. Experience and support from a significant other were also not significant predictors of depersonalization.

In terms of personal accomplishment, the only significant work environment related predictor was involvement. After accounting for the variance associated with work pressure and clarity, involvement added 6% of unique variance to the regression model (F_{change} $(3, 85) = 5.50, p < .05$). A majority of the variance predicted by the regression model was accounted for by personality factors; mainly neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness (see Table 4). Holding work related factors constant, these three personality variables accounted for 17% of the total variance of personal accomplishment. Although support from a significant other and friends both were significant predictor variables in the stepwise regression neither accounted for a significant proportion of variance once work environment and personality were held constant. In all three hierarchical regression models it was a combination of work environment, personality, and social support that predicted overall burnout.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that although child and youth care workers are mentally and physically exhausted, they are still fairly engaged and feel a high degree of pride and accomplishment in their field. The finding that child and youth care workers are emotionally drained is not surprising considering that child and youth care is an exceedingly challenging profession (Savicki 2002). Although it was initially hypothesized that child and youth care workers would experience high scores on all three burnout

Table 4 Hierarchical regression analysis for significant variables predicting personal accomplishment ($N = 89$)

Variable	B	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
Step 1						
Work pressure	.18	.13	.14	.02	.02	.01
Step 2						
Clarity	.19	.20	.10	.03	.01	.01
Step 3						
Involvement	.46	.19	.32*	.09	.06	.06
Step 4						
Neuroticism	−.21	.08	−.27*	.16	.06	.12
Step 5						
Extraversion	.29	.12	.27*	.21	.06	.17
Step 6						
Conscientiousness	.22	.09	.25*	.26	.05	.21
Step 7						
Significant other	.10	.10	.10	.27	.01	.21
Step 8						
Friends	.11	.13	.10	.28	.01	.21
Step 9						
Experience	−.06	.08	−.07	.28	.00	.20

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

dimensions, this was not the case. On the contrary, child and youth care workers experienced relatively low levels of depersonalization and high levels of personal accomplishment.

Previous literature that has found significantly higher levels of burnout in younger employees was partially confirmed (Brewer and Shapard 2004; Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Schwartz et al. 2007). In the present study, younger employees experienced similar levels of emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment as compared to older employees, but scored significantly higher on the depersonalization scale. Attrition has become a considerable challenge in the child and youth care field and this problem may be partially attributable to both the high incidence of exhaustion as well as a cynical attitude about one's clients by younger employees (Savicki 2002). One possible explanation for this finding might be that many younger employees simply use the job as a stepping stone to better opportunities and this may result in younger employees not wanting to become emotionally attached with the children and youth in care (Cavaliere 2004). It is also possible that younger employees enter the profession with high hopes and expectations and quickly become disenfranchised when the job does not meet their expectations (Kanter and Mirvis 1989).

Work environment characteristics were not the primary predictor variables in all three burnout dimensions as had been predicted in the initial hypotheses. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that each of these three dimensions was best predicted by a different combination of several work, personality, and social support variables. Based on the results of this study, it was the employees who were experiencing a high degree of work pressure, a poor understanding of their roles and expectations, and

who felt the least commitment to their jobs that experienced the highest amount of emotional exhaustion. Considering that emotional exhaustion is regarded as the most important burnout dimension, and that it is primarily predicted by work environment variables, overall burnout could possibly be reduced in child and youth care facilities by improving working conditions. Emotional exhaustion was also predicted by neuroticism and support from a significant other which have both been identified as burnout correlates in other studies (Ghorpade et al. 2007; Kokkinos 2007; Zeng and Shi 2007). It has been hypothesized that individuals who are highly neurotic possess a psychological predisposition to experiencing burnout (Manlove 1993). Conversely, support from a significant other has been identified as a significant buffer against burnout (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). As found in previous studies, it is those individuals that have a healthy and supportive partner that are better able to deal with emotional stress in an effective manner (Halbesleben 2006).

Unlike emotional exhaustion, depersonalization was predicted by an equal mix of both work environment and personality variables which included clarity, involvement, neuroticism and agreeableness. Child and youth care workers who were emotionally stable and selfless experienced significantly less cynicism towards the children and youth residing in their facility. Agreeable people are sympathetic, understanding, and altruistic and it reasons that individuals expressing these qualities might experience an emotional connection to children and youth (Costa and McCrae 1992). In terms of the work environment, the degree of concern and commitment to the organization and knowledge of what to expect when entering the workplace are essential elements in reducing feelings of cynicism. A possible explanation for this finding could be that loyalty and commitment to the organization would naturally result in a degree of devotion to the children and youth in care. As well, child and youth care work is often an unpredictable environment both in terms of the impulsive nature of the clients as well as constantly changing policies and procedures from administrators. In such an environment it might benefit the child and youth care worker to maintain a certain degree of detachment from both the clients and the occupation in general. Therefore, employees who work in a more consistent environment may tend to depersonalize to a lesser degree than employees whose environment is in constant flux.

A very interesting result stemmed from the discovery that the personal accomplishment dimension of burnout is mainly a function of personality traits and has little to do with organizational characteristics. Although involvement was found to be a significant work related predictor, a majority of the variance associated with personal accomplishment was explained by the neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness factors. In the present study, it was those workers who were emotionally stable, outgoing, determined, and strong willed that experienced the highest levels of personal accomplishment. This finding is particularly important as it challenges the notion that all aspects of burnout are best predicted by organizational variables (Leiter and Maslach 1988). As with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, emotional instability seems to affect all aspects of an employee's ability to remain psychologically engaged and emotionally available. As well, being outgoing, sociable, and energetic may result in more positive interactions and relationships with high-risk children and teens and this may translate into feelings of accomplishment. Outgoing individuals are also more likely to be optimists and being optimistic may prove a valuable asset when working with children and youth whose future is uncertain and often discouraging (Costa and McCrae 1992).

The fact that personal accomplishment was best predicted by personality variables as opposed to organizational characteristics was an interesting result and one that may have significant implications for the way burnout is conceptualized and treated. The role of

personality as a predictor of burnout is a fairly recent phenomenon and little research has directly compared organizational characteristics with personality variables. However, studies do exist that have linked the Big 5 personality constructs with personal accomplishment (Zellars et al. 2000). In this study it was found that unlike feelings of exhaustion and cynicism, an employee's feelings of accomplishment are mainly a result of inherent personality attributes.

In summary, child and youth care workers seem to experience aspects of burnout in a unique manner as compared to other human service occupations. The psychological and emotional demands of the job make child and youth care work an exceedingly demanding profession and this has caused tremendous turnover within the field. Burnout is a complex construct and its onset is a matter of the unique make-up of the employee as well as the challenges found within the profession. Therefore, in order to reduce incidence of burnout it is important for the employer to not only consider environmental factors, but the types of individuals working with the children and youth in their care.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the results of this research there are several practical recommendations for child and youth care facilities that could prove helpful in reducing the incidence of burnout among staff members. Firstly, given the high levels of exhaustion among child and youth care staff (and the significance of emotional exhaustion in the burnout process) it would be important to find ways to reduce this dimension of burnout. According to the results of the present study, the majority of variance associated with emotional exhaustion is from work pressure, role ambiguity, and involvement. Job pressure could potentially be reduced by increasing the number of staff per child ratio, allowing the staff more breaks, debriefing with staff members after difficult situations or altercations with children and youth, and reducing the expectations and responsibilities of child and youth care workers.

Emotional exhaustion might also be reduced by ensuring child and youth care workers are well trained and knowledgeable regarding their roles and responsibilities. In the child and youth care profession, workers are sometimes placed in difficult situations where their legal and occupational rights are not clear (e.g., when to physically restrain a child, expectations when working in the community, punishment and consequences for inappropriate behavior). Therefore, proper training and workshops as well as effective communication by supervisors are essential for employees to experience a sense of clarity and understanding. Based on my personal experience as a child and youth care worker, although many child and youth care workers are trained in first-aid, Native awareness, and suicide prevention, there seems to be a gap in educating new staff about the potential emotional and psychological difficulties of working with high-risk children and youth. Considering the high rates of burnout in younger employees and the difficulty retaining staff in child and youth care facilities a general introductory workshop that could include a section on the risks of burnout might prove valuable and informative.

Establishing a sense of pride and loyalty towards the organization is something that should be cultivated within the child and youth care profession. Unfortunately, child and youth care workers are often looked down upon by the general public and the occupation is often overlooked as a viable career choice (Cavaliere 2004; Krueger 2007). Despite these obstacles, the child and youth care profession should fight to establish a sense of pride and identity and it is important for employers to reward and encourage staff for their hard work and dedication. Generating a sense of interest and involvement in the field could be done

through the establishment of committees, extracurricular activities, awards banquets, and various other social events.

It would also be highly desirable to ensure that younger employees are mentored by older, more experienced employees. Considering the significantly higher level of cynicism and depersonalization among younger employees found in this study and others it would be prudent for employers to closely monitor the mental state of young workers (Schwartz et al. 2007). Several studies have discovered a discrepancy between the preconceived ideas of young child and youth care workers and the reality of child and youth care work (Prosser et al. 1999). It could be highly valuable and cathartic for younger employees to have an older, more experienced mentor to discuss feelings of disenchantment, frustration, and emotional detachment.

Given the importance of personality variables in predicting burnout levels in child and youth care workers it would be irresponsible to ignore the human element in the burnout equation. The inherent make-up of the workers entering the child and youth care field is important in predicting burnout levels. This is especially true of individuals who score highly on the neuroticism dimension of the Big 5 personality factors as this variable has been found to be predictive of all three burnout dimensions. Therefore, proper screening and selection of employees should be a chief concern among employers when looking for hardy, emotionally stable individuals. However, the low wages and insufficient training and supervision which permeate the child and youth care industry need to be addressed if employers are to have any choice in the selection of workers (Savicki 2002). That being said, employers should conduct thorough background checks of employees to ensure they are capable of handling the stress and pressure that is to be expected when working with high-risk children and youth.

Limitations of the Study

As expected, certain limitations to the present research need to be acknowledged and addressed. Firstly, the sample size became an issue considering the number of predictor variables that were entered into the hierarchical regression analysis. Although a ratio of 10 cases for every 1 predictor variable is acceptable, it is a liberal ratio and not ideal. Second, the reliability of some of the subscales, especially those associated with the Work Environment Scale (WES), was called into question (e.g., Peer Cohesion) and may have affected the results of the regression analysis. Although the WES is a thorough measure of the work environment, some scales are not ideally suited to the child and youth care industry. Third, all scales used in the study were self-report and different methods of data collection (e.g., behavioral observation) may yield different results. Fourth, due to the use of correlation and regression analyses the results of this study cannot yield causal relationships between the variables. Finally, qualitative methods would have greatly enriched the findings in this study. Further studies looking at the individual experiences of burnout in both younger and older employees would be valuable in uncovering the experiential element of burnout.

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