

Report on study of religious coping and burnout in Christian counsellors

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Through this newsletter in 2002 I asked readers who were practising as Christian counsellors or therapists to take part in my study of religious coping and burnout. Unfortunately there were only 44 replies from Christian psychologists and counsellors who were approached through national newsletters and relevant workplaces. My analyses were delayed as I tried to recruit more participants. In this article I outline briefly the aims and preliminary results of the study in the hope that more people will be motivated to complete the questions. I need at least 60 participants to begin more detailed analyses that will address my key question, so I'd be very glad to hear from another 20 people or more who would volunteer.

Background and aims

Burnout is a concern for those who work directly with people because it has been associated with lowered job performance, job turnover, and stress-related health symptoms (Maslach, Schaufeli et al., 2001). It has three components: a core of emotional exhaustion where the person feels over-extended; a marked detachment that is termed depersonalization; and a lowered sense of personal accomplishment. Both individual and workplace factors have been related to burnout in studies spanning the last two decades. Clearest associations with burnout have been found for job demands (Janssen, De Jonge et al., 1999; Demerouti, Bakker et al., 2000; Balogun, Titiloye et al., 2002), lack of control over work (Elloy, Terpening et al., 2001) (Maslach, Schaufeli et al., 2001), low support from colleagues or supervisors (Balogun, Titiloye et al., 2002; Kalliath and Beck, 2001), and stress-related personality characteristics such as neuroticism (Deary, Blenkin et al., 1996) and low levels of hardiness (Collins, 1996).

While some work has examined correlates of burnout in clergy(e.g. Rees. Robin and Francis, 1991; Grosch and Olsen, 2000), we know little of how religious attributes or responses affect burnout. Research suggests that clergy burnout may be affected by religious problem solving (Rodgers and Piedmont, 1998), spiritual transcendence and faith maturity (Golden, 2002) and an internal style of coping marked by spiritual practice, a focus on autonomy and competence (Miner, 1996; Sterland, 2000). However, very few studies have examined how religion affects burnout of Christians in non-clerical occupations.

Therefore, the broad aim of this research was to see whether religious coping was associated with burnout in a sample of Australian Christian counsellors. In addition, if the expected association was found, I hoped to tackle the key question: Does religious coping predict burnout beyond the effects of work environment and personality? This is important because if religion does make a difference psychologically it should be possible to demonstrate this effect in studies that statistically control for workplace and personality factors.

The method

Participants were members of the Christian Counsellors' Association, the Christianity and Psychology Interest Group of the APS, and some counsellors

contacted through schools and voluntary agencies. Of the 44 participants 36 were female and the average age was 45 (range 23-68, SD 12 years). On average they worked 22 hours per week and had been working as a counsellor for 8.5 years (range 1-40 years, SD 7.5 years). Most commonly they held a bachelors degree (42%) or a masters degree (35%) with only 19% holding a certificate and 5% a doctorate as their highest qualification. They tended to work in places employing more than 10 people (51%) with a third in small workplaces of 2-9 people and 16% in sole practice. Sixty percent worked with adults, while the remainder worked exclusively or mainly with children and/or adolescents. Very few included specifically Christian elements into their work with clients 'often or very often' (7%), 54% included them 'sometimes or seldom', while 39% never include them.

Those who agreed to take part were mailed or emailed a package with demographic and workplace questions, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (*Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation, Personal Accomplishment*), the NEO-FF personality inventory with subscales of *Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness* and *Conscientiousness*, and measures of religious coping. Five religious coping subscales were selected from the *Religious Coping Scale- RCOPE* (Pargament, Koenig et al., 2000). *Benevolent Religious Reappraisal*, covers responses of trusting God and looking for spiritual benefits in the situation. *Pleading* involves asking for God's direct intervention. *Spiritual discontent* covers negative feelings towards God, such as anger or abandonment, and negative attitudes towards God such as questioning God's power or care. *Seeking support* refers to requests for prayer and support from one's Christian community. *Religious redirection* covers responses of looking for a new direction in life or a spiritual transformation. In addition the *Ministry Locus of Coping Scale* – MLOC (Sterland, 2000) was used to measure an internal versus external source of religious coping; high scores indicate an external locus.

Results were analysed using product moment correlation coefficients and partial correlations rather than multiple regression analysis because of the small sample size.

Results

Compared with norms for mental health workers (Maslach and Jackson, 1986) the Christian counsellors had similar levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, but higher scores on the personal accomplishment subscale, suggesting lower levels of burnout overall.

Emotional exhaustion (EE) was correlated significantly with a number of variables, including demographic, personality and religious coping scales. Specifically, it was negatively associated with age ($r=-.31$), openness ($r=-.31$) and agreeableness ($r=-.36$) and positively associated with neuroticism ($r=.48$), religious direction ($r=.50$), pleading ($r=.44$), spiritual discontent ($r=.39$), benevolent religious reappraisal ($r=.32$) and MLOC ($r=.35$).

Depersonalisation was uncorrelated with any independent variables.

Personal Accomplishment (PA) was correlated significantly with some personality and religious coping variables. Specifically, it was negatively correlated

with neuroticism ($r=-.65$), religious pleading ($r=-.45$) and spiritual discontent ($r=-.33$) and positively correlated with extraversion ($r=.53$) and agreeableness ($r=.32$).

While personality and religious coping variables were correlated with aspects of burnout, the sum of workplace items did not have a significant correlation with burnout.

From the set of significant correlates of EE the effects of those religious variables that were also significantly correlated with a personality measure were analysed via partial correlation (controlling for the influence of personality). In this way the effects of pleading, spiritual discontent and religious direction on EE were examined holding neuroticism constant. Similarly, the effects of pleading and spiritual discontent on PA were examined while controlling for extraversion using partial correlation coefficients. Only one effect of religion remained significant after the effect of personality was held constant: religious direction was positively correlated with EE ($r=.38$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

Essentially this study was testing how both ministry-related and general religious coping were associated with burnout in a sample of Christian counsellors. Ministry-related and four general religious coping measures were significantly correlated with the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, and two were associated with personal accomplishment. None was associated with the depersonalisation component of burnout.

As expected, MLOC (where high scores indicate maladaptive, external locus of coping in ministry) was positively associated with emotional exhaustion. This scale has been found to correlate with all aspects of burnout in Australian Protestant clergy (Sterland, 2000). In addition, the negative general religious coping subscales of spiritual discontent and pleading for God's direct action were also positively associated with emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment. These scales have been linked to distress and poor spiritual health in studies cited by their authors (Pargament, Koenig et al., 2000).

However, it was not expected that positive religious coping, as measured by scales of benevolent religious reappraisal and religious direction would be positively associated with emotional exhaustion. It appears that the effect of religious direction, or seeking to achieve a life transformation in the face of difficulties, is associated with emotional exhaustion even when the effect of neuroticism as a personality characteristic is controlled. It is not clear why these relationships hold. Perhaps when counselling is invested with spiritual meaning and intensive religious coping strategies are used there is an emotional cost. It would be necessary to replicate these findings in larger samples before drawing any firm conclusions.

Overall, these results demonstrate the importance of exploring religious variables when examining psychological outcomes for professing Christians. While it is impossible to capture spiritual phenomena in a set of items, psychologists can study behaviours arising out of religious faith. Understanding how spirituality impacts

psychological health is important for adequate theories and may point to ways of alleviating or preventing undesirable psychological states such as burnout.

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