

Changes in burnout over the first 12 months in ministry: Links with stress and orientation to ministry

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Abstract

Working in Christian ministry is stressful because it is focused on the intangible spirituality of people within a secularized society. Consequently, clergy are at risk of burnout. An internal orientation to the demands of ministry (where ministers depend on internal sources of authority and coping, such as spirituality and competence) is associated with low burnout in cross-sectional studies of ministers. However, little is known about stressors in early ministry and whether an internal ministry orientation is associated with burnout over the first year of ministry. Sixty graduating theological students completed demographic items, exploratory questions relating to the psychological effects of secularization, and measures of burnout, personality, and orientation to ministry. Most of these measures, together with ratings of stress and coping, were repeated after 12 months. Burnout increased over time in ministry, and ministers reported that ministry and relational issues were most stressful. Those with only a weakly internal orientation to ministry demands experienced higher levels of burnout on exit from theological college, and after 12 months. The results support a prediction from secularization theory, that the declining authority of ministers will have important consequences for their psychological health.

Introduction

Burnout is a psychological condition that results from chronic stress related to working with people (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). It has three central dimensions: emotional exhaustion, where the person feels emotionally drained by their work; depersonalization, or a response of cynicism and withdrawal from people; and a low sense of personal accomplishment. Christian ministry is often depicted as a stressful calling that is conducive to burnout (Croucher, 1991;

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Kaldor & Bullpitt, 2001; Sanford, 1982; Willimon, 1989). Work related stressors for clergy include the open-ended nature of ministry and its unseen, spiritual goals (Miner, 1996), the diffuse role of ministers, congregational expectations, high mobility, and impoverished or conflicted personal relationships (Whetham & Whetham, 2000). It is not clear whether work-related or personal issues are seen by ministers as more stressful and how such stressors relate to burnout.

Ministers are working in a context of secularization, defined as a decline in the authority of religion as an institution, and as specific organizations (Chaves, 1993, 1994). The dilemma for ministers is that external bases of authority are weakened by secularization, but at the same time their autonomy and inner sources of authority are challenged. It is difficult, but possible, to derive inner legitimation from spiritual practice and a sense of authority based on one's relationship with God, or from a sense of personal competence (Miner, 1996). Further, internal legitimation is the only source of legitimation over which the minister has direct control. Associated with the shift of social authority from religion to other institutions is a shift from external authority of beliefs, to the internal authority of personal choice (Luckmann, 1967). Thus, secularization processes also pressure ministers to question the beliefs of their earlier socialization rather than remaining "unsecularized" and maintaining taken-for-granted beliefs (Miner, 1996). It is therefore hypothesized that the psychological consequences of secularization, and particularly the consequences of weakened external sources of authority, generate work-related stress and burnout. An important psychological consequence of secularization is the difficulty in developing an inner sense of legitimation based on personal spirituality and competence. Hence, ministers demonstrating an internal orientation to ministry demands are expected to have low burnout on exit from theological college and after 12 months in ministry.

Personal factors that are related to ministry burnout include demographic characteristics such as age (Francis, Loudon, & Rutledge, 2004; Hills, Francis, & Rutledge, 2004; Randall, 2004), personality traits (Francis et al., 2004; Hills et al., 2004), and religious coping styles (Rodgers & Piedmont, 1998). The results suggest that measures of age, personality, stress, and religious coping (in addition to ministry orientation and styles based on secularization theory) should be included in studies of clergy burnout. Hence, a broad research question was posed: which variables best account for burnout on exit from theological college and after 12 months in ministry?

Method

Participants

Sixty theological students graduating from Protestant theological colleges in Sydney, Australia, participated in the research. The majority (77%) were male, with an average age of 34 years ($SD = 6.4$), and over half were associated with mainstream Christian denominations: 29% Anglican, 24% Presbyterian, and

12% Uniting Church. Almost two-thirds (62%) had prior experience in paid ministry, with 34% having worked for two years or less in paid ministry, and 28% with 3–10 years' experience.

Materials

At first administration, the demographic items were completed, and the following measures administered in counterbalanced order: the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) Form S (Costa & McCrae, 1992) that assesses personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness; the Orientations to the Demands of Ministry Scale (ODMS; Miner, Sterland, & Dowson, 2006), a measure of whether ministers are internally oriented (relying on internal sources of authority and coping) and comprising 29 items covering the three dimensions of satisfaction with spiritual practice, autonomy, and competence; the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) with three subscales of *Emotional Exhaustion* (EE), *Depersonalization* (DEP), and *Personal Accomplishment* (PA), and additional brief scales including *Unsecularized*, measuring the degree to which the person has maintained the faith they were taught as a child.

At the second administration after 12 months, respondents were also asked to report on stress they had experienced under the headings of physical/health, material, relational, and ministry stress, and rating on a 10-point scale its intensity/severity, overall stressfulness, and perceived contribution to felt stress levels, as well as the overall intensity and stressfulness of the last year's events. Respondents also completed subscales from the Religious Coping Scale—RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).

Procedure

Students at theological colleges in Sydney were contacted via individual letters or information sheets at assemblies. Those who agreed to participate ($N=103$) were given or sent copies of the questionnaire to be returned via pre-paid envelopes or e-mail. Sixty graduating theological students returned responses. Twelve months later, follow-up questionnaires were sent to all participants who could be contacted, and 44 forms were returned.

Results

Burnout on exit from college and its prediction

Overall, the sample had moderate levels of EE and PA, and low levels of DEP at college graduation, and scored at similar levels to normative samples of mental health workers (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Mean scores for the subscales, with means of the normative sample in parenthesis, were: EE, $M=19.2$ (16.9), $SD=8.5$; DEP, $M=5.6$ (5.7), $SD=3.4$; and PA, $M=34.2$ (30.9), $SD=6.2$.

Table I. Multiple regression analyses of demographic, personality and religious measures as predictors of the sub-scales of burnout in theological students at completion of their studies.

Burnout sub-scale: criterion	Predictors	<i>B</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²
Emotional exhaustion	Age	−0.161	−0.122	0.406
	N	0.326	0.290*	
	O	0.493	0.326**	
	Internal ODM	−0.100	−0.162	
Depersonalization	Age	−0.108	−0.203	0.212
	N	0.078	0.172	
	Unsecularized	0.214	0.266*	
Personal accomplishment	E	0.322	0.316*	0.252
	Internal ODM	0.135	0.300*	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.
N: neuroticism; O: openness to experience; E: extraversion.

Three separate multiple regression analyses were used to examine predictors of burnout on exit from theological college. Neuroticism and openness to experience were significant predictors of EE. Having maintained Christian faith from childhood (*Unsecularized*) was a significant predictor of DEP. Extraversion and holding an internal orientation to ministry predicted high levels of PA (Table I).

Reports of stress during the first year following completion of theological training

The majority of ministers reported stressors in all areas, but only personal and ministry stressors were perceived to be severe and significant in contributing to overall felt stress. For details, see Table II. Ministry ($r = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$) and relational ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) issues were most strongly associated with participants' general ratings of stress for the year.

Burnout changes and predictors of burnout after 12 months in ministry

After 12 months, the mean level of EE had increased significantly (from 19.2 (SD = 8.5) to 23.6 (SD = 8.2) $t = 2.85$, $p < 0.01$), DEP had increased significantly (from 5.6 (SD = 3.4) to 7.0, (SD = 4.3), $t = 2.16$, $p < 0.05$), but PA had remained strong (at 35.3 (SD = 5.8) compared with a previous mean of 34.2 (SD = 6.2)), and all fell within the moderate range.

Five variables were significantly correlated with Time 2 burnout measures at $p < 0.01$: neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, overall stress and internal orientation to ministry. Three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed with EE, DEP, and PA at Time 2 as the criterion variables, and predictor variables entered in two steps, with ODMS entered at the second step. Hierarchical regression was used to test the additive effect of ministry orientation beyond personality and stress measures (as recommended by Rodgereson & Piedmont, 1998). No cases were deleted from the analysis because of multi-variate outliers. The small sample size ($N = 41$) renders it necessary to interpret

Table II. Reported stressors over first 12 months of ministry and stress ratings.

Area/rating type	Mean/SD rating	Comment on stress area: percentage of responses in category and typical example
<i>Physical stress</i>		
Intensity	2.95 (2.5)	34% mild health issue for self or family, e.g., flu, minor injury
Stressfulness	3.73 (2.42)	43% ongoing issues for self or family, e.g., "only mild illnesses for self, but close family member suffered several small strokes"
Importance	3.11 (2.32)	16% serious issues for self and family, e.g., "debilitating hay fever (self) and father treated for cancer"
<i>Material stress</i>		
Intensity	2.34 (2.25)	17% anxiety over debt or budgeting, e.g., "I'm concerned about the management of debts such as car loan and mortgages"
Stressfulness	2.47 (2.26)	17% loss of material goods, e.g., "Had car stolen and could not afford to purchase another"
Importance	2.26 (2.14)	15% losses or anxiety re investments, e.g., "I'm concerned about continued rental income (from investment property)" 13% low rate of stipend or salary, e.g., "low income as this is a part-time appointment" and "Current housing costs are double the actual housing allowance from the church"
<i>Personal stress</i>		
Intensity	4.43 (2.86)	22% stress relating to immediate family members, e.g., "Having a daughter who is a single mother living at home"
Stressfulness	4.49 (2.64)	17% concerns about extended family members, e.g., "My brother's engagement broke up and my parents separated"
Importance	3.45 (2.43)	17% loss of contact with family or friends, e.g., "Moving to an isolated area meant loss of contact with family and friends" 15% bereavement, e.g., "Death of brother-in-law and four close friends" 11% marital stress, e.g., "Marriage was under a lot of pressure and children were very unhappy in the new town and school"
<i>Ministry stress</i>		
Intensity	4.88 (2.35)	23% responsibility to meet high expectations or needs, e.g., "I started new services with high expectations from parishioners" and "People have needs I can't meet while in a temporary part-time position"
Stressfulness	4.97 (2.44)	17% loss of people, e.g.: "an associate minister left a lot earlier than expected so now I am solo minister"; "people are dying and leaving the congregation"
Importance	4.19 (2.50)	13% conflicts with organizational authorities, e.g., "I've had some conflict with senior church members"; "There has been conflict with an elder over dealing with pastoral issues that were unresolved by an interim ministry"

the results with caution. With EE as criterion, at step 1, with neuroticism and overall stress in the equation, $R=0.61$, $R^2=0.36$, $F(2,39)=11.16$, $p<0.001$. With the addition of ODMS at step 2, $R=0.67$, $R^2=0.44$, $F(3,38)=10.10$, $p<0.001$. With DEP as criterion, at step 1, with overall stress in the equation $R=0.40$, $R^2=0.16$, $F(1,42)=8.10$, $p<0.01$. With the addition of ODMS at step 2, $R=0.56$, $R^2=0.31$, $F(2,41)=9.26$, $p<0.001$. With PA as criterion, at step 1, with personality variables in the equation $R=0.54$, $R^2=0.29$, $F(3,38)=5.09$, $p<0.01$. With the addition of ODMS at step 2, $R=0.66$, $R^2=0.43$, $F(4,37)=6.96$, $p<0.001$ (Table III).

Table III. Hierarchical multiple regression of Time 1 personality measures (neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness), and Time 2 overall stress ratings and internal orientation to the demands of ministry as predictors of Time 2 burnout subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment.

Step	Variables	<i>B</i> at step	β at step	R^2 change at step	Final <i>B</i>	Final β
<i>EE as dependent variable</i>						
1	Neuroticism	0.251	0.241		0.141	0.135
	Overall stress	1.664	0.497	0.36**	1.418	0.431**
2	Internal ODM	−0.140	−0.314	0.08*	−0.140	−0.314*
<i>DEP as dependent variable</i>						
1	Overall stress	0.722	0.402	0.16**	0.493	0.274
2	Internal ODM	−0.098	−0.407	0.15**	−0.098	−0.407**
<i>PA as dependent variable</i>						
1	Neuroticism	−0.138	−0.188		−0.058	−0.079
	Extraversion	0.323	0.365		0.306	0.346*
	Conscientiousness	0.113	0.139	0.29**	−0.098	−0.012
2	Internal ODM	0.138	0.439	0.14**	0.138	0.439**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Burnout on exit from theological college

Graduates from theological college experienced moderate levels of burnout on the scales of emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, but relatively low levels of depersonalization, on average. Findings that personality dimensions of neuroticism and openness to experience increased the risk of higher EE, while extraversion increased the possibility of higher PA at graduation, are consistent with work by Rodgerson and Piedmont (1998). The prediction that an internal ministry orientation would be associated with decreased burnout at college graduation was partly supported, since lower scores on ODMS predicted higher personal accomplishment, but they were not associated with other burnout sub-scales. In addition, the finding that those who were “unsecularized” and maintained their faith from childhood were more likely to cope via depersonalization suggests that these people experienced theological college as particularly stressful, and responded to increased emotional exhaustion by withdrawal (Maslach et al., 2001).

Stress during the first year of ministry

Consistent with previous research (Miner, 1996; Whetham & Whetham, 2000), ministers reported relational and ministry issues to be most stressful, and contributing the most to overall levels of felt stress. Conflicts were highly stressful, suggesting that theological students might benefit from more training in conflict resolution. In addition, high expectations and needs, and loss of people, were stressful situations over which a minister has little control. Problem-solving strategies have little impact in these circumstances, and hence the teaching

of emotion-focused coping strategies may be beneficial. Support for ministers as they deal with loss of friends and family-related issues would be helpful to reduce relational aspects of felt stress and its impact on levels of burnout.

Statistical predictors of burnout after a year in ministry

Having a weak internal orientation was moderately, significantly associated with burnout scores after the effects of personality and stress ratings had been considered. Hence, a measure derived from the secularization-stress model of burnout was a statistical predictor of all sub-scales of burnout after 12 months of ministry and suggests that social context is important for understanding clergy burnout. Ministers lacking firm inner legitimation are likely to base authority and coping on external sources, such as denominational authority, or congregational approval and support. However, in a secularized society, denominational authority declines, and congregational support is fickle. There is significant mobility of church attenders (Kaldor & Bullpitt, 2001), and religious pluralism within denominations and congregations (particularly in larger denominations) contributes to dissent, and even schism (Sutton & Chaves, 2004). Those who rely on external legitimation are likely to find that stress is heightened just as support declines.

Caution and applications

The results must be treated with caution because of the low sample size. It is possible that those most affected by burnout would be least likely to be able to maintain commitment to a longitudinal study, and hence measured burnout rates may underestimate the actual levels. Therefore, attempts to change vulnerability factors during the period of theological training would be useful. Holding to one's childhood faith without questioning and low levels of internal orientation to ministry are related to burnout. Theological students could be encouraged by spiritual directors, in a non-threatening context, to develop considered, mature beliefs. It would also be helpful to promote a more internal orientation, through good spiritual practice and a sense of personal competence and autonomy, during theological college and its aftermath. Peer support groups, spiritual direction, and professional supervision could be a means of focussing on these important psychological dimensions.

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