

A structural equation model of burnout and job exit among child protective services workers

Brett Drake and Gautam N. Yadama

Substantial theoretical and empirical work has been done about burnout in child welfare services. The majority of work is based on the three-part conceptualization of burnout embodied in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The three elements of the MBI—emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA)—are commonly viewed as a syndrome, with EE and DP having a strong positive association and PA having a weaker, negative correlation with EE and DP. This study uses a structural equation model to examine these three constructs in relation to job exit among child protective services workers over a 15-month period. The model was supported, with EE relating to job exit and DP and PA relating to EE and DP. Findings reinforce some views about the central importance of EE but also show the relevance of all three MBI elements to job exit. Implications for child welfare practice and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Key words: burnout; child protective services; child welfare workers; job exit; Maslach Burnout Inventory

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The child welfare field has long been among the most demanding and difficult vocational paths available in the human services. Social workers involved in child welfare show more depersonalization, less worker comfort, more role ambiguity and conflict, and more value conflict than workers in family services agencies or community mental health settings (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Laird, 1985). Inadequate pay, difficult working conditions, lack of recognition, chronic stress, overwork, and other negative job characteristics have led to a continuing crisis in child welfare worker retention. Some authors (for example, Lee, 1979) have described burnout in child welfare as an inevitable occurrence that can only be postponed. Other authors have cited two-year turnover rates ranging from 46 percent to 90 percent (Harrison, 1980; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Jayaratne, Himle, & Chess, 1991; Shannon & Saleebey, 1980).

This crisis is particularly serious given the complexity and breadth of skills required for effective child welfare practice. An adequate command of needed skills and competencies may take many months or years to develop (Lee, 1979), and the swift turnover in agencies means a relative lack of skills and competencies in a large percentage of the child welfare workforce. The rapid and continuing loss of experienced and committed child welfare workers must be reduced to ensure a workforce with the skills to perform extremely difficult and critical functions. In addition to its effects on turnover, burnout impairs practice by contributing to lower levels of commitment and impaired decision making (McGee, 1989).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The three-part structure of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) and the parallel three-part conceptualization of burnout have become the central concepts in burnout research (McGee, 1989; Thompson & Page, 1992; Yadama & Drake, 1995). Maslach's model includes the constructs of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP),

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and personal accomplishment (PA). Maslach and Jackson (1986) described EE as "feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work," DP as "an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's care or service," and PA as "feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people" (p. 7). Rates of EE and DP are considered to be higher among burned-out individuals, and PA is expected to be lower among burned-out individuals.

The relationships among EE, DP, and PA are not well understood. The model of burnout has not yet been welded into a unitary theoretical entity (Koeske & Koeske, 1989). In exploring factors associated with burnout, researchers generally analyze the effects of EE, DP, and PA separately (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984; Himle, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1987; Holloway & Wallinga, 1990; Jayaratne, Chess, & Kunkel, 1986). This valid approach remains somewhat conceptually unsatisfying, because separate analyses overlook interrelationships among EE, DP, and PA.

Recently, some researchers have suggested a stress-strain-outcome model reconceptualizing burnout. In this model, burnout is synonymous with EE (Koeske & Koeske, 1989, 1993). This reconceptualization is an evolutionary rather than a radical departure from Maslach's original three-part model and is consistent with the basic assumptions underlying the MBI. The DP and PA subscales still represent important constructs related to EE; however, the conceptual emphasis moves toward EE, to which the label "burnout" is uniquely applied, and DP and PA play somewhat subsidiary roles. Koeske and Koeske (1989) saw DP as "one possible outcome which may result from persistent exhaustion" (p. 132) and saw PA as important because of its moderating effects. One advantage of this reconceptualization is that burnout can be understood in relation to the literature on stress.

We propose a different approach that seeks to model the relationships among the elements of the burnout construct as they relate to job exit. To construct a theoretically and empirically satisfying model linking the three parts of the MBI with job exit, it is necessary to examine the current literature discussing linkages among DP, EE, and PA. A number of approaches have been taken to understand the relationships among various aspects of the burnout phenomenon. A moderate relationship has been repeatedly shown between EE and DP, whereas a weaker relationship exists between EE and PA and between DP and PA (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; McGee, 1989).

Thompson and Page (1992) stated that "the [EE] and [DP] subscales of the MBI, respectively, are sug-

gested as appropriate operational measures of the mental and behavioral withdrawal described by the model" (p. 3). That burnout is a process of withdrawal has been a central part of the theoretical literature for many years (Daley, 1979; Maslach, 1982; Pines & Maslach, 1978).

It is intuitively appealing to assume that emotional withdrawal will precede behavioral withdrawal, rather than the reverse. It makes sense that an emotionally weary individual would be less disposed to make the emotional investment required in dealing with clients as individuals rather than as depersonalized cases. This relationship was also suggested by Maslach and Jackson (1986) and Koeske and Koeske (1989). Leiter (1992) used structural equation modeling to test a model that, among other things, suggests that EE has a causal role in increasing DP. His model showed EE, DP, and PA as latent variables, with no direct effects between PA and the other variables but a positive relationship from EE to DP. A structural equation analysis supported this model with an acceptable goodness-of-fit. These findings have particularly strong relevance to the field, because quality of work and ability to engage in effective relationships with clients are severely compromised by burnout (Shannon & Saleebey, 1980).

PA has been a particularly troubling aspect of the burnout construct. It is "independent of the other two subscales and . . . cannot be assumed to be the opposite of [EE] or [DP]" (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 7). Koeske and Koeske (1993) have shown that individuals with a higher PA are less likely to intend to quit their positions than individuals with a lower PA. Ratliff (1988) discussed the importance of PA to human services providers, particularly given the humanitarian orientation of many who are drawn to the human services. Although not the same as PA, a sense of professional success has also been found to be associated with job satisfaction (Cherniss & Egnatios, 1978; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). Koeske and Koeske (1993) used PA as a mediating factor in their model, placing it both as antecedent to EE and as a mediating variable between EE and job exit.

These studies are encouraging and represent helpful, if preliminary, glimpses of the burnout phenomenon. Clearly, no consensus exists in the literature about the relationships among elements of burnout as conceptualized and measured by the MBI. Researchers need to incorporate findings from existing research into a comprehensive theoretical model of the dimensions of burnout and their effect on job exit. A simultaneous estimation of such a model should clarify the relationships among the dimensions of burnout as well as job exit. However, any model linking burnout to job exit

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can be expected to have only moderate explanatory power, because many other factors are associated with the decision to leave a job, including job satisfaction, role conflicts and ambiguity, pay, health status, relocation of a spouse's employment, and the availability of other work. Our model can best be conceptualized as an effort to determine the nature and degree of the relationship between burnout and job exit, not as an attempt to demonstrate that burnout is the primary cause of job exit.

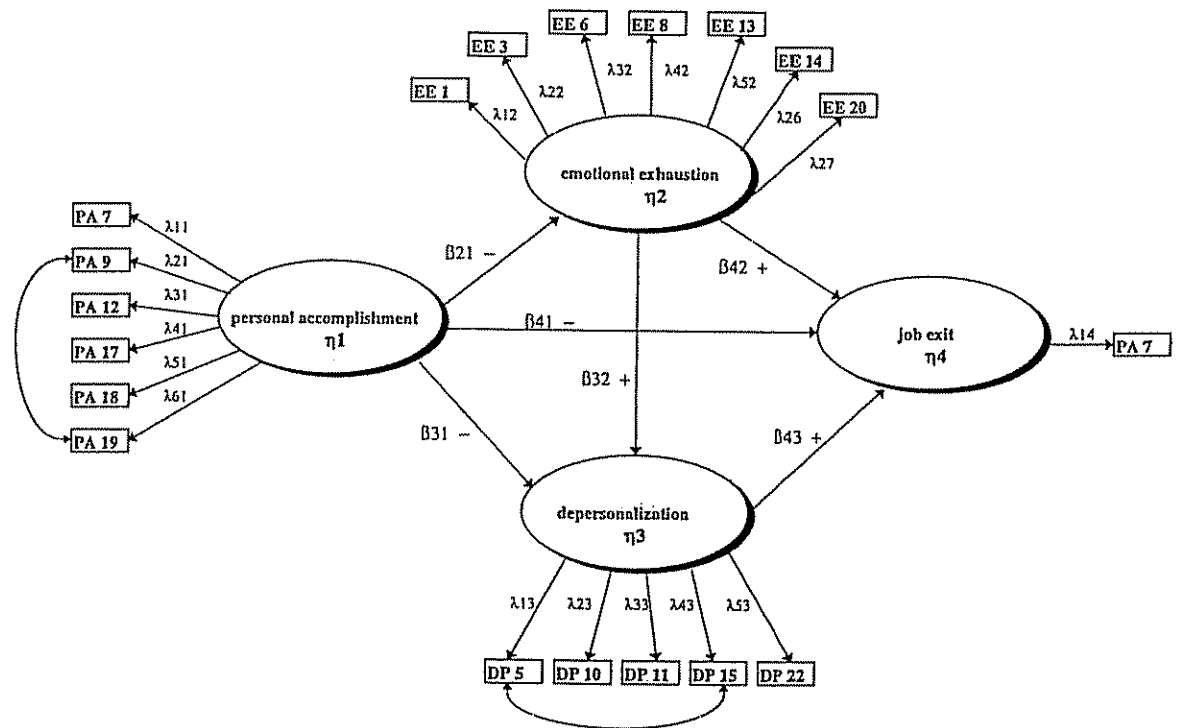
MODEL OF BURNOUT AND JOB EXIT

We agree with others (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Maslach & Jackson, 1986) that EE, DP, and PA as measured by the MBI represent distinct, separate constructs and should be understood as such. To empirically understand the relationships among EE, DP, and PA, it is not important whether the term "burnout" is best applied to all three elements, as Maslach and Jackson would have it, or to EE only, as Koeske and Koeske would have it. Drawing on established empirical and theoretical relationships among EE, DP, and PA, we can postulate the following:

- Workers who are more emotionally exhausted will become more depersonalized (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Leiter 1992; Maslach & Jackson, 1986). We therefore expected a direct positive effect from EE to DP.
- Emotionally exhausted workers will be more likely to leave their jobs (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). We therefore expected a direct positive effect from EE to job exit.
- Depersonalized workers will be more likely to leave their jobs, because behavioral withdrawal should precede job exit. We therefore expected a direct positive effect from DP to job exit.
- Given the importance of a subjective feeling of professional success to job satisfaction, feelings of personal accomplishment will have broad effects, decreasing EE, DP, and job exit (Cherniss & Egnatios, 1978; Ratliff, 1988; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). We therefore conceptualized PA as a construct exogenous to EE, DP, and job exit, with negative effects on all constructs (Figure 1).

Although the primary focus of this model is on job exit, by combining the MBI conceptualization of

FIGURE 1—A Theoretical Model of the Effects of Personal Accomplishment, Emotional Exhaustion, and Depersonalization on Job Exit among Child Protective Services Workers



NOTE: PA = personal accomplishment; EE = emotional exhaustion; DP = depersonalization.

burnout with the job exit construct we can address two other areas of practical concern. First, understanding how DP relates to other elements of the burnout construct is valuable intrinsically. The associations between the burnout syndrome and the behavioral manifestations of burnout have relevance to agencies seeking to improve their quality of service. Depersonalized workers are less able to do quality work and are less likely to engage in effective relationships with clients (McGee, 1989; Shannon & Saleebey, 1980). Second, EE is useful to examining the mental state of individuals in child welfare services. Understanding the relevance of PA to EE can thus give direction as to whether emotional withdrawal can be forestalled through enhancing feelings of accomplishment.

This parsimonious and elegant conceptual model is well grounded in prior research and theory. The use of actual job exit (as opposed to intention to leave) as the dependent construct allows for a direct examination of the relationships among perceived work environment, burnout, and job exit. However, we do not want to preclude the possibility of alternative models. One model posits a reciprocal or a nonrecursive effect between EE and DP. Another posits that EE and DP have direct effects on PA and that PA has a direct effect on job exit. We will empirically examine these potential alternatives to the model.

METHOD

Sample

In March 1993 we mailed 230 questionnaires to child protective services workers selected at random from among the 1,147 workers currently employed by the Missouri Division of Family Services. Of the 185 packets that were returned, 177 were complete for all variables considered in this study, yielding a response rate of 77 percent. This rate is slightly higher than that reported previously (Yadama & Drake, 1995), because this study uses fewer elements of the MBI, and therefore one case excluded for missing data in a previous study can now be included.

The majority of the respondents were women (80.7 percent), had bachelor's degrees (62.9 percent), and were white (85.1 percent). The median age was 38 years. The median time working in child welfare was five years. Workers were fairly evenly split between metropolitan areas (45.2 percent) and nonmetropolitan areas (54.8 percent). The composition of the sample is close to national norms for gender, race, and educational level (Shyne & Schroder, 1986; Vinokur-Kaplan & Hartman, 1986).

Measures

The MBI has been shown to be robust in reliability and construct validity and is by far the most widely used burnout instrument (Dowd, 1985; Kahill, 1988). However, there has been some criticism of the DP subscale, which contains only five items (Koeske, 1989).

In this article we refer to MBI items with a two-letter prefix indicating the subscale to which they belong, followed by the number of the item. For the analyses conducted in this study, the MBI was altered through the removal of four items—items PA4, PA21, EE2, and EE16—to improve the factor structure of the MBI on the basis of a prior confirmatory factor analysis of the MBI by the authors (Yadama & Drake, 1995). In addition, error terms of items DP5 and DP15, as well as PA9 and PA19, were allowed to correlate. The revised scale is consistent with Byrne's (1991) previous confirmatory factor analysis of the MBI.

We determined job exit over a 15-month period by comparing the list of workers sampled in April 1993 to a statewide worker roster from July 1994. Workers who had been promoted to supervisory positions were not counted as having exited their jobs. Although many burnout studies use intention to leave rather than documented job exit as a dependent variable (Kern, Bauman, McFadden, & Law, 1993; Koeske & Koeske, 1993), job exit is more meaningful because it relates to practical issues such as the inability of agencies to maintain trained personnel and the subsequent increased cost and reduction of service delivery. Job exit and intention to leave were correlated ($r = .25, p < .001$).

Model

The model was tested using LISREL 8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993). All of the constructs are treated as endogenous. PA is the first endogenous construct, has five observed indicators, and is exogenous to EE and DP. EE and DP are the intermediate endogenous constructs and have seven and five observed indicators, respectively. Job exit was measured using a single indicator, and the error term for this observed variable was set to zero. A maximum likelihood estimation method was used to test the model. Given a sample size of less than 200 ($N = 177$), a weighted least-squares (WLS) estimation, which normally would have been ideal for the model, was not recommended (Byrne, 1995; Joreskog, 1990): "A poorly estimated asymptotic covariance, such as estimated from a small sample, can do more harm than good when used with WLS. If the sample size is not sufficiently large to produce an accurate estimate of the asymptotic covariance matrix, it is probably better to use [maximum likelihood] or

robust in reliability for the most widely used (Byrne, 1985; Kahill, 1988). The criticism of the DP items (Koeske &

BI items with a two-factor structure to which they belong. For the MBI, the MBI was altered—items PA4, PA21, and DP5 were removed. The factor structure of the MBI was confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis (Yadama & Drake, 1994). Items DP5 and DP15 were allowed to correlate with Byrne's (1991) analysis of the MBI.

A 15-month period by which the MBI was implemented in April 1993 and July 1994. Workers in supervisory positions were interviewed for their jobs. Although many workers gave negative feedback rather than documentation (Kern, Bauman, Koeske, & Koeske, 1993), the MBI is used to practice agencies to maintain frequent increased cost of job exit and intention to leave ($p < .001$).

LISREL 8 (Joreskog constructs are treated as exogenous construct, has latent endogenous constructs observed indicators, estimated using a single indicator likelihood estimation model. Given a sample of weighted least-squares estimates would have been recommended (Byrne, 1991) or maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) if the sample size was large enough to produce an accurate covariance matrix, maximum likelihood]

[generalized least squares]" (Joreskog, 1990, p. 399). We instead used a maximum likelihood estimation.

Although PA is labeled as endogenous, in the model it precedes and is therefore exogenous to EE and DP. EE and DP in turn affect job exit, the final endogenous construct in the model. Such a conceptualization of PA as the first endogenous construct instead of as a purely exogenous construct has its advantages in LISREL. In identifying all constructs as endogenous it is possible to test for alternative propositions such as EE and DP affecting PA rather than vice versa. In defining PA as endogenous we could test the model while allowing for the possibility of discovering alternative effects through a *modification index*—"an estimate or prediction of the decrease in chi-square that will be obtained if that particular path is introduced in the model" (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993, p. 26). In this sense, we used modification indices as we would goodness-of-fit indices—to assess the viability or possibility of previously specified alternative models in the data. However, one should not rely solely on modification indices to identify alternative propositions; any path identified through a modification index must also be plausible and theoretically defensible.

RESULTS

The overall fit of the model was good [$\chi^2(145) = 215.69, p = .000$]. Even though the probability was

not greater than .10, applying conventional guidelines, the chi-square index was less than twice the degrees of freedom, indicating a reasonably good fit.

The chi-square statistic is based on the assumption that the model holds exactly in the population, which may be an unrealistic assumption in most empirical research (Joreskog, 1993). Therefore, it is important to also assess a model using root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), which is a measure of discrepancy per degree of freedom and is useful in assessing the degree of approximation in the population (Joreskog, 1993). A RMSEA of .05 indicates a close fit. The model had a very good fit (RMSEA = .053, $p = .37$, lower confidence interval (CI) = .037, upper CI = .067). Both the comparative fit index (CFI) and the incremental fit index (IFI) were .94, again indicating a very good fit. The goodness-of-fit index and the adjusted goodness-of-fit were .89 and .85, respectively. The parsimony normed fit index (PNFI) was .72, and the standardized root mean square residual was .062.

We tested the three alternative conceptualizations against the null model. None of these models showed any statistically significant change in chi-square values or any improvement in NFI, PNFI, or CFI (Table 1).

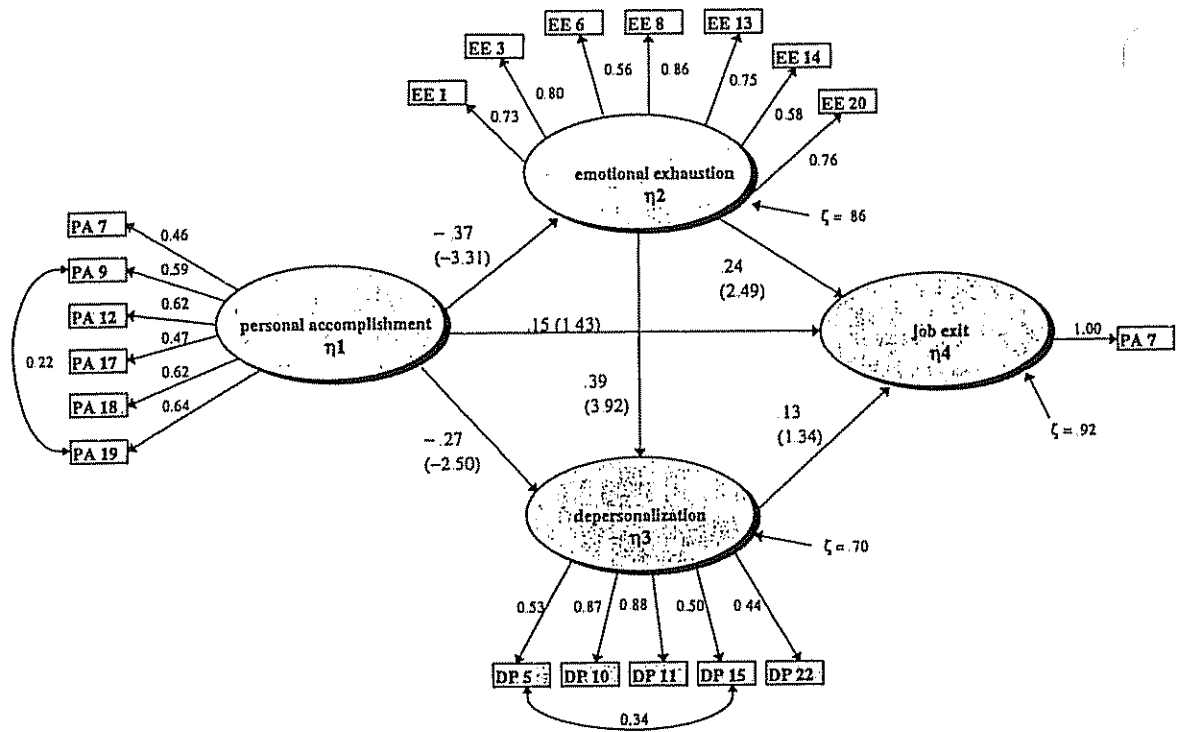
The null model is presented in Figure 2. Loadings of observed variables on latent variables ranged from .44 to .88, with the majority of observed variables

TABLE 1—Fit Statistics for the Conceptualizations of Burnout among Child Protective Services Workers

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2 Change	df Change	NFI	PNFI	CFI	Decision
Null model (hypothesized model)	215.69	145	—	—	0.85	0.72	0.94	Null model
Alternative model 1 (nonrecursive effects between EE and DP)	214.86	144	.830	1	0.85	0.71	0.94	Reject— χ^2 change is not statistically significant ^a ; no improvement in NFI, PNFI, and CFI
Alternative model 2 (nonrecursive effects between PA and EE)	214.86	144	.830	1	0.85	0.71	0.94	Reject— χ^2 change is not statistically significant ^a ; no improvement in NFI, PNFI, and CFI
Alternative model 3 (nonrecursive effects between PA and DP)	214.86	144	.830	1	0.85	0.71	0.94	Reject— χ^2 change is not statistically significant ^a ; no improvement in NFI, PNFI, and CFI

NOTE: df = degrees of freedom; NFI = normed fit index; PNFI = parsimony normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; EE = emotional exhaustion; DP = depersonalization; PA = personal accomplishment; — = χ^2 and df changes are not applicable; ^a χ^2 change over the null model is not significant at the .05 level.

FIGURE 2—Direct Effects from a LISREL Analysis of Personal Accomplishment, Emotional Exhaustion, and Depersonalization on Job Exit among Child Protective Services Workers



NOTE: PA = personal accomplishment; EE = emotional exhaustion; DP = depersonalization.

having loadings of .50 or higher. Construct reliability and validity were calculated from the specific factor loadings and error coefficients associated with each item (see Pandey & Yadama, 1992). All of the burn-out constructs had good reliabilities; EE had the highest (.89), followed by DP (.79) and then PA (.74). The validity of a construct is determined by calculating the average variance extracted in the construct by a set of observed indicators. About 33 percent of the variance in PA is explained by its indicators, 53 percent for EE, and 45 percent for DP. Although reliabilities are high, the average variance extracted in each construct is moderate.

Emotional Exhaustion

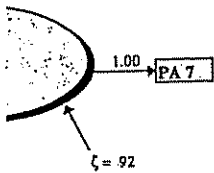
PA had a significant direct effect on EE, which supports the hypothesis that PA has a negative effect on EE ($\beta_{21} = -0.37, t = -3.31, p \leq .01$) (Table 2). This effect of PA on EE also represents the total effect on EE in the model. Fourteen percent of the variance in EE is explained by PA (squared multiple correlation [SMC] = .14).

Depersonalization

Both EE and PA have direct effects on DP, which supports the hypothesis that EE has a direct positive effect on DP ($\beta_{32} = 0.39, t = 3.92, p \leq .01$) and PA has a direct negative effect on DP ($\beta_{31} = -0.27, t = -2.50, p \leq .05$) (Table 2). In addition, another indirect effect was detected: PA had a significant negative indirect effect on DP through EE ($\beta_{21}\beta_{32} = -0.15, t = -2.70, p \leq .01$). The total effect of PA on DP was of a substantially greater magnitude than the direct effect alone ($\beta_{31} + \beta_{21}\beta_{32} = -0.41, t = -3.32, p \leq .01$). Thirty percent of the variance in DP is explained by PA and EE (SMC = .30).

Job Exit

The model had a positive direct effect from EE to job exit ($\beta_{42} = 0.24, t = 2.49, p \leq .05$), which supports the earlier hypothesis. We also hypothesized a positive direct effect from DP to job exit. This effect was not significant ($\beta_{43} = 0.13, t = 1.34$). The proposed negative direct effect from PA to job exit was also not significant ($\beta_{41} = 0.15, t = 1.43$).



effects on DP, which has a direct positive effect on DP ($\beta_{31} = -0.27, t = -2.70, p \leq .01$) and PA on DP ($\beta_{31} = -0.27, t = -2.70, p \leq .01$). In addition, another indirect effect of PA on DP was of a significant negative effect through EE ($\beta_{21}\beta_{32} = -0.15, t = -2.70, p \leq .01$). Thirty percent of the variance in DP is explained by PA and EE.

Direct effect from EE to job exit ($\beta_{42} = 0.24, t = 2.49, p \leq .05$), which supports the hypothesis. The model also hypothesized a direct effect of PA on job exit. This effect was significant ($\beta_{41} = 0.15, t = 1.43, p \leq .05$). The total effect of PA on job exit was significant ($\beta_{41} + \beta_{21}\beta_{42} = 0.15, t = 1.43, p \leq .05$).

TABLE 2—Standardized Effects, *t* Values, and Variance Explained in the Burnout Constructs

Path	Effect	<i>t</i> Value	Variance Explained (%)
Emotional exhaustion			
PA→EE (β_{21})	-0.37	-3.31**	14
Depersonalization			
PA→DP (β_{31})	-0.27	-2.50*	30
EE→DP (β_{32})	0.39	3.92**	
PA→DP through EE ($\beta_{21}\beta_{32}$)	-0.15	-2.70**	
Total effect of PA→DP ($\beta_{31} + \beta_{21}\beta_{32}$)	-0.41	-3.32**	
Job exit			
PA→job exit (β_{41})	0.15	1.43	8
EE→job exit (β_{42})	0.24	2.49*	
DP→job exit (β_{43})	0.13	1.34	
PA→job exit through EE ($\beta_{21}\beta_{42}$)	-0.14	-2.53*	
EE→job exit through DP ($\beta_{32}\beta_{43}$)	0.05	1.31	
Total effect of EE on job exit ($\beta_{42} + \beta_{32}\beta_{43}$)	0.29	3.28**	
Total effect of PA on job exit ($\beta_{41} + \beta_{21}\beta_{42} + \beta_{31}\beta_{43} + \beta_{21}\beta_{32}\beta_{43}$)	0.00	0.06	

NOTE: PA = personal accomplishment; EE = emotional exhaustion; DP = depersonalization.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A series of indirect effects was also evaluated. PA had a significant indirect effect on job exit. This effect can be mathematically described as $\beta_{21}\beta_{42} + \beta_{31}\beta_{43} + \beta_{21}\beta_{32}\beta_{43}$, but given the nonsignificance of β_{43} , it can best be interpreted as the effect of PA through EE on job exit ($\beta_{21}\beta_{42}$). This was a modest effect ($\beta_{21}\beta_{42} = -0.14, t = -2.53, p \leq .05$). When combined with the nonsignificant direct effect (β_{41}), the total effect of PA on job exit also becomes nonsignificant ($\beta_{41} + \beta_{21}\beta_{42} + \beta_{31}\beta_{43} + \beta_{21}\beta_{32}\beta_{43} = 0.00, t = 0.06$). EE had no significant indirect effect on job exit through DP ($\beta_{32}\beta_{43} = 0.05, t = 1.31$), not surprising given the nonsignificance of β_{43} . The total effect of EE on job exit was only slightly greater than the direct effect ($\beta_{42} + \beta_{32}\beta_{43} = 0.29, t = 3.28$). Eight percent of the variance in job exit is explained by the model (SMC = .08). The indirect effects can be interpreted as not having any substantial effect on job exit. This absence of powerful indirect effects further spotlights the key role of EE in determining job exit.

DISCUSSION

The model as originally postulated was generally supported by the goodness-of-fit obtained and the direct effects observed in the data, with only the relationships between DP and job exit and PA and job exit being nonsignificant. The model suggests that DP and PA do not necessarily explain a worker's propen-

sity to leave the job (Figure 2). PA also affects EE and DP and not vice versa. This was determined by examining the modification indices. There were no non-zero modification indices for the effects among the constructs (beta matrix). In addition, fit statistics were not improved when other models were considered, indicating a lack of support for any alternative conceptualization of effects among the latent constructs and confirming the structural model of burnout and job exit as proposed. Major modifications of the overall theoretical model are therefore unwarranted. However, the anticipated relationships between DP and job exit and between PA and job exit did not obtain in the data.

Ideally, this study would have benefited from a larger sample. However, the sample size compares favorably with other published works, including Leiter's (1992) study with 124 participants and Koeske and Koeske's (1993) study with 91 participants. Given the exploratory nature of this work, we do not consider that the sample size is insufficiently large but would encourage replication with samples of more than 200 participants. Although Missouri is not unrepresentative of the majority of child welfare agencies that hire bachelor's-level personnel, these findings may not be applicable to states such as Illinois and California that hire master's-level workers. Caution should be exercised in applying the findings to such states.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF BURNOUT

Whereas past research has often established the close link between behavioral (DP) and psychological (EE) elements of the burnout construct, PA has often been ignored. PA has a significant effect on both DP and EE and through EE has a significant indirect effect on job exit.

The model presented here represents an empirically validated and theoretically defensible conceptualization of the relationship among elements of the burnout syndrome. The results of this study are not incompatible with Maslach's original three-part conceptualization; however, the data support a focus on EE as the most important aspect of burnout in relation to job exit. In this regard, the findings are consistent with theoretical positions stressing the primacy of EE. The model has implications for three areas of application: worker mental health, service delivery, and worker retention.

Worker Mental Health

The association between PA and EE suggests that worker mental health can be improved if PA is fostered and maintained. Programs seeking to reduce psychological burnout among employees may be able to achieve this goal through enhancing subjective feelings of success and achievement among front-line workers. This might be done by training supervisors to help workers realize the small gains their clients make and by formally recognizing worker accomplishments.

Service Delivery

DP negatively affects service delivery. DP was directly affected by both PA and EE, with the total effect of PA on DP being magnified through the indirect effect of PA through EE. On the basis of this data, agencies seeking to decrease DP among workers can do so by enhancing perceived accomplishments or reducing psychological burnout. Enhancing feelings of PA seems to be the desired course, because such action would reduce DP both directly and through improving levels of psychological burnout.

Worker Retention

EE had a direct effect on job exit; DP appears to be unrelated to worker retention. However, the relationship of PA to other variables was interesting. PA had a moderate direct effect on EE and a moderate total effect on DP; therefore, PA is important both as a determinant of worker mental health and as a determinant of depersonalization of clients. The indirect effect of PA on DP through EE makes good conceptual sense and suggests that the relationship between PA and DP

is substantially stronger than their bivariate association suggests.

It is troubling that EE is related to job exit and DP is not. DP is a more troubling aspect of burnout than is EE, because DP is conceptually behavioral in nature. People who are most behaviorally affected by burnout syndrome are no more likely to leave the job than those who are affected.

Because people with lower levels of DP have been shown to be able to provide better services, it would be desirable if those individuals were disproportionately likely to remain with the agency, but this does not seem to be the case. It is important to point out that we did not find that depersonalized workers were more likely to stay with the agency, only that they were not less likely to stay.

CONCLUSION

It would be useful for future research to replicate the model presented in this study, particularly focusing on the measurement of the three dimensions of burnout. It is possible to derive a more parsimonious set of items using more advanced techniques such as confirmatory factor analysis that capture a much larger share of the variance of each construct. In addition, the relationship of other constructs to those we studied should be explored. Appropriate latent constructs might include issues such as role conflict and job satisfaction. This is important to establish an array of factors that result in job exit or retention, which could be used to construct more sophisticated models demonstrating the relationship of burnout to these factors and to job exit.

Such research should be neither expensive nor time consuming, because several large burnout databases already exist. Structural equation modeling has provided an opportunity to revisit some of these data, offering the promise of drawing more precise and satisfying conclusions through the examination of more clearly specified and accurate models than has been possible using traditional regression procedures.

In addition, research might focus more specifically on the role that feelings of personal accomplishment play in relation to worker retention and worker effectiveness. Our findings suggest that subjective feelings of personal success may have broader implications than were previously realized. It would be interesting to perform experimental studies on groups of child welfare workers exposed to training or support programs designed to maximize feelings of efficacy and accomplishment. Positive findings from such groups would be useful to agencies and supervisors in designing and implementing programs for their workers. ■

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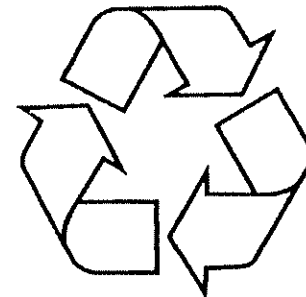
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