An Investigation into the Relationship between Burnout and Coping Strategies among Teachers in Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the association between burnout and coping strategies among teachers in Turkey. Demographic Information Form, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Problem Solving Inventory, and the Ways of Coping Inventory were administered to a sample of 159 teachers (79 male and 83 female) working at primary through high schools. It was found that the teachers experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment and used self-confident, searching social support, and optimistic coping strategies in coping stressful situations. Results showed that the helpless coping strategy was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion of teachers and was an important predictor of emotional exhaustion of teachers. This finding suggested that teachers with high emotional exhaustion endorsed a significantly more helpless coping strategy. The results indicated that the self-confident coping strategy was the significant predictor of personal accomplishment and negative correlation with personal accomplishment. In conclusion, the results of this study have demonstrated the important consequences of coping strategies on burnout levels of teachers.

Key words: Burnout, coping strategy, teachers

1. Introduction

Burnout is one of the most studied topics in the literature. There are various definitions and descriptions of the concept (Soderfeldt & Soderfeldt, 1995); burnout was initially defined by Freudenberger (1974) as a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to an occupation, way of life, cause, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward. On the other hand, according to Pines and Aronson (1988), burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations.

In addition to different definitions in literature, there are varied models of burnout (Cherniss 1982,French, Roger, & Cobb, 1974, Meier 1983). Among these models, Maslach and Jackson's Three-Factor Model (1981) is widely appreciated among researchers. The major premise of the model is that burnout is a multidimensional syndrome consisting of three cognitive and affective components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of accomplishment. In this model, emotional exhaustion represents the basic individual stress dimensions of burnout, referring to feelings of being overextended and perceived depletion of one's emotional and physical resources. Depersonalization represents the interpersonal context of burnout; it refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job. Accomplishment represents the self-evaluative dimension of burnout, referring to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity at work (Maslach, Schaufeli, &Leither, 2001).

Pines and Aronson (1988) emphasize that all kinds of occupations requiring direct contact with people involve some degree of stress.

Certain categories of human services, such as medical, educational, and social-psychological services, are particularly vulnerable to burnout. School teachers are often faced with stressful situations and suffer from high degrees of stress and burnout. There is no single predictor of burnout among teachers working in schools. Various factors may contribute to and continue the development of teacher burnout. Chang (2009) categorized the sources of teacher burnout in three groups: individual factors, organizational factors, and transactional factors. Teacher burnout is often caused by exposure to high levels of organizational stressors, including work overload, large class size, lack of resource, students problems, individuals stressors such as marital status, years of teaching experiences, educational background, personality traits and transactional stressors consisting of peer and administrative support, teacher efficacy, internal rewards et al. Researchers have conducted many studies that have helped to identify relating factors and the sources of burnout. The major sources of burnout among Turkish school teacher in these studies was found age, the number of students, marital status, work environment, appreciation by supervision (Cemaloglu & Sahin, 2007; Gündüz,2005; Kırılmaz, Celen, & Sarp,2003)

Use of various coping strategies accounted for one of the individual sources of teacher burnout (Chang, 2009). Cherniss (1980) stated that professionals who experience burnout are unable to effectively cope with stress and at the same time are unable to eliminate or avoid stress. The individuals who experience prolonged and continual exposure to stressors and lack of adequate coping strategies may succumb to a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion, known as burnout (Dunham, 1980, 1984). In addition, Maslach and Jackson (1982) emphasize that the high rate of burnout in a variety of professions has been associated with withdrawal coping strategies, such as getting away from people, while low burnout has been associated with social coping strategies such as talking with others. In addition, Carmona et. al. (2006) noted that direct and palliative coping styles may play an important role in burnout. A direct coping style is described as problem-solving behavior through rational and task-oriented strategies, whereas a palliative coping style is described as dealing with emotional distress through strategies such as ignoring the situation. A direct coping style has been found to have lower levels of burnout; those who report using a palliative coping style have higher levels of burnout. Moreover, the use of a direct coping style has been associated with downward identification and with increased burnout over time.

A number of studies reported a relationship between teacher burnout and coping strategies in stressful situations (Beckett, 2011; Betoret & Artiga, 2010; Pines & Kafry 1982). Coping strategies such as avoidance and distancing strategies were found to be associated with higher level of stress, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Austin, Shah, & Munce, 2005). Tripken (2011) reported that teachers who experience moderate or high levels of burnout had lower preventive coping than teachers who reported low symptoms of burnouts. Some researchers have found that certain coping strategies appeared to contribute to the level of burnout felt by the teachers (Carolyn, 1998;Chain & Hui,1995).

These kinds of studies have clearly demonstrated that teacher burnout levels are affected by coping strategies. Although burnout has become one of the most widely studied subjects in Turkey, there has been no study which evaluates the link between coping strategies employed and burnout levels specifically among Turkish teachers. The knowledge obtained from this research provides insight into the relationship between coping strategies and burnout of Turkish school teachers.

The primary goal of current study was to understand the role of coping strategies in burnout of Turkish school teachers and associate between participants' coping strategies and their burnout level. As seen in the related literature, we expected that coping strategies would be associated with teacher burnout and would predict their burnout.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 159 Turkish school teachers (79 female and 83 male) with between one and twenty-nine years of work experience. Of the participants, 40 % of the participants were working as teachers in elementary schools. The average age of the participants was 33.59 (*SD*=7.73), ranging from 21 to 59. As for the educational levels of participants, 90.6 % had a graduate degree. About 70 % of the participants were married with a mean of 1.79 children.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected by using the Demographic Information Form, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Ways of Coping Inventory.

Demographic Information Form: All participants completed a Demographic Information Form developed by researchers. This was used to obtain information about socio-demographic features of the participants such as age, gender, education level, and work experiences.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): Originally developed by Maslach and Jackson (1982), the MBI evaluates three domains of burnout: Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The emotional exhaustion domain contains nine dimensions measuring reduced energy and job enthusiasm and emotional and cognitive distancing from the job. Depersonalization consists of five items measuring cynicism, lack of engagement and distancing from the students or treatment of students as inanimate, unfeeling objects. Lastly, personal accomplishment is operationalised along eight dimensions measuring perception of having an influence on others, working well with others and dealing well with problems.

An adaptation study for the Turkish version of the scale was provided by Ergin (1992). The internal reliability of the Turkish version of MBI was 0.83 for emotional exhaustion, 0.65 for depersonalisation, and 0.72 for personal accomplishment; the test-retest reliability was 0.83 for emotional exhaustion, 0.72 for depersonalisation and 0.67 for personal accomplishment.

The MBI is a 22-item instrument with a 5-point Likert-type scale. An intensity score is calculated for each of the three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (0-36), depersonalisation (0-20), and personal accomplishment (0-32). High scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation and low scores of personal accomplishment are considered to indicate burnout (Maslach & Jackson 1982).

Ways of Coping Inventory (WCI). This scale was developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) to measure ways of coping with stress in adult and adolescent populations. It was adapted for Turkish by Sahin and Durak (1995). Results of the factor analysis of the Turkish WCP indicated that stress-coping strategies consisted of five sub-dimensions, including self-confident, optimistic, helpless, fatalistic, and seeking social support (Sahin & Durak 1995). The Cronbach α of the scale was found to be .68.

The WCI is a 4-point Likert type scale with 30 items, each of which asks respondents to indicate the degree to which they use a specific behavior to deal with a stressful situation. The response to each situation ranges from "does not apply or not used" (0) to "used a great deal" (3). Scoring involves adding up individual item responses for each of the eight subscales of ways of coping. High scores indicate that the respondent usually uses the methods described by that scale to cope with a stressful event.

2.3. Procedure

In this study, questionnaires were administered to teachers individually between September and November 2011. Before administration, participants were informed about the nature and goal of the study. They were told that some aspects of burnout would be investigated. In order to provide confidence, participants were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires. The consent for participation was verbally obtained from participants before administration of the questionnaires. Then, questionnaires were described to participants and they were informed about how they should answer items on the questionnaires. Moreover, participants were asked to complete the mentioned measures as honestly and completely as possible and were told that they could refuse to answer any items in the questionnaires that made them uncomfortable.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of MBI and WCI total and subscales. Results showed that the teachers experienced a high amount of emotional exhaustion with a mean score of 23.44 (*SD*=6.62), a low degree of personal accomplishment with a mean score of 21.98 (*SD*=4.19), and a moderate degree of depersonalization with a mean score of 15.76 (*SD*=3.17). The mean scores of the WCI showed that teachers reported using coping strategies that are theoretically adaptive, such as self-confident (*M=15.74*, *SD*=3.40), searching social support (*M=7.29*, *SD*=2.93), and optimistic coping strategies (*M=10.78*, *SD*=2.63). The least frequently used strategies were reported to be the fatalist (*M=4.87*, *SD*=2.76), and helpless (*M=9.26*, *SD*=2.93) coping strategies.

In order to examine the relationship between coping strategies and their burnout, Pearson Moment Correlations were calculated (Table 1). The result indicated that the helpless subscale of the WCI was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion (r=.26, p<.01) and depersonalization subscales (r=.25, p<.01) of the MBI. The fatalist subscale of the WCI has positive and moderate level correlations with depersonalization subscale of the MBI (r=30, p<.01). The self-confident subscale of WCI was negatively correlated with personal accomplishment subscale of the MBI (r=-.33, p<.01). The searching social support subscales of the WCI indicated very low correlations with MBI scores.

Regression analysis was used to examine whether coping strategies are a significant predictors of burnout. In the data analysis, three regression analyses were conducted for the three subscales of the MBI. The results of the regression for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment are given in Table 2.

The coping strategies were able to explain 11 % of total variances on emotional exhaustion score. According to the regression analysis, helpless coping strategy was the only significant predictor of emotional exhaustion at the .05 level. In order to test the hypothesis that individuals with high emotional exhaustion had significantly more helpless coping strategy than those with low emotional exhaustion, a t-test was conducted. When compared to individuals with low emotional exhaustion, individuals with high emotional exhaustion endorsed a significantly more helpless coping strategy (*t*=2.13, *p*<.036). Results also indicated that the coping strategies accounted for 16 % of total variances on depersonalization score. It was found that the fatalist coping strategy was the only significant predictors of depersonalization at the .05 level. However, there was no significant difference between individuals with low and high depersonalization levels in terms of use of the fatalist coping strategy (*t*=1.89, *p*>.074). The contribution of coping strategies explained 17 % of the variance of personal accomplishment. The self-confident coping strategy was the only significant predictor of personal accomplishment at the .05 level. When individuals endorsed high personal accomplishment, they reported to use more self-confident coping strategy (*t*=2.27, *p*<.050).

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to understand the role of coping strategies in burnout of Turkish school teachers. It was generally found that the teachers experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion. This finding was consistent with the results reported by Carolyn (1998), Dunn (2000) and Kırılmaz, Celen & Sarp (2003) and can be linked to many of the sources of teacher burnout identified by Cemaloglu & Sahin, (2007), Gündüz (2005), and Kırılmaz, Celen, & Sarp (2003) including work overload, large class sizes, student problems, and lack of resources.

Results also indicate that teachers reported using adaptive coping strategies such as self-confident, searching social support, and optimistic coping strategies to deal with stressful situations. These results were consistent with results reported by Bozkurt (2004) and Özdemir, Kaya & Recepoglu (2011). Teachers had graduated from university and undergone in-service training. It thus seems that educational experiences help individuals gain stress-coping strategies.

The results indicate that stress coping strategies play a unique role in predicting burnout of teachers. This finding is consistent with previous research findings emphasizing the importance of individual coping strategies against burnout (Cherniss, 1980; Dunham, 1984). Specifically, the helpless coping strategy was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion of teachers and was an important predictor of emotional exhaustion of teachers. Helpless approach expresses the loss of trust in managing the process under stressed conditions, blaming himself for being responsible for the negativity and failing to find a solution to the problem (Sahin & Durak, 1985). The findings of the study suggest that teachers employing the helpless coping strategy to cope with stress might be more prone to emotional exhaustion, feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources.

The self-confident coping strategy was the predictor of personal accomplishment. The negative correlation was found between self-confident coping strategies and personal accomplishment. These results indicate the more self-confident coping strategies teachers employ; the more likely they are to experience high levels of personal accomplishment. When the teachers have the active, rational and conscious efforts to change the situation which involves the assessment of the importance of the problem and the solution options, they feel a high level of personal accomplishment.

The results show that fatalist copings strategies are positively correlated with desperationalization. Therefore, using of the fatalist coping method was shown to be associated with increases in depersonalization.   That is to say, putting on a fatalistic attitude under stressed conditions and accepting to live stress-related negativity leads an individual into desperationalization, which refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job.

This findings emphasis the importance of promoting adaptive coping strategies to combat burnout. Cherniss (1982) suggested possible points of intervention strategies, which are connected to burnout process. Ongoing training for teachers can help them respond productively to problems and reduce burnout. Therefore, strategies such as stress management training or problem solving training to decrease burnout might include career development or training of teachers.

This study has some limitations. First, participants were recruited in a non-random manner and thus may not be representative of all teachers who work in all schools, so generalizations of the results obtained from these data should be made with caution. Moreover, teachers were chosen from a wide range of grade levels. Future research studies are needed, with extensive and random sampling of participants working in different cities.

5. Tables and Figures

5.1. Table 1. The Correlation Between MBI and WCI

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional Exhaustion	-							
2. Depersonalization	.45	-						
3. Personal Accomplishment	.13	.15	-					
4. Self-Confident	-.17	.21**	-.33**	-				
5. Optimistic	-.07	-.18*	.25**	.62**	-			
6. Helpless	.26**	.25**	-.14**	-.33**	-.26	-		
7. Searching for Social Support	.01	.03	.03	.12	.04	-.09	-	
8. Fatalist	.19*	.30**	-.20	-.38	-10	.53	-.15*	-

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

5.2. Table 2. The Result of Regression Analyses on Burnout

	Predictors	B	SH_B	β	T	P	R	R^2	F- value
Emotional Exhaustion									
	Self-Confident	.34	.22	.17	1.53	.128	.33	.11	1.79
	Optimistic	.28	.27	-.10	-1.02	.313			
	Helpless	-.35	.17	.19	-2.08	.045*			
	Fatalistic	.09	.24	.04	.392	.696			
	Seeking Social Support	-.07	.18	-.03	-.392	.696			
Depersonalization									
	Self-Confident	.09	.10	.10	.91	.359	.41	.16	2.95
	Optimistic	.06	.13	.05	.48	.629			
	Helpless	.09	.08	.11	-1.18	.239			
	Fatalistic	.23	.11	-.19	- 2.03	.044*			
	Seeking Social Support	.05	.08	-.05	-.059	.953			
Personal Accomplishment									
	Self-Confident	.31	.14	.26	2.21	.029*	.41	.17	3.16
	Optimistic	.04	.17	.13	.25	.802			
	Helpless	-.01	.10	-.01	-.15	.879			
	Fatalistic	.19	.15	.12	1.29	.197			
	Seeking Social Support	.12	.11	.08	1.05	.294			

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