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The Relationship Between Occupational Burnout and Perceived Ethical Leadership Style

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Abstract

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It is believed that ethical leadership style might be significant for the professional burnout, but mostly in the literature these phenomena are investigated separately. Their correlation is controversial, the previous research results have been limited. The aim of the study was to establish the relationship between employee occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style. Also the importance of employees' socio-demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, and education) for this relation was tested. 242 employees working in Lithuania (47 men and 195 women) participated in the study. Ethical leadership style was assessed with the questionnaire of Brown, Trevino & Harrison (2005). Occupational burnout was measured using Copenhagen Burnout Inventory by Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen & Christensen (2005). The results revealed that burnout of employees who consider their leaders as more ethical is lower than that of the employees who consider their leader to be less ethical. The study also showed that employees' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, education and age) are not significant to the correlation between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational burnout. The conclusion may be drawn that employee attitudes towards their leader is important for the occupational burnout. This means that in order to reduce burnout leader has to focus on ethical behavior and moral working environment.

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Keywords: Occupational burnout; Perceived ethical leadership style.

1. Introduction

According to European research data it was discovered that 23 % of employees have already suffered from occupational burnout (Kavaliauskienė, & Balčiūnaitė 2014). It is agreed that burnout is one of the fundamental factors deterring workers' health and well-being resulting in various disorders of nervous system, metabolism, cardiovascular diseases, loss of energy, fatigue, insomnia, stomach



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disorders, depression, and anxiety (Bellou, & Chatzinikou, 2015; Laschinger, & Fida, 2014). The consequences of occupational burnout for the organisation are less discussed in scientific literature and considered as less harmful comparing to the consequences for the employees (Petruševićienė, 2013). Therefore, the levels of burnout and possible prerequisites of this negative issue in employees' life are constantly reinvestigated in different countries (Chaudhry, Khokhar, Waseem, & Haq, 2015).

Researchers usually use the definition of burnout presented by Maslach & colleagues (1982), that is certainly the most popular in the US and internationally (Lang, Patrician, & Steele, 2012). However, Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen & Christensen (2005), Borritz, Bjorner, Villadsen, Mikkelsen & Kristensen (2006) criticise this model. They state that depersonalisation may be handling strategy of fatigue and stress, whereas low personal accomplishment is the consequence of occupational burnout. Also they argue that the model of Maslach is not suitable for the employees whose working activity is not related to dealing with clients (Kristensen et al., 2005; Madathil, Heck & Schulberg, 2014). Therefore, this research is based on the occupational burnout model suggested by Kristensen et al. (2005) which is adapted for a wider range of employees (Borritz et al., 2006). Kristensen et al. (2005) claim that occupational burnout indicates the level of burnout which is the result of working activity, being in the working environment or thoughts about the work (Kristensen et al., 2005). They identified three dimensions of burnout: personal burnout (essential element of burnout syndrome), work-related burnout and customer-related burnout (Robinson, Magee, & Caputi, 2016). Personal burnout is employee's emotional and physical fatigue; work-related burnout is caused by troublesome work activity; customer-related burnout is caused by frequent communication with customers (Kristensen et al., 2005).

Scientific literature has shown that organizational factors, like job demands, high control, conflicts at work, role imbalance, heavy workload, or tight work schedule, are more significant for the emergence of occupational burnout than individual factors (Russell, 2014; Guo, Guo, Yang, & Sun, 2015). Leadership style of the manager might be one of the essential organizational factors (Laschinger, & Fida, 2014). The majority of leadership styles is evaluated unambiguously in the context of occupational burnout. Transformational, authentic, participative, or supportive leadership styles are related to lower probability of occupational burnout while transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles are related to higher probability of occupational burnout (Yuan, & Lee, 2011; Gill, Flaschner, & Shachar, 2006; Russell, 2014; Laschinger, Wong, & Grau, 2012; Zehir, Ertosun, Zehir, & Muceldili, 2011; Zopiatis, & Constanti, 2010; Kanste et al., 2007). Still the relationship between ethical leadership and burnout is not clear. Authors state that issues of ethical leadership in the context of burnout need further and more deep investigations (Kanste, Kyngas, & Nikkila, 2007; Cremer, 2015). Thus the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between employee occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style.

Different authors present various definitions of ethical leadership styles, however, this research is based on the definition proposed by Brown, Trevino & Harrison (2005). Ethical leadership could be defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120).

The main ethical manager features are: moral values (honesty, responsibility, reliability), managerial skills (changing the behaviour of subordinates by establishing clear ethical standards) and orientation to the subordinates (taking care of the welfare of subordinates, employee motivation, encouragement, support) (Cuellar, & Giles, 2012; Chughtai, 2015).

Some authors claim that ethical leadership reduces employees' occupational burnout (Madathil, Heck, & Schuldberg, 2014). According to Peterson, Walumbwa, Avolio & Hannah (2012), Bouchamma & Brie (2014), Nelson, Boudrias, Brunet, Morin, De Civita, Savoie & Alderson (2014), Sahin, Cengiz & Abakay (2013), ethical manager creates favourable conditions to achieve professional and personal development of the employees. This leads to positive assessment of manager, higher well-being and the sense of happiness. Consequently this reduces burnout (Kanste, Kyngas, & Nikkila, 2007; Bouchamma, & Brie, 2014). On the other hand, some authors provide contradictory results stating that ethical leadership may increase occupational burnout (Liu, Loi, & Lam, 2013). Ethical requirements and high standards of moral performance from the leader may cause challenges for subordinates, increase tension and stress, that lead to exhaustion (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2013). These controversies initiate the research question: What is the relationship between employees' occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style? As the definition of the ethical leadership provides more rationale for positive impact of ethical leadership, we hypothesize that employees who perceive their managers as more ethical have lower levels of occupational burnout than employees who perceive their managers as less ethical.

Also the relationship between ethical leadership style and employees' occupational burnout may be different due to certain socio-demographic characteristics of employee. Some earlier studies revealed that tension and stress are more often experienced by employees who have higher education (Michailidis, & Georgiou, 2005; Watson, Deary, Thompson, & Li, 2008; Rudman, & Gustavsson, 2012). They are more ambitious and more demanding for themselves, and this leads to a greater probability of occupational burnout (Lopez, Green, Carmody-Bubb, & Kodatt, 2011; Kompier, 2006). Furthermore, Antoniou, Polychroni & Vlachakis (2006), Rupert & Kent (2007) claim that younger employees get tired more often than older. More frequent occupational burnout of the younger employees is explained by more energy and efforts invested performing tasks and seeking to meet high standards of working requirements. Moreover, Kuzminaitė (2012) states, that inappropriate ways to overcome stressful situations increase the risk of occupational burnout. As Zheng, Witt, Waite, David, Driel, McDonald, Callison & Crepeau (2015) claim that employees who have a higher level of occupational burnout are more sensitive for various characteristics of the organisation, including the leadership style. Such individual differences in burnout encourage to raise the second research question: Is the relationship between employees' occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style different in separate socio-demographic groups (education, age, gender)? Previous research results provide some data for the hypotheses: the association between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational burnout is stronger among employees with higher education than among employees with lower education; and the association between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational burnout is stronger among younger employees than among older ones.

In addition, gender issues also might be important in this context. Peterson, Walumbwa, Avolio & Hannah (2012) and Kanste, Kyngas & Nikkila (2007) confirmed that one of the main features of ethical leader is provided emotional-social support. This includes open communication, listening to subordinates, concern, empathy, and recognition. Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers (2016) state that women more than men are sensitive to support demonstrated by ethical leader. This might lead to different associations between leadership style and burnout in males' and females' groups. Based on the literature we hypothesize that the relationship between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational burnout is stronger for the women than for the men.

2. Research methods

The study involved 242 employees from various organizations in Lithuania. Women (195) study involved more than men (47). The age range was from 23 to 73 years. It was derived average age (45,62 years). In both age groups (46 years old (and less) 47 years (and more)) the number of respondents was similar. The bigger part of respondents had higher education.

A self-reported questionnaire for the employees consists of three main parts: (1) Ethical Leadership Questionnaire; (2) Occupational Burnout Questionnaire; (3) demographic questions (gender, age, education).

In order to evaluate ethical leadership style the questionnaire created by Brown, Trevino & Harrison (2005) was used. This instrument is composed of ten items. Each item is evaluated according to five-point Likert scale (1 – totally disagree, 5 – totally agree). A higher score indicates a greater perceived ethical leadership style. Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire is 0.916.

Employees' occupational burnout was assessed by Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005). In order to adapt the questionnaire to a wider range of respondents (employees whose work is not necessarily related to the customer service), the occupational burnout questionnaire used in this research consists of twelve items composing single factor of general burnout.

Each item of the questionnaire is evaluated according to five-point Likert scale (1 – never / almost never and 5 – always). An increasing number of the points shows that a respondent has a higher level of occupational burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005). General Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire is 0.862.

The results were analysed with the help of descriptive statistics, Student's t tests, and correlational analyses.

3. Findings

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------------------------------------|-----|---------|----------------|
| Perceived ethical leadership style | 239 | 42,0126 | 6,09896 |
| Occupational burnout | 234 | 25,3932 | 5,90404 |

Table 2. Student's t tests analyses.

| | Employee's education | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|-----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Perceived ethical leadership style | Lower education | 43 | 42,8372 | 6,05896 | 0.323 |
| | Higher education | 193 | 41,8135 | 6,13786 | |
| Occupational burnout | Lower education | 41 | 24,4634 | 6,73831 | 0.307 |
| | Higher education | 190 | 25,6316 | 5,74696 | |
| | Employee's age | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Perceived ethical leadership style | Younger (20-46 year) | 119 | 41,0672 | 5,67141 | 0.124 |
| | Older (47-65 year) | 117 | 42,9402 | 6,43038 | |
| Occupational burnout | Younger (20-46 year) | 119 | 26,5966 | 5,62579 | 0.001 |
| | Older (47-65 year) | 112 | 24,1161 | 6,00262 | |
| | Employee's gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Perceived ethical leadership style | Men | 47 | 41,2128 | 6,68852 | 0.317 |
| | Women | 192 | 42,2083 | 5,94815 | |
| Occupational burnout | Men | 47 | 23,5745 | 6,28229 | 0.082 |
| | Women | 187 | 25,8503 | 5,73229 | |

In order to test the first hypothesis, Spearman's rho correlation was used. It was determined that employees who perceive their manager as characterised by ethical leadership style have statistically significant lower level of occupational burnout than employees who perceive their manager as less characterised by ethical leadership style ((Spearman's rho correlation coefficient -0.357) ($p < 0.000$)).

In order to compare the relationships in different groups of employees, Fisher r-to-z transformation was used. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style among different employees' socio-demographic characteristics.

| | Employee's education | N | Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficients | Z | p |
|--|----------------------|-----|---|------|--------|
| The relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style | Higher education | 190 | -0.266 | 1.9 | 0.0574 |
| | Lower education | 40 | -0.547 | | |
| | Employee's age | N | Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficients | Z | p |
| The relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style | Younger (20-46 year) | 118 | -0.256 | 1.87 | 0.0615 |
| | Older (47-65 year) | 112 | -0.471 | | |
| | Employee's gender | N | Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficients | Z | p |
| The relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style | Women | 187 | -0.278 | 1.95 | 0.0512 |
| | Men | 47 | -0.546 | | |

Table 3 show no statistically significant differences of correlations in different socio-demographic groups of study participants.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The main purpose of the study was to establish the relationship between employee occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style. First of all we hypothesized that employees who perceive their managers as more prone to ethical leadership style have lower level of occupational burnout than employees who perceive their managers as less prone to ethical leadership style. The results confirmed the findings of Peterson et al. (2012), Bouchamma & Brie (2014), Nelson et al. (2014), Kanste, Kyngas & Nikkila (2007), Sahin, Cengiz & Abakay (2013), Brown Trevino & Harrison (2005), Slater (2008), and others who found that ethical leadership style has significant contribution to the development of occupational burnout. This might be explained by ethical manager's behaviour with the employees. As mentioned earlier, ethical manager is orientated to the subordinates (gives enough individual attention, listen to them, encourage them to express their opinions, proposals, new ideas and welcomes the initiative of the employees, openly share information with them and has high moral values characterized by trustworthiness, reliability, responsibility, consistency, justice, honesty, motivation, integrity. Consequently this leads to a positive evaluation of the ethical leader. Thus, the more expressed ethical manager's leadership style, the more favourably employees evaluate their supervisor. As a result, the probability of burnout is decreasing.

Contrary to expectations we did not find the support for our further hypotheses. Our study found that employees' education and age are not significant for the relationship between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational burnout. The results of this research do not coincide with research carried out by Michailidis & Georgiou (2005), Watson, Deary, Thompson & Li (2008), Rudman & Gustavsson (2012), Kuzminaitė (2011), Kompier (2006), Rupert & Kent (2007). Such results can be explained by more important impact of variables that were not analysed in this research. For instance, relationships with colleagues, cultural environment, working experience and etc. might sometimes have greater contribution to the relations and employee well-being than usual socio-demographic factors (Enehaug, Helmersen, & Mamelund, 2016). The relationship between the latter factors and occupational burnout can be very similar or even stronger equally of employees education and age groups than the relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style. It can reduce the importance of socio-demographic factors in the connections between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational employees' burnout.

Further, the analysis of the results showed that gender of the employees was not significant for the relationship between perceived ethical leadership style and burnout. The results did not confirm the conclusions of Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers (2016). Although, as the Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers (2016) stated, women are more sensitive to support demonstrated by ethical manager, however, such results could be determined by a greater sensitivity of men to another specific behaviours of ethical manager. This might reduce the value of gender for the relationship between perceived ethical leadership style and occupational employees' burnout.

There are several limitations in this study. First, our data were limited to Lithuanian organisations. The number of the participants who participated in research is not representative. Second, the study did not analyse all possible occupational burnout determinants, therefore, the results could be determined by the other aspects of organisation environment, activities, employees' personal characteristics and

attitudes. Third, objective measurement instruments were not used for the collection of the research data. Respondents filled in questionnaires on their own. Such data collection strategy could cause false results due to the tendency to evaluate manager's ethical leadership with high scores because there might be distrust of the confidentiality of the data.

The results of this research indicate that employees' opinions and subjective evaluation of the manager's behaviour is significant for the occupational burnout. As a result, further studies should pay attention how employees evaluate the factors related to the working environment, manager behaviour and other work-related activities and to determine the connections between these factors and occupational employees' burnout. Main results provide some practical implications. They propose that in order to reduce occupational employees' burnout, it is important to pay attention to the employees' needs and ethical behaviour, and encourage to investigate in the future the factors that may change their approach to the manager, working environment and operational peculiarities. In order to determine more aspects of the relationship between occupational employees' burnout and ethical leadership style more research is needed.

The conclusions of the research are as follows:

1. Employees who perceive their manager as characterised by ethical leadership style have lower level of occupational burnout than employees who perceive their manager as less characterised by ethical leadership style.
2. There is no gender differences in the relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style
3. There is no differences in the relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style among employees with higher and lower education.
4. There is no differences in the relationship between occupational burnout and perceived ethical leadership style among older and younger employees.

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