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Assessing the effectiveness of support strategies in reducing professional burnout among

clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA)

Abstract

The pastoral care and support of the clergy is an issue of growing concern to denominational leaders in the light of reported levels of stress in ministry, sickness, and early retirement. Drawing on the balanced affect model of professional burnout proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory and the dimensional model of personality proposed by the abbreviated Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised, this study assesses the effectiveness of five support strategies operated by The Presbyterian Church (USA) to reduce levels of professional burnout among the clergy: study leave, sabbaticals, ministry mentors, spiritual directors, and minister peer groups. Data provided by a random sample of 744 clergy demonstrated that, after controlling for individual difference in age and personality, none of the five examined strategies served as predictors of lower levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry, but two strategies served as predictors of enhancing satisfaction in ministry, namely having a mentor and taking study leave.

Keywords: clergy, burnout, stress, spiritual director, mentor, Presbyterian

Introduction

Over the past three decades a series of books has drawn attention to the problems of professional burnout and poor work-related psychological health among the clergy, employing arresting titles like *Ministry burnout* (Sanford, 1982), *Clergy stress: The hidden conflicts in ministry* (Coate, 1989), *Clergy under stress: A study of homosexual and heterosexual clergy* (Fletcher, 1990), *Burnout: Stress in ministry* (Davey, 1995), *Healthy clergy: Wounded leaders* (Walmsley & Lummis, 1997), *Burnout in church leaders* (Kaldor & Bullpitt, 2001), *The cracked pot: The state of today's Anglican parish clergy* (Warren, 2002) *Clergy burnout: Recovering from the 70-hour work week and other self defecting practices* (Lehr, 2006), and *Public people, private lives: Tackling stress in clergy families* (Burton & Burton, 2009). One particular research tradition has attempted to enhance scientific rigour in this field by means of employing recognised psychometric measures of professional burnout and work-related psychological health among relatively large samples of clergy. There have been three main strands within this research tradition.

The first strand has employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory as originally developed for use among the caring professions or human service professions by Maslach and Jackson (1986). The Maslach Burnout Inventory conceptualises poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout in terms of three dimensions defined as high levels of emotional exhaustion, high levels of depersonalisation and low levels of personal accomplishment. Studies employing the Maslach Burnout Inventory among clergy have been reported by Warner and Carter (1984), Strümpfer and Bands (1996), Rodgerson and Piedmont (1998), Stanton-Rich and Iso-Ahola (1998), Virginia (1998), Evers and Tomic (2003), Golden, Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, and Rodgerson (2004), Raj & Dean (2005), Miner (2007a, 2007b), Doolittle (2007), Parker and Martin (2011), and Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, and de Witte (2011).

The second strand has employed a modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory especially developed by Rutledge and Francis (2004) for use among clergy. With permission from the Consulting Psychologists Press, some of the existing items were reshaped to reflect the experience and language of the clerical profession and some new items were developed to expand the range of issues explored in the parent instrument. Studies employing the modified Maslach Burnout Inventory among clergy have been reported by Francis and Rutledge (2000), Francis, Louden, and Rutledge (2004), Francis and Turton (2004a, 2004b), Randall (2004, 2007), Rutledge (2006), Francis, Turton, and Louden (2007), and Turton and Francis (2007).

The third strand has employed the Francis Burnout Inventory as originally developed for use among clergy by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005). The Francis Burnout Inventory conceptualises poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout in terms of Bradburn's (1969) classic model of balanced affect, involving high levels of negative affect in the absence of good levels of positive affect. In this model positive affect is accessed by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and negative affect is accessed by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. Studies employing the Francis Burnout Inventory have been reported by Francis, Wulff, and Robbins (2008), Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, and Castle (2009), Robbins and Francis (2010), and Brewster, Francis, and Robbins (2011).

The measurement of work-related psychological health and professional burnout through psychometric instruments like the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the modified Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Francis Burnout Inventory allow clear comparisons to be made between groups and clear hypotheses to be tested. The most secure research finding so far established by this research tradition concerns the association between poor work-related psychological health or professional burnout and two of the three major dimensions of

personality proposed by Hans Eysenck (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) and operationalised by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985), and the Eysenck Personality Scales (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). Studies conducted among 1,468 Roman Catholic priests by Francis, Louden, and Rutledge (2004), among 1,071 Anglican clergy by Rutledge and Francis (2004), among 1,278 Anglican clergy by Francis and Turton (2004b), and among 2,319 clergy from a range of denominations in Australia and New Zealand by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins and Castle (2005) all located poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout within the personality quadrant defined by low extraversion and by high neuroticism. This finding among clergy has also been demonstrated among the professional groups, including teachers (Capel, 1992; Goddard, O'Brien, & Goddard, 2006), childcare workers (Manlove, 1993), employment service care managers (Goddard, Creed, & Patton, 2001; Goddard, Patton, & Creed, 2004), and nurses (Bühler & Land, 2004).

The finding that there is a consistent association between personality and poor work-related psychological health or professional burnout is useful in two senses. In a practical sense, the finding could help those holding responsibility for the practical oversight of clergy to identify those most vulnerable to poor work-related psychological health and to target appropriate interventions or support strategies. In a research sense, the finding could help to establish a robust research design capable of assessing the effectiveness of different interventions or support strategies. Three studies have been reported that have tested this research design to assess the effectiveness of three specific support strategies: supervision, prayer, and companion animals.

In the first study, Francis and Turton (2004a) examined the theory that clergy who hold a positive attitude towards supervision (and who, through supervision, may engage in reflective ministry) are less likely to suffer burnout. Data were provided by a sample of 1,276 male stipendiary parochial clergy working in the Church of England who completed the modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the short-form Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, together with a ten-item scale concerning attitude toward professional supervision. The findings did not provide a great deal of evidence in support of the hypothesis. Clergy who expect to engage in supervision in their ordained ministry are neither more nor less susceptible to depersonalisation nor more or less susceptible to emotional exhaustion, in comparison with colleagues who do not expect to engage in supervision. On the other hand, clergy who expect to engage in supervision in their ordained ministry are likely to record a significantly higher level of personal accomplishment, in comparison with colleagues who do not expect to engage in supervision.

In the second study, Turton and Francis (2007) examined the theory that confidence in prayer is fundamental to maintaining a good level of work-related psychological health among clergy and that low confidence in prayer is associated with professional burnout. Data were provided by a sample of 1,278 male stipendiary parochial clergy working in the Church of England who completed the modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the short-form Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, together with a scale assessing clergy attitude toward prayer. The findings indicated that, after controlling for the personality variables, a positive attitude towards prayer was associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion, lower levels of depersonalisation, and higher levels of personal accomplishment. Reflecting on these findings, Turton and Francis (2007) concluded that, while a disciplined prayer life may remain central to testing a vocation to Anglican ministry and central to programmes of ministerial formation, the busy round of parish life may make the disciplined pattern of prayer harder to maintain in the years after ordination. Yet a priesthood that loses touch with the practice of prayer and loses confidence in the theology of prayer may become separated from the vocational roots essential for sustaining energy in ministry. Prayer may

well stand not only theologically, but also psychologically, at the very heart of Christian ministry.

In the third study, Francis, Turton, and Louden (2007) examined the theory that companion animals may contribute to the work-related psychological health of Catholic parochial clergy as a possible antidote to the personal and social loneliness of single celibate men. Data were provided by a sample of 1,482 Catholic clergy serving in parochial ministry in England and Wales who completed the modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the short-form Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire together with a question about the ownership of companion animals. The findings indicated that, after controlling for the personality variables, no psychological benefit accrued from owning a cat, while the ownership of a dog was associated with statistically significant (but very small) increases in two aspects of professional burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation). Reflecting on these findings, Francis, Turton, and Louden (2007) concluded that, instead of providing opportunities for relaxation, the companion dog seemed rather to add to the pressures of life in the presbytery, and to provide yet another indication of the way in which men serving in the Catholic priesthood in today's society are overburdened with the demands of ministry. With such pressures there may just not be enough time to enjoy taking the dog for a walk.

Against this background the aim of the present study is to examine the effectiveness of five specific support strategies promoted by The Presbyterian Church (USA) for reducing professional burnout and for enhancing work-related psychological health among clergy serving in that Church. The five specific support strategies promoted by The Presbyterian Church (USA) concern the provision of sabbaticals, the availability of study leave, the use of a mentor, the use of a spiritual director, and the membership of a minister peer group. The first two of these five provisions (sabbaticals and periods of study leave) suggest that planned time away from the recurrent pressures of ministry offer opportunities for reflection and for recouperation, as well as for creative study. The other three provisions (mentor, spiritual director, and minister peer group) suggest that planned opportunities to discuss work-related experiences and expectations within the context of secure relationships facilitate mature reflection and evaluation. While many other support strategies may be accessed by individual clergy these five have been specifically identified by this Church. The specific research hypothesis is that accessing any one of these support strategies should be reflected in lower levels of professional burnout, after taking into account individual differences in personality.

Method

Sample

A sample of 539 clergymen and 205 clergywomen serving in a parish in The Presbyterian Church (USA) responded to a self-completion questionnaire; 12% were under the age of forty, 24% were in their forties, 40% were in their fifties, 20% were in their sixties, 3% were aged seventy or over, and the remaining 2% failed to reveal their age.

Measures

Work-related psychological health was assessed by the two scales of the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005). Positive affect was assessed by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and negative affect was assessed by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. Each scale compared 11 items assessed on a five-point scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

Personality was assessed by extraversion and neuroticism scales of the abbreviated Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised as proposed by Francis, Brown, and Philipchalk (1992). Each of the two major dimensions of personality (extraversion and neuroticism) is assessed by a six-time scale. There is also a six-item lie scale. Each item is assessed on a two-point scale: yes and no.

Support strategies were assessed by the following five questions: Have you ever taken a sabbatical while in ministry? Have you taken study leave within the last five years? Do you have a mentor in ministry now? Do you belong to a minister peer group now? Do you have a spiritual director now?

Results

Table 1 presents the general take-up of the five specified support strategies. Just over half of the clergy currently belong to a minister peer group (53%), a quarter currently have a mentor in ministry (20%), and one in eight currently have a spiritual director (13%). There is a high level of use made of the study leave facility: 87% of the clergy have taken a study leave within the last five years. One in five of the clergy have taken a sabbatical while in ministry (19%).

- insert Table 1 about here -

Table 2 presents the scale properties of the five variables subsequently introduced into the regression model: two measures of work-related psychological health, the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS); and the three Eysenckian measures, extraversion, neuroticism and the lie scale. All five scales achieve *alpha* coefficients of internal consistency reliability in excess of the threshold of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003).

- insert Table 2 about here -

Table 3 presents the two multiple regression models with the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry as the dependent variables (extraversion, neuroticism and lie scale entered in that order) before entering the five support strategies. The regression models have been designed to explore the effect of each of the five support strategies independently. According to the *beta* weights the following three main conclusions can be drawn from the regression models.

- insert Table 3 about here -

First, in terms of the personal factors, sex is not a significant predictor of either positive or negative affect. Clergymen and clergywomen record roughly equal scores on emotional exhaustion and on satisfaction. Age, on the other hand, is a significant predictor of both positive affect and negative affect. Compared with younger clergy, older clergy show higher levels of satisfaction in ministry and lower levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry. This finding is consisted with a range of previous studies (see, for example Rutledge & Francis, 2004; Francis, Louden, & Rutledge, 2004) and may best be explained by the tendency for the younger clergy most suffering from burnout to leave ministry before they enter the older age group.

Second, in terms of the personality measures, these data confirm the findings reviewed earlier. Positive affect, as assessed by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, is correlated positively with extraversion and negatively with neuroticism. Negative affect, as assessed by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, is correlated negatively with extraversion and

positively with neuroticism. The lie scale (usually interpreted as a measure of social conformity) is correlated positively with satisfaction in ministry and negatively with emotional exhaustion. This finding suggests that socially conforming clergy may experience ministry more positively than their less socially conforming colleagues.

Third, the major interest from the two regression models concerns the impact of the five support strategies on work-related psychological health, after taking into account the influence of sex, age and personality. The data do not commend any of these strategies as being particularly effective in reducing professional burnout or in enhancing work-related psychological health. In terms of negative affect (emotional exhaustion) none of the five support strategies emerged as having significant impact. In terms of positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) just two of the five support strategies emerged as having (a small) significant impact. Slightly higher levels of satisfaction in ministry were reported by those clergy who had taken study leave within the last five years (87% of the sample) and by those clergy who currently had a mentor in ministry (20% of the sample). Belonging to a minister peer group, currently having a spiritual director, and having taken a sabbatical while in ministry were unrelated to current levels of satisfaction in ministry.

Conclusion

Against a wider background of research concerned with the measurement of professional burnout and work-related psychological health among clergy, the present study set out to examine the effectiveness of five specific support strategies available within The Presbyterian Church (USA) for reducing professional burnout or for enhancing work-related psychological health. The five support strategies were the provision of sabbaticals, the availability of study leave, the use of a mentor, the use of a spiritual director, and the membership of a minister peer group.

Data provided by 539 clergymen and 205 clergywomen serving in a parish in The Presbyterian Church (USA) question the effectiveness of these strategies. After taking age, sex and personality into account, none of the five support strategies significantly lowered levels of emotional exhaustion. The fact that two of them, however, enhanced levels of satisfaction in ministry deserves further attention.

Higher levels of satisfaction in ministry were associated with having taken study leave within the last five years. Given the fact that the majority of clergy (87%) had taken study leave within the past five years, it may be worth giving closer attention to the minority who have failed to welcome this opportunity. Failure to take study leave within the provision of The Presbyterian Church (USA) may be symptomatic of a more serious malaise.

Higher levels of satisfaction in ministry were associated with currently having a mentor in ministry. The system of mentoring available within The Presbyterian Church (USA) may be worth closer scrutiny and further development. Certainly, out of the range of available support strategies explored in the present study, mentoring appears to offer the better hope for enhancing the work-related psychological health of the clergy.

Alongside the previous studies reported by Francis and Turton (2004a), by Turton and Francis (2007), and by Francis, Turton, and Louden (2007) the present study suggests that it is possible to evaluate the impact of different support strategies on enhancing the work-related psychological health of the clergy. Further studies within the same tradition would be well placed for developing ministry as a research-based profession and for improving the health of the clergy and the potential effectiveness of their ministry.

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Table 1

Pastoral Strategies

Strategy	Yes %
Have you ever taken a sabbatical while in the ministry?	19
Have you taken a study leave within the last five years?	87
Do you have a mentor in ministry now?	26
Do you belong to a minister peer group now?	53
Do you have a spiritual director now?	13

Table 2

Scale properties

scale	*alpha*	male means	sd	female means	sd	*t*	p<
SEEM	.82	27.41	7.90	28.79	7.94	2.1	.05
SIMS	.80	44.56	5.70	44.16	5.79	0.8	NS
Extraversion	.81	3.61	2.03	3.82	2.13	1.2	NS
Neuroticism	.69	1.50	1.57	2.02	1.66	4.0	.001
Lie Scale	.72	2.75	1.90	2.58	1.86	1.1	NS

Table 3

Multiple regression

	r^2	Increase			beta	t	p<
		r^2	F	p<			
Satisfaction in Ministry Scale							
Sex	0.001	0.001	0.5	NS	.008	0.2	NS
Age	0.025	0.024	17.4	.001	.128	3.5	.001
Extraversion	0.067	0.042	31.6	.001	.151	4.3	.001
Neuroticism	0.146	0.080	65.7	.001	-.264	7.3	.001
Lie scale	0.150	0.004	2.9	NS	.069	2.0	.05
Sabbatical	0.156	0.007	5.5	.05	.062	1.7	NS
Mentor	0.163	0.007	5.7	.05	.076	2.1	.05
Peer group	0.168	0.005	4.5	.05	.060	1.6	NS
Study leave	0.174	0.005	4.5	.05	.075	2.1	.05
Spiritual director	0.175	0.001	0.0	NS	.028	0.8	NS
Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry							
Sex	0.004	0.004	3.1	NS	-.014	-0.4	NS
Age	0.044	0.039	29.1	.001	-.119	-3.6	.001
Extraversion	0.065	0.022	16.2	.001	-.076	-2.4	.05
Neuroticism	0.296	0.231	231.3	.001	.484	14.6	.001
Lie scale	0.300	0.004	4.1	.05	-.073	-2.3	.05
Sabbatical	0.303	0.003	2.8	NS	-.046	-1.4	NS
Mentor	0.303	0.000	0.1	NS	.001	0.0	NS
Peer group	0.307	0.003	3.4	NS	-.050	-1.5	NS
Study leave	0.310	0.003	3.4	NS	-.065	-2.0	NS
Spiritual director	0.313	0.003	2.7	NS	.054	1.6	NS