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Assessing clergy work-related psychological health:
Reliability and validity of the Francis Burnout Inventory

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Abstract

Drawing on the classic model of balanced affect, the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI) conceptualised good work-related psychological health among clergy in terms of negative affect being balanced by positive affect. In the FBI negative affect is assessed by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) and positive affect is assessed by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS). In support of the idea of balanced affect, previous work had shown a significant interaction between the effects of SEEM and SIMS scores, showing that the mitigating effects of positive affect on burnout increased with increasing levels of negative affect. In this paper a convenience sample of 155 priests serving with the Roman Catholic Church in Italy have been assessed on the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS) as an independent measure of wellbeing and concurrently on the two scales, SEEM and SIMS. Crucially for confirming the idea of balanced affect, there was a significant interaction between the effects of SEEM and SIMS scores on scores recorded on the Purpose in Life Scale, confirming that the mitigating effects of satisfaction in ministry on purpose increased with increasing levels of emotional exhaustion.

Keywords: Balanced affect, purpose in life, Catholic priests, exhaustion, satisfaction

Introduction

Poor work-related psychological health or professional burnout is a matter of theoretical and practical concern across many of the caring professions, including the clergy. One established model for assessing both the levels and correlates of poor work-related psychological health among the caring professions has been operationalised through the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1996). This model conceptualises and assesses professional burnout as comprising three components, styled emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal accomplishment.

In the Maslach Burnout Inventory, emotional exhaustion is assessed by a nine-item scale. The items describe feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. The item with the highest factor loading on this dimension is one referring directly to burnout, 'I feel burned out from my work.' Depersonalisation is assessed by a five-item scale. The items describe an unfeeling and impersonal response toward the individuals in one's care. An example item on this dimension is 'I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects.' Personal accomplishment is assessed by an eight-item scale. The items describe feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people. An example item on this dimension is 'I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work'. A combination of research evidence and theoretical development has led to the suggestion that the three dimensions of burnout conceptualised by the Maslach Burnout Inventory are not only independent, but also sequential, with emotional exhaustion being the lead and primary indicator (Maslach & Jackson, 1996). According to this model, emotional exhaustion leads to depersonalization, and depersonalisation leads to the loss of the sense of personal accomplishment. The Maslach Burnout Inventory has been employed in a series of studies among clergy, including work reported by Warner and Carter (1984), Crea (1994), Strümpfer and Bands (1996), Rodgerson and Piedmont (1998), Stanton-Rich and Iso-Ahola

(1998), Virginia (1998), Evers and Tomic (2003), Golden, Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, and Rodgeron (2004), Raj and Dean (2005), Miner (2007a, 2007b) and Doolittle (2007, 2010), Chandler (2009), Joseph, Corveleyn, Luyten, and de Witte (2010), Buys and Rothmann (2010), Parker and Martin (2011), Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, and de Witte (2011), Rossetti (2011), Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2013), Herrera, Pedrosa, Galindo, Suárez-Álvarez, Villardón, and García-Cueto (2014), Crea and Francis (2015), and Adams, Hough, Proeschold-Bell, Yao, and Kolkin (2016).

Although the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been used in studies among clergy, some reservations have been expressed that the items are not particularly well-worded to capture the experience and working practices of religious professionals. For example, it has been noted that some clergy seem uncomfortable referring to those among whom they minister as ‘clients’. In response to this criticism, Rutledge and Francis (2004) obtained permission from the Consulting Psychologist Press to reshape some of the items of the Maslach Burnout Inventory to reflect better the experience and language of the clerical profession, and at the same time to develop some new items relevant to the clerical profession that would bring the three subscales to the same length of ten items each. A series of studies has reported findings employing this modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory in the United Kingdom among Roman Catholic priests engaged in parochial ministry (Francis, Loudon, & Rutledge, 2004; Francis, Turton, & Loudon, 2007) and among Anglican parochial clergy (Francis & Rutledge, 2000; Francis & Turton, 2004a, 2004b; Randall, 2004, 2007; Rutledge, 2006; Turton & Francis, 2007). The modified Maslach Burnout Inventory for use among clergy has been further modified and refined by Hills, Francis, and Rutledge (2004).

More recently a somewhat different criticism has been offered of the model of burnout conceptualized and operationalised by the Maslach Burnout Inventory, with particular reference to clergy. This criticism has challenged the three-component sequential

model of burnout in favour of a two-component balanced affect model. This alternative model of clergy burnout, proposed by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) draws on Bradburn's (1969) classic notion of 'balanced affect', according to which positive affect and negative affect are not opposite ends of a single continuum, but two separate continua. According to this model it is totally reasonable for individual clergy to experience at one and the same time high levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect. According to this model of balanced affect, warning signs of poor work-related psychological health occur when *high* levels of negative affect coincide with *low* levels of positive affect. In terms of the work-related experiences of clergy, Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) translated negative affect into emotional exhaustion and positive affect into ministry satisfaction. These two work-related constructs were then operationalised by separate 11-item scales: Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM), first reported by Francis, Kaldor, Shevlin, and Lewis (2004), and Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS). Together these two scales comprise the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI). Recent 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), Brewster, Francis, and Robbins (2011), Francis, Gubb, and Robbins (2012), Robbins, Francis, and Powell (2012), Barnard and Curry (2012), Randall (2013a, 2013b, 2015), Francis, Robbins, and Wulff (2013a; 2013b), Francis, Payne and Robbins (2013), Robbins and Francis (2014), Francis Laycock and Brewster (2015), Sterland (2015), Francis and Crea (2015), and Durkee-Lloyd (2016).

In a study conducted among clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA), Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011), set out to test the balanced affect model of clergy work-related psychological health. The strategy adopted by this study examined the incremental impact on independent measures of burnout of the interaction term created by the product of the two measures of negative affect (Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry)

and positive affect (Satisfaction in Ministry Scale) after taking into account the impact of these two factors considered separately. The two independent measures of burnout employed in this study were self-perceived physical health and self-perceived burnout. Self-perceived physical health was assessed by the question: ‘How would you rate your overall health at the present time?’ with the following four response options: excellent, good, fair, and poor. Self-perceived burnout was assessed by the question: ‘To what extent do you think you are suffering from burnout in your current call?’ with the following four response options: to a great extent, to some extent, to a small extent, and not at all. Consistent with the theory of balanced affect, the data demonstrated that the mitigating effects of positive affect on burnout increased with increasing levels of negative affect.

Research question

While the study reported by Francis, Village, Robbins and Wulff (2011) provided an adequate validation of the theoretical position underpinning the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health and supported the construct validity of the two scales of the Francis Burnout Inventory (Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and Satisfaction in Ministry Scale), there are two weaknesses in the study that need addressing by further work. The first weakness concerns the two independent measures of poor work-related psychological health employed in the study: both were single-item measures, one of self-perceived physical health, and the other of self-perceived burnout. The rigour of validation could be improved by employing a recognised scale or scales to provide an independent measure of psychological wellbeing. The present study addresses that weakness by employing the Purpose in Life Scale proposed by Robbins and Francis (2000). The second weakness concerns the reliance on only one group of clergy, located both geographically and denominationally (Presbyterian ministers in the USA). The present study addresses that weakness by testing the balanced affect model among Catholic priests serving in Italy.

Method

Procedure

In the context of programmes operated in Rome for Catholic priests on the topic of personality and spirituality, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire covering issues relevant to the programme. Participation in the programme was voluntary and responses to the questionnaire were confidential and anonymous. Full data were provided by this convenience sample of 155 priests.

Participants

Three fifths of the participants were Italians (63%) and the remaining 37% were from a number of other countries; 56% were diocesan priests, and 44% were religious priests. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 76 years with an average age of 46 years ($SD = 12.16$); 8% of the participants were in their twenties, 29% in their thirties, 30% in their forties, 21% in their fifties, 6% in their sixties, and 7% in their seventies.

Measures

Work-related psychological health was assessed by the two scales reported by the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI: Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005). This 22-item instrument comprises the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS). Each item is assessed on a five-point scale: ranging from agree strongly (5) to disagree strongly (1).

Purpose in life was assessed by the Purpose in Life Scale, developed by Robbins and Francis (2000), a twelve-item instrument designed to assess a unidimensional construct. For example, a core item reads, 'My personal existence is full of purpose'. Each item is assessed on a five-point scale: ranging from agree strongly (5) to disagree strongly (1).

Data analysis

The data were analysed by means of the SPSS statistical package using the reliability, correlation, factor and regression routines.

Results and discussion

- insert table 1 about here -

The first step in data analysis examines the psychometric properties of the two scales of the Francis Burnout Inventory (Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and Satisfaction in Ministry Scale), in terms of the correlations between each individual item and the sum of the other items, factor loadings on the first factor extracted by principal component analysis (unrotated), item endorsement (as the sum of the agree strongly and agree responses), the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) as an index of internal consistency reliability, and the proportion of variance accounted for by the principal component as an index of item homogeneity.

In terms of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, table 1 demonstrates good properties of internal consistency reliability and item homogeneity, with an alpha coefficient of .81 and the first factor accounting for 36% of the variance. This reverse-coded item (I always have enthusiasm for my work), however, has not functioned as well in this study as in other published studies. In terms of indicators of emotional exhaustion, some idea of the extent of the problem among priests is given by paying attention to the three items attracting the highest levels of endorsement. At least one in five of the priests considered that their humour has a cynical biting tone (20%), that they have been discouraged by the lack of personal support for their ministry where they are serving (23%), and that fatigue and irritation are part of their daily experience (28%).

In terms of the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, table 1 demonstrates good properties of internal consistency reliability and item homogeneity, with an alpha coefficient of .79 and the first factor accounting for 34% of the variance. In terms of indicators of satisfaction in

ministry, some idea of the level of reward experienced by the priests is given by paying attention to the three items attracting the highest levels of endorsement. Over three quarters of the priests considered that they had accomplished many worthwhile things in their current ministry (77%), that the ministry where they are serving gives real purpose and meaning to their life (83%), and that they were really glad that they had entered ministry (90%). This high level of satisfaction is consistent with the recent findings among Catholic priests reported by Rossetti and Rhoades (2013).

- insert table 2 about here -

The second step in data analysis examines the association between aspects of personal lifestyle of priests and scores recorded on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and scores recorded on the Satisfaction in Ministry Scales. The three lifestyle issues selected concern whether the individual priest is living alone, has a hobby, and spends time in prayer. These lifestyle factors help to assess the construct validity of the Francis Burnout Inventory. They suggest that lower levels of burnout may be associated with not living alone, having a hobby, and spending time in prayer (for example see Turton & Francis, 2007). The data presented in table 2 demonstrated that more time spent in prayer was associated with lower scores of emotional exhaustion ($p < .05$), but not with significantly higher levels of satisfaction in ministry. There were no significant associations between burnout scores and living with others or with having a hobby, although the trends were in the predicted direction.

- insert table 3 about here -

The third step in data analysis examines the mean scale scores on the three core variables employed in the analysis and the correlations between them. Table 3 demonstrates that purpose in life scores are correlated positively with satisfaction in ministry and negatively with emotional exhaustion in ministry; and that there is a clear negative correlation between satisfaction in ministry and emotional exhaustion in ministry.

- insert table 4 about here -

The fourth and final step in data analysis tests the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health and burnout. To test the notion of balanced affect, the effects of SEEM and SIMS scores on the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS) were tested in a multiple regression model in which SEEM and SIMS scores were allowed to interact. The marginal effect of SIMS on the model with the interaction term included was statistically non-significant which explains why this term does not appear in the model as displayed in table 4. The results indicated a highly significant interaction. This interaction term suggested that the mitigating effects of ministry satisfaction on burnout were greater when the level of emotional exhaustion was higher, and this is clearly illustrated in Figure 1. In particular it can be seen that for these particular priests the negative effects of exhaustion could be completely eliminated by the highest scores for satisfaction. For example, the two priests with the highest reported levels of satisfaction (SEEM = 55 & 53 respectively) had similar high purpose in life scores (PILS = 60 & 56) although their exhaustion scores differed by 15 points (SIMS = 21 & 36 respectively). These results strongly support the hypothesis of balanced affect. There was no dependence of PILS on age for this sample of priests.

- insert figure 1 about here -

Conclusion

This study set out to build on and to extend earlier work reported by Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011), designed to test the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health and burnout among clergy, as operationalised by the Francis Burnout Inventory. The balanced affect model of work-related psychological health maintains that positive affect serves to offset the deleterious consequences of negative affect in terms of overall psychological wellbeing. Accordingly the effects of positive affect on maintaining overall psychological wellbeing increase in importance in line with increasing levels of

negative affect. Within the Francis Burnout Inventory positive affect is operationalised by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and negative affect is operationalised by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011) provided support for the balanced affect model by demonstrating the significance of the interaction term between emotional exhaustion and satisfaction in ministry among Presbyterian ministers in the USA against two single-item measures of physical health and burnout.

The present study replicated and extended the work of Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011) in two ways: by employing a more robust independent measure of psychological wellbeing and by exploring the effect of the interaction term among a group of clergy who differed from the original sample both in terms of culture and in terms of denomination: Catholic priests serving in Italy. That the data from this second study also unequivocally supports the balanced affect model of clergy work-related psychological health provides further support for the theory and further construct validation for the Francis Burnout Inventory as an operationalised form of that theory.

On the basis of the findings from both studies, among Presbyterian ministers in the USA and Catholic priests in Italy, the balanced affect model of clergy work-related psychological health and the Francis Burnout Inventory can be commended for further studies exploring the incidence and correlates of clergy burnout. At the same time, however, there would be real value in other independent studies providing a wider basis for the validation of the Francis Burnout Inventory, both by extending the range of cultural or denominational contexts in which the instrument and theory have been tested and by extending the range of independent measures of psychological wellbeing on which the effects of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale have been tested.

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Table 1

Francis Burnout Inventory: scale properties

	<i>r</i>	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry</i>			
I feel drained by fulfilling my ministry roles	.57	.68	14
Fatigue and irritation are part of my daily experience	.48	.58	28
I am invaded by sadness I can't explain	.49	.58	13
I am feeling negative or cynical about the people with whom I work	.47	.58	12
I always have enthusiasm for my work*	.10	.13	57
My humour has a cynical and biting tone	.51	.65	20
I find myself spending less and less time with those among whom I minister	.46	.60	16
I have been discouraged by the lack of personal support for me here	.50	.63	23
I find myself frustrated in my attempts to accomplish tasks important to me	.57	.67	14
I am less patient with those among whom I minister than I used to be	.52	.52	15
I am becoming less flexible in my dealings with those among whom I minister	.53	.53	13
Alpha / % variance	.81	36%	
<i>Satisfaction in Ministry Scale</i>			
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my current ministry	.36	.47	77
I gain a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people in my current ministry	.42	.54	70
I deal very effectively with the problems of the people in my current ministry	.31	.39	73
I can easily understand how those among whom I minister feel about things	.25	.31	75
I feel very positive about my current ministry	.61	.75	68
I feel that my pastoral ministry has a positive influence on people's lives	.47	.54	77
I feel that my teaching ministry has a positive influence on people's faith	.24	.40	76
I feel that my ministry is really appreciated by people	.58	.33	74
I am really glad that I entered the ministry	.51	.69	90
The ministry here gives real purpose and meaning to my life	.55	.72	83
I gain a lot of personal satisfaction from fulfilling my ministry roles	.63	.77	71
Alpha / % variance	.79	34%	

Note: N = 155

* This item has been reverse coded to compute the correlations, but not the percentage endorsement

r = correlation between item and sum of other ten items

f = loading on principal factor (unrotated)

% = sum of agree strongly and agree responses

Table 2

Personal lifestyle

	%	SEEM		SIMS	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Who do you live with?</i>					
Alone	16	27.6	7.7	41.6	5.7
With others	84	25.1	6.6	42.8	5.0
<i>On average how much time do you spend every day in personal prayer?</i>					
10-30 minutes	17	28.7	7.6	40.3	7.1
30 minutes - 1 hour	56	25.6	6.7	43.2	4.8
More than 1 hour	27	23.2	5.9	42.8	3.7
<i>Do you have a hobby?</i>					
Yes	67	24.6	6.4	43.2	4.4
No	33	27.3	7.5	41.3	6.1

N = 155

Table 3

Mean scale scores and correlation matrix

	Alpha	Mean	SD	SIMS	SEEM
Purpose in Life	.89	52.7	5.6	.58	-.44
Emotional Exhaustion	.81	25.5	6.9	-.51	
Satisfaction in Ministry	.79	42.6	5.1		

Table 4

Multiple regression of PILS on SEEM and interaction with SIMS

	B	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
Constant	57.6622	1.5772	36.6	.001
SEEM	-0.8475	0.1006	-8.4	.001
SEEM * SIMS	0.0156	0.0027	5.8	.001

Figure 1

